

The Morality of Individuality and Autonomy and the Co-dependence of Education

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The USA chooses a new president in November. Although the outcome will have its political impact on the world, for this paper our interest focuses on the electoral process leading to the November date. It is a powerful drama as well an opportunity to see American mythology pumping actively. Michael Osborn's (2006) review of Janice Hocker Rushing's work¹ elucidates how some American myths play out politically. One of those is the myth of the rugged individual, the classic John Wayne character who - with his gun - is a law unto himself. Rushing sees that myth nourished or degraded by the tension between *individualism* and *community*. She also believes this foundational myth touches sensibilities deep within the American psyche. We agree.

Typically, Republicans choose the side of individualism and create heroic dramas that glorify individual actions and accomplishments. Fred Thompson's speech at the Republican convention (Sep 2/08) was a brilliant example of portraying John McCain as a man whose broken body houses an unbroken spirit. For Republicans, heroic individualism is endangered by Big Government (i.e. Democrats) in the short term; and by the destructive power of communities (i.e. Blacks, Hispanics and other immigrants) in the long term. "Obama/community organizer" is a downright scary prospect.

¹ Janice Hocker Rushing was a rhetorical scholar who suggested new methods to understand and to focus rhetorical criticism.

Yet the Democratic National Convention also played the myth. It featured plenty of “rags to riches” stories and heroic overcomers of adversity: Joe Biden’s family tragedy; Barack Obama’s raised by a single mother; “Uncle Teddy” Kennedy’s “win one for the Gipper” speech; and perhaps even Hillary Clinton’s “I have picked myself up off the ground” and am “never quitting” mentality. All these examples tap that foundational American mythology which prizes individuality and personal autonomous action.

As our bibliography shows, a number of scholars have critically analyzed this myth. For Fineman (2004), autonomy and the sharp separation between private and public spheres drive both policies and personal ideas about American life. America’s celebration of individualism has prevented it from ending social and personal injustices, notably the providing of basic medical care. That myth of autonomous action and individuality and its impact on all of us is the topic of this paper. It raises a number of questions. Where did this myth originate? How does it impact education, especially the academy where most of us live and work? And, how might we gain a vision of collective responsibility and dependency?

Cases

Many people demonstrate respect and consideration for others. Many others do not.

- The president of a private school organization bragged that he had managed to smuggle into Canada a substantial amount of silver jewelry without declaring its value and paying import duties. A motion of non-confidence did not carry – the majority of board members didn’t think this action was serious.
- A tradesman insisted on cash rather than a cheque, clearly to avoid income taxes. A group of soccer referees also insisted on cash for the same reason, though their mission was to “uphold the laws of the game.”
- A “friend” boasted of having sold a house with serious though undeclared flaws.
- Plenty of drivers ignore construction highway signs instructing cars to merge with the lane next, driving fast on the almost empty lane right to the end of it before

merging, thereby saving about half a kilometer of slow going and less than thirty seconds in actual time.

- A couple left a few bulk grocery items on the lower shelf of the shopping cart. The busy cashier did not notice, and the couple sneaked through the line without paying.
- A seriously misbehaving young girl told her babysitter, “You’re not my mother. You’re not the boss of me!”
- One of Adrian’s daughters lives in a solidly middle-class neighborhood next to neighbors who have an outside hot tub and noisy teenagers. In summer, loud music and conversation goes deep into the night. Gentle approaches have met with “None of your business, this is my house,” and no police will alter that exercise of autonomy.
- Millions of North Americans casually and regularly break existing laws by smoking weed and snorting coke.

Do we actually live in two distinct moral worlds? Within any of our communities (nuclear and extended family, church, circle of friends) we extend and receive respect and consideration, and extend and receive support in living. We do for others, and they do for us. We serve and are served. We seldom press our egos and other egos recede in our presence. But, outside the borders of various social groupings it’s every one for *self*. It’s as if, when in streets and malls, we walk inside an invisible cocoon of utter privacy and rules of our own making. Often we say “sorry” or “pardon me” when in danger of having our bodies touch other bodies in crowded places, or when we open a public door at the same time as someone else on the other side. Cocoons passing other cocoons.

We are not talking about evil people in our list. They are everyman and everywoman – they are us, and the product of our education and socialization. We think that most of them act in morally ambivalent ways because they are convinced that their individual actions are somehow separate from the lives of others – natural and rational actions of an autonomous person simply looking out for number one. Lie. Cheat. Steal.

Hide the truth. As if what seems good for them can somehow be disconnected from what is bad for others. We all do such things.

In this paper we suggest that our Western culture has become excessively individualistic. Individual humans are autonomous; that is, they are laws unto themselves. We believe that for many people personal autonomy acts as a “silent moral assumption,” to use a Paul Ramsey phrase (12). Our paper explores the idea that a *myth of personal autonomy* explains both the contemporary lack of manners and a widespread contempt for law and authority. After historical reflections, we attempt to show that such an understanding might be a not surprising consequence of our educational system. In this paper, we wonder aloud whether we educators are perpetuating the mythology that prizes personal autonomy too highly.

What do we mean by “Myth?”

The next part of this paper is heavily dependent on a book written by Dutch ethicist Gerrit Manenschijn, called “De Mythe van de Autonomy” (1999). (All translations ours.)

Myth is not the same as “primitive,” or “lie,” or “fantasy” stories which under positivist assaults crumble and deserve no more than historical scrap heaps. Rather, we see “myth” as residing in the realm of value and meaning, not in “facts.” We use it in the sense that Christopher Booker uses it in his book *The Seven Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories*. Booker notes that one basic myth upon which stories are created is “Rags to Riches.” Examples include *Cinderella*, *The Ugly Duckling*, *David Copperfield*, or *Pilgrim's Progress*. In the “Rags to Riches” myth, someone commonplace is dramatically shown to have been hiding potential for a second, more exceptional, self within. At the character’s lowest moment, there is only a glimpse of the possible. Perhaps the character receives outside help; and, there is a teaser - a moment when it appears happiness is at hand. But, that happiness is taken away, and the character must work independently to grasp it again. Still, there is a happy ending. As luck would have it, Jim (the night prior to working on this paragraph) watched an “old” Barbra Streisand and Jeff Bridges movie aptly titled *The Mirror has Two Faces*, which explores this myth.

All cultures have myths, and authors more global than Barbra Streisand (who wrote the film for herself) have written stories of transformation. In the German *Bildungsroman*, a young central figure emerges step-by-step from an initial state of dependent, unformed childhood to a final state of complete self-realization and wholeness. The genre arose during the German Enlightenment and is regarded by some as a variation on the concept of the *monomyth*, (films such as *Harry Potter*, *Lord of the Rings*, and *Star Wars*, and in the animated *Cinderella* and *Snow White*). These heroes' journeys mirror a basic pattern found in many narratives from around the world. This mythical pattern was described by Joseph Campbell's book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949), and the author borrowed the term *monomyth* from James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*.

