

I have argued that the goal of college ought to be active engagement with generative big questions.

COLLEGES AND THE COLLAPSE OF THE PUBLIC SPHERE

I have also argued that the purpose of this sort of education is to nurture and sustain the public sphere. I pointed to the deep dilemma that in the United States today the public sphere may be on its last legs. Indeed, many people in politics, media, and the public do not seem even to want a public sphere. Many people appear to view any commitment to others in a public sphere as some sort of socialism, an affront to individualism and hard-core capitalism.

There is one thing that is absolutely crucial both for a college education based on generative big questions and for a healthy public sphere. This is something so simple that one would have thought we could never be in danger of losing it: a simple commitment to basic or “hard core” facts. A pursuit of truth based on disciplined observation (which we have seen earlier to be the basis of science, discovery, knowledge production, and pragmatic problem solving) requires a commitment to and acknowledgment of basic or hard-core facts.

Hard core facts are facts so well supported by evidence—so well tested against the world—that we ignore them at our peril if we genuinely wish to solve problems and avoid harm and risk from the world around us. No one builds a bridge (or engineers anything for that matter) and ignores hard core facts. If you do, the bridge collapses. Yet today we have so many people who are so ideologically or religiously committed—or, in some cases, so committed to their self-interest—that they readily ignore or deny hard core facts.

We used to expect the “news”—things like newspapers and the nightly television newscast—to offer us hard core facts, to tell us the “truth” in that very basic everyday sense. Other outlets could trade in ideology, religion, and the pursuit of self-interest (for example, entertainment and ads). But today, newspapers are dying and television news is either largely entertainment or ideology (as in Fox News). People do not seem to care much anymore about hard core facts. They care about being told that the world is the way they wish it to be and any number of politicians and media outlets are there to do precisely that.

It can sometimes, of course, turn out that hard core facts are “wrong”. We humans can always make mistakes. But in the vast majority of cases, such facts are not wrong and ignoring them is dangerous. Yes, maybe, just maybe, putting your hand in the fire will not burn you, but no sane person puts his or her hand in the fire. That it will burn is just too hard core a fact to ignore.

That the earth is billions of years old, not less than 10,000 is a hard-core fact. That humans and dinosaurs were never on the earth together is a hard-core fact. Yet a great many religious people in the United States readily deny these facts. Could one ever have imagined a modern world in which “educated” people denied such facts? That President Barack Obama is a citizen of the United States and was born in the United States is a hard-core fact. That Saddam Hussein did not orchestrate the 9/11 attacks is a hard-core fact. Yet a great many ideologically-driven Americans readily deny these facts.

Hard core facts are not conservative or liberal. People who acknowledge them are not Democrats, Republicans, or Socialists. Such facts are simply the basis, the beginning point, of discussion and argument for anyone who has any commitment whatsoever to discussion or argument with others who do not already agree with them. Hard core facts are, thus, too, the basis and beginning of a public sphere. There is no point whatsoever to a college education in a society that has no real commitment to hard core facts. Hard core facts are just the beginning, not the end of a public sphere or college education. However, without that beginning there can be no end or ends.

In debates over health care in the United States, there are many who have argued that a public health care system would involve “health rationing” (decisions about what sorts of health care to pay for in terms of how much value and length in would add to one’s life) and “death panels”. Thus, they argue, we should reject a public system. But it is a hard-core fact that the current system of for-profit health insurance in the United States already involves health rationing. Insurance companies regularly make decisions about what they will and will not pay for in terms of cost, probability of success, benefit to the patient, and the “experimental” nature of the procedure. Insurance companies often deny benefits to people with “pre-existing conditions” that have a tenuous connection with the patient’s current condition. Furthermore, the thousands of people without health insurance face the most dramatic health rationing possible: they die even when quite normal surgeries are unavailable to them because they cannot pay for them.

These facts are not liberal or conservative. And such facts do not determine what sort of health care system we should have. Nonetheless, people on all sides of the debate need to acknowledge them if they want to use terms like “health rationing” and “death panels” and want to genuinely seek a solution to health care in the United States.

