

## Putting God to the Test

# God & the SAT

God is eager to enter the process not only of developing but also of testing every student's natural talents

Patricia Sisca Pace

**T**here has been a lot of uproar over the SAT in recent years. Universities, parents and students want to know what purpose it serves, questioning the ultimate worth of a college entrance exam that measures aptitude (what the student is capable of learning) rather than achievement (what the student has actually learned).

Much fallout has followed the inquisition, attended by a change in the test itself. In March 2005, the new SAT was unveiled. It revealed several modifications, but not enough

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to quell the debate of aptitude vs. achievement. Evidence suggests—when success is defined as completing college freshman year—that achievement may be the better predictor. On the other hand, if the test's goal is to identify natural talent in order to make sure that talent is given the opportunities and resources it needs to develop fully, then a measure of aptitude might be the way to go. So the war rages on, and I have taken a side.

I would like to suggest that a measure of aptitude that demands the creative use of learned information, evidenced in the SAT, is in accord with God's dream for humanity. My belief is based on the assumption that God is eager to enter the process not only of developing but also of testing every student's natural talents. Why not? After all, God crafted each precious gift precisely with the world's needs in mind, so why not enter the important step of measuring the development of those gifts?

Tests, by their very nature, are gateways in life's journey, part of a rite of passage into the next major phase of talent development and, as such, connect to the student's

unique purpose on this planet. How could God not enter that process? But, would God put a stake in such a testable claim? I believe so. And with that belief in my heart, I put God to the test.

## The Hypothesis

The hypothesis: God enters the standardized testing process to help students perform at their personal best.

To test my hypothesis, the first matter of business was to prepare my students because both God and humans contribute in a relationship based on partnership. The students' contribution naturally consisted of academic preparation, certainly enough to become familiar with the test. But to be more fully responsible to God, I believed the students needed to see the test and their performance on it within the truth of God's perspective, as opposed to society's tendency to yoke test scores to personal worth. Such a transcendent view required an approach radically different from the standard SAT seminar. For this part of the preparation, I selected the best wisdom in



Catholic spiritual tradition that was pertinent to the task.

- St. Ignatius of Loyola offers spiritual exercises that are both relevant and easily assimilated into test prep, so I taught my students an adapted version of his "Discernment of Spirits," equipping them to distinguish between helpful and harmful ways of perceiving both their feelings toward the test and their performance.
- To help students tap into the deep reserves of wisdom already residing within them and to ready that wisdom for the SAT essay, I adapted Jesuit Father George Aschenbrenner's "Consciousness Examen" for their use.
- To prepare their bodies for the long hours of testing and to open their minds to the role a healthy body plays in performance, I turned to the Medical Mission Sisters' focus on holistic healing.
- To bring into greater awareness the sacredness of every part of their lives and how each part, fully alive, contributes to their personal best performance on the SAT, I taught them how to apply the Benedictine charism of balance.

Using these charisms of the Jesuits, Medical Mission Sisters and Benedictines, I put together eight brief lessons that I offered to my students within a retreat atmosphere. I trusted that if they were given the opportunity to meet the SAT in a sacred space, allowed to see the beauty of the problems within the safe and secure arms of God and taught how to implement practical techniques from Catholic spiritual tradition, God would work through them and help them perform at their personal best. In short, if they lived up to their end of such a covenant, God would do the rest.

## How Did God Do?

I happily report that God passed the test. Using the upper end of each student's score continuum (generated by a prior PSAT test) as the goal score, the participants in this "SAT Retreat" exceeded their goal scores. Specifically, the students who participated in only the retreat increased their scores by 165 points, while the scores of those who also took an academic seminar increased by 275 points. I ran this experiment for two years at Cardinal Dougherty High School in Philadelphia, with the collaboration of Principal Mary Harkins. Harkins, who is now principal at Archbishop Wood High School in Warminster, Pennsylvania, is offering the SAT Retreat to the students there and reporting similar results.

## What the Results Mean

Based on these findings I suggest that the SAT Retreat trains young people how to implement a mechanism that Sue Monk Kidd writes about in her book, "The Secret Life of Bees." After humorously describing a young boy who complains about having a steel plate in his skull that prevents test answers from getting through to his consciousness, she writes:

*In a way, though, the boy was right. Every human being on the face of the earth has a steel plate in his head, but if you lie down now and then and get as still as you can, it will slide open like elevator doors, letting in all the secret thoughts that have been standing around so patiently, pushing the button for a ride to the top.*

As I understand Sue Monk Kidd, the stillness she describes is a state that allows access to the wealth of wisdom lying beneath the surface of consciousness. If it is true that

stillness can help access information stored in the brain—and evidence identifying a relationship between stress reduction and enhanced memory suggests it does—then Catholic spiritual tradition offers many practical techniques for students who want to learn how to generate such thought-provoking stillness. And for those who do, wisdom soon follows: a wisdom that includes, among other welcome surprises, the ability to solve tricky problems, as King Solomon discovered. As a matter of fact, among those "secret thoughts" that await rising to consciousness are the solutions to all of life's problems, every one of which puts natural ability to the test.

When a school's bottom line is test scores, caring administrators may bring God into the equation by suggesting to their students that they pray for help. However, these same administrators often make the mistake of leaving God out of the practical solutions, choosing instead to use limited time and resources on areas they believe are more germane to increasing scores, such as academic prep or quick fixes, like eating peppermints while testing. If people believe peppermints can raise scores, God deserves at least a chance.

My results show that God comes through, presenting an interesting challenge to administrators. Why not bring into the classrooms of Catholic high schools Catholic spiritual techniques that students can use to help them perform at their personal best on important tests?

Sure, religion is a subject with facts to be memorized, just like every other subject. But lived spirituality is much more than that, leaving Catholic school educators the task of providing their students with real experiences of practical spirituality, showing them how God weaves through *all* the other subjects taught in Catholic schools. Including test prep? Does God go even there? Yes, indeed. ■