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ARTICLES

Acres of Rhinestones: Temple Betrays Its Heritage

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"Acres of Diamonds"…are to be found in this city, and you are to find them. Many have found them. And what man has done, man can do.
—Russell H. Conwell, founder of Temple University, "Acres of Diamonds"[1]

Liberal education has been disappearing, and what remains is diminished and compromised. At Temple University, the largest department in the college of liberal arts is criminal justice. The second largest is counseling psychology, and the humanities disciplines have become left-veering sociology. While islands of traditional learning survive, the one reliable outpost at Temple had been the "Intellectual Heritage Program," established in 1986, which was comprised of required courses in the Great Books. In fall 2008, Temple replaced this celebrated program with "Mosaic," a dramatically different approach to the classics. This essay traces the continuing erosion of liberal education at one university and the justifications for these corrosive innovations.

[1]The text of "Acres of Diamonds" can be found on the Temple University website (www.temple.edu) at http://www.temple.edu/about/Acres_of_Diamonds.htm.

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Temple University is state-related and draws undergraduates from the second and third quintiles of high school graduating classes. Our students typically have read little, have rarely visited museums, have never seen a serious play or traveled, and consider college a portal to employment. Temple has always served students from unprivileged families, so its long commitment to liberal education has been especially commendable.

When I entered Temple in 1959, freshman English introduced us to great writers. We read Plato, Aristotle, Sophocles, Bible selections, Shakespeare plays, Marx, Freud, Ibsen, Turgenev, Joyce, and Orwell. In addition, core curriculum requirements included a year of literature, American and modern world history, lab science, and courses in mathematics, sociology, economics, religion, and philosophy.

Thirty years later, when I assumed directorship of Temple's Intellectual Heritage Program, the core curriculum had new concerns—mostly relevant to current urban social issues. Students could bypass literature and philosophy but not race relations. Liberal arts courses now focused upon feminism or anti-imperialism. Tenured faculty members had abandoned undergraduate teaching for the higher rewards of graduate teaching and research. Colleges and universities now addressed practical needs. We wanted STEM graduates (science, technology, engineering, mathematics). We wanted graduates to service our social agencies (criminal justice and healthcare administration) and our healthcare needs (medicine, dentistry, and pharmacy). And we wanted teachers—although without concern for what they know.

Humanities faculties share responsibility for this decline. In the storm of new forces impinging upon the university, they have adopted a self-serving strategy. The humanities have abandoned the great works that were once their lifeblood and have instead become aggressive sociology, free from the discipline of serious social theory. A former university president noted privately, "It is friends publishing friends and rewarding work no one else reads or cares about."

This decline also reflects the political economy of majors, as major requirements devour space once devoted to core courses. Departments point to the increased knowledge in every field; and with the ongoing fracture of disciplines into specialties, major requirements expand from eight courses to twelve or more. Accrediting agencies, manned by specialists in the very fields they regulate, endorse this expansion with the threat of withholding approval. In addition, departments steer student selection of core curricular

distributions so that their students take pre-professional courses disguised as core courses. Aggressive departments have incentives to demolish liberal education. Increased undergraduate enrollments in introductory and specialized core courses require additional graduate students to provide instruction; and increased numbers of graduate students allows for expanded graduate programs and more faculty specialists teaching only graduate courses. At the top of the new pyramid of privilege, faculty members teach only their own latest research.

Mosaic

While these politics grind on, the program once devoted to the classics of Western thought has given way to hot topics. Western thought has become too narrow. Our students, it is argued, need to accommodate cultural differences as they enter a so-called globalized society. The new idea of breadth is to oppose Western classics to classics of other traditions. Read a book from the Bible? Only if paired with the *Daodejing*. In this way, students are uprooted from their own culture and from the hegemonic superiority that so endangers the world. Students will become skeptical of their own culture while they learn to admire the exotic promises of others.

As the mission statement of Mosaic proposes, the new version of liberal education must "focus on contemporary concerns, such as globalization and environment/sustainability."[2] The benefits would be that "by challenging students to contextualize ideas and arguments, Mosaic promotes cross-cultural, historical, arts-oriented learning and diversity." This expanded lens invites comparisons across time periods as well as across cultures by organizing the syllabus around thematic units and then linking "texts" (as books are now called) that share similarities despite emerging from different eras and places.

