THE CURSE OF THE WERE-BUREAUCRAT

or

How I realized that I had finally joined the older generation and become one of them

---

by Susan Wood

In my undergraduate days, my beloved Alma Mater would conduct a grueling yearly ritual that idealistic students had inflicted upon themselves. In typically 1960's activist fashion, student groups had demanded a say in college governance for undergraduates, and the college gave us one, in the form of the annual Campus Colloquium. For one full day, generally chosen for the rainiest and bleakest time of the winter term, so as to discourage Ferris Beullerism, the college cancelled classes. Students were instead expected to attend group discussions at venues throughout the campus on topics like . . . well, for the life of me I can't remember most of them. I do recall one session in which a student delivered an incomprehensible rant about Pre-Med requirements. Her argument might have made sense if she had talked at about one-quarter of the speed, but she machine-gunned her remarks so fast that even the moderators of the discussion threw up their hands and exchanged despairing glances. Too many No-Doz, I suspect, or perhaps some more insidious controlled substance. But since all of us were putting away coffee as fast as the food service could refill the urns, who am I to judge? Some colloquium ses-

sions had to do with the language requirement, and with whether or not we should redesign the major programs. These were, after all, the 60's and early 70's, when students were demanding more "relevant" areas of study, which in plain English meant more social sciences and less mathematics. But what I mainly remember about those colloquia was slogging through the mud and rain from one building to another, drinking cup after styrofoam cup of coffee in order to keep focused on my task as a good academic citizen. And wishing I were curled up in a cozy room with a good novel, as I suspect a number of my fellow students were. One thing I don't recall is that any concrete change in policy, procedure or curriculum ever came out of those talk-a-thons.

Thirty five years later, as I listen to the members of a faculty task force all talking at once, much too fast, and much too loud, as they all struggle to be heard over their colleagues who are also talking too fast and too loud, I muse that even those who can remember history may be doomed to repeat it anyway. Every now and then the faculty and administrators of this beloved institution, with the noblest intentions in the world, establish a task force designed to make us a sleeker, newer, more modern, efficient and elegant institution, prepared to progress boldly into the 21st century. And every time, it seems to my jaded eyes that the results are sadly ephemeral.

Remember the Strategic Plan? A large number of our colleagues labored mightily on it, and produced a long, carefully written document detailing Oakland University's commitment to undergraduate education, graduate education, research, community outreach, collaboration, and all sorts of good stuff like that. For a year or so, we were expected to cite chapter and verse from it when we asked for money, conducted departmental self-studies, proposed new programs or courses, etc. etc. The beauty of the Strategic Plan, from the point of view of most academic departments, was its breadth. Since the university had democratically made sure that most schools and/or departments were represented, almost everyone had gotten a chance to put in a plug for his/her own field of academic en-

deavor. You could find something in it to support just about anything short of actual crime. The most helpful paragraph was the one about commitment to undergraduate education, since all of us do that. We were all quite happy with the Strategic Plan, a fine example of participatory democracy in action.

But before the ink was dry on the Strategic Plan, Creating the Future had already begun. This time, the "think tank" consisted not only of faculty, but also of representatives from local business, industry, city and county government, and other sources of VIP fire-power. This was a demonstration of OU's commitment to working collaboratively with the larger community. Again, everyone concerned took the job seriously, worked hard, put in long hours, and produced a detailed report to which departments were asked to refer in subsequent documents, as we asked for money, etc. etc. And again, the document was comprehensive enough to justify pretty much any plan.

Then there was Vision 2010. President Russi and Vice President Esposito produced a very professional presentation, with video and Power Point, which at the time was still a fancy new toy, before even techno-dunces like your author had learned how to use it. This Vision was to be presented to potential donors and corporate sponsors during our capital campaign, after first, however, being rolled out for the faculty, to get their feedback and support. The faculty would provide the participatory-democracy piece that ensured that the Vision Statement did indeed represent the university's vision. This time, no one could accuse the report of being too broad; it was quite specifically focused on a few programs that the university considers areas of strength. But barely had the President and Provost presented their first dress rehearsal to the first group of faculty when the outcry of "What about us?!?!?!" began to ring forth from every department and program that hadn't been mentioned. That's participatory democracy for you, folks. So eventually, it was back to the drawing board for Vision 2010, and we ended up with a broader, more comprehensive document that we were expected to cite when asking for

money, proposing new programs—well, you know the drill by now.

