Scott J. Peters, the youngest child of working-class, Depression era parents, grew up in a small town nestled in the corn and soybean deserts of the Midwest. He fell in love with stories and storytelling as a child. And music, which he pursued first with trumpet, baritone, and tuba, and then with a Fender Stratocaster. After graduating from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, he recorded his first album with his band Crayon Rubbings at a recording studio in a converted packinghouse in Denver. He then left the glamorous world of rock and roll for a decade of equally glamorous work as a political activist in Illinois and Minnesota. Troubling questions about higher education’s roles in supporting or hindering democracy led him to pursue a PhD in history and political theory with Harry Boyte at the University of Minnesota, which then led him to his faculty position at Cornell University in 1999.

Soon after he began his work at Cornell, Scott’s childhood love for stories and storytelling was revived, thanks to his colleague, mentor, and friend John Forester. As a professor in Cornell’s Department of Global Development, Scott now uses a range of narrative methods—including oral history—to co-construct and interpret stories about people’s life and work experiences. For five years (2012–2017) he served as faculty codirector of Imagining America: Artists and Scholars in Public Life.

In line with the scholar-as-human project, he is most interested in exploring the humanizing power of stories and storytelling. Situating his work in the
transdisciplinary field of civic studies, he focuses on the social, cultural, and political dimensions of what is often referred to as development.

When I was just beginning my doctoral work at the University of Minnesota in the early 1990s, my advisor, Harry Boyte, told me the following story:

A professor of political science asked one of his students to write a list of all the political issues and problems about which she was personally concerned. When she was finished, she brought it to him. “Now,” the professor said, “you should pick something that’s not on this list for your dissertation research.”

We laughed at what we took to be the absurdity of the professor’s advice. But as I would later discover, both in my research as a historian of American higher education and my experience as a professor, for many, such advice isn’t absurd at all. It’s wise. And correct. What makes it so is its alignment with a particular way of understanding how trustworthy knowledge and theory are discovered, produced, and developed—a way that’s usually described as being “scientific,” “disinterested,” and “objective.” In dogmatic versions of this way of knowing, we are required to bracket or dismiss our concerns and interests, our opinions and convictions, our standpoints and worldviews, our beliefs and values, our emotions and feelings. To be provocative, I would say that we are required to bracket our humanity—to dehumanize the inquiry process.

In support of this requirement, dogmatic advocates of this way of knowing have succeeded in establishing (and reproducing, as we see in my advisor’s story) a norm in the academy that encourages—even celebrates—a sharp separation of the identities of scholar and human. For those who embrace this separation, the theme of the Mellon Diversity Seminar at Cornell University that led to this book—the scholar as human—doesn’t represent an enticing possibility to be embraced. It represents a corrupting danger to be avoided.

In my view, efforts to (re)humanize the academy and academic work by taking up the task of (re)connecting and (re)integrating our identities as scholar and human do involve dangers that we must learn to see and avoid. But I also know that there are many things of value to be gained by such efforts. I say know rather than think or argue because I have been engaged in them my entire academic career. The same advisor who told me the story I related above invited me to connect and integrate my identity and work as a civic agent (a more inclusive way of saying citizen) with my identity and work as a scholar. I took up his invitation. It opened a life path that has been deeply satisfying to travel. But it’s also been deeply difficult—at times almost
painfully so—due to critical pushback I’ve encountered and the challenge of navigating the many dangers, dilemmas, and tradeoffs it has involved.

In this afterword, I’d like to pose and briefly take up a set of key questions about the idea—or, perhaps better put, aspiration—of the scholar as human. My questions emerge from the view, shared by the organizers of the Cornell seminar, that the way things are with respect to this aspiration is not the way things should be. And that the vision and pursuit of what should be is, or in powerful ways can be, prophetic.

Here are the questions:

• What’s the situation we’re in?
• What’s the story about how we got there?
• What’s the argument about why it’s problematic?
• What’s the vision of a better place to be?
• What’s the theory of change about how we might narrow or bridge the gap between where we would like to be and where we are?

