Chapter 1

Humans as Scholars, Scholars as Humans

Anna Sims Bartel

The thing being made in a university is humanity . . . Underlying the idea of a university—the bringing together, the combining into one, of all the disciplines—is the idea that good work and good citizenship are the inevitable by-products of the making of a good—that is, a fully developed—human being.

—Wendell Berry

How can higher education become a more multidimensional enterprise, one that draws on the full range of human capacities for knowing, teaching, and learning; that bridges the gaps between the disciplines; that forges stronger links between knowing the world and living creatively in it, in solitude and community?

—Parker J. Palmer, Arthur Zajonc, and Megan Scribner

Anna Sims Bartel’s dissertation advisor once said to her father-in-law, “Anna’s problem is that she is part activist, part administrator, and part academic.” He replied, as she would have: “Exactly. But why is that a problem?” As someone passionate about the work of story in the world, Anna earned her PhD in comparative literature at Cornell and has put it to work trying to make higher education ever more useful in the world. She does this through faculty roles, consulting, and public humanities initiatives as well as the development of community-engagement centers at several institutions of higher education in cold, white places (upstate New York, Maine, and Iowa). Currently Anna serves as associate director for community-engaged curricula and practice in Cornell’s Office of Engagement Initiatives, where she works on advancing faculty growth and network development in engaged scholarship, teaching, and research. Her life’s work is to transform higher education toward greater public engagement and usefulness, through structural, systemic, cultural and relational change. Anna’s current research interests are broad and include social change and transformation; cli-fi; the US agrarian novel; and, of course, civic engagement. Her most accessible publication (“Why Public Policy Needs the Humanities, and How”) appeared
in 2015 in the Maine Policy Review, and her recent work focuses on “democratically engaged assessment.” She works at and builds out the intersections of social innovation and civic engagement and networked models of faculty development. Anna enjoys the things that support chronic hope: the chaos of her young family; being in, on, or near moving water; the smell of dirt and the good things that grow in it.

Her chapter here aims to provide intellectual framing for this project as a whole: as a reflective practice, a faculty development opportunity, a community-building moment, an institutional transformation initiative. She lays out discrete ways of thinking about civic professionalism, civic agency, public happiness, and civic loneliness, weaving them together into an argument for transforming our institutions and practices of scholarship.

I used to do an exercise with my students, as an introduction to the role of universities in US culture. I asked them to close their eyes and picture a college professor, then, keeping their eyes closed, to describe the professor. I wrote on the board what they envisioned: an older man, white, wearing a cardigan with elbow patches or a bow tie or both, who has a drinking problem and may or may not be sleeping with students. He is probably lonely and divorced. His work is abstruse and of interest to few people besides himself. Then I asked them to open their eyes and describe the college professor in front of them: also white but female, just thirty, with purple cat’s-eye glasses and short, spiky, blondish hair. Also: with a husband, two dogs, and commitments to various local boards. The class was on concepts of work as service, and it involved each student partnering with a non-profit for a semester-long internship to explore how they might connect the issues they were passionate about with paid work to sustain them more richly in life. And every Tuesday night we would gather to discuss the readings: theology, feminist theory, educational philosophy, sociology of work, poems, and stories. In short, we were using interdisciplinary humanities to learn reflection, deliberation, and ethical engagement with the world, understanding our work choices as a core component of our human being. That’s higher education too.

These questions of the relevance of higher education and its faculty have new urgency in the face of rising tuition costs and declining public support for higher education (fiscal and otherwise), even more urgency in light of the assorted catastrophes we are facing in the world. Higher education has produced faculty who live divided lives (Boyte and Fretz; O’Meara; Palmer; Snyder-Hall), and reconnecting the pieces—reason and emotion, theory and practice, public and private—seems essential if we are to move on
productively. These are not new ideas. The 2007 Heart of Higher Education conference and its 2018 follow-up (both from Parker Palmer’s work) created important national forums for these discussions; the Democratic Engagement White Paper from Saltmarsh, Hartley, and Clayton laid out a case for the civic component of this; Sandmann and others have offered insights into how we can “create academic homes” for public and engaged scholars. The Fetzer Institute, the Kettering Foundation, the National Science Foundation, the Association of American Colleges and Universities, Imagining America, Campus Compact, and a wide variety of other national organizations have supported inquiry into these same themes. All of us are asking questions: How can we make engaged scholarship, or in our case engaged humanities, more relevant and better understood? How can we imagine a new reality, one in which more faculty are engaged, curious, and connecting their public aspirations and professional work in productive ways? And, most importantly, how can we actually shift faculty and institutional cultures to invite and enable such healthy, whole engagement as norm rather than exception?

The Mellon Diversity Seminar at Cornell University sought to do just that. We recognize that change is more than individual, that learning communities can support individual change even as they shift expectations and understandings for the group as a whole. We believe that the kinds of shifts necessary are cultural and institutional, professional and personal, perhaps even spiritual for some. Our interests are diverse and perform in many ways the kinds of connections we seek to lift up. In exploring our theme of “Scholars as Humans: Enacting the Liberal Arts in Public,” we addressed issues including identity (conceptually, but also literally, as one studies focuses on governmental ID processes); slavery and its living legacies; the role of theater in promoting social change; social movements and “demosprudence”; the radical pedagogies of a Brooklynite Latino goat farmer; local collaborations with Latino/a communities; the ethics and practices of trust in rural Peruvian archaeological digs; the experiential impacts of physically visiting Underground Railroad sites; youth-driven collaborative urban theater; naming and talking about the things we cannot talk about; and, of course, the larger questions of the role of the humanities in public life and in our lives. We talked and ate; we each designed and led at least one session; we shared and responded to one another’s writing.

