

1981 Distinguished Teacher of the Year

Don E. Marietta, Jr., Ph.D.
Professor of Philosophy
College of Humanities

The University as a Real World

President Creech, Vice President Michels, honored guests, colleagues in teaching and learning, I greatly appreciate the honor given me today, especially because it comes from student leaders and was initiated by people with whom I share the classroom week after week. When I consider the men and women seated behind me, I am humble, because I know of the fine teaching, important research and significant public service of my fellow faculty members. I believe the honoring of a distinguished teacher is an act of appreciation for what all of us are doing, and I want my colleagues to feel that this is our honor, a recognition and giving of thanks to this faculty and to this University.

I would like to share with you my beliefs about universities, especially beliefs about the university as a real world.

My first career was outside of academia, in what academics sometimes call "the real world." I never thought of the world in which I worked in that way. To call it real would have implied that some other world was unreal. Some things were more urgent, more demanding, more threatening, more rewarding, more highly valued or in some other way more significant than others, but all work and all worlds, including academia, seemed real to me.

Then I heard university professors speak of "the real world" outside the university and wondered what they meant. In my rather positivistic philosophy, to exist was to be real, so it seemed obvious that these professors were making some sort of value judgment about the university.

The first reference to this real world and to the implied lack of reality in the university were related to money, to the large salaries and profits of business people and non-academic professionals. This bothered me, because I had assumed that most university professors would be committed to a more inclusive standard of values, with creativity and beauty and knowledge and personal integrity ranking higher than money. My experience with people whose lives were oriented primarily toward money had revealed the incompleteness, the shallowness and, indeed, the futility of money as a

primary value. Plato lumped together as artisans all of the people whose lives were limited to the economic sphere. As elitist as Plato was, I could see that there was something to his low ranking of purely economic activity. The modern academy, as Plato's academy, places the life of the mind and spirit above the realm of money. Indeed the academy cannot take as its paradigm of value a segment of life in which success is often the fruit of manipulation of people, an extreme narrowness of will and vision, and fortuitous circumstances. It cannot look for a model in a mode of life which often cultivates shallowness and makes a virtue of ignorance. It is the task of the University to educate leaders for the economic realm who can bring into that sector of our common life the high humanistic values of which the university is the custodian. I could not, therefore, see the reference to the "real world" as expressions of sober academic judgment, but rather as expressions of frustration and resentment from professors whose salaries did not reflect their years of study and hours of creative labor.

Perhaps there is more, however, to the feeling that the university is unreal. Sometimes I sense the feeling inside and outside the university that academics are protected from hardship, from risk, from the need for decision and action. There is an irony in this. Professors do not feel very secure, which is probably why they often envy other professionals who make more money. Students do not feel protected. Yet we hear talk of an ivory tower.

In the past there was the image of the university as a place where students could spend four years exempt from economic responsibility, tutored and entertained by an other-worldly class of the genteel poor, the professors. This hardly describes the student of today, and it seldom was true of all students. Wage earning aside, is the university a place of protection? Is it a place where life is set on a shelf for a period of preparation for life? The student is hardly protected intellectually. Beliefs and values, even life goals, are severely challenged when the university is doing its job. Students are under extreme pressure, and the chance of failure is real. If this is not so, the university is not doing its duty, is not being a university. In an important sense the university is a place of preparation, but life goes on, a tough and challenging life. Decisions are made and lives are changed. There is preparation for richer and deeper life, more useful and rewarding life; but the time of preparation is a time of living, and the way this part of life is lived will affect the way the rest of life is lived.

What are the professors who preside over this time of challenge and growth? Are they out of the world, set apart from life, like highly specialized robots? Apparently there are times when we feel so. Why? What makes us feel set apart from the real world?

The life of a university professor or student does make possible a partial detachment. Some kinds of detachment are useful, even necessary, for doing certain tasks well, but

the university is not unique in that regard. The detachment which is not purely instrumental and temporary, but which becomes a way of life, is not demanded by the university, nor does it serve the university. It is the sort of retreat from life which can be found in places other than the university. It is a radical one-sidedness in which a person identifies with only part of life. It is an isolation from life which often leads to an isolation from self. The university may facilitate this retreat, but it does not cause it. Is this one-sidedness the nature of university professors? It is not the case generally, nor does it need ever be the case, unless some psychological state drives a person into being less than a complete person. David Hume, speaking of philosophers, said, "Be a philosopher, but first of all be a man." This could be said to all academics. "Be a scholar, but first of all be a human being." Being an authority on ancient culture need not take a person out of this century. The researcher of the most minute physical phenomena need not ignore the smell of growing plants or the feel of earth beneath the feet. Arcane disciplines and abstract specialties need not make us less than full participants in the drama of human life. The university expects us to play a role in the broader society in which we are citizens. Perhaps the notion of what counts as service to the community has been limited. The services some of us can render have not been widely recognized, but every one of us can serve, even if first we must teach the community to realize its need.

There seems to be something more, however, to the complaint that we are in an unreal world. Often we feel powerless, unable to make the sort of difference in the world we want to make. Actually, we professors and students are more influential than most of our fellow citizens, but we feel more impotent because we care more. We have a clearer vision of what society can be, and this makes us more frustrated than most of our neighbors. Perhaps this is part of the price we must pay. Our influence may always seem too small, the effect of our efforts too late in coming. Let us not forget, however, that we do have influence. That real world we speak of needs us, and it looks to us for help. There are those people, of course, who will not admit their need of academia. They boast of being the movers and shakers, fancying themselves at the only scene of action. They are like the head of the hammer, which does not know that the handle gives it most of its power. We cannot stop them from building their egos at our expense, and it is not easy to bear the scorn of a fool; but let us remember who we are and what we do.

We do not need to see the university as an unreal world or belittle it by comparison with some "real" world out there. There is only one world, all of it real. Our responsibility is to be real in the world. When we are real in the world, we will see that our part of the world is real. This will not make our lives easier or remove our frustrations, but it will enable us to feel our vitality and our power.