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Form and Texture of a Professional Life

Since the end of World War II, universities and their faculties have changed in noteworthy ways. Some deplore the present and take pleasure in romantic backward glances. However, nostalgia for the snows of yesteryear will not move higher education forward. The two-part question worth asking now that the changes have taken place is: What should a contemporary metropolitan university expect of its faculty? What should a contemporary faculty expect of its metropolitan university? In creating the form and texture of professional lives, both faculty and administrators should elude three traps designed specifically to ensnare academic climbers and/or those prone to seek in apathy refuge from the hierarchical intellectual world. One, serious scholarship is the exclusive province of research university faculty. Two, the nature of scholarship pursued by faculty in metropolitan universities is less worthy than that pursued by faculty in research universities. And three, metropolitan university faculty should structure and teach courses of study that are of immediate economic usefulness—even to the neglect of those that are of long-term intellectual importance.

Something in all of us thrills to the drama of the death knell. Students continue to feel as if they were engaging in a subversive act by discussing Nietzsche's death of God; professors continue to feel as if they were flirting with the avant-garde by lecturing on Roland Barthes' death of the novel, and administrators, politicians, and pundits of varied hues now cultivate an apocalyptic tone when speaking of the death of the traditional professoriat as proclaimed, for example, by a Charles Sykes in *Profscam: Professors and the Demise of Higher Education.*

However, what inspires many to keep talking and writing long after the impact of the notion of finality should have faded is that "death" in these cases is followed by a transmigration of souls; "death" does not really end the story for God, the novel, or the professor. God is spotted working through Mother Teresa; critics await the fiction of Saul Bellow, and ever more students of all ages attend classes taught by faculty in over three thousand institutions of higher learning across the country. In the case of the professor, at least, "death" in this context is a synonym for change.

Change as a threatening element in our lives has become a staple of pop psychology, and acceptance of change, a virtue widely prescribed as the medicine of choice for emotional malaise. However, the gradual transformation of the professor from shepherd of souls and dedicated, though severe, pater familias to sophisticated intellectual and worldly individualist has precipitated a rock slide of criticism of far greater magnitude than that occasioned by a common ho-hum fear of change. Upon occasion, legislators, alumni, administrators, journalists, each bear witness to the transformation in such impassioned rhetoric that one

would think the bounds of nature themselves had been violated. It is as if they had watched their favorite espalier walk away from the wall to which it had been carefully tied and begin to freely wave its branches in the breeze. The metaphor is apt, for faculty in all American colleges and universities now know their worth and have indeed declared their own forms.

In part, the outsized anger that follows this declaration of independence has two sources. One, the change is both recent and truly profound. Older alumni still speak of professors as secular monks whose central pleasures were limited to the successes, even modest, of their students; older administrators still describe a past where these same secular monks bowed before the authority of abbot-presidents; older legislators and trustees still remember dedicated faculty with a monk-like disdain for worldly goods. And anyone of a certain age can recall the self-image burnished, perhaps in self-defense, by the professors themselves: the impracticality, the absent mindedness, the aloofness from political and larger community concerns, the chilly reviews of all things American as opposed to European, the slightly anarchical choices in matters of dress, automobiles, and home furnishings.

Unquestionably, most if not all contemporary faculty members are leagues away from their older, monkish selves and have the past three decades polished to a brilliant sheen a more professional, more sophisticated image. Their lives are no longer circumscribed by campus walls; their ambitions soar above that of spurring others to great heights; their acceptance of authority is very nearly limited to that of persuasion, and, to paraphrase the poet Richard Wilbur, their loves, both spiritual and worldly, call them joyfully to the things of this world. They are no more impractical or absent minded than bankers or physicians or lawyers, and they are detached only in the special way associated with protecting their teaching and their research from influences that might taint one or the other or both. That they can tell the difference between fair remuneration and abusive remuneration and that they can appreciate the difference between a Hyundai and a Honda has caused serious distress to those who believe strongly in the beauty of monastic living—for others.

