



AFTERWORD

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What does it mean to be a professor? These days, this question is often on my mind. My illusions have long been stripped away. I wonder now, did I waste my life?

Many decades ago, I was thrown out of a Catholic seminary. I then chose to be a professor because I saw it as akin to being a secular priest. Professors, I thought, saved people, not with grace, but with knowledge.

If Universities were ever in the salvation business, they are no longer. Like everything else in our society, they are dedicated to money, self-deception, and short-term interests. They exploit non-tenure-track faculty; honor grants more than ideas; and underwrite lots of mindless publication with no real impact on the world.

Of course, many of us professors are to blame too. We got very good at deconstruction, not so good at construction. We developed a wealth of examples of what was bad, not very many of what was good. We knew better what we were against than what we were for and how to make it happen. We were often de-activists, not activists.

Tenure was, they say, meant to underwrite academic freedom. For the most part it has tested and then rewarded institutional quiescence. Now I myself repeatedly broke the rules: I kept yelling at Deans and Presidents and had to leave institution after institution. Each time, though, I got a big raise, because leaving (or at least getting another job offer) is how we academics get big raises, another form, perhaps, of quiescence.

I have taught for 40 years. To be a “professor” meant to me that you professed both in the classroom and on paper. I have been at seven institutions and I have never seen teaching honored anywhere near as much as publication, despite lots of talk about how much teaching is valued when they are sending out tuition bills.

Like most of my colleagues I have long given up any belief in master narratives and big “T” Truth. Unlike some of my colleagues, I have gained a renewed belief in little “t” truth.

In my view, at heart, what good academics do is to ask the world (simultaneously full of things, beings, and people, all of whom have their own “inclinations”) questions, big or small. Then they listen carefully to the world’s responses with respect and act again with due regard to those responses, until they have made the world and themselves better through their conversations with it. And this is what good academics teach their students to do.

When we do not respect the world (of things, beings, and people), it bites back. Witness global warming, environmental degradation, global poverty, out of control casino capitalism, and

wide-spread civic malaise. When there are many people in a society who believe the Earth is 6000 years old, evolution never happened, contraception is abortion, high inequality is good for the economy, education is about just getting a good job, and the more carbon in the air the better, master narratives are no longer the problem. The problem is a simple lack of respect for the world, for things, beings, and people. It is a lack of respect for little “t” truth, which means not certainty, but an honest conversation with the things, beings, and people. Such disrespect can bring damage and maybe even death for us and our world.

As we humans face a coming Armageddon of grief which has already come for millions of poor people around the globe, I despair that I can do nothing big. But I feel I can—with my fellows—at least put my finger in the dike. It is a little contribution while we hope for better ideas and more respect for the world from those we have taught and who will follow us.

Let me close with Raymond Williams (*The Year 2000*, 1983, New York: Pantheon Books, pp. 268-269):

It is only in a shared belief and insistence that there are practical alternatives that the balance of forces and chances begins to alter. Once the inevitabilities are challenged, we begin gathering our resources for a journey of hope. If there are no easy answers there are still available discoverable hard answers, and it is these that we can now learn to make and share. This has been, from the beginning, the sense and the impulse of the long revolution.