And then last year there was the "march of the hedgehogs." Each school and program was supposed to formulate a single, unifying vision. This statement of common purpose would make us resemble the wise, single-minded hedgehog, who knows one big thing, as opposed to the dilettantish fox, who knows a lot of little ones. And then we would all "get on the bus" together, and journey toward—I'm not sure what, but presumably a glorious future. The trouble is that a liberal arts education, by its very nature and philosophy, encourages at least a year or two of fox-like thinking, otherwise known as general education and distribution requirements. Of course, every department of every school wanted to make sure that its unit's hedgehog statement mentioned, or at least alluded to, its own area of study. I'm not saying that the final products were foxes in hedgehogs' clothing, but I could have sworn I saw a few bushy red tails with white tips flicking out from under the spiny coats as the hedgehogs marched across the stage of 201 Dodge Hall on their way to "get on the bus." Which has now, apparently, taken them somewhere distant from here. But I have no doubt that in a year or two, another time-intensive, labor-intensive task force will be created, to take yet another shot at creating a grand and coherent vision of Oakland University's future. And another, and another. They will all produce painstakingly drafted, 100-or-so page documents that will either be handsomely printed on glossy paper and distributed to every faculty mailbox, or sent out electronically, to be printed by the recipients. Either way, a lot of trees will die, and OU will pay for the paper.

Meanwhile, other task forces have been given slightly more narrow charges, like for example completely redesigning the General Education program in such a way as to satisfy North Central's demand for a method of assessing "student learning outcomes." After four years of exhaustive and exhausting labor, the General Education task force deconstructed the older program, turned it inside out, upside down,

reassembled the respective parts, and came up with—well, what do you know, almost exactly the same set of requirements as before, except with new language to describe them, which we now had to incorporate into syllabi and catalog copy. And, of course, a new layer of paperwork for the instructor, who now has to produce numerical evaluations of the class's performance, in addition to, and not by any means to overlap with, the task of grading 80 to 100 students.

Do I sound like a cynical, petulant adolescent? Yes, probably. And despite my sarcasm about participatory democracy, I would be the last, as a student of Classical antiquity, to disparage the Athenians of the 5th century B.C. for inventing it. Their city assembly meetings were undoubtedly every bit as raucous, chaotic, frustrating and frequently unproductive as many that I've sat through. But if the Athenians hadn't had the courage to fling themselves into those tasks of governance, we'd still be living under a system of divine kingship, in which the leader's word is law because the god Ammon Ra ordained that he was to be born to the first wife of the previous Pharaoh. Would I rather teach at a university in which all decisions are made by a small cabal of tenured faculty in a smoke-filled back room, from which they emerge with decisions for which they are accountable to no one? Well, I did teach in a non-tenure track position at exactly such an institution, which I will not name except to say that it's a large university in Cambridge, Massachusetts, with an inflated sense of its own importance. Transparency, with all its headaches and drawbacks, is far preferable.

They say that at a certain age we all realize with horror that we've turned into our own parents, or otherwise entered the Old Fogey generation. One such moment for me occurred during a contentious faculty meeting of the Art and Art History department. Over the past few years, during which I chaired AAH, the implementation of our studio art major had doubled the number of students in our programs, expanded our faculty, and led to some predictable differences of opinion about directions in which the department should be going and

how it should be governed en route. One faculty member remarked that our one-hour meetings, the only time slot that we could fit into everyone's teaching schedules on a weekday, was too short, and that we needed a longer session. "Well," I replied, in utter disbelief that these words were coming out of my own mouth, "should we have a day-long retreat some Saturday to talk this through in more detail?" And that was what we did, not once but twice, holding one retreat in the fall semester and another shortly after the beginning of the winter term. Was it helpful? I hope so, although the results didn't take the form of a clear and specific road map that we could follow in subsequent years. The benefits were more in the form of the opportunity to air our respective opinions and listen seriously to one another. And it was a great excuse to serve the adorable, and delicious, little hedgehog-shaped pastries from the Give Thanks Bakery in Rochester. They're made with marzipan, chocolate, and almond shreds to form the hedgehog spines. One colleague opined that they were too cute to eat, but quickly overcame his objection.

The great archaeologist Mabel Laing used to remind us during my college days that "the unexamined life is not worth living, and the unexamined university is not worth loving." So perhaps despite my curmudgeonly venting about the futility of most task forces that are charged with creating grand master plans for the future I should accept them as a necessary part of a university's life. Even if we don't succeed in remaking the institution after some utopian ideal, we have at least made the conscious effort to articulate our goals and philosophy. But the skeptic in me has to remind my colleagues not to get too carried away with the importance of it all. Life, as a culture hero of my rebellious generation wisely observed toward the end of his own, is what happens to you while you're making other plans. So let's hold our retreats and task-force meetings, and resist the temptations of entropy and cynicism. But let's not forget to bring the cookies, either.