Sacred Ground: Higher Education and the Importance of Place

JEFFERY P. APER
Millikin University

Abstract: The growing emphasis on cyberspace as a primary locus for the teaching and learning efforts of modern colleges and universities belies larger issues of connection, meaning making, and community necessary to human growth and well-being. College and university campuses can be critical loci of such functions if they are understood as sacred places devoted to ideals of growth, development, community, communication, and especially of freedom of inquiry, expression, and conscience. Though the current pandemic has reinforced reliance on online methods of instruction and interaction, the critical longer term needs of individuals and society at large are served by a renewal of the commitment to college and university campuses as places dedicated to the essential ideals of respectful polity, comity, and mutuality.

Résumé : L'accent de plus en plus mis sur l'espace virtuel en tant que lieu principal d'enseignement et d'apprentissage dans les collèges et les universités modernes dément les problèmes plus vastes de connexion, de création de sens et de communautés nécessaires à la croissance et au bien-être humains. Les collèges et les universités peuvent être des lieux critiques de telles fonctions s'ils sont compris comme des lieux sacrés consacrés aux idéaux de croissance, de développement, de communauté, de communication et surtout de liberté d'enquête, d'expression et de conscience. Bien que la pandémie actuelle ait renforcé la dépendance à l'égard des méthodes d'enseignement et d'interaction en ligne, il existe un besoin de faire une critique de l'enseignement en ligne à long terme par les individus et la société en général. Cette critique permettra de contribuer à renforcir l'engagement des collèges et universités qui continuent à être des lieux dédiés aux idéaux essentiels d'une politique respectueuse, de la courtoisie et de la réciprocité.

Journal of Educational Thought
Vol. 55, No 1, 2022, 23 - 30.

Sacred Ground: Higher Education and the Importance of Place

I hope here to invite the reader to a deeper consideration of the importance of the college or university as a physical place and what that means for the ongoing prospects of our culture and our nation. The pandemic has renewed claims that the traditional university is an expensive and needless anachronism that will be compelled to move much more extensively toward online operations and service to its several constituencies. There is, to be sure, a long history of claims that technology would be the end of universities (mass printing of books, correspondence learning, film, radio, television, computers…), but the university remains and must be sustained as a location for something more than simply conveying information, especially in an era when most people carry around searchable access to the world's greatest libraries on a pocket-sized device. But information is not knowledge, and amassing information is not learning. Colleges and universities are and must be much more than variations on Keanu Reeves plugging a cable into the back of his head and learning Kung-Fu.

I am highly skeptical of the predicted shift of all higher learning to the cyberworld, but not because I think the greatest college is the learned master on one end of a log and a student on the other. In days of yore when I was an undergraduate there were times when I worried about the possibility that a person might literally drift off into irretrievable oblivion from the impenetrable tedium of a classroom. Thus, I do not aim to present any sort of neo-Luddite or nostalgic argument about dehumanizing or quality-diminishing effects of teaching and learning technology, since any technology is simply a new set of tools available for use somewhere on the continuum of effective application. The available evidence does seem to warrant a conclusion that technology tools of various kinds can be substantively beneficial to the work of colleges and universities.

My purpose instead is to address what I think are two important parts of a much larger set of considerations: the first concerns at a basic level the human sense of place with specific reference to college and university campuses; the second concerns the importance of those campuses as essential places devoted to the cultivation and preservation of substantive discourse and meaningful intersections of the sometimes very different subgroups that come together to create highly diverse societies. Authentic, personal experience matters. Neither simulations, virtual

communities, nor any other kind of simulacra replace the multifaceted depth and breadth of direct experience.

Why does Physical Place Matter?

Though much of Western culture is routinely on the move, attachment to place is often equated with stagnation, and virtual places have become as important as physical places, there is still a profoundly deep connection many of us feel to special places. They may be our places of origin, they may be the site of key experiences or memories, or they may reflect and embody our core values. We take pains as a society to preserve and interpret the history and significance of a variety of special places - the homes of former national leaders, sites of natural wonder and beauty, battlefields, early settlements, churches, and the like. Human experience is filled with recognition of certain places as important and meaningful. Such understanding of place shapes individual and group identity as well as orientation to the world. The disconnection from physical place and community impoverishes our lives; we genuinely need what can come from the deep well of experience in a place that carries personal and shared meaning.