Because the scholar-as-human aspiration is to a significant degree personal, these questions must be taken up by individuals in ways that are grounded in their particular locations, desires, interests, standpoints, worldviews, and convictions. But there are collective dimensions to the aspiration as well, and they call on us to take up the questions together. In doing so, we will need to invite and fruitfully engage differences of many kinds, including perspective and experience. That means that in addition to developing answers to questions posed in singular terms (e.g., “the” situation, “the” story, “the” vision), we will also need to pose and answer them in plural terms: What are the situations we’re in? What are the stories about how we got there? What are the arguments about why the situations are problematic (or are not problematic)? What are the visions of better places to be? What are the theories of change about how we might narrow or bridge gaps between where we would like to be and where we are?

The scholar-as-human aspiration isn’t new. Named in different ways, it has been a topic of concern, conversation, and debate throughout the history of American higher education. As I was making notes for this afterword, I searched my memory for examples. While I wasn’t immediately sure why, what came to mind first was a book I had long ago discovered in my research—Higher Education and Society: A Symposium. It was published by the University of Oklahoma Press in 1936. It contains a collection of addresses that were delivered at the Southwestern Conference on Higher Education, held in November 1935 at the University of Oklahoma. A professor
of philosophy from the University of Oklahoma named Charles M. Perry wrote the introduction.

After pulling it down from my bookshelves and blowing off the considerable amount of dust that had covered it, I began to read Perry’s introduction and the rest of the book. As I read I felt as though I had found a time capsule that was meant to be opened exactly when I had opened it. During a time of great economic, political, and cultural upheaval that in some ways resembles our own, here was a group of scholars and administrators discussing the nature and value of the academy and academic work, arguing as they did so about the changes they thought should or shouldn’t be made. Most notably, Perry’s introduction sounded an alarm about developments and trends in higher education that are closely related to the aspiration of the scholar as human. Before I take up the questions I posed above in relation to our own historical moment, let’s take a look at how Perry implicitly took them up in his.

“To Eliminate the Personal Equation”

Perry opened his introduction by noting that democracy, which he described as the “golden mean between anarchy and dictatorship,” depends on education. But, in his view, education in the United States had proved to be a disappointment. It had misled people and failed to prevent them from becoming “dupes of propaganda.” Not only the public schools, but colleges and universities of all types, he argued, had “failed to make as large a contribution to the success of democracy as might be expected.” He spent the rest of his introduction telling a story about misguided change and reform in American higher education, from the colonial period to the mid-1930s, and laying out what needed to be done, from his vantage point, to open a path for reform.¹

Perry’s story began with a critique of American higher education’s focus during colonial years and the early decades of the Republic. In that period, he wrote, colleges and universities “stressed character at the expense of content.” They focused on “why” over “what.” He argued that this began to change during the mid-nineteenth century, and not for the better. According to him, things began to flip to the opposite position around 1840, when institutions of higher learning “began to stress content at the expense of all other considerations,” turning their focus to “what” over “why.” Things devolved, Perry claimed, to a “sole recognition of content”—of “what”—through three distinct stages. The first stage featured an emphasis on “practicality,” which emerged from worries about declining enrollments, a rising industrial
economy, and other forces. The second stage featured a focus on science and what he called the “methodology of investigation.” The third stage, which Perry characterized as “unexpected,” featured the emergence of uncertainty, skepticism, and relativism in theories of knowledge. This was particularly threatening and dangerous, he noted, as it not only disappeared the “why” but also the “what.” “The moral and esthetic experience at this point,” he wrote, “has the consistency of very thin air.”

It is in Perry’s characterization and critique of the second stage that we connect most directly with a prophetic view of the aspiration of the scholar as human. “The research worker in every field,” he wrote, “rightly attempts to eliminate the personal equation. That which exists is thus utterly dissociated from anything subjective. He comes thus to think of all that is concerned with his person as suspect and of that which is impersonal as the true and the real.”

Interestingly, there’s an essay in *Higher Education and Society* that exemplifies Perry’s characterization of this second stage. While he didn’t name it, he likely had it in mind when he wrote the passage I just quoted. The essay is by Isaac Lippincott, a Harvard-trained economist who was a professor at Washington University in St. Louis. Titled “Training the Economist of the Future,” it’s included in a section of the book headed “Higher Education and the Training of the Social Technician.” Lippincott wrote it in a collective voice, using the word “our” to speak for the whole of the scholarly community. “In our capacity as discoverers,” he claimed, “it is our duty to discharge that function without prejudice or bias, without an injection of likes and dislikes, and without an eye on tradition. Our likes and dislikes have nothing to do with the case.”

