

Dreaming and the University as a Way of Life

by Dolores M. Byrnes

In higher education, many of us dream of a world of changed values where the inchoate, contested, but urgent constellation of things that we collectively believe in, work for, and seek on college campuses has spread well beyond any specific “quad” and has instead become something of a global norm. Imagine that higher education is no longer demarcated as some wholly separate, even foolish sphere of impractical fantasy that the more “realistic” part of society endures only so long as our outcomes are either profitable or relatively well behaved. Could the values of the university ever become mainstream or even dominant? Could they permeate the very ways in which human life and society are conceptualized?

If the acts of teaching and learning were considered high status activities in and of themselves, could they ever replace earning money? What if the acts of seeking and debating knowledge, truth, and wisdom were natural, inevitable, taken for granted? Imagine if learning were available to and participated in by all, throughout the course of a life, woven through work, leisure, family, community.

Dreaming is at the core of what we do in higher education; it is a socially valuable and even urgent exercise. In a recent communication that I helped to draft for the president of our college, I wrote about some important strands from a contemporary self-image in the higher education sector:

A modern institution of higher education is ... on one hand: rooted in medieval structures, yet always casting an eye toward the future, *it is a site for the*

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pursuit of dreams and the cultivation of hope. It is by definition cut across by competing internal and external interests, forced to balance multiple, incommensurate priorities while navigating more than the usual share of uncertainty (emphasis added.).

As a nation, we still offer a chance at something we call the American dream to everyone, even if only a small elite is able to freely and consistently experience the greatest material benefits of this society. The collective American belief in advancement rests also upon our identity as a nation built by, and constantly reimagined and recreated by, people who dream big, such mythical figures as feisty

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immigrants, visionary, garage-tinkering entrepreneurs, and so many others. Our collective faith in “opportunity,” actively fostered by neoliberal rhetoric, televised and family-imparted morality/folk tales, lotteries, and advertising, while hedged in by realities like school districts based on property taxes, as well as deeply unfair health, criminal justice, and labor systems, may be a key to our ability to live relatively peacefully within such a huge and astonishingly ambitious political entity.

Following on this logic, perhaps a new progressive era in higher education might build much more explicitly upon the foundational commitment to democracy which already underpins the U.S. educational system, as flawed as it is and as deeply permeated as it is by inequity. Above all other occupational categories, educators are inspired by the ideal of democracy. Most of us are not naïve nor are we cynical; we honestly believe in the potential of education to change lives. This belief is interwoven in our work, our lives, our very way of being in the world. And most of us long for the day when democracy is much more widely embraced and implemented in this nation, however we conceptualize it (more electoral participation, a Congress less beholden to lobbyists, etc.). Some professors of education recently told me during a department retreat: “We are all Marxist, it doesn’t even need to be said.” Taken as an occupational category, educators constitute an incredibly valuable but stunningly undervalued resource in America.

In a new progressive era, all of us working in education or engaging in it as students—and not just at the postsecondary levels—should be as fully supported by all of the systems and structures of this society, as are those sectors associated with commerce and defense. Whether we work in public, private, research-based,

teaching, secular or religious institutions, we must become as valued and perhaps even as glamorous as the corporate sector, the legal, health, and medical professions, entertainment figures, celebrities, politicians, and the wealthy already are. The cost of subsidizing and supporting these relatively more superficial (and far less productive) figures in this society should not have to be borne by those of us who actually are working long, underpaid hours every day to turn the nation's collective dream into more than a cruel delusion or outright lie.

Recognizing and thriving upon our diverse responses to multiple needs, both state and society would herald and esteem the work of educators in a new progres-

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sive era. Our efforts would be acknowledged for what they are: explicitly contributing to individual and community well-being and to increased human flourishing, to greater tolerance and to nonviolence, to the ability to solve complex problems with wisdom and sensitivity, and thereby to global security.

In the liberal arts colleges especially, where major grantors and major donors so rarely visit, we could be supported in offering what has become an increasingly expensive, even luxurious experience: the provision of a rigorous, broadly-based intellectual scaffolding which allows students to grow, to dream, and to participate in important, cross-disciplinary acts of knowledge production. Across all of our institutions, imagine if we could focus on mission and scholarship and even physical facilities, without having to devote so many resources to philanthropy, fundraising, and self-promotion. Imagine if our students (or their parents) did not have to take on such massive debt in order to complete undergraduate and graduate training. In this new era, higher education would be seen as a national public good, a noble and highly prestigious profession, no matter what group is engaged in it. As we see from recent bailouts, certain economic sectors can lobby for and receive massive government support, even those sectors that have ignored consumer trends, widened the gaps between the wages of their lowest and highest workers, and shrugged off changes in their industries for decades. In the higher education sector, we ignore trends at our own peril, and this fact has kept us relatively nimble and responsive, while often forcing us to cut corners in far too many ways.