More than a century ago, sociologist Emile Durkheim observed that all religious traditions classify the world into two categories – the profane and the sacred. I will extend this concept of profane space to account for those places that are not respected or cared for. They hold no particular shared meaning and are undifferentiated in human thought and action. Much of the space we encounter in today's world is in this sense profane because we have culturally agreed to perceive it that way. We deny the sacred and turn the world into vast tracts that are at a minimum neutral and largely without meaning in our view or worse, degraded and even dangerous. Sacred places, though, are typically set apart, protected, even venerated. Geographer Yi-Fu Tuan has called such places "fields of care" – invested with emotional energy that carries a sense of meaning and purpose about human existence. Our experiences, our identities, and our relationship to the seemingly limitless space of the universe are shaped by our sense of meaningful place. Such places become sacred through our ties to them, our commitments, our reverence, and care for what they tell us and tell about us.

Anyone who has experienced a long sojourn away from a place imbued with personal meaning may have a feeling of loss when disconnected from that place, which may embody and reflect their identity, and is distinctly differentiated from profane, emotionally

neutral space. Yet the valence of meaning associated with most places we encounter is judged more in terms of pecuniary value than as part of a complex and diverse physical world all human beings need for both physical and psychological reasons. As writer and environmentalist Tom Bender has observed, "The places we make act as mirrors to our lives." Sacred places are recognized, valued, and protected for the history they hold, and the stories they sustain that help us make meaning of our existence.

For many traditional college and university alums, their campus is such a sacred place – a place where they had a sense of finding themselves, finding their life partners, or discerning their vocations. The campus and experience it embodies provided a foundation, a firm center from which new graduates could step forward into the challenges and disorder of the larger world. But that experience and sense of meaning seems to be eroding for many contemporary students. Since their founding, many European and North American colleges and universities have sought ways to create special places, special landscapes, believed to be conducive to, perhaps even essential to, their fundamental purposes and objectives. Western societies have historically established special, or designated, places for the purposes of higher learning, reflection, preparation, or training. In these ways colleges and universities were presented and interpreted as places of personal transformation. In a much earlier era, the intention (admittedly idealized) was that students came to campuses as pilgrims, recreating the journeys of ancestors to sacred places; journeys intended to challenge and change them. Pilgrimage reproduces the epic journey of trial and transformation captured in ancient stories from cultures around the world. Pilgrimage has traditionally been understood to involve a separation from "regular life" – a journey to a place that is sacred - so education would be a kind of allegorical experience of the journey through life from immaturity to maturity, from ignorance to knowledge, from foolishness to wisdom, from doubt to faith. Challenge, even severe challenge, was understood to be important and meaningful.

Contrast such intention with the records of Canada and the United States over the past century. As higher education rapidly expanded in the post-World War II era, the college experience became increasingly a mass-produced commodity. The modern approach to higher learning seems to resemble a vending machine more than a commitment to transformative personal experience. The vending machine allows for a simple transactional relationship,

while personal growth and transformation is a complex, difficult, and in some ways almost ineffable process with uncertain outcomes.

Even the buildings of the modern era tend to reflect the profane and aesthetically barren temper of the interior of a manufacturing plant. I invite the reader to take the time to visit any campus across North America that has existed since at least before the First World War and look carefully first at the original buildings of the campus, then at the rapidly constructed buildings of the 1950s, '60s, and '70s. They tend to differ quite markedly in appearance, purpose, and feel in ways that reflect the naive instrumentalism that has shaped higher education over the past 70 years.

This instrumentalist perspective is profoundly reinforced by the egocentrism implicit in much cyberworld experience, which suggests to us that the world somehow revolves around our wishes and convenience. Though they are often mocked, for years there have been variations on television advertisements for online universities that enthusiastically declare that all degree requirements can be met via online learning. One of the primary points often seems to be that the degree can be earned entirely in one's home. Though such messages may be considered practical to some and comical to others, they find a large and receptive market, and the implication is deeply concerning. The physical experience of a university is framed as an inconvenient irrelevancy, or perhaps simply a privilege or indulgence of the wealthy. The message is clear that any important learning, personal growth, or development can occur without the discomfort or inconvenience of having to leave home, or to see, hear, or otherwise actually deal with others face to face.

Thus, in a world increasingly characterized by part-time students and faculty, faculty allegiance to an amorphous "community of scholars" rather than an actual physical place of work and dedication, and online learning, what is the essential value of campus as place? If we no longer need to travel to campuses of any kind to obtain information or even particular knowledge and skills, what difference does the place make other than a sentimental attachment to specific locations that evoke important memories? Is nostalgia really the ultimate reason for regarding the campus to be a sacred place?

