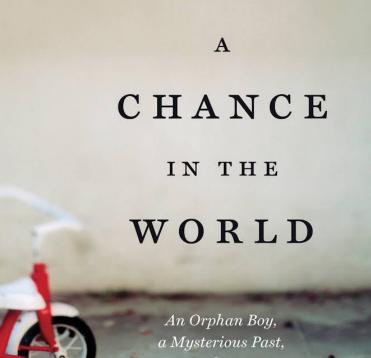
BOSTON COLLEGE



a Mysterious Past, and How He Found a Place Called Home

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FIRST YEAR ACADEMIC CONVOCATION SEPTEMBER 8, 2016

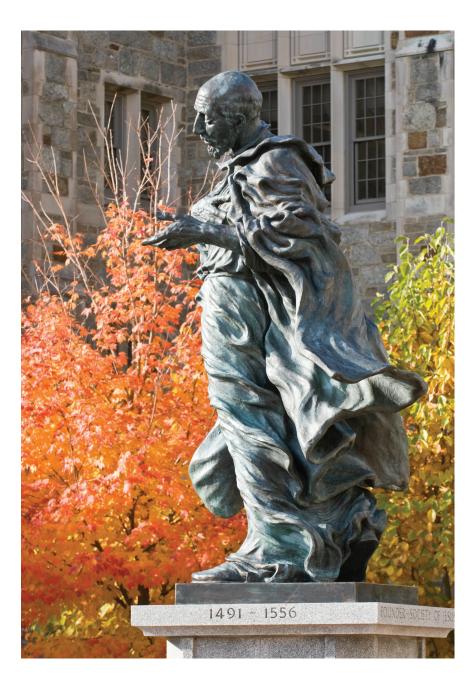


TABLE OF CONTENTS

| I. | Why Read a Book | 2 |
|------|---------------------------------------------------|----|
| II. | Why Read Steve Pemberton's A Chance in the World? | 3 |
| III. | A Way to Approach the Text | 5 |
| IV. | Questions to Consider | 8 |
| V. | Continuing the Conversation | IO |

Why Read A Book?

We can learn what is in any book on Huffpost.com or Amazon, hear what others think on Twitter, listen to a TedTalk if we want to learn from cutting-edge thinkers. So why sit with a thick paper tome when it's far easier to get our information and entertainment in other forms?

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One answer is precisely because it is easier, and noisier, to learn and be entertained via digital and truncated means. Technology keeps us connected, linked, always visible, always able to see and be seen. Sometimes this connection, this being linked, on, and seen is valuable, worthwhile and even politically efficacious. Sometimes.

But if all we ever do is check status updates, skim articles, and read summaries of other peoples' ideas while listening to music and texting our friends, something valuable gets lost. That something goes by many names: concentration, solitude, space for reflection, intimacy, and authenticity. Reading a book, we hope you'll learn at Boston College if you don't already know and believe, brings with it unique form of pleasure and thinking.

Reading can take us out of the smallness of our own perception, our own little lives, the limited boundaries of what we have experienced. We can glimpse into the perspectives and even empathize with people whose lives are vastly different than our own. As Zits, the narrator of Sherman Alexie's novel *Flight* learns, "I can't jump into Dave's body but I can feel and see and understand a little bit about his pain, I guess.¹"

Beyond teaching empathy, reading takes us briefly out of the noisy, overwhelming chaos that is our daily life and gives us something else, which William Dereseiwicz describes well:

But a book has two advantages over a tweet. First, the person who wrote it thought about it a lot more carefully. The book is the result of *his* solitude, *his* attempt to think for himself.

Second, most books are old. This is not a disadvantage: this is precisely what makes them valuable. They stand against the conventional wisdom of today simply because they're not *from* today. Even if they merely reflect the conventional wisdom of their own day, they say something different from what you hear all the time. But the great books, the ones you find on a syllabus, the ones people have continued to read, don't reflect the conventional wisdom of their day. They say things that have the permanent power to disrupt our habits of thought².

Cultivating habits of thought. That's what coming to BC is offering you. Some habits can and should be digital, connected, and even multi-tasked. But sometimes we all need the habit of opening a good book, diving in, and leaving the din of our contemporary moment, temporarily, behind.



Why Read Steve Pemberton's A Chance in the World?

As a member of the class of 2020, each of you will have the opportunity to read *A Chance in the World* and to welcome author Steve Pemberton to Boston College to discuss his work.

Steve Pemberton is the Vice-President of Diversity and Inclusion for Walgreens Boots Alliance, the first global pharmacy-led, health and wellbeing enterprise in the world, employing 370,000 people in 25 countries. Prior to that he served as Chief Diversity Officer for Walgreens, becoming the first person to hold that position in the historic company's 114 year history. He is widely considered a subject matter expert on matters of diversity and inclusion and its importance to the sustainability of organizations and the communities they serve.

