A Swan Song (or a Fanfare): Some Thoughts of an Institute Director After 30 Years of Service

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Several years ago, Prof. Randy Pausch, a young superstar in computer science, gave a much-discussed lecture at Carnegie Mellon. In an address that was advertised as his last, Pausch entertained a packed hall with his stories about his fulfillment of some rather spectacular childhood dreams (e.g., experiencing zero gravity; becoming an Imagineer for Disney).

A leader in the creation of virtual realities (the stuff of which movie special effects are made), Pausch knew how to grab an audience’s attention. His depiction of his childhood aspirations and their mostly adult fulfillment was sufficiently entertaining and the insights were sufficiently touching that the genre of last lecture became the focal point of much conversation. Indeed, the Carnegie Mellon lecture itself has been viewed by about 15 million people on YouTube.

Fortuitously, Pausch’s purportedly last lecture actually was the first in a series of “last” lectures, and he made the round of talk shows to promote

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However, the more common form of the genre is a lecture composed
as if it were one’s last—a valedictory
as the speaker moves from one phase and venue of life to another. Notwithstanding Pausch’s example, a
typical last lecture is less like a high-minded Socratic last testament
than, say, a low-key version of Mr. Washington’s farewell address (still,
of course, an atmospheric aspiration) or, even more commonly, a
proclamation akin to the announce-
ment that “you won’t have Nixon to
kick around anymore” (a decidedly
less lofty benchmark).
I certainly do not intend this article
(or the lecture on which it was
based) to be my final words. Hence,
this article is not presented as a marker
of my denouement. Nonetheless,
I am at a point of transition, maybe
from one career to another—at a
minimum, from one extended phase
of life to another. When I awoke on
February 1, 2012, for the first time in
about 30 years I was not the director
(usually having been the found-
director) of a relatively large,
mostly grant-funded interdisciplinary
university-based program. At least
as far as my own acquaintances
extend, I held such a position longer
than any other director of an analo-
gous center or institute on children,
families, or communities anywhere
in the world. (At the conclusion of
this article, I will give some brief
impressions about the reason for the
common instability of such pro-
grams and the associated brevity of
their directors’ employment.)
As was true when I began my
career in academia, however, I am
now a “regular” faculty member in
another interdisciplinary program. In
my new position as a professor in
the University of Colorado’s Kempe
Center for Prevention and Treat-
ment of Child Abuse and Neglect,
there are several important changes
from my professional life more than
30 years ago. I have accrued three
or four decades of seniority, a little
fame (thus far unaccompanied by
criminal indictments), and the cush-
ions of soft landings facilitated by
golden parachutes both for my wife
and colleague Robin Kimbrough-
Melton and for me—the first time
(at least to my knowledge) that any-
one has actually paid to get rid of
us! In short, I now have assets
enabling me for the first time that I
can recall largely to set my own
agenda.
Thus, I have been liberated from
some of the daily, often existential
demands of institute leadership for
the first time in three decades.
Hence, the possibility of a new career
is not merely a metaphor,
although my intention is less to
adopt a new vocation than to con-
centrate my efforts on topics and
strategies more profound and
certainly more interesting and enjoy-
able than administrivia.
In a rough analogue to the half-
empty/half-full debate (or perhaps
the less-filling/tastes-great variant),
readers are free as they wish to con-
ceive of these remarks as my last
lecture or my first—a swan song
(valedictory address) proclaiming
whatever insights that I have gener-
ated or a fanfare (an inaugural
address) describing the phenomena
that I want to explore more deeply.

It Would Be Funny If It Weren’t
So Absurd

In the year or so from the time
that I began seriously considering a
job change until Robin and I settled
into our new home, I gave much
thought to the nature of university-
Based, public-service-oriented insti-
tutes’ work, my own contributions,
and their import, however transi-
tory. These questions were particu-
larly salient as we prepared to move
and in that context reviewed files
showing the nature of my activities
over the years. Although this
inquiry stimulated many warm

Questions for Self-Assessment

1. According to legal realists, what is the purpose of law?
2. Melton argues that universality is the core idea in international human rights law. Explain.
3. Why does Melton emphasize psychological-mindedness rather than psychology in his analysis of the application of human rights?
4. What is the fundamental attribution error?
5. What is Melton’s explanation for the common brevity of term of employment of directors of institutes and centers associated with child, family, and community issues?
Thoughtful innovation too often succumbs to mindless application of civil service rules, faculty manuals, and mandated but inapposite and premature experimental designs

No experience was more personally deflating, however, than finding the file that reminded me how much attention that I had once given to the collection and sharing of cartoons. My file showed that I had gradually forsaken this practice during the time that I’d been in South Carolina, until I simply stopped it more than a decade ago. In retrospect, the absurd had become sufficiently commonplace that it had ceased to be funny.

