What Harvard Has Taught Me

J. LORAND MATORY June 2, 2009

At the end of a successful comp for The Crimson, each new editor in my cohort was asked to name his or her politics for recording in a great book that no non-editor would ever be allowed to see. Amid a litany of “Democrat,” “Republican” and the occasional “democratic socialist,” my answer stood out for its confession of the shared reason that we were all together at Harvard and in the upper room of 14 Plympton Street: “intellectual elitism.” That moment of truth occasioned for me a clarity that I did not recover until I sat down to write this word of farewell to a community that, with all its contradictions, I love with the love of family.

July brings the end of my half a lifetime of residence and rootedness in Harvard Yard—first as an undergraduate (1978-82) and then as a faculty-member (1991-2009). Next I will become chair of the Department of African and African American Studies and professor of Cultural Anthropology at Duke University, where I have been given the resources to help build the world’s greatest department. Though I am happy to go there, I am sad to leave the ground where the sapling vines of my spirit have become trunks supporting the growth of others. What seeds will I carry with me?

As a Student
I learned that the most memorable part of a lecture class—in the absence of the experiential stories that reveal the humanity of the professor and the debates that recognize the students'—is the coffee, giant chocolate-chip cookies, and the inklings of doodles that the student brought with him or her into the lecture hall.

By the time I reached Harvard, I had learned how to sit relatively still for an hour and to reduce others' thoughts to halfway comprehensible scribbles. Part of the trick to remaining sane while sitting still for so long is to allow the mind to wander invisibly. At best, it wanders to a place where the lecturer's ideas are tested and challenged, which means that one has also missed ten minutes of the ongoing lecture. At worst, the mind simply counts the minutes until class is over. There is never a guarantee that all, or even most students, will, by the end of the term, be able to articulate most of the intellectual goals of the class. When I graduated, for instance, I couldn’t even have explained what anthropology is, and I was an anthropology concentrator. The test of the professor’s efficacy is less the amount of information memorized by the student than the degree to which the student is infected or seduced by the words, gaze, and dance of the professor, the degree to which the student too comes to embody the questions that the professor is asking and the passion to come up with answers of his or her own.

The greatest success is the student who pursues his or her own research. The student who does not turn trained precision of thought into a weapon against received wisdom might get an A for the elementary school lesson of sitting still. The student who learns the quickest route to a legitimizing degree and a six-figure salary gets an A for the lessons of vocational school. But the student who uses scholarship and words to resist the authoritarianism and the injustice of senescent power gets an A for the lessons of Harvard College. In the history of Harvard, many students and professors will mistake the socialist student activism of the 1930s, the African-American and anti-ROTC activism of the ‘70s, the South African divestment activism of the ‘80s, and the workers' rights activism of the ‘90s for rebellions against the university. In fact, they are the new fruits of knowledge fertilized by the old fallen leaves; they are the seeds of the persistent refinement of scholarship across the generations.

As a Harvard undergraduate, I learned that a good set of roommates—and by this standard, there is hardly a bad set—is central to collegiate intellectual growth. There could hardly be a better illustration than the wisdom of the Freshman Dean’s Office having assigned me to bunk in the penthouse of Grays middle entry with a tall, handsome, working-class and hilariously cynical white boy from Georgia. A lifelong hunter, he could hardly have seemed more different from me—a scion of the “Gold Coast” Afrostocracy of
Washington. We irritated each other with occasional lapses in the tidiness that we both prized, but our late nights were never long enough for us to finish turning over the last rock of elite W.A.S.P. naivete and insincerity, or the last LP from the other’s collection that we’d never heard before. Today, from Wall Street, he tutors me in a vocabulary of life wildly foreign to me, and I do the same, undoubtedly, for him. But in our dialogues we are also always learning to take a thoughtful distance from our daily habits of thought and conviction.

As a Professor

I learned about the ambivalent role of hierarchy in the production of authoritative knowledge. I re-entered Harvard well-trained in the virtues of intellectual elitism, but only gradually became aware of its contradictions.