These "confrontations," which are intended to emphasize cultural diversity, are more likely to lead students to imagine that peoples from different times and places all thought the same things, only in somewhat

[2]The mission statement, entitled "Mosaic Proposal Draft 2" and dated October 29, 2008, was obtained on request from the assistant director of the Mosaic Program. This draft is the only document yet available on Mosaic, although it has now completed its first year. As of May 2009, the online site describing the Mosaic Program (www.temple.edu/ih/mosaic/) remains blank.

varied terms. The Greeks of the classical period thought about fate, and so did the Mayans. *Genesis* tells us a creation story, and so does *Gilgamesh*, only the ancient Babylonians—being more liberal and inclusive—do not demand displays of their sacred law in U.S. courthouses.

I suspect, too, that this confrontation of cultures, as a pathway to "globalization competency," emerges from a more serious false premise. It assumes that our students, having lived their culture, also understand it. However, our students know little about the Bible, and that little is badly askew. They are ignorant of our debt to the Greeks—the exacting pathways of Socratic discussion, the ethical conundrums posed by Sophocles, Eros in the voice of Sappho, the urbane idealism of Pericles. Negotiating globalization is risky when you do not know who you are.

While Mosaic proposes this globalization premise, the more intense justification for the change is to sharpen student skills. As the director of the Analytic Reading and Writing Program confided to me, what students read does not matter; the goal is to ensure they read those texts with precision and use them to develop their writing abilities. Inviting students both to question their cultural traditions and to improve their academic skills are commendable goals. However, our problem is that we no longer seem to know what liberal education is about and for, and so the Great Books become a dummy hand in the game of technical training.

Mosaic's mission statement articulates these objectives:

> Mosaic, the two-course General Education requirement for the intellectual development of Temple University students, is to be the pinnacle of communication and critical development in a student's liberal arts education. Building on work in the Analytical Reading and Writing Program (the former First-Year Writing Program), Mosaic provides students with skill-building activities and the challenge of close reading. Following thematic modules, students participate in a discussion-intensive seminar, forcing them to use critical reasoning to evaluate difficult texts in accordance with these themes and current issues. By challenging students to contextualize ideas and arguments, Mosaic promotes cross-cultural, historical, arts-oriented learning and diversity.

Looking past the instrumentalist premise and barbaric prose, notice the shift of power from the interests of traditional faculty to those of institutional advancement. Curriculum is now determined by something ambitiously calling itself the Analytical Reading and Writing Program. The mission

statement concludes with the overmastering goal of building diversity: "to create and continue developing Temple University as a diverse learning community"—invoking both diversity and learning communities.

Mosaic's new director informs us: "In July 2006 upon assuming the directorship of the Intellectual Heritage Program the General Education Executive Committee encouraged me to re-think the current content of the Intellectual Heritage courses as well as to restructure the existing paradigm of the course." What at first glance seems a "dangling modifier" construction error in fact reveals something important. The impetus for the change came not from the program faculty or new director, but from a university committee under the aegis of the provost's office. Dominant in this process were administrators and faculty members from places in the university with little allegiance to liberal education, but with aggressive pedagogical and political ideas.

Another clue to the spirit of this renovation is the transformation of Great Books into "primary texts." Unlike a "great book," a "text" welcomes unweaving to expose its ideological warp and woof. "Great Books" await our admiration; "primary texts" invite us to dismantle them, revealing our superiority to their pretensions.

Mosaic limits itself to eight texts each term; four required and four selected by the instructor. Whatever the choice, "the courses would focus on the development of critical skills in reading, writing, and oral communication." This confrontation between Great Books and skills development is expressed in several destructive ways. By concentrating on student skill development, Mosaic will "replace the impulse to indulge academic fields with the tough work of addressing pedagogical needs." Studying Great Books within their tradition is an *indulgence* while improving skills is "tough work." The tilt of this argument exposes an ideological commitment.

Elsewhere we learn that "our goal is for students to develop multiple literacies, as opposed to the kind of 'straight-line' thinking students are trained to do in their home disciplines." Teaching in the disciplines—guided by intellectual discipline—amounts to uninspired and unimaginative training. Similarly, "coverage is the enemy," as if we need to choose between skills development and the Great Books. The statement assures us that "Mosaic privileges skills over content." We are promised "deep learning," both because there will be fewer texts and because we will now be "putting texts

in cross-cultural, trans-historical and interdisciplinary relationships." Imagine doing this with Plato's *Republic*! However, these claims are not intended seriously. Mosaic also promises "learning outside the classroom." These book thingies provide outmoded academic experiences. Students now spend time visiting Eastern State Penitentiary.