Myths, most often embedded in stories – grand or not so grand narratives, offer a sense-making handle on the seemingly chaotic jumble of human experiences. We ask, “What does the myth *Cinderella* help us know?”

The dark version of *Cinderella* is as much about the family in *Cinderella* as it is about the girl herself. The father marries a proud woman accompanied by her daughters. The three tragically “fall” because of wrong motives and character flaws. Looking at the essential traits of the *Cinderella* character tells us much about what the culture of the day valued in a woman's character as well as, for example, how a specific representation of the myth addresses issues such as *happily ever after*. In the Brothers Grimm story *Cinderella* is **humble** - she asks for little in terms of material objects [dresses and jewelry]; **loyal** - she honors her dead mother; **obedient** - she doesn't rebel against authority; and **helpless** - she passively plays her archetypal maiden's role. We witness no internal transformation in *Cinderella*, because for these Grimm brothers women didn't have significant inner lives. Outward transformation is all that matters.

But in Walt Disney's version *Cinderella* is a flighty young woman – certainly more a 'character' than in the much earlier Grimm. She is also a bit whiny, and certainly not as humble. She is obedient, but a bit sulky; and one feels she is on the cusp of the kind of rebellion that offers her courage to stand up to a stepmother and stepsisters.

Our point about myths is this: myths are (often unconscious) patterns of thought that shape our sense of the world. They accompany the ideas which bombard our mind and with which our imaginations constantly play. In academic research, these are our biases – our “theoretical frameworks” as it were. To escape myths, whether good ones or bad ones, takes a powerful almost prophetic act of the will. Richard Hofstadter’s 1963 Pulitzer Prize-winning *Anti-intellectualism in American Life* set out to trace the social movements that shaped the American intellect – America’s theoretical framework. His book suggested the concepts of “god terms” and “devil terms.” In the time in which he wrote, “science” had become a “god term” – a mythology that shaped how people came to believe or disbelieve. “Science will save us.”

That is a typical myth. If the statement is to be judged on its factual merit, it is easily shown to be inadequate. Just before Hofstadter, Alfred Kinsey wrote two “scientific” books about human sexual behavior, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (1948) and *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (1953). These books told us all we had to know about sex – and did so “scientifically.” Lionel Trilling, the brilliant literary critic, reviewed and critiqued the first Kinsey report, and noted in his review the slavish American attitude towards science. In fact, while the Kinsey Reports claimed to use only scientific observations and data, they were filled with assumptions and conclusions based upon highly debatable matters. The (first) Kinsey Report’s greatest flaw, Trilling said, was “the question of whether the Report does not do harm by encouraging people in their commitment to mechanical attitudes toward life” (1950, p. 218). But the myth of “science” persists, and is prominent currency for those who refuse to face the possibility that North Americans might have to drastically reduce their standard of living in the face of climate change. Science (technology) will solve the problem!

Myths, good or bad², point to a valuing of life in a certain direction. Jim’s Dad repeated the following “rules for life” over and over: (1) the world doesn’t owe you a living, (2) when you have your education, no one can take it away, and (3) don’t do

² In the novel *The Bridge over the Drina*, Nobel Prize winning author Ivo Andric describes another example of how stories of hate and revenge keep clashing over the centuries all rooted in various myths in the Balkans, specifically in what is now Bosnia.

anything to embarrass your mother. After a while you get it. The two us (a combined more than 130 years) each have our own childhood memories that have shaped, and still shape, our behaviours, thoughts, and sometimes even dreams.

For a more contemporary example of myth embodied, behold the current struggle around a bill in Canada's parliament concerning regulations of alternate medicine, a billions-of-dollars industry. No conclusive scientific evidence points to positive medical benefits of the claims found on many jars and packages on shelves in "natural product" stores and in ads and sales talks by, for instance, Herbalife agents. Why, then, does this industry thrive? It thrives, first, because human instincts reject the exaggerated claims of a medical profession that looks upon the human body as a repairable machine. But also, the myth of "natural" points to a promise of eternal life ("life force") found in nature itself.

Various forms of New Age religion have the same mythical function with respect to established religions. Myths understood in this way point to more or less permanent mystery, to unsolvable human dilemmas. The language of myth, therefore, is not one of science and facts, but of the three P's – poetry, psychology, and philosophy. Myths embody our hopes, not our factual certainties. Myths, therefore, ought to be taken seriously as indicators of human thinking and feeling and imagination. To confuse myth with facts can be dangerous, as when devotees of "natural medicine" ignore medical science and rely on "natural cures" exclusively with the presumption that their claims are true in the way legitimate professional medical claims can be true. They might pay for their myth faith with premature death.

Autonomy as myth

Manenschijn (1986) considers autonomy a myth. And, as a myth, its plus side taps “deeply hidden layers of fear and despair, hope and expectation” and stimulates “creative possibilities...powers of imagination.” (13) The myth of autonomy is a story that helps us understand the shift of moral competency from the collective to the individual. “The story of autonomy is always the story of the emancipation of the individual. It is the individual who formulates law for himself, not a group or society at large.” (17) On the minus side, autonomy is a highly debatable concept when it is proclaimed as something *prima facie*, as in “human beings are autonomous beings,” with “are” understood to be an ontological and not a mythical term. Anticipating the development of his case, Manenschijn offers the following example, based also on the work of Nagel (1986, 116).

You have applied for a job; it has been offered; and you have either taken it or not. Is this your autonomous decision? If the choice were only subjective (“it’s my decision”), it is. But the fact that the decision was made does not explain why it was made, nor why a “no” was rejected. If we try to give an account of “why,” we begin to move in the realm of objectivity. All kinds of factors must be considered – biological, psychological, and social factors; and, over many of those we have no control. (Our emphasis.) We are often unable to determine which of those causal factors had the greatest influence. In other words, while no one compels us to take a job or not, the choice is anything but only my subjective choice all facts considered.

Personal autonomy is not a subjective absolute. It is not an inalienable human characteristic, something like “the opposable thumb and our upright walking on two legs” (21). Instead, as Kant indicates, it is “an ideal of maturity and liberty.” Who are autonomous people? Those “able to form an independent judgement with regard to their own situation and who have the courage to face vital decisions.” It is easier not to be autonomous, to let a book decide for you, or a counselor, a clergy, a physician, an advertiser, or the current writing about complexity theory.

Manenschijn offers examples of sloppy use of “autonomy.” For example, for a time Amsterdam was known as a city where anything goes. Prostitution, if practiced

inside designated areas, was a tourist attraction, lucrative for some citizens and for the city itself. Cannabis sales were regulated in so-called coffee-houses; and, the street hard drug trade, while officially illegal, was not combated. (As an aside, the current mayor is working hard to change that image and reality.) In a 1998 campaign, the chief of police tried to put an end to street soliciting, especially in tourist areas like the proximity of the Central Railroad station. The police chased the women away, but they simply moved their theatre of operation. When failure became obvious, the chief noted: "We cannot crawl inside the skin of these women. They have their own, autonomous considerations."

