From There to Here and Back Again

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Have you heard the one about the Appalachian-born, Southern Baptist raised fundamentalist, longtime professor of philosophy at a Lutheran university, who walks into a Roman Catholic university and becomes the Dean of the School of Liberal Arts and Sciences…?

No, this is not a new Jim Gaffigan joke, and when one realizes it is the actual path taken by a real person, questions are bound to be raised. "Say what?" one might hear. "Come again?" the shocked might ask. Or, inspired by John McEnroe, someone might even shout, "You can't be serious!" Perhaps a more refined way of asking this same question might be, "How did you get from *there* to *here*?"

I vividly remember deciding I would go to college. Throughout the years, I have been asked why I went. My answer has always been the same: to avoid manual labor. At an earlier time, I would not have added much to this answer except to say that my parents were both members of the workforce, and witnessing their work set me on a different path. I would add more now, but it is enough to say that, for most of his life, Daddy worked in a packing house where they slaughtered hogs and cattle. My uncles and many other men from my community also worked there. When she was young, Momma worked at a place called "Standard Knitting Mill," in Knoxville, Tennessee. It was a textile mill where she, along with aunts and other women from my community, spun cotton for the making of apparel. Momma, like other women, would quit to raise the children. Once my siblings and I were of school age, she went back to work in the high school cafeteria, eventually rising to the level of manager. For years, she would leave our house by 5:00 a.m. and get home much later than her children at the end of the school day. I simply wanted something different from this. And my parents, neither of whom ever thought of going to college (Daddy was a 10th-grade dropout, Momma a high school graduate), made it possible for me to attend the University of Tennessee in 1982.

I began studying to be a band director. I spent two years focusing on the appropriate music classes, and only took the general education courses I absolutely had to take. My record of these early forays into courses other than those I believed would be relevant to the job I wanted is, let's just say, a tad askew. I took an introductory math course over the summer before my

first quarter. I remember begging the professor for a D+, thinking at the time that I would be done with math and able to move on to more music classes. I did buckle down and study for a psychology exam. In the bedroom I shared with my older brother (I was a commuter student because we could not afford for me to live on campus), I sat at the desk my parents bought us and studied literally all night. I failed the test, but I think I barely passed the class (I am not sure). Then there was the Introduction to Religious Traditions course that I took from a Buddhist scholar. I know I failed that one. However, it helped me to understand irony, because I would later transfer to a small, southern Baptist college and graduate as a religious studies major.

I decided to attend this Baptist college after receiving a "call to preach," which was the way my Appalachian people described what I would learn later others referred to as a call to ministry or a vocational calling. At the time, the University of Tennessee did not offer Bible courses. I figured (at the strong encouragement of others) that I needed to go somewhere that taught the Bible. After all, I would be preaching from it, and a Baptist college would help me along that path. At Carson-Newman College, a liberal arts Baptist college, I went through a period of ardent fundamentalism. Try as I might, however, the fundamentalism didn't stick.

Once freed from the bonds of my self-incurred religious tutelage, I spent the next seven years at a Southern Baptist seminary. Why? Because the professors who had the biggest impact on me in college were alumni, and I wanted to be like them. If someone mentioned going somewhere that was not Southern Baptist or mentioned things like "study abroad," I don't recall. All I knew was Southern Baptist. As I think back, I now know that this education taught me first about the possibility of being both rooted and open, even if such a thing was at odds with the overarching views of the leaders of the institutions at which I was enrolled.

But my educational journey was not yet at its end. I believe that I made my way to philosophy because one of the very last courses I took at the small, Baptist college was "Philosophy of Religion." That turned out to be the course that put the philosophy bug in me. Throughout my degrees at seminary, I studied philosophy the most, and at the end of my time there I applied for the Ph.D. program at the University of Oregon, another public university like the one where I had begun my education.

One reason for going to the University of Oregon was because I thought it would open doors for me elsewhere, especially a return home to rural East Tennessee. If not Tennessee, I had always hoped at least to return to the South or Appalachia and teach. That was not meant to be. I got a tenure-track job at an Evangelical Lutheran Church of America university in

Tacoma, Washington. I knew what Lutherans were but had no experience with Lutheran higher education. At this university, I honed my craft of teaching general education classes filled with students who had zero background in philosophy, many of whom were first-generation and first-time college students like me. I saw myself in many of them and vowed to become the kind of teacher that had first inspired and supported my intellectual journey.

