

The Practical Life of the Mind: Scholarship and the Small College

“No man but a blockhead ever wrote except for money.” So said Samuel Johnson, in one of his more concussive pronouncements, uttered in 1776. Yet here we sit—perhaps like blockheads—at a ceremony honoring academic scholarship, the least commercial form of writing imaginable. Why is the Nachbahr award worthy of such recognition? For his part, Dr. Johnson would know. In addition to being one of history’s most durable curmudgeons, Johnson was a prodigious scholar himself—a literary critic, a lexicographer, a lover of language, argument, and eloquence. Those of us on the Loyola faculty also know. Although it specifically recognizes scholarly achievement in the Humanities, I believe that the Nachbahr award indirectly acknowledges the work we all do, in every discipline. We all have experienced the loneliness, the drudgery, and sometimes the inconclusive outcome of scholarship. Yet, we have also felt the exhilaration of discovery and the satisfaction of membership in a dynamic community of inquiry. In that regard, it is especially meaningful to me to welcome Fr. Linnane into our fellowship of scholars. Finally, those who were friends and colleagues of Bernard Nachbahr certainly know the deep significance of this award. They recognized in his unpretentious cosmopolitanism the engagement in “a diverse and changing world” that Loyola College strives to instill in all its students.

Still, I wonder if there are some of us here today who may think that Dr. Johnson had it right the first time. There is in our culture a preference for the more obviously practical, concrete, and commercial over the artistic, theoretical, or intellectual. This sensibility was nicely summed up in the 1980s by a Cambridge, Massachusetts waiter when one of my graduate professors, a Harvard Ph.D. in European diplomatic history,

tried to secure seats at a crowded restaurant by asking if the waiter could free up a table for Dr. Schuker. The skeptical waiter replied, “Are you a real doctor or just a bookworm?” My assigned topic of the day, the life of the mind, may appear to be firmly rooted in the realm of the bookworms. I would like to suggest, however, that both the “real,” that is, medical, doctor and the diplomatic historian participate in the life of the mind *and* help confront the practical challenges of the real world. Of course it is vital to have trained medical specialists who are conversant with the cutting edge developments in their discipline. But given the extraordinary frostiness in current diplomatic relations between the United States and Europe, it may also benefit society to draw on the insights of scholars with expertise in European diplomatic affairs. As we have been cruelly reminded lately, theoretical or “academic” problems have a way of becoming crushingly practical, often with little warning.

As an historian of American political institutions from the 1870s into the mid-twentieth century, I have a very practical concern: power. In the first part of my period American public life consisted of a relatively weak national government, a strong and vital party system, and a local politics of ethnic, religious, and racial contention: community politics often divided on such questions as whether public schools should have mandatory Bible readings (using the Protestant King James version) or require English language instruction; whether saloons would be open on Sundays or Sunday ball games and horse-racing tolerated; whether African Americans could vote or gain access to public facilities. By the end of my period, a stronger national, regulatory state had emerged, parties had lost their central hold on Americans’ loyalty, and economic issues had gained greater salience. Over the course of this period, I wondered, how did these

community battles find expression in the formal political/governmental system? How was the public interest defined and acted upon in a multiethnic, class-conscious society? In short, how was power articulated and applied? My pursuit of those questions led me from the interaction of reformers, political parties, and government in state politics to the prohibition movement, the most divisive social issue of the age. In turn, my research on prohibition successively developed from an initial interest in the methods of the Anti-Saloon League, the first modern, single-interest lobbying group that dominated the drive to national constitutional prohibition; then to the expansion in state authority inherent in national prohibition and the strange scheme of “concurrent” federal and local enforcement that the 18th amendment introduced; and, finally, to my current project investigating vigilante action by the 1920s Ku Klux Klan to enforce prohibition in local communities, which returns to the contentious politics of belief and behavior. I have tried throughout my research to break down the divisions between the history of institutions and the lives of ordinary people. It is a coherent and, I hope, relevant scholarly agenda.

Yet, again, one may question the importance of scholarly research at Loyola College, an institution that assigns primary emphasis to teaching, and especially to the teaching of undergraduates. Our goal as academic professionals is to combine effective, personalized teaching with an active commitment to advancing our respective disciplines through research. I think it is a matter of great significance that each of the former Nachbahr winners is an outstanding classroom instructor. Unlike undergraduate students at the larger research universities, Loyola students do not suffer the consequences of a research-first orientation: closed doors and non-existent office hours, frequent and

prolonged faculty absences, the screen of teaching assistants shielding professors from inquisitive and bothersome students. Our top scholars are in the classroom and in their offices. So, our commitment to research does not compromise our devotion to teaching. But how does research actively promote good teaching?

