"The God Who Appears": An Inductive-Humanistic Approach to Undergraduate Education

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This isn't quite the essay that we planned to write. As professors at a public liberal arts college, our original intention was to prepare a submission to the present volume of *Teaching Matters* that defends the values of our educational community against alternative visions of higher education primarily concerned with content mastery and skill development. Our argument ran something like this: The mission statement of the University of Maine, Farmington (UMF) makes explicit our intention to "graduate individuals who will live purposeful, ethical, and personally rewarding lives, and who will strengthen the social fabric of the communities they inhabit in Maine and beyond." The means to achieving this goal is to create a *nurturing, supportive, safe* academic environment where students feel free to be themselves and realize their potential.

Yet a polemic piece published in the September, 2015 issue of *The Atlantic* gave us reason to pause. The authors, Greg Lukianoff (a constitutional lawyer) and Jonathan Haidt (a social psychologist), draw attention to what they see as a disturbing trend in higher education: the need to protect students from "words, ideas, and subjects that might cause discomfort or give offense" (p. 44). According to Lukianoff and Haidt (2015), "this new climate is slowly being institutionalized, and is affecting what can be said in the classroom." (p. 44) "The ultimate aim," the authors suggest, "is to turn campuses into 'safe spaces' where young adults are shielded from words and ideas that make some uncomfortable." (p. 44)

We agree with Lukianoff and Haidt (2015) that an education organized around themes of protectiveness is inadequate preparation for a professional life that "often demands intellectual engagement with people and ideas that one might find uncongenial or wrong." (p. 45) Moreover, we recognize the possibility that the project of transforming a college into a "safe space" where students can simply "be themselves" is not a solid foundation for the psychosocial challenges of post-college life. Simply put, the experiences of the typical American college student do not seem to effectively align with the issues they will confront in the proverbial real world. This problem was cleverly documented in a recent episode of *South Park*, when a villain named "Reality" reminds those of us seeking existential security that "the world isn't one big liberal arts college campus."

Inspired by the writings of Protestant theologian Paul Tillich (1886-1965), we offer a constructive response to the dilemma facing contemporary higher education. Specifically, we defend a vision of college life that highlights *courage* – not *safety* – as our primary value. The courage that we envision, moreover, is not a skill that can be taught in the same sort of way that we discuss concepts in chemistry or mathematics. We are not here to teach our students *about* courage. Rather, our challenge is to help students *become* courageous. The realization of this ambitious project requires an academic community appropriately attuned to the values and concerns of the broader culture.

Toward an Inductive-Humanistic Philosophy of Education

Paul Tillich had a special interest in exploring the relationship between secular culture and the religious life. His so-called "method of correlation" establishes a correspondence between the existential questions posed by every authentic human being and the religious symbols that point in the direction of a viable response. On the one hand, we are perpetually haunted by the possibility that our most meaningful projects may be destined for failure. There is no guarantee that what we will ever achieve quite what we set out to accomplish – indeed, that our projects were ever truly worthy of commitment in the first place. After all, *why should we be active citizens in our community, express with confidence our own voice, and humbly – yet hopefully – seek wisdom from others? Why, moreover, should we invest our knowledge in meaningful personal projects while also seeking to foster the common good?*[1]

For Tillich (1952), preoccupation with questions concerning the meaning of life can be understood as "anxiety about the loss of an ultimate concern, of a meaning which gives meaning to all meanings. This anxiety is aroused by the loss of a spiritual center, of an answer, however symbolic and indirect, to the question of the meaning of existence." (p. 47)

Such anxiety, we believe, is a thread woven into the very fabric of higher education. Our students are all too aware that everything they believe – everything they are – can be brought into question. For some, this anxiety breeds what Lukanoff and Haidt (2015) describe as a perpetual need for protection (from threatening ideas, words, etc.). However, it may be possible to allow oneself to be challenged by alternative points of view (and ways of life) while also preserving a sense of wholeness and personal integrity. In other words, we may be able to appropriately *manage* – if never completely eliminate – our existential anxiety. But what role can a public liberal arts college play in this process?

