Of Imaginary Cows and a White Toy Sheep: The Freedom of a Christian College

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Harvard Psychologist Robert Kegan tells the story of a little boy he worked with who, as I remember it, was named Tommy. Tommy had an imaginary farm. One morning Tommy’s mother asked him what he would be doing that day.

“I'll be working on the farm,” Tommy answered. “Today is the day the cows and bulls make the new calves.”

His mother couldn’t resist the entrée. “Tell me,” she said, “How do the cows and bulls make the new calves.”

“It’s real simple,” answered her son. “The cows and bulls trim their toenails and bury the little pieces of toenails and a baby calf grows.”

“Well, Tommy, not exactly,” his mother countered. And she proceeded to tell him for nearly twenty minutes the biological facts of cattle reproduction. “And that,” she concluded with a sense of satisfaction is how calves are born.”

Tommy looked up at his mother, shook his head and replied, “Not on my farm it’s not.”

I am not exactly sure why I find that story so appealing, but I have repeated it many times since I first heard Kegan tell it at a conference I attended some years ago. Perhaps it is that satisfying feeling of hearing a child say something challenging and wise. More likely it is that the story contains a profound insight into how we human beings tend to operate. Because someone has a grasp of fact or truth or useful knowledge, it does not necessarily follow that the insight will adequately address another person’s perspective on the world.

We adults know that Tommy’s mother was factually, scientifically correct in her explanation of bovine reproduction, but we realize that Tommy had an insight into, a control of, and a commitment to his imaginary farm that superseded the “facts.” At least Tommy’s response permits us to realize that the mother does not have the full story though she has a correct story. This understanding contains the approach I would like to take in responding to Professor Tom Christenson’s valuable essay relating Luther’s “The Freedom of a Christian” to the idea of the vocation of a Lutheran College or University. He has managed to demonstrate openness to the diversity of our individual histories and realities as Lutheran institutions while simultaneously elucidating the core of the tradition we hold in common. He has done a great service by suggesting some new ways to consider the liberal arts curriculum and help us bridge the traditions of the liberal arts and Lutheranism on the one hand and on the other the contemporary demands for an education that responds to our current situation.

In fact, I found myself agreeing with nearly everything Dr. Christenson says -- not only agreeing with it but feeling the tug of enlistment. For those of us who view educating others as our true vocation, the summons to rise to our highest calling -- to liberate and to help students achieve their greatest possibilities -- is stirring. Still, as I read and re-read the essay in preparation for forming a written response, I heard a little “Tommy voice” whispering “Not on my farm.”

It took me some time to put words to my uneasiness. Because I believe it is relevant to my later comments, I hope you will indulge me as I re-create the process of my own discovery about my initially-unnamable reaction. One of my first thoughts about Dr. Christenson’s paper was that he and I must be kindred spirits. I recalled that in the early 1980s as a professor in the English department at Thiel College I had given a presentation at the Association of Lutheran College Faculties meeting entitled “How Liberating are the Liberal Arts?” My answer was “Not very.” My paper, like Tom Christenson’s, was based in Luther’s treatise “The Freedom of a Christian.” My primary argument, different from his, said that the liberal arts are truly liberating only insofar as our colleges emphasize them for their own sake and not as practical preparation for some career work and a road to success. I decried our having fallen into the clutches of the marketplace, preparing students to fill slots in an economic machine rather than truly liberating them.

I realize I would not write that same paper today because of the path my own education has taken since then. I moved from that very small town in Pennsylvania and
being a full-time professor at Thiel to the large city of Minneapolis and being a full-time academic dean at Augsburg then to a small city in the South and being a college President at Lenoir-Rhyne. I learned first-hand three quite different Lutheran colleges; two are to a large extent traditional residential liberal arts colleges, the third--Augsburg College--hosts a very diverse student body including over one thousand working adults in its weekend program. In my administrative roles I have had to work more directly with alumni, parents and other constituents than I did as a professor; and now I have become responsible for the recruitment of students, raising funds, and balancing the budget.