Much of my energy was invested in seemingly perennial struggles to finance activities that are or should be at the very heart of the university’s mission and indeed the community’s responsibilities. As a result, too often my creative effort was diverted from public service per se to administrative gamesmanship. I spent far too many hours in often unsuccessful efforts to ensure that due reinforcement (both social and tangible) was provided to the faculty and staff involved in family and community studies and related public service.

Perhaps the most maddening experience, however, was the constant need to overcome the strictures illogically imposed in the name of accountability by guilds and bean-counters in both funding agencies and the academy itself. Paradoxically, such arbitrary procedures and classifications often impede the implementation of creative strategies in addressing overarching but inadequately considered problems of our time—the raison d’être for unconventional structures like centers and institutes. Thoughtful innovation too often succumbs to mindless application of civil service rules, faculty manuals, and funder- or manager-imposed inapposite and premature experimental designs, a predilection given greater power by the current obsession with “evidence-based” technologies.

Of course, some colleagues thrive in this environment, at least for a time. Others are rendered helpless in a hostile or simply unsupportive environment. Some, like Robin and me, finally recognize that it is time to go, that it has been too long since the cartoons were funny. We see missed opportunities and eventually begin to look westward and skyward toward more exotic settings on the great, ultimately mile-high frontier.

Why Psychological-Mindedness Matters

The Importance of Subjective Experience

There is obviously more than a little cynicism in these initial comments. Although there is also more than a little truth in the account that I have related so far, it is of course not the whole story. This so-called last lecture—or, if you will, final reflections—is designed to give a smattering of Melton’s greatest hits, of ideas and actions that were brought to life in centers and institutes, structures that at their best provide focal points for the generation and sharing of collective experience among people of diverse backgrounds.

About 20 years ago at the American Psychological Association meeting, I gave an invited address that was subtitled, “Human Rights in Psychological Jurisprudence.” The lead title was, “The Law Is a Good Thing (Psychology Is, Too).” In retrospect, a better title may have been, “Psychological-Mindedness Is a Good Thing (Psychology? Eh, Not So Good!).”

Placing myself squarely within the tradition of legal realism, I began the APA lecture with the premise that “law is intended to promote human welfare”—that it is “truly a good thing that confirms the worth of humanity—that indeed gives official recognition to each citizen’s unique personality—and that promotes a sense of community … by (a) announcing the norms of the community and thus reifying the values embedded in the culture and (b) establishing structures that create or sustain social behavior consistent with those values, … By the proclamation as well as the guarantee of the interests that are most fundamental to our identity, law serves to sustain deference to those interests … [and thus] to give practical meaning to the aspirations of the people.”

Careful adherence to these purposes requires that authorities—in a democratic society, purportedly most of us—take people seriously:

...People all over the world value the law when it treats them with respect—when it offers them a voice in a context in which they are treated with politeness and dignity in a state of equality. ... Taking people

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2Id. at 384.
Put colloquially, taking people seriously means that they are treated like anybody and somebody. Being treated like anybody means being accepted and respected as a person, no matter one’s age and social background. Ultimately, the core idea in international human rights law is universality. In both logic and practice, respect for human dignity has little meaning if it does not apply to every human being. For example, in Christian teaching (as in other great religious traditions), rights belong to every child of God (“the least of these”), including those who are otherwise most vulnerable to exclusion or mistreatment.

The seminal document in human rights, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, expresses this idea in its title (Universal Declaration) and its basic principle that “everyone has the right to recognition every-where as a person before the law” (emphasis added). Indeed, the word everyone appears 30 times in the Declaration’s 30 articles, with the commitment to universality often being further emphasized by use of all to express particular articles’ scope.

Put simply, rights have no practical meaning outside a community inclusive of intimate, family relationships, all as subjectively experienced.

This principle has never been more elegantly expressed than in Justice Blackmun’s dissenting opinion in Bowers v. Hardwick, in which he argued that criminalization of homosexual conduct was constitutionally prohibited. Consider these excerpts about the nature of family-related rights:

1. We protect [rights associated with the family] not because they contribute, in some direct and general way to the general public welfare, but because they form so central a part of an individual’s life.

2. And so we protect the decision whether to marry precisely because marriage “is an association that promotes a way of life, not causes; a harmony in living, not faiths.”

3. We protect the decision whether to have a child because parenthood alters so dramatically an individual’s self-determination, not because of demographic considerations or the Bible’s command to be fruitful and multiply.

4. And we protect the family because it contributes so powerfully to the happiness of individuals, not because of a preference for stereotypical households.

5. … The “ability independently to define one’s identity that is central to any concept of liberty” cannot truly be exercised in a vacuum; we all depend on the “emotional enrichment from close ties with others.”

6. Only the most willful blindness could obscure the fact that sexual intimacy is “a sensitive, key relationship of human existence, central to family life, community welfare, and the development of a human personality.”