I believe that certain individuals can be effective, even inspiring, teachers without pursuing scholarship, but I think it is impossible for an *institution* to offer vibrant, first-rate, college-level education without a faculty composed of active, committed scholars. To turn the old, offensive adage on its head: those who do research teach best. To teach well one must know one's discipline from the inside out, to be immersed in it; and—at least in my discipline of history--there is no immersion as complete and compelling as primary research--to be hip deep in your sources, making sense of the scattered, intractable evidence that the ocean of the past has cast onto our thin shoreline of documentation. Sometimes one's research uncovers small revelatory nuggets that clarify a teaching point. For instance, I sometimes need to convey to students the lag between industrial expansion and government regulation, especially factory safety laws, in the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century. The testimony of a Chicago union official in 1907, which I encountered working on my first book, "that no wood worker working in a factory in the city is recognized as a mechanic if he has all his fingers" sharpens the focus immediately.

Much more critical to my teaching is the way my research experience helps expose students to what is quite literally the *discipline* of history. History is the study of change and continuity over time through the patient accumulation of evidence. Like most scholars, historians seek to isolate thematic patterns in the past, but we are, sometimes to

the irritation of colleagues in other fields, insistent on honoring the integrity of time, place, and context within these larger patterns. The particular, the discrete, the subtle countertrend—in short, the details—are critically important to historians, not for what might be called antiquarian or preservationist reasons—to capture the past in amber, as it were—but rather to investigate as closely as possible the dynamics of past societies and change over time. Because I have done it myself in my own scholarship, I can better advise students not to pluck out the first attractive piece of evidence that affirms their preconception, but rather to build their argument out of the totality of the evidence, including evidence that runs counter to their assumptions. One need only recall our government’s string of intelligence failures to recognize the importance of cultivating a more disciplined approach to knowledge.

A second, equally important, methodological lesson that can be drawn from historical scholarship involves appreciating and navigating through a diversity of viewpoints. Historical research is conducted across the distorting dimensions of time, culture, and perspective. Keith Schoppa, our distinguished historian of China, found that in order to understand the motivations of his Chinese subject, he had to set aside western assumptions about proper family relations and social behavior and absorb the very different precepts of Chinese society. Even for American historians like me, our own national past is a foreign country with different beliefs and practices. Historians, and students studying history, cannot assume that their own outlooks and priorities are universally shared. Moreover, historians have come to recognize that there is no single past that can be scientifically replicated, as some enthusiastic nineteenth-century historians had hoped, but rather a variety of experiences and perspectives informed by

such factors as nationality, religious faith, race, ethnicity, gender, and class. This does not mean that the past is some relativistic carnival house of mirrors, a multitude of warped reflections from which we can gain no clear perspective. It means, instead, that historians must undergo a double transformation as they encounter the evidence of the past. First, historians must, in a sense, inhabit their subjects. To know a subject, historians must see the world as the historical figure saw it, must understand the perspective of that person or group of people. But historians cannot *become* the historical figure, cannot simply adopt the viewpoints of those they study. The second part of the transformation is to extract oneself from that close, empathetic understanding of the subject and then to analyze the subject critically, with the broader perspective that the historical source may lack. Empathetic understanding and critical analysis through intense study of primary sources are the keys to historical research and knowledge. I can understand the outlook of the prohibitionists I study without being a prohibitionist. The ability—and willingness—to absorb the perspective of others, even that menacingly abstract capitalized Other, without losing one's own critical detachment is a requirement of modern life that historical study can promote. In their own distinctive ways, the other academic disciplines also encourage us to step outside ourselves and in doing so, develop our own critical capacities. That is the civilizing mission of education.

It is essential that universities and colleges, even small colleges such as Loyola, shelter and sustain scholars. Partly this is to benefit students. The contemporary American college experience has many functions: developing career skills, cultivating friendships, even, it has come to pass, learning to become an adult. But the central experience for students, especially in Jesuit colleges with a strong commitment to the

liberal arts and sciences, must be a four-year academic confrontation with the ideas and challenges that define our humanity. That confrontation can be life-altering, as it was for me and probably many others here today. And it depends on the assistance of faculty who spend not four years, but their entire careers wrestling with those basic questions. In that sense, colleges must be countercultural; they must resist our contemporary taste for the quick, shallow, and satisfying. Scholars need colleges as much as college students need committed scholar-teachers. Scholarly work requires time and patience. It is often slow and highly specialized. Scholarship requires independence, especially in pursuing basic research. And scholarship requires support, both financial and organizational. Colleges, including Loyola, provide time, independence, and support to scholars. It is a sign of civilization to do so. It is an affirmation of Loyola College's mission to do so. And, in the end, it is very practical, and not at all blockheaded, to do so.