

Opinion Piece for the Chronicle of Higher Education

The Vanishing Heart of Higher Education

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Walking through the campus of a great university or college is what it must have been like to walk through the ancient temple Acropolis of Athens in its heyday. The monumental architecture, the streaming of thousands of people, the cyclic enactment of time-honored rituals, all of which are consecrated to an intangible reality, together conspire to convince us that here, in these halls of learning and contemplation, the deepest and most precious treasures of our civilization will be transmitted to the young minds and hearts of our children. What greater privilege exists than to participate in this pageant of inquiry, teaching and study? And, yet, over the last two decades it has become increasingly clear to me that by a remarkable sleight of hand, the very core of that transmission has been carefully identified, skillfully removed, and quietly disposed of.

Higher education concerns the mastery of knowledge, of methods of inquiry, and the skills of expression, but these are inevitably organized around a guiding principle, used to a particular end. We are good at transmitting mastery, but poor at handling the question of principles, ideals, the moral and spiritual aspirations that define a humane civilization. Others have been more attentive to what I think is the heart of education. We can learn from their example.

In 1990, after 50 years of struggle, Nelson Mandela, walked away from twenty-seven years in prison as a free man and future president of South Africa. He was educated as only few of his race were in Africa. That which sustained and guided Mandela and the ANC in their “long walk to freedom” was not, however, his academic education. This much is clear from his first protest which concerned his election as class president at Africa’s only black college. Because of voting irregularities he had refused to assume the office to which he had been elected, even when told by the

college's white president that such action would result in his expulsion. Already then Mandela was willing to face harsh reprisal for the sake of an ideal. Ejection from college threw Mandela into the heated political arena of Johannesburg where oppression was far more pernicious, one which again Mandela faithfully fought for decades. What animated those long years of struggle? We sense it in his autobiography while witnessing his daily debates with ANC colleagues about the course of action they should follow, about what was right and what wrong, and the tactics that would lead to their eventual triumph. While they might disagree concerning many particulars, they never doubted the fundamental value of the debate. Like Socrates they were arguing the details of the Good, not whether it existed at all, and like him they were willing to act and to suffer the consequences.

That to which Mandela held through decades was alike in kind to the reality that has sustained the likes of Mahatma Ghandi, Martin Luther King, Vaclav Havel, Aung San Suu Kyi, Rigoberta Menchu, or the Dalai Lama. Take away every outer means of action through exile, incarceration, even death; threaten them with the power of an army, or withhold from them the wealth of industry, and it has little effect. For one cannot touch the source of their work in this way. It ultimately does not stem from material resources or might, but from an immaterial and inviolable wellspring that, ironically, increases its effectiveness in proportion to its oppression. Moreover, this force is recognizable and communicable; able to animate thousands, even millions to absurd, and apparently hopeless acts of resistance. And it is precisely this invisible and immaterial reality which becomes the axis around which civilization defines itself. South Africa, the Czech Republic and Tibet-in-exile, indeed all nations, are what they are because of the invisible moral and spiritual capital contributed by countless individuals. The tragedy of Bosnia is the telling counterexample where the moral capital of a diverse population had been so brutally manipulated or exterminated by calculating bureaucrats who believed in nothing but themselves, that the force of ethnic hatred became the defining "moral" axis for the region by default.

Strangely, it is exactly these essential but immaterial dimensions to the world that have been systematically eliminated from the academy. The moral ideal that sustained Mandela in prison

or Ghandi in the face of British soldiers is all too easily converted by us, through the magic of a modern nominalism, into a socially-constructed projection with which we can play language games in communities of discourse. This is the brilliant means by which we identify, remove and dispose of the embarrassing earnestness of our students, as well as the aspirations of history's greatest figures from St. Augustine to Yitzhak Rabin. All too often we handle the defining issues of human existence only abstractly, only from a distance and with an intellectual sophistication which masks our basic inadequacy.

Several years ago an Amherst College student came into my office furious and in tears. Her first-year seminar on "Food" was dealing with the problems of world hunger, and throughout the week she had become increasingly confused and angry. She had grown up as a peasant in rural Portugal, only learning to read while a house servant at age 16. By 19 she was one of only a few women studying at the University of Kuwait, and at 21 she was volunteering in Ethiopia to work in the refugee camps during the worst starvation. Now, fresh from that experience, she was in an Amherst class where the concept and fact of hunger was being dissected according to proper post-modern methods of historical, economic and sociological analysis, and this by students and professors who had never seen hunger, must less felt it themselves. Yes, she had struggled against every adversity to come to Amherst in order to learn, but why was learning so disembodied, so disconnected from the life it sought to illuminate? Is it possible to understand hunger having never heard the feeble cry of a starving child or held them as they slipped away? And if these experiences are not had personally, then empathetically, by giving time, attention and thought to precisely the toughest parts of life.