Under Steve's leadership, Walgreens reached record levels of performance on nearly every measure of diversity, and he has frequently represented Walgreens' employment model at the White House and on Capitol Hill. In 2015, Steve was appointed by United States Secretary of Labor Thomas Perez to serve on an Advisory

¹Alexie, S. (2007). Flight: a novel. New York: Black Cat.

²From a lecture by William Dereseiwicz to the plebe class at the United States Military Academy at West Point, October 2009

Committee for the Competitive Integrated Employment of People with Disabilities. Before assuming his role at Walgreens, Steve was Chief Diversity Officer and Vice-President of Diversity and Inclusion at Monster.com, where he had end-to-end management responsibilities for the Diversity and Inclusion business unit which focused on helping employers diversify their workforce.

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Steve's journey of professional achievement and public service is all the more remarkable in light of the adversity he endured in his childhood. At 1½ years old, he was described by a caretaker as a boy who would not have 'a chance in the world.' Growing up as a ward of the state, Steve defied seemingly impossible odds in his relentless march toward adulthood. His memoir and your First Year Academic Convocation book, *A Chance in the World*, describes the unbelievably true story of Steve's determination to navigate a foster care system that has failed him, while trying to solve the mystery of his identity, family and home. Throughout his quest to find both a source and sense of identity, he encounters several individuals whose kindness gave him the resolve to not only carry on, but to discover his vocational purpose. Through the compassion of a few key mentors in his life, Steve comes to find his own strength and resilience, allowing him to overcome the pain and isolation of his early life and to become an agent of change and a champion for others.

As a proud member of the BC Class of 1989, Steve has gone on to serve on several boards including The Home for Little Wanderers and UCAN to provide guidance and inspiration to the most vulnerable in our nation. His efforts have earned him national recognition, including the coveted Trumpet Award in 2014, the prestigious Horizon Award awarded by the United States Congress, and Honorary Doctorates from Winston-Salem State University (2014) and Boston College (2015).

As you begin reading *A Chance in the World*, it is our hope that Steve's example gives you insight into the strength of the human condition. Since 2004, Conversations in the First Year has engaged members of the incoming class in an intellectual and reflective dialogue with a common text. This practice embodies the richness of the Catholic intellectual tradition at Boston College, which calls us to examine our faith and experience in conversation with other thinkers. We are thrilled to introduce you to the first of many thoughtful, inspirational, and profound conversation partners you will have the opportunity to engage with during your time at Boston College.

A WAY TO APPROACH THE TEXT

As members of the Class of 2020, your academic experience will begin with this book, which invites us to consider the human spirit's capacity for resilience, determination and the creation of new beginnings, no matter how broken our past or great our successes.

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Student formation is an essential component of a Jesuit education and at Boston College we emphasize three particular dimensions – intellectual, social, and spiritual. The prominence of formation in Jesuit education can be traced back to the values that St. Ignatius Loyola and his companions embraced in founding the first Jesuit schools to educate men and women for and with others.

To cultivate this formation, St. Ignatius and his companions translated their distinctive spirituality into an educational vision by describing it as a three-part process. It begins with paying attention to experience, moves to reflecting on the meaning of experience, and ends in deciding how to act moving forward. Jesuit education, then, can be described in terms of three key movements:

1. BE ATTENTIVE

We learn by organizing our experience and appropriating it in the increasingly complex psychological structures by which we engage and make sense of our world. From infancy, learning is an active process but in our early years it happens without our being aware of it. Once we become adolescents, though, whether we will continue to learn is largely a choice we make.

Conscious learning begins by choosing to pay attention to our experience -- our experience of our own inner lives and of the people and the world around us. When we do this, we notice a mixture of light and dark, ideas and feelings, things that give us joy and things that sadden us. It is a rich tapestry and it grows more complex the more we let it register on our awareness (from A Pocket Guide to Jesuit Education).

As a young boy, Steve frequently engages in conscious learning – paying attention to the dynamic, and often damaging, circumstances of his home environment. However, despite his trying upbringing, moments of joy, light, and goodness are not lost on him. Describing one of his favorite summer activities - sitting on a rock wall in his neighbor's yard in the shade of a large oak tree, he writes: *"I was never more at peace during my childhood than when I sat there...This was my sanctuary, the place where I felt the most alive - and the safest"* (p. 29).

Paying attention requires an opening of the self up to what is new or unique, allowing the reality of people and things to enter our consciousness. Ignatius was convinced that God deals directly with us in our experience, leading to the profound realization that God is "working" in everything that exists. This is why the spirit of Jesuit education is often described as "finding God in all things," including in our responses to the people and experiences we encounter.

