

PREFACE

Philosophical reflection is recognized as the adventure of one who seeks to understand. . . . Its most appropriate expression is an essay where the character of the utterance (a traveller's tale) matches the character of the engagement, an intellectual adventure which has a course to follow but no destination. A philosophical essay leaves much to the reader, often saying too little for fear of saying too much; its attention is concentrated but it does not cross all of the ts of the argument; its mood is cautious without being defensive; it is personal but never merely "subjective"; it does not dissemble about the conditionality of the conclusions it throws up and although it may enlighten it does not instruct. It is, in short, a well-considered intellectual adventure recollected in tranquility.

—Michael Oakeshott¹

Undeclared explores a territory I am calling "formative higher education." The phrase is intentionally ambiguous: "higher education" suggests an institutional frame, a formal process occurring in colleges and universities; "formative education" evokes a broader existential task, the quest to understand, cultivate, and enact ourselves in lives worth living. To what extent such soulcraft still has a place in the university is one of the book's driving questions. To this end, I inspect the corporatization, instrumentalization, and privatization of the contemporary university; search for the ghost of the whole person in the machinery of Gen Ed; examine the miseducation of the professoriate; and expose the reduction of vocational formation to technical training and credentialing.

Ultimately, though, my aim is recuperative, not suspicious. The goal is to make contact with estranged aspects of ourselves and unearth forgotten dimensions of learning. I want us to get reacquainted with our inner sophomores (whether one graduated some time ago or is in fact currently

a sophomore). I attempt to pry open a space for *skholé* in the midst of the grind and to recover a humane conception of vocation from the shell game of credentialing. *Undeclared* offers a picture of personhood as dynamic integrity and a vision of higher education as a quest for meaning and purpose. I ask us to imagine college as a community of persons-in-process, supporting each other's efforts to make sense of ourselves, to clarify what matters, to carve out meaningful projects, and to organize our talents in the service of something worthwhile.

The book is composed of three long essays, punctuated by three shorter interludes. The first essay, "Soul Action: The Search for Integrity in General Education," considers what it would mean to take holistic higher education seriously. Hidden in the platitude to "educate the whole person" are four tasks as electrifying as they are daunting: to discover what you are made of, judge what aspects of yourself are most important to cultivate, develop each to some fullness, and integrate these separate lines of development into a unity of character and outlook. Our formalistic approach to general education trivializes some of this work and ignores the rest. Students encounter not live invitations to explore and integrate, but fossilized requirements for "scattering and smattering."² But we cannot ask of students something that we do not ask of ourselves. We scholars struggle even to bridge disciplines in meaningful ways, let alone to model how one might integrate fact and value, knowing and doing, thinking and feeling, mind and body, living and learning. Exploring how we face up to, flee from, and live with the tensions constitutive of our all-too-human (second) nature, I develop an account of character as complex coherence, of personhood as ongoing soul action.

What would it look like to build a college from the ground up to stimulate and support such soul action for students and teachers alike? To answer this question, the second essay, "Wide Awake: Aesthetic Education at Black Mountain College," revisits one of the great experiments in the history of higher education. At Black Mountain, we find not perfunctory distribution requirements but an entire communal life—from classroom learning to college governance, from dining hall to dorm room, from theater rehearsal to work shift—devoted to general education. The arts were center stage in this (extra)curriculum, but not exactly as we have seen them before. Black Mountain treated art neither as an object of veneration nor as a vehicle for self-expression but as medium, as enabling constraints in which one can work out the terms and direction of one's freedom. Black Mountain

College offers not a dusty artifact but a living reminder, not a scalable model but a proof of concept that general education need not be scattered and hollow. Sitting in on the Socratic seminars of John Andrew Rice, the design studio of Josef Albers, the writing workshop of Charles Olson, and the makings and happenings of MC Richards, Buckminster Fuller, Merce Cunningham, and John Cage testifies to the possibility of higher education as vibrant and resonant, as integrated and integrating.

When asked to defend their practicality, the liberal arts vacillate between two apologies: the old one that there is more to college than vocational preparation and the new one that humanities graduates actually fare well on the job market. The final essay, “Job Prospects: Vocational Formation as Humane Learning,” blazes a trail out of this lose-lose situation. The typical humanistic complaint about the second apology is that it cheapens the humanities. By contrast, I show how both strategies make a mockery of vocation itself, leaving unquestioned the vertiginous reduction of vocational education to training and credentialing. This excludes, I argue, no fewer than four essential aspects of vocational formation: finding a worthy form of work to which you are suited, becoming aware of the ethical geography in and around your practice, finding in that work sources of your ongoing self-cultivation, and preparing to leave the practice if and when it begins to stunt your growth. What this expanded vision makes clear is that humane learning is in fact central to vocational enactment. Indeed, vocational life is itself a continuation of our effort to form ourselves. Through a series of philosophical engagements and literary cases, I offer a phenomenology of vocational experience, tracing the lines of formation from college into the worlds of work.

In this way, the three essays work to expand the higher educational imagination, recovering ideals that have been shoved aside or replaced by counterfeits. But talk of educational aims rings hollow without a clear-eyed recognition of conditions on the ground in contemporary universities. While the essays also attend to material conditions, the interludes offer targeted desublimations, intervening where we are prone to lapse into romanticization. The first, “Campus Tour,” offers a survey of the deformations of the corporatized university. The second, “New Student Orientation,” acknowledges the powerful push to instrumentalize learning and probes the possibilities for reorientation. The third, “Public Hearing,” explores how the defunding of public universities proceeds hand in hand with the vitiation of the arts and humanities.

The organization of the essays is thematic, not analytic. These are, in the words of Michael Oakeshott, traveler's tales. Each follows a path where it leads, paying careful attention at every turn. And of course the most interesting part of travel is who you bump into. To stage the most direct and vivid encounter with the question at hand, I engage an eclectic cast of characters. I turn not only to standard figures in philosophy of education (Plato, Rousseau, Dewey, Oakeshott) and philosophers of meaning and value (Gadamer, Arendt, MacIntyre, Walzer), but also to essayists who simultaneously discuss and enact formation (Montaigne, Emerson, Thoreau, Nietzsche, Berger), novelists (Woolf, Salinger, Ishiguro), higher education experimentalists (Rice, Albers, Olson), songwriters (Waters and Biafra), and various figures of biographical interest (Robert Oppenheimer, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Piet Oudolf).

This belletrist approach may seem strange now that scholarly writing is dominated by the journal article and the monograph.³ And one can certainly write a monograph on the displacement of formative higher education in the performative university. However, the normalization of this mode of writing is one of the forces working to marginalize humane learning. The research report positions authors as distanced from both their subjects and themselves, imagining an audience that is somehow both intramural and adversarial (confederates of a scholarly tribe, ready to turn on their own). The article deploys its pawns (citations) to defend its king (the thesis). The essayist stands up from the board and sets out in search of interesting interlocutors.

If our aim is to recenter formative aims in higher education, then we are better served by reclaiming the rich and varied tradition of humane letters (poetry and prose; the dialogue and the bildungsroman; the epigram, the letter, and the autobiography; the consolation, the meditation, and the thought experiment). It is no coincidence that many of the great treatments of formative experience have taken the form of essays.⁴ The essay is itself a formative genre, staging the attempt of the author to make something of their experience, in dialogue with others who, as Ezra Pound puts it, have "taken the risk of printing the results of their own personal inspection and survey."⁵ The essay reunites knowledge and self-knowledge, situating both in the quest to make something of oneself. Unlike the research report, the essay is both voiced and addressed, written from one soul to others. It implies, it enacts, a community of searchers.

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