



# Reclaiming the Soul of the University

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**W**HAT can a Protestant university learn from a pope? For that matter, is it possible that all of our universities, the American academy, both religious and secular, might have something to learn from that great Christian philosopher, poet, and leader of the people, Pope John Paul II? Preposterous? Far too much intrusion of religion into the halls of higher learning where secular freedom must reign? Let's think about this.

These reflections emerge out of two converging streams of thinking I've been doing lately. First, with so many others across the world, I have been thinking about how the late pontiff has influenced me. Perhaps Pope Benedict XVI will have much to teach me as well, but the "humble giant," as New York's Cardinal Edward Egan called John Paul II, has helped to shape my understanding of what my university, Seattle Pacific University, ought to look like. Strange as this may sound to some, I think this great pope might have something to say as well about what all of our universities might look like.



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Second, I sense the American public grows restive about what George Marsden calls the "soul of the American university." Almost every day we hear another scandalous report coming out of the halls of academe: from plagiarism to silly political correctness to the use of sex and alcohol for athletic recruiting. This media attention tells me that people are eager to know where the university stands: Are there deeper, more healthy operative values, a place deep down where a more worthy purpose is defined; can we articulate a mission for the university that engages our world with a vision of hope and goodness?

Just as we have appropriately scrutinized and scolded American business for the scandal of values exposed to

the light over the last few years — the greed, self-interest, dishonesty, and lack of integrity — so, too, I believe the American university must step under the white-hot spotlight of accountability about core values and driving purpose.

As universities, we have been entrusted with a worthy mission: the discovery of new knowledge, the preservation of tradition, and the shaping of culture. We are asked to pass on the secrets of the tribe to the next generation, and we are given the awesome task of helping to shape a worldview and the character of tomorrow's leaders. Or at least that has been our mission for centuries.

But when I read some professor's claim that the victims of 9/11 were really perpetrators, making the absurd connection to Nazi tyranny, and then I hear some among my colleagues jump to defend his academic freedom, I fear we have lost track of that deeper, driving purpose. Just a few weeks ago, a foundation in Oregon decided no longer to fund a university, because, in the eyes of the foundation, the university had abandoned the mission of building character.

The stories seem to proliferate: "Wait until you hear the latest coming out of the grand halls of the ivory towers," our reporters announce with a snicker. And I am embarrassed and disturbed for my beloved profession.

In his big new novel, *I Am Charlotte Simmons*, Tom Wolfe tries to put his finger on the pulse of the university campus these days, and the picture is not a pretty one. In Wolfe's view, what we find is a community without a soul. *New York Times* columnist David Brooks says that Wolfe has captured a world, the contemporary university, where character formation is no longer a legitimate purpose of the university. This is "a world of unprecedented ambiguity," says Brooks, "where it's not clear if you're going out with the person you're having sex with, where it's not clear if anything can be said to be absolutely true."

And so I ask, might Pope John Paul II contribute some fresh thinking about this state of affairs? Of course, we

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all have things about which we would like to argue with the pope. To be sure, I am decidedly and passionately Protestant, and as such have no authority to say anything about a pope. And then, too, I realize that the leaders of our Catholic institutions have struggled mightily with the pope's commitment to structural control, and I sympathize with those concerns.

But encountering this pope is like walking into a huge room full of books and images. From the extraordinary pictures of his grand gestures and actions, and the seemingly endless writings, there is so much to learn, and perhaps, even while we maintain our disagreements, we can pick and choose something of great value for the noble enterprise we call the American university.

Consider this statement by the pope: "*the world [is] tired of ideology [and] is opening itself to the truth. The time has come when the splendor of this truth has begun anew to illuminate the darkness of human existence.*"

Might it be possible that the pursuit of truth could become once again the driving purpose at the heart of the university? The pope's statement also implies that such a passion releases us from the tyranny of ideological bias and conflict. Or that such truth, when discovered, or even when we step close to its edges, is splendid, full of splendor, full of light. And then we get the sense from this pope that there is such joy in this discovery and even in the pursuit.

Of course, the pope demonstrated with his life that the discovery and pursuit of truth were not ends in themselves. To hold to ourselves what is true and beautiful is to squander its value. Rather, we must shine what we find into the darkness of seemingly intractable problems that plague our world. That such light might contribute to peace and reconciliation, healing and wholeness — herein lies the real motivation for our work as universities. That such light might teach us better to root out the causes of poverty, the profound disparity of economic opportunity, the curse of racism and ethnic dividedness — these are the things that drive our venture of higher learning.

As we live in this hope — called naïve in our time — we are drawn, better yet, we are called, to make a difference for good, and for truth, for splendor, in our communities and in our world.

Doesn't the pope know that any notion of the truth is problematic in our time? Whose truth is he talking about? One person's truth might seem to another merely ideology — how in the world can we distinguish between the two? And isn't this exuberant hope defied by the realities of our world?

Doesn't he know that we have had to abandon character formation as a purpose because we cannot agree on a moral framework from which to guide our students?

Things have grown too complex to be talking about something so merely poetic as this "splendor of truth." And isn't it quite presumptuous to think that any university might have the ability to shine a light like that to illuminate the horrifying "darkness of human existence"?

I think what we witnessed over the past month or so, with millions of people gathering around the pope's passing, is not just respect and love for this great leader, *but a yearning and a hunger for something like this splendid truth, for something like this release from ideology, the hardheaded but profoundly hopeful thinking the pope spoke into our lives for a quarter of a century.*

George Weigel, the author of *Witness to Hope*, a marvelous biography of the pope, said in *The Wall Street Journal* after the pope's death that Pope John Paul II continued to affirm, all through his life, the "inviolable mystery of the human person." At the core of his teaching was this deep, unshakable conviction that all human life has dignity. Out of this conviction, Weigel says, the pope kept calling for "vibrant public moral cultures capable of disciplining and directing the tremendous energies — economic, political, aesthetic, and, yes, sexual — set loose in free societies."

Could this be the place to begin to restore the soul of the university and our flagging credibility with the American public?

With a vision like this, our universities would come back off the margins, turn around the ridicule that seems to come our way daily, and step back into the role of leading our communities with a vision of hope. We need to envision again that our core business as a university has something to do with this dignity of the person and this marvelous splendor of truth and goodness and beauty, complex though that process is in our post-modern world.

We need to imagine that we are in the business to teach character and integrity and honesty and hard work. We need to imagine that our work takes place in a moral universe. We need to believe again that we can, perhaps better than any organization in our society, shape vibrant public and moral cultures that can discipline and direct the tremendous energies of our world.

Finally, and perhaps most of all, we need to imagine again that central to our purpose is to come alongside the next generation to provide for them a clear sense that their gifts come with responsibility and obligation, to empower them with confidence that they can and should make a difference for good. Perhaps Pope John Paul II could be a model for us as we seek to restore our students' trust in us, a trust that we will equip them, not just with the tools of competence, but as well with a vision for a better world, beyond ideology, full of splendor and hope.