A TV station decided to investigate those "autonomous considerations." In a documentary, it presented images of drug-enslaved undernourished, badly-dressed unkempt women with hollow eyes and mouths in urgent need of dental care. One of these women, when asked if she wanted to break with this enslavement, answered that "somewhere" she wanted to, but not really. That the chief of police used "autonomous" to describe them simply illustrates confusion about its meaning. In his mouth, the concept "autonomous" was an excuse for not tackling the problem any further.

As a second example, although "autonomy" is not found in the following book, its "silent moral assumption" is omnipresent on its pages. In *The Crisis of Homosexuality* (Philadelphia: Victor Books, 1990) a number of evangelical Christian authors explore this topic from out of the perspective that the Bible and God are unalterably opposed to the "homosexual lifestyle." A number of stories describe "conversions:" gay and lesbian people first in (often multiple short-term) same-sex relationships, but now "cured." Some of these "cured" people are now in heterosexual relationships. Only one essay challenges some of the assertions, particularly the success rate of such "conversions." Totally missing in the book are accounts of long-term same-sex relationships of people also wanting to be part of God's flock.

Though Christians ourselves, we do not share this book's perspective. But what interests us is the book's constant refrain that all human beings have it in their power to be who they want themselves to be. Going to straight from gay/lesbian is a choice. It might take faith in Jesus and a burning conviction that God does not condone

homosexual behaviour and ultimately not homosexual desires either, but every human being must make, and can make, “right” choices. Here is a telling quote.

Much of our behavior is shaped by forces beyond our control – genetics, physical conditions, parental influences, culture. But the biblical witness is that we are accountable, responsible, and that we are charged to something about who we are. We shape who we are by the minute-by minute decisions we make, building gradually who we become as men and women. (168, our emphasis)

Although we may be born with, in our childhood shaped by, and in our culture conditioned to have homosexual tendencies, we have it our power to change, though it might take a lifelong struggle. That confidence sounds to us as a disguised faith in personal autonomy – disguised though it is by highly-charged religious language. For a comparison, here is Manenschijn citing Ian Hacking (“Rewriting the Soul. Multiple Personality and the Sciences of Memory.” Princeton: Yale University Press, 1995, 79). Talking about certain feminists from whom “male” means enemy and who opt for lesbian relationships, Hacking observes, sarcastically as the context makes clear: “We should not assume that [such a person] has discovered a ‘true’ self, but on the contrary, she has broken through to the freedom to choose, to create, to construct her own identity. She no longer is a pawn in a predestined game; she has become an autonomous person” (Manenschijn’s emphasis). This thought mirrors the earlier quote. Autonomy, explicitly and implicitly, is invoked to bolster highly debatable positions.

A third example comes from a TV program made by two Canadian journalists who studied the euthanasia situation in Holland a number of years ago. The documentary looked at the situations of two gay men, and it is important to keep in mind that the current regimen of drugs that substantially retard the development of AIDS symptoms was not yet in place and the onset of AIDS was then a short-term death sentence. For one man AIDS was in its final stages, and the other had just been informed that he was HIV positive. Both contemplated euthanasia. The second man advanced “autonomy” as the grounds for requesting assisted suicide at a time of his choosing and indicated that the time would be right after he was diagnosed with AIDS. But the interview portrait clearly demonstrated that autonomy was not the real grounds.

His words and body language screamed that he was petrified of pain and suffering – and who can blame him. He could not face the onset and development of this dreadful, undignified disease. He seemed without family and friends, terribly alone, utterly vulnerable. Fear was the grounds for his decision, not autonomy. The use of “autonomy” masked the fear, at least superficially.

Of course, he had the freedom to act as he did. The “opportunity” was possible within Dutch law, as long as he could find two physicians to agree and one physician to assist. But opportunity and will to act is not autonomy. “Autonomy” is regularly invoked to justify forms of euthanasia, but the circumstances bear careful examination. Does that invocation mask utilitarian motives, as in costs of further treatments and the burden on caregivers, and judgments about “quality of life?” These motives are usually advanced not by the patient or elderly person, but by bystanders. Even if offered by the decider, autonomy is not the ground even if it is advanced.

What is autonomy? A prominent Edmonton medical diagnostic clinic has “mission statement” posters on walls in every department, and these stress respect for human “autonomy” and “dignity.” A technician, asked about how he understood “autonomy,” confessed that he had never thought about it, but he also responded by saying that he would never administer a physician-prescribed procedure if the diagnostee objected.

“What about a person in advanced Alzheimer or dementia?”

“Uuuuh. At least I would tell such a patient what I would be doing and why, as if he/she could understand my instructions.”

“But does that person have autonomy when it is in fact family and physicians make the decisions? And would you know how they made those decisions?”

“...interesting question...”

Manenschijn, also citing Dworkin (*The Theory and Practice of Autonomy*, Cambridge U.P., 1988), points out that “autonomy” is loosely used in many circumstances, almost always with a positive ring. He provides a number of examples, summed up as follows: “If I have run out of arguments to make my case, I drop the word autonomy, and my hearers will nod in agreement.” (35) The problem is that autonomy is not something possessed as a matter of course, but something to be striven for. It is not a human

characteristic but a human ideal. At least that's how Kant saw it, and he has been called the inventor of autonomy.

A very brief history of autonomy

First, it bears keeping in mind that the Greeks already used "autonomy." However, they did not use autonomy in a personal way but in a political sense. Autonomy was the claim made by city states and political territories for settling their own affairs in defiance of various overlords bent on territorial conquest. In this paper, when we consider personal autonomy we use the term in an analogous way, as in "I'm the boss in my own self and my own personal territory."

Three developments encouraged the shift. The first was the rise of cities and the concurrent rise of "burghers," bourgeoisie, or middle class all over Europe in the early centuries of the second millenium. Hansa is a good example. A two-century long league of mercantile cities all over Northern and Western Europe, Hansa's origin reaches back to the early 13th century. Around Northern European rivers like the Elbe, then around the Baltic sea, and next around the North Sea, international trade in lumber, grains, wax for candles, furs, fish and dairy products steadily increased, facilitated by advances in ship building and navigation. Cities like Hamburg, the initial center of Hansa, grew in size and independence. But its burghers chafed under a mosaic of musts that had been designed by castle and cathedral minds most at home in wide-open spaces. City folk crowded together, assembled capital, and needed laws that could travel widely, stretch over the inherited territories of, and bypass the quaint habits of many different feudal lords. The Hansa arrangements of weights, coinage, quality, and custom duties that covered much of Western Europe made growing trade possible and simply overrode the power of church and feudal lords, though often paying lip service to their presumed ultimate authority. Neither castle nor cathedral devised business arrangements, business law, or business ethics: the merchants did it themselves. It took a century or so, but Hansa arrangements became laws onto themselves – autonomous in other words. Yet, those who followed these arrangements still understood themselves to live within a form of

collective autonomy. They lived free from church and prince, but bowed to Hansa rules for all citizens inside a Hansa city. It would take more time before the concept of individual human autonomy would be firmly articulated, but Hansa understandings created favourable conditions.

