Higher Ed Is Dead / Long Live Higher Ed
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Ask yourself:

Could this meeting be a zoom?
Could this zoom be a phone call?
Could this phone call be an email?
Could this email be a text?
Could this text be unsent?

Could we in silence retreat to the
forest?
Could we, by game trails &
forgotten paths, vanish into the
trees?

~ Louis Evans

- **Introduction**

The first panicky moment I had at the outset of the pandemic wasn't about mortality or illness or market crashes supermarket runs. It was about channels of communication – or, rather, about the fact that there are entirely too many of them. I was in a Zoom meeting (if not my first Zoom meeting, then close to it) with senators, administrators, and some other faculty and staff, discussing whether, when, and for how long to close campus. Meanwhile, I could hear the emails continue to trickle in, many from students (it was the end of the quarter); and the Facebook messages from friends at other universities ("Have you closed yet? They're actually saying here that we might stay open!"); and the texts (at one point from someone in the Zoom meeting with me: it was early days yet, and we hadn't discovered that Zoom itself has a private messaging function.) I imagined what the coming month – the coming term? year? more? – would be like with the University and the world online. All online, all the time. Nothing but Zoom and Canvas and emails and texts and Facebook and Twitter and Banner and Activity Insight.

That's when the mild panic set in. But it wasn't about the logistical challenge of managing all these digital streams per se, impossible though that challenge may be. Rather, what triggered the premonition of panic was what this first instance of the challenge revealed. For some time now, university faculty (and many, many others) have been compelled to operate within two economies at the same time, economies that are ultimately irreconcilable: On the one hand, there is a perceived economy of *scarcity,* i.e., the economy that governs also the world beyond the campus's borders, that assumes all things, knowledge included, are or can be made into commodities, then seeks to insure that demand exceeds supply, so that the commodity remains profitable. The watchwords of this economy are "productivity" and "efficiency." And, on the other hand, is a perceived economy of *abundance,* specifically an abundance of *time:* my time, your time, our students' time. Not the time it takes to do the actual teaching and learning, the actual work we've come here to do, but rather the time that it takes to learn the new course management system, the new form of presentation software, the new medium for group discussion; the time it takes to record, evaluate, and assess the results of all this, to write the report that justifies it, to craft the proposal for funding to support the next iteration of it, to conduct the search for yet another layer of managers to supervise it; and, above all, all the time spent Zooming and calling and emailing and texting that the forgoing requires.

It is simply assumed that you and I and our students have time enough not only to teach and to learn but also the limitless abundance of time needed to keep the illusion of productivity and efficiency afloat. The economy of scarcity could hardly be profitable otherwise.

That this illusion is in fact delusional – neither true nor sustainable nor desirable that it be either has been made, I believe, abundantly clear these past 15 months. Our own university, and the others that have weathered the ordeal of the pandemic intact, even thriving, didn't do so by virtue of visionary leadership, or managerial foresight, or best practices, or any of the tactics and strategies meant to promote productivity and efficiency. We came out alright because, confronted with a present no educational leader, manager, or technocrat had foretold, the people on the ground – that is, the teachers, students, and staff charged with making education *happen,* in real time, catastrophe or no – found that they had the ingenuity, the compassionate esprit de corps, and, for once, ironically, the permission to make it happen.

I don't look forward to another year mostly locked in my house, needing to be tested to come to campus, and placed a minimum of 6 feet away from the others who venture to join me there. But I look less forward still to a return to the campus I remember having left. That campus seemed to believe that its future resided more in the ingenuity of its architectural, landscape, and branding designers than in the ingenuity of its teachers. That campus appeared ready to lavish resources on creating community amongst undergraduates and alums while doing all it could to keep faculty siloed and supervised. That campus seemed determined to put a sclerotic, multi-tiered approval process between any desire to try something new and the actual attempt to do it. I don't look forward to returning to that campus at all.