Our project was designed as it was—a small, year-long weekly seminar, with lunch—partly because the format is comfortable for academic humanists and partly because the structure of a learning community, a community
of practice, a community of transformation, is also comfortable. Our process stood in contrast to conventional methods of institutional change-promotion: counting on “aggregation of individual changes,” thinking “in terms of scale and speed,” and staying focused primarily on “top leaders” and “problem-solving.” Instead we chose to emphasize structure and process, relationship, and “getting the questions right” (Block, 74–75). We recognize the dialectical relationship between individual and communal transformation, and we understand that we seek both. We further understand the tension and interdependence between what Adrianna Kezar, in her book How Colleges Change, calls “first-order changes” (those dealing with relatively straightforward shifts, say in pedagogical technology or dissemination strategies) and “second-order changes” (deeper shifts in values, attitudes, or culture). The breadth of institutional change we imagine will require both, and there is much energy at Cornell already being put toward first-order changes, particularly through Engaged Cornell and the Center for Teaching Innovation. Our seminar, then, can be described as working toward second-order change, building networks and communities that we hope and believe will lead to lasting systemic shifts in our work as scholars and humans.

As a staff member with Cornell’s Office of Engagement Initiatives, which stewards Engaged Cornell (“advancing Cornell’s mission through community-engaged discovery and learning”), I work at the intersections of higher education and public life, supporting faculty who seek to engage with their communities in learning how to do that better. Some do it for enhanced student motivation and learning; some do it out of their own sense of identity and commitment to the world; some do it for a sense of professional contribution, as a way to live out the public purpose of their discipline (Saltmarsh). And while I can and do provide support and deliberative exploration across these arenas of pedagogical, civic, and vocational concern, individual or first-order change is rarely enough if it’s countercultural. Culture change, or deep second-order change, is what we’re after ultimately. Faculty learn best from their peers both in terms of technical or practice dimensions and in terms of courage and conviction, so the creation of peer learning communities is a vital component of what I do. We see these communities as networks of engagement and support, enablers and encouragers of the brave and curious work of building community across difference. In such communities, as we saw in our Mellon seminar, people come to trust one another and one another’s shared commitment to public purpose, and the community becomes a space of refuge, exploration, and transformation.
Peter Block says that “community . . . is about the experience of belonging . . . to belong is to be related to and a part of something.” But he also offers a second meaning: “to belong to a community is to act as a creator and co-owner of that community. What I consider mine I will build and nurture. The work, then, is to seek in our communities a wider and deeper sense of emotional ownership; it means fostering among all of a community’s citizens a sense of ownership and accountability” (Block, xii). In higher education, this means supporting a transformation from “the isolation and self-interest within our communities into connectedness and caring for the whole” (1). Even caring, as a concept, engaging heart and body as well as mind, flies in the face of our cognition-oriented, technocratic cultures of institution. Since Plato, academe has been relegated to provinces above the neck, when processes of knowing in fact depend heavily on passion, affect, and psychological comfort. These reconnections, fundamentally, are the challenging, hopeful, essential work of community engagement within higher education, and it is what our seminar was designed to nurture.

**Building Community and Achieving Cultural Change**

Change efforts can be sorted in many ways, by exploring the depth or nature of a goal as well as its process and ethics. A key consideration in their success or failure often stems from their engagement of multiple stakeholders, or, conversely, the extent to which they appear to be a top-down mandate. Although many high-level articulations of the shift to an engaged campus or an engaged faculty presume a sweeping change, some sort of lock-step progress involving “nothing less than a radical reordering of the nature of faculty work from the individual to the collective, from the personal to the social” (Plater, 158), the reality is that such an approach may be counterproductive, at least if faculty see it coming. The cultures of academic freedom that mark higher education and differentiate it from most other professions assume that our collective is made up of our individual contributions and that we should trust one another to be wise and brilliant and to offer contributions that will in some way enrich us all. Moreover, “higher education institutions, as social institutions, are supposed to be long-standing and support an enduring mission” (Kezar, 62). Even change efforts that are about reorienting “toward a founding mission” (as in the case of Engaged Cornell and similar initiatives elsewhere) may find themselves run aground on disagreements over the merit of the mission and its drift over time.
Two strong alternatives present themselves: organizing, as in social movements, and network weaving. We find them symbiotic and use network theory for its apparent rigor and data-driven-ness (using the master’s tools, so to speak). Contemporary network theory suggests that different others in relationship can achieve valuable change more efficiently together than they could separately, and often in unpredictable ways; positive change that serves us all is more often, some theorists and practitioners claim, the result of vibrant, generative social networks than of well-executed administrative plans (Wheatley and Frieze). Plus, as the logic of human behavior would dictate (and as my own experience bears out), faculty tend to fear the loss of their freedom, especially to agendas they did not design. Their perennial tension with administration makes engagement by fiat, by appeal to institutional mission, untenable and unwise as a standalone approach.