Here is Lippincott’s conclusion:

Summarizing, I may conclude: first, our function is to promote the spirit of discovery; second, to sharpen the powers of observation; third, to develop analytical powers; fourth, to encourage accuracy of work; fifth, to learn to check theories with data; and finally to develop a spirit of scholarly neutrality. On the other hand, we must train our students to avoid snap judgment, to repress bias and prejudice, to abandon the vicious ideal-forming habit while in the process of investigations, and to avoid in all our researches the intrusion of personal attitudes. These latter are the attitudes of social reformers. They must be shunned by the man who is imbued with the spirit of true discovery.

It’s possible, of course, to give Lippincott’s essay a sympathetic reading by noting his commitment to accuracy and his concern about “snap judgment,”
bias, and prejudice. But it’s also possible to give it a sharply critical reading. Perry’s introduction offers several key points we might include in such a reading. Let’s return to it. After Perry described what the “research worker in every field rightly attempts” to do—“to eliminate the personal equation”—he offered a stinging critique of some of the assumptions behind that action, and a sobering account of its results in and implications for higher education and society. In Perry’s view, the assumption researchers make that there is “no teleological principle operating in the material studied” disallows “the objective world to have any values even for itself.” This effectively disappears values “from the universe.” Working on this and other assumptions, the researcher “becomes the indifferent observer of the passing objective show,” he argued. “Being trained not to care what happens, he is beyond good and evil.” “It would seem,” he went on, “that methodological assumptions could be held strictly subordinate to human interests or if extended to speculation could be disregarded, but so great is the power of habit that, when students are subjected to these requirements years on end, they come to apply them not only to research problems but to their friendships and all other human concerns.” Perry proclaimed that the “social effect of this development has been disastrous.” In summing up the situation as he saw it in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, he offered a bleak portrait of higher education’s failings:

In society at large during the time in question, mass production and the piling up of profits were being made the main objective. Quantity of material goods and the amount of income were being exalted over the quality of life. Personality, the arts, and social loyalty were being discredited. During this time the higher institutions of learning, paralyzed by uncertainty, weakened by compromises, more than half committed to materialistic standards, deserted the proper interests of mankind. Students were either left to drift whithersoever they would or were encouraged to use the knowledge and skill acquired in colleges and professional schools to serve anti-social interests. In this way democracy has been betrayed by her most trusted helper.

According to Perry, the way out of this situation required the restoration of three abandoned principles. First, despite limitations and inescapable subjectivity, “it is possible,” he asserted, “to get dependable knowledge about the world we live in.” Second, there are not just things in the universe but values and meaning as well (in his terms, both “what” and “why”). Third, and most important, “the greater values” such as freedom and creative activity “must not be ignored in favor of the lesser.” A focus on the “lesser” value of making
a living was, in Perry’s view, insufficient. “Man is not able to subsist on bread alone,” he wrote. People’s lives “must be encompassed by beauty and truth and justice. These additional spiritual elements which are so necessary for the complete and happy life involve a utilization of all the social interests as well as an attempt to procure a balanced development of the individual.”

With respect to professional training, Perry warned that it was becoming so “practical” that “all social ends” were being “sacrificed to personal ambition.” Is it possible, he asked, “to make use of this powerful motivation and at the same time impart a sense of the part which the profession serves in society as a whole?” Noting that, while the planning committee for the Southwestern Conference on Higher Education was meeting, “dust storms had been raging for weeks,” he asked if students could be “initiated into a sense of some immediate social need and enlisted in meeting it.” Research, in this context, was not to be abandoned, he wrote, but “co-ordinated with human needs.”

Perry called for reforms that would embrace and enact a commitment for academic institutions and professionals to attend to “the whole of experience, in a word, to the normal, healthy interests.” With vital principles “restored to their proper perspectives,” he wrote, “educational reform can be considered intelligently. It is not enough merely to continue with the amassing of a vast compilation of unenlivened facts. It is not enough to develop practical talents alone. Something more is demanded than the gaining of credits. The primary objective of all education must be the cultivation of the student as a human being.”

Charles M. Perry: The Scholar As Human?

