

ACTA Higher Ed Now Podcast – Pano Kanelos & Michael Poliakoff – May 6, 2021

Michael Poliakoff ([00:00](#)):

Good morning. Welcome to Higher Ed now. I'm Michael Poliakoff, the president of the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, and it is our enormous privilege this morning to hold a conversation with Pano Kanelos, Dr. Pano Kanelos, the president of St. John's College. And he of course has been an active friend for some time. He gave a wonderful presentation at our Athena Round Table Conference two years ago. And today, we have the opportunity to talk more with him about his view of higher education, his tenure as the 24th president of St. John's College and his vision for what American higher education needs to move forward and to serve the nation as its responsibility.

Michael Poliakoff ([00:53](#)):

So with that, Pano, I'd like to start by asking you to talk a little bit about your leadership as the 24th president of St. John's, and noting, of course, that you have something really quite exciting ahead as you make plans for addressing higher education from an even larger and higher podium in the future? So with that, let me turn it over to you.

Pano Kanelos ([01:23](#)):

Well, first let me say, Michael, thank you for this invitation to have this conversation. I'm just delighted. It's one of my favorite podcasts as a listener, and just an honor to be here speaking with you and also to be speaking through and with an organization like ACTA, one of the great pillars of higher education and needed now more than ever. So my leadership as a 24th president of St. John's, for of all, it's sort of amazing that St. John's has had 24 presidents. I mean, it's a relatively ancient institution by American standards. It was founded in 1696 before there was a United States. It's the third oldest college in the country. So the kind of heritage at this place is thick and meaningful.

Pano Kanelos ([02:18](#)):

So the sense of stewardship when you move into a role like this is just profound. When I first arrived here, one of my colleagues, one of our best known tutors, Eva Brand, pulled me aside, and Eva's always had lots of advice for me, most of it totally profound. And she said, I won't do her accent, but she has the most charming German accent. And she said, "Pano, there's something you need to know about the presidency at St. John's because it's not like a presidency at other institutions. Is that okay?" Tell me more. She said, "At St. John's, there's a president and there's a dean. Those are the two primary leadership offices." And I said, "Yes." And she said, "They have different sorts of responsibilities, but they're equivalent in their importance." And I said, "Tell me more."

Pano Kanelos ([03:18](#)):

And she said, "The president is primarily responsible for preserving the existence of the college, and the dean is primarily responsible for preserving the essence of the college." And that really

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sort of set me straight. What is my role here as a president? To make sure that we keep the lights on and that the college continues to flourish. And that was a bit of a challenge for me because before this, I'd always been an academic, sort of straight academic. I was a dean for a few years, but a professor. So to come to St. John's where so much is about conversation and books and the life of the mind, it was a bit of adjustment for me to think of myself as the kind of caretaker of the institution.

Pano Kanelos ([04:12](#)):

But then I realized quickly that you can't be the president of St. John's College, and I think maybe any other college, by just being some sort of administrative manager because existence is not simply a matter of balancing accounts and raising money. It's about living and exemplifying the mission of the institution for the president. So my North Star here has always been the motto that we use as a college. I mean, St. John's, I think, offers the kind of paradigmatic liberal education, and it's embodied in the motto of the college, which is, "Facio liberos ex liberis libris libraque." Quite a tongue twister, but it translates from the Latin as, "I make free adults from children by means of books and a balance."

Pano Kanelos ([05:07](#)):

Most colleges, I don't think, paid very much heed to their mottoes, or at least they don't anymore, but at St. John's, the motto perfectly suits the mission. I mean, to be a truly mature human being is the cultivate one's freedom and to take responsibility for it. And a liberal education does this both by putting side-by-side books and a balance. What we mean by balance here is, of course, the scales that one uses in scientific measurement by putting the humanities and sciences in conversation with each other, beside each other.

Pano Kanelos ([05:43](#)):

So as I kind of absorbed this coming in, my job is to keep the college going, but also to protect and preserve the mission of the college. I learned very quickly that if I was going to be a leader here, my job was primarily to read, to converse, to teach, more importantly to learn, and to keep the lights on. And it has just been a tremendous privilege to be in this role.