7. The fact that individuals define themselves in a significant way through their intimate … relationships with others suggests, in a Nation as diverse as ours, that there may be many “right” ways of conducting these relationships….

8. I can only hope that … the Court soon will … conclude that depriving individuals of the right to choose for themselves how to conduct their Nation’s history [could do more harm] than toleration of nonconformity could ever do.

In effect, Justice Blackmun argued, the Constitution’s import is not bounded by the literal content of its terms. Rather, the meaning is found in the search for the psycho-

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3Id. at 385 (italics omitted).

The vision that was embedded in our work was grand, but it was also mundane. It was not grandiose; it was, we learned, fully achievable. Strong Communities “applied our highest aspirations to the seemingly inconsequential actions of everyday life. Communities in which children feel safe, in which they are heard, in which they and their parents are treated with respect, and in which there are strong norms of caring and mutual assistance would be fine places to live.”

Such attributes are goods in themselves, logically embedded in the quality of life. Although susceptible to empirical study and undoubtedly related to many other positive outcomes, their moral value is not contingent. As goods in themselves—fundamental elements of human rights—merely the experience that they exist is morally, legally, and politically important. Although such experiences are often related to socially significant goals, we need not and often should not look further, because our interest is not grounded in such instrumental effects. Frankly, the test scores and other markers of youth achievement and ultimate conventional adult success on which our society has become fixated are trivial when caring communities fully respect human rights—an assertion that is given proof by the mounting evidence of the pervasiveness of effects of neighborhood quality on child well-being.

Conversely, judicial and administrative decisions that have been most contrary to psychological research and theory generally have signified such an extraordinary ignorance of—or perhaps disdain for—human experience that the bare rudiments of empathy should have led to different assumptions and different results:

[For example, a] court should be able, on its own, to discern that a dragnet canine search of schoolchildren, complete with strip searches of selected students, differs qualitatively from mundane school activities in its intrusiveness. [The late Chief Justice] William Rehnquist should not have needed a Stanford education (although one wishes that he had used it) to determine that [juveniles’] “custody” in a fortress-like secure detention facility is substantially more restrictive than “custody” in the typical American family.

[Accordingly, the] distinguishing feature of psychological jurisprudence is not that it relies on social science evidence (although it often may do so) but instead that it uses subjective experience as the unit of analysis. … Similarly, adoption of a psychological perspective might result ultimately in less use of social science evidence, because courts [and other authorities] would be less disposed to look for rationales (and thus to posit empirical assumptions) to justify intrusions on the fundamental rights of disadvantaged groups. …

[It is likely] that psychological inquiry would diminish the now-too-frequent instances of courts’ [and other authorities’] directly contradicting social reality through legal fictions—thus applying a double assault on personhood by mystification of experience and rationalization of limitations on exercise of rights.⁶

Armchair Psychoanalysis Is Popular, But …

The tendency to go beyond empathy to “psychologize” an understanding of phenomena that in their
The big although oft-disregarded message of contemporary social science is that situations typically matter much more than do personal traits.

Accordingly, the raison d'être of the centers and institutes that I have directed and indeed my personal goal have been to change institutions and settings, not individuals. Hence, we enable and support much more than we persuade. We seek to create institutions that treat people humanely and respectfully and that permit—or even "demand" (in an environmental sense)—people of good will to enrich the lives of all around them and to buffer the challenges, big and small, that life brings each of us at times of celebration, anxiety, or grief.

Reflecting on the worldview of the exceptional volunteers (those who were frequently at the forefront of community change and neighborly care in Strong Communities, my hunch is that few, if any, of them perceive themselves as engaged in "therapeutic" change, even though most, if not all, recognized their effectiveness in making things a bit easier for the people whom they serve in their daily lives. Although it is professional heresy to say so, the reality is that the personal change that may come from individual clinical services (or individual supervision in workplaces) is usually trivial in relation to the effects of the "climate" in the places where we live, work, study, worship, or play. To repeat Eleanor Roosevelt’s stirring words, “Such are the places where every man, woman, and child seeks equal justice, equal opportunity, equal dignity without discrimination. Unless … rights have meaning there, they have little meaning anywhere.”

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The End of the Last Lecture: Universities’ Affirmative Roles and Duties

The Celebration of Great Lives and Great Ideas

In the end (the most significant position in a last lecture or, for that matter, any lecture!), universities’ most important roles, reflected in their historic entanglement with societal religious institutions, are to be custodians, interpreters, publicists, and agents of those values and beliefs that Mr. Lincoln described in his first inaugural address as “the better angels of our nature.” Although the division of responsibility is not rigid (as most notably illustrated by seminaries), churches and temples are the venues for the expression and study of revealed truths, whether by divine gifts or spiritual quests; universities are the repositories of the insights emanating from the application of such truths to lived experience.