I think we must also imagine what new research about the brain would mean in a world truly shaped by the values of higher education. Perhaps perceptions of space and time, and the consequent notion of what constitutes work and leisure, might one day be personally constructed according to each person's cognitive ways,

if we privileged the importance of learning above all.

As a form of civilization, we could aim to refute even Karl Marx, passing through capitalism, without allowing the human soul to become stifled and obscured by a singular reliance upon the logic of a rational-actor model, by zero-sum concepts of life, by privileging the exchange mentality and the cash nexus, with their attendant alienation, exploitation, and obsession with profit. We would draw upon, but transcend Jacques Lacan: courageously refusing to let the image of the mirror become the primary means through which each of us, as human beings, chooses to explore the full meaning in life. We would learn from Charles Taylor in reclaiming some of the complexity, grace, and intermingling of good and evil lost in the shift to such highly disciplined societies.¹

Perhaps in this emerging world, advertisements would no longer deploy freakish, coarse, demeaning fantasies and images that presume to be human. Perhaps the act of manipulating individual and collective identity for profit would become unnecessary and obsolete, even illegal. Could there be a world where every person has the time and freedom to study, dream, write, and think about, as well as practice and act on some of the things that really matter: infant care, love, truth, meaningful work with the most vulnerable members of society, knowledge, the sacred, but also the profane?

We may now be witnessing the emergence of a tantalizing new expression of identity, transcending the “individual-nation” dyad with something more like a “community-planet” dyad. This generation of high school students is intimately connected to each other through technological means, empowered by an entertainment and advertising culture that glorifies youth, technology, and globalism. This experience far surpasses previous shared phenomena, like watching *The Ed*



Sullivan Show every Sunday night or crouching beneath a school desk during nuclear attack ‘drills.’ There is still an unacceptable and tragic level of bullying of those young persons who are judged to be ‘different,’ and obviously there are strands of homophobia, anti-intellectualism, apparent over-medication, cynicism, and misogyny within our culture, but millions of young Americans are absorbing globally—or even species—based information. They are learning that values like inclusiveness, friendship, and strength in diversity are crucial to the survival of the planet, and of humanity itself.

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Will young people reach across national boundaries in community with their peers around the world, crafting solutions that have eluded those of us who are trapped by identities and laws grounded in the nation-state alone? Transcendence will be urgent, as the new generation grapples with a world with 500 million guns, where hundreds of millions will have to move or die as the climate changes, where one in six live in an urban slum, where half of the population in the less-developed countries is 18 years old or younger, and where international crime earns \$1 trillion annually in profit.

The corporate media and the entertainment industry lag woefully behind the sophistication of young people, and indeed behind that of anyone who has traveled outside of the U.S., as well as most of us who live and work on a college campus. Can we still wrestle pleasure, joy, and sociality—and our ability to dream—from these far-too powerful realms? Can we change the conditions of society enough to restore the ability to dream to all of those who have suffered from the widening income inequality seen in this nation since 1980?² Can we call out the university on its promise: a site for true dreaming, for visions and prophets, tempered with appreciation for the wisdom of the past? Can we in higher education believe enough in what that promise means to act courageously, well beyond the warmth and safety of our own campuses?

In a new progressive era of higher education, we would reclaim the act of courageous and even strange, radical dreaming as our own uniquely human and locally grounded birth right. On a college campus, we know about dreaming well. We study across cultures, across time and space, seeking ways of dreaming wisely, and ways of testing these dreams. It is not too late to share that capacity—to take even a fraction of what we know, all the knowledge and research that is taken for granted on any single college campus, and seek to put it fully and comprehensive-

ly in place. Let us use our relatively physical boundedness, our presence as a kind of city on so many hills, to our advantage, and most importantly, let us believe deeply in the value of what we do. 

ENDNOTES

1. Taylor, Charles. *A Secular Age*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007.
2. The Gini coefficient (index of income concentration) measures family income inequality, which decreased between 1947 and 1968 but has been increasing since 1968. “Households in the top fifth of the distribution (particularly those in the top 5 percent) increased their share of aggregate income, while those in the bottom four-fifths lost ground. Households in the top fifths of the distribution increased their share of aggregate income by 7.3 percent from 1980 to 1992. During the same period, households in the lowest two-fifths experienced a sharp decline in their share of aggregate income. The bottom fifth’s share of aggregate income declined by 11.6 percent ... These changes highlight the growing gap between the country’s richest and poorest households.” U.S. Census Bureau. Housing and Household Economic Statistics Division. (August 12, 2008) “Income Inequality (1947-1998).” www.census.gov/hhes/www/income/incineq/p60204/p60204txt.html.