I’ve spent a long time reflecting on what Perry wrote in his introduction to Higher Education and Society. I see much that I admire and agree with in it, including moments I would characterize as being prophetic. Most notably for this essay, I see a thread that runs through it that connects remarkably well with the singular version of the questions I posed above. I see a sobering perspective on the situation in American higher education during the mid-1930s; a story about how it got there; an argument about how and why it was problematic; and a brief vision of a better place to be. However, beyond the vague move of restoring “vital principles” to their “proper” perspective, I don’t see a credible theory of change for how to get to the better place Perry envisioned—or, more modestly, how to narrow the gap between what was and what in his view should be. I also don’t see something else: I don’t see the word “I” anywhere in his introduction. He didn’t say anything about
his personal experiences, his personal values and commitments. He wrote in the disembodied voice of the humanities scholar, performing the important role of social or cultural critic without implicating himself in what he was writing.

When I recognized this, I did an internet search to see what I could find out about Perry. The only thing of substance I turned up was a biographical entry in the 2005 edition of The Dictionary of Modern American Philosophers. Beyond the usual things that are included in such biographies—when he was born (1876) and when he died (1942), where he was from (Union Township, Michigan), and where he got his degrees (BA from Albion College in 1900, PhD in philosophy from the University of Michigan in 1911)—the entry includes the following interesting facts. He “devoted several years to religious and social service, first as a Unitarian minister in Iowa City during 1914–19, and later as a social service worker in Minnesota during 1919–23.” While he was a professor at the University of Oklahoma, he “was equally active in his university and community.” He served as state chairman of the American Civil Liberties Union in Oklahoma in 1938 and 39. He was a member of the Norman, Oklahoma, Chamber of Commerce. And finally, to me the most humanizing detail in the entry: “he was an enthusiastic member, and at one time President (1934–5), of the faculty club, where he was an avid member of the square dance group.”

Learning these personal details, I went back and reread Perry’s introduction, looking for hints of the Unitarian minister, the social service worker, the ACLU activist, the chamber of commerce member, and most of all, the avid member of the square dance group. Did he purposely bracket all these parts of his identity out of his essay, and the knowledge he undoubtedly gained from all his rich and varied life experiences? Or are all these things there in his introduction nonetheless, between or behind the lines, animating, informing, and guiding his scholarship and his voice and vision? And what about other details of his life and personality we don’t learn from the biographical entry? Was he struggling to hold on to hope, to prevent himself from sliding into despair and cynicism? Was he at times confused and doubtful about his convictions, his expertise, his talents, his colleagues, his university, his community, his country? And what about the nature and consistency of his character? Did he practice what he preached? Or was his behavior at odds with his ethical convictions?

We don’t know. But surely, like all of us, he had weaknesses as well as strengths; flaws and shortcomings; quirks and contradictions. Surely, in other words, he was human. If he was one of my colleagues, and he had asked me for feedback on his essay, I would have advised him to revise it by putting
himself in it. In doing so, he might have been able to enhance its trustworthiness and power by making it more real. More human.

**Putting Myself In**

In order to answer the singular version of the questions I posed earlier, in relation now to our historical moment instead of Perry’s, I’ll follow my own advice and put myself in this essay even more deeply than I already have. As an agitating provocation, I’ll use two sentences from an essay that was recently published in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*: “There Is No Case for the Humanities,” by Justin Stover, a fellow at All Souls College, University of Oxford.

In his essay, Stover defends a narrow conception of what a university is and should be that aligns remarkably well with the one that Abraham Flexner laid out in 1930 in his book *Universities: American, English, German*. Like Flexner, Stover wants to keep many things out of universities, and out of the work that academic professionals who are employed by them are expected (and allowed) to perform. Among the things he wants to keep out are professional schools (except medicine and law) and most forms of “applied” research, public service, and engagement. Like Flexner did, Stover bemoans cultural and political forces that have led to the inclusion of these things and many others. “What has happened relatively rapidly,” he complains, “is the absorption of all areas of human endeavor into the university. One of the premises behind the land-grant universities dotting the American landscape is precisely that they could foster progress and innovation in agricultural science. That may well have been a fine idea, but there is no particular reason that you need a university to improve yields and reduce livestock mortality.”

When I first encountered these sentences, I had to stop and reread them. I did so because I couldn’t believe what I was seeing. I’ve spent nearly twenty-five years studying the history of land-grant universities, including the “premises behind” their establishment. What Stover does with these two sentences effectively erases the very thing I find most important and inspiring in land-grant history: women and men who took up and pursued the scholar-as-human aspiration in prophetic ways that are aligned with the project of building and sustaining a democratic culture. His sentences accomplish this erasure by removing all considerations of ethics, politics, culture, and power from the “area of human endeavor” he refers to as “progress and innovation in agricultural science.” By implying that the nature, meaning, and significance of “progress and innovation” include only material, economic, and technical dimensions (and perhaps also environmental), he strips “agricultural
science” of all its cultural and political aspects, including—beyond improving yields and reducing livestock mortality—its human purposes and ends.

