

Fear of the Self In American Academic Life

By Enid Bloch

There is a strange dissociation in modern American academic life, a separation between the personal feelings and experiences of scholars and what it is they allow themselves to teach and write.

This disjunction is difficult to describe, for we have to sense it more by what it hides than what it reveals. Behind it, I believe, lies a subtle yet pervasive emotional state I would identify as “fear of the self.”

Perhaps I can best convey what I have in mind by citing a passage from Ralph Waldo Emerson’s *Divinity School Address*:

I once heard a preacher who sorely tempted me to say I would go to church no more. [As you listen to these words, substitute “teacher” for “preacher” and “school” for “church.”]. . . A snow-storm was falling around us. The snow-storm was real, the preacher merely spectral, and the eye felt the sad con-

trast in looking at him, and then out of the window behind him into the beautiful meteor of the snow. He had lived in vain. He had no one word intimating that he had laughed or wept, was married or in love, had been commended, or cheated, or chagrined . . . This man had ploughed and planted and talked and bought and sold; he had read books; he had eaten and drunken; his head aches, his heart throbs; he smiles and suffers; yet was there not a surmise, a hint, in all the discourse, that he had ever lived at all.¹

“The true preacher,” Emerson declared, “can be known by this, that he deals out to the people his life—life passed through the fire of thought.”²

Should not true teachers, true scholars, be recognized in much the same way—as persons willing not only to pass their lives through the fire of thought, but actually to let

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students and colleagues know about the smoke and the flames?

Yet I wonder how often our students must feel like poor Emerson in church, listening to spectral figures dispensing disembodied knowledge.

It is rare, for example, for professors to speak openly and seriously about what it is that first drew them to their studies and how their attitudes and understanding have changed or matured with time.

Such self-reflection and emotional revelation, many teachers believe, is "unprofessional," and as they deny it for themselves they often seek to suppress it in their students as well.

I know scholars whose subject matter is the great paintings and sculpture and literature of the ages, who will never allow themselves to talk publicly about how they themselves are moved by the beauty of these things.

"Why don't you *say* it's beautiful," I asked one of my colleagues in frustration one day, after watching him present slides of ancient artifacts that to me were altogether ravishing.

"Because that would be subjective and self-serving," he answered.

Another friend told me that as soon as anyone in class uses the words, "I feel," he stops the student cold.

"Why?" I asked.

"Because when someone brings up personal feelings," he explained, "there is nothing to discuss."

Nothing?

Now my colleagues are very good teachers, who love what they do. It's just that they won't *talk* about that love, or free their students to talk. It may be true that eruptions of feeling get in the way of careful thought, but doesn't absence of feeling also cripple thought?

Shouldn't we be teaching our students to *use* their emotions rather than repress them, to recognize in their own delights and fears and confusion the very keys to the human condition?

In Emerson's words, the true scholar "learns that in going down into the secrets of his own mind he has descended into the secrets of all minds."³

Many of the great thinkers of the ages have made this same discovery. In that most sublime of Hindu scriptures, the *Bhagavad-Gita*, the god Krishna urges the young Arjuna to "see the Self in every creature and all creation in the Self,"⁴ to feel the sufferings of others as if they were his own.

This is not an easy level of understanding to reach; it requires a long and difficult inner development. Confucius knew its demands, for he regarded the moral life as a

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maturation. What he calls *ren*, or warm-heartedness, does not simply emerge full-blown in the individual, but has to be cultivated through education and experience.

Isn't this what the liberal arts are supposed to be all about? Then why does so much effort go into "training" young scholars (what a terrible word, "training," as if they were circus animals) to produce carefully circumscribed, unemotional pieces of "research," rigorous in method, closely reasoned, and very heavy on the jargon.

There is nothing wrong, in and of itself, with the modern drive toward precision and accuracy. But where, in all this dogged work, shall we look for grace and beauty and breadth of vision? What has happened to inner growth, to the struggle for self-awareness, to expanded empathy and the lifelong quest for wisdom?

If you want to sense the spiritual emptiness Emerson had in mind, think no further than the academic journal collection in your college or university library. Do you rush to its volumes, eager to extract their pearls of wisdom? Do you linger there, warmed by the beauty of language, the depth of feeling and insight with which their authors reflect on human triumph and tragedy? Of course not.

