The Best Reason to Go to College

It's the same as it ever was: To learn that the world is more than the issues that divide us.

By Pico Iyer Sept. 6, 2020

As colleges throughout the United States reopen, facing a weird new landscape of empty rooms and scattered classmates, it's easy to wonder what these traditional places of learning still have to teach the rest of us. Long before the pandemic, campuses were in the news not so much for opening young minds as for closing down discussions and less for encouraging humanity than for promoting ideologies.

Upon my own return to a university classroom, in the spring of 2019, after a hiatus of 37 years, I imagined that my tastes and values, my very language, might seem out-of-date to many of the students I was instructing, and I'm sure they did. I suspected that these teenagers would be much less concerned with books than I and my old classmates were, and I was right. I assumed that as a writer who had been crisscrossing the globe for 45 years, I'd have wisdom about travel to impart, and I was wrong: Thanks in part to their generous and well-endowed university, the 16 undergraduates in front of me spent the first class speaking of recent trips they'd taken to Nauru and Kyrgyzstan and Hongpo, among other places I'd barely heard of.

In almost every way, the young at this elite university seemed brighter, more mature, more reliable and infinitely more globally aware than I and my pals had been in our radically less diverse day. But the most beautiful surprise was to see how deeply many of them had absorbed lessons not to be found in any textbook. Picking up a campus newspaper one day, I found an article by the person I'd foolishly taken to be our class clown. He went to Mass every Sunday, he wrote, precisely because he had no religious commitment. He wanted to learn about perspectives other than the ones he knew. He

admired the discipline and sense of order encouraged by such a practice, which he felt he might lack otherwise. He'd been startled by the open-mindedness of a devout roommate, with whom he used to argue through the night. If someone of religious faith could be so responsive to other positions, he wrote, should not a secular liberal aspire to the same?

I realized, as I read the piece, that I had little to teach such students in a class ostensibly about exploring cultures different from our own. More deeply, I was impressed by how imaginatively a young person was addressing the central problem of the times: the fact we're all united mostly by our divisiveness. Whether in the context of climate change or the right to life — let alone the ethics of trying to protect others from a killer virus by simply wearing a mask — more and more of us refuse ever to cross party lines. And in an age of social media, when we all imagine we can best capture the world's attention by shouting as loudly as possible, there's every incentive to take the most extreme — and polarizing — position around.

Our institutions are not going to solve this; they (and the unwisdom of crowds) are often the problem. As the wise Franciscan priest Richard Rohr points out, the only thing more dangerous than individual ego is group ego. That's one reason I, driving around blue-state Santa Barbara, Calif., try to listen to Fox News — I can get plenty of the other side from my friends. It's also why I, though not a Christian, seek out the clarity of Richard Rohr. We're caught up in an addiction to simplifications for which the only medicine lies within. We need to be reminded that not to be right doesn't always mean you're wrong. And that to be terribly wronged does not mean you're innocent. The world deals in black-or-whites no more than a hurricane or a virus does.

It's hardly surprising that so many citizens, unable to find wisdom in the political sphere (which, almost by definition, thrives on either/ors), look to religious figures for a more inclusive vision. Pope Francis, in Wim Wenders's glorious documentary "A Man of His Word," stresses the importance of not

imposing our views on others and never thinking in terms of simplistic us-versus-thems: Would God, Francis asks, love Gandhi any less than he does a priest or a nun simply because the Mahatma wasn't a Christian? The Dalai Lama, for his part, points out that to be pro-Tibetan is not to be anti-Chinese, not least because Tibet and China will always be neighbors; the welfare of either depends on the other. He begins his days by praying for the health of his "Chinese brothers and sisters."

Traveling across Japan with the Dalai Lama a year before the pandemic, I heard him say often that after watching the planet up close as a leader of his people for what was then 79 years, he felt the world was suffering through an "emotional crisis." The cure, he said, was "emotional disarmament." What he meant by the striking phrase was that we can see beyond panic and rage and confusion only by using our minds, and that part of the mind that doesn't deal in binaries. Emotional disarmament might prove even more feasible than the nuclear type, insofar as most of us can reform our minds more easily than we can move a huge and intractable government. By opening our minds, we begin to change the world.

Religion itself, of course, can be as sectarian as the enmities it deplores, which is why the Dalai Lama, one of the world's most visible religious figures, published a book titled "Beyond Religion." It's why he puts much of his faith in science, whose laws and discoveries lie beyond human divisions and apply equally to believer and nonbeliever, Muslim and Jew. Yet the same wisdom was apparent to me in 16 students who seemed ready to look beyond convenient dogma and dehumanizing abstraction.

One of them, a sunny and very personable gay athlete, was an unabashed supporter of Donald Trump (whatever, he asserted, the president might say about gay rights). When I handed out an excerpt from Barack Obama's "Dreams From my Father" for our group to read and discuss, I was properly apprehensive.

The minute we assembled the following week, up shot the hand of the

passionate Trumpite. He'd been stunned, he said, by the intelligence, the eloquence and the subtlety of "President Obama," as he respectfully called him. "I don't agree with many of his positions," he said, "and I wouldn't vote for him." But how could he not be swayed by the humanity of the man's command of the word and the power of his prose? He'd been so impressed that after completing the 20-page assignment, he'd spent the weekend going through the entire 442-page book.

Of all the many things I learned in that classroom, perhaps that was the most valuable. If someone barely of voting age could open his mind so expansively, how could I and others a generation or two older continue acting like preschoolers? We alone among the animals, the Dalai Lama regularly points out, enjoy reasoning minds, the capacity to see beyond reflex. The best reason to go to school, even if you're a so-called teacher, is to find out how much you don't know.

Pico Iyer is the author of 15 books, most recently the companion works "Autumn Light" and "A Beginner's Guide to Japan."

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