

# Pursuit of the *Pneuma*

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When the invitation from Gerald Early to contribute to this issue of *Dædalus* arrived in late February last year, I was commencing a ritual of mile-long walks and conversations with Phil Jones, an old friend and colleague at the University of Iowa. I had been trying to control the physical symptoms of diabetes, and Phil was kind enough to suggest that we walk for a mile or so every two days at a nearby mall. Phil had only recently been fired from his position as vice president for student services and dean of students at the University of Iowa. The public reason for his dismissal was that university officials were not satisfied with his handling of an incident involving several black student athletes and a white student. A white male official had also been fired for the very same alleged "neglect." Phil had served the University for forty years, but he was let go without a hearing. In return, Phil sued the University for what he believes was his unjust dismissal. Then he began to write a book about his experiences at Iowa, beginning in the early 1960s, when he first arrived as a student, and tracing his career there until the time of his dismissal as a vice president.

Phil asked me to read drafts of each section of the work-in-progress so that we could discuss them while we walked. His vivid recollections prompted me to recall my own encounters with institutional powers, not at Iowa but elsewhere. What struck me about Phil's writing was not his anger, which was not at all visible, but the affec-

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tionate relationships he had shared with his colleagues and peers. From university presidents to departmental chairmen to bureaucratic officials he encountered during his years at Iowa, he wrote nothing negative about anyone. Rather, he captured the nuances, the day-to-day actions of his well-meaning colleagues, who were deeply involved in creating a bureaucratic structure of affirmative action – the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) – intended to include, support, and nurture students from minority groups. Reading Phil’s detailed recollections, I saw the portrait of a muscular bureaucratic structure that must have evolved within universities in all parts of the country during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s.

What was striking to me was Iowa’s institutional receptivity to non-white students, especially black Americans. Phil described one major contributor to the University, a philanthropist named Roy Carver, who said to him in 1971, “I told you I was going to do something for the colored boys.” The same Roy Carver also contributed to the building of the Carver-Hawkeye Arena and additions to the University Hospital. For many years I had wondered what formed the basis of that receptivity and generosity, but could only speculate on the effectiveness of laws promoting inclusion and “affirmative action.” Now I truly believe that these developments at Iowa evolved out of a unique *spiritual* dimension of the state of Iowa’s population. One senses this trait, which I have begun to call “neighboring,” in Iowa store clerks, garbage collectors, postmen and women, young people, and, most especially, in senior citizens. When Phil and I walk through the mall, we are constantly greeted by passing strangers. If I had to capture this quality in language, I would employ the ancient

Greek word *pneuma*, meaning “the vital spirit of life itself,” whether at work or during times of worship, and especially during times of giving. Indeed, *pneuma* is foundational in all systems of religious belief, but it seems to me that, as a civic conviction, it is still vital as well in communities rooted in rural mores. Why else would construction workers feel more comfortable beginning their work at dawn? Why else would farmers’ markets remain so popular among residents of urban areas that are overstocked with discount supermarkets? And why else would communities like Iowa City, as well as its university, go to such great lengths to attract, and then to maintain – long before the advent of “affirmative action” – so many black students, as well as those from other minority groups? And what, particularly now, is causing so many institutions to retreat from this noble stance? There are the tensions caused by the Tea Party and its increasing numbers in all areas of the country. There is the legislative focus on Latino immigrants and the rising call to exclude them from the protections offered by the Fourteenth Amendment. Add to this list the declining popularity of Obama as the nation’s first black American president.

During our long walks and conversations I found myself repeating to Phil Jones a phrase I had absorbed many years ago from my conversations with Henry Nash Smith, a Mark Twain scholar and professor at the University of California, Berkeley. Touching on the political and aesthetic polarization of the 1960s and 1970s, Professor Smith employed, repeatedly, the term “bureaucratization of the *pneuma*,” meaning that the spiritual dimensions and processes of American life were increasingly being subjected to bureaucratic control. In my interactions with Phil Jones,

I tried to recall a time when bureaucratic power was not as visible in Iowa City as it is today. I was inspired by a telephone call I received from a friend in town, informing me that a woman we both knew, Dr. Jean Arnold, had just died at age ninety-seven.

