

Convocation and Installation – November 2010

In 1975 I was an undergraduate at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg. Those were difficult years in South Africa. Persecution and humiliation were the daily lot of the majority of citizens, not least because of a determination on the part of the state actively to contest their right to citizenship itself.

To a young white man from the English-speaking minority, such as myself, the campus environment—at that time a hotbed for anti-apartheid activism—was exciting but also confusing. Confusion arose because the University, being government-funded and owing its existence to parliamentary statute, was in important ways inseparable from (one sometimes thought complicit in) the established order against which many in the student body felt compelled to protest. Predictable intergenerational hostility was complicated by the sympathetic presence at many of our protest meetings of the university Vice-Chancellor, often in full academic dress, and surrounded by eminent colleagues from the professoriate clad in their doctoral scarlet. Although we knew that they wore their academic regalia in an attempt to prevent the police breaking up our meetings as a “riotous assembly,” the spectacle was confusing: here was the leader of the institution, dressed in a manner that asserted his leadership and appeared to confirm his allegiance with the status quo, joining with students in protest against policies propagated by what we thought to be the very source of his own authority, the government.

I have many vivid memories of this time, including one of Dr. Philip Tobias, the eminent professor of anatomy and world renowned authority on human evolution, deftly slipping away through a cloud of tear gas, his billowing robe asserting in very stark contrast to the uniforms of rampaging riot police the elusive yet indomitable value of humane learning and scientific enquiry.

Another memory from the same year is of the annual academic freedom lecture, given by Ronald Dworkin, soon to be famous as a philosopher of law and a constitutional scholar, teaching at Yale, New York University, and the University of London. In 1969, at the age of 38, Dworkin had been appointed to the Chair of Jurisprudence at Oxford, and when I heard him speak in Johannesburg he was a passionate man in his mid-forties. This was a transformational experience for me,

although I do not think I realized it at the time.

Dworkin established his reputation as a critic of legal positivism, a doctrine—derived from the work of Jeremy Bentham—that asserts there is no inherent or necessary connection between the validity of law, on the one hand, and ethics or morality on the other. In 1977 he was to publish a book called *Taking Rights Seriously*, which expanded upon the notion of what he called “law as integrity”—which as an undergraduate listener I took to mean that there is a necessary, epistemic, connection between law and ethics or morality.

This way of thinking blew away the clouds of confusion for me. The notion that an unethical or immoral law must be opposed, and could be opposed without necessarily vitiating one’s allegiance to one’s country, made it possible for the Vice-Chancellor to engage in protest against the enforcement of apartheid in the academy without necessarily abnegating his authority—without being required, figuratively as well as literally, to cast off his gown of office.

The fundamental question was this: in whose name did he wear that gown? At one level this was easy to answer, for as the presence of the ceremonial mace at convocation made clear, the right of the university to grant degrees came from the state. From what source, however, did he derive his authority to critique the state itself, and did all of us—students, faculty and staff alike—derive our right to demur at injustice? If that authority depended upon the government of the day, it was obvious that he and we had no serious right to protest, and our activities were illegitimate. But they did not feel illegitimate, and Dworkin’s insistence on “law as integrity” showed us why: the authority upon which the university was built derived not from the monolithic state as temporarily constituted by partisan politicians, but from *society* as the constantly shifting sum of human experiences, aspirations and contradictions.

The triumph of reason and justice which was the release of Nelson Mandela and the advent of democracy in South Africa is known to you all, but had we not—had the country not during those dark years—maintained its allegiance to “law as integrity,” the outcome most certainly would have been disastrous. Law *had* to be understood as enjoying an epistemic, even if in practice inconsistently realized, relation to ethics. Furthermore—and this is simply an extension of that last point—the authority asserted by the Vice-Chancellor in my anecdote was nothing

if not derived from values that transcended the state itself. “Law as integrity” was a theory that made not society itself but social idealism—the valorization of a just society—the foundation, justification, and *raison d’être* for the law.

That, at least, was what I understood in the 1970s to be the import and application—in South Africa, at that time—of Ronald Dworkin’s thinking. The notion has remained with me ever since, surviving my decisions to leave the study of law, subsequently to become a scholar and teacher of English literature, and eventually to commit myself to the service of higher education in the kind of administrative role into which I have been inducted today. The story of the Vice-Chancellor’s presence at protest meetings is worth telling because it helps make sense of those decisions which, cumulatively, have brought me here to McMaster. The issue of the Vice-Chancellor and his authority, his responsibility to social and human values beyond the immediate and contingent, bears directly upon this ceremony and the significance of the gown that has just been placed on my shoulders.