Each week she would tutor immigrant Cambodian refugee children, and send books to her village for a little school she helped found. These moral actions had no place in her education, or more accurately said, they had everything to do with her education but could find no relation to her studies at Amherst College. In this matter Amherst agreed with Derek Bok's position that service should be performed outside the university, which implies it can serve no real purpose inside. [check the reference from Good Society]. Civil rights, world art, genocide, abuses and achievements

of every kind are all examined, and often by deeply caring faculty and students, but always under the distorting light of a curious, myopic and (I would hold) erroneous conception of objectivity and freedom that paralyzes compassion among students and faculty alike.

My Portuguese student would have understood the recent Harvard graduate who, in his commencement address said to his classmates, teachers and relatives, “They [the faculty] tell us that it is heresy to suggest the superiority of some value, fantasy to believe in moral argument, slavery to submit to a judgment sounder than your own. The freedom of our day is the freedom to devote ourselves to any values we please on the mere condition that we do not believe them to be true.”¹ Contrast these words with those of Vaclav Havel from the opening to his Summer Meditations:

As ridiculous or quixotic as it may sound these days, one thing seems certain to me: that it is my responsibility to emphasize, again and again, the moral origin of all genuine politics, to stress the significance of moral values and standards in all spheres of social life, including economics, and to explain that if we don’t try, within ourselves, to discover or rediscover or cultivate what I call “higher responsibility,” things will turn out very badly indeed for our country.

Havel is aware that in the judgment of our greatest institutions of higher education, it is ridiculous and quixotic to affirm the moral origin of political and economic life, and to advocate the cultivation of a “higher responsibility.” Yet he persists in doing so, again and again. He is well-practiced in speaking dangerous and ridiculous thoughts. But then the record he is concerned about is what he calls “the memory of Being,” not the record as printed on the pages of history books, newspapers or academic journals. It provides for him the metaphysical ground for moral judgment, the ground whose very existence we in the universities increasingly deny.

An entirely parallel development has taken place in the sciences. Here too the essential has been made to vanish. We are

¹ Quoted in The Good Society, by Robert N. Bellah et al, p. 44.

not surprised when physicists proudly declare they on the verge of discovering the “theory of everything.” They (or perhaps I should say we, since I am a physicist also) have been making similar announcements for two centuries at least. But I find the current explosion of interest in consciousness studies -- with its attendant explanations of everything we sense, feel and think -- a decidedly curious affair.

From the time of Hobbes until very recently, consciousness simply did not exist in polite academic company, not in any significant sense of the term anyway. More recently, with the advent of neuroscience and brain mapping, consciousness and subjective experience have been rehabilitated. Although by an altogether fascinating bit of philosophical sophistry most philosophers of mind, cognitive scientists, and all proponents of strong AI still maintain that the neural correlates of conscious experience are the only reality; that is, brain states correlate with a “phantom” consciousness only. The MRI machine produces a brain picture correlated, for example, with pain. The felt pain, we are told, is not really real, only the neural action is real, which of course we only learn about through the subjective (and therefore unreal) experience of reading the MRI picture in the first place. Every time I debate this view with a proponent I have the strange experience of someone passionately committed to, and brilliantly arguing for the position that their thoughts, feeling, convictions and all other subjective experiences (or “qualia”) do not exist, including of course everything they have just been saying and thinking with such conviction. Doesn’t this strike you as somehow perverse, if not self-defeating?

At a meeting I organized entitled, “Is Consciousness Explained?” with philosophers Daniel Dennett and Michael Lockwood, and neuroscientist Francisco Varela, Dennett opened his lecture by saying that as divergent as the opinions would be, the audience had nothing to fear, because all three presenters were materialists. I appreciated his candor, but I had hoped for a more open-minded meeting.

As with moral discourse, so too with consciousness. Having successfully identified the embarrassing element, namely the possibility that we possess an essential but immaterial nature, we have excised it and disposed of it as a phantom or illusion. Moreover, this truth is purportedly discovered via scientific

analysis and careful philosophical reflection (using phantom minds, of course).

