Jamil S. Zainaldin

The humanities have an undeniable civic value. State humanities councils, in the programs they fund and conduct in the communities, contribute to civic enrichment, build public support for scholars and scholarship, and involve out-of-school adults in the life of the mind. Participating scholars report valuable results for their research and teaching, as well as psychic rewards that contribute to their overall professional growth. Though higher education's attitude toward such programs has been somewhat indifferent in recent decades, there are hopeful signs of change on

The Realm of Seriousness:

The Public Role of the Humanities Scholar

The Civic Value of the Humanities

I recently bumped into a colleague in history. We had not seen each other in years. He knew I was with the Federation of State Humanities Councils, and he knew also that humanities councils fund and conduct public humanities programs. He asked, and I think with the best of intentions, "What is it about humanities programs that appeals to folks in communities? I mean, what do people *really* do in those programs? Are they antiquarians?" Phil simply could not imagine anything of any seriousness that could happen in a humanities program "for the public." I think he respected me well enough to think that there must be something to "humanities council work," but he simply was not prepared by his professional work or his professional role as a scholar to know what that could be. And this is the misfortune: that my friend, a leading scholar, a person of great and strong opinions about politics, a person whose political views are sensitively interwoven through his well-respected scholarship — a person, in short, who readily understands the complexity of the relationship between politics and his scholarship — apparently had not thought much, or maybe at all, about the relationship between his scholarship and his public role as a scholar.

He makes a radical separation between what he does as a scholar and what he does as a "citizen," a sphere that for him is private. I realize now what I should have said when he asked me what scholars in public programs *really* do: "Scholars in public programs agree to be themselves in the company of others." My point is simply that Phil has something important to say to the public *as a scholar*. I want to go a little further: the public will want to hear from him, needs to hear from him, and if it does not, society's discourse is the poorer for it, and Phil himself has lost some of his power to help shape public discourse on matters of importance to him and society. Possibly, Phil is the poorer,

too. This is anything but a private matter.

I want to press hard the civic values of the humanities. Because they are so life-bound, the humanities have the capacity to speak to many of the problems we're experiencing in late twentieth century American society. It has been said that democracy depends on "faith in strangers," and we are a society, it would seem, with little faith and many strangers. We are beset by problems in the body politic — racial and ethnic antagonisms, rising xenophobia, troubled communities, violence and hatreds, distrust. We have before us a prospect of limited economic growth, if there will be growth at all, and a government that seems taxed in the extreme in its capacity to "solve" social problems. Indeed, the government cannot heal us. It is our instrument, not our soul.

The healing must begin within. We live in different realms of life, sometimes in many realms at the same time. One realm is that of work. We do it because we have to, and need to. Some of us love what we do, but do we must. Another realm is that of entertainment. When we have a beer, when we watch a show on television, or a football game, or play a game, or watch a movie, or listen to music, or entertain our friends or are entertained, we are pausing for pleasure. American society is good at promoting these realms. Our society is not so good at promoting the more serious realm of meaning. We need to look hard to find it and much of this work is done, as it were, privately. It is where we get down to the business of thinking about life itself, and this business is every bit as essential to living as bread and water. It is a realm that higher education inhabits. In this realm, the humanities also preside: it is a home for the scholar-humanist. It is in this realm that we can make our strongest appeal for the public's support, and not with the goal in mind of solving problems, but with the goal of seeking to understand so that *we*, scholar and community, together may act with wisdom and with heart.

The Humanities Councils

As a humanities scholar, I have found a way to contribute through my involvement with the humanities councils. The humanities councils, 56 in number (one in each state, the territories, and the District of Columbia), are governed by boards made up equally of scholars and public members who employ small professional staffs. They receive congressionally mandated support from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH). They also receive support from state legislatures, private donors, foundations, and corporations. Their mission is to help make the humanities a part of everyday life, and they do so by funding and conducting projects in support of film, library reading programs, interpretive museum exhibits, lecture series, chautauqua performances, community symposia, seminars for high school teachers, and other projects as well. Many of these programs involve scholars working with the adult public.

The humanities councils, when they fund or conduct projects, make a noteworthy contribution to society. This is a contribution made full by the expertise of humanities scholars working with people at the local level and through local institutions: libraries, museums, historical societies, town halls, civic centers, civic clubs, heritage sites, local and state government bodies, colleges and universities. It is also a contribution made full by the public's participation, for it is the genius of the councils' work to elicit thought from non-scholars.

