

Elimination of discrimination:

Tradition and renovation

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C.S. Lewis used to say that the medieval Romance of the Rose would not ring true if rewritten as the Romance of the Onion. What he should have said was, not in England. There's a poem by Lorna Goodison, a Jamaican writer, about how her "great grandmother's royal scent of cinnamon and escallions/ drew the sailor up the straits of Africa" and they fell in love and his ship sailed on without him. A rose would ring very false indeed as the image for this west African romance, while onions might be just right.

We live our lives according to ideas of beauty and goodness and truth. These ideas and the images by which we represent them are produced in a variety of ways, but the ways which have most influence on our lives are the product of our great secular and sacred institutions and the intellectual and artistic traditions which they nourish.

Despite its misgivings, the University is one of these institutions and a major force in giving credibility to ideas that shape the way we think and feel about ourselves, about others and about the world. The University also gives credibility to people whose ideas it has authorized in one way or another. We even have a system to certify these people - a system of course credits and their accumulation according to some curricular arrangement. "Credit" comes from a Latin word meaning "he or she believes." Our system of credits and credentials is essentially a system of belief not only in our students but also in our faculty, our

curricula and our methods of instructions.

We live in a society in which many people face prejudice every day simply because of the way they look or the way they talk. If we at the University believe that ideas are important, then we must surely believe that the University - especially its students and graduates - can make a difference. For good or ill. Willy nilly, our universities are implicated in the social and economic inequities as well as the inequities of race, gender and class that plague our society. Among other things, we often perpetuate ways of thinking and feeling that sustain these iniquitous conditions. As well, universities are at the very least co-conspirators in circumstances that diminish opportunities for some individuals to attend and to share in the privilege and power a university education conveys. Some of these circumstances we do not control, but all of them we can surely influence.

There are many people - and it is particularly clear that there are many of aboriginal and African and Asian heritages - for whom this university is not a very hospitable place and who, in a variety of ways, are discouraged from coming or from taking part while they are here. When they express their discomfort about our surprisingly stubborn adherence to certain ideas and decorums, we play out Matthew Arnold's 19th century dichotomy of culture and anarchy, easily identifying the barbarians as the ones who look different and who speak differently. After all, "barbarian" comes from a Greek work meaning those who don't speak Greek.

Arnold was the eloquent champion of a system of

education that would teach "the best that has been known and said in the world" and he was a notable figure in his time. But his time knew and said the best attitude to aboriginal peoples was represented by legislation like the Indian Act and that the best approach to Africa was to get the nations of Europe together to divide it up. The second half of the 19th century was a time when people and places were defined and power distributed along imperial lines. It was also the time when most of our disciplines in the arts and sciences were determined, along lines that reflected the same knowledge and the same attitudes.

Since then, much has changed. But not very much has changed at our universities, which in many ways are still approaching knowledge as they did in the 19th century when the essential structures of higher education were established. Although we may pride ourselves on fidelity to our intellectual traditions, we should be conscious that it is in danger of becoming at best a kind of endearing nostalgia and at worst a continuation of invidious and intimidating habits of mind. It is not simply that our dedication to conventional disciplines in the humanities and social sciences excludes the traditions of others - those of aboriginal or African or Asian heritages, for example. It distorts them too and causes us to see these in diminished ways. And these are the ways we convey to our students.

This goes deeper than matters of detail, to the structure and the style of our disciplines, and the ideas they convey. Let's look for a moment at the heritages of the people of our first nations. Literary studies, my discipline, plays its part in making them

invisible by privileging written over oral traditions, in many cases actively discrediting the latter (and, by implication, those whose heritage it is). And so we have our well established Stratford and Shaw Festivals and our well-deserved Governor-General's awards for poetry, prose and playwriting but no corresponding celebration of the rich literary inheritance of aboriginal storytelling. The discipline of political science, to take another example, has developed in ways that assume a separation of material and spiritual values - of church and state - and has great difficulty accommodating the spiritual beliefs informing the expressions of aboriginal sovereignty that are so important in the contemporary political arena, seeing them as rhetorical, romantic or just plain embarrassing. Continuing the pattern, economics construes prosperity primarily in terms of employment and access to material goods, so that aboriginal hunters in the north are classified as unemployed and in need of southern development strategies. Such a litany should also include history and anthropology which, with their language and logic of discovery and their tendency to treat other peoples as objects rather than subjects, consolidate assumptions that ultimately have prescriptive as well as descriptive power and deeply affect our social, economic and political attitudes. And so on, through law, medicine and engineering. . . . The sciences are not exempt, although they have been much readier to recognize the relative rather than the absolute character of their truths. And yet ideas in the sciences are often remarkably consistent with the broader philosophical assumptions of their time.

This is not intended as an attack on our intellectual enterprises but simply a reminder of what they are, especially disciplines in the humanities and social sciences. They are indeed precious heritages. Some are also in some sense imperial heritages, privileging certain kinds of knowledge. They are constructions of knowledge in a time and place and by a group of people with particular assumptions and ambitions.

If we really want to address the issue of racism at this university - which is to say if we really want to improve and enrich this place - I think we must address openly the nature and the power of our disciplines. I'm not talking here about developing what it is fashionable in the United States to call a politically correct attitude (which must be much like any other orthodoxy), nor about what some sceptics refer to as the deconstruction of our disciplines. I'm talking about

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the renovation of them. Like all responsible renovators, we should first check the foundations.

Furthermore, we should realize that something of this challenge should (and if we have the wisdom to encourage it, will) come from our students, who are at the end of the day our most precious and enduring heritage. They are deeply implicated in and by the ideas we cherish and many are deeply disturbed by them. This university should surely be able to provide an opportunity for them to articulate (and to be challenged on) both the need and the strategies for change. We are as an institution inevitably conservative and so are many of our students. We should encourage those who are not.

The ways in which we do so will be as important as what we do. For just as an examination of the limitations of our disciplines with regard to the perspectives and experience of women would be deeply suspect, and probably deeply flawed, if carried out primarily by men, we cannot expect to address some of these issues without the benefit of the perspective and experience, as well as the commitment, of those whose heritages are marginalized. I often hear that this will take time, especially given the composition of our University community right now. We should be more impatient.

This is not going to be easy. But it is an opportunity which we should not let pass. We are in danger of losing our faith in ourselves. This is a chance to recover and reaffirm our belief in the importance of what we do.

There's a story told by Philip Levine, an American poet, about working on the milling machines in the Chevrolet gear and axle plant in Detroit. A newcomer arrives to work beside him and after a while he asks what they're making, to which the poet answers.

I'm making 2.25 an hour, don't know what you're making, and he had to correct me, gently, what was we making out of this here metal, and I didn't know.

It's time to think about what we're making here at the University of Toronto.

From the "Forum" column of the *University of Toronto Bulletin*, January 21, 1991. Professor Chamberlin is with the Departments of English and Comparative Literature at U of T, and was principal of New College from 1985 to 1990.

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