In the fifteen years since I wrote that paper, the environment of higher education has also changed dramatically. You know most of what I mean -- from the burdens of institutionally-funded financial aid to the national hostility over tuition costs, the inadequate preparation of students, and the impact of computer technology. Even greater and more dangerous changes inhere in the attitudes our constituents have toward our kind of education. Researchers James Harvey and John Immerwahr reported in a 1993 review of public opinion surveys a consistent public view that higher education is necessary for employment but that liberal arts education is irrelevant to their goal of preparing for a career (reported in Hersh). More recently, Richard Hersh, president of Hobart and William Smith Colleges, wrote about a large study Daniel Yankelovich conducted for his institution on the same issue. The study concluded that few people believe in the importance of learning for learning's sake. Few have any idea what a liberal arts education is; 85% of high school students and 75% of their parents believe the reason to go to college is to prepare for a prosperous career; and they believe that a liberal arts education should teach them workplace skills.

So in reviewing my reaction, I traced the growing complexity of my own views -- my experiences about where colleges stand, where potential students and their parents stand, and where I stand on the issues of what an education should do for and with students. As I made this journey, I grasped more clearly my disjunction from Tom Christenson's use of Luther's treatise to speak about colleges and universities. It is not as correct to say that I disagree with him, rather that I think he has left out an necessary part of how we can most usefully view the vocation of our colleges. The crux of my perspective is this: just as we can say that a Lutheran college is a ministry of the Church but must be clear that it is not the Church; so I believe we must be clear that while a college is composed of people, it is not a person. This distinction is critical, I think, for Luther is writing about Christian persons and their salvation and not about Christian institutions.

Luther clearly makes this distinction in his treatise. When he asks how a "pious Christian, that is, a new and inner man becomes what he is," Luther answers that "it is evident no external thing has any influence in producing Christian righteousness or freedom or in producing unrighteousness or servitude" (278). The inner person is an individual. The inner person is the free Christian. A college or university cannot cause, prevent or, most critically, share in this freedom. The college lacks, except in a metaphorical sense, a soul that could be thought of as free. Luther exhorts every Christian "to lay aside all confidence in works and increasingly to strengthen faith alone" (281). This exhortation is not something colleges and universities can take to heart. A college without works, and lots of them, is dead.

I want to argue that when we speak of a college or university, we can be speaking of two different realities. On the one hand, there lies what I will call the "imagined college." I mean by this something parallel to the "imagined communities" about which Benedict Anderson writes in his book with that title. Anderson argues that a nation is "an imagined political community." People must imagine their nations, he says, because there is no way any person could know or experience all the land or all the people that make up one's nation. America as a land exists between the Atlantic and the Pacific Oceans; America as a nation exists in our imaginations. Anderson's distinction is useful for us as well. I suggest that the college which educates is the "imagined college" and includes the coming together of the courses into a curriculum and the entire process of communal life into the education of the whole person. Anderson notes that the nation is imagined as a community because "regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship" (7). One could argue that a similar sense of community prevails on a campus. As much as the hundreds of pages we produce every ten years for our regional accrediting agencies might suggest to the contrary, I want to posit that this concatenation of realities exists essentially -- though not entirely -- as something real but created in the spirits and minds of the college community. It is this imagined college.
which really matters to us; this college is the alma mater. This is the college where faculty perform their transformative art. In this realm the college as college may be thought of as free.

On the other hand we have the “real” college. This is the college of electric and fuel bills, federal financial aid reconciliations, deferred maintenance, computer systems, and contribution raising. If we put this into Luther’s two kingdoms” terms, the real college resides solely in the kingdom on the left just like any other business. The real college is not a person, and the real college is not free. I hope you will understand that these terms “imagined” and “real” are in no sense intended to contain evaluative judgments. “Real” does not mean “true”; and “imagined,” “false.” Because of Anderson’s use of the concept “imagined communities,” I simply thought them useful in making a critical distinction.