Dante (1265-1321) may well be the key figure whose words embodied the impetus towards autonomy, particularly in his description of poet Virgil in Part 1 of "The Divine Comedy." Dante's significance is this: Virgil may be in Inferno (and in Dante's mind no one not believing in Christ could not be), but nevertheless this pagan poet was a great man whose splendid thoughts must be honored. The following lines are found within a translation by Dorothy Sayers, Penguin, 1949. When Dante and Virgil (Dante's guide though Hell and Purgatory) first meet (Canto I), Dante exclaims:

Canst thou be Virgil? Thou that fount of splendour
Whence poured so wide a stream of lordly speech?
...Oh honour and light of poets all and each,
Now let my great love stead me – the bent brow
And long hours pondering all thy books can teach!
Thou art my master, and my author thou,
From thee alone I learned the singing strain,
The noble style...

Dante learned not from a Christian, but from a pagan who thought for himself and displayed great learning and skill. A further contrast is found in the realization that most great artists and artisans, for instance those who built splendid churches and palaces, had been anonymous until now. Their work was a testimony to thinking and great art, and the name didn't matter. But here Virgil, the individual name and poet, is honored. That point is reinforced in Canto IV. With Virgil as his guide, Dante meets four more distinguished poets: Homer, Horace, Ovid, and Lucan. Instead of claiming superiority because of his Christian faith, he observes,

When they had talked together a short while
They all with signs of welcome turned my way,
Which moved my master [Virgil!] to a kindly smile;

And greater honour yet they did me – yea,
Into their fellowship they deigned invite
And make me sixth among such minds as they. (Our emphasis.)

In other words, Dante proclaims himself to be a great man, and not because of a presumed road to heaven but because of his accomplishments on earth. It is perhaps no exaggeration to say that these words herald the emancipation of personal responsibility, a road of thinking and acting that ends in Kant's *Invention of Autonomy* (J.B. Schneewind. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998). These words express the spirit of growing personal independence and liberation from undue and unwarranted control by religious and political institutions³. The Renaissance laid the groundwork for the Reformation to blow open thoughts about authority and personal responsibility.

One study that documents the shift towards individual autonomy on almost every page is *The Rise of the Dutch Republic* (John Lothrop Motley, London, 1868). This work vividly portrays a 16th century people rejecting the authority of emperor (Phillip II) and Rome (a variety of popes). The strugglers may not have formulated alternative theories of authority and morality, but they lived them already. In that small watery territory, Pope and Emperor were being set aside and indigenous authority arrangements developed even before philosophers figured out alternate political theories. Merchants lived these theories, as did bankers and traders and manufacturers whose representatives governed cities, provinces, and together the commonwealth.

British thinker Hobbes (1588-1679) also aided the development of personal autonomy. He lived in turbulent times (a “world turned upside down”), with Catholics and Protestants vying for control over souls, and royals and republicans vying for political control over bodies. He asked this basic question: “What is the justification for human authority?” What made Hobbes unique at the time was his starting point: neither Church (the arm of God) nor Ruler (inherited right), but each person. In his view, we all share the same entitlements. But to that liberating thought he added an overwhelmingly pessimistic element. He imagined a “state of nature,” the human species not yet part of

³ For a vivid description of living under such compulsions, read Jan Huizinga's “The Waning of the Middle Ages.”

various social groupings, and it explained to him conditions everywhere. Human beings are creatures of violence (confirmation wasn't hard to find in his day nor in ours). Unless we find a way to curb our violence, we shall continue to destroy one another. We might individually survive because of strength and wit, but we are always under assault. (Our initial examples are perhaps cases in point.)

How do we curb "state of nature" violence? Here Hobbes hooks in on the spirit of individualism already expressed by Dante and prepared for in Hansa and other commercial arrangements. For Hobbes, social arrangement does not take precedence over individuality; quite the opposite, individual decision-making results in social arrangements. As Manenschiijn observes in representing Hobbes' view: "The state is not a community in which everyone has an assigned place, but a cooperative venture of individuals for the benefit of everyone." (44) Although all human beings have a fundamental right to everything, if peace and prosperity are to be achieved violence must be curbed. But how?

Hobbes notes three possibilities.

1. Individual human beings surrender some of their basic rights to a "council of men" or "sovereign," either form chosen and appointed to ensure that all will live in peace and prosperity. If that sovereign (single or collective) crosses the line, we take the authority back and find someone or some council new (as the Dutch Republic had done. Hobbes spent time in Holland; and, during his life, England's Charles I was beheaded in 1649.).
2. We let "nature" take its course, battle until a strong leader emerges victorious and gracefully lets victims survive, but in bondage.
3. We accept the principal of power inherited – feudal arrangements already largely dismantled in Western Europe.

Hobbes clearly preferred the first option, a powerful central authority democratically created. State formation arises when individuals agree to a social contract and voluntarily submit to a created authority. Although Hobbes did not employ "autonomy," his ideas were vital to what Kant came to say about autonomy, and Kant

did employ the word. Moreover, Kant saw autonomy as the foundation of morality. The way Manenschijn reads Kant reading Hobbes, the price we all must pay to emerge from the “state of nature” is to surrender rights to an agreed-upon legal system that ensures the same limited rights to others. It makes Hobbes focus only on the political situation, our agreed-upon acceptance of the limits of individual power for the sake of ourselves (self-preservation – curb “their” violence) and others (curb our violence).

But Kant takes issue with Hobbesian limits. He extends autonomy to both political aspects and what Manenschijn calls our ethical-civil situation, or the way human beings should treat each other in all human situations (48). Autonomy is not merely the exercise of voluntarily surrendering some rights for the sake of self-interest (Hobbes position), but it is a high calling for all human beings. Morality is not merely acting within a legal framework (whether willingly or not), but a voluntary obedience to moral law in all human situations.

At this point Kant makes a major leap, prompting Schneewind to call him the inventor of autonomy. In Kant's eyes autonomy is not today's (see the earlier examples) often unbridled exercise of individual human will (“none of your business”); or, as a literal being/making a law unto/for oneself; or human beings having autonomy, by virtue of being human. For Kant, autonomy is voluntarily surrendering yourself to the law which is the categorical imperative. To cite one of his formulations of this imperative: never use human beings as a means, only as an end. For Hobbes, living ethically (he only addressed it as a political option) autonomy means voluntarily surrendering autonomy to a high authority for the sake of escaping violence. Kant reads that as heteronomy, as surrendering autonomy to a “council of men” or a “sovereign.” But Kant wants the individual human will involved in all situations of life. Daily life requires human decisions that always consider all other human beings. No (hu)man is ever an island, ethically speaking.

