

Helping Our Students Discover Their Deepest Longings

- Bro. Jony Gregory, CSC

As a Religious Brother of the Congregation of Holy Cross, my journey has taken me to five different Holy Cross high schools in Bangladesh, where I have had the opportunity to serve as a teacher and administrator. One of the most important aspects of my role is engaging with my students on a personal level, delving into the core of their aspirations and dreams. Often, when I ask them about their aims in life, I receive responses that reflect societal expectations—dreams of becoming doctors, engineers, pilots, or scientists. However, what strikes me is the underlying motivation behind these choices. Inquiring further, I find that many students express their career aspirations not out of a personal calling or passion, but rather as an obligation to fulfill the dreams of their families. It is disheartening to witness young minds compelled to tread a path solely to meet the expectations of their parents, grandparents, or other family members. This realization is shocking and thought-provoking, as it brings to light the challenge we face in nurturing an environment where students can freely explore and discover their dreams, desires, and longings in life.

Navigating the journey of self-discovery can be challenging for today's young generation. Beyond meeting family expectations and fitting into what society expects, today's youth face a maze of challenges. Picture this: constant smartphone and social media allure, tempting online games and videos, the tricky art of multitasking, the never-ending messages on instant messaging apps, a flood of information to sort through, the captivating world of video games, and even the pressure to match what friends are doing. Not only are the students facing these challenges, but we educators also find ourselves caught up in the web of devices and distractions. Yet, we have a crucial responsibility to guide our students. We need to be like lighthouses, showing the way through stormy seas. By finding ways to balance our digital lives and helping students connect their dreams with the world around them, we can be the role models they need to navigate this complex journey. Together, we can unlock the potential for each student to align their deepest longings with the needs of our ever-changing world.

Contemplating the path that led me to uncover the deepest longings within me, my thoughts take me back to 1998, when I was a seventh grader at Tumilia Boys' High School, Kaliganj, Bangladesh. At that time, the school was under the administration of lay individuals, and now it is run by the Holy Cross Brothers of the St. Joseph Province, Bangladesh. In those days, the prospect of becoming a doctor seemed like my predetermined destiny, echoing my family's aspirations. Little did I know that destiny had a different path waiting for me. The turning point occurred when two Holy Cross Brothers visited our school. Until then, the concept of Religious Brothers within the Catholic Church remained unknown to me. Their presence sparked curiosity, and they spoke passionately about a vocation to Religious Brotherhood, emphasizing the values of community, togetherness, and service. Intrigued, and at the urging of my friends, I registered for the "Come and See Program" at Holy Cross Juniorate, Nagori, just a couple of miles from my village.

Attending the three-day "Come and See Program" turned out to be a life-altering experience. Surrounded by the Holy Cross Brothers, I discovered a profound sense of joy, fulfillment, and inner peace that resonated with the simplicity of living, a stark contrast to my earlier aspirations. The essence of their lives, characterized by eating, playing, working, and praying together, unveiled a strong sense of community and brotherhood that captured my heart. What began as a tentative decision to attend the program turned into a transformative journey. The Brothers' way of life, marked by shared moments of joy and service, ignited a flame within me. I found myself drawn to the idea of a life committed to service through brotherhood. The nurturing environment of the "Come and See Program" and the subsequent years at the formation house and the new school provided me with a space to explore, reflect, and understand the deepest desires of my heart. Gratitude fills me when I reflect on the guidance and teachings of the Holy Cross Brothers during those formative years. Their influence helped me unravel the profound joy and meaning that could be found in a life dedicated to service and community. As I journeyed through self-reflection, I discovered the calling that would shape the course of my life. It is a journey I am grateful for, an odyssey that began with a simple invitation to explore, and it led me to the fulfillment of my deepest longing.

