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Reflections on: “The Life of the Mind”
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“The life of the mind” -- now as a Professor of literature, a lover of language, and a student of postmodernism you couldn’t ask for a richer moment than occurred yesterday, when President Rosenberg was asked to define and resisted defining what it is indeed that he means by: “The Life of the Mind” -- a President resisting a definitive answer, actually launching us into the murky waters of postmodern indeterminacy? I smiled to myself as my colleagues, including me, collectively let out an incredulous: “What? No definition? How can he invoke this concept without defining it?”

Upon reflection though, it seems to me that it is precisely indeterminacy, flexibility, nuance, actually empowering listeners to do their own defining that is the pinnacle of excellence in the expression of the mind’s life: the mind’s life that resides in the spaces, the interstices, those almost un-nameable places in-between concepts like Truth and truths, Reason and Knowledges, Certitude and Questioning -- the mind’s life that is what the revolutionary educator Paulo Freire describes as the humanistic impulse to question i.e. To be fully human is to ask why? To be-- in a sense--uncertain.

Proceeding from a place of “uncertainty” to my mind, in its **best** sense, means proceeding from a place of humility and a desire to know. *Engaging with the community*, for example, from a place of questioning, of respect, of indeterminacy, means that a university relationship with that community does not usher from condescension masking itself as salvational liberalism --the quintessential “civilizing mission” -- i.e. “the community is broken, poor, failing, and *we* are going to fix *you*, improve *you*, bring *our* resources to *you*” -- rather it means recognizing that the university has as much to learn from the community as the community from the university, especially regarding what *we* think we know and that about which we are often most definitive.

Proceeding from a place of indeterminacy at an even deeper level means recognizing that the western philosophical model that splits the mind from the body, Descartes notwithstanding, is itself just ONE philosophical perspective; and in fact, especially in Miami, we exist not just at the gateway of diversity in terms of culture, language, ecology, but also *philosophy*. At its very simplified level: ***the life of mind is the life of the body and the life of the body the life of the mind*** – which brings me quickly to the issue of materiality.

Bodies always signify materiality to me: Is there a place within the discourse of *enhancing research initiatives* to:

1. actually create an academic environment that materially measures or accounts for, for e.g. the incumbencies of single-parenting, parenting period -- parental responsibilities

often temporally simultaneous with tenure-earning. When might we honestly address hidden structural inequities built into the institution around gender, race, sexual orientation? For instance, just yesterday at the faculty convocation, my colleague pointed out to me that almost ten years ago she raised to those in positions of power, the issue of the absence of childcare available during evening lectures, seminars, etc -- her query *remains* unaddressed; in the interest of efficiency we have moved to the five day teaching model, department meetings held between 3:30 and 5:30 -- except that this is the time that secondary schools end -- I was just *this week*, in conversation with a tenure earning colleague because she has no one to pick up her two children, cannot afford aftercare and yet is concerned about missing dept. meetings, especially in this pivotal year!! The life of the mind is unquestioningly the life of the body.

2. develop a mind/body discourse which truly engages and doesn't just pay lip service to economic realities especially in the humanities of a radically diminishing book industry, understaffing at university presses/journals, the fact that it might take humanities faculty six months to an entire year to get a response from a major peer-reviewed journal, or university press. If things are tight all around in terms of economic strictures, the humanities you can be sure is usually the first cut, most underserved. *

Even as I believe we MUST develop a viable mind/body discourse that attends to the material concerns of faculty, staff and students, that discourse should not be, and cannot be framed in the language of efficiency -- a delicate balance to straddle for sure.

So finally, as I listened to President Rosenberg speak about the role of the university as we "hit the ground running," I could not help but channel W.E.B. Du Bois, the foremost African American intellectual, activist, dreamer, archivist of memory, champion of hope of the C20th. His paradigm-shifting work, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) is a book that I believe *no college student* should graduate without having read. In his chapter titled "*On the Wings of Atalanta*," Du Bois invokes the Greek myth of *Atalanta* as a metaphor, a warning to the then fledgling Atlanta University that she not get sidetracked by the peculiar and urgent demands of the immediate moment, but remain true to the ideals upon which she was founded. His words more than one hundred years ago remain as true today as they were then.

We would do well to remember that this is a race barely two generations out of enslavement -- emancipated and *still suffering* under the hard yoke of Jim Crow segregation -- and the easiest path, the most practical path *seemed* to be to train black students to be agrarian workers, to get the quickest, most utilitarian education possible, so that they could enter the workforce asap and earn a decent living. Du Bois in his idealism and prescience says ostensibly: NO -- do not be fooled like the swift-running winged *Atalanta* was by golden apples; do not lose sight of the finish line by becoming distracted by what he called, "the Gospel of money" and the "Mammonism" of American consumption; it seems apt to recall here my colleague Professor Breslin's admonition to

us all yesterday that: “creativity cannot be subordinated to efficiency”-- so in my concluding remarks, I’d like to end with Du Bois and his wisdom:

“The function of the university is not simply to teach breadwinning, or to furnish teachers for the public school or to be the centre of a polite society; it is, above all, to be the organ of that fine adjustment between real life and the growing knowledge of life...nothing new, no timesaving devices – simply old time-glorified methods of delving for Truth and searching out the hidden beauties of life and learning the good of the living. Teach thinkers how to think – a needed knowledge in a day of loose and careless logic...The riddle of existence is the college curriculum that was laid before the Pharaohs that was taught in the groves by Plato, that formed the trivium and quadrivium and is today laid before the freedmen’s sons by Atlanta university and [here a hundred years later at FIU] – and this course of study will not change, its methods will grow more deft and effectual, its content richer by toil of scholar and sight of seer, but the true college will ever have one goal, - not to earn meat, but to know the end and the aim of life which meat nourishes... (58-9).

Now *this* I would humbly submit is something akin to the work of the mind’s life!!

** In my nervousness I forgot to say how very proud I am of my English department colleagues: Kathleen McCormack (Research); Phil Marcus (Teaching); and Rick Schwartz (Mentoring) who all received much deserved faculty recognition awards. I would also add that despite huge budget cuts it would be disingenuous not to recognize the College of Arts and Sciences real attempts to support the English department in rectifying its huge teaching/research shortfall through supporting key strategic hiring in the past four years. Such intra-university support though, does not negate the major crisis in the humanities regarding bread and butter issues like understaffing, journals shutting down, university presses working on a shoestring etc.