There are profound implications here for how we are supposed—and not supposed—to understand the mission, purposes, practices, and identities of scientists and scholars who are employed by land-grant colleges and universities as academic professionals in the agricultural sciences. In short, Stover’s sentences render such scholars and scientists as instrumental technicians who perform technical work for measurable material and economic ends (e.g., improving yields and reducing livestock mortality). There are also profound implications for how we are to understand agriculture. In short, we are to understand it as a business with only technical and financial aspects. The “culture” part of the word “agriculture” is to be ignored.15

With all this in mind, we can see how Stover is able to claim that there is “no particular reason that you need a university to improve yields and reduce livestock mortality.” But here’s the catch. If we understand the meaning and significance of the premise of fostering “progress and innovation in agricultural science” as including rather than dismissing considerations of ethics, politics, culture, and power, as well as the critical issue of which ends scientists and scholars should and should not be pursuing, then there are many “particular” reasons why we need a university. Such reasons have to do with the things we would include in a vastly expanded and highly complex understanding of what “progress and innovation in agricultural science” not only involves but also requires, particularly when it is taken up and pursued in societies that aspire to be democratic in ways that reach beyond periodic elections to the realm of everyday life and work: namely, a set of nontechnical matters that are normative in nature, including decisions about both the ends and means of agricultural science in land-grant colleges of agriculture. Embodiments of the scholar-as-human identity that are shaped by and aligned with the project of building and sustaining a democratic way of life are in my view prophetic. Those who aspire to this identity would (and in my view should) welcome deliberative and reflective attention to nontechnical matters of cultural purpose and significance as components of their professional work. Those who aspire only to a limited identity of the scholar as technician do not.

Here’s an example of a moment from land-grant history when an aspiring scholar as human spoke up—with a critical and prophetic voice—in defense of the larger vision of purpose and work I’m referring to. In an address she delivered at the annual conference of the Association of Land-Grant Colleges and Universities in 1937, a home economics leader from Illinois named Kathryn Van Aken Burns directed a stinging criticism to the men in
the audience. She noted that her Illinois colleague Isabel Bevier had recently
told her that the development of home economics had given land-grant col-
leges “an idealism and a cultural element not always recognized, as well as
a new measuring stick. Heretofore, results had been largely in terms of live-
stock or crops; hereafter, the measure of successful agriculture was the kind
of life produced.” Burns went on to argue, however, that “in spite of much
fulsome oratory” about extension’s larger cultural elements and purposes,
they were “pretty much lost sight of in carrying out the immediate objectives
for improved agricultural practices.”

Stover’s sentences by implication erase such moments or render them ille-
gitimate. The “cultural element” tied to “the kind of life produced” has no
place in the narrative his sentences reflect and reproduce about how and why
land-grant institutions were founded, what their purposes and work have
been and are supposed to be (and not be), and what they have accomplished.
The narrative his sentences reflect and reproduce, whether he’s conscious of
it or not (I expect not), is consistent with a deeply problematic master narra-
tive or meta-narrative that many people have told and reproduced for more
than a century. This master narrative obscures historical and contemporary
debates and disagreements about three key issues: (1) what the “premises
behind the land-grant universities dotting the American landscape” were;
(2) what is to be included in—and left out of—their public purposes; and
(3) judgments about not only the results but also the nature of their work,
including its cultural and political meaning and significance.

Knowledge about what is obscured by the master narrative constitutes
what Michel Foucault referred to as “subjugated knowledge.” In my work
as a scholar I seek to unearth and examine such knowledge, using historical
and narrative methods. While I never put it this way until I was invited to
write this afterword, what I have discovered and examined in my research
is in essence a hidden history in the land-grant system of the embodiment
of the scholar-as-human aspiration that is closely (and always everywhere,
imperfectly) aligned with the prophetic project of building and sustaining a
democratic way of life. Importantly, this isn’t a historical phenomenon that
is finished. It continues in our time in many places, including my own institu-
tion: Cornell University.