Fortunately we all at least subconsciously know better. We drive cars and raise our children as if our subjective experience of them and of oncoming traffic really mattered. Of course, you and I can rehearse the account given by strong-AI enthusiasts of meaningful actions. My purpose here is not to engage that debate, but to point out how little it is engaged at all within the academy (with a few important exceptions) because there is simply no tolerance for a competing view. A true competing view would give ontological status to mind: it would seriously entertain the possibility of an immaterial basis for consciousness and devise research strategies to explore that hypothesis. At a minimum it would develop a rigorous, phenomenological, first-person methodology that integrated the results of modern cognitive neuroscience with carefully evaluated subjective experience. But especially in the research institutions of America this position is an anathema. The final word is telling. An anathema is pronounced by an ecclesiastical authority and accompanied by excommunication. Such is the usual verdict of the academy on one of its members who has strayed too far from the perceived wisdom. Am I being harsh? Not at all. Following a talk on the anthropic principle by a distinguished physicist and author, a physics colleague leaned over to me and said, "One step more and he should be drummed out of the physics community." While I have little sympathy with the anthropic principle, I appreciated the speaker's courage in broaching difficult issues. One could multiply such cases endlessly.

I find it infinitely paradoxical that we have set up so many hurdles to free inquiry, and in the very institutions purportedly dedicated to the ideal of clearing them away. In academic research and publication, one is actually free only within a very circumscribed arena. Like a zoo animal, you may explore whatever corner of the cage you want. Reaching further is all too often rewarded with stern consequences. If you lack tenure the solution is clear; if tenured, then professional isolation is a potent response. Under the stress of intellectual isolation most become embittered and leave the university.

When development of a moral life and the possibility for free inquiry no longer finds sustenance in an institution, that life must

transfer itself to another host. The pattern is an old one. In?? century Paris the cathedral school at Notre Dame grew trenchant in its resistance to new philosophical streams entering Europe that stemmed from pagan Greece. As a consequence the Left Bank of the Seine became home to an alternative educational venture where students from many regions would gather on streets covered with straw to hear forbidden lectures and engage in forbidden discussions in the only language they shared. In the "Latin Quarter," in the very shadows of Notre Dame de Paris, a staff of renegade freelance faculty taught the like of Thomas Aquinas. In this manner the tender beginnings of the Sorbonne took root in the soil of discontent. In like manner today, when the great institutions of public trust -- governments and universities -- are increasingly abandoning their traditional charge of truly serving the public interest, other extra-governmental and university structures arise to foster civil society and genuine education. Real governance and education increasingly take place outside the institutions originally mandated that responsibility. This explains the rising importance of non-governmental organizations and the dramatic growth of youth service initiatives. In units such as these the moral and spiritual capital for a civil society can find nurture and unfold free from the unremitting glare of critical intellectual analysis.

As institutions hollow themselves out, losing sight of their core values and purpose, the fragile remaining structure must eventually collapse under its own weight regardless of the endowment it possesses. The Church had all the assets, the Latin Quarter only straw-strewn alleys, but the future was theirs.

Neglecting open and thorough inquiry into who we are and the metaphysical foundations for a civil society is risky. If institutions of higher education abdicate this responsibility, then the moral education of the next generation may well fall to the religious right or radio talk show hosts. For this reason I still harbor the hope that our great colleges and universities, our medical, law and business schools will open up in the requisite ways. Is it impossible to work from within, to marry the moral and spiritual with the intellectual rigor of the academy? I see no inherent or insurmountable obstacles to this, and I even see individual instances where the log-jam is breaking up.

Around the country dozens of professors and deans are floating new curricular initiatives, educational programs and research projects open to the full range of human experience and curiosity. Alternative, mind-body medicine is perhaps the furthest along with centers cropping up in medical schools and hospitals all over the country. It will be enormously important for them to develop the right research agenda and educational programs to separate wishful thinking and commercial opportunism from genuinely helpful interventions. But I find it enormously exciting, for example, that after 18 years Jon Kabat-Zinn's Center for Mindfulness and Medicine (???name) at the University of Massachusetts Medical School is finally gaining the recognition it deserves, or that during the last three years Douglas Sloan has established The Center for the Study of the Spiritual Foundations of Education at Teacher's College Columbia University. Likewise, in the area of consciousness studies the beginnings of an alternative academic community is starting to shape up at the University of Arizona. Even the US Department of Agriculture is finally getting interested in so-called natural systems and organic farming practices. Having followed, and even participated in these and like-minded initiatives, I fully appreciate the struggle, skepticism and ridicule endured in order to reach this modest level of recognition. Their fragile success has come late and hard.

