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In April 1967, at more or less the mid-point in the Vietnam War, Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke at Riverside Church in New York City, outlining the need for what he called “a radical revolution of values”: “We must rapidly begin the shift from a thing-oriented society to a person-oriented society. When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights, are considered more important than people,” he said, “the giant triplets of racism, extreme materialism and militarism are incapable of being conquered.”<sup>1</sup>

Nearly a quarter of a century later, in 1989, with the Vietnam war over, yet countless new conflicts underway and global inequities undiminished, Bill McKibben in *The End of Nature* drew attention to the ecological impact of our increasing orientation to things and unprincipled embrace of the machine. This assertion of human power he was later to identify paradoxically as evidence of our *dehumanization*, of our failure to make the shift towards what King characterized as “a person-oriented society.” In his seventh book, *Enough* (2003), McKibben offered advice for “Staying Human in an Engineered Age.”

How are we to understand that last phrase? It is certainly not intended to disparage engineers or the work they do, but it is connected to the way in which that work is sometimes viewed—often not by engineers themselves. “An engineered age” I take to be McKibben’s term for an era intoxicated with technology for its own sake, or one built on the assumption that human progress and technological advance are congruent, if not one and the same thing.

I think it also refers to one aspect of our culture with roots deep in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries. The industrial revolution, economist Douglas Allen asserted recently, effected a fundamental shift in our human institutions, away from those regulated by social values such as trust and custom, and towards a regime built around measurement and the removal of randomness in outcomes.<sup>2</sup> Whatever considerable good such a regime brought with it, it brought also danger; as “life became more predictable [and controlled], . . . [the potentially anarchic force of] nature played a smaller role.” The noisiness “of the various inputs, and the individual contributions of nature and people” was steadily suppressed to facilitate an outcome “engineered” in the sense that it was planned, controlled and (importantly) *measurable*.

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<sup>1</sup> For a transcript of the speech:

[http://www.democracynow.org/2013/1/21/dr\\_martin\\_luther\\_king\\_in\\_1967](http://www.democracynow.org/2013/1/21/dr_martin_luther_king_in_1967).

<sup>2</sup> Douglas W. Allen, *The Institutional Revolution: Measurement and the Economic Emergence of the Modern World* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 12.

A colleague recently drew my attention to an amusing article in *The New York Times*. Under the title “The United States of Metrics,” author Bruce Feiler explored our contemporary obsession with quantitative measurement.<sup>3</sup> As an indication that things have probably gone too far, Feiler pointed to an app called Spreadsheets, which “uses body sensors, accelerometers and smartphone microphones” to monitor almost every quantifiable detail of its owner’s sexual activity—not, apparently, for “creepy” purposes, but so that this information can be rolled up into a comprehensive database documenting sexual practice across the United States.

“We are awash in numbers,” writes Feiler, “Data is everywhere [and] old-fashioned things like words are in retreat; numbers are on the rise. Unquantifiable arenas like history, literature, religion and the arts are receding from public life, replaced by technology, statistics, science and math. Even the most elemental form of communication, the story, is being pushed aside by the list.”

Ponder the Spreadsheets app: what is the point of it? Will vast aggregations of data about human sexuality ever capture the story of attraction, love and lust? If not, where does the process lead us—to the replacement of sex with huge amounts of evidence (so-called “big data”) for hypothesizing about it? What kind of knowledge will Spreadsheets provide of the most profoundly human instinct?

McKibben asserts quite reasonably that if we are to retain or regain our humanity, the displacement of unruly nature by orderly lists (and all they symbolize in technology, commerce and the full range of contemporary life) cannot continue indefinitely. That is the simple message of his book title— *Enough*—and it restates remotely in time and within a different complex of anxieties the message of Martin Luther King.

At the heart of what McKibben has to say about staying human in an “engineered age” is our capacity—indeed our obligation—to *choose* what technologies shall be embraced and what rejected, and to do so in accordance with values that strengthen rather than displace our humanity. It is imperative, in short, that humanity ultimately prevail over mere numbers. But as Bruce Feiler’s article brought home to me, it is by no means certain that here in North America in the second decade of the Twenty-First Century, we human beings know well enough what is good for us and enriching to our humanity. It took no less a mind than Albert Einstein to observe that “Not everything that matters can be measured and not everything that can be measured matters.” Apparently our culture has found this message about as difficult to assimilate as the mathematics of general relativity.