Tillich (1959) outlines three possible "aims" of educational institutions: technical, humanistic, and inductive. Technical education

involves the development of the skills and cognitive competencies that are valued by culture at a given point in history. All university faculty recognize the importance of this educational aim. For example, as psychology professors, we are concerned that our students acquire basic skills in the domains of statistics and research design, and also demonstrate competency in a broad range of topic areas (e.g., social psychology, personality theory).

Nevertheless, our ambition extends well beyond simple content mastery. We are also concerned with the second aim highlighted by Tillich: *humanistic education.* This includes the actualization of personal potential and the realization of personal values. There is much to be said about the importance of this dimension of our work, and we would certainly like to believe that our students acquire greater self-knowledge and find new paths to self-actualization (or self-realization) as a result of taking our classes. Yet, even here something appears to be missing. The behaviorist B.F. Skinner once asked the humanist Carl Rogers to defend the privileged status he grants the process of self-actualization. As Skinner ponders, "self-actualization – *for what?*" (Rogers & Skinner, 1956, p. 1065, emphasis added)

Humanism, however well-intentioned, carries with it the perpetual risk that human reality will collapse into a dynamic that Tillich (1952) describes as "empty self-relatedness" (p. 155) – a form of narcissistic self-involvement that lacks the power to ever really break out of itself. This sort of narcissism, we suspect, lies at the root of the culture of protectiveness described by Lukianoff and Haidt (2015).

The third aim of education – the inductive – pulls students out of themselves and repositions (inducts) them into a meaningful cultural group. As a simple example, Tillich observes that the purpose of American history (in the United States) is not simply to teach the content of American history, but to induct students into an authentically American way of life. As psychology professors, we encourage our students to see themselves as members (or potential members) of a broad range of possible social groups, including our psychology department, Psi Chi (the national undergraduate honor society), the American Psychological Association (APA), and the broader community of scholars (with the accompanying responsibilities).

But induction – despite the valuable role it may play in encouraging students to understand themselves as members of broader communities – is no more adequate a response to our existential predicament than is a naïve humanism. In our pluralistic world, no single community has a monopoly on moral truth. For example, the community of humanistic counselors has been challenged by social critics concerned that a preoccupation with the problem of personal growth encourages a form of self-involvement that distracts us

from broader – and arguably more important – socio-political issues (see Prilleltensky, 1994).

Embracing the norms of a single community – even a community with a reputation for making a positive difference in the world – is no guarantee that one is on the path to moral integrity. After all, the code of ethics articulated by the American Psychological Association (APA) – laudable in so many respects – allegedly failed to deter several prominent APA-affiliated psychologists from involvement in the torture of terrorism suspects. Indeed, it was recently discovered that the relevant ethical guidelines were manipulated in 2004 in such a manner as to leave sufficient ethical wiggle room for psychologists to provide assistance in "enhanced interrogation" projects (Risen, 2015).

If groups have the power to pull us out of ourselves, the enlightened soul may nevertheless find it necessary to challenge the moral climate of groups. As such, we understand the relationship between humanistic and inductive education as a mutually-enriching dialectic, with induction illuminating the social dimension of our existence, and the humanistic project drawing out the moral principles that define our core personhood.

While we certainly value technical training, the accent at a public liberal arts college is on the inductive and humanistic dimensions of education. Moreover, these dimensions *must be correlated.* That is, participation in a meaningful community can be offered as a response to (or correlated with) the personal limitations of students and faculty. For example, students who want to "help people" come to college with little power to realize this mission. Our task is not simply to provide our students with the relevant skills, but also to illuminate how achievement *requires* participating in broader academic and professional communities (e.g., peer review, sound scholarship, behavior consistent with standards of professional ethics, etc.). Of course, the communities into which we are inducted are fallible (as the APA torture scandal reveals), and thus it is important that community "induction" be tempered by a (humanistic) commitment to a *life of integrity*.

