

SEARCH

AT ASBURY UNIVERSITY

Sixteen faculty across disciplines gathered at Asbury University's Windsor Manor on September 26 for a one-day symposium designed to foster interdisciplinary dialogue about the intersections of faith and science. Made possible with a grant awarded by the Lilly Foundation to event facilitators, Dr. Ben Brammell, Professor of Biology, and Dr. Dan Strait, Professor of English, the three dialogue sessions comprising the symposium invited faculty into an active conversation.

An interview of Dr. Brammell and Dr. Strait conducted on October 22, 2020 by partial-sponsor, SEARCH at Asbury University, follows.

What did you talk about at the Faith & Science Symposium?

Dr. Brammell: We started by talking about our current interrelationship: our personal stories and how, up to this point in our careers, our faith has influenced our discipline, scholarship, and teaching. We read a chapter in a book titled *Joining the Mission*. It's addressed to faculty members at faith-based institutions and provides advice and insight on how to go about integrating your faith with your discipline. Then, we spent some time talking about future plans. What could we do better? Who are we as a university? How can we better accomplish that integration of our faith and discipline in a manner that sets us apart as a faith-based institution?

Dr. Strait: I started by talking a little bit about the background of the conversation that emerged between Dr. Brammell and me: the kinds of questions that he and I were asking each other, the differences, as well as the impasses, at various points, that we were experiencing. Part of that was learning how to talk to each other across disciplinary boundaries: I as a scholar-teacher in literature and he as a scholar-teacher in biology. There is a whole critical vocabulary that we were learning. I needed to see more from a scientific perspective, and Dr. Brammell, I think, was trying to see more from a humanities perspective. Then, I talked about how and why we decided not to have a symposium that was going to center on one specific, potentially controversial science issue and miss the opportunity of creating context for conversation and debate. What we decided to do instead was to have those hard conversations by establishing the narrative background for how these questions emerge in people's scholarly lives. So, we started the day by asking a couple of people to share their stories about how they have personally started to encounter, in their intellectual life and their spiritual life, and in some cases even in their personal life, these challenges faced by having to answer science questions in light of Christian belief.

What did you learn from the experience?

Dr. Strait: Since the very beginning of meeting with Dr. Brammell, I started to feel a new urgency about the fact that, while I have three degrees in English and I don't have any plans on getting a formal degree in science at this point (I think the world will be glad about that), I need to do everything within my ability, and within the context of my own intellectual life, to develop, at least as thoughtfully as possible, a view of science; and understand, by virtue of keeping open a number of important questions about what science does and how it works, its value to culture and society, its relationship to my own discipline. What I'm really trying to do is to feel a new urgency about knowing enough to stay in a thoughtful conversation in a liberal arts context, and to keep the conversation moving forward. In talking to Dr. Brammell, I started getting more interested in science again, which I think is exactly what should happen and I think when that conversation doesn't happen between and among colleagues, then sometimes that interest may be there, and it may have potential to grow, but it remains suppressed, because we remain happily in our areas, cut off from the wider conversation.

Dr. Brammell: It was encouraging to me to communicate with people from different disciplines on campus. We rarely get together and have intentional conversations about topics such as this. It's really encouraging to see that our colleagues are interested in these topics. We certainly didn't agree, there wasn't a universal view of this that was held, but it was very collegial and very intellectually stimulating to be able to converse with our colleagues about these topics and see what their views are. Like Dr. Strait said, I'm extremely encouraged by this experience to be interested in and learn about disciplines outside of my own and see the interconnections between science and all other disciplines.

Dr. Strait: And I think the other thing we were learning from each other as we were hearing some stories at the Symposium is a set of very universal pedagogical challenges, because regardless of our disciplinary interests, we are all in one way or another fielding questions from students in classrooms and labs, that are difficult, and that are not easily resolvable. And again, I think we need to show the students that we ourselves are lifelong learners. If there is any subject that will remind us over and over again of the fact that we'll never have exhaustive knowledge, one is science, and two is the humanities. We could spend our lifetime reading deeply in these areas only to be discovering new questions all the time. That's part of the exhilaration.

How does this event encourage more of these discussions among University faculty and is there a model that emerges from this event?

Dr. Strait: One thing that we are still quite concerned about is the unfortunate habit, probably at every school, particularly maybe smaller schools, to have these one-off events. We'll have a good day - the atmosphere was really good, it was really winsome, very collegial, as Dr. Brammell has said - but we will have one of these events and we'll all leave encouraged and even with renewed interest in these things, and then we lapse back into our demanding routines, which is perfectly understandable, but then we never actually have part two or three or four or five of these conversations. So, it can't be just a one-off event, where we go out there and feel really good about this conversation, without sustaining that conversation as part of the permanent, ongoing set of inquiries that this university should be very much about.

Dr. Brammell: I think it provides the initial spark that is needed, so there's the opportunity to begin to engage in these conversations. Since then, I've met once with two faculty members from other disciplines to have coffee on campus and talk about some of the issues that were brought up at the meeting. Our hope is that more of that will occur and be, as Dr. Strait said, this ongoing process on campus and we'll be more unified as a campus in these topics.

Dr. Strait: And I'll give you one example of how this happens. Coming off of this event, Dr. Shafer, our chemist, recently presented at Brown Bag on the subject of light: the science of light, the mystery of light, the inscrutability of light. I went more enthusiastically, because I'm connected now to Dr. Brammell's conversation. I've joked with Dr. Brammell that I've talked more to him in the last six months, for sure, than I had in the previous 11 years, which should be the most obvious benefit of doing something like this. To Asbury University's ethos, not only has this been constructive in the area of having conversation about faith and science, but it's also built a relational bond that has moved well beyond academics - fishing, family, other kinds of issues - and that's who we are as a whole-person community. So, we do our work within that context, but that context doesn't get strengthened if we're never talking to each other.

Is there more you would like to say about what you want to see come from this or what's next for Faith & Science at AU?

Dr. Brammell: We're excited about an additional event that's in the planning phase. In this event, we hope to bring in some very distinguished outside speaker to campus to talk about both science and philosophy and topics related to that and even about his grappling with faith and science. He's a quite a notable scientist, so we're really excited about that and the conversations that he will stimulate.

Dr. Strait: We're really excited about part two; a very intense and rich next step that takes us even more deeply into the some of the really substantive questions. What this did was it started to prepare the ground, however modestly, for this next event. SEARCH becomes a huge benefit to give traction in different ways to these particular academic events. This is a very concrete way in which we can begin to enroll students, initiate students, invite students into this kind of ongoing scholarly conversation. So, SEARCH is a great catalyzer. It's a great framework. It's a great platform to start disseminating and extending this conversation across campus to students and faculty.

Anything else that you would like to say?

Dr. Strait: We would like to see some kind of annual event that carries on this conversation. It would be great if we can have an endowed lecture series, so that we can have a queue of speakers for the next five years to come in and give one lecture during the day and then at a dinner we have part two of that lecture or a mini addendum to the lecture. I just think we're living in a time, and look, we're sitting here wearing masks, we're walking around as poster children of public health slash science related issues, and for us to sit here and think that we don't need to be thinking about science is absurd. I think I have a new urgency about that.

Dr. Brammell: It would be silly to think that we as a society have a good grasp on science, wouldn't it?