

Humanities: An Academic Rebirth or Graveyard

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Last week I surrendered to the sense that an entire world is dissolving underneath our feet –Leadership, structure and institutions crumbling, authorities corrupted, faith in the whole human experiment evaporating. I said out loud, for many to hear, “this could well be the end of times as we’ve come to know it.” I’m editing/ writing this essay because I strongly believe lessons taught to Humanities leaders and the general public will assure survival of the human species from self- destruction.

How did I enter this mood? Was it reading about there not being sports on TV, the Global Pandemic, Trump’s leadership challenges, or our challenges in China or the Middle East? It happened after downloading a package of essays from The Chronicle of Higher Education, the Wall Street Journal, and the New York Times – and especially

the study of literature, whose eroding condition makes the status of the American Republic look healthy.

Taken from the New York Times the title of this feeling should be, “Endgame,” and its explanation regrettably reads like a disaster movie. The trend lines of media and literature popularity is no longer on the verge of collapse. It’s in the midst of it.” Jobs are disappearing (at a higher rate than the Great Depression of 25-30%), college enrollment has tanked, and amid the wreckage the custodians of humanism are “confused, befuddled and without purpose.” Colleges don’t seem to know what business they are in. Those who it should benefit the most are abandoning its value proposition.

Op. Eds on education across all media, routinely cover administrative and political battles, the hiring process, and the rebellions of graduate and under-graduate students. But the central essays should be the ones that deal with the questions and the ways that the humanities keep trying and fails to justify itself.

According to the New York Times, if there’s any lesson learned by the slow death of Humanities departments, it’s that if you aspire to keep your faith alive even in a reduced form, you need more than worn our clichés and socially irrelevant shock references. George Orwell’s 1984 knew information and communication would eventually cause all things to be questioned and as a result, subjects like the humanities would be thought of as either irrelevant entertainment debates or “fool’s gold.”

According to researchers, a thousand different forces are killing interest in the humanities- and its preservation and recovery will depend on more than just a belief in truth and beauty, but in a belief that “the best that has been thought and said” are now reduced to clichés or empty phrases. I agree with the op ed writers, they should at a minimum create a belief platform, on the very idea that teachers, advocates, certain books and art are transcendent, in the belief that students should learn to value these education forms before attempting their elimination.

I know many business leaders and professors; some are fiscal conservatives and most are political liberals; for them humanities should be a science with disciplinary procedures and habits of mind... aiming to model both the style and analytics of engagement and critical thought.

When I was a University of Illinois undergraduate; I assumed the so-called “core” curriculum promised to teach “approaches to knowledge” rather than the thing itself. It was, and remains, a crazy person’s view for humanists to take, a unilateral disarmament in the contest for student hearts and minds. No discipline, I’m aware of, promises to teach only the utopian outcome or a style of thinking and problem solving instead of the science of its fundamental structure and the retracing of how we arrived at where we are.

The New York Times stated “the irony is that the forces that have undermined the Western and white-male approaches” makes the Humanities easier to eliminate, marginalize and redirect. Today should be a time of exciting debates over whether it’s possible to teach Americans humanities. Instead, too many humanists have trapped themselves in a false choice between a) the stories of “dead white males” b) educating role is not to transmit values” or c) my way is exclusively right. The rationale being it’s God’s will or it is the way I was raised and the way the founders intended. Therein are the basic issues and the causes of the dying state of humanities.

Avoiding false Humanities beliefs will not completely restore a successful academic or intellectual pursuit. But begins the path to recovery with a renewed faith not only in humanities methods and approaches, but in the future of the science of humanities itself.

In the early 1980’s Dr. Crosby began crusading Industrial Leaders on the value and wisdom of Quality Assurance. As a Department Head at Honeywell Inc. I became a fervent believer and a disciple of Dr. Phil Crosby’s research and teaching.

Honeywell leadership made a commitment to overcome the market share challenge from Japan Inc. head-on, with confidence and resolve. Without this “all-hands-on-deck” and in-depth structural understanding of quality assurance, companies like Honeywell may not have survived.

We should expect Covid-19 will be talked about for centuries to come; if we get it right, it will become recognized as a tribute to the maturity and the advancements of science, technology, and humanity. Conversely, I recently read that post-pandemic failures have triggered an avalanche of fault-finding, divisions, hatred and extremist. This period in history may become the USA’s ultimate test of democracy and capitalism. We live in a great country, and many well-intentioned leaders and policy makers are being tested. I’ve come to believe

The birthing of humanities and education presents the opportunity for an updated and renewed interest in a Humanistic way of life. Doing so, would avoid letting Humanities become a museum item and a footnote for historians.