Michael Poliakoff ([06:10](#)):

That is so beautifully said, and of course, St. John's, which is storied, wonderful institution, has been fortunate to have you. I do worry about the trajectory of academic leadership. In many ways, it's beginning to get too corporate to pick too much of a sense of the business aspect, crucial as that is, obviously, to keeping these complex institutions going, but when college leadership loses its touch with the reason for the existence of the institution, then it's likely to veer off path. And you bringing that wonderful, rich background in Shakespeare and a sense of what's valuable, what are the priorities in this short time that we have for students in college, whether undergraduate or graduate? That's really a wonderful gift to the world of education and to the nation.

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Michael Poliakoff ([07:19](#)):

And I actually loved the little evocation of children as well in St. John's motto. I hope I'm not saying too much, but I think of what Cicero said that if you don't know what happened before you were born, you're a child forever. And recognizing that we all have a trajectory that we have to follow, there are propaedeutic studies, things that get us ready for a higher level of study. And the way St. John's has actually taken up the responsibility, come to be an academic community that knows priorities, that's such a wonderful, wonderful message. I wish it was writ large across the nation.

Pano Kanelos ([08:14](#)):

I agree with you on all counts. I mean, I think the model that St. John's preserves and promotes is one that insists that, at the center of human flourishing is the asking of human questions, the fundamental human questions and the seeking of answers to those questions. We are responsible, we will become responsible adults when we take responsibility for answering the great questions in life. We need to learn not what to do, how to do it, when to do it, but why we do the things we do, why to engage in the things that we engage in. The why questions are at the heart of a true sort of education, and I think that's one of the things that has slipped away in higher education.

Pano Kanelos ([09:30](#)):

Sometimes I worry that higher education has lost all sense of what's really higher. I think that you can divide institutions today between, and I mean institutions of higher learning, between those that still have some confidence in transcendent things and those that don't. And a place like St. John's still has confidence in the transcendent. Not necessarily that the truth is out there and if you spend four years at St. John's, we're going to put a bow on it and hand it to you with your diploma, but the truth is out there, and it is our responsibility, as thinking human beings, to pursue that truth with vigor.

Pano Kanelos ([10:30](#)):

Once we let that slip, once we let slip away the notion that there is something called truth, even if it's perpetually evasive, it changes the tenor of education itself. If you follow the St. John's curriculum, which is roughly 200 of the greatest books ever written, you're constantly following others who are pursuing the thread of truth, and it inculcates in you that kind of passion for that. So I think more than anything, if St. John's is modeling something that's of value for education, it's that kind of dogged insistence that transcendence is something worth pursuing.

Michael Poliakoff ([11:22](#)):

I think you found something that's enormously important for all of higher education, which is that the answer is partly to be found in the process itself, and the way you do that so brilliantly at St. John's is through conversation that it's not so much a process of pouring knowledge

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through a funnel into students' ears or getting them to learn algorithms, but taking them through those difficult conversations, which is not only cognitively so enriching, but it's also modeling something that heaven knows higher education is losing and the nation's losing, the ability to disagree, debate and still recognize that we're all together in the search. And I just love the way, the couple of times I've been on the St. John's campus and have seen it in action, the way this is so cultivated. My hope is that those students will take that with them in whatever they do for the rest of their lives.

Pano Kanelos ([12:35](#)):

Michael, I think liberal education is conversation. I mean, our patron saint is Socrates, right? I mean, somebody who poked around Athens and grabbed people by whatever a lapel looks like on a toga and insisted that they talk with him. And he insisted on posing questions and then pressing and pressing and pressing knowing that neither his interlocked nor he would ever reach a conclusive answer. That's part of the freedom of a liberal education, that we allow our conversations to be unbounded, that conversations will go wherever they will because then the conversation itself is not about reaching an end, it's about the process, as you say. It's about the act of discovery. It's about finding along the way, the twists and turns that we couldn't have foreseen.

Pano Kanelos ([13:33](#)):

And I think when you think of education based upon, let's say, a lecture model, that moves in the opposite direction. A lecture presumes that there's somebody that holds some kind of knowledge, and they hold that firmly. They're qualified. They're an expert, and their job is to transfer that knowledge to a vessel, and that vessel is a student. But a true liberal education is not about the transfer of information, it's about transformation itself. And it's through that process that one becomes a better and more efficacious knower of things. I'll use maybe an [insolent 00:58:35] example, but I'm thinking of sports, and I'm thinking in particular, when I was a kid, I played little league baseball, and I had my fantasies of playing in the major leagues, complete futile.