2. BE REFLECTIVE

The outcome of paying attention to our experience may be a complex variety of images, unrelated insights, feelings that lead in contradictory directions. To connect the parts of our experience into a whole, we need to examine data, test evidence, clarify relationships, understand causes and implications, weigh options in light of their possible consequences. We need, that is, to see the patterns in our experience and grasp their significance. Reflection is the way we discover and compose the meaning of our experience (from A Pocket Guide to Jesuit Education).

In the opening pages of his memoir, we witness Steve engaging in a form of literal and figurative reflection, staring long and hard in the mirror, taking in the details of his features. He writes: "This type of examination was not borne of vanity. I was too young to try to determine whether I was handsome or not, or even to care. Nor was I all that interested in determining if I was black or white. I was trying to discover much more important things: Who did I look like? Where had I come from?" (p. 6). This reflective practice is one that accompanies him as he journeys forward. On the day of his graduation from Boston College, Steve reflects upon the days he spent looking in the mirror as a child, "trying to discern whatever secrets about myself I could" (p. 126).

Reflection is a kind of reality-testing. It takes time and care. Ultimately, it is the work of intelligence, which is why Jesuit education has always emphasized intellectual excellence. There is no substitute for using the minds God gave us, to understand our experience and discover its meaning (from A Pocket Guide to Jesuit Education).

3. BE LOVING

Being attentive is largely about us and how God is working in us through our experience. Being reflective moves our gaze outward, measuring our experience against the accumulated wisdom of the world. Being loving requires that we look even more closely at the world around us. It asks the question: How are we going to act in this world? In part, this is a question about what we are going to do with the knowledge and self-understanding and freedom that we have appropriated by reflection. How shall we act in ways that are consistent with this new self and what it knows and values? (from A Pocket Guide to Jesuit Education). Towards the end of his memoir, Steve is grappling with the very questions that surround the call to be loving: "The big question now was what to do next. How do you overcome something like this? How do you live a meaningful life when you know for sure that your mother and father didn't want you? How do you become a man?... It's a quest that continues to anchor me today. I could build. I could create a better life than the one I had inherited" (p. 203-204).

The intentionality with which Steve sets out on an adult life of meaning and purpose reveals the power these three movements can have to transform our lives and bring us closer to our authentic selves.

But we can't move very far in the direction of answering this question without discovering that it is not only a question about how our lives can be authentic. It is also a question about our relationship to the world around us and what the world needs us to do. We are not solitary creatures. From the womb, we live in relationships with others, grow up in cultural, social, and political institutions that others have created for us. To be human is to find our place in these relationships and these institutions, to take responsibility for them, to contribute to nurturing and improving them, to give something back.

So, for Jesuit education, it is not enough to live authentically in the world. We have to participate in the transformation of the world (the Hebrew phrase tikkun olam conveys the same idea, of mending or repairing the world). For more than four hundred years, it has been said that Jesuit education educated "the whole person." Today, we live with an increasingly global sense of what it means to be human. A person can't be considered "whole" without an educated solidarity with other human beings in their hopes and fears and especially in their needs. We can't pay attention to our experience and reflect on it without realizing how our own lives are connected with the dreams of all those with whom we share the journey of human existence, and therefore with the economic, political, and social realities that support or frustrate their dreams. This is why Jesuit education is so often said to produce "men and women for others" (from A Pocket Guide to Jesuit Education).

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

As you prepare to read about Steve's search for a sense of identity, family and home, we invite you to examine your own life experiences that have brought you to this moment in your life and continue to influence your journey forward. The following are questions you might consider as you read *A Chance in the World*:

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Home is the place where our life story begins. It is where we are understood, embraced, and accepted. It is a sanctuary of safety and security, a place to which we can always return. Down in the dank basement, amid my moldy, hoarded food and worm-eaten books the idea that my real home, the place where my story had begun, was out there somewhere, and one day I was going to find it. (p. 50)

Steve describes home as an emotional and temporal concept, rather than a physical one. How do you conceptualize home? When and by whom have you felt truly understood, embraced, and accepted in your life? As you enter into this new university community, how will you be proactive and intentional in your effort to make Boston College a home?

The characters that unfolded in those books and the worlds they lived in showed me a different life, a future far beyond the pain of the house on Arnold Street. (p. 31)

Caught in the clutches his cruel foster family and subjected to constant abuse as a young boy, Steve finds his only refuge in a box of books given to him by a kind stranger. In these books, he discovers new worlds he can only imagine and begins to hope that one day he might have a different life. How can reading literature and experiencing art influence our understanding of the world around us? In what way has encountering the stories of others through reading helped you to grow in knowledge, imagination and hope?

