The Is, the Ought, and the In Between: A Professor's Life

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In January, 1989, I organized a faculty retreat in Cardiff-by-the-Sea, California, to explore the question of what it means to be a professor. The participants were a newly appointed professor, a professor about to leave the university for, as she described it, an environment more conducive to thinking and learning, a professor renowned for her love of teaching, a professor renowned for his love of research, and two professors renowned for their love of the life in toto. As I recall, the conversations were lively, and though the perspectives on the question of what it means to be a professor varied considerably within the group, we did manage to agree that a professor's life was a good one, especially if you were committed to learning, and sharing the results of your learning with others (Dustin, 1990).

Among the participants was Thomas L. Goodale, a professor from George Mason University in Virginia. I had met Goodale the first time at the 1987 National Recreation and Park Association's Leisure Research Symposium Social in New Orleans, Louisiana, when Bev Driver introduced him to me as Tom "Canada." To Driver's delight, I took the bait by replying, "So nice to meet you, Dr. Canada," not understanding that "Canada" was merely a tease at Goodale's sixteen year tenure at The University of Ottawa. Blushing, I apologized, and went on to say I had been well aware of his name, if not his visage, for many years, since my mentor at The University of Minnesota, John Schultz, told me long ago that I would like him if I ever met him, because we were both devotees of Jacob Bronowski.

Professor Schultz was right. Over the years, I have become both a friend and a fan of Goodale, and when I saw reference to a recent talk of his in Parks & Recreation that was characterized as a "sermon" (Stewart & Samdahl, 2000), it occurred to me that this was one preacher worth writing about. For Goodale, in my humble estimation, epitomizes what being a professor is about. Now I know not everyone will agree with me. Park and recreation educators are decidedly Pollyannish about the prospects for the future, while Goodale is Cassandra-like, possessing a seriousness of mind and purpose that is sobering. As his friend and colleague Geof Godbey attests, "Goodale has little tolerance for injustice," and he can expound at the drop of a hat on what's wrong with the world, and on what's wrong with our profession's efforts to remedy it.

Goodale is prone to the jeremiad, and he is better suited for challenging our thinking than making us feel good about ourselves (Witness his closing address at a recent SPRE Teaching Institute at Indiana University where he focused on the downside of technology right after many of the institute's presenters had championed its upside.).

His arguments are well researched, well articulated, and so well tied to the larger problems of the day that you are often left scratching your head and wondering just what you can do about it. As Janna Rankin is fond of saying, after one of his talks, "I just feel like going home and cleaning out the garage."

Goodale, in sum, is both a trumpeter and a fighter for the ideals he believes in based upon his reading of the world. He professes a particular point of view. He stands for something. While you may disagree with Goodale, you never have to worry about not getting his point. And while he may come across to some people as vinegarish, the aftertaste says a lot more about the culture he is trying to come to terms with than it does about him. He is a professor's professor, and he has spent his entire career negotiating the uneven terrain that is higher education, a terrain that can best be described as the land of the is, the ought, and the in between.

The Is, the Ought and the In Between

Professors, you see, view the world through many different kinds of lenses. Some peer through the lenses of a natural or physical scientist and focus on trying to see the world as it is. Others peer through the lenses of the arts and humanities and focus on trying to see the world as it ought to be. Still others peer through the lenses of a social scientist and focus on trying to see the world in between, the bridge, if you will, between what is and what ought to be.

Unfortunately, as Allan Bloom describes it in The Closing of the American Mind, professors—especially social science professors—often get their lenses mixed up. Social scientists, for example, frequently ape the methods of the natural and physical sciences in trying to understand social problems. But they run into difficulty, according to Bloom, because the assumptions underlying scientific inquiry that have worked so well in explaining the physical world have proven inadequate when applied to that part of us that is not body, the part that makes us uniquely human. (Bloom, 1987)

This "vision thing" has resulted in a great debate within our social scientific community over the appropriateness of different kinds of lenses for viewing the problems confronting our field. Diane Samdahl has done a masterful job of capsulizing this debate in Edgar Jackson's and Timothy Burton's Leisure Studies: Prospects for the Twenty-First Century, so I won't delve into it here. (Samdahl, 1999) Suffice it to say I think Goodale has a handle on the implications of this debate, since so much of what he has to say these days points toward leisure politics rather than leisure science to cure what ails us. (see Hemingway, 1999, for an expanded discussion) While honoring the contributions of social science, Goodale recognizes its limitations, and he believes our hope for the future rests in our collective will to do the right thing more so than it does in collecting more data. To be sure, he appreciates how social science can inform decision-making, but he also understands that social science is not enough. He is, at his core, an activist.

