

EDITORIAL

Americans are always moving on.
It's an old Spanish custom gone astray,
A sort of English fever, I believe,
Or just a mere desire to take French leave,
I couldn't say. I couldn't really say.
But, when the whistle blows, they go away.
Sometimes there never was a whistle blown,
But they don't care, for they can blow their own
Whistles of willow-stick and rabbit-bone,
Quail-calling through the rain
A dozen tunes but only one refrain,
"We don't know where we're going, but we're on our way!"
Stephen Vincent Benét

Toward More Being In Doing

There are the opening lines in the Prelude to *Western Star*, Benét's epic poem detailing the 200-year, pell-mell, coast-to-coast American trip. A meticulous historian with a gift for language that few have matched, he pictures some of the consequences of muddled thinking. His metaphors vividly frame much present day activity across the planet. Who can't recall a jangle of jingles that boil down to a dubious message?

Life inevitably is a trip into the opaque, and that's as it should be. Without some blur, blah — a boring three-score-and-whatever, hardly worth the investment. And yet, as finite creatures life in unending blur would render us helpless. In the dash toward an unknown coast at least some of the scenes along the way should become less fuzzy, and one task of higher education is to assist the traveler in recognizing, distinguishing, clarifying both old and new. No doubt, there are successes. However, to some extent success occurs in spite of, rather than because of the process. It is an in-spite-of, a somewhat mindless going-without-knowing aspect of the process that is troubling.

The issue is two-fold (a) the predominant view of the nature of knowledge in higher education, and (b) some apparent effects of that view on the undergraduate program. Though the context here is that of a single Faculty, I see the issue as pervasive. Space permits little more than a sketchy outline, a heuristic peek if you will.

If you sense Michael Polanyi in the development, you're right!

View of Knowledge. My daily menu in the university is courses focusing on communication theory and practice for teachers. The primary perspective is transactional (something happens within, between and among persons as they speak and listen to one another); the secondary perspective is transmissional (information is introduced which those present may find useful). Insofar as possible, the goal is an ongoing, active chemistry with everyone present a potential learner and teacher. From what I hear and observe, the goal is hardly widespread. You may say, "That's fine for the study of human communication, but it won't work in X." Content obviously has much to do with what goes on in a course, but the issue here is much more fundamental.

I wonder about the reserved, antiseptic way in which many in academe present their professional concerns — in texts and journals, meetings and conventions, staff and classrooms. With notable

exceptions, it's as though to become involved in, excited about something is to render that something suspect. It's called bias among other things. To be sure, there is risk in getting caught up, but that's only part of the picture.

Over two centuries of insistence on scientific detachment has fostered an eroding paralysis, a distancing of knowers from knowns. Like noise, it's been around so long we hardly notice its impact. Most students get the bug sooner or later. The truth is out there, not in here. If you find some, go look for more — and be sure to file it. Rather than owning what you know, say it in the third person. 'Ibid.' gradually replaces 'I'. (It even seems appropriate to underline the term here!) Many, conditioned by depersonalized approaches to thought, perpetuate the paralysis from behind today's lecterns. Something's wrong.

Fearing, wanting, striving, coming to know, knowing — these are all active processes stretching from cradle to grave. Though there may be interludes of relative quiet, such activities never cease completely for the living. They are evidence of the 'I' at work — perhaps struggling with which 'Ibid.') to use, if any at all. Pushed to extremes, scientific detachment reminds the would be knower to speak of such processes in no more than subdued terms.

But what of knowledge? Conventionally, knowledge is a noun not a verb. Thus, it must be a body of something that has been accumulating somewhere. But where? The library for sure. A university would be in deep trouble without a representative share of the world's wisdom. While museums and galleries are other repositories, the library is sufficient to establish that knowledge is something substantive — out there. But, suppose all that substance were suddenly destroyed. A university would be in difficulty, but remain a university — as long as seekers gathered in collaborative attempts to comprehend. And without seekers? An undemolished library stands as little more than a useless wasteland.