The gown is a gift of the McMaster University Alumni Association, and I am very proud and grateful to receive it. I am even more proud when I reflect on what the gift means: that our graduates now at work in the world maintain their investment in their university, that they have an interest in its leadership, and that they understand the extent to which the work of the university must be integrated with, or at least responsive to, their hopes and the constructive aspirations of our society at large. I use that word “integrated” to trigger in your minds a recollection of Dworkin and the idea of law as integrity, for insofar as the academic vestments of my Vice-Chancellor in Johannesburg in some way symbolized the dependence of law on ethics and morality, on positive civil aspirations, I invite you to think of this garment as a symbol of “*education as integrity*,” by which I mean quite simply the obligation we in the university must acknowledge to work constantly towards the betterment of our immediate community and broader society. In this province and in this country those goals are frequently shared with government, but this is not always or necessarily the case, as the South African example attests, and for that reason it is critical to be clear at all times about the source of university authority, and about the different forms of that authority.

I am speaking this morning in commitment to the idea of service as an underlying

value of the academy. Today, at United Nations Headquarters in New York City, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon is being joined by representatives from academic institutions in more than thirty-five countries formally to launch UNAI, or United Nations Academic Impact, an initiative intended to promote the direct engagement of institutions of higher education in programs and projects relevant to the United Nations mandate, and in particular to the realization of that organization's Millennium Development Goals: the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger, achievement of universal primary education, the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women, the reduction of child mortality, improvement of maternal health, progress in combating HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases, and the achievement of environmental sustainability.

McMaster University joined UN Academic Impact soon after its establishment, and is one of a relatively small number of Canadian institutions to be signatories, so it is appropriate that today, while sister institutions around the world are gathered in New York City to reaffirm their determination to improve the human condition through higher education, that we should pause to reflect on the way in which McMaster University contributes to that effort.

“Education as integrity”: a somewhat mundane though nevertheless profound interpretation of the phrase is that the practice of learning and teaching is nothing less than the embodiment of honesty and sound ethics. My faculty colleagues on the platform and in the audience would no doubt expatiate at length on the idea of an ethical pedagogy, and it is obvious that a powerful connection exists between the dominion of honesty and ethics in the classroom, and the rule of those same values in society.

Because the university derives its authority from higher human values and a committed civility, it furthermore goes without saying that the day-to-day activities of the institution need to reflect that commitment. Hence, collegiality and the principle of academic self-governance must be respected and reinforced, as must fairness, openness and transparency, as well as the fundamental principle of academic freedom, which not only allows but encourages dissent and disagreement. It remains astonishing to me—and an odd sort of consolation—that the apartheid regime in those difficult days in South Africa could never quite bring itself entirely to eliminate academic freedom. Even though you had to do so under supervision of a stern and disapproving librarian, you *could* read Marx's

Kapital or the *Communist Manifesto*; and the Vice-Chancellor *could* put on his robe of office and tell the student body why detention without trial was indefensible in a civilized society, and why the doctrine of *habeas corpus* had to be defended. Barbarism, evidently, is only rarely absolute.

There are also less obvious resonances for the phrase “Education as integrity.” The language suggests wholeness: education as a gathering-in or reconciliation of diverse elements, and we are reminded that this is an activity of the highest order, that it should be available to all and should act for the betterment of all, and that education is diminished in value and effect when it falls out of touch with the full *gestalt* of human concerns.

What is going on in New York at this moment is an attempt to take such an understanding of education beyond sanctimonious generalization, to make the work of the university more meaningful—and the learning process more successful—through a dynamic and interactive engagement with the very human problems which it seeks to address. Over the last decade universities, especially in the English-speaking world, have participated increasingly in a bloodless marketing discourse, focused on “global citizenship” as the goal towards which they and their students should aspire. But for all this time they have failed effectively to re-negotiate the relationship upon which such aspirations might successfully be built, the link between institutions of higher education and the world which purportedly they seek to serve. To require that students acquire an “international experience” at some point in their degree is admirable enough, but also minimal in what it is likely to contribute either to the student’s development or to the nation visited. What kind of education is it that relegates experience of the broader world to an optional add-on available only in the senior years, or—worse—assumes that experience of the world is unworthy of academic credit and must be postponed until after graduation? What kind of education assumes that “the world” begins—or at least demands to be reckoned with—only once you leave our national borders? And what kind of education leads students to believe that the world exists to provide an arena and a resource for their personal improvement?

In New York today the emphasis is on *impact*. What appears to be yet another conference on academic internationalization is in fact a significant departure from the discourse so far. The sponsorship of the United Nations at this event is

misleading: although many nations are represented, nationhood itself is not directly relevant. The intention is to rally the universities of the world to focus on their obligation to address humanity and its most urgent needs. In certain cases, this obligation and the discharge of it will be transnational, while in other cases it will not. McMaster University, as a signatory to *Academic Impact*, could certainly boast about our contributions to nursing in Pakistan, or to the treatment of diabetes and related disorders in the Indian and Indo-Canadian population, but we could just as easily focus on the work of our researchers in addressing aging or poverty in Hamilton.