They do this in many different ways. Council programs offer a unique kind of "forum." The humanities give us a medium for communication where language,

disagreement, ideas, values, where "reasoned analysis," where discussions of what constitutes "a fact" can become part of a discourse that is deliberately outside of the political context that prevails in a city council, the halls of Congress, the state house floor, or in one's own community where positions have been made rigid by "opinion." This "forum" will not give us answers; it will give us an intelligent way to talk about the whole, with a better-than-even likelihood that something *important* can be said and learned.

Humanities council programs also foster local and community history. This may be one of the most important products of council programs that connect scholars with communities. It is worth looking at one local history project in some detail to see what can be accomplished for the people of a community. The project site is in Etowah, Tennessee, an Appalachian community that was thriving in the early twentieth century as the L&N Railroad regional headquarters and the home of railroad car works. When the railroad died, according to James Ward, an historian who evaluated the project, "the community that remained lost its principal economic connectedness with the larger world." It also had "little connection to the widely taught and understood history of the South, with its focus on the old agricultural South and the modern South of sprawling cities." However, this project gave the citizens back a history of their own. Under a grant from the Tennessee Humanities Council, professional historians worked with former L&N employees and other long-time residents of this 73 year-old company town to collect, preserve, and give meaning to their stories. These talks, according to Ward, "helped to place Etowah's recent economic, cultural, political, and social conditions in perspective, and the entire project will have lasting effects upon Etowah[.]"

An exhibit grew out of the project and now has a permanent home at the restored train depot. The depot itself has been made a new center of the town's life. It is a functioning building with office space and rooms for meetings, and there are areas set aside for the community where receptions, family reunions, political meetings, and celebrations marking the passing of individual lives are regularly held. As described by Ward, "it stands as a constant reminder that Etowah is a living historical entity, always changing, always valuable. Its story is on full display for all who attend wedding receptions and retirement parties, reminding them that they, too, are adding to Etowah's historical records."

The District of Columbia Community Humanities Council has been supporting an oral history project in a public housing unit for senior citizens ("Potomac Gardens") located in one of the poorest sections of the city. The residents of the project, working with scholars, told their stories, and in the process, learned about and from each other. The experience for the residents was one of unimagined revelation that actually gave birth to a new community. Thelma Russell, a senior citizen resident of Potomac Gardens, reflected on the project:

"Program after program, we began to learn more and share more about what we remember and what we experienced. We have talked about religious traditions; migrating to and growing up in the city; working as domestics; and living through the depression and later the riots in Washington. These programs have helped us listen to one another and to learn from each other. The education most of us received taught us as though Black people did not exist, let alone contribute anything worthwhile to our city and our nation. [This project] is filling in the gaps and showing us that we are a part of history — our lives and experiences are important. Just as important, we are learning how much we have in common with each other. We were strangers before; now we understand that our common ground is the African-Ameri-

can heritage that we share."
The records and oral histories created by the residents of Potomac Gardens, trained by area historians, have been preserved as part of a collection on the history of the District of Columbia and will be used by scholars writing histories of the District's neighborhoods.

Another function of council projects is problem-solving at the community level. These are not ordinary projects, but every state has funded programs that seek to create a forum where disputes in the community can be worked through. In Zion, Utah, a council project allowed polarized factions in the village of Zion, located at the entrance of the renowned national park of the same name, to discuss their differences over economic and environmental development through panels made up of a philosopher who was also a city mayor, a rancher-turned-novelist, a literary scholar, and a psychologist. Constructive conversation had broken down entirely by the time the project began. What the townspeople and city leaders found at the end of the five-week series of programs was common ground; the immediate issue of development was no less divisive, but the healing had begun.

All of these programs are educational. Many other examples could be described. A school curriculum project, a seminar for high school teachers, a reading and discussion program in a local library, a community lecture series, a book festival, a chautauqua program — in all these activities there is the simple joy of learning something new, of extending one's horizon, of engaging an idea. The appendix lists examples of the variety of public projects that scholars are involved in through humanities council funding.

Institutional Indifference

I think of the humanities councils as part of a "movement" because they stand for the proposition that the humanities belong to all people, that people create the humanities in the lives they live, and that the scholarship of the humanities takes its ultimate significance from its capacity to serve people, ordinary people, who, like scholars, use the tools of the humanities to make sense of their lives.

But Phil, I must confess, is a challenge because he is a chair of a department in a university. There are others, many others, who are major figures in academic history, and literature, and philosophy, who give unstintingly of their time (or of their words) to the public and who personally define their roles as scholars to include a public dimension — who believe that part of the privilege of being truth seekers, knowledge makers, information transmitters is the obligation to give back to society. This is not an obligation that many institutions impose on faculty. Rather it seems to be more privately held.