Nothing I write can accurately capture the power and timeliness of the gift Mrs. Levin gave me that day... For the rest of my childhood, however, she would walk beside me. And as an adult I have found I cannot forget her. (p. 31-33)

Mrs. Levin, the kind stranger who gifted books to him as a child, made a profound impact on Steve's life, though she could not have been aware of the extent of the difference she was making at the time. Who has been a Mrs. Levin in your own life? Who do you consider a quiet hero walking beside you, whether they know it or not? To whom do you owe a debt of gratitude for their kindness or generosity? And how can we embody the generous spirit of Mrs. Levin, striving always to be more attentive and loving to those around us? "You are beyond repair." (p. 31) "You're gonna be no good." (p. 51) "Nobody wants you." (p. 101)

As human beings, we create stories about our lives to help make meaning of our experiences. This starts in childhood where we weave our perceptions of ourselves and of the world around us into a narrative about what we can and will achieve. These life scripts continue to have a deep and unconscious effect on how we live our lives. Steve's life scripts were shaped by his dysfunctional and abusive relationship with his foster family, the Robinsons. Although he overcame their projections of inadequacy and undesirability, it was a long road.

What were the prominent life scripts in your childhood? How were your life scripts shaped by your parents or loved ones? In what ways have they changed and/or evolved throughout your adolescence? How does recognizing the stories we tell ourselves, or those told to us by others, help us to become more enlightened and authentic in our journey towards adulthood?

As the start of second semester approached, the disappointments were adding up. I had naively thought that college would erase the past and allow me a fresh start. Instead, I found myself facing new setbacks. And, in the midst of those discontents, I still longed for my parents, despite my greatest efforts to pretend that they were no longer necessary. (p. 116)

Throughout his high school years, Steve's dreams of attending college, and specifically Boston College, kept him motivated inside and outside of the classroom. However, the reality of his first year at Boston College differed in many ways from the expectations he had acquired over the years, including hopes for a fresh start. What are the expectations you bring with you as you embark upon your first year at Boston College? How will you cope with unexpected disappointments or setbacks? In what ways can you capitalize on the love and success you have experienced up to this point in your life? How will you balance the new freedoms and responsibilities you will encounter?

In the most difficult times, I always found comfort in prayer... I found that peace and quiet and strength often followed my humble requests. I talked to God the way one talked to a best friend. (p. 206)

The Robinsons rarely attended church, so Steve had little experience with organized religion as a child. However, throughout his young life, and throughout his memoir, we witness moments where he engages questions of faith, meaning, and the presence of God in his life. Steve describes his experience of prayer as talking to a best friend. How does this depiction compare to your own experience of prayer? Where have you found moments of peace, quiet and reflection in your own life? How do you hope to engage questions of faith and explore your own spirituality during the course of your undergraduate experience?

CONTINUING THE CONVERSATION

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As you enter Boston College, you must consider how we live in the 21st century and how the world is growing rapidly and changing in unforeseen ways. In the midst of this globalized and technologically driven world, we ask you to critically evaluate all that has come before us. To enter into the University core curriculum is to enter into a foundation of knowledge and experiences that will better equip each of you to synthesize and adapt to the ever-changing world that you are part of each day. Being able to read attentively, write articulately, and think critically are important building blocks within your academic journey here at Boston College.

To fully embrace your Jesuit, Catholic education, you also need to consider how you will grow in your own understanding of faith. There are many conservation partners, including the Jesuit community, faculty, staff, and administrators, who are here to be your companions in contemplative action and reflective conversation as you search for truths in your life and the world around you.

Boston College hopes that each student will deepen their individual faith over the course of their years here. There are a number of sacred places within our community where you can go to contemplate and recognize God in all things.

> We would encourage you to seek out these sacred places on our campus: www.bc.edu/prayermap.

Patient Trust

Above all, trust in the slow work of God. We are quite naturally impatient in everything to reach the end without delay. We should like to skip the intermediate stages. We are impatient of being on the way to something unknown, something new. And yet it is the law of all progress that it is made by passing through some stages of instability and that it may take a very long time.

And so I think it is with you; your ideas mature gradually—let them grow, let them shape themselves, without undue haste. Don't try to force them on, as though you could be today what time (that is to say, grace and circumstances acting on your own good will) will make of you tomorrow.

Only God could say what this new spirit gradually forming within you will be. Give Our Lord the benefit of believing that his hand is leading you, and accept the anxiety of feeling yourself in suspense and incomplete.

—Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, S.J.

As you enter into your first year of college, it is important to examine the decisions that you make while here at BC. Taking time to reflect upon your motivations, your desires, and your fears will give you a better perspective on your life—where you came from, where you are presently, and where you are heading. Boston College hopes to partner with you during this journey through the careful discernment of the intellectual, spiritual, and social components that affect you during your undergraduate journey.



Torch lighting during First Flight Procession.

Notes





Conversations in the First Year: A Program of the Office of First Year Experience



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