The concept of academic freedom in its pure form provides a good illustration of the difference between the two colleges. A faculty member’s right to say whatever is necessary to push toward the truth as he or she sees it is protected, even encouraged. To apply Professor Christenson’s words, “It is a freedom to see the truth and tell it.” So valued and valuable is this concept that higher education has developed an elaborate system, bolstered by bookfuls of legal precedent, to support and protect it. Those of us who spend most of our time in the college where college relations, public relations, marketing, recruiting, and fund raising take place do not have such academic freedom. As the preceding list of functions reveals, this is the realm where for the most part our interaction with those outside the campus community takes place.

Here I can think of no better illustration than Socrates, both the historical person and the character in Plato’s Apology. It appears to be the case that Socrates’ execution resulted more from the threat which the incipient institution of the academy posed to the traditional values of Athenian society than from anything else. In the Apology Plato creates a Socrates who assumes the freedom to tell the-truth-as-he-sees-it in such a way as to offend those who judge him and to exacerbate the threat to them, virtually ensuring his martyrdom. Because of this reckless disregard for his life over against the freedom to say what he believes, Socrates has become a symbol of the committed academic truth seeker. Now I know I do not need to tell you this, but for the sake of rounding out my point, I will. Very few if any college presidents are likely to pursue the presentation of their particular versions of the truth about their college to the hemlock cup in the manner of Socrates. Yet, if they did, while they might appear heroic, they would not be true to their vocation. Whatever it may have been in the past or is remembered in legend as being, the current role of the college president is to advance the college in the realm of the “real college,” to do everything possible to ensure its continued existence and its growth and the succesful accomplishment of its mission in this realm.

The Association of Governing Boards (AGB), the professional organization for Boards of Trustees of Colleges and Universities, designates the selection and evaluation of the college’s president as one of a board’s major functions. As part of its assistance to boards, AGB suggests assessment criteria for presidential evaluations. In support of my earlier observations, I note that a majority of the criteria concern such things as public relations, fund and friend raising, and budget management. Recent articles and letters in The Chronicle of Higher Education also indicate that presidential effectiveness is rated and that many presidents will rise or fall on their ability to gain access to major gifts. What I mean to suggest here is that what most constituents see as primary functions of some college staff persons – those whom I have described as operating in the so-called “real college” – are functions that in many ways preclude freedom.

Let me offer an example. In his essay Tom Christenson states that Christians are “freed to serve the world by being skeptical of and challenging all worldly claims to ultimacy. We are called, in other words, to recognize idols when we see them. . . . Certainly materialism in all its modes is one such idol in our society.” Then he quotes David Orr in Earth in Mind saying, “The plain fact is that the planet does not need more successful people.” Dr. Christenson concludes that too many of our students “are convinced that education serves only to get a job. . . . A Christian college/university informed by Luther’s interpretation is free to challenge this [success myth] and other pervasive ‘ultimacies’.” Now I agree wholeheartedly with everything Professor Christenson says here. In fact, it was at this point that I thought most intently of accusing him of plagiarizing my essay from the early 1980s.

Yet, despite this statement of agreement, I want you to imagine me in my role as the president of a Lutheran college. In this case, picture me trying to fulfill the
expectations of how I ought to best do the part of my job involved with raising funds so that we can continue to accomplish our mission. In this fictional vignette, I am meeting with a potential donor to the college, a multi-millionaire manufacturing entrepreneur who happens to be Lutheran and has an interest in the college. As far as any of us knows, this potential donor has earned every one of his millions of dollars by honest hard work. He has never mistreated his employees or been accused of any immorality or illegality. As I go about cultivating this potential donor, do I have the freedom to tell him that the mission of my college is to convince students that materialism is one of the idols of our time? Shall I say that of our reality. Be that as may, there is no way around the time, I suggest that whether we slip into secularism or not, Lutheran and has an interest in the college. As far as any of any millions knows, this potential donor has earned every one of his millions of dollars by honest hard work. He has never mistreated his employees or been accused of any immorality or illegality. As I go about cultivating this potential donor, do I have the freedom to tell him that the mission of my college is to convince students that materialism is one of the idols of our time? Shall I say that we do not need another successful person because success is a false ultimacy? In a very real sense I do not think I have that freedom, and the college does not have this freedom. How many of our potential large supporters were not successes in our materialistic world? Few. How many are not very proud of their success and do not want current students to follow their example? Fewer still. In the realm of raising funds, paying bills, defending against litigation there exist restrictions on the freedom of a Christian college.

