

Retirement Talk March 12, 2020

The world we live in today is quite different from the one into which I was born in the mid-1940s. Christopher Lasch has claimed that modern progress, far from liberating people from a repressive past, has generated a culture where human beings suffer a reduced sense of self, and search endlessly for an elusive fulfillment, either by accumulating consumer goods, or through the subordination of self to some putatively therapeutic milieu (hence, the proliferation of sects, movements, 'isms'). Individuals have become detached from those moral codes and institutions—family, church, local community, artisanal workplace—which once initiated them. The celebration of reason alone, the liberation of the individual, the repudiation of traditional duties as repressive, have all engendered a debilitation in the substance of the self. Just as the modern interventionist State has undermined the fabric of local communities by taking over services formerly provided by families, neighborhoods, and mutual aid societies, so the postmodern world's consumerist obsessions and its veneration for science and technology have become substitutes for spiritual fulfillment and social justice. W.H Auden called it "the age of anxiety, Lasch named it "the age of narcissism," and I have referred to it as "moving from the age of the enlightenment to the age of entitlement." And, as Thomas Molnar has suggested, we now have ideologies functioning as an "ersatz spirituality" with their own inimitable forms of proselytizing zeal. In many senses, then, there has been a loss of legitimacy—as seen in the current disaffection and cynicism of populist movements against the state power, such as, Trump and Brexit, etc.

Michael Leunig (regarded in Australia as a national treasure) once drew a cartoon that depicted a mother on her mobile phone scrolling through Instagram, not noticing that her child had fallen out of the pram, the accompanying poem reading:

'Mummy was busy on Instagram
When beautiful baby fell out of the pram
and lay on the path unseen and alone
Wishing that he was loved like a phone.

When I first came to EDCP in 2010, this is symbolically what I observed. The beautiful EDCP baby, full of intellectual creativity and wonder, had fallen to the wayside while members were all busy focusing on the Instagram of internecine conflict and quasi-litigious turmoil. I felt for the EDCP baby, I had been present at its birth. I knew that if only the love that was being shown toward the phone exhibiting the internal turbulence could be re-directed toward the academic and practice properties of curriculum and pedagogy for which the department was well known, then an outstanding revitalization could potentially happen. So what did I see back then?

Unlike Socrates who stated that the body is the prison of the soul, I took the Foucauldian inverted perspective that: "the soul is the prison of the body" (Foucault, 1975, p. 177). Put differently, the soul of EDCP was not inhibited by the department's body, its organization, but

that the department's soul was negatively affecting the communal organization of EDCP. My job, then, was to restore the department's soul, to revivify its relationship both to the subject matter of curriculum and pedagogy and to one another as colleagues in that pursuit. Or, as Pignatelli (2002) suggests:

The role of the leader . . . must necessarily transcend managerial competence. The leader sets herself the task of establishing and sustaining the school [department] as a learning community whose members systematically attend to the school's [department's] well being. (p. 174)

What I saw is best illustrated with a story. Walking through Pacific Spirit Park one summer, my wife, Maureen, and I came across a fluvial erosion channel that cut through the thick forest. It was obvious that it was the site of a stream but there was no water, only a bed; no flow, no rush of energy, no stream. Curriculum and pedagogy are like a stream. If the stream has run dry, it ceases to be a stream. It may have a streambed but if it does not flow, it ceases to exist as a stream. Curriculum may have its words, structures, and activities, but if it fails to flow and has no spirit, no conversation, the pedagogy is a mere streambed and not a stream that inspires and transforms. When curriculum as conversation flows, our pedagogy ceases to be instrumentalist, and it becomes the heartbeat and catalyst of study.

My diagnosis, then, was that we needed to become a community that is characterized by numinous energy, humor, humanity, humility, and animated curriculum to inspire students and ourselves to study assiduously the pleasures, pains, and vicissitudes of postmodern life. We needed soul and spirit. A department without soul, without spirit, is like a riverbed without water; no flow, no rush of energy, no stream. In-spirited curriculum and flowing pedagogy can achieve what words alone cannot do. Like music, art, poetry, or drama, it intuitively sparks our minds to ask powerful questions about the world and our reality. It enables us to process our lived experience in a non-rational fashion that in turn releases healing energies in ways that reason alone cannot do.

