

A New Vision for Higher Education

*From a presentation by Arthur Zayonc PhD
6 May, 2008*

I would like to use this occasion for imagining in bold contours a possible new future for higher education more generally; one that rests on a spiritual understanding of our world and ourselves, unites science, spirituality and the arts, is contemplatively oriented in its method of inquiry and instruction, and is deeply engaged with the pressing issues of our time.

Educational Philosophy: An Enlarged Cosmology, an Expanded Methodology, and a More Inclusive Ethic

The worldview on which contemporary higher education is constructed is too limited. Its impoverished and largely reductive understanding of the world inevitably leads to partial solutions to the problems we face in such areas as education, health care, agriculture, and economics. We need an education that embraces and develops an enlarged view, one that has room in it for the transpersonal and spiritual dimensions of reality. I think of this as an *enriched cosmology and anthropology* that includes but extends the limited view prevalent today.

Likewise, the very methods of scholarship and research are limited. For all their power, the conventional methods of scientific research and critical scholarship need to be broadened. The reflective, contemplative, and experiential methods developed within the contemplative traditions offer a complementary set of research methods for exploring the nature of the mind and of the world. When taken together with conventional methods, an *enriched research methodology and pedagogy* are available to us. Such first-person phenomenological methods of inquiry open up new pathways for deepening and enlarging our worldview and so can lead to real and lasting solutions to the problems we confront. We see this occurring already in the area of mind-body medicine and holistic education.

Third, the ethics we practice are too often based on a limited, cost-benefit analysis. The new university should be a community within which we learn to practice an *ethics of genuine compassion*, and learn to extend loving kindness to circles beyond those closest to us. This development can be supported by both certain contemplative practices and service-learning within our surrounding community.

The achievements of conventional science, humanistic scholarship, artistic production, and social science are impressive. And yet for all their successes, more is called for. In each of the three ways sketched out above, I see it as essential to enlarge our way of teaching, learning, and researching. These three extensions are an enlarged cosmology, an expanded methodology, and a more inclusive ethic.

Our Common Humanity: A Core Value

Two images: The first is of the Dalai Lama's flight from Tibet and the cultural genocide that has taken place ever since. Yet, while recognizing the tragedy of Tibet, the entire world has benefited by his presence among us. This only occurred because the Dalai Lama recognized a greater stream of spirituality and ethics that he chose to serve on behalf of all humanity, all the while remaining a "simple Buddhist monk." His particular lineage is Buddhism but his compassion and wisdom seeks to serve all. My second image is taken from my own tradition of Anthroposophy and Waldorf education where I see the need for a similar development. Rudolf Steiner sought to partner with and to serve all people, yet this is too often forgotten. We should also dedicate ourselves to a greater stream of human spirituality, practicing a radical openness, while remaining modest practitioners within our lineage tradition. I believe that a spiritually-based university will have this characteristic: its diverse community of teachers and students will treasure and serve our common human future while its members will remain rooted in their different practice traditions.

This value will insure that the education offered will have in view our full humanity, in all its dimensions and seen from diverse vantage points. The new university will approach the challenges of our time with a wide, encompassing, and integrative view. True insights are not the exclusive property of any one spiritual tradition or sect, but belong to all who are truly awake. Increasingly many are coming to realize that our highest allegiance is to our common humanity, which knits together everyone across all divides of ethnicity, religion, and politics. The new imagination therefore honors difference but also reflects a common dedication to humanity and to the planet we inhabit.

Compassionate Action

It is of increasing importance that students experience the ways in which their studies and vocation make a positive contribution to the world. Teaching and research now must be embedded in society and seek to respond to the needs of

others. For this reason, community engagement should be integrated into the offerings of College[s].

Lineage and Legacy

The roots of higher education in the West can be traced back to the cathedral schools and monasteries of the 12th century. Likewise, in Asia, education was inseparable from religious and spiritual life. With the Enlightenment education made a crucial and proper shift towards the secular. Now we are faced with the challenge of creating a form of education that is at once true to the best ideals of the Enlightenment, which valued reason, experience, and human rights, and at the same time reconnecting to the spiritual lineage that supports our values and deepest understandings.

The Dalai Lama often speaks of secular ethics and secular spirituality. This is the great human stream I feel the new university should serve. If we are able to recast tradition into a truly integrative, transformative, and communal endeavor then the legacy we leave posterity will be priceless. I feel a real urgency around this task. Those who can offer leadership in many fields of life, education and practice are ripe. We are, in a sense, at a moment in history that calls for our action.... a much larger vision to be realized, one that can work its way back into mainstream higher education.

Death precedes rebirth. We honor the past best when we see it as the foundation for the future. We are called to practice presencing that future, sensing its quiet but persistent call as it lives its way into the present.