Sufficiently provoked and agitated, I can now offer brief answers to the
first set of questions I posed above: What’s the situation we’re in? What’s the
story about how we got there? What’s the argument about why it’s problem-
atic? What’s the vision of a better place to be? What’s the theory of change
about how we might narrow or bridge the gap between where we would like
to be and where we are? I answer these questions from the vantage point of
a particular “we”: those of us who are employed as academic professionals in land-grant colleges of agriculture.

The situation we’re in is, in several important ways, positive and inspiring. But it’s also deeply troubled and troubling. I’ll briefly elaborate, drawing on oral histories of faculty members’ life and work experiences that I have co-produced with many colleagues and students.¹⁹

The situation we’re in is one in which many scholars and scientists are establishing relationships with others—in and beyond their fields, and in and out of the academy—in pursuit of projects and purposes that offer them a deep sense of significance and meaning (or that they interpret in ways that provide them with a deep sense of significance and meaning), including but not limited to the project of building and sustaining a democratic culture and way of life. They are taking part in community life not only as scholars and scientists but also as interested rather than disinterested human beings, motivated and propelled by human emotions, passions, commitments, hopes, and fears. In different ways and combinations that fit their own distinctive likes and dislikes, they are reveling in the joy of connection, of communion, of collaborative public work, of larger social or cultural purpose, of discovery, of the freedom to follow their curiosity. They are mentoring and supporting each other and their students and nonacademic colleagues and partners as human beings with lives that are larger and more complicated than the positions they occupy and the roles they are assigned and expected to play. And they are doing all these things imperfectly and unevenly—sometimes successfully and sometimes not; sometimes with admirable humility, generosity, and gratitude, and sometimes not; and sometimes in ways that are connected to and consistent with their interpretations of what “the land-grant mission” obligates them to care about and be, and sometimes not.

In other words, despite their failings and imperfections, land-grant colleges of agriculture comprise an institution in which the scholar-as-human aspiration already exists. This is a key aspect of the situation we’re in. I know this not only from my research but also from my personal experience. I embrace and pursue the aspiration myself, with many colleagues. It adds meaning and significance to my work and life.

As I’ve noted, the situation we’re in isn’t all good. In many ways it’s troubled, and troubling. Those who embrace and pursue the scholar-as-human aspiration in land-grant colleges of agriculture (and elsewhere) often find themselves up against counterforces that not only discourage but also disrespect, discredit, marginalize, and even undermine them. These counterforces, which come both from within and outside of academic institutions and fields, include and involve the enforcement of the separation of scholar and human
identities as the “correct” way of being and working. Enforcement is enacted through such things as tenure and promotion decisions, review processes for publication and funding, graduate program selection and training, and much more. As a result, the scholar-as-human aspiration is difficult to pursue and sustain. I think it’s fair to say that those who do manage to pursue it against its many counterforces are an endangered species. And part of what is troubling about that is the relative lack of attention it is receiving as an issue or problem.

It’s a long story, how we got to the situation we’re in. It’s not a story of the loss of a golden age. It’s a complex, ongoing drama with tragic and prophetic qualities. It goes something like this: From the very beginning, some women and men who were hired as academic professionals in land-grant colleges of agriculture pursued their hunger to be whole persons in ways that aligned with the scholar-as-human aspiration. Some of them did and said remarkable things. Some of what they did and said was prophetic, in that it revealed ways that unfulfilled possibilities and commitments might be achieved—especially those tied to the project of building and sustaining a democratic culture and way of life, in everyday places that included farms and small rural communities. Struggling with and against all kinds of counterforces, and their own weaknesses and faults (e.g., their racism, sexism, selfishness, greed, laziness, and antidemocratic tendencies), many of them fell short or were co-opted or fired. But many also persevered in at least partially admirable ways. In doing so they made an imprint into the culture of land-grant colleges of agriculture that continues to this day, just as counterforces made enduring imprints as well. In essence, the story of how we got to the situation we’re in today with respect to the scholar-as-human aspiration is a story of tensions and battles between competing forces and visions. Importantly, the story isn’t finished. It hasn’t yet become only a tragedy. It still has prophetic qualities.

Good prophetic stories don’t just offer visions of what can and should one day be. They also offer critiques of what is. And they illuminate paths for moving from what is to what can and should be. Paths that can be understood as theories of change.