George Marsden in his voluminous work The Soul of the American University offers a stern warning for colleges like ours, which he sees on the slippery slope sliding toward secularization in the historical tradition of Harvard and Yale. His Calvinist-inspired vision is arguable for Lutherans who do not set up the same dichotomies between the kingdoms of Christ and of the world, as Tom Christenson and others have pointed out. At the same time, I suggest that whether we slip into secularism or not, we at some time – perhaps in our very beginnings – became firmly entrenched in the “commodity economy” where the “real college” lost its freedom. Many in academe dislike using the terminology of business to describe part of our reality. Be that as it may, there is no way around the fact that we offer a service which people purchase or do not. This statement does not imply that everything we do is for sale or could be purchased or that whatever amount a student pays in tuition could ever buy an education. Yet, especially those of us who are essentially traditional, residential liberal arts colleges have created a kind of education that demands buildings, residence halls, food service, heat, light, libraries, counselors, and now computers. All of this costs money, and most of it we cannot do without. Did our sister college Upsala fail because its mission was unworthy or its faculty and staff failed to be properly dedicated or work sufficiently hard? I think not. It failed because it did not enroll enough students who paid enough tuition to pay its bills.

I do not think this kind of talk demeans us at all. Of course, it does not touch what is most significant, most uplifting, most beautiful and certainly not what is most enjoyable about our institutions. However, insofar as we do have a business side to our work, we had best realize we are not free. So what is my point in bringing these mundane considerations into what we all would rather think and talk about in the most uplifting and ideal of terms? In essence, I am calling for our insisting on a sense of complexity as we seek to define the vocation of a Lutheran college or university. Doing so may help ensure that we do not remain solely in the realm of the imagined college, making our definition truncated and thus not really useful to us as we reflect upon the day-to-day aspects of being a college of the Church. It is this consideration I wish to graft onto those of Tom Christenson.

Just as Luther posits our lives as Christian persons in two kingdoms, the heavenly one and the secular one, and posits also our ability to serve and to operate with righteousness in both, so I think we can profitably posit that our colleges operate in two realms. I am aligned with Luther’s position on this. As Richard Solberg has noted, “Luther’s philosophy of education grew directly out of his concept of two kingdoms. He placed education squarely within the ‘orders of creation,’ or God’s ‘secular realm’” (76). At the same time, I am suggesting that the “imagined college,” made up as it is mostly of Christian persons, has some existence in the spiritual kingdom through the Church. This idea of our operation in two realms, if lived rightly and thought through with the proper appreciation for complexity and ambiguity, can prove valuable. It can give us an idea of how a Lutheran college can be said to be distinctive and can fulfill its vocation while surviving and prospering in a world where secular measures of role and purpose judge quality.

There are many ways in which our colleges live in this challenge of doubleness, and there are many times we are called to live there. Mark Schwehn, the Dean of Valparaiso’s Christ College, has written of the kinds of double demands I mean. Schwehn discusses, for example, “the deep ambivalence that many Christian parents entertain about the kind of school they want their children to attend. In brief, many Christian parents want their sons and daughters to attend colleges and universities that are sufficiently counter-cultural to protect their youngsters...
from some of the uglier onslaughters of modernity” he says, “but that are enough in accord with modern culture so that their sons and daughters will prosper upon graduation by attaining wealth, power, influence, social standing, promotion, advancement, etc., within the secular world” (2-3).

