

COURIER-JOURNAL

• October 24, 1984 •

A supplement to Catholic newspapers published by the National Catholic News Service
1312 Massachusetts Avenue NW, Washington
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Faith Today

Exercising your potential

By Katharine Bird
NC News Service

During a recent trip to Africa, Father Edward Braxton visited an ancient tribe, the Masai, at their village outside Nairobi, Kenya. The priest, director of campus ministry at the University of Chicago, shared bread and beans with the tribespeople in their mud huts.

Then, Father Braxton said, a 14-year-old took him by the hand and led him off to see his goat herd. The young man told the priest, in the English he learned at a Christian school, that he didn't intend to cut his ear lobes as his tribe traditionally did.

Asked why, the youth replied, "Because I know only Masai do this." He added, "I see that if I stay here all I will do is be a herdsman. But there is a world much bigger than the Masai."

"Now that I can read and write I want to go to secondary school," he told the priest. "But I know I cannot do it by myself. We are fast friends now. Will you help me?"

Father Braxton says he looked at the earnest youth in his red smock and beads and thought how "incredible he is, given his circumstances." The theologian said he also realized that he had a unique opportunity to help this teen-ager. And, with more education and perhaps college, "there wouldn't be any stopping him."

Father Braxton indicated that for such a youth the road to a sterling future lies in education. However, developing his potential shouldn't mean losing his

identity as a black, the priest stressed.

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"Real education is having your being expanded to grasp the meaning of life and your potential and the contribution you can make to your community," Father Braxton elaborated.

Father Braxton, a black priest of the Chicago archdiocese, told of a young Puerto Rican he met at Chicago's Holy Name Cathedral. After eighth grade the boy dropped out of school and started working in a grocery store to help his parents make ends meet.

"I saw he desired to know more, so I encouraged him to go to high school" and get a part-time job, Father Braxton said. Then, when the boy was tempted to settle for a "quasi-managerial job in a drug store, I argued with him to stay in school, to keep developing his mind."

After a while, the young man took and interest in the legal problems that some Puerto Rican people were experiencing. He began asking legal questions, Father Braxton said. Gradually the young man recognized that he had a continuing interest in legal matters and decided to go to law school.

"Now he is a lawyer doing wonderful things for his people," Father Braxton said. In his view, that young man "came up from the bottom by getting a tremendous grasp on his potential" and how that potential related to people's needs.

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The man now credits the priest for his encouragement all down the line. But, Father Braxton says, "he puts too much on me. I was just a catalyst to help him pursue what was in him."

Human potential, Father Braxton reiterated, is the "capacity a person has to grow and improve, to recognize gifts and talents and to develop them to the fullest."

The crucial next step, he thinks, is "to read the signs of the time." This means looking at the world to see what is needed and then connecting those needs with one's particular gifts.

Father Braxton said he is convinced that "most humans have far more potential than they are aware of." Often an unusual circumstance triggers people into awareness of some special ability.

He told of a young Nigerian woman who studied at Harvard University. During a political upheaval in her country, her family was in a precarious position, possibly facing death. At first, unable to get reliable information about her family, Father Braxton said, the girl simply "disintegrated."

Then, helped by conversations with her friends and with him, the student calmed down, marshalled her inner resources and developed a systematic plan. She located and then approached the appropriate agencies to get information about what was happening to her family.

In doing so, "she tapped human potential she didn't know she had," Father Braxton said.

(Ms. Bird is associate editor of Faith Today.)



Human potential. How do you recognize it? Draw it out? Katharine Bird interviews Father Edward Braxton, who says that most people have more potential than they know what to do with.

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