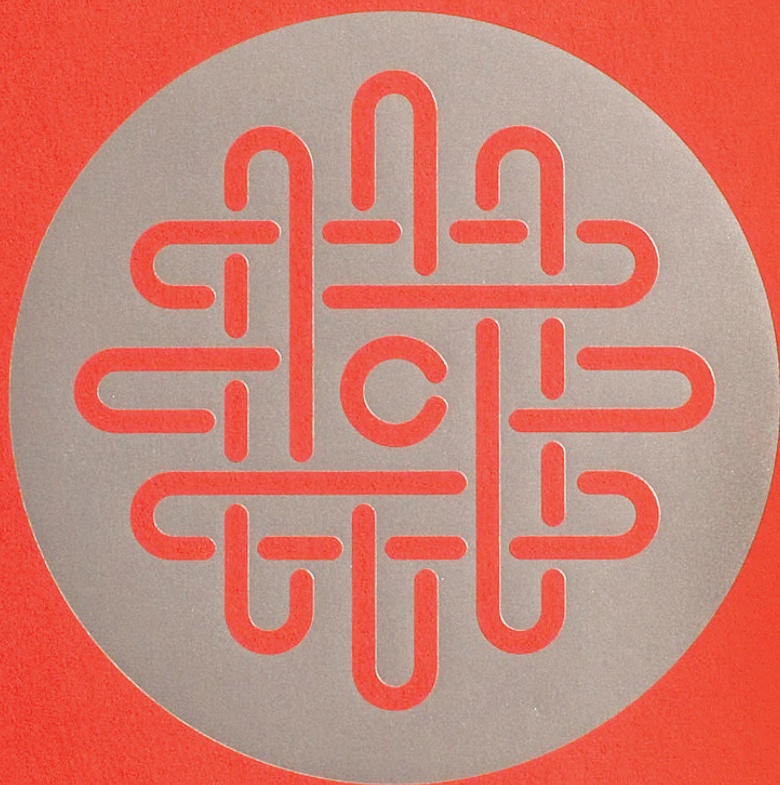


BOSTON COLLEGE

RELATIONSHIPS IN THE DIGITAL AGE:
THE DESIRE FOR CONNECTIVITY, COMMUNITY AND COMPANIONSHIP

THE CHALLENGE OF VULNERABILITY

THE CIRCLE



FIRST YEAR ACADEMIC CONVOCATION – SEPTEMBER 11, 2014
WITH AN ADDRESS BY DAVE EGGERS
GO SET THE WORLD AFLAME



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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?

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 already, 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 DAVE EGGERS' THE CIRCLE?

How often do we read books together? A common reading program allows us to engage in a broader set of questions of not only ourselves but also the Boston College community at large. Dave Eggers' *The Circle* provides us a unique lens, which helps us understand and reflect on our relationships. As we immerse ourselves into this new community, our hope is that you think deeply and critically about the text, which will help you engage your BC experience more thoughtfully.

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



A BOOK AND ITS AUTHOR

As a member of the class of 2018, each of you will have the opportunity to read *The Circle* and to welcome author Dave Eggers to Boston College to discuss his work.

Eggers is an author, editor, and educational activist known for his breadth of writing ability, including short stories, novels, and biographies, as well as his work with McSweeney's publishing house (www.mcsweeneys.net), which he founded. A Pulitzer Prize finalist for *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* and a National Book Award finalist for *A Hologram for the King*, his writing involves more than words, often including social commentary, inviting readers to consider the world around them in a new way and respond to the issues he raises.

Following the publication of his novel *What is the What*, which was inspired by the story of a Sudanese civil war survivor and for which he was the winner of France's Prix Medici and a finalist for the 2006 National Book Critics Award, Eggers founded the Valentino Achak Deng Foundation. This foundation, named for the civil war survivor, promotes literacy and education in South Sudan (www.vadfoundation.org).

Eggers' concern for human rights, the focus of the book *Voice of Witness*, grew into a non-profit organization which tells the stories of individuals who have suffered abuse in our society and which has developed a curriculum for education about injustice in our world (www.voiceofwitness.org).