The second source of anger derives, quite touchingly, from the sentimental attachment of so many to the romanticized image of their former selves striding across one quad or another toward Lecture Hall 207 where Professor X or Y, in baggy tweeds and rumpled hair, and floating above everything but the text in hand to which he was obsessively attached, inspired them to read Keats or Spinoza for the first time. Even Americans who have no such

memory to decorate have imagined the scene as it might be played with their children seated in the front of the class. As cynical a middle-aged narrator as the one encountered in John Barth's *The Floating Opera,* who claims never to expect very much from himself or from his fellow animals, has this to say about his former professors at the Hopkins:

> It was the men, the professors, the fine, independent minds of Johns Hopkins—the maturity, the absence of restrictions, the very air of Homewood, that nourished the strong seeds of reason in our ruined bodies; the disinterested wisdom that refused even to see our ridiculous persons in the lecture halls; that talked, as it were, to itself, and seemed scarcely to care when some of us began to listen, to listen intently, fiercely, passionately. (New York: Avon Books, 1956, pp.137–38)

Such nostalgic revisitings are what daydreams are made of, and few can shake a daydreamer's shoulder with impunity. However, "Where are the snows of yesteryear?" is not the question that will move a contemporary metropolitan university forward or create and support a professional faculty willing and equipped to do so. Furthermore, it may be worth noting that while the professoriat in such universities, indeed in all universities, has changed significantly since, say, the end of World War II, so have the colleges and universities in which they work, the students whom they teach, the administrators with whom they plan, the communities in which they live, and the publishers for whom they write. That being the case, and focusing in this instance on metropolitan universities, the two-part question that might justifiably interrupt all daydreams of the way we were is the following: What should a contemporary metropolitan university expect of its faculty? What should a contemporary faculty expect of its metropolitan university?

Senior administrators, members of search committees, and members of tenure committees in metropolitan universities should seek and retain faculty who are passionately committed to learning and to teaching. Faculty who apply for initial appointments and who present themselves for tenured positions should seek metropolitan universities that are passionately committed to creating and maintaining conditions that encourage and support learning and teaching of the highest order. While many might be tempted to dismiss these statements as the traditional genuflecting before the altar of higher education, all experienced academicians know that in some instances both faculty and institutions have allowed routine to veil their distinguished mission. In such cases a dutiful calendrical repetition has replaced passion, and those in question cease to see

very clearly or to care very deeply about discovering the new, preserving the old, and sharing both.

One of the threats in the professional life of a faculty member is identical to one of the threats in life itself, namely, everydayness. Scholarship and teaching demand intellectual intensity, and they demand it year after year after year. They demand it in sickness and in health, before students and colleagues who are responsive and nonresponsive, when worries besiege the mind with distractions, in times of success and in times of failure. While all faculty are energized by a deep interest in a particular discipline, a neophyte scholar/teacher is further sustained by novelty and the natural exuberance of youth. However, as one academic term follows another, both novelty and youth go the way of all novelty and youth, and the faculty member is left occupying a very large house with interest alone. It is at that moment, whenever it is reached, that intellectual intensity holds and gains strength or dissolves and begins to be replaced by mechanical responses.

Colleges and universities are amazingly resilient institutions that can for years survive mechanical faculty, for good machines do have a number of characteristics that are valuable, even if efficiency is not the queen of virtues. Here is one of Max Frisch's fictional characters praising the qualities of the robot as described in *Homo Faber*:

> Above all, however, the machine has no feelings, it feels no fear and no hope, which only disturb, it has no wishes with regard to the result, it operates according to the pure logic of probability. For this reason I assert that the robot perceives more accurately than man, it knows more about the future, for it calculates it, it neither speculates nor dreams, but is controlled by its own findings (the feedback) and cannot make mistakes; the robot has no need of intuition. . . . (New York: Harvest/ Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1959, p. 76).

However, any university peopled by robots will discover over time that while faculty meet their classes and students attend them, its spirit has died. Orientation programs point nowhere; commencements begin nothing. It will discover that while it feels no fear, it feels no hope, and that while dreams are no substitute for logic, logic is no substitute for dreams. The faculty of a metropolitan university, perhaps more than any other faculty, must guard against the diminution of intellectual intensity in and out of the classroom, for it is to their public urban institutions that turn in great numbers the poor, the minorities, the disenfranchised, the newly arrived immi-

grants—all those who truly need to be pulled back from leading lives of quiet desperation.