Similarly, it is my experience that Lutheran colleges and universities often receive double messages from our churches. On the one hand, the church and members of the churches and synods decry what they view as a small number of Lutheran students on our campuses, the presence of the evils of the larger culture among our students such as promiscuous sexuality and alcohol and drug abuse, too few required religion courses, or small attendance at chapel services. On the other hand, when budget apportionment and support are considered, the colleges are often seen to be self-supporting business ventures which have a source of income and should be able to support themselves if they manage things properly. When do the pages of church publications report on colleges? It is almost entirely when one of us receives a very large gift or is honored by U.S. News and World Report rankings as one of the best. Am I accusing parents and the church of being hypocritical, disingenuous or ignorant? Perhaps one could argue any of those descriptors as true at times. My point, rather, is that they, like us, are vacillating in an either/or approach to the vocation of a Lutheran college when a both/and approach can be more useful. In terms of vocation, we are mistakenly compared to the Church proper and seen to be failures when our ministry, evangelism, values, and worship life do not approach the standards set by the Gospels and tradition for the Church. In fact, we share a different kind of ministry: one having more in common with Lutheran outdoor ministries, hospitals, or services for the aging.

In his work The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property, author Lewis Hyde constructs a valuable distinction between the “gift” and the “commodity” economies in which human cultures operate. In the gift economy, people give something to another with no expectation that something of value will be given directly in return but with an expectation that the recipient will give a gift, perhaps the same gift, to someone else. “The gift perishes for the person who gives it away . . . A gift is consumed when it moves from one hand to another with no assurance of anything in return,” (9) explains Hyde. This cycle of giving with no assurance of return but an expectation of continued giving by the receiver creates growth in resources and enhancement of community. Hyde summarizes the growth this way:

A circulation of gifts nourishes those parts of our spirit that are not entirely personal, parts that derive from nature, the group, the race or the gods. Furthermore, although these wider spirits are part of us, they are not “ours”; they are endowments bestowed upon us. To feed them by giving away the increase they have brought us is to accept that our participation in them brings with it an obligation to preserve their vitality. (38)

On the other side exists the “commodity economy” in which exchange is made on the basis of equivalent value. I give you a thing or service and expect that you will give me something, in kind or in money, of approximately equal value. “When anyone . . . sets out to make money in the marketplace,” explains Hyde, “he reckons his actions by the calculus of comparative value and allows that value, rather than the home life of his clients and friends, to guide him” (104). This is our normal manner of operating, especially with strangers. From this exchange no community is built. If my sink becomes clogged, I seek the name of a plumbing service in the telephone directory. Someone comes to my home to perform the service; I pay the plumber and expect – in fact, hope – never to see the plumber again. No relationship has been built by our exchange of money for service. On the other hand, when I move into a new neighborhood, the next door neighbor on my right whom I have not met before brings me a loaf of banana bread and a welcome to the neighborhood. Later, the house on my left gains a new owner. On their moving day, my wife and I invite the new owners and our neighbors on the right to a barbecue in our yard. The gift moves on; a circle of giving, a neighborhood community, is created.

Hyde explores this dichotomous sense of human economy with two ends in mind. He uses it both to examine some of the dangers arising in a society which moves almost entirely into the commodity economy and loses the community-building functions of the gift economy, and he uses it to build the foundation for a study of the role of the artist in society. While he does not mention higher education specifically, I think his work provides some valuable insights for investigating my contention that Lutheran colleges and universities operate simultaneously in two realms. Hyde notes our cultural distinction between “masculine work” and “feminine work.” “In a modern,
industrial nation, the ability to act without relationship is still a mark of the masculine gender; boys can still become men and men become more manly, by entering into the marketplace and dealing in commodities. A woman can do the same thing if she wants to, of course, but it will not make her feminine" (105). “What we take to be the female professions,” explains Hyde, “— child care, social work, nursing, the creation and care of culture, the ministry, teaching . . . all contain a greater admixture of gift labor than male professions — banking, law, management, sales, and so on” (106). Those in the so-called female professions are paid less than those in the male professions. While this reflects in large part our culture’s stratified approach to gender, men in these professions are also paid less than men in the male professions.