This has not always been the case. In the first half of the nineteenth century there was an easy equation between the purposes of education and republican citizenship that continued to fuel educational expansion into the twentieth century. Prior to World War II, much of higher education rested on a civic foundation whose broad mandate was to serve the lives of the people. In the field of history, between the two World Wars, there were historians like Charles Beard, a scholar-icon in the historical profession, who saw their roles as including a public dimension. For Beard, being a scholar historian included extensive involvements in secondary school education, curriculum development, textbook writing, and teacher training. The circle of history was more widely drawn then to include school teachers, college faculty, learned librarians, archivists, students, local historians, and patrons committed to

"historical progress." Though in truth this circle was being constantly winnowed, and professionalized, throughout the first half of this century, it was in the decades after World War II that the process gained momentum. The emergence of the research model was complete by 1960.

I carried out a survey of humanities councils to learn something about how the reward structure operates in the public humanities. Recognizing that this is not a scientific survey because it includes a good deal of impressionistic information, here is what I learned:

1) Most scholars who participate in council programs do so because they want to. Most are not "rewarded" for these efforts, except psychically, of course, and increasingly they are rewarded by humanities councils themselves who now publicly honor citizen-scholars in their states with prizes or awards.

2) Institutional encouragement of public programs follows no particular pattern. There is some evidence to indicate stronger participation on the part of public universities, though scholars from private institutions are also present. College or university leadership is important in faculty decisions to participate in programs, it would seem. In some states, community college faculty are very active participants in public humanities programming, and elsewhere would be more so except for the demands on their time in their home institutions.

3) There are "enough scholars to go around" for most councils, but if councils programs were to expand in scope — funding permitting — there would not be. Several councils, in fact, have indicated that they are hampered in programs that they can plan because they cannot attract scholars to carry out the work and cannot afford to hire scholars on a full-time basis either.

4) There seems to be no pattern in who, among scholars, participates in council programs. Certainly, younger scholars not yet tenured are rather unusual, but they are in evidence. Younger tenured scholars are in evidence too, and some of the most distinguished humanities scholars in the nation are active participants in council-funded programs in their states. It seems to be the case that the more established scholars take part in council programs generally, however. One conclusion from this hodge-podge is that the chief reason for taking part in a council-funded program is personal, and therefore that the reward is in the doing.

What portion of the university-based population is like Phil? There is no certain way to say, since non-involvement in a public program can also be attributed to not being asked, to being quite busy and, in fact, over-burdened with existing duties, and other factors as well. Moreover, one must be careful about generalizing from state to state, since humanities councils in small population states in the West have a history of involving almost every humanities scholar in their states. However, I must report that many of my colleagues in the councils see very little "official" institutional support for scholars who take part in their programs or for the work of the councils — this despite the fact that college presidents, deans, and department heads are frequent members of humanities council boards. Overall, though, the apparent lack of official institutional rewards seems not to have materially hampered the efforts of humanities councils to carry out their programs.

This picture of higher education, neither hostile nor particularly supportive, seems reflected in other evidence. Of the 91 current campus initiatives on file with the American Association for Higher Education (AAHE) relating to faculty work loads, assignments, and rewards in research universities, comprehensive universities, and liberal arts colleges, I found few that addressed issues of service, and only one was noted that offered a systematic definition of service to include scholarship in

the community. And, presumably, these are the reform-minded institutions. Yet another vantage is a survey of American historians conducted by the editor of the *Journal of American History* in which respondents were asked to register their agreement or disagreement with the following statement: "The academic reward system encourages historians to write for academic audiences and discourages historians from reaching out to multiple audiences." 38 percent of the respondents strongly agreed, and 43 percent agreed.

Hopeful Signs

The tradition of scholar-citizen does exist today as a model, and it is practiced by some of the most distinguished scholars in the humanities professions. Moreover, some of the elected leadership of the humanities disciplinary organizations are beginning to question the posture of some members of their profession and, in language that is strong, sometimes verging on judgmental, are prodding a greater involvement with the public. Other organizations like the Organization of American Historians and the American Historical Association are reconnecting with their own activist tradition in secondary education. Definitions of scholarship are also being affected. Some national disciplinary associations in the humanities, such as participants in the Syracuse project described elsewhere in this issue by Robert Diamond, are working on statements about scholarship that are inclusive of public activities. This is a dramatic step in the redefinition of faculty role that, if it continues, has the potential of connecting to developments at the state level and setting a more encouraging tone for public scholarly involvement of the professoriate.