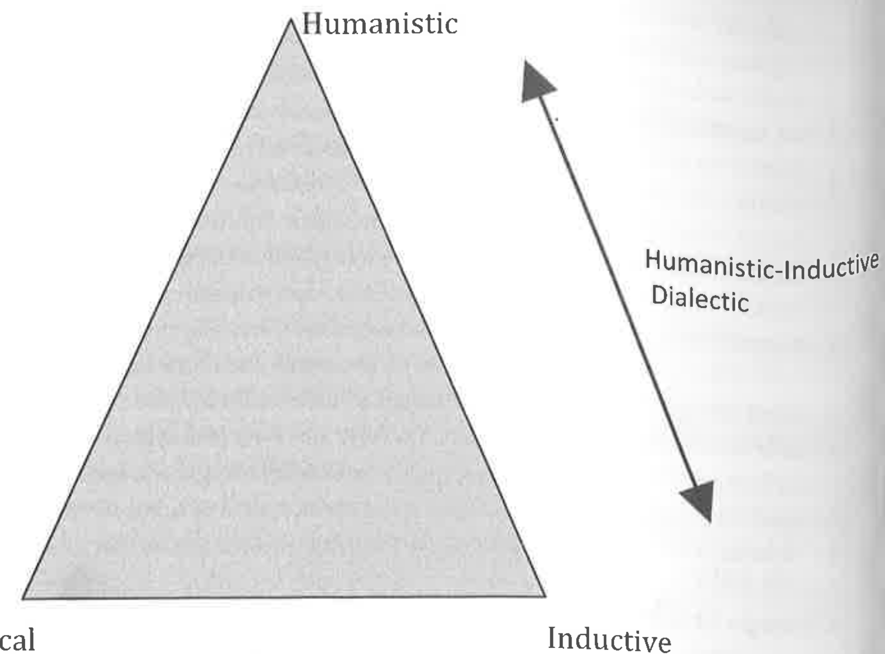

Figure 1: *The Three Aims of Education*

In his book *The Courage to Teach*, Parker Palmer offers the metaphor of the "dance" to illuminate the dynamic interplay of the communal and personal dimensions of education. We involve our students in a "dance" that ideally integrates the personal (humanistic) with the collective (inductive), where each pole of this dialectic enriches and deepens the other. Like Parker, we conceive of education as a corporate experience, best achieved in a supportive community (e.g., via face to face and experiential learning). We fulfill our educational mission by (a) getting to know our students (and not just in one class), (b) situating our students in broader communities, (c) allowing these broader communities to effectively open up new questions and problems for our students, and (d) exploring the implications of engagement in multiple communities for personal and professional development.

As Palmer (1997) observes, "good teaching cannot be reduced to technique. Good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher" (p.10). Yet, for us, the identity and integrity of the teacher is never a finished project. Each of us is a flawed human being seeking to become

whole and make a positive difference in the world. Each of us is perpetually struggling with what Tillich (1952) describes as "anxiety about the loss of an ultimate concern, of a meaning which gives meaning to all meanings" (p. 47). If we cannot definitively resolve these issues for ourselves, we are hardly prepared to resolve them for our students. Even if we wanted to *protect* our students – to create a "safe space" in which they can flourish – we cannot yet agree on what they need to be protected *from*. All we can say is that our students share our deeply human need to grow stronger and wiser. We submit that we can achieve such strength and wisdom only by full participation in an inductive-humanistic dialectic.

The spiritual force that allows for such participation is appropriately dubbed *courage*. Our primary pedagogical challenge is thus to demonstrate what it means to be courageous – to be ourselves while also coming out of ourselves and finding our place in the world. Though we have no intention of teaching "courage" as if it were yet another skill set, we may nevertheless be able nurture the development of courage in our students.