What we seek to do, then, as we make our path toward the commonly desired end of academics with a public purpose, in hopes that “we might become a healthy people in a healthy land” (Berry 2002), is to incite in each faculty member engagement with his or her core purposes and fullest humanity. This is not unlike the Courage and Renewal work of Parker Palmer in that it is grounded in relationships of safety and bravery; we connect those text-driven reflective approaches with Liberating Structures that surface wisdom from many voices, to create heart-forward spaces of rest, introspection, deep listening, rigorous critique, and endless possibility. In such communities and in the relational work of network weaving (ideally conjoined in long-term learning communities like our Mellon Diversity Seminar or the Engaged Faculty Fellows cohorts I lead), we find the seeds of both enhanced individual engagement with the world and potential collaboration toward ever greater impact. “On the one hand, a campus must find ways for the work of individual scholars to fit into a collective purpose and, on the other, find a worthy purpose for its collective work” (Plater). Such alignment builds community even as it honors the basic human motives and propensities of each of us: to desire a fuller understanding of our own gifts and inclinations, to fear the loss of what we value, to be of use.

**Why This Is Hard**

Universities are difficult places because they have inherited a range of purposes, both implicit and explicit, including generating new knowledge, protecting and transmitting particular knowledges and cultures, training leaders, contributing to the public good, and advancing technological and
economic progress, both broadly and in our home communities. Even at Cornell, where we have a specific contractual and historical public purpose, we have struggled to adhere to it in the face of rising pressures toward external funding, ranking systems, and disciplinary norms. Engaged Cornell’s framing documents declare its intent to “reorient the university toward its founding mission of knowledge with a public purpose.” Many faculty would contend that the knowledge they pursue and create is all about public purpose, but they also face enormous pressures to not waste time exploring those, even if public purpose is the force that gives our work meaning. Scholarly work is technical, quantifiable, our reward system seems to imply, rather than relational, and what matters is the sharpness and volume of what we can do in our field rather than the usefulness of what we can do with our field. Humans want to be useful, and our scholarship is often, for many of us, a way to “be of use.” So how did we come to this? How did we come to a place and a time where it is not only humorless but downright important to claim, as we do, that scholars are humans? Of course, we are! But by guiding our work away from its core social purposes, by devaluing more diverse ways of knowing and being, our institutions seem designed to make us less so.

Through promotion and tenure pressures, faculty are often channeled away from larger public interests and practices and toward the hyperspecialized, profoundly narrow, often theoretical interests of the disciplines (Ellison and Eatman). There are several reasons for this: one is inertia, which at this point represents a serious force in the academic mainstream; another is how “excellence” is defined; but another is that our power derives from our inscrutability. As Maria Regina Kecht reminds us in Pedagogy Is Politics, to demystify our work, to articulate it clearly, is to hand over the reins of power. Our value lies in the inaccessibility of our knowledges, in our doing what no one else can do, and perhaps what no one but our peers can understand well enough to properly critique.

This seminar is about healing these rifts between mainstream academic culture and the interests of humans, both individual and societal. In it, faculty from various disciplines explain and explore the intersections of their scholarly interests with their human lives and identities. We are aware that our own histories drive and shape our pursuits with force and specificity, and we are often aware of the sacrifice involved in stripping our scholarship of those personal dimensions. It is relevant! something in us shouts, that I come to this work through my particular life, and for it to be my work, then, I need to offer it to readers through my particular lens. But the academy has only so much
tolerance for “other” voices, for approaches that are not recognizably “scientific,” say, or for “soft” topics like children or justice or love. In technocratic cultures that make little or no space for the multiple dimensions of scholars as humans, that reward publication over impact, and that define the profession as narrowly research-driven, the fullness of a scholar’s humanity suffers. And, we would argue, humanity as a whole suffers too. What we want to ask here is what does academic work look like if we do not insist that it be cored like that? What might it look like whole?

The question itself poses serious challenges, especially to those more senior faculty who have successfully built a career that engages more of themselves. We have among us several rock stars, in law, history, and African-American studies, for example, and in each case they have been able to cultivate both theory and practice of disciplinary engagement for rewarding and rewardable teaching and research. These are unusual cases, and we seek to learn from them, both to guide better future work in ourselves and our colleagues and to understand more richly how academic work can serve public life. There are twin aspects of this project: making space for and celebrating the scholar as human, but also lifting up the work that such human-scholars do. Their work is engaged with the world, it learns from the world. It seeks to “give back” but not in oversimplified ways: we believe in the complex equation positing both that we are better scholars when we engage in the world and that perhaps, in being better scholars, or at least by being present with our particular tool kits, we can make a better world. In short, we are performing and exploring the public humanities.

**Why a Public Humanities Community Is Necessary**

Our seminar met on November 9, 2016, the day after Donald Trump was elected president of the United States. We were traumatized, disbelieving, despairing; the hard work the world so obviously needs seemed not only halted but driven back. Facing climate change, nuclear threat, constitutional crisis, loss of health care, deportation of loved ones and students, egregious denigration of most vulnerable social groups, we were all asking what else we could do, how our work mattered in the world. Some of us had already designed our work to align with our sense of greater purpose in the world. And all of us needed to revisit these questions and to imagine what a deeper integrity might look like.

We agree: the humanities are of greater importance than ever before. The forces that threaten us now include popular cultural metanarratives that are profoundly damaging; disrespect for truth and inquiry; the devastation of journalism, a public-humanistic mainstay; ethical and constitutional
dilemmas our nation has never seen; rampant, hateful discrimination; revival and reverence of Nazism; and actual torch-bearing professions of hatred. We are witnessing (and no doubt participating in) stark contrasts between “us” and “them,” including a failure of empathetic connectivity or awareness that our roles might be reversed.