Because teaching contains a large component of gift labor, it requires a strong commitment of the teacher’s emotional and spiritual energy. In speaking of the compensation received by such persons as teachers and artists, we shall have to recognize, Hyde argues, that “the pay they receive has not been ‘made’ the way fortunes are made in the market, that it is a gift bestowed by the group” (107). Anyone who has been in teaching and seen it as a vocation knows that the amount of labor expended is out of proportion to the compensation; but teachers do not see their labor as being purchased but as being given as a gift. A professor gives of the self and that self is not for sale. We also know that many of our students grasp the value of the gift they receive and do, in fact, pass on the gift in pursuing their own vocations and in the gifts they give to the community.

The prevalence of this kind of relationship with students and of the appreciation of the gift bestowed appears to have entered a state of decline, however, as an attitude of “consumerism” has risen in our society. Consumerism is an attitude relevant to the commodity economy, its major function being to ensure that the consumer receives a product or service commensurate with the value of what is given in exchange, usually money. In our day, however, consumerism has infected everything, including and perhaps now especially the vocations and services which have traditionally stood primarily in the gift economy. Health care has come under the scrutiny of consumerism with many results. Among the results is a purported cost control but also a growing dissatisfaction with the state of the affective aspects of health care like time for nurturing care from nurses or the opportunity to be consistently treated by and build a relationship with the same physician.

In education, consumerism has pushed many students and parents toward a relationship built on the phrase “I pay so much for this education you had better give me what I want” and reinforced by threat of litigation.

For many of us the response to consumerism and, whether we articulate it in this way or not, our response to our loss of place in the gift economy has been simply consternation. Internally we have bemoaned the loss of the “good old days” and condemned the loss of traditional academic values. Most troubling of our responses has been a tendency to assign blame internally. Externally we have been silent or simply noted the problem and lived through it or accommodated to it. Ironically, as we have moved further from the gift economy we have often claimed to be becoming more “service oriented.” Of course, in this context “service” means not the giving of a gift of service but customer or consumer service.

What I am suggesting as a more productive response lies in a recognition of our functioning in two realms, two economies for different purposes and for different parts of fulfilling our vocations. The “imagined college” functions in the gift economy where mostly faculty but also administration can create a true community of exchange and, indeed, love. The “real college” functions in the commodity economy where mostly administrators but also faculty work to ensure that the buildings are built and repaired, the bills are paid, and the technology works so that the project of teaching can be carried out.

How might this double view of our vocation be valuable to us and what might its effects look like? First, as I have discussed in detail, this approach can give us a more complex and thus more useful definition of our vocations as colleges of the Lutheran Church. Such a definition could help us find a way to position ourselves in a world that is much more complex than the world in which our colleges were founded and the one in which most of our growth occurred. Second, it can have significant value related to the functioning of our internal communities. As the Pew Higher Education Roundtable’s Policy Perspectives argued in its Spring, 1996 special issue, one of the critical issues in survival of colleges and universities will be to mend the breach between faculty and administration. “What is needed,” the members of the roundtable say, “is an ability to move from a negotiated culture to an environment in which administrators and faculty each acknowledge the expertise of the other and work together to benefit the institution . . . . The answer, we believe, lies
in the ability of the academy to stay the course – to hold in purposeful juxtaposition the often contrary perspectives of faculty and administration. . . .” (10). The double view I am suggesting could be the answer to Rodney King’s oft-repeated question: “Can’t we just get along?” If both faculty and administration are seen as having absolutely essential, valuable, and worthy tasks to perform, tasks without which the vocation of the college cannot be fulfilled, the chances are better that we will value each other more.