The revolution replaces the impractical and goal-less habits of traditional education with, as cited above, a "focus on contemporary concerns, such as globalization and environment/sustainability." By being relevant, these courses are more likely "to create 'life-long learners' and intellectual curiosity that will carry well beyond the graduation date as students can see clearly that these difficult classic texts can help them negotiate intellectually the issues that confront them daily."

A revolution like this should make Burkeans of us all. Forcing the rationalities of the moment to crowd out time-honored truths usually leads, as it does here, to Swift's Laputa.

The Themes

The theme for the first semester of Mosaic is "The Texture of Reality." Here students consider "aspects of the world that are 'hidden' from ordinary sight." Students examine the "self" and "other" in a psychological and sociological context—that is, via that which can be measured and proved; in "the religious/spiritual realm, the truths that people seek, and find, cannot be proved or disproved." No-nonsense Mosaic divides the world into what is factual and what is not. Science knows one world, faith another. Things that are "hidden" (portentous quotation marks) are not really hidden but masked by ideology, seen and not-seen at the same time. Similarly, the "self" and "other" (again, portentous) are also illusory, and merely comprise the flow of material stuff subject to interpretation depending upon power needs and relationships. Postmodern premises peek out from the prose.

Since there is no self—Mosaic students learn that their particular worldview, values, and identity result from the circumstances of class and socialization, how they have been educated, and other conditioning factors—

> Students should be shaken from their comfortable idea that their view of the world is "good" or "appropriate" or, even worse, "normal, usual, and universal." They should be forced to deal with narratives of people who, through movement, encountered realities they never knew existed.

Liberal education once invited students to consider ideas. After the revolution, students are "forced to deal with" the truths they must learn. They are to be "shaken," though not stirred.

The first unit in The Texture of Reality requires the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, a text introducing students to "the special quality of displacement and what it can tell you about yourself and the things you encounter." This selection signals that we are no longer covering our Intellectual Heritage. The Marduk and Tiamat creation account provides no foundation for our culture and its traditions—and, at this point, for no one else's either. This story of courage and resourcefulness produces none of the cultural reverberations of, say, *The Odyssey*. And is it too mean-spirited to say that *Gilgamesh*, for all its charm, also has none of *The Odyssey*'s literary imaginativeness and formal brilliance?

Gilgamesh is to be paired with another selection from a list that includes *The Travels of Marco Polo*; *The Journals of Lewis and Clark*; Wu Cheng-en, *Monkey: Journey to the West*; *Popol Vuh: The Definitive Edition of the Mayan Book of the Dawn of Life and the Glories of Gods and Kings*; Bartolomé de las Casas, *An Account, Much Abbreviated, of the Destruction of the Indies*; and *Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali*. Three are titles students may have encountered; the others unlikely. And while each work is worthy, in the economy of the syllabus every title "in" means other titles "out." These exotic texts replace those of Sappho and Sophocles, Aeschylus and Homer, Pericles and Moses—all of which also involve journeys but have the added virtue of constituting part of the foundation for the culture we should understand (our own) and belonging to a set of common references educated people must possess.

The second unit, "Self and Others," describes its philosophical basis as follows:

> This theme considers the world as a place of relationship, in which truths or models are found through consideration of relationship. Those relationships might be dyads but they can be entire societies or relationships between societies. It is possible to think of this as a somewhat phenomenological view of things as it posits the existence of others (and the world) as a given and a certain responsibility as well.

I have puzzled over these sentences and admit defeat. The recommended discussion topics are "love; obligation; individual/society; mortality/change/

loss; leader/subject; determined/fluid; revolution." As victim of essentialist, phallocentric, or some other diseased kind of thinking, I cannot find the focus in this list. This thematic chowder speaks eloquently of the need to respect tradition. Revolutions are perilous entities; seeking a rational basis they create monstrosities.

The list of "Self and Others" texts reflects this stew. Freud's *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis* is required. How this addresses the discussion topics beats me. The list of additional readings also includes *Hamlet*—clear proof that no Shakespeare specialist was involved in the planning. *Oedipus Tyrannus* or *Antigone* is listed, as are Confucius, *Analects: With Selections from Traditional Commentaries*; Zeami, *Izutsu* (*No Drums*); and Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. Part of me hopes instructors select *Oedipus* to go with Freud; at the same time, I anticipate the disappearance of Sophocles' play into the theoretical embrace of the psychoanalyst.