An awakening to the importance (or should we say, reality) of public authority is in evidence by the growing activism of humanities organizations in relations with Congress — often coalescing around funding, policy, and regulatory issues connected to the National Archives and Records Administration, freedom of information laws, records classification, programs for international exchange and education, portions of the National Science Foundation, the National Park Service, and the National Endowment for the Humanities. Many of these disciplinary organizations are actively involved in lobbying through coalitions created specifically for this purpose, an unthinkable activity fifteen years ago.

National disciplinary organizations are also paying closer attention to the public dimension of their profession's work. The American Council of Learned Societies, a membership organization of humanities learned societies, has worked closely with my own association, the Federation, to explore ways of strengthening ties between scholars and humanities councils. The Modern Language Association (MLA) includes in its survey of its members questions about "fostering public appreciation and use" of the humanities. Interestingly, in 1990 MLA learned that fully one-third of the respondents had taken part, as scholars, in public programs. There is some evidence that these tended to be the more "established" members of the profession. In the same 1993 *Journal of American History* survey cited above, among the statements that readers were asked to respond to was the following: "Good historical scholarship engages multiple and diverse audiences." 40 percent "strongly agreed" with the statement, and 42 percent "agreed." A mere 7 percent disagreed on the importance of reaching a broader audience. These are significant findings that eventually, I hope, may place Phil in very select company.

There is also the national example of the new Chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities, Sheldon Hackney, who has announced that broadening the humanities to reach more of the American public is one of his highest priorities. He

has also announced his goal of establishing a "partnership" with the state humanities councils, the first chairman to do so, and is beginning what he is calling "a national conversation" in which the humanities can be infused into a new national discourse about the direction of the nation. Again, it is the public dimension of the humanities that is being emphasized.

One particularly important initiative related to the public is being launched by the Center for History Making in America, housed in Indiana University. The Center, working with several humanities councils and with funding from NEH, is conducting a national survey to learn more about how ordinary people perceive, use, and understand history in their daily lives. Recognizing that there is an extraordinary gap between the voluminous production of scholarship on the one hand, and where the public gets its information about history on the other, the Center is, in a sense, opening up the difficult — and very sensitive — question about the consequences of specialization. The debate within the academy over conceptual developments in humanistic scholarship and pedagogy itself has a very public ring: arguments about the literary canon are front-page media fare because the public — and journalists — instinctively know that large issues are being debated about values, personal identity, and national direction. Much the same thing can be said about "the new Western history," feminist literary studies (and publicly waged counter-arguments), and "bottom up" history. Not unlike the rock-and-roller who records on a country-and-western label, scholars like Henry Louis Gates in literature, and Cornel West in religious studies, who actively pursue a more public voice, now have their own label: "the crossover academic." "Culture wars" and "political correctness" are not terms that describe a scholarship in retreat from issues of public significance.

The Need for Change

The public role of the scholar can be talked about in two ways: the unofficial role inherent in being a truth seeker, and the official role that is recognized and rewarded by higher education institutions. The problem is in the latter category, and while there are changes occurring in the official language of "reward structure," they are at best minor where public service is concerned. In spite of this, scholars are taking initiative in a whole range of activities — writing books for public distribution, writing op-ed columns in national newspapers, contributing to magazines and book review supplements, appearing on radio and television talk shows, speaking before large audiences. What information we do have available suggests these numbers are growing, or at the least, that there are changes in the attitudes of the membership organizations that educators and scholars belong to. There is the example of the AAHE and its creation of the Forum on Faculty Roles and Rewards for evidence of a ferment that will not be contained.

There are many public spheres, and it is the public work of scholars close to home, the low visibility trench-work of laboring in one's own community, that humanities councils specialize in — schools, libraries, historical societies, local museums, historic sites, civic clubs, local government, neighborhood associations, residential housing sites, literacy programs, factory lunch rooms, the chautauqua "big top." This is action that can make a difference because it takes place *where people live and work*. And, it is at the local level where ordinary people can be touched and absorbed into a discourse of meaning.

There does seem to be a permeable gate for reform. The public dimension of the scholar's role, perhaps for the first time since World War II, is under very serious

scrutiny, at large and within the walls of universities. I believe there is a great deal at stake in opening that gate.