In the seeker, knowledge becomes a verb, participating in an active process wherein what is already known serves as an interiorized base for addressing the unfamiliar. Without the integrative powers of the knower — the capacity to function from the what-is-known in facing the to-be-known — the out-there remains unintelligible. It is the individual who brings and holds knowns and unknowns together. Polanyi has described this holding-together-by-the-person as the tacit dimension of all knowledge. He was right in indicating that knowledge becomes a verb in the seeker. Whatever the issue, from motor skills to metaphysics, we deny at our peril the critical importance of the tacit powers of the individual, the personal character of knowledge. Fixation on detachment distorts the scientific method; it is always an inference maker who breathes life into method. The same can be said of learning and knowing. The predominant view of knowledge, then, distances us from ourselves, from one another and from the very stuff we seek to understand.

Predominant view and program. Note this conversational fragment overheard recently. First student: "Why do we submit to this torture?" Second student: "Beats me!" If such comments were isolated, they perhaps could be ignored. But they aren't. Expressions like "linguistic zoo" or "sheer insanity" or "rat race" or "just one more term and then I can live" crop up with fair regularity. The wife of a fourth year student suggested to her husband that he seemed to be "a couple of time warps removed from reality".

What do such expressions mean? It's too easy to discount them as disgruntled outbursts from the lazy, as manifestations of an adolescent penchant to bitch. Again, there's more to the picture. As I see it, the prevailing view of knowledge is the culprit. One byproduct of the view is that the to-be-known gets over emphasized, the becoming-knower taken for granted. Much must be covered

on many fronts in a very short time. Maintain a dizzy pace; tax students to the limit. Specific illustration should sharpen what I mean.

While the empirical evidence supporting what follows is flimsy and thus needs a pinch of salt, the point cannot be brushed off. For example, Ed.Psych. (or Psych., for that matter) texts are rather hefty tomes which ordinarily split into 25 or more chapters. Each is prefaced with words such as, "After mastering this chapter the student will be able to: . . ." followed by a list of 10 to 20 objectives. (I use psychology because objectives are conveniently spelled out, whereas it's often up to the student to ferret them out of the reading in other courses.)

For the moment, allow me some questionable assumptions and arithmetic. Conservatively, the student is expected to handle some 200 different Psych.-type things by the end of term. If the person carries a normal load (five courses) and each course has reasonably similar requirements, the figures extend to roughly 2,000 different items after a full year. When the total hits 8,000 — graduation. I'd certainly not stake my reputation on these calculations, but whatever the numbers be, they no doubt add up to a big bundle of bits. Absurd! As the saying goes, "That's no way to run a railroad!" And yet, the picture is not surprising when knowledge is perceived as 'out there'. Such numbers would be inconceivable in an approach premised on the view that a graduate's knowledge is essentially 'in here'. Understated, an information war of such magnitude extending over four years is confusing, frightening, alienating — even for the young.

A detached view effects program in another way. Consider these activities: reading, writing, speaking — all presumably important to most Faculties. Course outlines when translated become "read a bundle"; "read well" is printed in obituary type. Virginia Woolf's dictum, "try to become your author," gets lost in a speed reading contest. And writing? Stress is given to detached, reportorial assignments involving little opportunity for prewriting (scribbled notes, fits-and-starts work, pacing and pondering). Since such papers are marked, students write for markers. The personal log is virtually unknown — expressive language that draws from everyday concerns and invites the reader to enter (but not evaluate) the writer's own world. What about speaking? Again, it's product over process with 'chemistry' little more than an unanticipated side effect. Transactional rather than transactional interchange gets top billing in most places, even when small group discussion is employed.

Why the apparent neglect of reading well, of expressive writing, of transactional speech? Essentially, because such activities take considerable time — time away from all that must be covered. It may be, too, that many instructors don't know how to effectively slow down the blizzard. Sadly, it is precisely through such activities that knowers gradually develop their inferential powers. Neglected in the program, alienation from self, others and knowledge deepens.

To the extent that persons are not viewed as developing, evolving knowers, undergraduate education contributes to what I call intellectual constipation. Four years in a university obviously produces new awareness. But if I'm even close to right, it's apt to be a kind of free floating, disjointed tacitness — a product of insufficient chances to build and test a network of 'biceps' necessary for moving beyond square one. Too many graduates are apt to depart with undigested lumps of information scattered about inside and out, with lurking fears that others might discover how little they know without checking their notes. Sad.

Are there answers? One thing seems certain. More being in doing would strengthen the linkage between knowing and going. But that's the subject of another paper!

William E. Goding,
University of Calgary.