To explain the difference between Hobbes and Kant, picture this example. Three tall teenagers, two young men and a young woman, walk towards an old man. Each party sees the other party approaching, but no teenager makes any move to let the old

man have part of the sidewalk. Just before the moment of meeting, the old man steps on the grass. Hobbes would undoubtedly have recognized the teens' bad manners, but given his approach he would have judged the teens to have reacted autonomously. No law needed to be specified to cover this situation, for no violence threatened any of the four. Everyone was for himself. The stronger win. Kant differed. Bad manners offend the categorical imperative. What the teenagers did implied that they would have had to move to the grass if three larger teenagers had met them on this sidewalk. No, says Kant, acting ethically is to keep to the right (in England perhaps to the left) and enable everyone to use the sidewalk. It doesn't matter how you feel about that, dislike of the young or contempt for the old. It's not feelings that count, but doings.

To live Kant's way takes reflection, the constant use of one's rational skills. Always faced with "How would the 'Other'..." living with such integrity and preparation seems almost impossible. But, it is impossible, says Kant, which is why autonomy is not something that adheres to any human being by virtue of being human. As an ideal almost impossible to achieve, in the end we need God to sustain us, Kant also argued. That's how hard it is to live morally.

Recently a Savannah, Georgia, tennis club won the Georgia state championship. The club received a plaque to hang in the clubhouse. All but one player wanted a plaque with all player names underneath. The one player's argument: the team won, not a collection of individual members, some of whom had losing records that weekend. A list of names transforms the team trophy into something it was not meant to be. This example is trivial perhaps. But it points to the underlying problem that gives rise to the sloppy use of autonomy offered to mask or excuse bad behaviour. It has become acceptable to consider our individual selves as the center of our own universe. But that consideration masks an unwarranted assumption, namely that we are or should think of ourselves as individual selves. Self-help books suggest that "You" go looking for your own self. But, it would be difficult to find a "You" apart from other "yous." (You)man beings are connected to you with unbreakable bonds. Yet we act as if they are not. Such an un-Kantian use of autonomy is an outflow of thinking that all meaning flows out

of such an extreme and flawed notion of individuality. Individualism is the idol and grand lie of our culture.

Unfortunately, that myth has many in its grip and, as we consider in this paper, might be encouraged by our actions as we educate our young – including our graduate students. Unfortunately, from our humble perspective, the myth is deeply embedded in current educational philosophy and practice – as we explore in part two of our paper.

Part 2: A Short Critique of Our Educational Lives

Initial Confessions

We believe in human freedom. We believe that people can and should act out their own ideas and understandings. We also believe that Kant was correct – autonomy and individuality come with a huge responsibility that must be considered carefully as we work at being human “in fear and trembling.” As we observe people acting in ways that harm others, we are frustrated. We believe we should combat self-centered and harmful behavior.

We also believe that certain forms of schooling promote self-centeredness and an aggressive individualism that warps and misshapes a more edifying sense of autonomy. We see harmful systems. We see educators act as if there were no other choices. We believe positive changes are possible. As people who have made education our life’s work (Adrian as a publisher and writer, and Jim as a teacher and writer) – we see ways to improve it.

In elementary and secondary schools we see two distinct views tussle for supremacy. At one extreme the view reigns that each human being is a definable individual whose relationship with other individuals is based on some sort of contract, formal or otherwise. We’re all essentially on our own. Only in certain circumstances do we cooperate with others to achieve common but temporary goals. We each build our individual homes, but agree to also build a road to connect them. After those goals have been achieved, we’re on our own again. British philosophers Hobbes and Locke (1632-1704) saw it that way. Former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher believed the

same thing in the late 20th century. Political conservatives believe that good governments are limited governments. One way to keep governments in check is to allow them to levy minimum levels of taxes only. Without money, they can't expand their reaches into our lives. Educators who lean towards this view of what it is to be human tend to see their classroom as a collection of individuals, and see learning as whatever their individual students absorb of their teaching. Test results will tell them.

A polar opposite view considers human beings as always parts of a variety of communities (as in *common unity*): family, church, workplace, school. Communities are not simply voluntary arrangements for achieving specific and limited goals; communities make human beings human. A newborn baby is immediately a family member (nuclear and extended), neighbor and citizen, participant in the economy, soon a playmate of many and shortly after a communal learner. Those are not choices – they are part and parcel of living. It has always been so, though forms may change. For instance, tribe and clan are less important now than they were in the past. At its extreme, some philosophers and theologians lean towards the view that “individual” does not really exist. Human nature is a collection of human linkages. We're never totally isolated – talk and language are proof of that.

Brewer and Chen (2007) caution us that, although there has been much psychological research on the topic, the distinction between individualism and collectivism is poorly defined – “a catchall” that represents all forms of cultural differences and networks of interpersonal relationships. They call for clarity in the individualism-collectivism distinction and the building of a theoretical framework that brings together conceptualizations of individual, relational, and collective selves and their manifestation in self-representations, beliefs, and values. Earlier work by Voronov and Singer (2002) criticized those who utilized the dimension of individualism-collectivism (I-C) to understand the psychology of cross-cultural situations. They argued that I-C research is characterized by a lack of conceptual clarity and question its use as explanation of cultural variations in behavior. But we interpret such ambiguity as the

difficulty of bringing deep-seated myths to play in a categorical manner. We are operating with deep grammars, and attempting to simplify them is difficult.

However difficult it may be to gain conceptual clarity, Ralph Petersen, reflecting Kant's sense of autonomy, gives clear voice to classroom as community in his *Life in a Crowded Place: Making a Learning Community* (1992). He sees a classroom not as a collection of individuals but as a community. "Life in classrooms is an intense social experience. For six hours a day...one teacher and anywhere from twenty to thirty-four students (sometimes more) live together in a space the size of a large living room (1)." But simply living together in a crowded space does not determine community. Peterson makes his point this way: "Life in a learning community is helped along by the interests, ideas, and support of others. Social life is not snuffed out; it is nurtured and used to advance learning in the best way possible. Caring and interests of others breathes purpose and life into learning. Learning is social." And, "One could use the word 'family' to describe life in a learning community." (3).

Give his view of a classroom, Petersen addresses two major topics: (a) how does a teacher enhance community, make a classroom a "Caring Place?" and (b) how does "community" enhance learning?

Within the first topic he draws attention to the power of ceremony, ritual and rite (he distinguishes these three), deliberate strategies that govern classroom routines. "Conversation" is essential, ample opportunity to talk to one another. So is "play." He advocates that routines and jobs be in the hands of students, with rules developed and then maintained by all members of the community. All are classroom "residents." As for the second topic, within community language can be put to work, in both critique ("I have some questions about what you say") and dialogue ("Let's look at it from all sides"). Both are vital elements in learning, when learning is not understood as hoarding facts until you're asked to give those back on exams, but as personal growth towards the ideal of autonomy.

