The Rise and Fall of Higher Education

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Even if you have been attending worship here only for a short time you know about the Seven Principles that guide Unitarians in our efforts to live life in an ethical, compassionate and just manner. The banner that lists them is hard to miss in our sanctuary. But even life-long Unitarians are often not aware of the six sources that inform our living faith tradition. They are like wells from which we draw the waters of wisdom and spirituality that give life to our tradition. They include our direct experience of mystery, wisdom from world religions, our Jewish and Christian heritage, reason and science, Earth-centred traditions, and the one that inspires my thoughts on higher education today: "Words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love."

The key word is "prophetic". Prophecy is often misunderstood to mean predicting the future like the Oracle at Delphi, Nostradamus or the talking heads on Fox News. But prophecy is about speaking truth to power.

There is a story about King David who is confronted by the prophet Nathan. Nathan tells him about a man with many sheep who steals the one sheep of a poor man. David is incensed and demands to know who has done such a terrible thing. Nathan replies, "You are the man." Nathan is condemning David, who has many wives, for taking Bathsheba as his wife, after arranging for her husband, one his soldiers, to be killed in battle. This is prophecy.

The prophet stands at the edge of a community and names our inescapable struggle of good against evil, of justice against injustice. The prophet shakes us out of our pride and calls for a change of heart and mind and action. With fear and trembling, the prophet announces crisis and demands ethical decision here and now.

The role of prophet is not assigned to a few special people. Certainly in our Unitarian tradition it is a mantle we are called to wear collectively. Maria Harris, in her book *Fashion Me a People,* writes, "A people of faith must not be satisfied to know truth in their hearts, or speak of it to one another in hushed tones. The primary act of prophecy is proclamation, the *announcing* of truth, the *denouncing* of injustice, the *declaration* of opposition to the powers and principalities of evil. But a prophetic people do not merely wake up one morning and somehow 'know the truth;' they come to it through prayer, reflection, and the asking of hard questions, chief among them this: are *we* being just? Are *we* attending to the ways in which we profit or benefit from injustice? Are *we* actively oppressing?"

Unitarian minister and theologian James Luther Adams coined the expression, "Prophethood of All Believers." He intended that it should be a name by which all Unitarians are known. "A church that does not concern itself with the struggle in history for human decency and justice, a church that does not show concern for the shape of things to come, a church that does not attempt to interpret the signs of the times, is not a prophetic church."

Churches are not the only human institution called to be prophetic; so are universities. As Unitarians we rely heavily on reason and science and the liberal arts for discerning truth. Universities are our think tank for the kind of world for which we strive. Universities are not only repositories of human learning, they also ask and then study the hard questions that face us in an imperfect world. Their freedom to pursue this task is essential to a free, just and democratic society. They are our conscience, helping us to develop a moral code.

Academic freedom was a regular topic around the dinner table when I was growing up. My father was first pursuing his doctorate and then teaching at universities. My first career choice was to work in higher education for eight years, creating communities focused on

experiential learning. As a student, I spent nine years in institutions of higher learning. Academic freedom became one of my essential values.

What exactly is it? Academic freedom is defined as the freedom of teachers and students to teach, study, and pursue knowledge and research without unreasonable interference or restriction from law, institutional regulations, or public pressure. Its basic elements include the freedom of teachers to enquire into any subject that evokes their intellectual concern; to present their findings to their students, colleagues, and others; to publish their data and conclusions without control or censorship; and to teach in the manner they consider professionally appropriate. For students, the basic elements include the freedom to study subjects that concern them and to form conclusions for themselves and express their opinions.

Attaining the ideal of academic freedom has never been easy. The problem is that professors profess. They develop points of view from their study or research and they teach from those perspectives. Their ultimate goal is not just the pounding of knowledge into the heads of their students, to be regurgitated back in exams. It is to teach them how to think critically. The problem is that the power elite often finds what is professed counter to their interests. And a critically thinking populace is difficult to control, manipulate or intimidate.