Pano Kanelos ([14:39](#)):

But if you think about something, think about the way we learned sports, if I had sat down, if anybody sits down and they have the intention of reaching that goal, becoming a professional baseball player, and all you do is watch films about baseball, watch games, you take that information in lecture-style. And you think about it, you analyze it, you watch it, you'll never learn how to play. To learn how to play, you have to be engaged. You have to train the muscles. You have to involve yourself in the scrum of the game. In other words, learning is really doing. The most profound kind of learning involves praxis over [theoria 00:15:25], right? Practice over theory.

Pano Kanelos ([15:28](#)):

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Theory can fill in some of the gaps for us, but it's the doing where learning really takes hold in that kind of muscle memory, whether it's learning to be a baseball player or learning to be a seeker of wisdom. We need to develop the muscle memory that allows us to strengthen our faculties over time. And I'll say as kind of a side bar, as we talk about academy in general, I think one of the issues with the contemporary academy has been the prioritizing of theory over practice, the idea that ideas are at the forefront of learning rather than conversation. And that fixed ideas have already settled certain things for us, and education is kind of implementation of ideas, and we know that that's really simply another way of presenting ideology, fixed ideas. So I think education has to focus on the doing, on the activity of learning more than anything else.

Michael Poliakoff ([16:36](#)):

I was musing about this a little bit recently, and I'm curious to see how you would frame the conversation. So many of our institutions have basically grasped quickly at the newest and the latest theories, and of course, a theory is something that needs to be tested, tested against falsification. Scientists give us that wonderful model that the best scientist tries very hard to disprove his own theories because that's the way you get closer to that elusive truth. And I was thinking about this in terms of the very hot button issue of critical race theory, that is almost seems hubristic on the part of institutions to be enforcing a theory. What I'm not seeing is the conversation. How do we form the more perfect union, a more just, a more humane society? And surely, that can't be in dogmatism.

Michael Poliakoff ([17:53](#)):

Somehow, without having been on the St. John's campus for a while, I think it might be doing better than most in that it has a long, long legacy of people taking up very difficult, often painful, issues, painful issues that have been painful for human kind for centuries and being able to talk about them. Am I just being a little too starry-eyed here?

Pano Kanelos ([18:22](#)):

If you had said this to me about a year ago, I might feel that way, but I've had an experience in intervening time that aligns exactly with what you're saying. So yeah, St. John's absolutely is a place where civil discourse is alive and well and where we have one of the most ecumenical campuses in the country. The widest possible range of political perspectives, backgrounds, faith commitments, everything. Our faculty, unlike faculty in most places, it's a very politically balanced faculty. Then we also have scientists and humanists, and this is reflected in our student body, as well. How do we all come together in conversation? Because what we do is we talk about the larger human questions, not simply the way they're instantiated in our current politics.

Pano Kanelos ([19:31](#)):

So what is a human being? What is the good? What is suffering? What is beauty? Those larger questions give us the North Stars we need to aim at together. And in talking about those bigger

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questions, we start to learn how to talk to each other and to trust one another so that when we do sometimes descend into the weeds of everyday life and politics, we're a community that knows how to listen and be kind to one another already. So here's my example. This past fall, we have what are called preceptorials at St. John's, which are sort of our version of electives. Most of our curriculum is a fixed curriculum, but in the junior and senior year, students get to take one preceptorial semester, and the faculty will teach books that they're sort of moved to teach or that students as them to teach that aren't necessarily in the curriculum.

Pano Kanelos ([20:37](#)):

So last fall, I decided to teach a preceptorial on Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. I hadn't read the book since college. I was moved to return to it. I thought it something that would engage the students with very contemporary questions. So I arranged my preceptorial. The students signed up for it. And then I started re-reading the book in advance of our class, and I thought, "Oh my God. What have I done?" I had forgotten how absolutely provocative this book is. I mean, it is a book that is filled with horrific violence. It's filled with sexual assault. I mean, every kind of taboo is present, every hot button issue related to race is there. And I thought, "Oh my gosh, this is just going to... How am I going to talk about all these things?"

Pano Kanelos ([21:41](#)):

Especially last fall when young people in particular were really agitated about many of our social and cultural issues. I thought, "I don't know that I have the skill to do this, the skill to lead this conversation." And I'd also never taught... This had to be online, this class. I'd never taught anything online. I thought, "Oh my God, we're not even going to be shoulder-to-shoulder, face-to-face." I was really intimidated, I have to say. So the very first class we had, I just shared that with the students. I said, "You all need to know that I'm scared. I'm feeling very vulnerable. I'm very concerned that I've set a task for us at a very fraught time to talk about a very fraught book. And I'm concerned that even in this community, that the issues might be so electrically charged that we may not find productive ways to talk about this."