The humanities are where we learn such empathy, where we practice the skill of walking around in others’ shoes, as Martha Nussbaum’s classic *Cultivating Humanity* illustrates. But our fields do more than that. They are the home turf of ethics, of history, of concepts of war and peace and religion and otherness. They teach us, as Paulo Freire points out, that reading the word is reading the world, and, as Peter Brooks points out, that both activities must be pursued with rigorous training and good faith. We can practice, with texts, attending to specifics, to details, reading with integrity and courage, and we can hope to live out those commitments to clarity and generosity in our work with actual humans. In texts, we can practice not-knowing, or knowing too much; we can practice suspending disbelief and embracing impossible conflicts; we can enter into the possibility that we are wrong, without the fear of lived consequences, the possibility of failure.

And even beyond the methodological gifts of the arts and humanities, there is the simple fact that what we are most grappling with right now are fundamentally human questions. Questions about terrorism, nuclear holocaust, faith, identity, difference, patriotism, justice, belonging, and fear. Questions about how to make decisions together, how to love others, how to channel the marvelous energies of the human toward some kind of fair and durable future. These topics are, of course, ancient human questions, but they are also cropping up in the current poetic resistance to the forty-fifth US presidency. “Writers are responding to this turbulent moment in the country’s history with a tsunami of poems that address issues like immigration, global warming, the Syrian refugee crisis, institutionalized racism, equal rights for transgender people, Islamophobia and health care. . . . The recent resurgence of protest poems reflects a new strain of contemporary American poetry, one that is deeply engaged with public policy and the latest executive orders coming from the White House” (Alter). At the 2017 March for Science, Jane Hirshfield presented a new poem titled “On the Fifth Day,” which begins as shown below; she went on to found Poets for Science (https://poetsforscience.org/about).

On the fifth day
the scientists who studied the rivers
were forbidden to speak
or to study the rivers.
We need poetry because it exposes the fiercest problems with disjuncture, contrast, and brevity, and because it is pithy and portable and might be set to music. We need the poem because it can lure or jolt us awake, because we don’t even have to want to go there, but there we are. What if Adrienne Rich is right, in “In Those Years” and we really are standing alone and tiny on the barren shore, amid the rags of fog, still saying “I” while the great dark birds of history scream and plunge around us? What if our only solace or salvation is in the “we”—but we have forgotten it? Is that how we have ended up cold and alienated, suspicious enough that even when actual crime rates drop and drop, we cannot stop feeling less and less safe?

We also need the novel because it gives us many voices, many eyes to see through. Most of all, it gives us a chance to be what Jonathan Culler calls “omniscent readers,” understanding from a variety of perspectives in ways that human experience doesn’t quite allow. The rise of the novel parallels the rise of the city-state, theorists argue, which makes sense because we can’t really understand something as complex as a concentrated society without the conceptual tool of the novel. For concrete social change work on particular issues, novels are indispensable. Cli-fi, or climate fiction, has proven a powerful tool in understanding not only the science of climate change but also the ways in which humans can shape their own systems and choices in the face of what is coming. Communities with dynamic local food system efforts can find agrarian novels necessary companions, because despite our intellectual grasp of the issues at hand, most of us cannot readily occupy an affective or emotional space different from our own. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, for example, we consider the Joads to be living in poverty—but then they are moved off their land and we come to understand how rich they were before. We can wonder at the drive and resourcefulness they show, but also at the inhumanity of the system, the economic “monster” that justifies their eviction, even the tractor that can tear up the earth and then stand zombie-dead in the barn. We can rage, sick in our souls, at the piles of oranges ripe on the ground, that are doused in kerosene and burned in front of starving families, lest corporate profits be diminished by someone eating an orange they didn’t buy. The novel makes clear the systems that drive our world, in their absurdity and injustice, but it can also offer alternatives. Ruth Ozeki’s novel *All over Creation* provides systemic counterpoints in its band of guerrilla gardeners, planting fruit trees in the medians in LA; its anti-chemical activists doing pop-up theater in grocery stores; its populist heirloom seed purveyor, crippled by Alzheimer’s, being rescued by young rabble rousers who use the internet to literally farm out that sacred work through an actual agricultural world wide web.
My own past work with the Maine Humanities Council provides several useful examples, including those above. In a term-length seminar called “Feeding the Human Animal: Visions of Thriving and Surviving,” I led open discussion at our local public library on selected US agrarian novels. “What is the point of reading novels?” my introductory materials asked. “To better understand the world, of course. To see ourselves in different lights, in different places, in different relationships. To imagine other ways of being and to try out other ways of seeing. The process of living, then, demands the novel. And the process of living wisely and well, in ways that feed us and sustain the world we depend upon, demands the agrarian novel.” Together, in a town whose food policy council was making waves nationally, in a region where collaborations between aging white farmers and young refugee farmers were crafting new models of cultural and environmental sustainability, we discussed the meaning of agriculture, of caring for land, and of the systems of inquiry, respect, and commitment that it demands. After the Mellon seminar, Gerald Torres and I taught a short version of that seminar to Cornell law students, as a kind of precursor to a two-semester sequence he pioneered on law and policy of food systems. Our novel-based seminar was necessary, he felt, so that students moving into the study of law and policy knew what they were talking about.