This news took me back to the early 1980s, my first years in Iowa City, when I was recovering from the trauma I had experienced by means of the bureaucratic structures in Charlottesville, Virginia. Before leaving that city, I had gone through a brutal divorce, had lost even joint custody of Rachel, my young daughter, and was trying hard to heal a broken heart. Dr. Arnold herself was a Southerner, born in Alabama in 1921, and was the first disabled graduate of the University of Alabama Medical College in 1941. Ten years later, she became the first female psychiatrist to open a private practice in Iowa City. She practiced for twenty-eight years and helped a great many people, including me, all of us coming from radically different backgrounds. Our bond of friendship became almost as close as the one that I had shared with Breece Pancake, one of my most gifted writing students. I disclosed to Dr. Arnold that Breece had shot himself to death on the very same night – April 9, 1979 – that Rachel was born.

Our sessions focused to some extent on my growing awareness that many of my wounds were grounded in the racial attitudes that had shaped most of Charlottesville's perception of me: a black male who had been elevated from the lower class in Savannah, Georgia, to Harvard Law School and beyond. "You are a Pulitzer Prize winner and a MacArthur Fellow," she leveled with me. "You should never forget your early upbringing in Savannah, Georgia, and you should not have expected to be treated any other way in certain regions of the

South." For several years I worked with Dr. Arnold on coming to terms with my own emotional complexities and on what she termed my "neurotic need to rescue needy people." But most of all, Dr. Arnold helped me endure extreme personal pains. She advised me to do all that was humanly possible to maintain my bond with Rachel.

These memories of such a kindhearted white Southern female helping me regain my emotional balance return to me now as I read, almost daily, the news accounts of reactionary, racist developments in the South and Midwest, as well as in other parts of the country. Beyond the racist focus of the Tea Party, there are muscular legislative efforts to end the reach of "diversity" in public education. A recent issue of *The Progressive*, exploring such trends, featured an essay on the rise of fascism in the United States. One of the country's most conservative magazines recently ran a striking cover story on the dangerous threat of "multiculturalism" to the settled racial identities of the U.S. population.

Faced with such developments, one is almost forced to fall back on "liberal" rhetoric and "internationalist" clichés. But it does seem, once again, that rural states like Iowa, and especially small communities like Iowa City, offer alternatives to such trends. At the basis of these alternatives is the American belief in the sacredness of the individual. This belief is embedded in most of the country's sacrosanct documents, but it also plays an active role in the personal lives of most U.S. citizens. Moreover, it also seems to me that when two individuals, reared within the mores of the same region but who grow up separated by race and caste, discover each other outside of their native region, they are often inclined to reconnect through common strains of cultural background. When

this connection happens, as I have experienced in my relationships with Breece Pancake, Dr. Jean Arnold, and countless students and friends, a profound personal and cultural interaction can take place.

It is my belief that this "partial integration" of cultural selves, as it occurs between individuals from old, different caste levels of the South, is becoming the basis for "integration" between those from somewhat different cultural backgrounds. Perhaps it is the rural landscape of the state of Iowa and the small-town intimacy of Iowa City that encourage this subtle interaction. I do know that during my many years in Iowa City, I have worked with and befriended individuals from a great variety of ethnic, cultural, and color backgrounds; I have learned from them cultural and emotional dimensions rooted in levels of expression that go deeper than language. They may be called "white," "Chinese," "Korean," "Japanese," "Indian," "Arabic," or "African." In the past few months, I have received novels from three former students who are Chinese American: *All Is Forgotten, Nothing Is Lost* by Samantha Chang, *Gold Boy, Emerald Girl* by Yiyun Li, and *World and Town* by Gish Jen. But the integrative processes of the human imagination are almost always the same. In the classroom setting, the "teacher" learns just as much about the cultural dimensions through which the "student-writer" expresses himself as do the other students. Here I am tempted to recollect an ancient bit of spiritual wisdom, an insight that might still prove useful. It states that God *did not* create all existence in six days and then rest on the seventh day. Rather, God created imagination on the seventh day and gave this gift to his human creations. The person who is blessed with imagination is able

to stand in his own place and project himself into the places of all else God has created. The human imagination, in other words, is *integrative*.

We are so used to associating certain essentially human traits with color, or with its absence, that we are often tempted to impose stereotypes, and even *dos* and *don'ts*, on what we are being asked to read, solely in relation to the color or the cultural background of the person who has done the writing. Or to avoid the complexities of this trap, we sometimes tend to imagine the writer as "white." On the other extreme, when an unquestionably "white" writer attempts to explore the cultural mores that extend beyond those usually associated with "whiteness," the writer is often accused of trying to "pass" as "non-white" or of playing with the exploitation of a different cultural perspective. We can easily forget that the human imagination was created to be democratic as well as integrative.