Over time, I watched the humanities lose their hold on the identity of the university. Yet, instead of retreating, digging in, and dying in the ditch dug by Erasmus, I worked with others (domestic and international) to build programs and classes that required me to redraw territorial lines and make philosophy more practically relevant to students' lives and aspirations.[1]

And then the pandemic happened.

Like others, I made the online turn. I didn't have the same difficulty as many. Several years before, I had volunteered to teach an online philosophy course. "That can't be done," most philosophy colleagues would say. "Philosophy is best done live and in person," others would claim. "Let me try," I always replied. I was encouraged to develop a course, something that took me six months to put together before I rolled it out for a four-week summer class. I now know that doing that work was preparing me for what was to come. Online teaching during the pandemic also gave me the opportunity to revise my approach to how I could more effectively teach students on campus.

Something else, however, began to stir during this pandemic period. I was by now a convert to the importance of *access* in Lutheran higher education. I never lost my interest in and commitment to alternative ways of understanding the role of higher education for different people at different stages in their lives. I had kept Daddy and Momma close in my mind over the years as I tried to convince others of the importance of workforce education, or the importance of allowing students to ask about jobs and careers in and through our liberal arts courses. I started thinking I might be able to contribute to the work of higher education differently. I realized that, because of the pandemic, higher education could no longer rely on clean boundaries between on campus and online courses, and especially between liberal arts and professional schools. I knew, moreover, that if I were to consider a move from the classroom, the place and position would have to be special. Such a place would have to put *mission* above *market* (even though the latter would necessarily be a part of the discourse). This place would further need to embrace the centrality of the liberal arts as a bridge to workforce education and pre-professional programs, rather than viewing liberal arts as somehow inherently *just better*. I knew being in such a place would

bring challenges, just as I knew that such places like the kind I am describing often suffer from perpetual identity crises. Still, I believed that, if there were such a place, the opportunity to do something new and timely would be possible.

In the summer of 2022, after two decades of teaching at a Lutheran university, I accepted a position with a rural, Catholic university in central Montana. The mission of the university is "Liberal education for living and making a living." This means I am now becoming more familiar with Catholic Social Teaching and the Catholic intellectual tradition, as well as the Sisters of Providence who originally founded the university. In addition, I have been given the opportunity to think about new work that carries out the mission of the Sisters and continues to meet the needs of the community.

I am, however, the Dean of the School of Liberal Arts and Sciences. That, among other things, means the work we do, in terms of workforce development, must be rooted in liberal arts education. Why? Simply put, because our mission is not solely "making a living," it is equally and I would say foundationally "liberal education *for* living."

To illustrate this challenge and opportunity, let me recall a conversation at a workforce development forum. In the general discussion, a director of human resources at an industrial manufacturing and welding company raised his hand. He said, "I want welders who think." My first response, admittedly, was to remind people of Marco Rubio's claim in the 2016 presidential debates that "[w]e need more welders and less philosophers."[2] But then I decided to let Rubio's comment go, and instead I asked the director how *he* talked to his employees about this need to have welders who think. He answered, "I want our welders to have emotional intelligence"—which nearly astonished me.

I say "nearly" because I know deep down that there is a difference between being a welder and being a *good* welder. I also know that, at the University of Providence, asking the question, "What *kind* of student do we want to send into the world?" is at the center of what we do. That is one of the main reasons I decided to take this position. Still, this encounter made me pause.

I struggle to find my voice as a Dean of Liberal Arts and Sciences who believes strongly in workforce education. The two should not be seen as mutually exclusive. It's just not that common, however, to approach the liberal arts and workforce education together. At my university, the two must go together, because we are called to meet the needs of the community, and those needs are many. Maybe what I need to do is to return to Rubio's comment from a new angle. Why do we need, not "more welders and less

philosophers," but welders who can philosophize and philosophers who can weld? What would that do for our society, and how do we get from *here* to *there*?[3]

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[1] See on Erasmus the entry in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/erasmus/.

[2] See Marco Rubio, "We Need More Welders and Less Philosophers," *Washington Examiner*, November 10, 2015, https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/weekly-standard/rubio-we-need-more-welders-and-less-philosophers.

[3] I thank *Zeal* for the opportunity to contribute to this discussion. I especially thank Bernard Prusak and Margarita Rose for their extraordinary insight and suggestions that made this essay much better.