Activist professors are uncommon in our midst. That's because so many of us have been taught that we should strive to remain neutral, that we should strive to be objective, that we should strive to let the facts speak for themselves. As I have written elsewhere, "This creates an intellectual tentativeness that makes it difficult for us to say much of anything with certainty. We are, by education, prone to qualification. While I understand the scientific need for this, I also understand that others who are not so constrained are busily acting. To be bystanders, then, when our incomplete information is more complete than the information being acted upon is, to me at least, goofy. If, as social scientists, we wait to be absolutely sure about something before we speak up, we are destined to be a silent lot." (Dustin, 1999)

Goodale is anything but silent on matters important to him. First, he does his best to get the facts straight. Then he moves from those facts to discussions of what ought to be done about them. The best example of this is his decision to serve on the advisory board of TV Free America after he researched the deleterious effects of watching television. It is his willingness, or perhaps I should say his courage, to take this step from what is to what ought to be that separates him from the pack.

Goodale's critics will quickly point out a problem with such activism —the is/ought problem—as philosopher David Hume portrayed it. (Hume, 1970) It is impossible, Hume reasoned, to go directly from a description of the facts (what is) to a prescription for what should be done about them (what ought to be). If this was all Goodale was doing, I would be less of a fan. But he deserves more credit than that. As philosopher Mortimer Adler contends, the is/ought problem can be surmounted if one first distinguishes between real and apparent goods, between needs and wants, and by understanding the self-evident truth of right desire. (Adler, 1981) When Goodale argues with you about what ought to be done, he is not arguing about a matter of taste or preference. He is arguing about a matter of principle anchored in serious philosophical thought.

The philosophical realm is Goodale's turf. He knows it better than any other professor with whom I am acquainted (save, perhaps, John Hemingway). He wrestles continually with questions of good and bad, and right and wrong. He understands that recreation rightly understood is a matter of virtuous conduct. He understands this from reading and thinking about philosophy. And his preaching about what ought to be done is always grounded in a thorough consideration of the underlying philosophical issues. His arguments, then, hinge on the distinction between real and apparent goods, between needs and wants, and on his thoughtful interpretation of right desire. He reads voraciously. He ponders. Then he writes and speaks. This, I submit to you, is what a professor is supposed to do.

The Dignity of Uniqueness

To those who know Goodale, there isn't much wiggle room in him. He has strong opinions on many subjects, including what ought to be the nature of a higher education.

In his own words, the main work of the university is to "shape and maintain the conscience of humankind." (Goodale, 1990, p. 83) He is of the "old school," a school that views higher education first and foremost as preparation for responsible and enlightened citizenship in a participatory democracy. Training students for a job in parks and recreation, and subscribing to a pre-determined set of professional standards and competencies, make little sense to him. Throughout his career, he has employed a liberal studies approach to teaching undergraduates about leisure, preferring to acquaint them with enduring ideas revealed in history, philosophy, and literature over the latest benefits-based thinking of marketers and managers.

This conviction of purpose is what has made Goodale so vibrant a presence in our academic community. It is also what I will miss most about him in his retirement from university life. The educational philosopher, Eugene Debs, said "intelligent discontent is the mainspring of civilization." He was talking about Goodale. His departure from our midst will be as a flame gone out, and conference gatherings will be less combustible.

I will also miss his example. Bronowski once said that we ought to live our lives in a way that allows what is true to be verifiable. (Bronowski, 1975). Goodale tries harder to do this than most anyone else I know. There is a consistency to him that is rooted in deeply held core values, a consistency that is reassuring to those of us who count him as a friend, and who count on him occasionally for a word of advice. In this regard, he is worth his weight in gold. Always true to his word, and equally true to the ideals of his mentor, Harlan "Gold" Metcalf, he has devoted his life to staying consistently in the presence of the best in the sphere in which he has sought attainment, and he has made an honest response.

Godbey once wrote that "it is the uniqueness of the professor which historically counts within the hierarchy of the university. Instructors, it is assumed, will often function as almost interchangeable parts. As one moves up the pecking order, however, uniqueness becomes increasingly more important until, at the highest levels, what the individual professor does cannot be replaced merely by hiring someone else." (Godbey, 1990, p. 74) I agree with Godbey. For that reason, I know Tom Goodale will be irreplaceable. It will have to be enough to take his lessons to heart and cherish the memory of his example.

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