

Sowing Seeds on Rocky Ground: Developing Compassion in Institutions of Fear

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Those familiar with the gospels will recognize the allusion in my title to Jesus's parable of the sower. A farmer spreads seeds, and some land on the road and are devoured by birds; some fall on rocky ground, sprout quickly, and die in the sun; some take root among the thicket but are choked out by the weeds, and some nestle in fertile land and produce abundant crops. In the gospel of Matthew, Jesus defends his use of parables in addressing the crowds by drawing a distinction between the multitudes and his apostles. He tells his apostles that they do not need parables

...Because it is given unto you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it is not given. [12](#)For whosoever hath, to him shall be given, and he shall have more abundance: but whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken away even that he hath. Therefore speak I to them in parables: because they seeing see not; and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand.

Jesus then likens the seeds to the acceptance and, importantly, understanding of God's love. Only those people who understand the word of God enough to embody it can reap the bounty of his love. In a secular reading, Jesus is arguing that well-being requires more than knowing some content -- it requires bringing that content to daily awareness and practice.

Each of the other landing spots for the seeds make such a move to practice impossible, with each spot representing some deficiency in people's embrace or understanding of the word. For example, Jesus says,

But he that received the seed into stony places, the same is he that heareth the word, and anon with joy receiveth it; Yet hath he not root in himself, but dureth for a while: for when tribulation or persecution ariseth because of the word, by and by he is offended.

Here Jesus is talking about the quick converts who lack a deep sense of self. For them, the teachings of God are good only until they run into ambiguity, critique, or opposition. What's interesting is the use of the word "offended" -- it suggests a wide range of emotions, from simply being put off to feeling in some sense violated. But Jesus seems clear in saying that being offended originates internally, it is a way of responding to the trials of the world, not a result of such trials. To take offense to the extent that one will disown or forget what one has learned is to be afraid of what is happening -- to lack the courage that comes with understanding. It is to act from a position of shallow fear rather than deep connection.

It's not a stretch for me to see so many of my students as rocky soil -- willing, if not always eager, to learn new things, but also suffering from an incapacity to grow that knowledge into something larger and more transformative. Let me be clear at this moment that my point is not to criticize students in a "kids these days" kind of way. Instead, I want to explore -- in an admittedly messy and circuitous way -- the forces and trends that have been shaping higher education for at least twenty-five years now, forces and trends that have deeply colored our students' view of higher education, as well as those of non-college attendees and other stakeholders.

Here is a provocative statement: higher education is both a product and a replicator of a broad culture of fear, one that is itself as much a prerequisite for as it is a result of neoliberal economics and the continuation of sharp, rather insurmountable socio-economic class

separation. As part of what I call the information - service - credentialing complex (ISCC) in American society, institutions of higher education benefit from and, perhaps unwittingly, strengthen people's fears about gaining and maintaining traction in an economy that privileges a certain type of information- and service-based labor. Such labor forms a rather closed network of professionals who maintain strict but often transparent boundaries around their economic privilege. This is labor that is wholly divorced from materiality -- from making things -- and is focused on the valuing and revaluing of information as it moves from entity to entity. Transferring value via information and services is profitable for any duration only if the processes are perceived as more important than other labor practices. That importance is manifested through credentials -- or college degrees -- that demarcate the information sectors people can inhabit as professionals.

Neoliberal economic theories and practices have, for over a quarter century, encouraged the transfer of economic control from public or governmental sectors to private entities. One result is a constant emphasis on worker efficiency and market-based competition -- both of which have encouraged low-wages outside of the ISCC and intense pressures to create new markets for information inside the ISCC. Higher education is both a victim of neoliberalism and its main engine of growth. This dual existence comes to light in any close analysis of colleges' and universities' funding systems and student recruitment materials. For public institutions, state funding has been reduced to such levels that it's safer to call such schools "state-affiliated." As a result, many 4-year public institutions' tuition rates have risen substantially, immersing these schools in debates about return-on-investment that would not have made sense a generation ago. For private institutions, particularly those that remain "tuition-dependent", there is pressure to differentiate themselves from one another while also striving to achieve the same thing: higher levels of student placement within the ISCC. Schools outside of the protective bubble surrounding elite and flagship institutions must engage in neoliberal practices of comparative marketing and fiscal austerity.

Thus we see recruitment materials that focus less on the processes of education and more on the products of it. Students are encouraged to view campuses as pleasant way stations on the path to professional positions in the ISCC. The curricula, especially general education, often appears to students as a hazing ritual, a series of checks on the way to certification. And so we have a vicious cycle -- students and families want new or continued entry to the ISCC and they see college as the clearest way forward; market economics encourage students to see tuition rates as initial bargaining positions, and they demand higher levels of discount before enrolling; to make up for discounting, schools must attract larger numbers of students (or charge more for amenity-rich on-campus living); to do so, schools have to sell the credentialing process generally and their own individual brand on that process; graduates enter the ISCC at various levels and perpetuate the separation of economies.