Central, therefore, to the challenges of a metropolitan university is the wisdom of attracting and selecting faculty who, throughout their professional careers, can give a novel, a theory, a rendition, a performance, a solution "more life than life has"—to use Toni Morrison's fine phrase. Central to the challenges of a metropolitan university faculty is the stamina to sustain an intellectual vigor that refuses to be ravaged not only by time, but, upon occasion, by political chicanery, by administrative indifference, and by student apathy. A monkish Mr. Chipps, however nostalgically endearing, will not do. The times and the broad mission of a metropolitan university, with its rainbow curricula, heterogeneous population, and demanding complex communities, call for faculty who are both worldly and idealistic, who are both sophisticated and caring, who are both aware of their own worth and the worth of their students.

When the concept of research is broadened . . . hierarchical notions are let loose upon the land.

It follows, therefore, that a metropolitan university faculty and the administrators who support them will neither patronize their students nor accept with equanimity someone patronizing them. Effective resistance to patronizing in either case depends in part on an understanding of the hierarchical nature of the academy.

A few years back, the avant-garde composer Philip Glass had his opera, *Einstein at the Beach,* produced at the New York Metropolitan Opera House at Lincoln Center. Overheard in the lobby during intermission, as reported by the *New Yorker,* were the remarks of one bejewelled matron to another who had just expressed approval of the first act: "But, surely, darling, you saw the premiere performance in Avignon last summer."

Academics, for a set of complex sociological reasons, now work in that kind of Metropolitan lobby world, a world as intellectually hierarchical as a British club is socially hierarchical, a world wherein the technique of staying ahead of others—however one defines "ahead"—has become a source of both jubilation and anxiety. It may be grand to have seen the New York production, but it is grander still to have seen it earlier in Avignon.

Edward Shils, professor of sociology and social thought at the University of Chicago, in a perceptive, fifty-year backward glance at the university world, tells us that this passion for distinguishing an academic aristocracy from a haute bourgeoisie from a petite bourgeoisie is a fairly recent phenomenon. One that, quite ironically, has grown in the same household as the passion against what

is perceived to be elitism. In recalling his student days at the University of Pennsylvania, he writes: "We never thought about Harvard or Columbia or Princeton. Nor did we feel inferior to them. . . . Each university was sui generis" (*The American Scholar*, Spring, 1982, pp.164–65). And in referring to his early days as an instructor at the University of Chicago, which was somewhat more self-conscious than others about its place in the sun, he nevertheless points out that: "There was a vague sense of the hierarchy of universities, but it was not acutely felt. A person who had a doctorate from Chicago did not think that he was exiled from the Elysian Fields if he took a post at Vanderbilt or Utah. The hypersensitivity to rank, which is characteristic of the 'anti-elitist' decades in which we are now living, had not yet appeared." (Ibid)

Neither ignorance nor denial of the academic culture's class conscious mind-set will do. In defining and ordering the form and texture of their professional lives, metropolitan university faculty—and the institutions to which they are committed—must, therefore, dismantle at least three traps designed specifically to ensnare academic climbers and/or those prone to seek in apathy refuge from hierarchical systems.

1. Serious scholarship is the exclusive province of research university faculty. The desertion of scholarship or the limitation of it to the preparation of classes should be a matter of grave concern to all those who care about the long-term growth of metropolitan universities. To care so little about the advancement of one's discipline as to abandon it to the sole care of others is to come dangerously close to leading an intellectually parasitic life and most certainly to arousing doubts as to the size of the flame carried into classrooms. All faculty who submitted to the rigors of a doctoral program were at one time presumably alive with the wonders of their field. To become so disengaged from that field as to cease to contribute to it is to give evidence of a detachment that may at worst point to anomie and at best to a serious diminution of interest. For scholarship, broadly defined to include not only frontier research, but synthesizing of discoveries and explication of texts, not only sustains the intellectual vigor of the scholar him/herself, but makes possible as nothing else can a sense of solidarity and common cause with colleagues everywhere. A scholar who masters and then synthesizes, explicates, collates, traces, and applies frontier research is a scholar who collaborates with the most creative, the most imaginative, and the most perceptive world-class researchers. Such collaboration is of immense worth, for many balls would be lost in the sun were it not for the trained eye of a commentator who directs our gaze to their trajectories.