For one thing, that campus likely won't survive the next ordeal. Unlike the pandemic, the coming ordeal is predictable, in fact has been predicted, and there won't be a vaccine. It's what has come to be called "the enrollment cliff," i.e., the demographic fact that there are, and for the foreseeable future will continue to be, fewer graduating high

school seniors than there are seats in colleges to fill. For some months before the pandemic, the enrollment cliff was all that some on campus could talk about. Then the pandemic came along, and elbowed it from the center of those conversational circles. But it's still there on the horizon, and it isn't going away.

So while I shouldn't like to relive 2020-1, I should hope that we keep alive some of its lessons. Here is a miscellany of such that I think worth remembering, some of which come from rather farther afield than campus but all of which aim to recognize and preserve the virtues we saw on display here this past academic year-and-a-half.

- **Being the change that you want to see in the world requires, y'know, admitting the possibility of change.**

If you'd have said in March of 2019, or, really, at any time before the pandemic had arrived: "Let's put every class online, starting next quarter," you'd have been branded clueless, malevolent, or insane. Because, of course, that would be impossible, and there are (or would have been) no end to the arguments can be adduced to prove the point. And yet, in March of 2020, we did exactly that. Then we figured out how to redistribute classroom space such that the classes that would be held at least part of the time on campus in fall could accommodate rules of social distancing. Along the way, we adapted structures tenure and promotion, acquired new student housing, and even (no mean feat) revised final exam and other final requirements to enable students to take part in history.

Which is to say: Change is possible -- but only if we admit that, well, change is possible.

- **Less is more.**

To make change not only possible but actual, it helps to perform what Locke called

"underlaboring," i.e., to clear the field of weeds, stumps, and other obstructions to planting and new growth.

So let's cut the administrative burden on faculty in half. Make annual reports biannual, biweekly meetings monthly. Or cut them from two hours to one. Or ask: can the meeting be a zoom be a phone call be an email be a text. And if anybody balks, cut it in half again. That'll teach 'em.

I don't make this suggestion simply in the interest of requiring less work. (Although, you know what? That'd be a perfectly defensible goal. Try me.) I make it because none of these activities, typically, serve the cause of pedagogical creativity, and as such they steal valuable time from the activities that do. So if we're going to meet, let it be to make something together. If we're going to report, let the report be an element in a process of invention. Otherwise, cut the administrivia to the bone.

- **Make room to make it new.**

Speaking of pedagogical creativity: The notion that every curriculum and every course should be reduced to a set of teleological goals (or even that they *can* be*)* is – I was going to say "manifestly absurd," but I'll be less tendentious and instead say *controversial.* Aristotle may have thought so, but Plato didn't, and so on and so forth throughout the history of people who've thought about these things.

So can't we – shouldn't we: in the interest of our students – at least make room for both approaches? Instead of 6, 8, 10 goals to 10-week course, let it be 3, 2, 1, thus leaving the teacher – an artist and a craftsperson – room to invent, design, create atelically, for its own sake: an end in itself. I've yet to see the bullet-pointed list of course or curricular goals that has any genuine *heuristic* value, even if (like the rules of the sonnet, the villanelle, or acrostic) they can serve as inventively useful constraints. But only up to a point.

The same principle ought to be applied to the undergraduate curriculum as a whole. Instead of insisting that every student navigate a four-dimensional maze of general educational, major, secondary major, and minor requirements, let's set aside, oh, let's say 100 of the currently required 228 quarter hours to take part in the College of the New, an ongoing experiment in teaching and learning that observes no permanent curricular structure, no departmental affiliations, no series or ranks, no privileging of lecture hall, seminar room, or lab: that is, a college one whose only aim is to invent what comes *next.* A member of faculty here on campus, several years deceased, Dr. Vincent Harding, was fond of quoting a poem he had heard on the radio: "I am a citizen of a country that does not yet exist." Let us create an educational parallel: *I am a student and teacher at a university that does not yet exist.*