

PROLOGUE

A quest is not . . . a search for something already adequately characterized, as miners search for gold or geologists for oil. It is in the course of the quest and only through encountering and coping with the various particular harms, dangers, temptations and distractions which provide any quest with its episodes and incidents that the goal of the quest is finally to be understood. A quest is always an education both as to the character of that which is sought and in self-knowledge.

—Alasdair MacIntyre¹

One fall, several years ago, when I was teaching at a flagship public university, an undergraduate student followed me back to my office after lecture. We had been discussing Michael Oakeshott's classic essay on liberal education, "A Place of Learning," and I assumed that the student had come to continue the conversation.² And in a way he had. But I could tell that there was something he wanted to get off his chest. He fidgeted in his chair. He glanced at the door, which was partly open. Then he lowered his voice and told me, "I am . . ." I couldn't make out the final word. Worried, I leaned in and asked him to repeat what he had said. Then he told me his shameful secret: "I am undeclared."

I don't know how moments like this still manage to surprise me. I am well aware of the stigma. In the modern multiversity, Gen Ed is just a toll booth on the credential highway. Students get the message, loud and clear: pick a lane and step on the gas! But listening to this particular student, I couldn't help but feel amazed at the efficiency of our miseducation. Here he was, beginning his sophomore year, and he was already miscategorizing the virtue of the quest as the vice of indecision.³ What sprang to mind were the famous lines from Yeats:

The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.⁴

Fortunately, something told me that it was probably a bit early in the day for talk of drowning in a sea of blood, so I downshifted to Tolkien's more palatable one-liner, "Not all who wander are lost." And, truly, this student had not yet even begun to wander. He had entered (like many universities, mine admitted students directly into a school and a program) as a computer engineering major.⁵ It was only recently that he had, as it were, hit force quit.

As we discussed his experience, we found our way back to one of Oakeshott's characteristically lyrical passages:

Each of us is born in a corner of the earth and at a particular moment in historic time, lapped round with locality. But school and university are places apart where a declared learner is emancipated from the limitations of his local circumstances and from the wants he may happen to have acquired, and is moved by intimations of what he has never yet dreamed.⁶

We were struck by the irony of this phrase, "a declared learner." Oakeshott is not talking about picking a lane in the credential race. What he wants us to declare is precisely our intention to engage in a form of learning that is uncoerced and unscripted:

It is, in the first place, an adventure in which an individual consciousness confronts the world he inhabits, responds to what Henry James called "the ordeal of consciousness," and thus enacts and discloses himself. This engagement is an adventure in a precise sense. It has no pre-ordained course to follow: with every thought and action a human being lets go a mooring and puts out to sea on a self-chosen but largely unforeseen course.⁷

Oakeshott's words had resonated with this undeclared sophomore. He had come to university hoping for something different from his earlier schooling. Instead, grinding from exam to exam and from pre-req to pre-req, he found himself caught up in what was just a more advanced version of the same old game of "studenting."⁸ The irony was, only now that he was "undeclared" was he starting to approach his studies as a "declared learner." Why, we wondered, do we attach a negative prefix to this period of exploration when it was his freshman year that had felt *disconnected*, *unintegrated*, and *insignificant*?

It wasn't "relevance" he was after, if that means a rush to translate into familiar languages and practical applications. He was interested in expanded vocabularies and was game to follow ideas wherever they might lead. All he was asking for was a chance to explore how the core ideas in various classes interconnect and link up with the project of becoming an educated person. In fact, he had come to office hours to ask what I thought of an idea he had. He was thinking of starting an organization where groups of students from a given major could investigate, synthesize, and present to each other some of the core ideas in their discipline, and where students from different disciplines could explore overlaps and divergences in these ideas and talk about what it means to be educated.

It sounds like an institution of higher education, I said. I think we should try it.

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Undeclared

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