Building and maintaining community is not easy. Even established communities are fragile. At one conference the author said, "Forget September as a month for making

progress in prescribed curriculum. Attend to establishing and enhancing classroom community. If you succeed, the rest of the year becomes that much more productive.” And Petersen ends his book with, “We are social in every aspect of our existence. The place, the learning community, is of greatest importance for it is within the group that we come to value who we are and what we can do. Students in residence, confident in themselves and trusting of others, are in a position to take charge of their learning.” (139)

But, as Petersen himself observes, the notion of classroom as community seems swimming against the current. He is not a solitary swimmer, however. For example, Johnson, Johnson, & Smith (2007) believe cooperative learning has been resisted by advocates of social Darwinism (who believed that students must be taught to survive in a "dog-eat-dog" world) and individualism (the myth of the "rugged individualist"). The myth of autonomy and its shadow, individualism, is deeply embedded in education. In our paper we will explore two areas of individualism's embedded-ness: (1) pedagogy and assessment practices at all levels of formal education and (2) life within the academy.

Pedagogy for the myth of autonomy

One would think that citizenship should be about citizens – plurality and citizenry – a collective. But, in the *Cambridge Journal of Education*, Biesta and Lawy (2006) argue that the teaching of citizenship has shifted to an overtly individualistic approach. Their article advocates an inclusive and relational view of citizenship-as-practice within a distinctive socio-economic and political, and cultural milieu – especially dealing with the actual learning that occurs in the real lives of young people. We think they have a point.

However, much school learning separates knowledge into small bits for consumption (facts), learned by autonomous individuals who are consequently tested on the retention of these facts. Our educational metaphors and language are individualistic, and our assessment practices typically consist of the single person taking the single test and then being ranked in comparison to all other single students so as to establish a

hierarchy of grades that ranks individual vs. individual. Students soon learn their individual place (their class) within the class – be it bluebird or crow.

By about grade 6 students have a relatively clear idea where they stand for their educational future. School does a neat job of sorting the successful individuals from the less successful ones (traditional European schools were especially efficient in such practices). The winners gain a picture of success in life that includes further attendance at educational institutions. Those less successful come to replace visions of future education with visions of future material gain – jobs that promise good money that finance the amassing of material goods. And many fall in between the cracks because they made the wrong (“autonomous!!”) decisions.

In other words, children with the kind of intelligence that matches the system’s status quo mythology come to see themselves, mostly unconsciously, as the autonomous masters of their own fate. Other students learn both unconsciously and consciously that they are not going to make it to the top of that system, and turn to other goals – such as “getting rich” in material ways. The system offers them economic power instead of social/political power.

Hales (2006), an outdoor educator, explains how the process of individualization has prioritized the self over community and place. He also suggests that, with the negotiation of an autonomous identity, the young come tend to devalue certain others in a market-oriented world [those others who are seen as not making the system] as well as devaluing a sense of place. But the American idea that you can be whatever you want to be in life is a myth. The myth acts as a morally-defining compass that tends to keep students “in place” at school. It is turned into behavioral techniques which “help” students turn eyes towards trails such as money, fame, approval. Not to a sense of belonging to a human community that can rightfully ask of its members that they serve one another with their gifts. It is true that schools are a socializing as well as an educating enterprise, but the socializing part is an indoctrination towards the myth of autonomy.

Why we succeed or fail in school and, eventually in life, and why we feel good or bad about the choices we make along the way, are hardly random events. From the time we start school, we are told by loving parents and devoted teachers that we can be anything we want to be. We must simply “apply ourselves.” But beneath the onus of “applying one’s self” is the understanding that one naturally accepts the hierarchical structure of schools. That we can become president or prime minister depends upon if we aim high, work hard, and stay the course within that system. The promise of such success is seductive. It inscribes happiness, as we come to believe we are free to make choices about our lives that are wide open, unrestricted by anything except, perhaps, our own responsibility to stay the course. “Oh the places you will go,” as Dr Suess notes.

Congratulations!
Today is your day.
You're off to Great Places!
You're off and away!

You have brains in your head.
You have feet in your shoes
You can steer yourself
any direction you choose.
You're on your own. And you know what you know.
And YOU are the guy who'll decide where to go.

One of Jim's students once came back from an Edmonton inner-city high school noted for its heavy population of new immigrants who would be collected together into a large classroom (sort of the Ellis Island or Pier 21 of Edmonton) and given a primer crash course in English language and Canadian values. The student teacher noted that, during an exam, one Russian student got up, went to the next row, and began helping another student with his exam. When Jim's student incredulously asked the young student what he was doing, he just as incredulously answered, “In my country's schools, when we see another person struggling, we must drop everything and help that person.” Our point in this story is not so much whether the young student was blowing smoke – in fact, perhaps there is no Russian teaching that one must “drop everything” to rescue the

needy struggler. This action simply could simply be a 15-year old prank, deftly designed and carried out by a clever young teen with the sole intent of pulling a teacher's leg. But the story resonates truth in our reaction and the reaction of the student teacher. "Doesn't everyone know that tests are to be taken silently and alone? How can we tolerate such 'cheating?'" Such is the power of myths of individuality in North American education.

There are alternatives, Ralph Petersen's book being one of them. Within the past two years the province of Alberta has begun to introduce a radical new Social Studies Curriculum. In part, the curriculum is aggressively inquiry and group-oriented. In previous curriculum iterations, the social studies' class and its textbooks were written so that single students could study and learn⁴. The default position was individual student learning, assessed by individually-written exams. When students worked in groups, the purpose of those groups was to corporately gather "evidence" to address individual study. The new curriculum, on the other hand, employs a radically different default: it is group-centered. Now, when a student works alone, the purpose of that individual work is to gather "evidence" to support group inquiry and decision-making – much like the Georgia tennis club's team trophy we noted earlier.

There are two barriers to success of this new social studies curriculum. First, Alberta's teachers see the professional development needed to learn to teach the new curriculum as almost overwhelming. It will take years to re-tool their teaching practices and pedagogical thinking. They simply have come to come to a different understanding of teaching. Second, the Alberta government, intoxicated by oil and natural gas revenues and feeling macho about its ability to challenge world comparisons and world rankings of education, employs a highly-individualistic battery of high-stakes tests – achievement tests (at grades 3, 6, and 9) and diploma exams (at grade 12). It remains to be seen what happens if teachers accept the culture of corporate inquiry, when high-stakes assessment remain the litmus test of their work. So, here is a radical idea. If social studies curriculum is group-centered, then why not build group-centered assessments?

⁴ The curriculum is so radical that Jim, who has written a large number of social studies textbooks for the curriculum, considered but refused to single-author a textbook for it. He just didn't think he could do it.

We are aware of “differentiated instruction” trends and “multiple intelligences.” However, these discussions seldom question the ends of such instruction means. The differentiation aims to get all students to the same, unchallenged end. The prizing of one kind of thinking and learning over all others may not be so desirable. Craft (2006) notes that creativity has become a recent focus of attention for educational policy-makers; yet, this increased interest in creativity has occurred without thoughtful references to values. As a result, the invisible value underpinning creativity has been Western individualism – a base that both supports and drives a globalized capitalist marketplace. Because she believes wisdom involves making thoughtful, well-informed, and appropriate judgments leading to sound courses of action and consequences, she objects to a market-driven model of creativity in education. Instead, she desires a framework for understanding creativity that emphasizes responsibility (Kant’s sense of autonomy) and a right to express and consider wisdom a necessary element. This, she suggests, is what pedagogical consideration is all about.

