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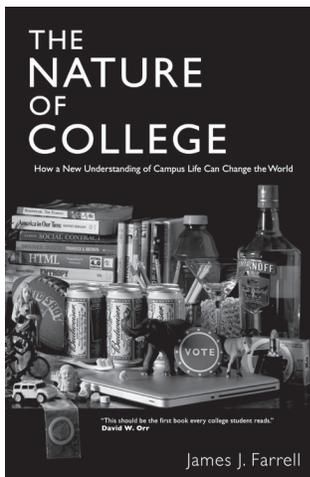
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# The Prophetic Vocation and the Nature(s) of College: Reimagining College with Jim Farrell

The vocational grounding of Lutheran higher education traditionally stresses an education that focuses on calling rather than material success or individual fulfillment. Yet one difficulty becomes finding ways to articulate this pedagogical frame within a world that frequently sees college as a means to a good paying job. For instance, on the St. Olaf website, under the “About” tab, one finds: “A St. Olaf College education develops the habits of mind and heart that enable students to embrace the challenges of a changing world, leading to lives of professional accomplishment, financial independence, and personal fulfillment.” Though a list later adds “academically rigorous” and “guided by our Lutheran Faith tradition,” this external marker stresses independence, wealth, and fulfillment as the explicit outcomes of one’s years at St. Olaf.

This view drips down into the various ways that St. Olaf directs students towards life after college. For instance, much pride has gone into a new center dedicated to “vocation and career.” Surveys detail where students, shaped by the St. Olaf mission, end up, including jobs at 3M, the Minnesota Vikings, and Apple, as well as service agencies such as Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services. Internships at major corporations, alumni networking meals, and recruiting visits all give



students a sense of what “professional accomplishment” looks like.

More to the point, this claim appeals to contemporary expectations about a “good” education. “About St. Olaf” markets the value of the education St. Olaf offers as giving the student the path to material success as well as greater clarity about one’s unique nature. Ever general, “fulfillment” reminds each student that a personal sense of what matters and is meaningful will be attended to while at St. Olaf.

So what? Isn’t such gainful employment a successful learning outcome? Aren’t we responsible for educating students to become productive citizens within a market economy, measured by material success and later an eventual contribution to the endowment of the college? In fact, in order to thrive, institutions must defend their existence within the educational market place. Higher educational institutions do close (Dana College, for example), and each college must ensure that students and their parents are confident that a comfortable life lies on the other side of the financial burden of a private education. But are these outcomes in continuity with the vocational foundation that shapes what we do and how we do it?

One means to meander into a conversation with these questions is to reflect on *nature*, both as something

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accepted as normal and intuitive (what is *natural*) as well as ecological nature itself that makes human life possible (the *natural world*). Higher education itself has a cultural nature, of things we do and beliefs we hold without thinking, and is part of the natural world. It is this dual nature that Jim Farrell's text, *The Nature of College*, passionately addresses. He deconstructs college as a culture, one taken as natural by students, faculty, and administrators, while placing collegiate life within an ecological frame that reminds us that college is a place dependent upon water, land, and air. Constructively, he then re-envisioned college as modeling "Anthropocene Responsibility," as Larry Rasmussen calls it, by restructuring the nature of college such that it practices a sustainable ethos that forms students for life after college (Rasmussen 1). As such, Farrell's argument provocatively points to a central vocational dimension within Lutheran higher education—namely, the prophetic responsibility to critique the contemporary ethos by affirming higher values such as justice, responsibility, and the good of the commons. Doing so, he asks us to reflect on the dangers, in terms of the ecological crisis but also for our Lutheran identity, of explicitly linking contemporary values with the nature of our colleges.

## The Nature(s) of College

For Farrell, who passed away last summer, college has two natures. The first relates to the socio-cultural habitat that students inhabit as they forage for their identity within college. Here, culture is a socially constructed system of symbols, practices, and beliefs taken as normal and natural. Working through such a culture within each chapter, he describes how students assume that collegiate culture is "natural," a given that cannot be changed. Thus, students strive to fit within this culture, learning from other students the rules that lead to success within the wilds of college life. For instance, it is normal that students today bring a vast assortment of electronic gear to college, including iPads, smart phones, and TVs as standard college equipment. It is normal that students largely dress in similar ways, especially since savvy marketers realize that many college students, free from parental limits for the first time, have their first credit card that allow them to spend freely. So "Joe and Jo College,"

as Farrell terms them, strive to perfectly fit into the nature of things within college. The normal routines of college parties, of religion and spiritual development, food, cars, and sex all shape the cultural geography of college.

But there is a second dimension to the nature of college: the campus as habitat, dependent upon a broad, complex ecological web. A college uses water, land, and air in order to function. Students take showers and flush the toilet; faculty use high-tech gear and electricity to help with research and teaching. The screen I am looking at to write this essay is made up of a myriad number of mined materials from all over the world. Too often, we ignore *this* nature amidst the comings and goings of the collegiate "nature," meaning we ignore "the complexity of our relationships with the natural world, and our complicity with commonsense patterns of thought and behavior that don't make sense anymore" (Farrell 6). We are ever part of a world of dirt, plants, air, water, and the like, but rarely pause to reflect on the ecological obligations this participation entails amidst the everydayness of college life.