Pano Kanelos ([22:43](#)):

And so I said, "I have only one rule for our discussion. And that is that we lead with grace, that as we converse with each other, if we become anxious about what somebody says or angry or disagree, that our first impulse is to be gracious towards one another and lead with that and ask a question or ask somebody to explain. But let's try to be as gracious as possible." I have to say, this course, this preceptorial, was the best course I've taught in years and years. The students, and this was a class that had students of different political perspectives, from different racial backgrounds, I mean, the whole mix in there. They handled this challenging work during a challenging time with such maturity, with such probity.

Pano Kanelos ([23:47](#)):

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There were times when you could see somebody's, the temperature rising, even on the screen. Somebody said something. But everybody kind of breathed and took their time talking about things. I mean, it was a transcendent experience for me. I was humbled. I mean, they did a job with this text that they did better with it than I could've ever hoped to do myself. I learned so much. So if we can cut and paste that and share with the world, I think we would have done everybody a service.

Michael Poliakoff ([24:24](#)):

Pano, there's a lump in my throat. That is so beautiful. It is my profound hope that this is what we can recover instead of the gotcha culture that seems to be widespread, bias response teams, a culture not of openness and dialog but of reactivity. Going back to our spiritual mentor, Socrates, I had occasion to reread the Euthydemus, and I was thinking, my first question, it's been years since I looked at it, why is Socrates wasting his time with these two outrageous, irritating, know-it-all, Sophists who were just playing with words? And I thought, no, this is what the great teacher does, responds to arrogance with a question, responds to closed mindedness with a challenge.

Michael Poliakoff ([25:35](#)):

What you just described is just so marvelous. I was thinking back to the last time I saw a class at St. John's with the storied Peter [Calcavage 00:25:54] leading a class on Descartes, and there were all the reconstructions of the ancient apparatus. So the students had to see what the process was for Descartes, and of course, Peter himself, not out of any pretension but out of modeling good practice, was reading from the French text as the students were using their translations. So it was modeling for them that you don't take the easy way out, that when we're trying to understand the past, we do it empathetically. We try as best as possible to get inside the culture itself, which of course led me to another realization about St. John's.

Michael Poliakoff ([26:42](#)):

You all still insist on language, modern and ancient, which is become so rare within higher education and is, at least in my mind, the only true multiculturalism.

Pano Kanelos ([26:58](#)):

That's right. Yes. I want to say, as a side bar before we talk a bit about language, you're right about Socrates. He approached very difficult people with patience and a kind of insistence on the most important things. But remember what happened to Socrates. So there ultimately can be a cost for engaging in those ways, but I don't think anybody disputes that it's a cost worth paying. Languages are so important at St. John's largely because we are creatures of logos. I mean, we're language bearing creatures. Our experience of the world, if you think about it, is really processed through language constantly. Our experience might even be composed of language, people who think that.

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Pano Kanelos ([27:56](#)):

So learning other languages shines a light back on ourselves, on our own limitations, on our ways of understanding and simultaneously, I think, reveals new kind of vistas to us. So it's sort of like when you can start using a language with some facility that's not your native language, it's like using a different operating system, and it has a profound effect on the way that we think about ourselves in the world. Again, I'm full of really horrible analogies, but one that comes to mind in this case is imagine every day, the way that you get around is you drive a Toyota. That's how you get from point A to B. What happens if you swap out that Toyota for a bicycle or a horse? You're still getting from point A to B, but your experience is totally different. It's a different pace. It's slower. You'll notice different things. You'll feel physically different as you're in transit.

Pano Kanelos ([29:11](#)):

And I think a different language has that effect on us. It moves us through communication in a similar fashion, but it has different kind of impact on us. So at St. John's, we begin with Greek. We spend two years with Greek. Many of the reasons behind that, we used to actually do a year of Greek, a year of Latin, a year of German and a year of French, but we couldn't get deep enough into the languages in one year. So we moved to two years of Greek, then two years of French. And the reason we chose Greek is because Greek is farther away from English than Latin is, just in terms of its structure, syntax, et cetera. So it had more of that kind of displacing effect as students were learning it, fewer students were familiar with it. But also because it's a portal into the earliest texts that we read.

