Review: Academic Life: Hospitality, Ethics, and Spirituality

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John Bennett’s latest book, Academic Life, raises issues that academics rarely discuss—at least not openly with robust debate, which might bring about a more productive and positive workplace. As Eugene Rice writes in the Foreword:

“This book is a radical critique of American Higher Education. In contrast to other biting criticisms—Sikes’ Prof Scam or Bloom’s Closing of the American Mind would be examples—John Bennett offers a constructive response a new way of framing the important work taking place in colleges and universities across the country.”

Bennett provides an outstanding and careful analysis of some of the problems that plague the academy. This is best illustrated by quoting what he writes in the Preface:

“Three common experiences in academic life are central to this essay: Early enthusiasms about joining the community of scholars are often soon diminished by academic politics; the excitement of genuine learning seems persistently difficult to arouse and sustain in a number of students; and the challenges of leadership focus on addressing pathologies rather than on improving education.”

So much of what he writes resonates with me. As a young professor, I was excited about being a part of the academy, though my enthusiasm was soon dashed because of the “insistent individualism” of which Bennett writes. Fortunately, I was able to rebound, as early on in my career I assumed leadership positions where I tried—sadly without much success—to mold departments and colleges into places where scholars would work together in harmony. I remember once when I addressed faculty members on the importance of scholarship, one faculty stood up and proclaimed: “I don’t like the word ‘scholar,’ and there is no way I’ll ever be a scholar.” His words made my mind dizzy and caused my heart to ache.

In the Foreword, Rice writes that he had trouble with the word “hospitality” when he first read it in the
While I had the advantage of having been introduced to Bennett's definition and use of the word, I too confess that when I first saw the word in one of the author's essays, I blinked two or three times. However, Bennett quickly explains that hospitable is the creation of space where students and teachers can enter into fearless communication with each other and allow their respective life experiences to be primary and most valuable source of growth and maturation.

Bennett is an excellent writer and a brilliant thinker. His ideas flow nicely and he ties them together seamlessly.

"Bennett’s exploration as a metaphor advancing our understanding and learning is especially provocative," Rice writes. And it is.

Academic Life has eight chapters covering:

1. The Nature of Insistent Individualism
2. Why the Prevalence of Insistent Individualism
3. Hospitality—An Essential Virtue
4. Self, Others, Institutions, and the Common Good
5. An Essential Metaphor: ConversationThe Uses of Conversation
6. Community and Covenant
7. Engaged, but not Heroic, Leadership

Academic Life is a relatively small book – about 200 pages. Even so, the ideas Bennett advances caused me to read and reread. I underlined and questioned, and I found myself exploring the issues in my own mind and framing responses.

Academic Life should cause those in the academy to rethink many of their practices. And perhaps—just perhaps—we will be moved to talk about the issues Bennett raises. We can hope for our “academic lives to have more spirit and greater soul.”

Academic Life. Hospitality, Ethics, and Spirituality has my vote for higher education’s book of the year. Professors and administrators alike should have this profound little book handy for reading and rereading.

Let the conversations begin.

[Editor's note: Dr. Bennett has an essay--"Engaged, But Not Heroic, Academic Leadership"--in this issue of the Journal of Academic Leadership.]

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