The cost of indifference to public attitudes and the retreat of scholarship from its official public role has been dear. And from over my shoulder I hear the haunting voice of my friend and colleague, Charles Muscatine, wise, gentle, an educator, a scholar's scholar with a long view, an intimate of university life with forty-years of campus battle scars (some he won), and a citizen who has taken stock and a stand: "If, as has been repeatedly said, academia will never reform itself, then the informed public must help reform it, with all the means it has."

NOTE: This article is excerpted from an essay commissioned by the American Association for Higher Education for its second National Meeting on Faculty Roles and Rewards, held in New Orleans in January, 1994. The author thanks the following individuals for critiques in the preparation of the essay: James Banner, Douglas Greenberg, Alicia Juarrero, Esther Mackintosh, Margaret McMillan, Page Miller, and Charles Muscatine.

The Roles of Scholars in Humanities Council Programs

The following is a representative list of ways in which scholars participate in state humanities council programs. It is not intended to be comprehensive; indeed, councils and scholars together are continually finding new roles for scholars in public programs, so any such list would fairly quickly be incomplete.

Lecturer. Perhaps the easiest role for a scholar to play, because it is what his or her professional life consists of, is that of lecturer on a subject area in which the scholar is expert. Because audience participation is a principal value in state council programs, such lectures are always followed by a question-and-answer or discussion period.

Discussion group facilitator. A second common role for scholars is that of leader/facilitator for reading and discussion groups. The subject matter of these discussion groups vary widely — from Homer poems to world politics — but they are always text-based and highly participatory.

Seminar or institute leader. Scholars play both the roles described above in the increasing number of council funded or conducted summer institutes for high school teachers.

Academic alliance partner. Another, more long-term way for a scholar to work with teachers is through participation in academic alliances, which councils fund or organize in a number of states. These are generally locally organized, discipline-centered partnerships between groups of school and college teachers who collaborate to support and improve local teaching in their disciplines. This offers teachers ongoing enrichment in their subject area, gives the scholar the opportunity to contribute to the quality of local public education, and provides both groups the opportunity to learn from each other.

Curriculum consultant. In several states, councils have worked with scholars in ambitious initiatives to revise outdated school curricula or develop new curriculum materials in areas where resources are lacking.

Scholar-in-residence. A number of councils have now sponsored scholars in this role, sometimes in schools, sometimes in medical facilities, at least once in a State Department for the Aging. The scholar's role in these programs varies: in some cases (as in the Department of Aging instance), they research programmatic needs and develop effective programs; in others, they offer a philosophical context for decision making; in yet others, they serve as a resource for teachers.

Researcher. Some council grants support scholarly research in a particular area (usually pertinent to the local community or region) that will then feed into a public program such as an exhibit, a dramatic performance, a newspaper series, a publication, a film, or a community history.

Media/exhibit consultant. As state council funded media projects have become increasingly sophisticated over the past two decades, scholars, serving as expert resources, have continued to play a key role in ensuring the depth and quality of the humanities content.

Chautauqua presenters. Building on the turn-of-the-century chautauqua tradition, scholars in many states are participating in chautauqua programs, portraying figures of local or national historical importance. Because the presentation is based on the actual writings of historical figures portrayed, scholars generally carry out extensive research to develop the character before presenting him or her to local audiences.

Is your institution a metropolitan university?

If your university serves an urban/metropolitan region and subscribes to the principles outlined in the Declaration of Metropolitan Universities on page 26 of this issue, your administration should seriously consider joining the Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities.

Historically, most universities have been associated with cities, but the relationship between "the town and the gown" has often been distant or abrasive. Today the metropolitan university cultivates a close relationship with the urban center and its suburbs, often serving as a catalyst for change and source of enlightened discussion. Leaders in government and business agree that education is the key to prosperity, and that metropolitan universities will be on the cutting edge of education not only for younger students, but also for those who must continually re-educate themselves to meet the challenges of the future.

The Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities brings together institutions who share experiences and expertise to speak with a common voice on important social issues. A shared sense of mission is the driving force behind Coalition membership. However, the Coalition also offers a number of tangible benefits: ten free subscriptions to *Metropolitan Universities*, additional copies at special rates to distribute to boards and trustees, a newsletter on government and funding issues, a clearinghouse of innovative projects, reduced rates at Coalition conventions. . . .

As a *Metropolitan Universities* subscriber, you can help us by bringing both the journal and the Coalition to the attention of your administration. To obtain information about Coalition membership, please contact Dr. David Bell, University of North Texas, by calling (817) 565-2477 or faxing a message to (817) 565-4998.