"the scrambling careerism of industry"

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McLuhans and Northrop Fryes. Running well behind, but strongly, are McGill, York, British Columbia and Alberta, with a few more.

Back in 1967 I was a rising academic, with a BA from UBC, a master's from California, a Woodrow Wilson Fellowship, an IODE Overseas Scholarship, a British Council Scholarship, a Centennial Award, a doctorate and a book on Stephen Leacock to my credit. Three years later I was a freelance writer, living from hand to mouth in a Cape Breton village.

What saddened me about academic life was, in the first place, that having figured out the rules of the rather tawdry game, I found myself playing it with the easy confidence of the cynic. It slowly dawned on me that most of my colleagues, decent people on the whole, really believe the university was doing valuable work for humanity. But I had simply lost the faith.

In the second place, I had seen my own university's savage reaction to a dissident professor and a handful of radical students. Professor Norman Strax protested the university's imposition of photo-identification cards by bringing books to the check-out desk of the library and refusing to show a card. The library refused him the books, and he left them there, then tried again. So did his student supporters, and when several hundred books piled up at the desk the university panicked and closed the library. Delighted, Strax repeated the performance the next two days. For these disruptive but essentially harmless antics, he was suspended, sued, and ultimately sacked.

Who did the university serve, I wondered, if it could so severely object to purely verbal and symbolic actions? The board of governors is a university's top authority. Look at the governors of most universities, and you'll discover a Who's Who of the local business elite.

Well, no, not entirely. I remember as a student the respect I developed for shrewd, provocative teachers like Donald Brown and Barnett Savery of the UNBC philosophy department, or for creative administrators like the Dalhousie psychologist Henry James, or for a gentle humanist such as Rob McDougall of Carleton or an urbane prophet such as Abe Rotstein of Toronto. Such people do exist, praise God, and happy is the student or colleague who stumbles upon them; they constitute a kind of genuine university within the official university, like nectar inside a skunk cabbage. But the official university, the organized university, the university as a social institution—as they say in Petit de Grat, by the Lord dyin' anti-Christ, what a t'ing!

I began to notice that the universities rarely respond even to their own students. Our department set up a kind of internal royal commission to hear submissions from members of the department about the directions we should take in the future. It didn't solicit opinions of anyone else: the students, for instance, or the English teachers in the high schools. This struck me as peculiar, so I asked my own students what they would like our department to do that it wasn't doing. An overwhelming majority of them said they'd like a course in writing—not creative writing, not basic composition, not grammar, just instruction in the kinds of skills that can easily be taught. They wanted to write workmanlike prose: clear, concise letters, pointed and entertaining memos, readable and logical reports.

I raised the idea at a department meeting. My colleagues were intelligent, conscientious and well-intentioned. But they simply could not see that such a course had any place in the university curriculum. Our undergraduates were students of what had been written, not student writers; in any case, they argued, writing could not be taught, and who would want to teach such a course? Well, I admit that no teacher can create a genius, but I'm convinced that the basic principles of prose composition can be taught. I was willing to try it. But the department voted it down.

SCHOLAR FACTORY

These are not horrible, dictatorial people. But they do have a very special, restricted view of the social order and their place in it. Our department was basically devoted to turning out scholars like ourselves, in plain defiance of the fact that most of our students would become salesmen and school-teachers, housewives and civil servants. We were answering not their needs, but ours.

We begin school together, and the articulate children of the well-to-do scamper briskly up the ladder, dropping off the next generation of labourers in grade school, the clerks and tradesmen in high school, the salesmen and bureaucrats in college. The sons of privilege ascend to the high sunlit plateau of the professional schools and step into medical practice, corporate management or the family law firm with the easy smiles and confident step of the new masters of the world, their superiority proven once again by their success in a game in which they make up the rules. Heaped against the bottom of the ladder, like discarded shingles, are the broken dreams of the farmers and fishermen, the shift workers and bus drivers, who once hoped the world would make way for their children too.

ALZÉAR BOUDREAU

In the trailer in Petit de Grat, Alzéar Boudreau is slowly working through the navigational problems. A soft-spoken man with a shy, appealing smile, grizzled and fiftyish, he quit school in grade three, and he does not read very well.

I have taught in high schools, and I know what is said in staff rooms: what was said, no doubt, about Alzéar 40 years ago. A nice boy, but not gifted. Just a fisherman's kid. He has trouble getting the hang of reading, but what can you expect? If Alzéar did not make a success of school, the fault was his, not the school's. He wasn't very bright.

I don't believe it. Alzéar has made no formal study of navigation before, but last year he bought a boat in Clark's Harbor, 400 miles away, and brought it home down Nova Scotia's open Atlantic coast, stopping only once in Halifax. It was foggy, and he never saw the shore between landfalls, but he steered the Western Pride right into Petit de Grat. We do a dry run of the examination we will face next week, and Alzéar makes one mistake in 80 questions. You have to make 70 per cent to pass: every man in the trailer is well above that level.

These are men who can build and repair their own boats and houses, who can tear down and overhaul their own engines, who can find the fish, catch them and preserve them.

And when these men are put in a classroom and given the chance to learn things which really matter to them, they show a kind of aptitude and drive I have never seen in an undergraduate class. There is nothing wrong with them. If the educational system writes such people off, as it does every day of the year, there is something wrong with the system.

Unquestionably the universities do useful and even noble things; unquestionably a society which devoted none of its resources to the study of poetry and philosophy, biology and hydrodynamics, would be a sadly deficient society. But our universities are not fundamentally devoted to those pursuits. Instead they represent the grabbing, scrambling careerism of industry spreading like a stain into intellectual life.

Peter Hsu photo

York's Ross building, from north end.

COMMITTED FEW

If ranks were abolished and degrees given out in slot machines at the university gates, if professors and other professionals were paid at the average level of Canadian workers, the whole house of cards would come tumbling down. Sitting in the wreckage would be a philosopher or two, a man of letters, a handful of other sages and a few intent disciples; and, slowly, they would become known as a group of people committed to the search for wisdom. That is how the universities began in the first place, when young people hungry for learning sought out men like Pierre Abélard and Thomas Aquinas in Bologna, in Paris, in Oxford. Such people still exist, people who have devoted their lives to thought and learning, and whose conversation is endlessly wise and provocative. They would continue to study and teach, because that is what they love to do.

Such authentic lovers of learning do not make people like Alzéar Boudreau feel small.