Courage at a Public Liberal Arts College

Paul Tillich (1952) defines courage as "the self-affirmation of being in spite of the fact of nonbeing. It is the act of the individual self in taking the anxiety of nonbeing upon itself by affirming itself either as part of an embracing whole or in its individual selfhood. Courage always includes a risk, it is always threatened by nonbeing, whether the risk of losing oneself and becoming a thing within the whole of things or of losing one's world in an empty self-relatedness." (p. 155)

As we immerse ourselves more deeply in various social groups – and allow ourselves to be transformed by the demands they make upon us – there is a perpetual risk that we will lose the very self that willed such engagement in the first place. Reciprocally, as we reflect critically on the social dimension of our existence – for example, when we question the moral integrity of the civic and professional communities to which we are committed – we risk retreating into an "empty self-relatedness," cutting our ties to the very world that conditions the possibility of meaningful life projects.

In essence, courage implies the power to preserve a sense of personal integrity while simultaneously expanding the range of our social relationships. While it is beyond the scope of this essay to fully explore the dynamics of courage in higher education, we offer three examples of the nurturing of courage in the psychology program at the University of Maine, Farmington:

1. In Spring 2016, we are piloting a course entitled *The Psychology of Marathon Training* (co-taught by Lilyana Ortega and Steve Quackenbush), which includes the simultaneous participation in an academic seminar and a marathon training program. Clearly, initiating such a project requires considerable courage. As one of the students enrolled in this course recently observed,

   "Joining the marathon training class required a huge leap of faith, especially since I am not a runner in any sense. There are many obstacles that are working against me - I could get severely injured; I might not meet weekly training expectations and meet my goals; I might not be mentally prepared for the run, and I might never complete the marathon. Whether I succeed or fail, all I know is I am taking the opportunity to become more physically and mentally fit, and that is worth the risk." (Alicia Higgins; UMF Class of 2016),

   The course also requires courage on the parts of the professors. One of the present authors (Steve) offered the following reflections about the upcoming course:

   "We have many challenges ahead, including managing students with different levels of ability and differing goals. Also, I'm afraid that the snow may hinder training (by dramatically limiting places where we can safely run). But I'm pleasantly surprised by the level of interest many students are expressing about a class of this sort. I think they truly <u>want</u> this sort of challenge (which is at once physical and mental) -- and they <u>want</u> to find the strength to succeed. So, even as we express concerns about "the coddling of the American mind", it remains the case that most of our students (in their heart of hearts) don't want to be coddled (and they don't want to be psychosocial 'couch potatoes')"

   It bears mentioning that this course would be virtually impossible in a non-face-to-face learning environment. What makes this class special is that a community of students and faculty are embarking on a challenging project *together*, in the spirit of mutual support.

2. Our popular *Death & Dying* course was developed at UMF in 1988 by the late, long-time department chair Bert Jacobs, and is now taught by Assistant Professor Natasha Lekes. The class introduces undergraduates to the daunting topic of death and dying, and includes such activities as walking reflectively through a cemetery and visiting a funeral home. In her syllabus, Lekes observes that '*death is an emotional topic and one that brings out our feelings and sometimes challenges*

our values.' The class requires courage from all parties: (a) *the professor*, who shares her own perspective on death, (b) *guest speakers*, including *counselors and clergy* providing solace and companionship to the dying and grieving, and *community members* willing to share their perspectives on life, death, and the afterlife, and (c) *the students*, who work through their own discomfort with death and embark on a journey exploring some of the most profound questions about human existence imaginable.

The intimacy promoted in this class pulls students out of themselves, fosters a sense of connection, encourages courageous sharing, and promotes a keen awareness of others' perspectives on this highly sensitive topic. As such, *Death & Dying* at UMF nicely illustrates our thesis that higher education should be a *visceral, three-dimensional* experience (at once technical, humanistic, and inductive).

