

Response to *Journal* review of discussion on homosexuality

Letter to the Editor

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I'm happy that *Journal* reviewer Ressa Peters was amused by some of the things I said in the public discussion I had with Wendell Eisener on homosexuality and erotic love ("Debate or sermon?", 29 November 2006). I want to tell her and others, though, that I didn't ever mean to be snide, at least not if "snide" means derogatory or supercilious.

Ms Peters writes that she was upset by some of what she heard, by, for instance, the claim that being alone is not good or that a couple's choice not to have children is not the right choice or that erotic love between people of the same sex is defective in comparison to erotic love between a woman and a man.

She also writes of tension and uneasiness in the discussion period. It's unfortunate that people were upset or tense or uneasy. Still, the matter how to live one's life is at the heart of the philosophical endeavour, and also at the heart of the idea of a liberal arts university. Confronting the matter how to live one's life requires one both to take seriously ideas that one finds repugnant and to expose one's own most cherished or comforting beliefs to critical scrutiny. Doing these things can certainly be upsetting, especially if one is committed to following the argument where it goes, even if it goes against what one formerly held. Easier, and more uplifting, is just to promote or celebrate whatever one unreflectively finds humane or noble. But simply to assume we all already are living well and we already know what is good or right is to miss the point of university life.

Ressa Peters wonders whether she learned much at the discussion. A difficult skill to acquire is the skill of thinking dispassionately about questions of value. If the discussion helped Ms Peters even a little to be able to evaluate dispassionately what Wendell called "the contraceptive mentality," to appreciate without fear or favour both Wendell's critique of that mentality and her own acceptance of it, then it did what a public discussion at a university should do.

I hope that the philosophy society at Saint Mary's continues to sponsor events that stimulate us to grow as intellectuals, even should what we hear at their events trouble us deeply.