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Program Review and The Book of Job

Willa Cather once wrote that there are only three or four "stories" and that we each live out at least one of them. Certainly one of the great stories is Job. The plight of the WCU Philosophy Program is really small potatoes on the world scene, but when I read the final report of the Program Review Committee it seemed to me, in its small way, that our case was so similar to the plight of that ancient man, Job. This is a story about teaching because for most of us at the university teaching what we love is why we are here. If we had wanted a really big salary we would have done something else. All of the people who were undergraduate philosophy majors with me make much more money than I do. They are lawyers, doctors, bankers, etc. I went into teaching philosophy and religion because I believe students need to think about important questions that have little to do with money and all to do with life. This is also an essay on teaching because I believe that people who are prevented from teaching what they love and only have the opportunity to teach entry level classes will burn out quickly and lose their love of teaching. Reducing some faculty to teaching only service courses creates a caste system in which some faculty are not only compensated more generously for their work, but, more importantly, some faculty exist only to serve other majors. This may create other people besides me, who, struck with the spirit of prophecy (or whining), want to "play Job."

The Book of Job is divided into four parts: a prose prologue, a poetic section in which Job is comforted, a second poetic section in which Job receives an answer from God, and a prose epilogue. I will only discuss the first two sections because the last sections, the final answer from God and the prose epilogue have yet to be played. The Program Review Committee gets three roles in my story--God, the comforters, and Satan. (Satan, only in what biblical scholars argue is the earliest meaning of Satan: the adversary, the one who speaks against, who accuses. This is certainly the proper role of the Program Review Committee, to examine and accuse programs and weed out those that do not measure up. It is not until hundreds of years later, in the Apocalyptic Literature, that Satan takes on the role of demon).

I. Prologue

In the prologue God is walking among his court in heaven and meets Satan, the accuser. God points out Job to Satan as an example of a fine fellow and Satan challenges God on this point. God allows Satan to torment Job. All this goes on unbeknownst to poor Job, who is having a great life until he is told that he has lost everything--including his children. Job deals with this torment but then God gives Satan power over Job's body and Job is driven to the ground where he sits and laments his fate.

II. First Poetic Section

The committee of "comforters"--Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar, and finally, Elihu--show up and try to explain to Job why God has canceled his life. It is important to note that none of the members of this committee are in Job's position. Job speaks to God as well as to his "comforters."

Job: Woe is me; why has this happened to us? We lose our life. Wouldst Thou take our children away from us?

Eliphaz: Verily, you philosophers have sinned; ye have been weighed in the balance and found wanting. Ye have fallen below the sacred numbers of graduates set forth in the holy law from Board of Governors. But why lamenteth thou so; ye will not lose your jobs.

Job: Jobs! Have ye never regarded the holy numbers in the blessed BD 119? We are philosophers; we are paid among the least of God's servants. We chose to do this for the love of philosophy, not money. And Thou wouldst take from us our children without whom little philosophy will come to pass in the valley of Cullowhee. Thou wouldst slay us unto the fourth generation. We may never return. For did not great Aristotle say philosophy requireth others?

Bildad: But ye had not many. Behold the legions of Marketing and CJ majors.

Job: Blessed be they. But our children were beautiful and they did go out into the world, even to law school, and graduate schools of diverse types, and some, yea, even unto jobs. For it is written in the sacred statistics that philosophy majors do score well on LSAT, and GMAT, and GRE, and MCAT even unto the highest levels. And they are admitted more than most others into these sacred vocations.

Zophar: But not many at Western hearkened to your call to major.

Job: We had not much time. Only seven years hence were we made a major. Verily, is it not written by the prophet, "Thou must raiseth the bar," and is not part of this raising expectations? The other day I did speak unto my intro religion class asking: "verily, how many of ye would be doctors?" And not a one did speak but only did they say that one does not aspire to be a doctor from Western. Should this not change? And can we not help? And is it not written that we shouldst have "excellence with a personal touch?"

Elihu: Yea, flaunt not your strength sinner. Your upper division classes are under enrolled.

Job: Not really, only some. Our average achieveth unto 13 in such courses, which transcendeth the holy number 10. And if Thee would but count general education we teach well over 20 a course. Yeah, in these courses we do teach 35. Do we gain no merit in Thine eyes for all these freshmen we do teach? We have sworn that in the new Liberal Studies we will make all our courses available and yet Thou wouldst still slay us. Why? Of what profit is this to Thee or to Western? If we teach the classes and it costeth thee not, wherefore wilt Thou not give us a major? Why dost Thou still torment us? Wouldst be good for Thee to take some logic to clear thy head. Are we not now regionally relevant and have the comparative advantage over the Philistines at App and the Hittites in the city of Asheville? For we now have environmental ethics. What else wouldst Thou that we do? Wherein do we still offend Thee? We were accused of not being planted in this region, of no comparative advantage, of having some under enrolled major classes. But in Thy sacred decrees you say these are no longer our offences. Yet ye wouldst still slay us. Oh that I could plead my case before Thee, but Thou decrees Thy reports from afar and Thou slayest us from afar.

Conclusion

Job does not accept the reasons of the comforters because they just don't make sense. In the final report the committee says our plans for environmental ethics and environmental philosophy "represent a major potential for comparative advantage," and "the move to offer upper division liberal studies credit is likely to have a positive effect on upper-level course enrollments" (already most of our classes are not under enrolled; in the future, none of them will be.) Yet they still want to kill the major. If we are able to offer most upper level courses as liberal studies under the new program and the major doesn't cost the university anything why can't we have a philosophy major? "It doesn't cost much so keep it" was the committee's decision about International Business. If this university aspires to be anything like a community of scholarship, there needs to be a good deal more dialogue on the direction we are going to take. I'm encouraged by some things I have heard in the last few weeks. And, of course, God does eventually speak to Job. It may not have been a very satisfactory answer, but it was personal. Like some other Jobs in this university I am hoping for wiser and more benevolent gods than produced what I've read in the report. We are waiting for god(ot?).

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