Along with Nínive Calegari, Eggers founded 826 Valencia, a tutoring center focused on writing and education, which has expanded from its original location in San Francisco to eight centers across the United States, including one in Boston. These centers foster various programs in each city, each of which is committed to encouraging young people from under-resourced communities to develop their writing skills through individual relationships, storytelling sessions, partnerships with schools, and bookmaking programs and more (www.826national.org). From this project developed ScholarMatch, which matches college-bound students with high financial need with donors (www.scholarmatch.org).

The Circle touches on issues of intimacy, community, humanity, work/life balance, the role of technology in today's society in the story of Mae Holland, a recent college graduate. As you consider Mae's experience and response to the world, we hope that you will consider your own as well.



A WAY TO APPROACH THE TEXT

As you enter into this Jesuit, Catholic University, we will ask each of you to engage in conversation, to live together, and to share your life with one another. As members of the Class of 2018, your conversation will include this book which invites us to consider how we engage with the world around us in today's society.

In *The Circle*, the experience of humanity is brought to the fore with the idea that, "All that happens must be known" (p. 67). With the ever-increasing desire to share information, with multiplying screens and chat rooms, to the point of complete "transparency", the human condition is on full display. Several of the characters, including Mae, seek to be fully "transparent", but despite this commitment, still feel a tension in wanting to turn off the cameras at times. This full transparency does not allow for an interior life, where one can reflect on one's actions. Instead, the transparency creates an inner conflict that is never resolved because of the lack of reflection.

In examining our own human experience, we can also learn more about our relationship with God. In his piece, "Living Conversation," (Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education. Fall 1995: 21-27.), Father Michael Himes, a professor in the Boston College Theology Department, writes, "God does not think being God is anything to be grasped; God empties himself and becomes human like all other human beings..."

If one makes this claim of the Incarnation--and it is one whopping great claim to make--then this principle inevitably follows: whatever humanizes, divinizes. That is to say, whatever makes you more genuinely human, more authentically, richly, powerfully human, whatever calls into play all the reaches of your intellect, your freedom, energy, your talents and creativity, makes you more like God. This is how we encounter God in our incarnational tradition: not "out there" somewhere, but here being human along with us. Whatever makes you more human makes you more like God."

Saint Ignatius was convinced that God deals directly with us in our experience. This conviction rested on his profound realization that God is "working" in every thing that exists. The Jesuit model of discernment involves three key movements: be attentive, be reflective, be loving. These movements invite us to observe what is happening in the world around us – in our own lives and the lives of others – to reflect on the meaning of these experiences, and to take the information that comes out of that reflection to determine how we are going to act.

By taking this time to be attentive to God's presence in the world around us – Finding God in All Things – we can notice how we feel, the thoughts we have, what gives us joy. Once we start to pay attention to our experience, we can come to a deeper understanding of our thoughts, feelings, ideas by taking time to reflect on and find meaning in these experiences.

By looking inward and developing an interior life, we can see what in our experiences challenges us, brings out the best in us, makes sense of the work for us, leaves us seeking for more. After gathering information and finding meaning in our experiences, we are called to respond to the needs of the world around us in the best way we can – in the most loving way – creating better relationships with ourselves, with others, with God (from *A Pocket Guide to Jesuit Education*).

1. "The Circle" is satire. Satire as a literary form employs irony and sarcasm to critique various values of our society. Some of these include social media, the need to belong to a group, the place of privacy, and what constitutes the ideal life. Pay attention to these as you read, thinking about ways in your own life that these values parallel or diverge from the ones that the main character, Mae, has.

2. At the beginning of the book, Mae has landed her ideal job, working at The Circle, the world's largest social media company based in California. What is it about this job that makes it her ideal? What hopes does she have? What expectations? Does her job seem like it would be an ideal job for you? Why or why not?

