

ACADEMIC CULTURE: A COMMUNITY OF PERSONAL QUESTS¹

Gemino H. Abad

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What is life in a university? I shall speak only for myself as I contemplate that life. In my letter to the former Secretary of the University, Prof. Martin V. Gregorio, seeking assistance to see me through our retirement processing, I asserted that “our University has treated me excellently well, perhaps more than I truly deserve.” Perhaps is only a little hedge; one looks over it.

I ask myself after more than forty years in U.P. Diliman: What is life in a university? What discipline, what aspiration is that mode of life? Discipline and aspiration are inseparable companions. Without discipline, the aspiration dissipates; without aspiration, the discipline fossilizes.

Life in a university is above all the intellectual life – the life of the mind and imagination, a whole lifework that creates new knowledge and deepens our humanity. What great fortune for one to know, early or late, his own lifework. One’s life only begins to be lived when one has found his lifework. Then one is removed from malice and contentiousness, and released from the coils of envy and bitterness. There comes such peace of mind that work itself becomes the spring of joy.

That lifework is, of course, in the very first instance, sole and individual, which is why I say: if the university is a community of scholars, it is a community of solitary personal quests.

What is the intellectual life committed to, for life? – that commitment which is the soul of its discipline, the energy of its aspiration. The intellectual – scientist or man of letters – is committed to an endless quest. That endlessness is what exacts virtue. Virtue is another name for discipline. The English word is from Latin *vir*; “man”, and so it denotes virility, but ungendered, it signifies valor and integrity of character, what the ancient Greeks call *arête*.

The quest has its essence in questions it asks, and those questions arise from a deep sense of wonder, a lively curiosity, an enduring fascination. For the power of the quest as endless is the power of mystery. As Thomas A. Witten, a professor of physics at the College, University of Chicago, says: “Everything known is right next to an infinity that is unknown. The trick is to be able to see it.”²

Whether trick or chance, what is requisite for one to get to the other side of what is (or seems) already known or familiar, is the arduous preparation. As Louis Pasteur puts it, “In the field of observation, chance only favors the prepared minds.”³ That preparation is the University’s main task for its young scholars. It is possible, for example, that the great ideas have already been thought in philosophy – the idea of justice, say, or freedom – but through changing times and circumstances, we always need to see clearly what those great ideas mean for our own time and circumstances. The essence of the mind’s preparation, the very essence of education, regardless of the field, is its cultivation of the ability to reflect, to integrate disparate viewpoints and values, and to use the valuable tools acquired ... to adapt successfully to the inevitable changes that every field of endeavor will surely require.⁴

That cultivation, that academic culture, is requisite for discovery, for new knowledge, for one more unraveling of a mystery. We speak of “frontiers of knowledge,” but that metaphor is misleading. The frontier, says Witten, is everywhere.

[T]he main obstacle to discovering something lies not in getting access to the thing discovered, but in recognizing what is before us. Our reality is