

## 'Why am I here?'

—Admiral James Stockdale, Oct. 13, 1992

ADM. JAMES STOCKDALE UNDERWENT AND ACCOMPLISHED a great deal in his life, but he lives on in popular memory merely as the one who, as Ross Perot's running mate in 1992, unintentionally introduced the phrase "Who am I? Why am I here?" into the cultural lexicon. And though his doddering debate performance is his unfortunate legacy to pop culture, the question "Why am I here?" is the best question there is, and as such cannot be asked too much.

We could have an interesting theological discussion sometime about why we, as individuals and as a species, are "here," that is, on Earth. But we also need to ask — let's give it a proper philosophical label — Stockdale's Problem of society's institutions. As a university, why are we here?

Over recent decades, there's no question that virtually all universities have settled into a pattern of self-serving institutionalism, the older and larger, the more settled. Many assumed the role of a cog in a higher-ed industry, head down and preoccupied with tending to its own machinery of dissertations, publication credits, symposia, and grants.

Wisemen down the ages have warned against letting the quest for knowledge, noble on its face, become a trivial pursuit, or worse, a means for putting others down. We've all seen examples in the modern academy of those who have fallen into the trap,

the worship of words, the more obscure their meanings the better for sounding superior, the scholars of whom you want to ask, "The world is on fire, and you're studying *what?*"

Call me Debbie Downer, but it seems increasingly clear that our "holiday from history" is over in a big way. There's a burgeoning sense of urgency over the condition of our planet and future of our species and a social revolution is emerging in response. Its central organizing principle is shaping up to be *sustainability*. Jim KUNETKA, a friend in the Development Office and an author, recently opined to me that the biggest problems in the world boil down to two things: population and energy. Works for me.

But there are other clouds moving in quickly too, either subsets of those or significant complications to them. Progress notwithstanding, this big blue marble is still wrought with an explosive, self-fueling mix of racism, sexism, ultranationalism, militarism, materialism, moral laxity of myriad forms, religious fanaticism, governmental corruption, corporate and individual greed, extreme poverty, and ecological degradation. We're overdue for a pandemic. We're under-prepared for natural disasters. You get the point. I don't want to seem hysterical here, but the fact remains that a lot of people smarter than me are reading the tea leaves and coming to the conclusion that our civilization frankly is running out of time.

There is work to be done on these problems by higher education on a scale that dwarfs the enlistment of the academy in the cause of the Cold War, an enlistment that was transformational. Interestingly, we're laboring under the same ultimate threat as we were then: annihilation. The difference is that this potential

annihilation is largely one of our own making. Instead of going out with a flash and a mushroom cloud, we're now facing down a more prolonged but no less serious end to our way of life, one of crazy weather patterns, rising oceans, resource wars, terrorism, and, just for old time's sake, a nuke or two. (TV's Charlie Gibson set up one of his presidential debate questions by saying, "The best nuclear experts in the world say there's a 30 percent chance in the next 10 years [of a nuclear attack on an American city]. Some estimates are higher: Graham Allison at Harvard says it's over 50 percent." Did anybody else hear that?!)

There's a moral obligation for every person of mental means to bend her energies toward solving the problems of our age. To use the University, or abuse the tenure system, as a place to camp out is indefensible. The University can coast on its prestige, or, all along with all of its peers, it can be a life raft that will carry us to a sustainable future. It's time for the University, all universities, to unleash the intellectual firepower of academia on the planet's problems like never before. If moral obligation isn't enough, then they should do it out of self preservation.

The Commission of 125 wrote, in Recommendation 14 of its report: "The University should serve Texas by marshaling its expertise, programs, and people to address major issues confronting society at large. The culture of the institution should convey to

students, as well as to faculty and staff members, that a commitment to service is intrinsic to a University of Texas education."

In 1953, Chancellor Logan Wilson put it this way: "We want this University to be truly of the first class, not for the sake of mere emulation or rivalry, but for more basic reasons. The potentialities of a great university as an instrument for the common good are almost limitless."

The University has always served a valuable vocational function, training students to make a living in a variety of fields. But it no longer seems acceptable for the University simply to train students to pull the levers and push the buttons of a machine that's broken. If there are disciplines that no longer serve the public good beyond employing people, then logic would suggest that the resources and energies required to sustain them should be transitioned quickly into fields that will redound to our survival.

While the world situation seems urgent, I'm not suggesting that every single faculty member drop what they're doing and switch to developing drought-resistant crops or fuel cells, nor that all students should switch majors accordingly (though it wouldn't hurt for a few in each category to do so). Art, for example, is among the many disciplines that, while seemingly nonessential in emergency situations, nevertheless constitute the intangibles that make life worth living. Remember the string quartet that played on deck as the *Titanic* sank? Let's hope the analogy does not have a similar ending, but it does illustrate how fundamental art and beauty, and to an extent diversion, are to the human experience. They call them the *humanities* for a reason.

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Rather, what it seems we should be on guard against is overspecialization, frivolous scholarship, and obscurity of expression.

Citing examples of frivolous or overly specialized scholarship is dicey, because what to me might seem impossibly narrow, to someone else might be the missing link in a longer chain of hugely important knowledge. But I have found three dissertations (not by UT scholars) that simply by their titles seem to tell a story of misdirected energy:

- *The Publishing History of Aubrey Beardsley's Compositions for Oscar Wilde's Salomé* "Abstract: This study claims that scholars need to examine all 27 English illustrated editions of Wilde's and Beardsley's *Salomé* to understand whether Beardsley's compositions do, or do not, illustrate Wilde's words."

- *A Study of Job Satisfaction Among Directors of Classified Personnel in Merit (Civil Service) Systems in California Public School Districts, County Offices of Education, and Community College Districts*, and

- *Improved Forecast Accuracy in Airline Revenue Management by Unconstraining Demand Estimates from Censored Data*.

Happily, there seems to be a backlash or a natural correction to the overspecialization that lured higher ed away from optimal usefulness in the latter part of the last century. This new swing back toward generalization seems to have animated the Commission of 125's recommendation of a new core curriculum and the ensuing creation of the dean of Undergraduate Studies. The commission wanted a university education to be more than the taking of classes picked from "a vast a la carte menu."

More and more press releases that ping into my in-box are announcing new centers that are interdisciplinary and cooperative, like the new Strauss Center for International Security and Law, which boasts faculty participants from numerous departments across campus. Its promotional literature says, "The Center transcends traditional academic stovepipes; promotes broad and respectful debate; and prepares faculty and students to become leaders in a complex global environment."

I'm also reminded of the creation of the Section of *Integrative Biology* not so long ago. And I think of Rick Cherwitz in the College of Communication, who is working to increase the connection between graduate students and the real world with his Intellectual Entrepreneurship program.

It's clear that as an institution, we're moving in the right direction. The only question now is whether we and others like us are moving fast enough.

The ultimate sin would be to have the intellectual tools to solve these problems and yet content ourselves with tending the machinery of industrial higher education, collecting our paychecks, and not asking "Why am I here?" —*Avrel Seale*