

“Of Our Spirituals Strivings”¹
Faith, Justice, and the Teaching of the Humanities

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One hundred years ago, in the wake of the American civil war and the death of Reconstruction, W. E. B. DuBois, one of our country’s seminal intellectuals, wrote *The Souls of Black Folks*. This book was a diverse collection of essays that wrestled with the problems of race, life in the American south, Afro-American ethnicity, social inequalities, death, and tragedy. It was, and is, an imaginative foray into American life, which asked all the pertinent questions about our lives as Americans in all of our particularities. DuBois brought his wide range of knowledge to confront the American white supremacist past that had been configured into the opening years of the 20th century. The book opens with a semi-autobiographical essay entitled, “Of Our Spiritual Strivings.” In this essay, DuBois wrestles with his own individual humanity and the racialized confinement that he and millions of other persons of African descent born into America faced over against a society that made them invisible and forced them to live behind what he called a “veil.” In expressing his own conundrum over being “Negro” and American, he placed the significance of the American debate over race and ethnic identity in the context of spiritual idealism rooted in Christianity. Now mind you, DuBois was not an orthodox protestant. Although the religious basis of his thought can be found in New England Calvinism, he was steeped in the American pragmatism of William James and in the German sociological thinking of Troeltsch and Weber. Nevertheless, the language in which he described the world bespoke of his religious heritage. He argued that the history of blacks in America had been that of strife and a warring of self to be recognized as full Americans. This struggle, he believed, had an end, an end which all humanity shares. DuBois summed up the struggle of African Americans for recognition stating:

This, then, is the end of striving: to be co-workers in the kingdom of culture, to escape both death and isolation, to husband and use his best powers and his latent genius (5).

The “kingdom of culture” was his secularized substitute for the Calvinist doctrines of the Heidelberg Catechism that asked, “What is our only hope in life and death?” or the Westminster Shorter Catechism that asked, “What is the chief end of man?” The answer: “to love and serve God.” DuBois, like his peers and mentors, was in a transition from a theological vocation of the intellectual to teach and search for truth, toward what he believed to be a broader and more intellectually consistent basis for inclusion of all humanity. The highest good for human beings was to be “co-workers in the kingdom of culture,” and all people played a role in building this kingdom.

For DuBois, the kingdom of culture meant that in the universities it was necessary to teach and debate the highest truth. Justice or injustice cannot be discerned without a

¹ The title is taken from the opening essay of W. E. B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*

forum of openness. “The function of the university,” he opined, “is not simply to teach bread winning, or to furnish teachers for the public schools, or to be a center of polite society; it is, above all, to be the organ of that fine adjustment between life and the growing knowledge of life, an adjustment which forms the secret of civilization” (70). He lamented that throughout the American south no such institutions existed where both black and white persons of “broad culture, catholic tolerance, and trained ability, [join] their hands to other hands, and [give] to this squabble of the Race a decent and dignified peace” (page #).

In the world of ideals, one without political dominance, DuBois’ belief that we as humanity are co-workers in the kingdom of culture, and that institutions of higher education share the work of kingdom building is one with which I also resonate. He was absolutely correct that the life of the university should foster the good society. However, he lived in a society that breathed a chauvinistic racialism through all of its vital organs. He did not, nor can we, escape the reality of hatred, closed minds, doctrinaire opinions, wealth, and political power that determines many of the features of university life. This fact would eventually force him out of the academy into a role as a cultural and political advocate; in 1909 DuBois would be a founding member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

This then brings us to the question of the day: Is developing just members of society the job of higher education? Institutions of higher education should promote justice as a value in the many different spheres of human endeavor (Walzer). By justice, I mean the value to adjudicate, discern, and give social meaning from the various realms of knowledge and living. Academic communities of learning, whether motivated by the Lordship of Christ or other motivations, have as an intrinsic duty as communities that are in search of truth to account for and constantly debate ideas. Alfred North Whitehead, the philosopher and mathematician, says that, “[w]hat education has to impart is an intimate sense for the power of ideas, for the beauty of ideas and for the structure of ideas, together with a particular body of knowledge which has peculiar reference to the life of the being possessing it” (Whitehead 23). The very notion of the university is that it is a community of moral discourse. This means then, by its nature, that the academic community is necessarily a political community. By this I mean it is necessary within the hallowed corridors of learning that each of us is listening to the other as to the social end and simple beauty which ideas present to us. That is, the individuals who make-up the community must decide where their highest allegiances are to be found. Too often in the segmented life of contemporary higher education this questioned is ignored in the name of specialization. I am not here to demean specialized knowledge, that would be a travesty. However, the learned community and the community which is learning must be able to explain why our theoretical investigations have some kind of social good. The naming of this good is then always political and must be adjudicated in the realms of competing goods. Justice in the realm of higher education can only be fully explored when faculty and staff acknowledge where their own political commitments begin.