So, I set out to attempt to transform the EDCP culture. An understanding of culture must embrace four dimensions—intellectual, moral, material, and practical—together with the dual character of the human as a culture-bearing animal. A culture is . . . a system of inherited conceptions (intellectual), a set of common standards of behavior (moral), a pattern of meanings embodied in symbols (material), and a series of conventions [or norms] governing human interaction (practical/institutional), by which human beings communicate and perpetuate, but also modify and develop, their knowledge about and attitudes to life . . . [there are three features of culture that could become problematic] First, culture is diverse. Second, any given culture is permeable—to a larger or smaller degree—by influence from other cultures. Third, culture undergoes change as a matter of course.

I focused first on the intellectual and normative dimensions of our life together in the department. My intent was to provide through stories and lived experiences a lens and language for EDCP members to re-socialize their spiritual energies into collective efforts filled

with theorizing, philosophy, conviviality, care, the aesthetic and symbolic, and even the erotic. Foucault (1980) referred to this as “the will to discover a new way of governing oneself through a different way of dividing up true and false . . . [a form of] political spirituality” (p. 132). We began handling our own difficulties, not by handing them over to psychologist consultants to be managed, denied, or drugged, or to corporate manager consultants, or even to the soma of work and consumerism (as Aldous Huxley famously put it in *Brave New World*), but channelling them toward creative social processes by re-imagining together “the re-weaving” of an animated, hospitable community in which each scholar was deemed worthy and important. The role played by the late Bill Doll in all of this was an absolutely vital one. Secondly, I focused on the moral and material aspects of our life together in the department. This involved providing opportunities for full and free discussion of the meanings we would attach to processes such as “strategic planning” and “departmental review” (all of which we had to undertake but which I confess I didn’t find very stimulating or exciting), while permitting individuals and clusters of scholars to determine how they would organize their time to pursue their research, teaching, and service with my personally exhorted emphasis on our responsibility as scholars to maintain the public trust, while creating and serving the public good.

My strategy, then was to link EDCP members’ spirits with the department’s soul by offering a way for all of us to take seriously the movements within the underworld of the obvious—the subtle, the subterranean, the sacred, the symbolic, and spiritual—to ensure that neither externally imposed trammels nor internally divisive contestation were the driver of our life together in EDCP. Without a lens or language to see these underworld energies, and then work with them, that is, accompany them carefully and ethically, our work together as a unit had become disembodied and disconnected from the university world of research, teaching, and service. My task was to invite you into an intellectual ferment whereby we could learn to quarrel joyously about ideas that matter, and collectively to construct acceptable and creative ways of handling discursive argument and collegial differences; and, in the process, begin to acknowledge and recognize in one another the intellectual acuity, talents and considerable achievements that, at that time, appeared soporific and potentially moribund. In a nutshell, I invited you to engage in careful truth telling, to take risks and relish challenges, to create a public space in which members could speak openly without fear or favour.

I tend to assume that people who complain vociferously and/or criticize intensely have some lack or need in their academic and/or personal lives; that their work is not appreciated, or they do not feel that they belong to the department. So, I deliberately began to listen carefully to what people said, while attempting to recognize any and all achievements that were happening in the department. Those early months were not easy. Some members clearly wanted to hold onto the feelings evoked by the disruptive turmoil. In the first year, I did a lot of venom collecting. I also made strategic decisions that affected how the department functioned and stuck quietly to them, when one or two individuals objected. I noted agreeably the validity of their objections but added that I didn’t know whether or not the Dean was ready to appoint a new Head. So, we moved on. As a unit, we began to accept one another for the diverse

strengths we represented, we began to fly by letting go of the things that weighed us down. The past became a place of reference, not a place of residence; a place of learning, not a place of living. We focused on making improvements, not excuses. We sought respect, not attention! As we stepped out of our comfort zones, we began slowly but surely to experience transformation. Moreover, we can, with Sigmund Freud, now say: "One day, in retrospect, the years of struggle will strike you as the most beautiful."

Enlisting in the struggle to transform EDCP into a vital and viable intellectually stimulating community was not just a job for me; it was, from the very beginning, a calling. It has been a calling that I thoroughly enjoyed, and one that I am pleased I no longer have to do; finally, I am extravagantly appreciative of your generosity in inviting me into your collective experience as a transmuting community in action. I leave with joy and deep gratitude! Thank you for everything!

References

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