I have recently said that at McMaster we will need to define and refine our understanding of our place in the international context. I do believe, though, that we must understand our international commitments as merely a subset of our encompassing human obligation, and it is in attending to the latter that we will find a firm and clear direction to follow. That obligation is not confined to the Millennium Goals of the United Nations, although they do provide a helpful hook on which to hang a more defensible vision for higher education. Universities are comprehensive, multifaceted organizations, and it is just as important to recognize the complexity of the interface between the university and society as it is the simple requirement that we derive at least one part of our authority from society, and from the human dream of health, prosperity, civility, and cultural fulfillment.

The community in which McMaster is situated is no less complex and rich than the university itself. The City of Hamilton and the university have grown up together, and there is no doubt that we have contributed to each other's success. When I think about McMaster's "academic impact," as per the UN initiative, I do think of Pakistan, India and the many places in the world where our teaching and research has brought benefit; but I come back to Hamilton as the place where the university's engagement with the world has to begin, always. Just as "education as integrity" presupposes collegiality, honesty and fairness within our university community, so it also commits us as an institution to work for the enrichment and development of a healthy, just and prosperous community around us.

This is unproblematic, if not easy, so long as we understand that education, if it is to have and to serve integrity, must be at least a two-way process. Notwithstanding the nomenclature, the best teacher is the individual most open

to learning, and any learner fully seized of her subject will inevitably teach. The object of study is that from which we learn, which observation opens a way to imagining the benefits that will accrue equally to our students and to the community when we explore the potential of service or experiential learning in the social sciences, medicine, engineering, humanities, business or science.

To assert that global citizenship cannot be learned in a local context is simply wrong. Poverty on our doorstep is like poverty four thousand miles away: while the cultural and socio-economic determinants may differ, the nature of the human experience is similar, and it is possible to extrapolate from analysis of the local to shed light on problematic areas of the global. This is the gathering-in and interconnecting function of education as integrity.

In closing, and to illustrate that last point, I have one further anecdote involving my alma mater, the University of the Witwatersrand. This comes from a slightly later phase than that with which I opened: the mid- to late-nineties, after the arrival of democracy in South Africa, and at the beginning of what turned out to be a major transformation in the system of higher education. The Vice-Chancellor of the time—by then a different person from he with the penchant for wearing academic regalia while simultaneously breathing tear gas—was faced with a dilemma not unrelated to that confronted by his predecessor. After fifty years in which the majority of the population had been denied a decent school education, should the university protect its distinguished international reputation by insisting on entrance requirements so demanding that effectively the majority would continue to be excluded? Or should the institution's global standing be sacrificed, perhaps temporarily, in order to address the immediate needs of a hitherto disenfranchised population?

This was a real and for many a painful predicament, particularly since it pitted progressive social views against academic aspiration, sometimes within the same individual, but ultimately the university acted as if Ronald Dworkin's argument from 1975 was still being heard. Integrity in education meant that international standing bought by betraying local interest was unacceptable; advancement of the university that directly or indirectly hobbled the community in its quest for prosperity, civility and justice was reprehensible. So, for a decade the university concentrated its efforts on undoing, through education, the legacy of apartheid, after which it emerged once again into the international community of learning.

Today, in Ontario, we face pressure to internationalize and yet, as I have said earlier, it is unclear what should be the proper relationship between that global thrust and our local obligations. The universities daily face the challenge of accommodating the many students who wish to attend and are qualified to attend, and in all of this the talk of accountability and obligation looms large. To understand properly the question of the universities' statutory commitment and authority, and the relation between that and our moral and ethical obligations, will be fundamental to our prospects for success. Although we do not find ourselves in immediate danger from teargas and other cruder forms of interference and intimidation, the drift of the university sector is nevertheless not entirely within our control. For that reason education as integrity remains worthy of our vigorous advocacy and defense—how urgently you would only understand if you have seen it under threat.

For today's graduating students, with whom I am very proud to share in this celebration, my hope is that your time at McMaster has given you a great many experiences as inspiring to you and as influential upon you as those I have recalled today from my own student days. If you are anything like me, the real significance of many of those experiences will disclose itself to you only over time. I leave you, though, with the reminder that just as those who would teach must be open to learning, those who have learned—like yourselves—have an obligation to teach or foster enlightenment, in whatever form of work they find themselves, and in whatever circumstances. Without you, the academy will have little impact. I wish you well and commend to you a life of reflection, sound action, and integrity.