Outside of the ISCC, in the parts of the economy that don't require 4-year degrees, and to the folks for whom college was an exercise in hoop jumping and so-called political correctness, there is a growing sense of alienation -- the topic of one of David Brooks's recent NYT columns. Brooks cites sociologist Robert Nisbet's definition of alienation: "state of mind that can find a social order remote, incomprehensible or fraudulent; beyond real hope or desire; inviting apathy, boredom, or even hostility." Brooks argues that "alienation breeds a distrust that corrodes any collective effort. To be 'woke' in the alienated culture is to embrace the most cynical interpretation of every situation, to assume bad intent in every actor, to imagine the conspiratorial malevolence of your foes." For the alienated, the ISCC -- and the schools that continue its expansion -- are threats to a desired way of life, both materially and existentially.

Analyses of the last election bring the gulf between the ISCC and the alienated into stark relief. Regardless of your political leanings, it's no challenging statement to say that Trump's victory was powered by the frustrations -- and the fears -- of the alienated. Nor is it challenging to say that the disbelief -- and fear -- from those who did not support Trump are rooted somewhat in a deafness to the suffering of the alienated. This gulf is made all the worse when we view it from the lens of intersectionality. For the alienated groups, the ISCC folk's acceptance and promotion of practices that value diversity and multiple identifications -- even when such practices support neoliberal policies and may not even be deeply appreciated -- are seen as an unfair tipping of the scales away from groups that identify, perhaps increasingly incorrectly, as part of the majority. For the credentialed soon-to-be elites, such critiques of the practices seem steeped in a selfish, maybe ignorant, maybe bigoted view of the world. So the alienated fear the ISCC folks for their power to maintain economic status; and the ISCC folks fear the alienated for their power to threaten economic stability. And higher education profits off this divide in multiple ways. It can convert some of the alienated into paying customers, and it can attract more ISCC wannabes with fear of becoming one of the alienated.

So much rocky soil breeding fear and contempt. I contend that our students come to college steeped in a host of fears that are reinforced by college recruitment, retention, education, and placement processes. These fears are socio-economic at their base, and they harm students' well-being in two important ways. First, they strengthen debilitating cognitive states such as narcissism, anxiety, and loneliness. Second, they reduce students' capacity for compassion, which I'm defining here using ideas from sociology: it is "being moved by another's suffering and wanting to help."

I want to draw a clear distinction, as philosopher Paul Bloom and others do, between compassion and empathy. Empathy is sharing the feeling of another, of being attuned to another person's emotional and even physical state. It is central to our social and intellectual development, and empathic thinking can help people understand their situations more effectively. But empathy itself does not connote action beyond the response. Nor is good or moral action a necessary result of empathic thinking. It's quite easy to imagine how empathy can be employed to marshal support for any number of bad ideas. Compassion, according to Emmanuel Housset, "impels and empowers people to not only acknowledge, but also act toward alleviating or removing another's suffering or pain."

In my conference proposal, I mistakenly established a binary between diversity education and teaching for compassion. I don't think that diversity initiatives ignore compassion, but I do think the concept doesn't receive as much attention as, say, awareness, inclusivity, and empathy -- all of which are important to social and intellectual development, but none of which necessarily connote the direct relieving of another's suffering. We can certainly point to service learning curricula as potentially having compassionate goals, though some limited research suggests the possibility that required service learning may reduce students' empathy and compassion. Regardless, outside some mostly private, mostly religiously-affiliated institutions, compassion isn't likely to show up in mission statements or learning outcomes.

And here is where my thinking runs aground for the moment. I can critique higher education's role in reproducing our culture of fear, and I can point to a theoretical way out of this cycle through the concept of compassion. But I don't know how to bring that theory to everyday practice, not without potentially producing what students and non-students might see as another top-down initiative to get people to think the right way -- or creating another version of multi-culti intellectual tourism. For now, my best idea is this -- the direct, recursive, and scaffolded analysis

of the economics of higher education throughout the undergraduate curriculum, coupled with activities and reflective practices that compel self-motivated acts of justice and relief.

Back to the parable. What we need are people of good soil. People who can, regardless of their economic roles or status, fight against fear, away from the tendency to “be offended,” and with a compulsion for redemptive action. And I think that action must begin with those in and related to the ISCC. It is our responsibility to recognize the pain of fear in others and to use our advantages to alleviate that pain. In so doing, we may find ways to alleviate our own.