Socrates was an early practitioner of what we now call academic freedom. For Socrates, Athens was a classroom and he went about asking questions of the elite and the common man alike, seeking to arrive at political and ethical truths. He asked questions of his fellow Athenians in a dialectic way we now call the "Socratic method," which compelled the audience to think through a problem to a logical conclusion. Sometimes the answer seemed so obvious, it made Socrates' opponents look foolish. For this, he was admired by some and vilified by others. Those offended by his challenges to Greek conventional wisdom and the humorous way he went about his work charged him with being "guilty of refusing to recognise the gods recognised by the state and introducing other, new divinities. He is also guilty of corrupting the youth. The penalty demanded is death."

The jury was not swayed by Socrates' defence and convicted him by a vote of 280 to 221. Possibly the defiant tone of his defence contributed to the verdict and he made things worse during the deliberation over his punishment. Athenian law allowed a convicted citizen to propose an alternative punishment to the one called for by the prosecution, and the jury would then decide. Instead of proposing he be exiled, Socrates suggested he be honoured by the city for his contribution to their enlightenment and be paid for his services. The jury was not amused and sentenced him to death by drinking a mixture of poison hemlock.

In medieval universities, the church often saw scientific enquiry as undermining orthodoxy. Galileo and Copernicus, both devout Christians, were just two of many scholars and scientists who ran afoul of the most powerful institution in their day. Later, in Germany, professors were employees of the state. The state had no problem suppressing their teachings and publications if they did not conform to the realpolitik of the day. In America today, universities, both public and private, have Boards of Governors. These boards include society's political and business elites who can sack a professor at will or refuse tenure to those who profess troublesome ideas.

As a student at the University of California at Santa Barbara in the late '60s and early '70s I was embroiled in one such sacking. Angela Davis was teaching at UCLA. In 1970, in spite of being a brilliant and outstanding professor, a graduate of Brandeis and the Sorbonne, she was sacked, ostensibly for being a communist. And if that wasn't bad enough, she was a militant advocate for Black Power. Her firing resulted in mass demonstrations at University of California campuses. Some black students at Santa Barbara, one of whom was a friend of mine, occupied the Administration building. A demonstration in support of them was the first,

but not the last, in which I took part. While the courts would eventually reinstate her, Angela Davis' sacking had a dampening effect on academic freedom throughout the country.

As bad as the political climate, religious institutions, the state and business interests have been for exercising academic freedom, for the last thirty years there has been a much worse encroachment: neoliberalism's creation of the corporate university.

It is said that preachers really only have one sermon. I once teased my seminary chaplain by asking when was he going to write a new sermon. His immediate response was, "When you learn this one." It would not be surprising if you thought my one sermon was on the destructiveness of neoliberal ideology, which I believe is the antithesis of everything we hold dear as Unitarians. It is sapping us spiritually dry. It is the cause of outrageous wealth and income inequality, destruction of the planet, disenfranchisement of the population, child poverty, individual isolation, economic insecurity, the housing crisis, war, the destruction of the middle and working classes, and, of special focus today, the fall of higher education. In other words, neoliberalism seeks to destroy the notion of the common good. Nothing will do that more than destroying academic freedom.

The university has traditionally considered academic freedom as the means to enlarging the capacity of all to access and produce knowledge, which it considers a common resource for all, making education a common good. Neoliberalism's corporate university views knowledge as a commodity, education as a service to be privatised, and academic freedom as the ability to market knowledge and education services without governmental regulation.

Part of what drove me away from academe's ivy-covered halls was neoliberalism, though I didn't fully understand what it was at the time. Two mission statements from the same university, pre- and post-neoliberalism explain why. The original mission statement was, "The paramount obligation of the university is to develop in its students the ability to think clearly and independently, and the ability to live confidently, courageously, and hopefully." Neoliberalism transformed it into a corporate university mission statement: "Leadership. Service. Integrity. Creativity."