Furthermore, in most if not all cases this sense of being au courant, of being poised to receive what might happen next generates an intellectual excitement in classrooms that many students identify as inspirational and influential. For in such classrooms students not only master the subject at hand but appropriate an understanding of what gifts the spurring of intellectual curiosity can bring to man/woman's eternal search for a life with meaning.

Anyone of a certain age can point to an individual who boasts defensively of never having written a line "because he/she came here to teach." And, in fact, a very few of the "quick" *seem* to have remained both knowledgeable and spirited. However, exceptions in this instance, as in so many others, prove the rule and do not contradict it: one who remains passionately interested in a discipline contributes to it. And metropolitan universities will succeed as centers of learning for everyone to the extent that their faculty remain passionately interested and intellectually committed.

Metropolitan university faculty are called upon to direct this interest and this commitment toward meeting external as well as internal needs. Hence, metropolitan university faculty roam far beyond any single campus and develop concerns that include but also extend far beyond the strictly local ones. While such a faculty care deeply about the welfare and growth in quality of their own institution, they care equally deeply about state and national and international environmental conditions that either advance or hamper the advancement of knowledge everywhere and that either ease or curtail the dissemination of information and insights. They eschew the intellectually restrictive and provincial, for their students come from varied cultures carrying gifts of assorted premises. They greet change and discovery with confidence because they have cultivated a robust life of the mind that welcomes unexpected perspectives, and their students fill the classrooms with multicolored views.

2. The nature of scholarship pursued by faculty in metropolitan universities is less worthy than that pursued by faculty in research universities. The fundamental importance of "pure" research, that which extends the frontiers of a discipline, is not seriously disputed by the knowledgeable anywhere, and faculty at metropolitan universities as well as faculty at research universities engage in it with beneficial results to us all. However, when the concept of research is broadened to include the application of new knowledge, the synthesizing of new information, and the creative interpretation of texts, hierarchical notions are let loose upon the land.

This phenomenon might well be dismissed as yet another amusing characteristic of the academic culture if it were not for two damaging consequences. One, many metropolitan university faculty, whose talent and temperament favor a broad definition of scholarship, feel compelled by word and deed and manner to apologize and to seek forgiveness, at times on their own campuses and nearly always in the world of academe beyond, for engaging in activities that can make a significant difference in the biography of an idea or an institution or a community. And this felt need to explain to themselves and others over and over again why they decided to assault Everest by its northern as opposed to its southern route can affect adversely the progress of their climb by diverting energies that should remain well concentrated. Two, these tell-tale signs of insecurity given by the practitioners themselves can, ironically, strengthen the opinion of those who dismiss anything short of "pure" research as inappropriate for those capable of producing vintage works. In turn, that reaffirmation of academe's great chain of being weakens the resolve of faculty whose gifts would allow them to make worthwhile contributions to a field of study, but whose interest can only be sustained by the approbation and collaboration of colleagues. Such faculty are frequently those marked for defeat by time.

Many metropolitan universities are slightly anarchical places.

Metropolitan university faculty and administrators are perhaps the only professionals in higher education in a position to bestow intellectual prestige and significant rewards upon scholarship that is not so narrowly defined as to exclude everything but the addition of truly new knowledge. For the mission and identity of research universities are all too well defined and too well established to don characteristics that might render them unrecognizable, and those of colleges of liberal arts and community colleges place such institutions hors de combat. What is sorely needed is the conviction that solutions to regional community problems; insights into the formulations of public policies; contributions to the artistic life of the city that the university calls home; directions for the reform of public school curricula; gathering and dissemination of important data regarding the challenges of health care, waste disposal, and environmental pollution are, along with innumerable other areas of concern and importance, worthy of the intellectual attention of a faculty well trained to share its considerable expertise. What is additionally needed is the confidence to proclaim the conviction.

A metropolitan university campus that reaches consensus on a

definition of extended scholarship/research and that finds the means to reward its faculty for engaging in it must attend to other important related matters. It must, for example, stop counting and start reading. The number of papers published and the number of papers delivered at professional conferences are not where the mind's eye should rest. The quality of those works should be the focus of attention and evaluation. Search committees and tenure and promotion committees should examine a colleague's scholarship with care and judge it with courage. Is the book or the article or the government report alive? Imaginative? Does it point to future promise? Or is the book or the article or the report humdrum? Pedestrian? Does it give evidence of being the product of one merely fulfilling a duty?