In my view, the safest and most idealistic place for a writer is where he maintains contact with as many cultural traditions as possible. I am fully aware that I am stating this belief as a teacher of writing, one who works with students from a wide variety of cultural backgrounds. Still, I introduce the idea as a mode of preparation for certain complexities that are evolving in American cultural life. It seems inevitable that more and more people from a great variety of cultural backgrounds will eventually arrive on American shores. They will learn, and probably practice, the mores of American life. We can also learn from them, in order to put ourselves in better touch with a broader range of the non-European worlds and the mores of their people.

I try to keep in mind the sage advice passed on to me by my old mentor, the novelist and critic Albert Murray, who

criticized the advocates of “black nationalism” during the 1960s and 1970s. In his book of essays, *The Omni-Americans*, Murray argued that black American cultural expressions had evolved through a tradition of “abstraction and recombination.” That is, beginning in the earliest colonial days, slaves had begun to absorb cultural and linguistic elements from the variety of peoples they encountered: Anglo-Saxon, Scottish, Irish, German, Spanish, Indian, and so on. A friend recently pointed out to me that the “trademark word” in the black American vernacular idiom, “motherfucker,” is rooted in the idiom that the early Irish employed to degrade their Anglo-Saxon masters. The slaves synthesized such idioms into something fresh and new. It was this new, all-inclusive Negro idiom, Murray observed, that provided “white” Americans with insights and perspectives not native to their own ethnic groupings. This tradition continued until the idioms of black nationalism obscured it or shut it down. But in its day, Murray’s arguments favored a historic perspective. Along with his colleague Ralph Ellison, Murray provided black people with a linguistic model for the “integration” of the imagination, despite the narrow currents of black nationalism. This approach formed much of the basis for Albert Murray’s “omni-American” perspective on American life.<sup>1</sup>

Looking back on what may seem an abstract reflection of the American *pneuma*, I realize that, during all these years in Iowa, there was a pragmatic motive beneath my efforts to explore and cultivate an omni-American perspective and sensibility. The source of my motivation was largely Rachel. When Rachel’s mother filed for divorce, claiming complete custody of our child, I was presented with a tragic choice. I could stay in Charlottesville, maintaining employment at the

University of Virginia, and cultivate a place as a token individual on the outskirts of a racially polarized Southern community. Or I could take a great chance on a less polarized community in which I could nurture my daughter in the best possible human environment. Luckily for me, the Fellowship from the MacArthur Foundation arrived just when the Charlottesville judge was writing his divorce decree. (I was, of course, called “inferior” by the judge in his decree.) But I had already accepted the job at Iowa. The central focus of my life then became Rachel, and my care for her.

I decided not to use the MacArthur money for any purpose beyond my care of Rachel. I moved to Iowa City to begin my job in the Writers’ Workshop, but I maintained an apartment in Charlottesville, and after I had settled in Iowa City I flew back to Charlottesville several times each month to spend weekends with Rachel. Those years marked the beginning of our close bonds with friends in Richmond, in Washington, D.C., in Baltimore, in cities north along the East Coast to Boston and Cambridge. During her school vacations, I would travel to Charlottesville and bring Rachel to Iowa City. We would see friends in Chicago, in Cedar Rapids, and, of course, in Iowa City.

Over a number of years, Rachel and I built a multiracial, extended family unit. As she grew older, Rachel enjoyed deep bonds with a diverse group of friends in many parts of the country and in Iowa City in particular. The longer her stays became, the deeper her bonds with an extremely diverse group of young and very talented writers. Most important, Rachel *learned* from them. She learned much about the vital spirit of life, and, I suspect, she has

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grown to anticipate this *pneuma* as an essential dimension of human experience.

I still maintain relationships with a great number of the young writers with whom I worked during those years. More often than I care to keep track of, I receive manuscripts or just-published books from these talented people. The bonds we have are lifelong ones, despite the differences in our ethnic or racial backgrounds. We are, and will remain, *friends*.

Rachel now works as a teacher of English in Barcelona. I try to call her each

evening, taking into account the seven-hour time difference. Most evenings she is out with friends, taking walks, in restaurants or bars, on a beach, or teaching. Often during our conversations she invites her friends to say hello to me. The cheerful conversations of this diverse group of European people remind me that Rachel, possibly drawing on her experiences here in Iowa City, has formed her own multicultural group of friends. I want to believe that, even in Spain, Rachel is becoming an omni-American. I want to believe that her *pneuma* is a muscular one.

#### ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Albert Murray, *The Omni-Americans: Some Alternatives to the Folklore of White Supremacy* (1970; New York: Da Capo Press, 1990).