The lack of commitment to hard core facts in the United States goes far beyond denying them. A great many institutions engage regularly in deception to gain profit. As America has faced, debated, and investigated the causes of the 2008 recession, we have discovered a myriad of deceptive and fraudulent practices in mortgage brokerages, banks, and other financial institutions. As we have debated health care, we have found a great many deceptive and dishonest practices in the health insurance

industry. In our political life we have become used to the fact that politicians represent a cause because rich donors who are connected to the cause have given them money and not because it is true, right, or just. In the market place we take it for granted that ads and claims from businesses will lie to us, will tell us that something is “free” when it isn’t, that something is safe that isn’t, that something is good that isn’t. We hear an ad that says it is a “public announcement” and sounds like it is connected to the government when it is private company selling a product (e.g., a mortgage adjustment) that turns out to be a fraud.

In the end, we all realize we live in a world where “spin” and even lies readily trump truth in the sense of even hard-core facts. The argument for all this spin, deception, and fraud is that it leads to profit and rising stock prices. It is the price, people say, we pay for free markets that in the end make wealth “trickle down” to everyone. It is “better” than “socialism”, which is what people call any attempt by government to control and regulate spin, lies, and free markets. But, of course, our markets are not in reality free, since they are readily manipulated by monopolies and wealthy interests that buy politicians. In fact, we live in a world where people seriously argue that short term profit and rising stock prices are the leading or sole moral responsibility of businesses and corporations. Today, many people believe businesses and corporations have moral responsibility only to stockholders and not to stakeholders who may be harmed by their practices.

My purpose here is not to bemoan the constant spin, deception, and lies we face in the United States. It is not to bemoan how important money is for who represents us and how they vote in Congress. It is not to bemoan the death of news as reporting hard core facts and not ideologically laden spin (and yes all news was always in some sense ideological in the sense that all reporting involves some degree of interpretation, but, for goodness’s sake, there are degrees here and we have nearly lost one end of the continuum). This has all been bemoaned enough already by people from all different points on the political spectrum. My point is, rather, that in a nation committed to spin, deception, fraud, and disavowal of hard core facts there can be no political sphere and, thus, too, no need for colleges and universities.

Thanks to the drive for short-term profit on the part of business and ideological victory at all costs on the part of politicians and many voters, as well the prevalence of spin and deception, the public sphere is not coming back any time soon and not without some concerted effort. The only solution I can see to the dilemma that there is no real point to colleges and universities without a healthy public sphere—which they are meant to nourish—is to make it the role of colleges and universities, over the long haul, to renew, re-establish, and transform the public sphere. In the short run, the role of colleges and universities must be to actually be the public sphere. Like the monasteries in the Dark

Ages that kept literacy and learning alive so that they could be reborn again later, colleges and universities must constitute and sustain a public sphere until it can be reborn as the essential basis of a reformed society based on evidence, arguments, collaboration, and problem solving and not spin, ideology, and greed.

Now, I am well aware, that most colleges and universities—driven as they are by the competition for status, students, and money—cannot dare constitute a genuine public sphere. They must, like other institutions in the society, be driven by short term goals and a need to entertain and pander to their “customers” while not, in fact, giving them anything remotely worth the money they spend. But, perhaps, some colleges and universities will step forward to save and re-invent the notion of a national and even global public sphere. With barbarians at the gates, medieval monks did. But then we face another dilemma: if only colleges and universities that are already prestigious and wealthy can take on this role, and only for mostly elite students, then they can hardly themselves constitute a real public sphere.

WHAT DOES A PUBLIC SPHERE LOOK LIKE

A good deal of writing exists on the concept of the public sphere. However, I want to be specific about what I intend by the term here and now. People enter a public sphere because they accept “co-membership” with others, some or many of whom are different in social class, ethnicity, race, gender, values and beliefs than they are. That is, a public sphere is pluralistic in the sense that social, cultural, or biological divisions like class, ethnicity, race, gender, and values and beliefs per se cannot be a reason to exclude anyone.