Pano Kanelos ([30:06](#)):

We begin with... Our first year's almost entirely composed of works from Ancient Greece. So not only are we reading the text of the ancient Greeks, but we're trying to use the language that was their tool. And I think that doing that, especially with ancient languages, helps us to see a world that's both radically different from our own yet organically connected to our own. So I think the role of language at St. John's is not simply to, let's say, expand our cultured horizons, but to compel us to slow down, to think about the elements of language in a purposeful way, as we translate, to go through the rigors of translation and to realize, in some ways, that language is not as secure as we think it is.

Pano Kanelos ([31:10](#)):

I mean, when you're faced with translating a poem, for example, and you realize the multiplicity of options you have for translation, you begin to realize how mercurial language can be. And I think that's something that we all have to think carefully about because we use language really as our primary medium of not just communication but of sociability. So language is really... Our encounters with language at St. John's are really, I think, helping us get underneath the hood of our experience as human beings and seeing how all the different mechanisms work.

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Michael Poliakoff ([31:58](#)):

Again, absolutely lovely, lovely set of insights. It makes me think paradoxically of the practical side of the St. John's education. I read a book some years ago by Robert Hagstrom called *Investing; The Last Liberal Art*, and it has a full chapter on St. John's as the ideal preparation for someone who's going to work in finance. And I thought, compliments to Robert Hagstrom to recognize that that process, that cognitive discipline of seeing ambiguity, nuance, developing a real attention for detail, which is the quintessential habit that makes you successful in Greek, its absence making you not successful, a hyper-inflected language. This is really something that is so wonderfully transferable, and I know you have many stories of what Johnnies have done after this education that more thoughtless people would dismiss as something that's really completely irrelevant to the challenges of the outside world.

Pano Kanelos ([33:29](#)):

I mean, the first thing is that I think sometimes there is an assumption that a liberal arts education and a St. John's education is exclusively composed of what we think of as the humanities, that all we do is sort of read works of philosophy and literature, but a real liberal arts education and the education here is a balance of the arts of language, which in medieval times was characterized as the Trivium, and the arts of numbers, the Quadrivium, that the qualitative arts, the things we think of as the humanities, have to be in dialog with the quantitative arts, math and the sciences, and that they each inform the other. So we do so much math and science at St. John's that you can actually claim to have a degree in mathematics. Now, we don't have separate degrees at St. John's. You just have a Bachelor of Liberal Arts, but accreditors will allow students to claim that they have a degree in mathematics and/or a degree in the natural sciences when they graduate St. John's because we have to integrated that into the education in general.

Pano Kanelos ([34:56](#)):

Now, we do it in a very St. John's way. We read. We don't, again, have lectures and power points, we actually read great books that have generated many of the concepts that we use in math and science. So for example, the very first thing you do in your freshman math tutorial is you read Euclid's *Elements*, and you read the book, and then we talk about it. We have a discussion about the book, and then later on work towards proofs.

Pano Kanelos ([35:24](#)):

I'll tell a brief story that kind of illustrates the point that you were making originally, and that is, last year, so again, this was before COVID sort of dispersed everybody, I was walking across campus at the beginning of the school year. And I see this young man trying to get into one of the dormitories with his ID card. It's one of the swipe things, and it's not working. He needs some help. So I walk up to him. He was unfamiliar to me. So I assumed he was a new student, and he was sort of this tall, striking looking young man of East Asian descent. So I helped him

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out, and as I always do with our students, I introduced myself, and I said, "Can you tell me a bit about yourself and where you're from and how you came to St. John's? What was your journey here?"

Pano Kanelos ([36:15](#)):

I was always interested in students, where they started and how they've come. It was so interesting. It turns out that he'd grown up in Romania, but his parents had been immigrants from China. He had grown up in Romania. So he was fluent in Romanian, fluent in German, fluent in Mandarin, and had found St. John's through a contact. I said, "That's really [inaudible 00:36:38]." I said, "So what made you want to come here? Ultimately, why'd you come?" And he says, "Oh, I want to study computer science. I want to write code." And I thought, I'm thinking, "Oh my God. This poor, brand new freshman has traveled across the world and didn't look at our catalog, somehow thinks that we're like every other college and we're going to have a computer science department, and he's going to major in computer science." And I thought I just better break it to him right now.