To all-too-briefly finish the line of questions I posed above, writing now as a member of a larger “we” that includes scholars from many fields and disciplines working for many different kinds of colleges and universities, below are some of the things I would include in a prophetic story about the scholar as human.

First, here’s a brief critique of what’s problematic about the situation we’re in with respect to the aspiration of the scholar as human. In short, the forces and realities that make up the situation we’re in—which we all
too often collaborate with or surrender to—are restraining the range of possibilities for our work. And they’re doing so in ways that diminish and sometimes even damage its value, its impact, its meaning and significance (including its personal satisfaction), and its trustworthiness. Our value, impact, significance, and trustworthiness. To borrow from Charles M. Perry, the forces that are combining to create the situation we’re in are diminishing and damaging our ability to pursue the primary objective of “the cultivation of the student as a human being.” Of the scholar as a human being, since scholars are by definition students. They are also combining, as they were in Perry’s time, to elevate lesser over greater values and to betray what, I think we should say more modestly than Perry, has never actually been democracy’s “most trusted helper” but rather one of its most important resources.

Second is a vision of what can and should one day be. Here I need to address a flaw in this essay. I’ve left too much to readers’ imaginations, putting me at risk of being misunderstood. Readers may suspect that my vision of what should be is the scholar as political protester, activist, or advocate. The scholar who abandons objectivity and science and functions as a sloppy relativist or a propagandist. The scholar who abandons her laboratory, library, or studio and takes to the streets. But these things are not what I have in mind. My vision of what should be is the scholar and scholarly work—scholarship, the methods and purposes of scholarly inquiry, and our institutional cultures—freed from the restrictive shackles of dogmatic, either-or, zero-sum thinking. Thinking that is at its core dehumanizing because it dishonors and disrespects difference and dismembers not only our identities but also our very beings. My vision of what should be dissolves damaging either-or thinking and opens up rather than shuts down difference, enabling, for example, scientists to be both in the lab and in off-campus communities if they wish to be, without being punished for it. But my vision is also of a robust and rigorous culture of debate and discourse and the pursuit of high standards of quality and responsibility. The scholar-as-human role, as I envision it, is fruitful, responsible, and satisfying, all at once. But it isn’t inherently or automatically so. It requires practice and support. It requires us to broaden our understandings of what counts as fruitful and productive, responsible and satisfying. And it requires us to promote and defend these things against many forces that seek to squash them.

Third, a path for closing or narrowing the gap between what is and what should be. As I have stated, my view of the situation we’re in includes the inspiring and hopeful truth that the prophetic aspiration of the scholar as human isn’t merely a dream. It’s a living, breathing reality, already here
among us. And not just in land-grant colleges of agriculture. Therefore, a critical element in a theory of change that can narrow the gap between what is and what should be is to find ways to learn from and with the prophets who are already among us. To support them and join with them in our own distinctive ways. The most powerful practice we can engage in for operationalizing this element is the practice of storytelling, using rigorous methods of inviting, hearing, constructing, and interpreting stories from our life and work experiences to illuminate breakthroughs as well as barriers, successes as well as failures, dangers and dilemmas as well as possibilities and epiphanies.

This is both an individual and collective practice. I’m convinced that it’s indispensable for the development and testing of effective theories of change. I’m also convinced that our theories of change must always be contextually and situationally sensitive. There can never be a single theory of change that works for all people in all places, for all disciplines and fields, at all times. The helpfulness of stories is not that they tell us “how to do it,” then, but rather that they can open our imaginations to possibilities as well as perils, in ways that enhance our sensitivity to the many social, cultural, and political dimensions of our work and experiences. In other words, to its human dimensions. Above all, then, the scholar as human is a storyteller, a story listener, and a story interpreter, strong in her conviction that despite their many shortcomings, and despite their dangers, stories are valuable and indispensable. We desire them, tell them, and use them to give our lives and work meaning. And the more we live our lives in virtual reality bubbles, the more we long to tell and hear them in person, face-to-face. As professional storyteller Dan Yashinsky has eloquently observed: “People have a new desire to reconnect to their own voices, memories and stories. We’ve come to realize that we can’t double-click on wisdom. You must spend time listening, and what you must listen to are stories told by word of mouth. The human race has never found a better way to convey its cumulative wisdom, dreams and sense of community than through the art and activity of storytelling.”