"Community," the third unit, "opens up discussion related to implications of colonialism, role of civilization, the interaction between minority and majority, the struggles of individual freedom/group expectations." Plato's *Trial and Death of Socrates*, the required reading, is paired with one of the following: Freud, *Civilization and It's* [sic] *Discontents;* Helena Norberg-Hodge, *Ancient Futures: Learning from the Ladakh*; W.E.B. DuBois, *Souls of Black Folks*; Junichiro Tanizaki, *The Makioka Sisters*; Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*; and Khaled Hosseini, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. I would be delighted to think that the dissenting thought of Socrates might bring into question the assumption—contemporary Zimbabwe serving as a good test case, Iran another—that throwing off the yoke of colonialism advances individual freedom.

The fourth and final unit is "Ways of Knowing (Faith)." The description here is also revealing:

> What people believe about spiritual matters that cannot be proven and does not need to be proven [*sic*]. But this could be balanced with the issue of how we understand what is "good" and what is to the good according to some supernatural force or being who reveals truths to the faithful.

The required reading is Genesis or Exodus and the *Daodejing*.

Pairing the *Daodejing* with the Hebrew Bible may help dislodge a privileged classic, as it becomes just another text whose importance depends

only upon where you were born and what your culture imposes upon you. Supposedly, the Hebrew Bible reveals truths solely to the faithful—even though Yahweh addresses the Israelites, whose faith is only nominal on a good day, and Christ moves, scandalously, among broken spirits who lack faith. I suspect Mosaic's planners regard the Bible as a book for wild-eyed evangelicals who find within its pages secret messages for the saved. The superiority of the *Bhagavad-Gita*, the *Meaning of the Holy Qur'an*, and Sufi poetry is assured as we travel outward towards more diverse and wiser traditions.

What Has Been Lost

In 1989, an Intellectual Heritage student interviewed for the five-part PBS series "Learning in America" told host Roger Mudd: "First I thought they was messin' with my mind, but then I saw they was messin' with everybody's mind." What he understood so well, if not so grammatically, is that the Intellectual Heritage journey into the foundations of Western Culture was perilous and led to unsettling ways of thinking. Encountering thinkers who had formed his world, this inner-city student was acquiring a heritage denied him by a demoralizing entertainment culture and impoverishing schooling. The challenge was not only to his ideas but to the prevailing assumptions of "everybody's mind."

The first semester of Intellectual Heritage was divided into three zones: the Ancient Greeks, Monotheistic Scriptural Traditions (Jewish, Christian, and Islamic), and the Renaissance. Greek works studied included Sappho; Thucydides, Pericles' Funeral Oration; Sophocles, *Theban Plays* or Aeschylus, *The Oresteia*; and Plato, selections from *The Republic*, or *The Apology.* The Scriptures examined included Genesis 1 to 3; Exodus 12 to 24, 31 to 36; selected Psalms; Isaiah 1 to 12 or Job; the Gospel of Matthew; 1 Corinthians 13; and selected Suras from the Qur'an. The Renaissance zone covered Machiavelli, *The Prince*; Galileo, *The Starry Messenger*; and Shakespeare, *Othello*.

If Sappho's poetry were included in Mosaic, the emphasis would be upon her lesbianism and our need to cultivate tolerance. Sappho's difference, however, is more profound. Sappho speaks to us with the voice of desire, and Eros plays tones our culture no longer hears. We chat clinically about sex, engage in beer brawl smirk-fests, or recite the good reasons desire does not

pay, but our culture leaves no place in our lives for Eros. Sappho's voice invokes the lost grandeur of passion and the mysteries of who we are.

Pericles' Funeral Oration turns that exuberance outward to celebrate the city and its humane ideals. Athens did overreach itself in self-destructive imperialist ventures—a familiar story. New for students, however, is Pericles' understanding of how the city humanizes us. The Oration honors a new kind of personality—intrepid, inventive, active, with allegiance both to the past and to innovation and our desire for beautiful things. Pericles identifies rarely articulated democratic values beyond freedom of choice and written constitutions.

Intellectual Heritage challenged student thinking in other ways, too. Could it be, in Sophocles' *Antigone*, that Creon's arguments on behalf of civil duty carry real weight against Antigone's emotional protests? That ardent young love is less important than the stability of the state? That while traitors are people, they are traitors first and foremost? Addressing these perspectives to students habituated to sentimentalized versions of democracy "messes with their minds."

Teaching Plato's *Republic* in two or three class meetings to students with no background in philosophy can seem foolhardy. The selections must be tightly regulated—the opening chapter, which describes Socrates and his annoying questionings, the "Allegory of the Cave," Plato's comments on multiple constitutions, his depiction of the democratic character. If the objective is to grapple with Plato's thoughts on justice and the construction of his Republic, these selections are inadequate. The "Allegory of the Cave," however, helps students understand what philosophers do. Plato's remarks on democracy shock students who have rarely encountered a discouraging word. A whiff of Plato is unsettling; probably more so, for these entry-level students, than an exhausting march through the *Republic*.