There are however some signs that may be encouraging. Pondering obsessively and with some puzzlement the disappointing outcomes of their hyper-engineered economies, governments across the developed world are beginning to ask whether

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<sup>3</sup> [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/18/fashion/the-united-states-of-metrics.html?\\_r=2](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/18/fashion/the-united-states-of-metrics.html?_r=2)

the exclusion of randomness, of trust and custom, has really been to the good. And not for the first time, the Canadian Council of Chief Executives, which includes CEOs of 150 major Canadian corporations, has seen fit to indicate that it is educated human beings rather than technically expert list-makers who hold the key to leadership and success.

A survey of CCCE members released this past January showed that in evaluating prospective new hires today corporations tend “to emphasize soft skills—also known as non-cognitive skills—over hard skills. The soft skills most often listed by respondents included people skills and relationship-building, communication skills, problem-solving skills, analytical abilities, and leadership skills.”<sup>4</sup>

Whether this message has penetrated all the way through the companies led by CCCE members is certainly questionable, but there is some confirmation in the 2013 Campus Recruitment and Benchmark Survey<sup>5</sup> report that while hard skills are still not exactly devalued by corporations, the emphasis today is on finding the appropriate mix of hard and soft skills—on rehumanizing the workplace by readmitting to it the “noisiness” of subjectivity, intuition and custom.

Proponents of this approach sometimes imply that the paradoxical outcome of such rehumanization will be a more precisely engineered result. But who, with a real and lived understanding of the disruptive potential of the “non-cognitive” would ever believe that? Undoubtedly the result will be better in the sense of being more authentic and meaningful, but probably not in any way that is fully *measurable*. As the pendulum swings we will have to rediscover other means and modes of assessment.

It was recently reported in the *Wall Street Journal* that at business schools in the United States and Great Britain, “the Philosophy Department is invading the M.B.A. program.” “The global financial crisis has sparked efforts to train students to think beyond the bottom line,” with courses on subjects such as “Why Capitalism?” and “Thinking About Thinking.” These institutions now see a need for their Business students to read Plato, Marx and Kant “to know why we’re doing what we’re doing,” as one student puts it.<sup>6</sup>

At a much broader level, a national commission in the United States has issued a report proclaiming that those “unquantifiable arenas like history, literature, religion and the arts” which Feiler observed “are receding from public life” are essential “for a vibrant, competitive and secure nation.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> *Preliminary survey report: the skill needs of major Canadian employers*. January 2014. 5-6.

<sup>5</sup> Sponsored by the Canadian Association of Career Educators and Employers (CACEE).

<sup>6</sup> *Wall Street Journal* online, 30 April, 2014.

<sup>7</sup> *The Heart of the Matter*. [www.amacad.org](http://www.amacad.org); [www.humanitiescommission.org](http://www.humanitiescommission.org).

This rehumanizing of institutions, economic, educational and governmental, may be argued to be a luxury available only to wealthy nations, where technology is today far more than “enough” for survival—and there is some force to that point. Certainly, it is in Europe and North America that we are seeing the human dimension reasserted against the technocratic, as if in those cultures it is at last becoming obvious that you can have too much of a good thing.

At the London School of Business, for example, students are offered a course in “Nobel Thinking,” which may not serve to make them Nobel Prize winners but *is* intended to help them understand the sources and processes of transformative insight. I confess I am somewhat troubled by the ghettoizing of this within a single course—as if one merely needs to have taken the course to become an effective or Nobel-league “big picture thinker.” It would be more encouraging if the corrosive yet constructive influence of critical inquiry and reflection were suffused throughout the curriculum; but one is grateful for this nevertheless, as one is for courses such as “Modernity and the Holocaust” and “On Humour” at the Copenhagen Business School, and “Conceptual Foundations in Strategic Thought” at the McDonough School of Business (Georgetown).

Last year saw the appearance of a report to the European Commission on *Improving the quality of teaching and learning in Europe’s higher education institutions*, a document remarkable for its powerfully humanistic underpinnings. It’s not without irony that the process of “Modernisation” is in this instance understood to mean not increasing subservience to an industrial model, but rather a return to what Feiler would call “words and stories,” a rediscovery of the unquantifiable. And interestingly, this coming November, in the Netherlands, the Global Network of Research Intensive Universities will meet to frame and endorse a statement on the fundamental importance and relevance of the Humanities to all areas of study and, by extension, to the project of building and advancing a global *civitas* that is democratic and dedicated to the greater good of all humanity and of the planet which supports us.