Leading each of these initiatives is an individual who steadfastly followed their own moral compass over decades, often outside or at the margins of mainstream institutions. Agronomist Wes Jackson and physician Rachel Remen exemplify for me those who have managed to hold onto a vision of education and research defined not by intellectual vogues, government RFPs or the latest technological developments. In both cases they had made it academically, both were in leading positions, Wes as full professor in the California system, and Rachel as head of pediatrics at the Berkeley [check facts]. Having succeeded, they quit. That for which they sought, namely the heart of education which would give purpose and meaning to all they knew, this was missing. They set out to find it, each in their own way.

Moving into a sod house in a river bank and wandering the Kansas prairie, Wes got the idea for perennial polyculture (or natural systems agriculture) as the way to farm. He founded the Land Institute on a wing and a prayer. Its work has since been recognized

nationally and internationally as one of the most creative centers for agricultural research in America today, a center that values place, and the wisdom of natural ecosystems, over the wealth produced by an exploitative relationship to the land. Rachel Remen turned her attention to the suffering of the terminally ill, and to sources of healing that had absolutely no place in the tough university hospitals in which she had been trained and worked. They were immaterial, human and communal sources. She helped found Commonweal, a center where those with terminal illnesses can find the inner resources to carry themselves in dignity and peace to the threshold of death.

Twenty years ago, initiatives such as these were simply impossible to launch in a university context. They were starved for air and, unable to breathe, many innovators left. They sometimes banded together in fellowships like William Irwin Thompson's Lindisfarne Association, meeting, sharing recent results and finding encouragement through genuine collegiality. As a fellow myself, I know the value of these gatherings. Bright open minds and hearts, passionately engaged in their own work and interested in yours is a great context for intellectual growth. Today some of them have become so prominent publicly that the academy, somewhat reluctantly, is inviting them back in. Must it be this way? We tolerate diverse ideas and behaviors, because they have become empty ciphers in our game of knowledge, but we have little patience for ideals. Ideals are dangerous, we say, inevitably converting to ideology. But is this true? By assuming a moral stance and acting on it, must one be blind to the rights of others? Certainly not.

After suffering six years of house arrest, Burma's Aung San Suu Kyi has been nominally released. Via smuggled videotape she addressed the NGO forum at the UN Conference on Women. She had this to say about learning.

The last six years afforded me much time and food for thought. I came to the conclusion that the human race is not divided into two opposing camps of good and evil. It is made up of those who are capable of learning and those who are incapable of doing so. Here I am not talking of learning in the narrow sense of acquiring an academic education, but of learning as the process of absorbing those lessons of life that enable us to

increase peace and happiness in our world.... As we strive to teach others we must have the humility to acknowledge that we too still have much to learn.

Is it unimaginable that “academic education” too might learn? Learn from a woman in Burma, a man in Africa or Prague? Learn from the lessons of life, which is to say from conflict and suffering to inquire, teach and converse in the cause of peace and happiness. Learn even to open ourselves to ridicule for the quixotic belief that we inhabit a moral and spiritual universe?

In an effort to re-imagine higher education I suggest that we bring back open-minded moral discourse, that we entertain research into human nature without a pre-commitment to materialism, that we promote free inquiry into the basis of human community, commonly known as love, and finally that we commit ourselves to learning about the delicate orb which has hosted us over many millennia that we might become more gracious guests who know how to provide for generations after our own.

If it sounds as if I am suggesting a re-imagination that is open to considering the possibility of a spiritual dimension to everything we know, feel and do, then I have been heard correctly. I see this in no way as contrary to or at odds with good science, fine writing, or rigorous debates. If the spirit operates in the world, it can be encountered, explored and ultimately known. The knowledge we gain within this domain may be unfamiliar, the methods of inquiry new and even personal, but the deepest within us is, I feel sure, competent to know the deepest within the universe. We must only commit ourselves faithfully to the task. It is our higher responsibility, and to my way of seeing things, the very heart of higher education.