

To the University, With Love  
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Since 1983 I've been on the faculties of various universities in the United States: two public land-grant systems (Wisconsin, Illinois), one Catholic university (Notre Dame), and two private research universities (Chicago, Duke). I've taught undergraduates and graduate students, supervised doctoral students, written books and essays and journalism (some of it for *Commonweal*), and, throughout it all, talked to anyone who wanted to listen, with a special preference for those who'd pay to listen to me. The ordinary academic thing.

I'm a creature of the university, and, above all, a child of words. Words have flowed through me, sometimes easily and sometimes not; they're what I've immersed myself in and provided a channel for, and they're what I've tried to give to others. I've loved word-work and poured my life into it. I love it still.

I am, too, a working-class emigrant Englishman, in the first generation of my family of origin to gain a university degree. I've been a delighted citizen of the United States by naturalization since 1994, and have lived here much longer than that, from the bitter end of the Carter presidency to the astringent beginning of the Trump years. I'm sixty-one now, and was twenty-four when I landed at JFK with a suitcase, a scholarship, and \$500. My life in those years has been a university life, which has been both a privilege and an ecstasy.

Deep in me is a love for and romanticism about the United States that's perhaps only possible for an alien. Equally deep, the gift of class and temperament, has been a need to make my way. That's an ordinary immigrant passion, at least for those without resources. I had none, except for words. And so words, in universities, have been what I've used to make my way. I've used them to elucidate, to explain, to understand, and, subtending and informing those uses, to argue. The word-life, which is the same as the life of the mind, has been for me one of struggle to accentuate and sharpen intellectual differences with the goal of increasing clarity about what they come to and what's at stake in them. I've been rewarded for that word-struggle with academic positions and some academic honors. For those rewards I'm grateful and, often, still, astonished. How is it possible that I've held professorial chairs at top-flight universities? It didn't seem possible when I began; it scarcely seemed so even when it happened; and now that it's over it seems like a Taoist butterfly-dream or a Buddhist sky-flower.

It's over because I recently, and freely, resigned my chair in Catholic Theology at Duke University in response to disciplinary actions initiated by my Dean and colleagues. Those disciplinary actions, in turn, were provoked by my words: critical and confrontational words spoken to colleagues in meetings; and hot words written in critique of university policies and practices, in support of particular freedoms of expression and thought, and against legal and disciplinary constraints of those freedoms. My university superiors, Dean and Provost, have been at best lukewarm in their support of these freedoms, preferring to them conciliation and accommodation of their opponents. And so, I reluctantly concluded, the word-struggle, the agony of distinction and argument, the search for clarity by dramatizing and exploring difference -- these no longer have the place they once had in the university.

Harsh and direct disagreement places thought under pressure. That's its point. Pressure can be intellectually productive: being forced to look closely at arguments against a beloved position helps those who hold it to burnish and buttress it as often as it moves them to abandon it. But pressure also causes pain and fear; and when those under pressure find these things difficult to bear, they'll sometimes use any means possible to make the pressure and the pain go away. They feel unsafe, threatened, put upon, and so they react by deploying the soft violence of the law or the harder violence of the aggressive and speech-denying protest. Both moves are common enough in our élite universities now, as is their support by the powers that be. Tolerance for intellectual pain is less than it was. So is tolerance for argument.

For me, the sky-flower has fallen to the ground, its petals scattered but bearing still the beauty of a remembered reverie. I bear responsibility, of course; my class, my intellectual formation in the snidely and aggressively English dialectic of debate, my eye-to-the-main-chance polemical temperament, and, no doubt, other deep and damaged traits of which I'm scarcely aware, all had their part to play in bringing the sky-flower to earth.

The words remain, however, and I as child of them -- child, too, of the Word in which the words participate. Leaving the university is a small thing in that light. It's the opening of a door. And at sixty-one, the door opens, among other things, upon the path toward death. *Timor mortis conturbat me*, certainly; but the anticipation of death comforts me, too. That there are words for that complicated condition, and that it's possible to think with them, are not among the university's gifts. But without the university I would not be able to think about those words as, in fact, I can; and that is a debt of gratitude I won't now be able to further discharge.