Of course, there are limits and a public sphere can and does limit who can participate in it. However, the only limitations are these two: First, no one can be a member of a public sphere if they do not accept the role of reasons, argument, and truth (rather than deception) in settling disagreements and solving problems. This by no means rules out passion and emotion. We now well know from research that reason and emotion are not enemies, but work in tandem. However, it does rule out appeals to authority, power, self-interest, or force. These can only apply if others accept them on the basis of reasons, arguments, and evidence, including others who do not share the authority, power, self-interest, or ability to use force.

Second, a condition on a public sphere is that everyone in it agrees that they have an obligation to sustain the public sphere through cooperative and helpful behaviors towards others in the public sphere all of whom count as full members. People can most certainly debate what sorts of cooperation and help is useful, important, or necessary, but they cannot claim they owe little or nothing to anyone else, save as a matter of charity. Cooperation and help in a public sphere are not matters of charity, but

of social obligation and, yes, “social justice”. People who do not accept this are not real members of the public sphere, but, at best, selfish parasites on its resources.

People can belong to all sorts of groups that do not constitute public spheres, groups like religions, interest-driven groups, or groups with narrowly shared values and beliefs. They can opt out of any public sphere if they so choose. However if enough people opt out of public spheres, countries can lose their ability to function and the global world can and will break apart as a sphere for united human action. A public sphere is really a matter of a “social contract”. People agree to be a public sphere by behaving in ways that sustain it. People cannot, in reality, be forced to be in a public sphere, especially today when digital media and a global world allows people to engage only with others like themselves in terms of values, interests, or life styles, if they so choose.

WHY WE IN THE U.S. DON'T REALLY HAVE A PUBLIC SPHERE ANY MORE

The United States today is sometimes referred to as an oligarchy, not a real democracy. An oligarchy is a form of government where power is in the hands of a small number of people, whether these be the rich, royalty, powerful families, corporations, or the military. Aristotle used the term to mean just rule by the rich. Strictly speaking, the term for rule by the rich is “plutocracy”. The United States, since the 1970s, has become closer and closer to a plutocracy, causing real dangers for and damages to our democracy.

Nonpartisan research has shown clearly that, over the last several decades, the rich have gotten much richer, the middle class has made only small gains, and the poor have gotten much poorer. The term “rich” here though is misleading. The vast majority of gains in wealth and share of the national income has gone to the top 5% of Americans and even more to the top 1% (and the top 1% of this 1%). Great wealth has concentrated ever more tightly into the hands of a relatively small number of people.

This small group of people has used their wealth to influence political decisions at all levels of government. They have done so as individuals, but even more so through well organized and highly funded advocacy groups and organizations deigned to further their interests. They profoundly influence not just what government does (for example, pass tax cuts and tax breaks that favor the rich), but what it fails to do (for example, impose regulations).

Research has also shown that U.S. elected officials, by and large, carry out the wishes of the very rich even when these are not the wishes of the larger electorate. For example, several studies have found that U.S. Senators vote in ways that represent policy changes that surveys show the very rich favor. On the other hand, their votes do

not reflect what middle class people say they want on surveys and negatively correlate with what poor people say they want.

More and more actual policy changes (or failures of government to act) reflect the desires of the very rich as these are channeled through advocacy organizations representing their interests and lobbying Congress. Less and less do they directly reflect the outcome of elections, though our media pays more attention to elections as “horse races” or a kind of sporting event than they do to the work of advocacy organizations, lobbying, and money.

Organizations that once represented the interests of working class and many middle-class people, and created some balance against organizations representing the very wealthy, have greatly declined in power and influence over the last few decades. Unions are the best example of such declining organizations, though there are others (e.g., groups like the Elks or VFW). More and more, funding for campaigns and advocacy is left in the hands of the wealthy and their favored organizations.