As a way of underscoring the sincerity of its convictions in favoring quality over quantity, a metropolitan university might consider establishing the following policy. "For the purpose of evaluating colleagues, no search or review committee or senior administrator will examine more than four works by assistant professors, more than six works by associate professors, and more than eight works by professors. The works submitted for appraisal will be of the candidates' choosing and will be accompanied by a short essay describing the significance and purpose of each submission." The very act of choosing and defending would in itself reveal certain qualities of mind and point to certain characteristics of imagination.

Deans, academic vice-presidents, and presidents of metropolitan universities, who play a large role in determining and applying any reward system also owe it to their faculty to read their publications, attend their concerts and theater productions, view their exhibits, and promote their expertise. While certain twigs off the branches of technical and highly specialized studies may be beyond the reach of many administrators, it does not follow that a broadly educated dean or president whose own field is, say anthropology, cannot come to some broad judgments regarding the worth of a book describing weaknesses in public policies regarding health care for the poor, or one tracing the influence of African art on the paintings and sculptures of Picasso. At the very least, an educated administrator knows whether the book is gracefully or awkwardly written, whether it reveals an interesting and witty voice or a dull and tedious one, whether it carries a reader to conclusions persuasively or weakly. To deny this knowledge is to fall into unbecoming timidity if not inappropriate humility.

A metropolitan university must also give time and solitude their due. Faculty will begin to trust those who have converted from

counting to reading, not only when the quality of their scholarship begins to be discussed seriously, but when certain other additional conditions obtain. Two of these relate to the respect a metropolitan university accords time and solitude. It will, for example, discourage abreviated probationary periods before a faculty member comes up for tenure, not only because it wants time for careful evaluation, but because it wants to afford the faculty member in question time for careful scholarship and time for visions and revisions of creative projects. It will, as another example, review works in progress and take these as seriously as works that have reached completion, whether yet published, performed, exhibited, or presented. For what the metropolitan university wants above all else is for its faculty to remain interested in and committed to their disciplines and to the knowledge and insights they can bring to students and colleagues everywhere. So the first question asked in evaluations is not "What is the date on the last publication or performance?" The first question asked is "What is the quality of the scholarship now being pursued and how steady is the chase?"

A contemporary metropolitan faculty's need for time is perhaps exceeded only by its need for solitude. Montaigne's advice was to prepare a little back shop all our own wherein we might establish solitude. The counsel is wise, for journeys to the land of intellectual insights are essentially solitary adventures; group tours rarely produce prize slides or diaries. Indeed, the biographical account of all lasting contributions to any discipline points to a scholar's ability to retreat deep within him/herself and to return bearing the individual voice, the individual view. The unconvinced might attempt to imagine *Waiting for Godot* written as a group exercise or Mendelssohn's "Quartet in F minor" composed by a class in chamber music.

Many metropolitan universities are hurly-burly, crowded, noisy, slightly anarchical places where the newly arrived faculty often speak of feeling overwhelmed and where the older faculty often indulge in a remembrance of things past when campus life seemed becomingly leisurely and spacious. The isolating walls, both real and imaginary, have come down: business entrepreneurs walk the halls of Old Main, engineers from local high-technology firms inspect the laboratories, state development officers search the offices for consultants, superintendents of schools and directors of hospitals establish cooperative ventures with schools of education and nursing, and students of all ages, backgrounds, and levels of talent rightfully expect guidance and nurturing. And however vibrant academe in a metropolitan setting has become, all faculty, by temperament and vocation inclined to favor meditation and contem-

plation, give signs that this splendid world is occasionally too much with them.

Hence, metropolitan university administrators who understand and respect the intense and demanding nature of the work of faculty will take seriously their need for solitude and will whenever and wherever possible seek ways and means of nourishing it. For example, it will provide single, well-appointed offices; it will assign teaching schedules that allow blocks of time devoted to study; it will support generous sabbatical leaves; it will call only meetings and assemblies that have an important purpose and are well prepared; it will encourage faculty to share their expertise with the larger community and to do so generously, but never at the cost of excluding from their professional life a solitude that is essential to its continued vitality. For a faculty that spends all of their time repeating what they already know, will eventually know little.