The end of education ought not be individual sorting. Pedagogical wisdom and responsibility should have a prominent part. In Rowling’s *Harry Potter*, Albus Dumbledore’s educational problem is centered on how to train students not just in the “technology” of magic but also in the moral discernment necessary to avoid the continual reproduction of the few great Dark Lords like Voldemort and their followers. A Sorting Hat was used to decide which of the four houses a student would enter. Dumbledore noted to Harry that the hat placed him in Gryffindor.

“Listen to me, Harry. You happen to have qualities Salazar Slytherin prized in his hand-picked students. Resourcefulness, Determination, a certain disregard for rules. Yet the Sorting Hat placed you in Gryffindor. You know why that was. Think.”

“It only put me in Gryffindor,” said Harry “Because I asked not to go in Slytherin.”

“Exactly,” said Dumbledore. “Which makes you very different from [Voldemort]. It is our choices, Harry, that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities.”

Harry had asked the question “Who am I at heart?” But a better question was, “What must I do to become what I should be?” His character was not a fixed thing, but something he had a responsibility to shape. Hence, the Greeks called character “that which is engraved.” Education includes the thoughtful and responsible act of engraving.

Our Lives in the Academy

In this part 2b of our paper we question how we, as academics, shape our lives within the academy. Basically, we suggest that, as academics, we have come to see our enterprise as the action of single cells, following individual paths – some call this a research focus. It seems a lonely work. We live in an accepted mythology of research stars, especially at Tier One universities. As a result, our work is singular and we generally do it alone; and, we are unhappy. We compete with each other for what to us seem like finite resources and become, as academics, not so different than the teen who cuts himself off of the world using an cell phone, or iPod and earphones.

Others of our colleagues have also seen such individualism at play in teaching. For example, in an essay about teaching “human relationships” in post-secondary spaces, Sharer & Theobald (2006) suggest that the study of moral philosophy has fallen on hard times during the twentieth century, in part because contemporary society is marked by “possessive individualism.” They believe foundations professors have a burden to center human relations at the intersection of morality and teaching and tie all this to the “real world” of students. Rayner (2008) believes the Western educational system reflects the ideas and values of a “knowledge society” shaped by globalism, neo-liberal socioeconomics, a utilitarian and marketplace ethic, and an emphasis upon the ‘individual’ as consumer. In such a system, autonomy becomes individualism focused on the production and commodification of knowledge for economic consumption.

Abowitz (2005), framing the idea of autonomy within feminist and post-structural concepts, also asks how social foundations instructors can both teach autonomy and utilize critical pedagogies that contest Western narratives of individualism and the

autonomous self. She suggests that foundations teachers face pedagogical challenges and argues that a university student is a “subject-in-process” whose views are to be respected, but not because these views are fully-formed, fully self-reflective, nor because students are fully able to understand human agency. Wisely, she suggests that post-secondary teachers appreciate and respect how the high expectations of self-understanding we expect students to assume in our classes and in their other university experiences shapes their learning.

But, it is ourselves as academics that we deal with most specifically. In another paper for this conference, Jim and Bill Frick from the University of Oklahoma have worked to develop the idea that says the life of an academic is currently lonely and self-focused – resulting in an unhappy group of academics. Such unhappiness is caused by not living fully within the opportunity offered by the community of scholars that make up the academy. The genesis of the decision to work on this paper was traced back to a PhD student’s note that of 30 academic interviewees only two said they liked their academic job.

Why would academics dislike their work? In completing this paper, Jim and Bill addressed a number of issues: (1) the largely lonely occupation of single-authorship publication that has emerged over the past two decades and, with it, an erosion of collegiality; (2) a dog-eat-dog competition over finite resources, especially research funding and promotional competitions that can place colleagues in direct and sometimes fierce battles; (3) the largely derivative nature of our work, lacking originality and creativity; and (4) current and prevailing philosophical and sociological discourses based on underlying assumptions that humans are almost pawns of power and lack agency to enact personal decisions to change and the deep cynicism that embodies these philosophies (Foucault, right or wrong, is basically a downer).

These “instances” oppose what Aristotle defined, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, as a theory of the good life (eudaimonia) where humans flourished or lived well. Our experience of the academy is that many of those within it tend to be pervasively unhappy, largely as a result of an unconscious individualism that becomes self-focused, lacks creativity and

community, engages in conflicts over material resources, enacts a deeply-embedded competition, which leads to a deep cynicism that is devoid of vision for positive change. Frick and Parsons (2008) suggest that the culture of the academy can be reclaimed and offer examples of how that might be done on a personal and interpersonal level. They believe change must be cultural change – this includes changing our (1) language – the way we talk to each other and the words we use, (2) myths and worldviews – not focusing on lesser values⁵ that are material but, instead, focusing on higher values such as relationships, (3) our norms – the rules we have that help us relate to each other and the material world, (4) the way we live and behave – so as to build and sustain community, and (5) the way we create and use artifacts – building and creating “tools for conviviality.”

Some suggestions for reclaiming a collegial life include (1) acting with compassion (from the Latin, means “suffering with” – feeling empathy, identification, and sharing the experience of life with those with whom we work) towards others; (2) actively opposing systemic domination, and moving towards social justice (with colleagues and our students); (3) seeking to engage goals that promote working and learning in partnership or interdependence as opposed to independence. (Teaching, researching, writing, and serving together – for example, joining other in conferences.); (4) emphasizing engaged praxis, not intellectual piety and, by doing so, accepting the responsibility of an “ivory tower” that is responsible to a culture and a society; (5) talk more to each other in ways that transform through dialogue; (6) work to emphasize community (common unity) that is inherently social and political, involving practices such as demonstrating respect for each other, responsibility and integrity in relationships, and service; and (7) engage in cooperative acts committed to the long-term, with an active recognition that omni-competence is short-sighted and, as hard as it might be to do in a system that actively prizes omni-competence, remain committed to working in partnerships and community even when the system creates little space for these. These activities, we believe, would engender the sort of autonomy Kant and Hobbes would suggest – placing autonomy squarely within community.

⁵ As defined by John Paul II, lesser values can be defined as those whose focus is finite – such as material possession, which higher values are those whose focus is infinite – such as conviviality.

Bagihole and Goode's interesting article (2001) suggests that the academy is currently not such a place. Instead, academic careers demand individualistic self-promotion, which is used as a measure of achievement for senior positions. Their data, collected from interviews, found that academics have bought into the idea of self-promotion; furthermore, they theorize that men are advantaged by an in-built patriarchal support system, although men did not have to consciously seek to be helped by this system. The result is the perpetuation of a cultural hegemony of individualism that excludes women. Furthermore, attempts by women to set up their own systems are viewed as weakness.