Pano Kanelos ([37:04](#)):

I mean, classes haven't started. Maybe there's chance he can get his deposit back. And his name is Chen. I said, "Chen, you know we don't formally study computer science here. We don't even have computer labs." And he said, "No, no, no. I'm very aware of that." He said, "I want to write computer code, but I realized that we don't write computer code for machines. We write it for human beings, and I want to learn what it means to be a human being before I become a computer scientist." And I just wanted to hug the guy. I'm like, "Can I just box you up?" That to me is the distilled spirit of both St. John's and of liberal education that the foundation of all these wonderful things we can do with our life, whether it's in computer science, finance, making wine as many of our Johnnies have done, writing books, being a diplomat.

Pano Kanelos ([38:04](#)):

The foundation begins with asking the questions about what it means to be a human being and then radiating outward from that. So yes, I think you can go in any direction with this sort of education.

Michael Poliakoff ([38:18](#)):

I also want to talk with you a little bit about heritage. Of course, you are a Shakespearean scholar. You published a book on Shakespeare and the stage, and you organized an interdisciplinary Shakespeare studies program when you were at Loyola. These are great contributions to the humanities. It's been a passion for you, and I quickly disclose that I have been, in print, accused of [bardolotry 00:38:52], of worshiping the Bard. And I'm perfectly willing to say yes, guilty as charged, not as devoted a worshiper as I should be. I don't read quite as much as I'd like, but what intrigues me is how many institutions have really abandoned the birth rite.

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Michael Poliakoff ([39:17](#)):

There was that notorious moment at University of Pennsylvania when the students took the portrait of Shakespeare down from the department office, which their mentors had said they intended to do for some time. What do they do? Replace with some kind of Xerox of Audre Lord, contemporary writer. And of course, Penn got very defensive and said, "We still teach Shakespeare." The fact is their English majors are not required to take a course in Shakespeare there. All kinds of things they can take for their pre-1600 requirement. In many ways, they really have, at least, moved to the back burner the Bard, in some cases probably even a little more ruthlessly than that.

Michael Poliakoff ([40:12](#)):

Where do you see the importance of great books? Obviously, you're leading a college that has devoted itself to great books. What about the rest of the institutions? How can they reclaim what they are losing?

Pano Kanelos ([40:35](#)):

So first I would maybe frame it a little bit differently. Rather than think of it as a heritage that we have, I would think of it as an inheritance, and inheritance that's available to everybody. So Shakespeare in particular, but other great books are the birth rite of everyone. I was in Korea a few years ago. I'd been invited by the Minister of Education to talk about liberal arts education. They were very interested in integrating more liberal arts education into the curriculum of Korean universities. So in one of the conversations I was having with somebody we're talking about, what kind of curriculum, what kind of books would be on a reading list if you were doing this in Korea, and this fellow who's a Korean professor said, "Well, we'd start with Plato and Aristotle."

Pano Kanelos ([41:29](#)):

And I said, "Well, that's really interesting to me because people think of that as a Western tradition, but this is Korea. Why would you start there?" And he laughed at me. The West doesn't own this tradition. This is the world's inheritance. And I thought, "That's right." I thought that's right. I think what's happening institutionally, look, guilty as charged in terms of bardolatry myself, of course, but of all the works of the Western tradition, Shakespeare I think is probably the least in need of protection. I mean, there are more productions of Shakespeare today, more films, more experience of Shakespeare than there have ever been in 400 years.

Pano Kanelos ([42:23](#)):

So Shakespeare's alive and well, just not sitting as comfortably in the academy proper. So I have confidence that Shakespeare will rebound back into the academy at some point. I worry about other writers more. And I think... You have to let me go on a little bit of a Shakespeare rant since you mentioned Shakespeare.

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Michael Poliakoff ([42:48](#)):

Please.

Pano Kanelos ([42:49](#)):

Because I think this is how... Explaining what I think to be the magnetic quality of Shakespeare, I think might stand in for what I think is so magnetic about what we think of as a great book in general. Why are people still attending to Shakespeare even when they don't have to, even when it's not a requirement? Why are they still going to plays? Why are they putting on productions? Why are they making films? Why are they reading? Why are they obsessed with the sonnets? I think just what Shakespeare does is he's mastered his form, and he's mastered technique. And that technique is something akin, let's think of landscape painting.