3. Metropolitan university faculty should structure and teach courses that are of immediate economic usefulness—even to the neglect of those that are of long-term intellectual importance. A faculty, much in the manner of all professionals, can succeed in preserving their elan vital and then direct it toward unworthy ends. A danger as grave as the two cited above lurks on metropolitan university campuses. And since this danger is infrequently, if ever, recognized by even the severest critics of the professoriat and but occasionally acknowledged by many universities themselves, faculty and administrators alike may not be shielding campuses against its potentially hurricane-wind force. This danger lurks behind euphemisms that would have faculty who teach all but the top-tier pupils believe that equal access is to be equated with equal opportunity—that curricula designed to meet immediate economic needs are as valuable as those designed to meet the long-term needs of both the students themselves and the nation they will inherit.

In short, this third trap forgoes a belief in knowledge as spiritual power for everyone and substitutes a creed that justifies establishing curricula especially structured for the poor and the unaware. In the 1990s, one of the major responsibilities of metropolitan university faculty everywhere will be to protect themselves and their students from being pulled into that trap. For those who live by economics will perish by economics.

Faculty who have remained enthusiastic and dedicated, faculty who have looked a hierarchical culture in the eye and not blinked, faculty who now spend long hours structuring courses of study in metropolitan universities must not have taken apart traps one and two only to fall into the maw of trap three. They must guard against

being lulled by the cliche du jour into concluding that all obligations have been met when a curriculum prepares the poor and the newly arrived immigrants, the intellectually naive, and all those yearning for rebeginnings to enter the economic mainstream and to help the nation's economy remain competitive.

Let no one misinterpret this cri de coeur as sounding a retreat to days when aristocrats let their fingernails grow to prove that they never engaged in manual labor. Of course, universities must prepare and prepare well agronomists and chemists and nurses and accountants. Of course, universities must place these disciplines within their historical contexts, examine their contemporary ethical dilemmas, and charge them with fervor for quality and values. Educating students for the practice of law, the marketing of software, the building of bridges, and the designing of urban centers is both appropriate and worthy of the mission of any university. The conviction that strobe lights this third trap, however, is as simple as it may be controversial: a zest for work *succeeds* a zest for life. And a better means of achieving a zest for life than long intense treks with linguists and philosophers and artists through the forests, meadows, and caverns of the human spirit—one has yet to invent.

A valuable curriculum allows all students to share the joys of creativity and perspective.

Hence, a valuable curriculum allows all students to share the exclusively human joys that derive not only from analysis but from creativity and perspective. Why should the moments of heightened consciousness occasioned by truly seeing (because someone taught you to see) the windows of Sainte Chapelle be the exclusive domain of those who attend liberal arts colleges or enroll in the better research universities? Why should the turn of a phrase, the structure of an argument, the allusions to the past, or the music of a poem make only those of a privileged background feel intensely alive? Metropolitan university faculty must find ways to empower their students to discover satisfying patterns not only at the end of syllogisms, but also at the end of rainbows.

In all discussions centering on matters as complex as the form and texture of the professional life of a metropolitan university faculty, there are, of course, no formulas. There can, however, be principles. Three that seem worthy of deliberation are: (1) long-term vitality in teaching is inextricably linked to long-term vitality in scholarship; (2) scholarship broadly defined so as to include synthesis and dissemination of the new and explication of both the old and the new is of serious import and worthy of support and reward; and (3) teaching for short-term economic returns should

neither displace nor outrank teaching for long-term intellectual growth.

According to Fowlie, the French philologist, Ernest Renan, believed that "good and evil, pleasure and pain, the beautiful and the ugly, reason and madness, have as many indiscernible shadings as those we see on the neck of a dove." (Fowlie, p. 254) Metropolitan university faculty across the nation are happily dedicated to an examination and explication of these innumerable shadings, and the conviction that this probing and interpreting will lead to further examinations and explications is the very source of both their joy and their devotion. No work can boast of a more elegant colophon.

Suggested Readings

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