Feminist scholarship has more critique to offer the academy. Feigenbaum (2007), for example, reviews the work of feminist Canadian scholar Elizabeth Brule's 2004 essay, "Going to the Market." Brule notes that the corporatization of the university has led us to construct students as economic decision makers whose only rational choices are those that increase employment opportunities within the confines of our current labour market. Brule credits the connection between pedagogy and the market as the reason students do not engage critical, feminist, or anti-racist ideas. She notes that competition, self-sufficiency, and individualism are symptoms of neo-liberalism and allow few opportunities to reshape hierarchical power relations.

Our work agrees with these critiques. We believe we must work to transform our work from inherent and violent patterns of self-seeking, to overcome fatalistic traditions and actions that stifle or repress hope, and to dismantle oppressive hierarchical social structures that create and maintain an enslaved codependence. Teachers and students alike must learn and practice community, self-respect, and respect for others. Activities that effectively improve the quality of life for teachers and students must be goals we seek to "incarnate" in ways students may understand. We must engage students in open and constant evaluation of those shared goals – both as a way to improve our actions and as a way to formulate our visions.

We must not oversimplify the complexity of social or institutional myths that exalt an individual's ability to triumph. We know too well the deep grammar of mythological

hegemony. Against such mythology, transformations come slowly and with attendant failures. We are all complicit with self-fulfilling presumptions that govern the academy and condition us as individuals. We must understand that the system constrains both the “rich” and the “poor” who inhabit it. Sadly, our graduate students often jealously seek to emulate what seems to be our affluent, academic lifestyle and, by doing so, adopt the poverty of spirit which hounds the academy. Thus, we all fall into a too-easy compliance with what is basically an unjust system that exacerbates our own and, ultimately, others’ poverty as we produce an affected piety sans ethical action or service to our nobler intentions.

The idea of individuality, as we use the word, was foreign to the pre-modern mind. People did not use the term individual but person. There is a huge difference. To discover an individual, you isolate the person, insofar as possible, from all other outside influences and relationships. “Individual” augurs a sterile approach of a scientist who attempts to isolate a specimen to be studied in a vacuum-like lab environment so the object can be known in and of itself – Tennyson’s “Flower in the crannied wall, I pluck you out of the crannies.” Tennyson both kills the flower and removes it from context to learn about it. An opposite approach would see a person in his or her environment and to discover the impact of inter-personal relationships – what kind of a friend she is, what kind of a father he is, what kind of a colleague she is, what kind of a teacher he is to his students. “Person” is defined and realized in relationships of common unity.

There is an old aphorism about a man who visits Hell and sees starving people sitting in front of tables loaded with food. The reason was obvious – each person’s elbow was bound with splints and it was impossible to bend their arms and bring food to their mouths. The same man visited Heaven and saw the same tables loaded with food and people’s arms bound with immovable splints. Yet people were well fed because they had discovered that heaven was less concerned with feeding one’s self with splinted arms than using those arms to feed others.

Parker Palmer, known for his *The Courage to Teach*, talks of teaching autonomy – but sees autonomy in the more classic manner of Kant and Hobbes. His recent article (2007) explores a new professionalism and suggests that the vocation of higher

education must serve humane purposes. For academics, knowing is not enough – we must take responsibility for what we know. He calls for a profession that confronts, challenges, and changes our large, complex institutions that seem increasingly unresponsive to external pressure. As we prepare our students to be teachers, lawyers, physicians, and perhaps even parents, neighbors, and citizens, we also help transform the institutions that dominate our lives. His proposals call us to deconstruct the myth that institutions are external to us and that we have no power over their constraints. In shades of Barack Obama, he challenges us to build communities of discernment and support where our students learn what it means to live and work in undivided ways. We need an autonomy linked with responsibility. He draws a word picture of an academy – a truly higher education – that educates people in every field who have ethical *autonomy* and the courage to act upon it.

As we noted earlier, we are not contesting human freedom. We believe it exists and should exist. As Christians we believe God values human freedom enough to withdraw his own sovereignty so as to create room for it. We believe it is ethical – an act of moral literacy as it were, for us to share and clarify our backgrounds and foregrounds at this conference. We also acknowledge that Christian thinkers are often Western thinkers, and that this shapes our work. For example, East Indian theories involve concepts of self, such as “atman” and “ahamkara,” which differ from Western theories of self (e.g., the psychological theories of Freud or Erikson). Western psychoanalytic theories tend to suggest a stable and permanent individuality that focuses upon a myth of autonomy, but Indian thought seems centered on a myth of merging. We also note Steve Salerno’s (2005) critique of “self-help” movements that seem to have proliferated from our Western attachment to self.

Frederick Buechner (1991, p. 27), in a moving book titled *Telling Secrets*, talks of being a father to his daughter who had anorexia nervosa. He describes lacking wisdom to negotiate her illness as a father. He confesses that he knew he had neither the power nor wisdom to make her well. The psychiatrists he met told him he couldn’t cure her, and the best thing he could do was to stop doing anything. But he could not stop being her

father and, as her father, engaging in what he called “desperate meddling.” But everything he did only stiffened her resolve to be free from him. Her not eating was a symbolic act of freedom, and he was wont to do anything except to back off and give her freedom – even at the cost of allowing her to choose dying instead of living.

We struggle with Buechner’s concept of “desperate meddling.” We desire that all of us live more graciously; we hope to be critical without being rude – even accepting a prophetic stance. We note Buechner’s suggestion that “No one invites a prophet to dinner the second time.” We know that our stance can carry with it a tone of carping and whining that seems less than edifying. This said, we set out to share our initial thoughts.

The trail of these thoughts has been sometimes difficult, and there are steps we do not yet understand. We have a sense that we continue to obscure differences between autonomy and individuality – the former perhaps being a philosophical concept and the latter being a psychological and sociological concept; and, truthfully, we have not yet worked out how these meet and greet each other. Second, we sometimes feel as if we are swimming in quicksand – the more we flail about the deeper we sink. In fact, we have confessed to one another our fear that we were not up to the task, that we could not make it “work” sensibly. Our motivation to continue was energized by our belief that we were among friends who would generously join into our Quixotean conversation⁶. So we ask readers or hearers to join our conversation, accepting that the ideas are less than complete but offered honestly.

Finally, we employ Habermas’ belief that, ultimately, truth cannot be grounded in evidence, but in consensus. For Habermas, evidence and consensus draw together into the “ideal speech situation.” This ideal speech situation requires what we would think of as conversational “fair play.” Specifically, all participants must have equal opportunity to participate. They must have the right to assert, defend, or question any factual or normative claim. This interaction must not be constrained by “active” role or status differences or “one-sided” binding norms. Finally, participants in an ideal speech

⁶ We thank the conference in advance. Last year’s not-yet-finally-formed conversation on edifying research based upon the theoretical understandings of Walker Percy has just been accepted for publication in the “International Journal of Critical Pedagogy.” We actively appreciate such a space as the conference offers.

situation must be motivated only by the desire to reach a consensus about the truth of statements and the validity of norms.

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