Reading the Bible is also difficult in core courses. For students with religious training and conviction, the Bible is too sacred to study as a literary text. Asking what particular words mean, how a translation from the Hebrew changes that meaning, to what genre one book or another belongs may seem to transgress biblical sanctity. For other students, the Bible is nothing more than a bleak rule book directed against pleasure and free thinking—or as atheist Bill Maher calls it, the "Book of Jewish Fairy Tales."

The Bible, however, is mature reading. The Adam and Eve story is not about talking snakes, magical trees, and naked people, but about ingratitude,

recklessness, and our propensity to lawyer our way to our desires. Genesis 2 and 3 is cunning, humorous, psychologically insightful, tender, rhetorically rich, and immensely sad. For children, Moses has a magic staff that parts the Red Sea, but adult readers consider how the book of Exodus distinguishes between freedom and mental slavery, dramatizes the necessity of law to command our waywardness, and portrays political leadership—Aaron's feeble attempt at democracy versus Moses' resolution to obey a higher command.

Children read the Bible childishly. They place themselves safely in the community of the faithful and obedient. Children do not yet struggle with the strong passions and cunning evasions these Biblical tales identify so precisely. Our students have not yet experienced their betrayal of their own ideals. The hypocrisy they notice everywhere around them has not yet appeared in their mirror. Our students are only now becoming able to understand what the Bible portrays so eloquently and imaginatively. Nonetheless, introducing them to the beauty, power, and complexity of its teachings may protect them from puerile dismissal of works that will someday prove most useful to them.

Othello presents another shock. Like *The Starry Messenger* and *The Prince*, *Othello* challenges our Enlightenment faith in reason and our Romantic idealisms. Readers can domesticate *Othello* by reducing it to sensitivity training issues. However, Shakespeare's tragedy is not about race relations but about the instability of our souls. Shakespeare depicts the beastliness within, how heaven's gifts are squandered, and the pity of a great man humbled by his failure of faith. While *Othello* implicates race, class, and gender, Shakespeare demonstrates how precariously our ideals rest within the unstable human heart?

Along with exploring unsettling depths, Intellectual Heritage also introduced students to the references that distinguish educated people from others. Greek gods and heroes appear regularly in everyday chatter—who are Mars and Mercury, Homer and Hercules, Achilles and Aeneas, Venus and Apollo, Jupiter and Athena? What does "Machiavellian" mean? What qualities belong to "Shakespearean"?

The New Testament, along with its deep wisdom and inspired poetry, introduces students to a host of familiar expressions. A culture coheres on shared values but also on commonly understood phrases. In public parlance we depend upon a shorthand of common terminology—"a house divided

against itself cannot stand," "consider the lilies of the field," "render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's," "judge not, that ye be not judged," and so on. And what do we make of such metaphors as thirty pieces of silver, a Road to Damascus conversion, or a Good Samaritan, and on and on? The loss of touchstones adds to our social incoherence and disintegration; their abandonment brings deadly drought to our cultural ecology.

Conclusion

Temple University's founder and original benefactor, Russell H. Conwell raised the initial capital for the university in part by giving a speech evoking the riches of the mind waiting to be mined in Philadelphia. His stock metaphor—used in over 6,000 presentations of "Acres of Diamonds"—was the discovery of diamonds on a poor farm in South Africa. To Conwell, the working-class citizens of Philadelphia were themselves precious gems. All that was needed was an institution that took seriously their capacity to shine.

But times are hard, and perhaps the contemporary university has become nothing more than a training center for the pre-unemployed. Maybe a globalized society privileges no one culture, and our students will require cross-cultural versatility. In a post-everything world, cultural literacy may get along well enough without the classics. Perhaps recognizing allusions on *The Simpsons* is sufficient.

At Temple, we had hoped for something better for students facing a routinized future, unembellished by beauty, subtle thinking, eloquence, and passion. Our students deserve their Intellectual Heritage; everyone deserves this. In a culture as rich as ours, and in a society that stands to inherit traditions of liberty and to enjoy the freedom to construct significant selves, liberal education should be a treasured resource. It appears, however, that we have abandoned Moses to embrace Mosaics and now choose to learn reading and writing from practitioners of machine-tooled barbarisms.