There is a strong correlation between being a Republican and being wealthy and being a Democrat and being less wealthy. However, this correlation is obscured by one group—Evangelicals and other “cultural values” voters—who tend to be less wealthy but vote as Republicans because of issues like abortion, gay marriage, gun control, and others (and even here, the poorest Evangelicals are Democrats by and large). These “values voters” obscure the relationship between the wealth and the ways in which the Republican Party represents their wishes on economic issues. That said, it must also be said that, with the erosion of unions and the rising power of the very wealthy, Democrats also now need funds from and must aid the very wealthy and their advocacy organizations.

The 2008 recession was a good example of plutocracy at work. Very wealthy financiers, and others, helped bring about the recession via high risk speculation and advocacy for a lack of over-sight and regulation by government. By 2011 many of these people were flourishing again on the stock market and via other forms of speculation as well. But the lower and middle class were still paying for the recession through lost jobs, higher taxes, less pay, and lower social services.

None of what I have said implies there are not arguments for great wealth in a society or that there are not many people in the U.S. who are not disturbed by the concentration of wealth in the U.S. and its influence of elections and politics. Some argue that it is the fact that one can gain great wealth that motivates people to persist past failure, take risks, and innovate new ideas, products, and services. However, whether one is a conservative or a liberal, there are two questions here worth asking: 1) When does the concentration of wealth and power in a small number of hands cause many people to “buy out” of the society and lose their motivation for participating in and trusting in their

society, its organizations, and its government? 2) Is wealth based on speculation (like derivatives, stock options, credit default swaps, and other arcane financial instruments and bets) and not the production of actual goods and services actually as good for society as wealth connected to real goods and services?

In any case, the United States more and more behaves as plutocracy. The mass of the people in the society, more and more, feel detached from their society and government. They come to feel like victims or dupes and not participants. They retreat into their own idea, value, or life-style communities. They retreat from public argument with others unlike themselves because they do not feel such argument can be effective. It is not where the action is. The action is behind the scenes where political representation works for the very rich and not everyone else. The news media, now caught up with entertainment and political advocacy, deny or obscure the plutocratic nature of American politics as they stress cultural and value issues over economic ones. In the end, the public sphere ceases to exist or becomes a sham.

NEW PUBLIC SPHERES

The Internet and other digital and social media have given rise to new types of public spheres. In a massive multiply player game like World of Warcraft or a massive participant virtual world like Second Life, as well as in other virtual worlds and Internet supported interest-driven groups, people often seek to constitute a sort of public sphere. In fact, in these worlds and groups of people often have to come into contact and deal with people whose opinions, backgrounds, and values are quite different from them own. They may well interact with many more such people in virtual space than they do in their daily lives in the real world.

In other work, I have talked about "passionate affinity spaces". These spaces are cases where people interact in a virtual world or via the Internet or social media around a shared interest or passion. Not all virtual, Internet, or social media groups are passionate affinity spaces. As I define them, such spaces have several key features: 1) People in a passionate affinity space interact around shared goals because of a shared passion, not because of shared backgrounds, age, status, gender, ability, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, or values unless these are integral to the passion. 2) Not everyone interacting in the space need have a passion for the shared interest (they could simply have an interest), but they must acknowledge the passion and the people who have it and who form the main "attractor" for the space. 3) People earn status and influence in the space because of accomplishments germane to the passion, not because of wealth or status in the world outside the space. 4) The space offers everyone the opportunity, should they want it, to produce, not just consume, to learn to mentor and lead, not just to be mentored and follow. 5) People in the space agree to

rules of conduct—and often enforce them together—that facilitate the other features above.

The world today, thanks to the Internet and digital and social media, is replete with passionate affinity spaces. They can be devoted to almost anything one name, for example: women's health, cats, designing for the Sims, citizen science, gardening, fan fiction, video games, robotics, chess, sports, music, social and charitable causes, digital photography, and a nearly endless list of others.

In a cat breeding passionate affinity space, a fat bald conservative sixty-old white male high school dropout and a 20-year-old liberal African-American female with a PhD count as just the same if they are equally masters of cats and cats breeding or have a deep passion for them. Indeed, in many passionate affinity space people have avatars or other sorts of virtual identities that obscure such features. Indeed, the two might both have avatars that look like cuddly aliens from outer space. These two people are less and less likely to meet each other—let alone listen cordially to arguments from each other—in the United States today. But they can and will discuss cats and cat breeding.