3. Students at UMF become more courageous as they make connections across disciplines and engage with communities beyond the college. For example, in 2013, 85 UMF students from three undergraduate classes engaged in a collaborative effort to raise funds for Kiva, a global micro-lending program designed to alleviate poverty through person-to-person loans. Students from Anthropology (*Social Change*: Dr. Nicole Kellett), Economics (*Behavioral Economics*: Dr. John Messier) and Psychology (*Positive Psychology*: Dr. Maybury) met outside of class to develop ideas (ranging from t-shirt sales to a date auction) in order to raise funds for Kiva. The students eventually raised $1,700, which has now been loaned, repaid, and re-lent over the ensuing two years. As of December 2015, the original loan has resulted in 203 individual loans to people in need (a total of $5,100) and it continues in perpetuity.

While the objective of the project was to analyze a social problem (poverty) and directly enact social change, the students acquired hands-on experience with community organizing and a host of other skills, such as persuading local businesses to donate space. Participating students thereby enhanced their leadership and collaborative skills, learned about various efforts to enrich the lives of global citizens, raised awareness of social and economic issues worldwide, and become empowered to make positive change. All of this occurred by way of induction into a unique cohort of social activists (alleviating poverty through micro-lending). This project would not have been successfully realized if we were primarily

concerned about protecting our students from the issues and challenges they are likely to face in the proverbial real world.

Conclusion

There is something demonic about higher education in the United States. While we need not question the value of technical training, the identification of education with technique (e.g., the acquisition of discipline-specific skills) risks losing sight of *the person* responsible for the wise deployment of established knowledge. Yet, if we reify *the person* as the final end of higher education – as if our only task is to help each student achieve personal fulfillment – then we effectively stall the person-culture dialectic that represents the only real possibility for meaningful social engagement.

According to Tillich (1963), demons "are not simply a negation of the divine but participate in a distorted way in the power and holiness of the divine" (p.102). Higher education assumes demonic qualities when any individual element of the humanistic-inductive dialectic (the technical, the personal, or the cultural) demands special allegiance – as if it were a God in its own right.

Lukianoff and Haidt (2015) have expressed concern about "attempts to shield students from words, ideas, and people that might cause them emotional discomfort" (p. 51). Theologically speaking, such attempts are demonic insofar as they emphasize the importance of the *personal* dimension (or, more specifically, *the emotional life of the individual)* at the expense of the *cultural* and *technical* dimensions of human existence. Feelings do indeed matter, but it remains possible that other people (participating in the *cultural* dimension of our existence) may have *good reason* (thanks to insights acquired within the *technical* dimension) to disseminate ideas that many students find emotionally disturbing.

But we have no wish to throw our students into a den of wolves. *Mere exposure* to challenging ideas and people will never nurture the courage necessary to get the most out of higher education. Rather, full participation in the inductive-humanistic dialectic is best realized in *relationships* that give students reasons to break out of cycles of "empty self-relatedness," discover their place in the world, and – if necessary – make meaningful changes in their local and global communities.

For us, higher education must aspire to the divine, even as it loses faith in its original mission and is tempted by the false gods of the Academy (e.g., the idolization of content mastery reflected in many online degree programs). But if the divine appears to us as an unrealizable ideal, it may

nevertheless be foreshadowed by the positive relationships fostered at a public liberal arts college.

We do not believe that we are in any position to resolve the existential issues confronting our students. However, we submit that a liberal arts community has the power to nurture a *certain sort* of courage – the courage *to be* in the face of "anxiety about the loss of an ultimate concern, of a meaning which gives meaning to all meanings" (Tillich, 1952, p. 47).

Such is the God that appears to us, even as we are perpetually haunted by the possibility that higher education in the United States is fated to dissolve into an endless proliferation of techniques and political agendas. If higher education is presently in a state of crisis, we may find some sustenance in the memorable words of Paul Tillich (1952): "The courage to be is rooted in the God who appears when God disappears in the anxiety of doubt" (p. 190).

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Footnote

[1] The italicized sentences are adapted from the Mission Statement of the University of Maine, Farmington.

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