The first statement is a sentence with a temporal sequence. Thinking clearly, it wants us to recognise, leads to thinking independently. Thinking independently leads to living confidently. Living confidently leads to living courageously. Living courageously leads to living hopefully. And the entire chain begins with a university that recognises it has an obligation to its students, an obligation to develop their abilities to think and live.

The second is just four undefined words, marketing slogans if you will, onto which we can project whatever meaning we want. There is no relationship between them. There is no obligation. There is no purpose. More importantly it doesn't mention either learning or thinking. Those are not goals of the corporate university.

When I went to university, there were plenty of students studying engineering and the sciences but the bulk were studying the liberal arts. The idea was for students to develop a broad understanding of themselves and their culture. In other words, the purpose of education was to build a self or, in Keats' words, "to become a soul," as opposed to becoming a specialist. I don't remember my university having a business school, but I'm sure it does now. The purpose of education in a neoliberal age is to produce producers. Neoliberalism reduces all values to money values. The worth of a thing is the price of the thing. The worth of a person is the wealth of the person. Neoliberalism tells you that you are valuable exclusively in terms of your activity in the marketplace — in Wordsworth's phrase, "your getting and spending."

Commentator David Brooks noted that the university has three potential purposes: the

commercial (preparing to start a career), the cognitive (learning stuff or, better, learning how to think), and the moral. "Moral", here, does not mean learning right from wrong. It means developing the ability to make autonomous choices—to determine your own beliefs, independent of parents, peers, and society—to live confidently, courageously, and hopefully.

In the neoliberal age only the commercial has been emphasised. Since I graduated, the number of degrees granted in the humanities has plummeted. Even the sciences and mathematics represented only 2.6% of US graduates in 2013. By far the most degrees were in business, computer sciences, health, education and communications. Universities have become vocational schools interested only in creating cogs for the neoliberal economy. Not creating souls.

But one of the biggest differences is the cost of education. I managed to get three university degrees without acquiring any student loan debt. But no longer does society see it as a common-sense investment in the common good to make higher education accessible to all that would seek it. Rachel's daughter, Sophie, was brave enough to go against the trend to get her degree in Philosophy and History. She posted a photo of her degree on Facebook with the question, "Would you like fries with that?" as the only work she has been able to find is at McDonalds. Her mother pointed out the silver lining. As a philosopher she could at least ask, "Why do you want fries with that?" The worst part is she would have to work at least 480 8-hour shifts making fries just to pay off her student loan. This is hardly a formula for graduates to live confidently, courageously and hopefully.

But an even greater consequence is that, with lower public support, universities are reliant even more on philanthropy from the corporate world. A grant of $35 million like that made to the University of Toronto by the Munk Charitable Trust to establish the Munk School of Global Affairs does not come without strings. Peter Munk is CEO of a gold mining company accused of human rights violations. It is not a leap to suggest that any academic research that is critical of its practices would be frowned upon.

Universities also rely on support from neoliberal governments who are less interested in academic freedom than in silencing their critics. One recent example was the revelation that the New Zealand Police effectively tried to censor the gang research of sociologist Jarrod Gilbert by barring his access to basic and uncontroversial police data and by insisting that they "retain the sole right to veto" the publication of any research findings. The reluctance of the New Zealand government to say anything about the substantive issues involved in this case was troubling.

Only media disquiet and the subsequent police apology to Gilbert—after he was initially deemed unfit to carry out research because of "his association with gangs" – suggest a public recognition of the democratic importance of academic freedom, at least in cases in which it is blatantly under attack. Generally, however, suppression of academic freedom is more subtle, but nonetheless effective.

The reason I am preaching my one sermon once again is to raise our awareness of the neoliberal destruction of society's moral compass and source of knowledge. For without heightened consciousness our prophetic voice will be silent. We will not speak truth to power. We must challenge governments that do not value academic freedom's importance to a democratic, informed society and resist laws intended to silence our scholars. We must challenge our institutions of higher learning not to sell out to corporations that value only wealth and not the common good. We must not leave that task to others. If we do we may face a world where we have more people making fries than we can possibly eat and not knowing why.