In a different Maine Humanities Council program, called “Choosing Civility,” we undertook a text-based, civic reflection process titled “Imagining the Communities We Want to Live In.” We used Adrienne Rich’s “In Those Years” to explore the gap between “I” and “we” as we worked to envision together the communities we aspire to be. The slip and slide between poetic interpretation (“the dark birds of history felt like warplanes to me, they terrify me” said one participant), the affective experience of the reader (“I feel so alone since moving here, I don’t even know my neighbors”), and the complex, vulnerable work of negotiating how to live with different others (“the most moving thing I’ve seen lately was the neighbors keeping the walkway shoveled for the one guy who is in a wheelchair”) is necessary and generative movement, provoked by nothing so well as a good bit of art, explored in company. One participant commented at the end of the discussion that this had been great, that he had expected us to spend two hours discussing Bowling Alone, but this was new, using unexpected tools to think about the same old problems in a valuable new way.

And in a third program, called “Let’s Talk Local,” we codesigned a participatory process that would move us outside of problem-solving altogether. I did this with two communities, both choosing a tension that they wanted to explore and creating or finding “texts” that would help ground the discussion.
In Lewiston, Maine, a largely white, Franco-American, Roman Catholic, depressed postindustrial mill town that had seen vast in-migration of Somali refugees, the group settled on “The Changing Face of Home.” And rather than choose a poem or story, they wanted individuals to share their own stories, live, in the style of the nonprofit storytelling group the Moth. And the emphasis was not on cracking the nut of how to live together but on listening carefully to better understand one another. One story came from a young Somali man who had spent most of his life in a refugee camp; he spoke about family and friends as his sense of home, mobile yet solid. One story came from a white woman in her fifties, a long-time administrative assistant at Bates College, who was raised in Lewiston by Franco-American parents and who never learned English until she started first grade at the public school. There were others, including an Iranian immigrant who had been in Lewiston thirty years and was responsible for vast contributions in the nonprofit world. In facilitated civic reflection later, people came to understand that the issue is not about “foreign” versus “native” (no, none of the displaced peoples of the Wabenaki tribes spoke at this event, and no, not many of the historical white residents recognized the irony of using the term “native”) but about our capacity to live a sense of home that feels like home to us. We recognized our own innate sense of the world as it should be, and we dug further into the world as it is, coming to understand the smallness and specificity of our personal desires in the context of our larger human needs for thriving and surviving.

This practice of seeing the world as it is and working toward the world as it should be is not only the province of Saul Alinsky and broad-based community organizing. It is also, I’d argue, the province of public humanists. We hold up the great mirror and invite ourselves to see, but we also hold out possibilities, describe the adventures we might choose. We negotiate ethics; we imagine utopias and dystopias; we historicize the “commons” and “common good” and “commonwealth” as ways of understanding the consequences of our choices. “Our obsession with dystopia,” says Afrofuturist adrienne marie brown, “is our realization of what we’ve already set in motion” (Mar-Abe). To understand what we’ve set in motion, to do what we do, then, is to attend carefully to the world (“attending” in the way that Dean Hernandez, in Kirsten Greenidge’s play Baltimore uses it, as paying attention, showing up, being present) and to do so with care. As Mary Oliver learned from her lifelong love, “Attention without feeling . . . is only a report. An openness—an empathy—was necessary if the attention was to matter” (Popova).
As academics, we are asked too often to “report,” which we can feel is insufficient, but when reward structures are pegged to certain kinds of performances, the options seem limited. “Plato’s general theory of learning and knowledge—which argued for the great superiority of elegant ‘pure theory’ and ‘pure science’ compared to ‘inferior’ real world practice—and his elitist theory of governance are deeply embedded in the culture and structure of American colleges and universities” (Benson, Harkavy, and Puckett). Bringing together new learning about the yoked roles of affect and cognition in student learning and the importance of ethical judgment and intuition in wise work, Laura Rendón developed the term “sentipensante,” sensing and feeling together. She offers a powerful alternative to strictly cognitive approaches; she seeks to develop a vision “based on wholeness and consonance, respecting the harmonious rhythm between the outer experience of intellectualism and rational analysis and the inner dimension of insight, emotion, and awareness” (Rendón, 2). She acknowledges that these ways of knowing are often considered “too controversial to discuss publicly in higher education” but contends that we must dream this alternative vision into being, for the sake of our students, if not ourselves.

Part of the point of the humanities is precisely to dream up alternatives, to imagine ourselves into better worlds rather than keep us stuck in a problem-solving, putting-out-fires mentality. As Martín Espada’s poem “Imagine the Angels of Bread” demonstrates, sometimes we have to move right out of the domain of fixing things and into whole other possibilities:

this is the year that the hands
pulling tomatoes from the vine
uproot the deed to the earth that sprouts the vine,
the hands canning tomatoes
are named in the will
that owns the bedlam of the cannery;

If the abolition of slave-manacles
began as a vision of hands without manacles,
then this is the year;
if the shutdown of extermination camps
began as imagination of a land
without barbed wire or the crematorium,
then this is the year;↑
As Alice Mar-Abe writes in her article “Ferguson Is the Future,” “Despite all my grand aspirations to help craft a better future and a better country, I had never taken the time to envision it, to imagine how the average citizen would live in a utopic America. Instead, I usually approach social justice from a highly realistic, fact-based standpoint: what’s the problem and how do we fix it? Yet I inevitably hit a wall when I return to the deeper societal inequalities that no policy could possibly touch. And that’s where radical imagination comes in: we have to dream new worlds into existence before we can ever hope for them to materialize.”