"Amidst academic specialization, worries over grade inflation, and high-paying jobs as the measure of success, students—but also faculty and administrators—largely avoid seeing this nature of college, instead passively accepting things as they are."

In fact, amidst academic specialization, worries over grade inflation, and high-paying jobs as the measure of success, students—but also faculty and administrators—largely avoid seeing this nature of college, instead passively accepting things as they are. For instance, he discusses how "shit happens" (18). Everyone on campus naturally shits, and though students (and others no doubt) often use the word, very few people pay attention to what happens to our shit. We generally ignore how it reveals an ecological circle of the consumption and return of natural elements as well as the cultural constructs (example: indoor bathrooms) we've invented to help us move beyond our bodily natures.

In Farrell's view, contemporary American cultural ethos strives to hide the natural, with colleges often reflecting this ethos, rather than critiquing it.

Farrell's aim is then to re-imagine the nature(s) of college such that the structure of the institution itself normalizes a sustainable way of life. In short, the outcome of this education is students who strive to live sustainably both on and off campus, both in the present and future. Consequently, his pedagogical model is decidedly constructive. A "Commons Sense" ethic describes his ecological vision. Within this social structure, the average student wakes up to a monitor that reveals their water and electricity usage. She eats food made from sustainable and local sources, and pays attention to what she eats off campus as well. She can participate in religious services that explore simple living, and the political discourse on campus shapes informed citizenship, rather than "sitizens," as in people who sit and complain about the state of politics. [234]

The success then of higher education is the formation of eco-sensitive student natures.

As such, Farrell reveals a vision of college as both within but outside of contemporary culture. As he puts it, "college is the right time to establish regenerative routines for the real world, developing habits that enrich habitats" (257). Thus, in a manner analogous to the Lutheran "Two Kingdoms" concept, rather than merely accepting the preconceptions of students, the deeper vocation of college is to re-form student assumptions such that the values of the contemporary ethos no longer function as the de facto basis for acting in the world. Such a transformative education is vital because of the current ecological crisis. College must model eco-responsible lifestyles such that it becomes the student's lived educational outcome after college.

## The Prophetic

In a number of ways, the heart of Farrell's argument relates well to the critical prophetic thrust that energizes the Lutheran higher education tradition. And it is this prophetic vocation that requires us to be mindful of the values we state as the identifying marks that shape our educational practices. Walter Brueggemann, a Bible scholar, is a helpful conversation partner here. Some thirty-five years ago, he

critiqued the church as being "so largely enculturated to the American ethos of consumerism" that it lost its power to act (Brueggemann 11). In short, the church defined success in light of the values of the free-market, individualism, and material prosperity, rather than justice and community responsibility. In response, he called church leaders to bring a "prophetic task" to church life that would "nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us" (13). Finding in the Bible a clear call

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to resist consumption, he envisioned an alternative vision of community that stressed mercy and justice as central. More importantly, as prophetic, this vision reframed the debate about what was possible. It transcended particular issues by emphasizing the stakes behind particular human choices, thereby energizing the creation of new ideas for human community by re-imagining what should be.

Because of the Lutheran tradition, such a prophetic re-imagining is also a dimension within the vocation of Lutheran higher education. Independently of one's particular faith commitment, the vocational roots of a place like St. Olaf rest in a belief that there are greater goods than those offered by the world. Ideas like justice, freedom, and service are thus the proper outcomes of an education that is about transformation, rather than worldly conformation. To participate then in the life of Lutheran higher education means critically surfing the tension between the prevailing winds of worldly culture and revealing to the world a richer sense of what is true and meaningful. It does not deny the reality of the contemporary context, but sees its aims as limited and narrow, something to be critically kept at a distance as something that fails to reflect humanity's deepest longings and hopes.

It is this prophetic vocation that requires us to critique "About St. Olaf." Rather than a prophetic critique of contemporary ideas of success, this identifying marker seems entangled with an ethos of consumption and self-centeredness. It accepts that education is a commodity, a "thing" rooted in "the habits and dispositions learned in the consumption of literal commodities" that sees education merely as a means to other, more important "things" such as material prosperity, career success, and individual well-being (Miller 32). Indeed, as about 'personal fulfillment,' autonomy and individual realization become key values, a view that values "the feeling, the momentary illusion, of personal well-being, health, and psychic security" as reflecting the success of the educational experience (Lasch 7). Students are "potent customers," as Mark Edmundson notes in "As Lite Entertainment for Bored College Students," that must be "pandered to from day one until the morning of their final kiss-off" (Edmundson 46-47). In this view, purchasing a St. Olaf education allows one to buy the things that the contemporary American ethos values most highly.