Tenure at Harvard requires, above all else, copious publication. The peer-review process in scholarly journals and university presses subjects one’s work to harsh criticism by one’s intellectual rivals and demands punctilious caution in the handling of evidence and logic. The best way to guarantee success is to choose a specialty where mastering the entire literature is feasible and where one has few rivals. Such pursuit of expertise can generate finely tuned knowledge, but it can also generate territorialism and stifle debate. For example, another faculty resident in Leverett House in 1997-98 (when I lived there as a resident scholar) was a specialist in Near Eastern religions. His grand assertion one day that Islam and Judaism are the only two truly monotheistic religions prompted me mischievously to ask why the Hebrew god is sometimes called “Elohim,” a term ending with a plural marker. He told me to shut up, because he had been studying the topic for over a dozen years. That this fellow scholar did not receive tenure is a comfort to me. However, I cannot but recognize the ethos of which he is an unsophisticated manifestation. The cult of expertise—and the pride of being named the “top” expert, by virtue of being the expert at Harvard—sometimes makes us fear to question each other. Both faculty and administrators often make decisions that affect the state of knowledge and the functioning of the university, and I often feel that the explanation has not been made clear, that asking questions—particularly of the administration—is regarded as unfriendly. In fact, some in the current administration respond constructively to such queries, but that fact does not erase the historical ethos left by centuries of hierarchy and resistance to transparency. When they see a heartfelt challenge to the way things are currently done—as when I have complained about police conduct toward African Americans or about police undercover photographic surveillance of peaceful protesters on campus—many fellow scholars and administrators scurry away, in the fear of retribution, from a much-needed debate about whether things are as they should be.
In the cult of expertise, one is encouraged to say nothing outside one’s expertise and nothing that is threatening to power before one receives tenure. Unfortunately, such functional timidity often survives tenure.

A major effort that unites my specialist colleagues across disciplines is the periodic debate over the curriculum, which, each time results in a consensus that may last for a decade or more. We debate over which of our disciplines matter—and to what degree in today’s world of business, politics, warfare, and health concerns—with the intent to decide the mental shape of the next generation’s ruling class.

But the intent to make such a decision is profoundly undemocratic and perhaps excessively confident that the processes that designate us as experts also qualify us to decide what the next generation should know. We mime a process by which tomorrow’s ruling class will also make such undemocratic but “expertly-informed” decisions about the poor and working people of the planet. The Harvard scholars who populated the Kennedy and Johnson administrations during the Vietnam War provide ample evidence that our expertise can bear grievous results. One hopes that the Harvard experts now managing the economy from Washington will do a better job, their past contributions to the global economic crisis notwithstanding.

At Harvard, I have learned that universities are not neutral venues for the production of knowledge. Their architecture insinuates a framework that indeed penetrates the substance of knowledge. Lecture halls, for example, dictate the centrality of the expert and the silence of an audience whose members are invisible and inaudible. The audience would appear to have nothing to contribute to the professor’s knowledge or to its own. As a professor, I have learned always to turn my lectures into seminars, so that my students do not watch the clock and doodle as I did in college, or, in the contemporary alternative, e-mail and Facebook their friends about lunch.

Universities are often assumed to be a space separated from power, as a precondition of the genesis of objective knowledge. At Harvard, I have learned that, in fact, universities are funded by government, foundations, alumni, and other private donors who often thereby determine which forms of knowledge are useful and prestigious. Sometimes, unreasoned ethnic interests prevail, as when, in 2006, a top scholar was denied a job at Harvard on account of his non-specialist critique of Zionism.

Yet it is sometimes difficult to discern the intellectual logic, rules, or sectional interests that brought about such decisions by the deans. In fact, deans do not have the statutory right to
make such decisions, but they control the appointments procedure to a degree that faculty-members fear to oppose them. In department meetings, professors spend a lot of time guessing about how to satisfy the ego needs, idiosyncrasies, and disciplinary biases of the deans, who distribute the resources that make departments grow or wither. Lacking tenure, the career administrators themselves constantly trade rumors about who needs to be in the favor of whom in order to survive or get anything done.

Naïve scholar and teacher that I was when I entered Harvard a second time, I quickly received lessons in leadership that I hope will not be necessary to remember at Duke: When you take over a unit, fire or transfer anybody with power who does not owe it to you. Next, choose somebody with a high profile but tenuous backing to beat up on publicly. It cows everybody else into submission.

As a Child Growing Up and Leaving Home

At Harvard, I learned that time-honored reputation attracts a disproportionate number of the best scholars and the best students. But it does not automatically give rise to the liveliest dialogues among colleagues or the greatest global concern for fairness and justice. These desiderata require an additional collective effort, out of which the current University presidency was borne. However, the exodus of faculty-members of color that began during the Summers administration has actually accelerated this year. As observed even by departing professor and dean Lisa L. Martin, who is white, the current Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences does not appear to be committed to hiring or maintaining a diverse faculty. Moreover, it is unclear that Harvard has even thought about ways of making itself more hospitable to faculty with families. A vastly disproportionate number of Harvard professors appears to be unmarried, childless, divorced, or empty-nester. What limitations does this imbalance impose on the elite academy’s analysis of the world and instruction of its future leaders?

As I leave Harvard, I leave with the love of a child for his imperfect parent, with the knowledge that the parent’s virtues and imperfections are the foundations of my own. I love Harvard, will always love Harvard, and will fight—from near or far-- to make it a better place. And I thank you--my teachers, students, colleagues, and staff--for being the trellis of my growth and the flowering vines on my trellis.

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