Those of us who are public scholars in the arts and humanities are trying, it seems to me, to do all of these things: to see the world as it is, to work toward the world as it should be, to dream new worlds into existence, to persist in the possibility of hope. Which is why it is so unutterably vital that we bring our full humanity to our work—a project we can do only and best in the company of others.

**Weaving Faculty Networks for Change**

It is worth noting that our embrace of public humanities and scholars as humans is not necessarily an obvious choice. For us, the logic of it is sound: it represents a capacious worldview that understands my liberation as bound up in yours, but it is also clear from critical university studies that what “counts” in scholarship is closely aligned with what “counts” in scholars. Restrictions on my scholarship end up being restrictions on how I can be, who I can be, as a scholar. It is our contention and our experience that being our fullest selves, most interested in the well-being of the world, brings out our most powerful scholarship, and not only because it capitalizes on our passion. When we engage in the world as humanists, we can come to see our field as not only an object of study but also as a tool for addressing complex problems. At bottom, that is what concerns us here: How can the arts and humanities, practices of creating and interpreting human culture, contribute more powerfully to the public good? And how can we, as would-be contributors, find our ways more easily to the forms of engagement that we desire?

These two questions invite distinct but inextricably linked responses, one about the inner lives and satisfactions of faculty and one about their outer engagements as public humanists, which might embrace everything from genteel delivery of speeches at the county historical society and forceful op-eds to participatory after-school projects with urban kids. Our work can show up as scholarship on public issues, for public purposes, with public
partners, creating public goods. All of these are significant, and all demand a fluency and wholeness in identity that enables us to care, to listen, and to create something of public value. And, most importantly, all of that depends on us, as public scholars, as the contact points between the practice of academic humanities and the worlds in which they matter. If we lack the conviction or the space or the role with which to take up this work, we won’t.

The work, then, of creating spaces in which faculty can explore and inquire with a sense of trust and generosity, becomes paramount. Such spaces are necessary for the careful integrative work of designing scholarship that feeds the multiple aspects of self, that serves both the system and the soul. Such concepts of wholeness, integrity, and “living divided no more” have various manifestations today—William Sullivan’s notions of “civic professionalism,” KerryAnn O’Meara’s research into faculty “civic agency,” Claire Snyder-Hall’s work with “civic aspirations” and “civic happiness,” and Wendy Willis’s work on “civic loneliness.” The UCLA Higher Education Research Institute found significant evidence of spirituality as a force in the lives of faculty, and KerryAnn O’Meara’s work on faculty growth and civic agency also points to a greater need for such integrative work. Furthermore, Carol Colbeck’s research has demonstrated that faculty who engage in public scholarship find the “three-legged stool” of teaching, research, and service to be more hindrance than help, as it asks them to divide work that is fundamentally integrative into artificial categories. The whole (often civic, often spiritual) power of their work is invisible when it is carved into pieces to fit the mold. The “hidden wholeness” that Parker Palmer describes is a well-known avenue for reintroducing these questions of meaning to faculty culture, but the academy rarely feels like a welcoming space for such quasi- or even outright spiritual work. Our experiment was to see if we could design a space that was more welcoming, and to see what, once we did, it might produce.

Civic professionalism is a concept William M. Sullivan lays out in *Work and Integrity: The Crisis and Promise of Professionalism in America*. He unpacks the origins of the professions (medicine, law, and clergy in particular), with attention to the question of public purpose—and the corollary “hunger for something which is often missing or suppressed in work . . . a sense of engagement, through one’s work, with shared purposes which give point and value to individual effort. These purposes—dignity, justice, fellowship—make possible a civil and meaningful public realm. They are the promise of professionalism” (Sullivan, 16). Our seminar worked to explore what is missing, to voice such hungers as were there, and to lift up the purposes of dignity, justice, and fellowship as meaningful bases of our work. But it
was not easy: “The everyday practices of higher education work against the collaborative practices that are the heart of engaged scholarship, service-learning, and reciprocal, fluid, respectful partnerships with communities. The way faculty members are educated and rewarded encourages working in isolation or primarily with colleagues within their own academic disciplines, and seeing their own knowledge as qualitatively superior to other forms of knowledge and knowledge-making” (Boyte and Fretz). Our group was made up of engaged scholars with civic tendencies, people working on issues that have relevance in the “real world.” But even so, it was countercultural to spend time digging into questions of public purpose rather than parsing arguments, and it seemed to take some time to unearth and validate the civic aspects of our professional lives without feeling vaguely threatened by the process.

That sense of hovering threat, of knowing that an important way of being and working is discouraged (at least in pre-tenure years) contributes deeply to faculty unhappiness. KerryAnn O’Meara’s work on faculty civic agency with the Kettering Foundation explored this through interviews with “faculty who are deeply frustrated with narrow conceptions of what counts as scholarship and seek to connect their professional work with deeply held civic aspirations.” Faculty civic agency, as she uses it, describes the drive and strategy through which faculty engage with publics even against the currents of culture and rewards. Such agency is also important well beyond faculty development or job satisfaction, she notes, because faculty are “a key strategic agent of change in efforts to strengthen the democratic mission of higher education” (O’Meara, Terosky, and Neumann 2). A key further benefit of O’Meara’s framework for our thinking here is its emphasis less on barriers than on possibilities. She cites Marshall Ganz: “A structural bias in social movement studies seems to have made it more productive for scholars to identify the constraining conditions that make certain outcomes more probable than to focus on enabling conditions that make many outcomes possible. Agency, however, is more about grasping at possibility than conforming to probability” (Ganz, 511). While our seminar saw its share of complaint about structural obstacles to change, we were also committed to being something more than critics and to imagining together the possibilities we might cocreate (here in the academy as well as in and with larger publics).