No one turns to journal articles to feed the hungry soul. Most of us,

when we must read such things at all, grit our teeth as we work our way through their dismal prose and stilted professional posturings.

It's a sad thought, often noted, that most of the authors of the "Great Books" we ask our students to read would not be hired by a modern academic institution.

Indeed, our universities often seem to do their best to drive away some of their own most talented students and teachers, those special individuals who cannot submit their searching minds to the orthodoxies of particular disciplines or the passing moods of schools of thought.

If there is no place in our academic culture for such people, no encouragement for their soaring passions and daring imaginations, who will remain to write the "Great Books" of the 21st century?

I now reside in a classics department, but the field with which I am most familiar is political science. In my student days, thirty-some years ago, it was still a vigorous humanistic study grappling with the largest questions of human society and government.

At its heart lay political theory, a personal encounter with the great philosophic ideas and constitutional principles of the ages. But political theory functions today as a mere appendage to political sci-

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ence, a step-child of sorts, or a doddering elder relative.

The discipline cannot hold its own against young Turks—some of them not so young anymore—armed with the weapons of “science,” who reduce the passion and drama of political life, the great issues of human freedom and dignity and destiny, to whatever can be quantified and graphed.

Recently, I flipped through the latest issue of the *American Political Science Review*, the leading journal in political science. Its pages are filled with charts and graphs and algebraic formulae.

Much of it looks like an SAT math exam. You will be hard-pressed to find anything that is not presented in the form of hypotheses and data and results, or in concepts so abstract and so removed from ordinary life and language you practically need a translation to read them.

If you're looking for human discussions of human situations, you will have to turn to the chatty, informal *PS: Political Science and Politics*, a supplement to the *American Political Science Review*, featuring news of the profession: who's been promoted or what conferences are coming up.

PS always includes a few short articles written from a personal point of view, articles that could never be included in the journal

itself. Yet these, it seems to me, are often the only things worth reading.

Or consider what has happened to philosophy. Once the queen of the humanities, the unifying force of all human learning, philosophy has of its own free will shrunk to a mere shadow of its former self.

American philosophy departments are heavily weighted toward British analytic philosophy, and its practitioners dismiss any quest for comprehensive understanding as a naive dream. All that philosophy can accomplish, such scholars maintain, is to identify the linguistic confusions hidden within particular propositions. There is, they insist, no higher wisdom to be sought or found.

Can we not sense behind such styles of thought a subtle yet pervasive fear of the self? And is not fear of one's own self also fear of the world?

Is it an accident that it was in the 1930s and 1940s, with Nazism in the ascendancy and moral judgment so desperately needed, that scholars first attempted to create a “value-free” social science, within which they could avoid personal judgment?

Is it an accident that in today's world of enormous, almost incomprehensible planetary danger, so many academicians focus on small-

er and smaller issues, subordinating their personalities to the ever more precise expectations of their disciplines?

Carefully controlled intellectual work can serve as a powerful defense against the most frightening aspects of life, against those internal and external terrors we do not want to admit into conscious awareness. The scarier the world becomes, the more likely we are to see scholarship reduced to whatever arouses the least internal anxiety.

Our civilization may have to pay a terrible price for this kind of emotional and intellectual avoidance. We stand now at the close of the most murderous of all centuries and at the dawn of the next, perhaps the last century, when the human race may finally succeed in destroying itself altogether.

Endnotes

¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Divinity School Address," *Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson: An Organic Anthology*, ed. Stephen Whicher (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1960), 109.

Do we not need, more urgently now than ever before, the fullest possible exploration of what it is to be human, and of why human life is worth preserving?

But such work will never even be attempted if we teach our students to suppress their feelings, to ignore the questions that gnaw at their bellies, and to sacrifice their souls on the narrow altar of circumscribed research.

Courage is needed, not professional expertise, the courage to explore uncharted regions where disciplines dissolve and the only thing to find is life itself, in all its naked rawness.

"Life passed through the fire of thought," as Emerson would say. Is not that the greatest gift we can bestow upon our students, and they upon theirs, and all of us upon a tortured world? ■

² *Ibid.*

³ Emerson, "The American Scholar," *Selections*, 74.

⁴ *The Bhagavad Gita*, trans. Eknath Easwaran (Tomales, CA: Nilgiri Press, 1985), 107 [6:29].