Within our schools and broader society, there seems to be a tendency to overlook the importance of creating a conducive environment for students to unearth the deepest longings of their hearts. The pressure to conform to societal norms and maintain a certain status often overshadows the crucial task of allowing our students the freedom to identify and nurture their unique aspirations. It is essential for us, as educators and mentors, to recognize that each student is an individual with distinct dreams and potential, deserving guidance and an environment that encourages self-discovery and personal growth. In our pursuit of aligning with the prevailing currents of the world, we inadvertently deprive our students of the opportunity to authentically connect with their innermost desires. As we guide and shape future generations, we need to break free from the shackles of conformity and create a space where the dreams of our students can flourish. Only then can we truly empower them to become architects of their destinies, pursuing paths that resonate with their genuine passions and aspirations. It is a collective responsibility to foster an environment that not only educates the mind but also nurtures the heart, ensuring that each student has the chance to embark on a journey guided by their dreams and deepest life longings.

Teachers can play a pivotal role in shaping not just the academic destinies of their students, but also in helping them discover and nurture the deepest longings of their lives. Beyond the confines of textbooks and exams lies the terrain of self-discovery, and teachers must serve as guides and companions on this introspective quest. Establishing trust and connection forms the bedrock of this exploration. By fostering an environment of openness and empathy, teachers can create a safe space for students to share their thoughts and feelings. This trust allows for a more profound understanding of the individual beyond the surface of academic achievements. As educators, the goal is not only to mold successful professionals but also to assist in cultivating well-rounded, compassionate human beings.

Beyond the conventional emphasis on grades, teachers must inspire students to look within themselves and discern their true passions. It is about steering them away from the sole pursuit of meeting familial expectations and societal norms. By broadening the scope of education to encompass life's profound questions, teachers can help students embark on a journey of self-discovery beyond the boundaries of a career choice. To facilitate this process, schools can introduce students to the realities of the world outside the classroom through outreach programs.

Trips to slums, hospitals, and old-age homes can provide firsthand experiences of the complexities of human existence. Witnessing the struggles and suffering of humanity can help students to self-reflect and contemplate their purpose in a broader social context. These experiences can act as catalysts for students to explore their deepest longings as they grapple with the stark realities of the world. Beyond personal success, teachers can encourage students to set goals that contribute to society and make the world a better place. By instilling a sense of responsibility and purpose, teachers can empower students to envision a future where their actions have a positive impact on the world around them. This approach not only enriches the lives of our students but also contributes to the collective well-being of society. By building trust, encouraging self-reflection, and broadening the horizons of education, teachers can guide students toward discovering and nurturing their deepest longings. Through this transformative journey, students not only excel academically but also develop into compassionate individuals poised to make meaningful contributions to the world.

In the heart of Holy Cross lies a tale of a visionary, our founder, Blessed Anthony Moreau. Back in 1853, fueled by an unwavering desire and a burning zeal, he dared to send the Holy Cross men and women to East Bengal despite the daunting challenges it presented. East Bengal was once labeled a graveyard for the Early Holy Cross Missionaries. Yet, driven by his deepest longings, Blessed Moreau's vision flourished in foreign lands. The Early Missionaries in East Bengal soon realized that to dispel the darkness of ignorance, they needed to illuminate minds through education. Thus, Holy Cross, true to its roots, established numerous schools not only in Bangladesh but around the globe. These schools are not just about academic learning; they are about nurturing hearts and minds. Holy Cross believes that to uncover life's deepest longings, education has to go beyond textbooks.

As educators in Holy Cross schools, we carry the torch of our founder's values. Our duty extends beyond imparting academic knowledge; it involves upholding the deepest longings that inspired Blessed Moreau. Working with children, we recognize the importance of not just filling minds with facts but fostering a holistic education. It is about building trust among teachers and students, nurturing personal relationships, and engaging our students in humanitarian activities, giving them the right atmosphere to discover their deepest longings. Beyond the classroom,

through extracurricular programs and various initiatives, we aspire to positively impact students' lives. For us, being faithful to our duties means not only shaping young minds but also helping them find purpose in their lives. It is a responsibility we embrace wholeheartedly, knowing that in doing so, we contribute to making the world a better place to live.