3. Almost immediately upon becoming an employee, Mae is pressured to join as many social groups as she can, to 'zing' responses to various notes circulating, and to participate as much as she can. She is made to feel inferior for not participating. What do you think about the company pressuring her—they have very good reasons for doing so. Do you feel pressured in your life to participate?

4. Any resistance to constant participation in social media, in being constantly connected, brings up issues of privacy, and the book engages these matters consistently. Mae is made to feel that an experience she has kayaking all alone, is actually depriving the community of the opportunity to experience kayaking with her. On page 187 Josiah says not sharing her experience is "Like you're the only one that matters." How does the book respond to the notion that experience is only valued when it is mediated and shared? How do you feel about your personal experiences—is there pressure you feel to share them on Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat or Instagram? Do you sometimes feel the need for privacy? Do humans need privacy?

5. Mae has an ex-boyfriend, Mercer, who is outwardly and repeatedly critical of Mae's new life and in general of social media as shallow and meaningless. He insists (p. 134) that all the social media Mae engages in is making her and everyone "needy". Does that seem true, and does the book seem to back up Mercer's opinion? Does your own use of social media make you feel fulfilled, or "hollow and diminished" like eating a bag of potato chips, as Mercer says?

6. The book contains an ongoing discussion about capitalism and corporations. The Circle "had 90 percent of the search market...92 percent of texting..." Various lawmakers want to break up the company because it violates laws against monopolies in our society, but to Mae "it seemed insane to punish a company for its efficiency..." (p. 175). Does the book think the company is a threat or a benefit to society?

7. Human relationships play a major part in the book. Mae's relationship with Mercer goes downhill as she becomes more and more a member of The Circle. In addition, she engages in random hookups with Francis because she feels in control. From time to time she meets up with the mysterious Kalden as well. By the end of the book her parents are not talking to her. What is the book saying about the dangers of too much being connected? The Circle insists that its main value is human relationships. Does it seem to enhance them, or does it make human relationships worse?

8. Working at The Circle largely encourages immediate gratification of sensual pleasures—there always seems to be parties going on, the food is excellent, there are free rooms for members to sleep over in, which are beautifully designed with good food and drink and soft beds. How does all this sensual gratification effect Mae? In your own life, how does having your needs met as soon as they arise effect you? Does it help to reflect and pay attention more or less to the world around you?

9. The Circle invents a camera that is small enough to be worn around the neck, and encourages first congresspersons and then eventually Mae, to "go transparent", so that every moment of her day is filmed and made available on the internet in real time for anyone to follow. People who are reluctant to do so fall under suspicion: "If you aren't transparent, what are you hiding?" (p. 241) How does Mae feel about being filmed more or less 24/7? The assumption is that it will make people more authentic, but does it? Mae becomes aware of an element of performance in her everyday actions: "She began to think a bit harder about the clothes she wore to work. She thought more about where she scratched..." (p. 243) Thus the book raises the question of whether social media like Facebook encourage sincerity or falseness. How does it work in your life?

10. Kalden eventually turns against The Circle and begs Mae to do the same. How does she respond, and how would you if you were in her place?



CONTINUING THE CONVERSATION

As you enter into this Jesuit, Catholic, liberal arts university, 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, write, and think critically will be 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 conversation partners, including the Jesuit community, faculty, staff, and administrators, who are here to aid you within this journey and quest for understanding. 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.

The Summer Day

Who made the world?

Who made the swan, and the black bear?

Who made the grasshopper?

This grasshopper, I mean—

the one who has flung herself out of the grass,

the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,

who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down—

who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.

Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.

Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.

I don't know exactly what a prayer is.

I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down

into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,

how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,

which is what I have been doing all day.

Tell me, what else should I have done?

Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?

Tell me, what is it you plan to do

with your one wild and precious life?

—Mary Oliver, “The Summer Day,” from *The Truro Bear and Other Adventures: Poems and Essays*. © Beacon Press, 2008.

COMING FULL CIRCLE



First Flight First Year Convocation



Graduation Lineup on Linden Lane.

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.



Go Set the World Aflame!



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