An Authentic Place for Democratic Community

I hold that the answer to such questions is no, not only because we need sacred places for our own sakes. Human beings long for a sense of meaning and purpose, which can be fostered by the shared understanding of places revered for the values and ideals they represent. Even more pragmatically, the public good is served not only by sustaining some sense of cultural foundation for our society, but in important ways by the very existence, nature, and function of the university as a sacred, public place - a place that values, permits, and facilitates the direct encounter of and discourse between diverse groups. This concept of place may be crucial to building lasting connections and understanding between and within communities of difference, as an increasingly diverse and fractious society needs so urgently. If university campuses matter in a very practical sense, it may very well be as places where community and place reinforce each other in meaningful commitment to a larger common purpose and good.

Philosopher Jürgen Habermas argued persuasively that democratic process depends on a vibrant, physical community and interaction for the cultivation and survival of democracy in pluralistic times. We need this "discourse democracy" - encounters with others of different opinions, values, experience, and background for meaningful democracy to exist. Physical, public, shared place is needed for the possibility of such public discourse, because it is built on the inclusion and presence of those who are other - different from us. The psychological violence and alienation that can grow in the cyberworld are painfully apparent. We can all recount an ongoing stream of stories of cyber-bullying or other instances in which people use the cyberworld to engage in callous, unethical, even hateful communication in the belief that they are hidden, separated by space, and therefore unaccountable. Even when there is no malicious intent, the cyberworld permits us to engage in the larger culture in often voyeuristic and inauthentic ways.

We urgently need real, physical public places that can provide a common ground for contact, communication, and improved understanding, yet the opportunities for sincere and searching discourse seem increasingly to have been abandoned. Instead, as a society we tend to view public space as a source of hazard, inconvenience, entertainment, or personal benefit, but much less as a site of civic duty, political engagement, or social education. The

idea that public places should serve as the setting for reasoned debate and honest discussion has diminished significantly in our era. Debate is seen as a contest driven by the expectation of defeating or humiliating one's opponent, and discourse is regarded as a chance to defend a position at all costs with the intent of "winning" an argument. The engagement of differing views with a commitment to arrive at the best possible ideas, answers or solutions is far too often unfairly dismissed as unprincipled compromise or cowardly capitulation.

For colleges and universities then, the question is not whether students will come to campus, learn to love alma mater, and experience the distinctive character of student life. The question is whether colleges and universities will continue to serve society as sacred places - places cherished because they embody the highest aspirations of humanity in the twenty-first century. The challenge in this is profound. It means more than cultivating a vague "good spirit" among the many, often competing, constituencies within any institution. It requires a firm commitment to the idea and the ideal that the university is the crucible within which freedom of thought, of expression, of inquiry, and of conscience are encouraged, protected, and extended. This is neither a "liberal" nor a "conservative" argument as those terms are tossed about in the current socio-political environment. Sadly, adherents of perspectives spanning the gamut of contemporary political and cultural convictions seem to have become increasingly willing to shout down or silence those with whom they disagree. How much easier it is to envision such suppression when a click of a button can eliminate disagreeable information or commentary in the cyberworld. Facing other living, breathing human beings in the same place, at the same time requires courage and patience. If we are willing, the rewards can be great, measured in terms of empathy, understanding, and expanded perspectives and possibility.

The aspirations to democratic practice, justice, equity, mutual respect, and a vision of a future that includes all people will not be realized by a society willing to shut out a cacophonous world, cleaving to a world of "me" that empowers and even enculturates its members to reject all that is not immediately wanted, that reinforces divisions of race, gender, culture, power, and place. Inconvenient, expensive, frustrating – maybe all these things and more, still people must have sacred places devoted to coming together and learning together. We must face Other to learn who we

are and must know sacred places so dedicated that orient us in our world. The cyberworld will not and cannot do that. We should hope that colleges and universities can help sustain efforts toward such goals, and I believe we must commit ourselves with all the intelligence, energy, and passion we have to finally realize the necessary meaning and purposes of these sacred places.

Biographical Information: Dr. Jeff Aper is a recently retired chief academic officer and faculty member. He earned a Ph.D. in Educational Research and Evaluation at Virginia Tech University and went on to faculty positions at Southern Illinois University - Carbondale and the University of Tennessee - Knoxville. He later served as Provost at first Blackburn College and then Millikin University, both in Illinois. He has authored over thirty professional publications and has made an equal number of presentations at professional meetings. His primary scholarly interests relate to student outcomes, epistemological issues in educational research, and the ways values shape educational policy and practice.

Author and Affiliation
Dr. Jeffery P. Aper
Emeritus Provost
Millikin University
Email: jefferyaper@gmail.com