Pano Kanelos ([43:41](#)):

What does a landscape painter do? You transfer a scene from the material world onto a canvas, and you can only cover so much of it. So there's a frame around it. So you create a kind of focus on that particular scene within the frame for the viewer. But what the mind of the viewer does is it extends that landscape beyond the frame ad infinitum. So through that one particular rectangle of a scene, the entire world is present in the imagination of the viewer. So you actively, from a piece, imagine the whole. And moreover, as you're doing that, you the viewer are included in the landscape because you're there. I mean, you're there in some sort of cognitive, imaginative sense as the viewer. So you're part of this landscape that is elsewhere.

Pano Kanelos ([44:40](#)):

I think that's what Shakespeare does with his plays. What he does is he focuses attention intensively on a concentrated element of the human experience. So for example, in the Scottish Plays, ambition. In Romeo and Juliet, it might be the rebellious exclusivity of young love. In Midsummer Night's Dream, might be the dynamic of dominance and submission at the heart of romantic relationships. He takes us and without being heavy-handed about it, he makes us focus on those particular ideas, questions, themes and then fills in the whole world for us.

Pano Kanelos ([45:22](#)):

So for example, in Othello, the theme is jealousy. Othello's jealousy, the green-eyed monster, Jealousy. But what he does in doing this, he doesn't just give us the opportunity to reflect on jealousy, he makes us think about ourselves in the process. That very phrase, the green-eyed monster, gives us a clue. How one sees has impact upon how one experiences one's internal and external life. So what does Othello do? He asks for ocular proof of Desdemona's infidelity. What he knows of Desdemona doesn't quite match up with what he's hearing about her from Iago. So he says, "Show me. Give me something to see. Give me ocular proof."

Pano Kanelos ([46:17](#)):

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So Iago very cleverly provides a handkerchief, and we see our Othello... And we, as we're watching this happen, realize how Othello has been manipulated. We're outside of it. And we're like, "No, Othello! Don't fall for that trick. Remain steadfast to Desdemona." Just because you see that, what you see isn't matching up with the truth. Here's where Shakespeare pulls us into the landscape. What have we done while we're watching the play from the very beginning? We have been presented, our eyes have been presented a character, Othello, who is physically different from the other characters in a play. We make judgements about him through our ocular capacity. From the moment he's on stage, and this is why a stage version of Othello is so powerful, there's something, our eyes are telling us there's something different about him.

Pano Kanelos ([47:19](#)):

And then we imbue him with a set of characteristics that are ocular, superficial, without really knowing who he is. In other words, we make the same mistake about Othello, and the other characters in the play do this as well, that he makes about Desdemona. And in the end, the tragedy of Othello is that Othello comes to see himself through our eyes. The play ends, almost the very last thing he says is, "Set you down this." He's in front of everybody. He's learned the truth that he's been fooled. He's making a final statement as he's kind of holding a knife in front of the Venetian citizenry here, and he says, "Set you down this and say besides that in Aleppo once where a malignant and a turbaned Turk beat a Venetian and traduced the state. I took him by the throat, the circumcised dog, and smote him thus."

Pano Kanelos ([48:31](#)):

And as Othello says that, he stabs himself. So Othello in this moment is both the insider and the outsider, the Turk and the one defending Venice. He's the killer and the killed. And that [inaudible 00:48:45] is the fundamental tragedy that he ultimately sees himself in a way that others have mistakenly seen him all along. Sorry for the long discourse here, but what Shakespeare teaches us in this play is that every work of art, every great work, every great book is not about the author. It's not about the text. What makes the work great is that it draws us into it and compels us to look more deeply at who we are. Any book that can do that is a great book.

Pano Kanelos ([49:25](#)):

So our curriculum at St. John's is assembling 200 of those books that have the capacity to make us as reflective as we can be as human beings and then to transform who we are through that process.

Michael Poliakoff ([49:42](#)):

Transformative really is the word there in every possible aspect of the development of the brain and the development of the soul. This is of course a great inspiration. As you look outward knowing that you're going to moving on to something very ambitious and very large and ACTA looks forward to celebrating that as the plans crystallize, what's your vision for the nation for

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higher education, for the role of the liberal arts, and in particular, addressing a growing crisis in this country, a polarization that may not be unique but is certainly at a remarkably high level of virulence, inability to have civil discourse, the breakdown of the normal confines of search for the truth of reliance on evidence? We could go on listing the things that are there and the recognition that, as we often say in a little phrase at ACTA, what happens on campus doesn't stay on campus. Higher education has a profound effect on the way people will behave.