A civic public sphere was supposed to function as a sort of passionate affinity space where the shared passion was the health and wellbeing of civic society. In this civic public sphere being poor or rich, gay or straight, man or woman, black or white, conservative or liberal should not matter since the health and wellbeing of the civic society by definition includes everyone in it. However, once someone proposes a public health care plan, higher taxes, gay marriage, gun control, environmental protections and is told he or she is a "Socialist", "Communist", or "traitor", (rather than being offered a respectful argument based on a shared passion for civic society in the United States or the world), then the person ceases to be defined as in the public sphere. Enough of this and the public sphere ceases to exist and becomes a club for the likeminded or a "religion".

We have come to the point where we can have public spheres for those interested in cats or Harry Potter, but not for those interested in civic society. Now it must be admitted that passionate affinity spaces, whether devoted to cats or robotics (or World of Warcraft), are always in danger of being destroyed if people do not work hard to sustain them. People can begin to value socialization or shared politics over the formerly shared passion. They can seek to use wealth, outside status, or nastiness to influence the space. They can try to root out people they do not like, whether these be teens, women, people who do not share their views of what is "politically correct", gays, religious people or non-religious people, or anything else. Once the shared passion (or allegiance to its importance) is backgrounded, the space is no longer a passionate affinity space in my terms.

I will now define a public sphere as a passionate affinity space based on a passion for a shared civic society whether at a national or the global level. Since this sort of public sphere is all but dead in the United States, I have proposed above that colleges and universities be reformed to become public spheres that can eventually reignite a true civic public sphere (much as monasteries in the Dark Ages eventually reignited learning and literacy in the Western World). I can now say more about what this means: colleges and universities should become passionate affinity spaces based on a passion for disciplined observation applied to the health and welfare of human society in the natural, national, and global world. The key features of passionate affinity spaces can give us important clues, then, as to how to reform and reorganize colleges and universities.

COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES AS PUBLIC SPHERES

I am proposing that universities should be public spheres based on a commitment to disciplined observation (this would be the main rule of conduct) applied to a variety of different passions. These passions would all involve issues and problems germane to civic society, nationally and globally, and its relationship to nature, history, and the universe. People would not just study but engage with art, science, technology, and history in service of discovery, invention, public understandings, problem solving, and the creation of a better nation and world.

What this would mean is that discussions of how to reform colleges should focus not on content and classes, first and foremost, but on what sort of space or “community” we want to build. What interactions, relationships, norms, activities, and collaborations would constitute this space as a passionate affinity space devoted to disciplined observation in the service of discovery for the good of society, the world, all humans, and our biological, natural, social, cultural, and institutional environments? We would ask not what courses a student has had or a faculty member has taught. Rather, we would ask what students and faculty had done and produced over time together with others to constitute the college or university as a public sphere for discovery and public good.

We can further and imagine that there are no courses as we know them, only paths on which people travel together for a time and place in an attempt to discuss, explicate, and answer some big generative question relevant to civic and global society. A college degree would be granted only when a student had traveled several such paths and acquitted him or herself as good citizen of the college or university devoted to disciplined observation and to discovery, passion, and the public good.

Now I am aware that in today’s America, the term “public good” sounds suspicious. For some conservatives, it smacks of “socialism”, “social justice”, and taxes. For many in the United States, “public” means “poor people” and their demands for social

services. That, of course, is one of the main reasons our national public sphere is so imperiled. No one in any country lives without the support of society, not matter how rich. In our complex global and high risk world surely all of us will, in the end, live together or perish together. Our word "idiot" comes from a Greek word that meant "private citizen". For the Greeks, it was dishonorable to fail to participate in public life. The term "private citizen" implied that a person had poor judgment in public and political affairs. Over time, the Greek term idiōtēs moved from referring to a selfish person who did not contribute to the public sphere to refer to any individual with overall poor judgment, that is, an individual who is stupid. Colleges and universities need to become places where stupidity cannot flourish.