As a member of that Global Network, McMaster University will be represented there—appropriately, as our commitment to humane and enlightened learning and research in all fields from health to science to religion to labour goes back over 125 years. Perhaps because of that tradition, at this university we have been to a certain extent successful in resisting full conscription into “the Engineered Age.” Notwithstanding the path towards high achievement in science and technology on which President Harry Thode set us, beginning in the 1950s, the signal achievements of our subsequent history have arisen from a profoundly humanistic vision—perhaps the most notable instance being the founding of the McMaster Medical School forty-eight years ago, in 1966.

A unique and unprecedented experiment at the time, and one probably still unsurpassed for its global influence, the Medical School was the child of exactly the sort of speculative intelligence and interrogation of received wisdom that you’d

hope to acquire in a course on “Nobel Thinking.” And notwithstanding its increasing commitment to evidence-based practice, the Medical School placed humans before numbers. It focused less on bodies, the pathology of bodies and traditional notions of medical education, than on people—those who require care, those who would provide it, and on the best kind of interaction between the two.

More recently, this same approach has led the school into a more forthright embrace of the arts and the “non-cognitive” as a critical part of good medical education: we now have a visual literacy program for medical students which is taught in the McMaster Museum of Art. And this re-engagement with humanistic considerations is not confined to Medicine: this past year saw exciting collaborations between Engineering and Visual Arts students, and in the DeGroote School of Business discussions are moving ahead on a program which integrates business education with liberal learning.

Heartened though we should be by every indication that humanistic considerations—those “unquantifiable arenas”—are now being admitted to the calculus of productivity and innovation, there is great danger in thinking that so long as students in business, medicine or engineering are being required to take a humanities course we have taken up and properly discharged the challenge issued to us by Martin Luther King so long ago.

The project which Dr. King opened, and which Bill McKibben’s writing reminds us still lies ahead, is this: to reconsider the values which our society today seems to accept as obvious and unchangeable, to ask (as the cultural critic Judith Butler puts it) “about *the value* of these values, whether they are comprehensive, what they facilitate, what they foreclose, what kind of world they establish, and what kind of world they destroy.”<sup>8</sup> What matters, besides what can be measured? And what is the relationship of the quantifiable to the unquantifiable?

Those of us who are products of a humanities education—like Judith Butler, like myself—are used to pondering such questions, for sure, and we will talk about them perhaps too readily. But we do not have a monopoly of wisdom on this matter, for that which makes us all human is not *only* that which can’t be quantified. While the ability to work with words, images and music is an important—perhaps even a defining—component of our humanity, it is nevertheless only a component: what we do with numbers, what we build, what we do *contra natura* (in treating a disease, for example)—all of this is also intrinsic to our humanity.

In order to be human in an engineered age we have to avoid false binaries. If McKibben is correct and the love of technology and a technocratic mindset is carrying all of us and our planet towards disaster, it would be a grave mistake to swing to the opposite extreme and insist that all those things Feiler noted have been “receding from public life”—history, literature, religion and the arts—should in

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<sup>8</sup> Butler, 31.

their turn efface those things that are presently ascendant—technology, statistics, science and mathematics.

As graduates you are all leaving the University with an education tilted (I hope only slightly) towards one or the other of these extremes. That is as it should be: the world needs highly specialized minds as well as broadly cultivated ones; it needs brilliant engineers as much as it needs gifted painters and writers; it needs astute business minds as much as it needs passionate social workers; and it needs technology as much as it needs an ongoing critique of technology.

But whichever way your background, temperament, educational and career choices have made you lean, my parting advice to you is to remember your humanity, to understand it as something not just there for your *use*, but as something you have constantly to *negotiate*.

There's a discussion you have to be part of about how we want to organize our world, how we need to partner with and understand each other and our place in the physical universe.

The conduct of that discussion may seem like the exclusive preserve of the philosophy seminar, but it must engage every one of us, every day, whether we're technology boffins or international development workers. Unless you are a part of it, the answers to the big questions in all your fields will forever elude you.

For now, consider the evidence that we live in a dehumanized age; and as you leave this hall today, remember Bill McKibben's one word thrown up in our defence: Enough!

And in the pause which follows, whether you leave here as a doctor, a nurse, an engineer, an art historian or a social worker, ponder what role you would like to play, not only within the technical confines and the discourse of your chosen field but in the full and glorious project of our shared humanity.

My very best wishes go with you.