As a move or practice, storytelling may sound like a weak and ineffective ingredient in a theory of change, especially considering what we are up against. If it’s the only thing we do, it will be weak and ineffective. But I can report with conviction that it holds tremendous power and value. I know because I’ve both facilitated and participated in it with my colleagues and students here at Cornell and in many other places during my five-year term (2012–17) as faculty codirector of Imagining America: Artists and Scholars in Public Life. But I have yet to succeed in developing and testing a full theory
of change that moves beyond storytelling and interpretation. That’s not something I or anyone else can do alone. It’s an organizing project, with both intellectual and political dimensions. I’m hopeful that we’re entering a time when such work can be taken up. And I’m eager to join it.

**Spiritual Elements and Values**

To conclude, I want to flag an element in the scholar-as-human theme that is particularly important to me—spirituality—knowing, as I do so, that many will likely be troubled by it. Using a problematic gendered voice, Charles M. Perry noted it in his introduction to *Higher Education and Society*. “Man is not able to subsist on bread alone,” he wrote. Our lives must be “encompassed by beauty and truth and justice.” These and other “spiritual elements” were in his view “necessary for the complete and happy life,” because such a life involves “a utilization of all the social interests as well as an attempt to procure a balanced development of the individual.” When I read these passages from Perry’s introduction while I was working on this essay, I immediately thought of my favorite passage from Ruby Green Smith’s history of Cornell University’s extension work, published in 1949 under the evocative title *The People’s Colleges*: “Extension workers need to have faith in spiritual values and to recognize the human relationships that contribute to what the ancient Greeks called ‘the good life.’ They should believe that in the kind of homes, farms, and industries which are the goals of Extension service ‘man cannot live by bread alone’; that it is not enough for people to have food, shelter, and clothing—that they aspire also to find appreciation, respect for individuality and human dignity, affection, ideals, and opportunities. These are the satisfactions that belong to democratic living.” I carry this passage from Smith’s book with me every day. I see it as a core teaching from an unfinished script with a prophetic storyline. I love how it humanizes the people that land-grant institutions like Cornell are supposed to work for and with. And I love how, when we implicate ourselves in it as academic professionals, it can inspire and humanize us. In the end, I think most people who join the academic profession long to experience and support the satisfactions Smith wrote about in 1949, though for too many they have not been awakened and affirmed. Unfortunately, all too many are still being discouraged by professors who ask their students to pick topics to work on that are not on lists of issues and problems about which they are personally concerned. In other words, lists of things they care about.

I’m blessed to have had an advisor who didn’t do that to me. And I’m blessed to have many colleagues at Cornell and elsewhere who serve as
exemplars of the prophetic aspiration of the scholar as human, imperfect as they all may be. Colleagues in such disparate fields as plant breeding and philosophy, engineering and the humanities, horticulture and law, who take up work on things they care deeply about, boldly, responsibly, and productively, with humility and pleasure, on and off their campuses. They all have stories to tell. We need to make space and time for listening, and in response, for developing and testing a theory of change for narrowing the gap between the world as it is and the world as we would like it to be.

Notes

2. Ibid., 1, 2, 3. There are, of course, plenty of reasons to critique Perry’s characterization of (and story about) American higher education in colonial and early Republic years. For some of them, see Roger L. Geiger, ed., *The American College in the Nineteenth Century* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2000).
3. Ibid., 2.
7. Ibid., 3.
8. We can, of course, read Perry’s paraphrasing of the biblical passage from Matthew 4:4 critically, as a collaboration with and reproduction of oppressive power dynamics that turn people’s attention away from economic injustice and material deprivations. In my judgment, such a reading isn’t warranted here.
9. Ibid., 4, 5.
10. Ibid., 6, 8.
11. Ibid., 8, 5.
14. It is critically important for us to avoid both romanticizing and demonizing land-grant institutions, and the people who have worked as academic professionals in them. One tragic dimension of land-grant history—the original theft of indigenous land—has recently been highlighted through a project that located the acres that were stolen and distributed. See Robert Lee and Tristan Ahtone, “Land-grab Universities,” *High Country News*, March 30, 2020, https://www.hcn.org/issues/52.4/indigenous-affairs-education-land-grab-universities.
15. The word *agribusiness*, which was allegedly coined in 1957 by two Harvard economists, captures this erasure. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Agribusiness.


22. The theory and practice of broad-based relational organizing is particularly useful in higher education. See Maria Avila, Transformative Civic Engagement through Community Organizing (Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, 2018).