When political commitments are openly and fairly acknowledged, this is where imaginative teaching begins (Whitehead 101). Before any teacher engages a student in

the enterprise of learning she must be intimately aware of her convictions. It is not enough for a teacher to give the various viewpoints on a subject; in the end the most successful teachers model an interpretive strategy for their students. This interpretive strategy comes out of what DuBois called “our spiritual striving.” Let me squelch your fears, I am not arguing that the classroom is the bully pulpit for knee jerk advocacy of one or more of a thousand policy positions. What I am, however, arguing for is that if students are to learn to critically distinguish, teachers must be models of reflective thought; teachers who can connect their specialized knowledge to the larger world that they and the students presently inhabit. Any questions about justice in higher education begin in the classroom, the lecture hall, and the seminar room, and they begin with the teacher demonstrating how she approaches a subject as it relates to the broader society. What are the principles of evaluation used and why that set of guidelines and not others? What is the experiential basis that makes a professor lean toward a particular type of interpretation as opposed to another? What is the professor’s driving passion behind her research? When students witness their teachers wrestling with ideas and struggling to form opinions, they are freed and set forth on their way to do likewise.

What is supremely important about this process is that students can begin to deliberate and formulate their own social and ethical choices by engaging with the professor about hers. The self-conscious reflections of the teacher demonstrate thoughtfulness for the student. The very worst experience a student can have is a teacher who is unaware of her biases and prejudices and who wittingly or unwittingly inflicts them on her students. Let me proceed with an example. A student of mine once complained to me about another professor, a complaint I usually try to ignore because I am certain students complain about me to other professors. Her complaint was unusual. She stated that the professor could not offer her the extra assistance she needed because he attributed her problem to language. This student was born in Korea and adopted as an infant to a Dutch American household in Michigan. Her first language was English. He, however, was blind to her as a person and reduced her learning difficulties to comprehension of English as a second language, which was for her, her first and only language. His actions turned the student away from an area of study in which she had expressed some interest. This unexamined prejudice about what Asian students knew did not allow this able teacher to present to the student what she needed to know. As a result, her confidence went down, she became physically repulsed when attending class, and she eventually dropped the class. What she learned from the class was more about the professor’s racial stereotypical views than the subject. Here a great injustice could have been avoided had the professor been self aware and open to hearing from his student that she was struggling to comprehend significant data. This student might not have become a scholar in this particular subject; however, she might have learned and been able to model the learning approach in other venues of her life.

If we simply dismiss this professor’s ignorance as rash stupidity we do so at our own peril. For our students, justice is not embodied in some abstract ideals located in a library tome. Justice is embodied in us. How we consider our students and their development through our patience in answering what appears to be the most simplistic of questions is all bound up with their thoughts about justice. Taking a young mind seriously, and having

the courage take other minds seriously, is an act of justice. For me it proceeds out of a faith that we, those who inhabit our cosmos, belong to God. By being dismissive of students' concerns and not allowing them to voice contrary opinions we do not allow them to develop their own voice and be heard. Justice requires that they be given a hearing. The task of teaching is to cultivate their minds with information so that they might give shape to their own informed opinions.

Higher education is more than an "intellectual minuet," to borrow phrase from Whitehead. In the sphere of higher education, promoting justice is teaching students how to think carefully and consider wisely. I continue to believe that the scholars in the Italian Renaissance era of European history understood this matter correctly. They challenged the order of the medieval university, which focused solely on credentialing clergy and lawyers, to read Greek and Latin literature as well to cultivate vernacular literature. By reading the Greek philosophers, they reconsidered what the nature of education ought to be and fostered new knowledge in the arts and sciences. To train young minds, they believed that the humanities were paramount for the city-states to function democratically. They believed that broad learning along with persuasive speech would give leaders a more in-depth understanding to govern justly. They viewed learning as a tool to be utilized thoughtfully. Learning was to be utilized in the development of wisdom for the common good.

The tragedy of DuBois' day was that the conversation about the common good was forestalled by the use of race as a political tool to hold disparate people of African descent down, and hold a disparate group of "whites" together with the lure of racial supremacy, consumer culture, and political freedom. The academy marginalized the works of DuBois during his lifetime, leaving scholars some forty years after his death in 1963 to reevaluate his genius and acknowledge his vast contributions to world history, to the writing of American history, and to urban sociology. However, had it not been for his encounters at Fisk College (now University) in Nashville, Tennessee we might not have heard of W. E. B. DuBois at all. For in the context of a church related Congregational college developed for slaveholders' colored children and former slaves, he developed a powerful voice that could not be stifled. We owe a debt of gratitude to his teachers who believed in his abilities and taught him, and those that followed him with equanimity and justice.

Works Cited

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