And the purpose of all this, after all, is to create cultural conditions in which it is possible for faculty to live out a sense of civic agency as a civic professional—toward the end of improving the world, of course, but also for a deeper sense of “civic happiness.” Claire Snyder-Hall, also through work with Kettering, unpacks this notion, derived from Hannah Arendt.
She identifies civic happiness as akin to Aristotelian “eudaimonia,” a happiness larger than one’s private experience, that “relates to feelings produced through interaction with others, specifically the sense of fulfillment human beings experience when they work with others on projects that have public relevance” (Snyder-Hall, 9). Her own interview-based research (which intentionally builds on O’Meara’s) centered on questions of faculty fulfillment, albeit with a smallish group of respondents, but, she says, “While my small, nonrepresentative sample limits the generalizability of the study, a very strong set of common themes and similar experiences emerged out of the interview data. What I found was astounding: all those interviewed felt positive and energized by their civic engagement, found that it helped them do their academic jobs better, and experienced increased levels of connection with others and meaningfulness in their work” (Snyder-Hall, 3). So those civic professionals who approach their work with public purpose and use civic agency in creative ways achieve civic happiness. And everyone else?

“All those interviewed felt positive and energized by their civic engagement, found that it helped them do their academic jobs better, and experienced increased levels of connection with others and meaningfulness in their work.” (Snyder-Hall, 3).}

“Civic loneliness” is the alternative to the kind of beloved community we seek to build. Wendy Willis, executive director of the Deliberative Democracy Coalition, writes, “Apparently, loneliness is the new sitting, which for a few months was the new smoking. According to recent reports, social isolation and loneliness increases mortality at the same rate as 15 cigarettes a day.” But her analysis is serious. She says: “The war correspondent Sebastian Junger in his book Tribe, argues that returning soldiers suffer at least as much from the transition out of a purposeful highly connected society as they do from exposure to combat. In other words, reentry into the individualism and disconnection of American civilian society is nearly as traumatizing as war itself.” She reminds us that nearly half of Americans report being lonely, and the number who report they have no close friends has tripled since 1985. She argues, with Hannah Arendt, that loneliness “is existential and is a pre-condition not just to tyranny but to totalitarianism.”

The remedies she locates in civic deliberation and engagement: “People around us are literally dying for lack of connection and purpose. And the work of democracy is dripping with both connection and purpose.” But we have to do it differently, she says:

All too often, I find myself falling into the traps set by efficiency and goal-orientation. I find myself “cutting to the chase” so that communities I am working with can make some decisions and get on with it. I find myself saying things like, “I want to respect your time.” But what if I were to respect something in addition to their time? What if I were to center those healing values of connection and individual purpose in
my own work? What if—alongside hard-nosed public decision-making and rational deliberation—we also considered people’s needs to connect with one another in less goal-driven but meaningful conversation around things that matter to them?

This is the very point of our seminar, to create a shared sense of meaning and purpose and a space for relationships that can live those out.

**What Emerged in and from This Seminar?**

As we know from systems theory and from close studies of substantial change: “The world doesn’t change one person at a time. It changes as networks of relationships form among people who discover they share a common cause and vision of what’s possible” (Wheatley and Frieze, 2006). And mechanisms of change are different from what our institutions have trained us to expect: “When separate, local efforts connect with each other as networks, then strengthen as communities of practice, suddenly and surprisingly a new system emerges at a greater level of scale. This system of influence possesses qualities and capacities that were unknown in the individuals. It isn’t that they were hidden; they simply don’t exist until the system emerges” (emphasis in original). This “emergence” is why we build networks, in hopes that connecting individual efforts will yield something greater and more organic to the network than what we might conceive of ourselves. “In nature, change never happens as a result of top-down, pre-conceived strategic plans, or from the mandate of any single individual or boss. Change begins as local actions spring up simultaneously in many different areas. If these changes remain disconnected, nothing happens beyond each locale. However, when they become connected, local actions can emerge as a powerful system with influence at a more global or comprehensive level” (Wheatley and Frieze, 2006). If the academy is to change, it will be because of the networks that advance such change and the emergent qualities they generate. But deliberately investing in emergence is countercultural now and hearkens back to an agrarian ethic of ancient wisdom and trust. Nannie Rawley, in Barbara Kingsolver’s *Prodigal Summer*, keeps a back meadow fallow for wild apple trees to seed in. She is always looking for the next great accidental cross, and so she devotes that land to the possibility of the emergent unknown fruit rather than plant a predictable cash crop.