Further, this approach might give us the wherewithal to combat consumerism and its deleterious effects on our communities. Students who come to campus believing that colleges are “gouging” them, as a recent Time magazine cover insisted, are unlikely to enter into the relationship of gift and giver that is essential to the growth in intellect and spirit that our kind of college is called and dedicated to enable. We need a more useful way of talking to the public and our students about what happens at our colleges that distinguishes them from the non-Church college, the large public university, the technical college, even the virtual university on-line. These distinctive qualities exist in the imagined college. It is appropriate for students and parents and we ourselves to use consumerist vocabulary in speaking about the functions of such things as food service, computer lab, bookstore, and the business office; it is not appropriate to use such terms related to the teaching relationship. We do not now make a distinction about where such language is appropriate because, in part, we have not been able or have not wanted to make an argument about what separates our various areas of operation. Some have feared that in granting admission to the vocabulary of business we would contaminate what I have called the gift portion of our life.

Finally, I want to suggest that such an approach might give us a sense of our educational program as being a subversive activity. Some colleges, perhaps in an effort to protect the concept of a liberal arts college from recent and dangerous attacks, have redoubled efforts to insist upon the value of learning for its own sake and upon the inherent value of a liberal arts education as opposed to its practical value. As I have noted, that was exactly the approach of my paper from the early 1980s, “How Liberating are the Liberal Arts.” But something else is needed now. To bolster my argument I bring someone with impeccable credentials in the liberal arts, Jacques Barzun. Recognizing what he calls the “bleak” condition of the liberal arts in American education, Barzun says:

It is all very well to gather at conferences with batches of people who are . . . ‘dedicated to’ the liberal arts, but, when these people leave the . . . conference center, the state of affairs has not been changed one iota. . . . This has gone on for nearly a hundred years, ever since William James and Woodrow Wilson spoke out against what they saw as the start of erosion in the liberal arts within American colleges. (74)

Barzun proposes, “There will be no future for the liberal arts unless those who profess to be concerned make their case on the grounds that have so far been totally neglected, namely, that a course of liberal studies is intensely practical,” and, he maintains, “[the liberal arts] are practical because they develop general intelligence” (74). Whether we can agree on Barzun’s position or not, I want to use his approach to elucidate what I mean by being subversive. Recognizing that the “real college” functions there, we can, I believe, find a way perhaps to speak in the marketplace. We can be faithful to our values but speak in a language that resonates there. We can be confident in the belief that if we can attract students to become part of the college they will graduate with a full education that has subversively changed their lives and prepared them for a career. An education imparted by a faculty of persons free to explore the meaning of human freedom.

Perhaps Martin Luther was thinking of something like this when in the treatise “On the Freedom of a Christian” he discussed how St. Paul circumcised Timothy “not because circumcision was necessary for his righteousness, but that he might not offend or despise those Jews who were weak in the faith and could not yet grasp the liberty of faith.... He chose a middle way, sparing the weak for a time, but always withstanding the stubborn, that he might convert all to the liberty of faith” (306).

I am by nature an optimist, yet in my most sober moments I sense a real danger of our losing the precious gift our colleges have to give. There is no shame in imparting that gift while living in the midst of an alien and hostile environment and giving it even furtively to those who would not wittingly reach out to receive it. In his essay “Childhood and Poetry,” Chilean poet Pablo Neruda recounts an incident from the frontier town where he lived in poverty as a small child. One day he discovers a hole in a fence board behind his house.

“... I looked through that hole and saw a landscape . . . uncared for and wild. . . . All of a sudden a hand
appeared - a tiny hand of a boy about my own age. By the time I came close again, the hand was gone, and in its place there was a marvelous white toy sheep. . . . I went into the house and brought out a treasure of my own: a pine cone, opened, full of odor and resin, which I adored. I set it down in the same spot and went off with the sheep. I never saw either the hand or the boy again." (Hyde, 281)

Commenting on this incident at another time, Neruda explains "that exchange brought home to me for the first time a precious idea: that all humanity is somehow together . . . . It won't surprise you then that I have attempted to give something resinly, earthlike, and fragrant in exchange for human brotherhood. . . . Maybe this small and mysterious exchange of gifts remained inside me also, deep and indestructible, giving my poetry light" (Hyde, 281-282). If our colleges must be that tiny hand which offers its gift quietly and hidden through a hole in the fence of a wild landscape, then so be it; for the gift is precious and enlightening nonetheless.

Works Cited


