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Can higher education rediscover its 'soul'?

The search for truth and answers to the meaning of life has largely disappeared from today's secular schools of higher learning

By Douglas Todd, Vancouver Sun June 9, 2012

One of many new books determined to restore the relevance of higher education focuses on one specific but symbolic shortcoming.

It's Helen Sword's *Stylish Academic Writing* (Harvard University Press). The New Zealand professor's book maps out precisely how more academics could overcome their addiction to stodgy and unreadable prose.

Appalled at the wordy work produced by most academics, Sword analyzes 1,000 peer-reviewed articles and 100 academic books. She persuasively counters the fears of scholars who claim they're "not allowed" to write vividly and with panache.

In ruminating on why so much academic writing is uninspiring, Sword says conforming to colleagues' notoriously bland writing seems to comfort worried academics, and that jargon is a signal to peers they belong in the same elite club.

Sword, however, offers many examples of scholars whose writing breaks the grim pattern of obscurity and monotony. And she encourages more academics to practice clear communication, craft and creativity. It will, however, require courage.

Sword's admonition to academics to overcome their fear of clear writing is a revealing illustration of a much larger problem in contemporary higher education - a crisis of relevancy, of meaning.

Since Sword is targeting her book for sale to academics, she is not about to criticize them too harshly. But there is an undercurrent running through *Stylish Academic Writing* that suggests faculty who fail to communicate are ignoring a long-standing expectation that their work should have social significance.

There are notable exceptions to the current hollowing out of higher education, which I mention below. But it appears there is a growing lack of interest among many academics in communicating any-thing resembling "wisdom" to students.

Tom Wolfe took on this subject in his devastating novel, *I Am Charlotte Simmons*. Many other books also lament the emptiness and incoherence of much of contemporary college and university intellectual culture.

One stark title is *Education's End: Why Our Colleges and Universities Have Given Up on the Meaning of Life*, by Anthony Kronman of Yale University.

Education's End grieves the loss of humanistic interests in higher education, and the decline of the liberal arts. It regrets how colleges and universities are renegeing on earlier commitments to foster students' moral and spiritual growth.

Another graphic book title is *Excellence Without a Soul: Does Liberal Education Have a Future?*

Written by Harry Lewis, a former dean who taught at Harvard for 30 years, *Excellence Without a Soul* explores how the rise of "value-free" research universities has resulted in much of higher education abandoning students' personal development.

Where are the courses that explore the meaning of life? That dive into questions such as "Who am I? "What really matters?" "Where do I stand?" "How can I make a positive difference?" "What is real?" and "How shall I live?"

It's been largely forgotten that many U.S. and Canadian universities have religious roots, where such questions were standard fare.

However, religion has been largely shunned from higher education during the past 100 years, in the name of combating sectarianism and dogma.

There has been a positive side to this development, called "secularization." It was meant to show there were no taboos in higher education: Orthodoxy, especially religious orthodoxy, could be challenged.

The trouble is that now most North American institutions of higher learning, especially public ones, have gone to the other extreme.

They're become anti-religious.

Healthy "secularization" has turned into an ideology of "secularism." In their subtle conformity, they've tossed out the baby - meaning-filled wisdom traditions - with the bathwater, which they denounce as religion.

In most public university philosophy classes, there is much talk of "deconstructing" beliefs. As a result (outside of Christian, Jewish and other religious private schools) there is virtually no emphasis on students developing their own coherent world views.

As John Somerville writes in *The Decline of the Secular University* (Oxford University Press), the dogged secular-ism upheld by many universities is undermining what used to be the announced purpose of higher education - to foster engaged citizens capable of dealing with complex moral issues.

The Decline of the Secular University says today's university, obsessed with research and hunting down private sources of funding, has led to most students being inarticulate about their own spiritual or philosophical convictions.

"Universities are not giving us much practice at formulating world views, in its haste to fit us for jobs," writes Somerville, a University of Florida historian.

With the rise of pluralism and relativism in North American culture, Somerville notes how much of the talk today is simply about accepting diversity.

"We used to talk about truth, but now we talk about tolerance. They're not incompatible," Somerville writes.

Somerville calls on academics to reconsider how an open-minded attitude to religion, of the non-fundamentalist variety, could help lead faculty and students into a thoughtful look at life's bigger questions.

Like Somerville, American philosopher John Cobb Jr. argues in his book, *Spiritual Bankruptcy* (Abingdon), that the "secular" university is not educating students to fill "social roles of broad responsibility."

Higher education is generally now simply thought of as neutral "training," Cobb says. When it comes to inculcating values, he says the default position of "secularist" faculty tends to be "economism."

In other words, the dollar dictates.

Since serious dialogue about moral and spiritual convictions has been largely pushed out of the academy, Cobb regrets that a spiritual vacuum has been created in North American culture. Disastrously, it's often filled by religious fundamentalism.

Despite the truth of much of these criticisms, it would be unfair to write off all colleges and universities as essentially devoid of values.

There are pockets within higher learning in which meaning and morality are still seriously explored.

Some bright spots include college and university courses devoted to applied ethics, where students wade into life-and-death medical moral choices and the implications of far-reaching business decisions and environmental dilemmas.

A few collaborative liberal arts and sciences curricula, such as the University of B.C.'s Arts One, also still try to get beyond the mere facts to touch on values. And non-credit programs, such as UBC's "Practical Wisdom" lecture series, valiantly strive to make academia relevant.

It's also significant that CBC's excellent Ideas program recently aired a five-part series called After Atheism. It highlighted how non-dogmatic religious ideas, including those of Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor and Boston College's John Caputo, are again being discussed in some academic circles.

Such valiant professors and programs, however, are largely the exception to the "secular" rule in academia. Yet, like Sword's book on Stylish Academic Writing, they hint that the cause of meaning and social potency is not entirely lost in higher education.

Let's hope the day comes soon, as Somerville and many of us yearn, when more college and university students are encouraged to openly explore questions of meaning, to serve real human needs and to deepen their own spiritual formation.

"Imagine the university being frank and relaxed about arguments over moral judgments," Somerville writes in *The Decline of the Secular University*.

"Imagine taking 'Know thy-self' as a central educational goal."

dtodd@vancouver.sun.com

Blog: www.vancouver.sun.com/thesearch

Twitter.com/douglastodd

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