Michael Poliakoff ([51:14](#)):

So with all of that, please share a sense as you look out both in terms of what you intend to do and what the nation needs.

Pano Kanelos ([51:31](#)):

One of Lincoln's insights was that freedom is something that we have to attend to carefully and sometimes revive. Lincoln spoke of a new birth of freedom emerging out of the Civil War of his time. I think that that's where we are today, that we need to remind ourselves of what it means to be a free human being. Our democracy depends upon us recommitting to the fundamental notions of liberty, and I would say higher education has to reinvest itself in securing the freedoms that are at the heart of what we call a liberal education and a democratic society, freedom of inquiry, freedom of expression, and freedom of conscience.

Pano Kanelos ([52:50](#)):

Those should be cultivated passionately at any institution that calls itself an institution in higher education. In fact, I think cultivating those freedoms is what qualifies us to say that we are institutions of higher education. It puts the higher in higher education. Those freedoms, as we know, are really predicated upon civil discourse, on allowing ourselves to have conversations with each other that are mutually beneficial. I would say that there are three elements to civil discourse that we have to recognize and then implement if we're really going to kind of pull ourselves out of that current tension that we find ourselves in and to engage in truly civil discourse.

Pano Kanelos ([53:46](#)):

And what I mean by civil discourse is not polite conversation. We tend to think of civility just sort of meaning polite to each other, not strangling one another. I mean, that's all great. We need that, but real civil discourse is how civil society talks to itself so that we can continue to promote the good life together, to bring in... How do we talk to ourselves towards a common end, towards a common good? How do we bring those various perspectives together in a way that's productive and moves us forward? And the fundamental conditions that we need to fulfill for that are three.

Pano Kanelos ([54:29](#)):

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First of all, intellectual humility. We are, each of us, on this planet for a very short while. We show up, we know very little. We learn a few things along the way, but there's so much that we don't know, much, much more than we do know. I mean, step into any library and look at all the shelves. Think about what effort it would take to read every book in the library, what's humanly possible, and you realize how narrow our capacity for knowledge and understanding is. That should engender in us humility that we should have opinions and we should try to know things but we should hold those opinions gingerly, and we should attend to the opinions of others. So humility is key.

Pano Kanelos ([55:17](#)):

The second element is if we're going to converse together, would have to recognize the fundamental dignity of all the participants in the conversation. We are all, I used the phrase creatures of logos. We are all equivalently imbued with logos, equivalently imbued with reason, with however one defines a soul. We all have this together, and that's why we can find a common good, but we have to recognize and acknowledge the dignity of everybody who we're in conversation with.

Pano Kanelos ([55:54](#)):

And then the third thing is an absolute passion for truth. So we might have intellectual humility and recognize our limitations, but we should have a passion for continuing to pursue that North Star, continuing to pursue that evasive truth, continuing to not let ourselves be frustrated when we don't quite get there every time we try to find an answer to our question. We have to continue to press ahead. And what civil discourse entails is our pressing ahead together, our pressing ahead towards common goals. So my work, it has been up to this point and will continue to be to promote these principles, to continue to advocate for the principles of freedom that are at the heart of our society, that should be at the heart of our institutions of higher learning and the principles of civil discourse.

Pano Kanelos ([56:57](#)):

And I intend to do that through existing institutions and, let's say, through inauguration of new institutions as necessary. I hope everybody will stay tuned.

Michael Poliakoff ([57:12](#)):

Pano, thank you. This has been inspiring conversation. I look forward to sharing it with all of our active friends. You make me think, in closing actually, it's popped into my mind. Years and years ago, I read some selections from the church father Gregory of Nyssa, the Christian Platonist. Somewhere in there he said that true satiation consists of never being satisfied, and what you put in front of us is that challenge that we are all seekers. We need to be seekers in good faith, and if we hold onto that, as you put it, as a North Star, there really is a lot of hope that we have extraordinary things in front of us and that we can realize them.

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Michael Poliakoff ([58:10](#)):

So all of your friends at ACTA wish you the greatest of success not just because we like and admire you but because this will also be something that will be of tremendous service to the nation and to the world. Thank you for taking the time to be with us.

Pano Kanelos ([58:27](#)):

It has been an absolute pleasure. Thank you so much, Mike, and thank you to everybody at ACTA for all the wonderful and very important things that you do. Thank you.