A nonfictional example of emergence in practice: in April 2017, Philadelphia-based artist Pepón Osorio completed a two-year residency at Cornell University with the Cornell Council on the Arts. It was a challenge for the council to
place its faith in his practice, which is fundamentally emergent: he enters into relationships, listens, attends, and sees what comes of it—a very different practice than many that foreground outcomes-oriented planfulness and intention. His exhibit, based on his relationship with an African American family in downtown Ithaca and staged in Rand Hall, was a hand-built, upside-down house, showing videos of the family in relationship to one another, dancing or neck-deep in water. There was also a second part of the installation: a beautiful, long, polished dining table that he made by hand and set in a nook, separated by screens. There he participated in a series of hosted conversations, over food prepared by local chefs. Our diverse experiences as parents, transplants, climate change activists, history buffs, and trailing spouses informed our readings of the piece and shaped our conversation together in powerful ways. Some people saw the lottery tickets that papered the upside-down house as markers of chronic hope; others saw them as signs of a systemic oppression that takes people’s investment in a dream and puts it toward state systems that by and large don’t serve them. Some people saw the sandbags underneath the house as keeping the floodwaters away from the house; but the water was already in the house, so perhaps they were keeping the rest of society safe from this rising water. Our ways of knowing and being, brought together around a congenial table, could inform each other, creating emergent learning and insight.

Because of the ways in which it challenges Western and institutional forms of thinking, emergence is rarely something we seek to achieve. When we plan, we plan strategically, with logic models and theories of change that advance particular desired outcomes through particular tactics and inputs. To approach the work of change instead through a network-weaving strategy that places faith in its member “nodes” and in what might emerge from their interaction is a tough sell. Everything in our cultures (corporate and scientific, as well as academic) is geared now toward cause and effect, quantifiable interventions with knowable outcomes. The humanities teach us that the world is more complex (indeed, emergence is the very essence of what seminar-style learning has depended on all these years), yet it can be hard for us to make time in our productivity-oriented culture for the relationships that will yield emergence. Just as Pepón Osorio’s process shows us, inquiry, relationship, and commitment can be immensely fruitful, but it is an act of faith to undertake them without predictable outcomes and concrete aspirations. Already, from this seminar, we have seen certain planned outcomes: this book project; an associated website; participation in a community street fair. And we have seen a range of other outcomes that emerged without plan:
• Over the course of the term, we witnessed a gentling of comments, a growth of supportiveness, and a courage of sharing new writing, new approaches, often with “risky” personal connections and stories that had not been publicly shared before.

• Several scholars found new connectivity between their histories and identities and their scholarly commitments; several others reinforced them or dug to new levels (including me—identifying my own alienating “third culture” upbringing as a source of my deep attraction to community was a result of deep reflection in this seminar).

• Several scholars found new or renewed interest in direct community engagement—one attended the two-day Community-Engaged Learning and Teaching Institute; one joined the Engaged Faculty Fellowship Program upon his return from sabbatical and is working with colleagues to create a new minor in Public History; one served as a fellow in the same program and has also received grant funding to develop a course using community-based research and community-based theatrical production to explore the impacts of climate change in our region; a third became a Faculty Fellow in Engaged Scholarship as a way of moving her scholarly work more intentionally toward public impact.

• New collaborations emerged: two colleagues are developing new scholarship on “civic humanities,” and two others developed a new course for law students on US agrarian novels, intended as a fuller-story, more engaging way to understand law and policy of food systems (the topic of another community-engaged course developed). Furthermore, several of these colleagues are involved in a new Mellon-funded initiative from the Society for the Humanities, on rural humanities.

• New systems of support emerged as well: one faculty member made important decisions regarding a tenure and promotion process in deliberation with the group, responding to critical moments in our nation’s history with a deepening commitment to students.

The point of emergence, of course, is that it is unpredictable and often takes a while. Perhaps more importantly, it takes attention to the network: “Emergence has a life-cycle. It begins with networks, shifts to intentional communities of practice and evolves into powerful systems capable of global influence” (Wheatley and Freize). Our task, having built a network, is to sustain an intentional community of practice. And to better understand the long-term shifts our collaborations engender, we intend to use Ripple Effects Mapping (Kollock et al.), a long-term impact assessment practice, to better
understand the “ripple effects” caused by this seminar, including those that are now unforeseeable.

Conclusion

What the humanities provide the world is essential: an understanding of love, of relationship, of war, of diplomacy, of terror, religion, heartache, discrimination. It is the home turf of ethics, of culture, of all our ways of understanding one another in our fullness and creativity. Scientific methods have led us to imagine that what is most important or most true can be fixed, stripped away from all the rest, like Vitamin C tablets as a substitute for a whole, fragrant orange. Academic humanists are subject to these pressures to reduce and distill, to compete, to work from the head up instead of the heart out, to live in deference to the iron grip of Plato’s cold, dead hand (Benson, Harkavy, and Puckett). But such pressures make the least of us: they compromise our public scholarship, curtail our civic happiness, and impede our civic professionalism. Adjunctification and the postdoc circuit can create “a culture of perennial homelessness” (Roebuck), which further prevents relationship and rooting. The division of teaching from research from service further fractures people’s sense of their “public scholarship . . . as an inseparable whole” (Colbeck and Wharton-Michael) when what we hope to develop are whole scholars, whole humans, who live their work with integrity. To give us back a sense of hope, home, and wholeness, we need to nurture regular learning communities, communities of practice, wherein we can imagine together the work we want to do and support one another in doing it.

Notes

1. Marge Piercy’s poem “To Be of Use” is often cited in such conversations, both around scholarship and around social justice.
3. Quoted from Martín Espada, “Imagine the Angels of Bread,” Imagine the Angels of Bread (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997).

Works Cited

Chapter 1