Though I likely put too much weight on such a statement, the danger here is that it can begin to change the nature of a place like St. Olaf. It changes how we see ourselves over time, and thus becomes our nature. Here, Farrell's distinction between expressed and operative values offers a further means of critique. Operative values are those values that we actually live by, whereas the expressed values are those we make explicit; in his view, in ecological matters, our operative values (for example: efficiency, expense, and convenience) often trump our expressed values (equality, ecological concern, justice) (Farrell 7). Yet, this reasoning suggests that "About St. Olaf's" expressed values (material and personal success) actually don't reflect well the operative values within the college. The St. Olaf education *actually* values critical thinking, community engagement, and discerning one's calling as operative assumptions. The *actual* outcome of the education St. Olaf offers then is vocational: it shapes students that understand that there are greater pursuits than those offered by the consumptive world. But there then needs to be a greater intentionality between what we actually do and what we say we do, especially in relation to the prophetic vocation within our Lutheran identity.

## Practicing a Prophetic Pedagogy

Because of this lack of harmony between expressed and operative values, we need to rethink both. As Farrell points out, in particular we need to re-form the nature of college to better model practices that sustainably place humans within the wider ecological web. This is the greatest prophetic calling for a college today, as it tasks colleges to lead in re-envisioning the wider culture. And it is also innate to the vocational identity within Lutheran higher education. Our tradition asks us to prophetically re-imagine the world, and shapes students who will contribute to making this re-imagined world possible. There are then a number of pedagogical implications that arise out of Farrell's claims as such.

"Too often, we accept such things as academic specializations, the necessity of the major system, a focus on grades, and our collegiate brand as the 'way things are.'"

**Challenge Nature:** Farrell asks us to think beyond such normalcy and see the deeper commons behind what we do in college. As a whole, college culture works to enable students, post-college, to make connections between a variety of worlds (scientific, medical, spiritual, economic, etc.). By implication, shouldn't college culture be more intentional about making these connections? Too often, we accept such things as academic specializations, the necessity of the major system, a focus on grades, and our collegiate brand as the "way things are." Our students take this organization as natural, realizing their success depends on successfully navigating this wild. Might we do a better service to our students by revealing the translucent walls to the structure of college? For instance, why not rethink the major system. Students could "major" instead in a worldview (science, art, humanities) that is rooted in a contemporary issue (for example, ecological justice). Teams from different disciplines could teach general education classes, thereby making college more interdisciplinary. As a result, the nature of college would reveal a transparent intellectual commons, encouraging students to recognize the deeper questions behind college as a whole.

**Model Vulnerability:** We model what good conversations look like. For Farrell, we must model eco-logical conversations, with each discipline being a distinct piece to thinking of human life as intertwined within nature. But the deeper implication of his argument is that modeling requires respecting the notion that none of us have all the answers. Rather than a top-down hierarchy or the professorial voice, we should shape participatory conversations, such that both students and professors recognize that all are learners and teachers to some degree. As he notes, "we're all in this together." Admitting the limits of our power, knowledge, and individual wisdom can free us to create impactful learning communities (259). And acknowledging that one is a learner (as well as a teacher) can also allow greater revelation about how one's work fits within the whole form of life, including family, religious, and political commitments. One is not the powerful voice in the front, but a shared voice in an animated conversation about important questions.

**Practice Seduction:** The Latin roots of "seduction" include *se*, meaning "away," and *ducere*, meaning "lead." For Farrell, a good education leads a student away from assumptions about what is normal and natural to recognizing that human choices create cultures that ignore our interdependence with the ecological world. As a consequence, a college should focus on operative values that task students to grow to critically evaluate the contemporary ethos as the primary source of value. It should teach the prophetic vocation throughout the curriculum and lead students away from pre-conceived notions. College should be about helping students claim their callings as participants in a variety of different communities.

**Semper Reformanda:** A hallmark of the Lutheran tradition is the call to "always be reformed." As such, the college must resist the ossification of its nature. For Farrell, accepting the status quo risks negating the transformative power of education. He thus reminds us of not only the constructive task of college (to produce responsible eco-citizens) but also the deconstructive dimension (to examine, critique, and care about what, why, and how we do what we do). His aim, in particular, calls us to pay

attention to the operative and expressed values that guide a college. And understood broadly, it means shifting the nature of college in response to the urgent issues within one's context. For Farrell, the issue is the contemporary ecological crisis. But his thought also opens up the possibility for re-forming college culture to address other problems, such as income inequality, structural violence, and race and gender issues. This modeling is essential to the prophetic vocation of Lutheran higher education.

## A Natural Calling

Farrell's argument helpfully articulates the two nature(s) of college. It thereby seems fitting to conclude by re-imagining "About St. Olaf" such that it reveals an explicitly prophetic calling, particularly one with an ecological sensibility. Such a statement would claim that students are: vocationally accomplished, as in they will hear the call of nature as the place of human responsibility; ecologically dependent, as in aware of the deep ecological web that shapes their nature; and leading a life of personal involvement, as in caring about the shape of their ecological communities. Such is the nature of college.

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