The power of collective experience—stated differently, the power of ideas—is the most important reason why universities are good bases from which to work in communities, even though some other aspects of academic culture are maddening. In turn, as a practical matter, the institutional mission to expand collective wisdom is the most important reason for universities to reject parochial instincts driven by the restrictive guilds of the academy and instead to embrace globalism, multiculturalism, and Jeffersonian equality. Our individual influence rests, often imperceptibly, on the contributions of not only our colleagues but also those who are far from us in time and space. “Thinking globally, acting locally” is indeed at the foundation of effective community work.

Too often, however, academicians have overlooked the wisdom that can be found in the communities with which we work. Universities should indeed facilitate and celebrate the truths found in the lives of the philosophers, statespersons, scientists, and artists of global and historical renown. However, we should also facilitate and celebrate the achievements and insights of the traveling salesman (who died in his mid-50s, heavily in debt after extended disability because of a series of heart attacks and a stroke. Although his work had required him to drive 1,000 miles per week during much of his adult life, he did not board an airplane until after he had finished graduate school and welcomed a second child (also my parents’ second grandchild), in that instance a half-continent from my parents’ home. He never went abroad, although my parents sacrificed so that I could do so when I was in high school. I doubt if his name appeared in the newspaper at any time other than his birth, marriage, and death, but he spread the word about my own and my siblings’ achievements to anyone who would listen.

Much like the exceptional volunteers in Strong Communities, Dad was active in the local civic club. Indeed, almost every man whom I knew when I was a child belonged to the Granite Quarry, North Carolina, Civitan Club.

At one time or another, he held most of the offices in the small Methodist church that my great-grandfather had served as pastor. Whether he was with the bridge club, the kids in the neighborhood, the church youth group, the local restaurant servers and patrons (I think that he knew most of them in the Virginia small towns where he worked), or the staff in the stores that were his customers, he was a people person. When he died, he was on his way to his weekly playtime with the toddlers in the nursery of the much bigger church that the family attended after we moved to Roanoke, Virginia.

All of this went two ways—or, better stated, multiple ways. For example, when my sister married

8See http://www.ourstate.com/granite-quarry-civitans/ for a recent magazine article about the club.
after my dad became disabled, my parents’ Sunday School class hosted the reception. When Dad died, the informal restaurant that my parents frequented donated the catering for the funeral. As I am sure that Dad never would have expected, the sanctuary seating hundreds of people was packed. The owner of a motel where my dad had stayed when he worked in the area brought in his remodeling crew to renovate the family home, which had fallen into disrepair, so that it could be sold. (That family friend became a loyal volunteer in the Ronald McDonald House that my mother subsequently managed. Indeed, especially after Dad’s death nearly 30 years ago, my mother became an even more active community servant than he had been, but that is a story for another time.) Of course, there are many other examples from earlier years.

When Dad died, he had a tattered clipping of a Dear Abby column in his wallet. The column focused on a quote (“What Is Success?”), which is usually misattributed to Ralph Waldo Emerson but which was actually written by an early-20th-century magazine subscriber, Bessie Anderson Stanley, in response to an open call for 100-word essays:

To laugh often and love much; to win the respect of intelligent persons and the affection of children; to earn the approbation of honest citizens and endure the betrayal of false friends; to appreciate beauty; to find the best in others; to give of one’s self; to leave the world a bit better, whether by a healthy child, a garden patch or a redeemed social condition; to have played and laughed with enthusiasm and sung with exultation; to know even one life has breathed easier because you have lived—this is to have succeeded.6

Ms. Stanley’s quote that apparently meant so much to my father not only describes successful people, it also presents the essence of successful institutes concerned with community life. Indeed, a successful institute is a way of life. It presents a venue that enables thoughtful, caring, and dedicated professionals and community volunteers to experience “success” a bit more easily. Such an entity brings scientific and humanistic insights, just as it capitalizes on the assets in living communities, to facilitate the appreciation and enhancement—even transformation—of the expression of human rights in everyday life. One needs little knowledge of academic culture to imagine the gap between this mode of study and action and the norms present in conventional university departments and schools.

The Continuing Struggle

To illustrate this point further, I will close with a description of another personal experience. In January 2012, Robin and I were privileged to attend the 20th annual joint observance of Martin Luther King Day by the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra and the Morehouse and Spelman glee clubs. Reflecting Dr. King’s own musical taste and arguably expressing the threads of his own distinctive and monumental contributions, the annual concert combines the messages and experiences of African American artistic and spiritual expression and the aesthetics and ethics in Western intellectual history.

Yo-Yo Ma was the soloist in the centerpiece of the King Day concert (Dvořák’s Concerto in B minor for cello and orchestra). Besides owning many of Maestro Ma’s albums, we have been fortunate to see and hear him perform on several occasions. In my judgment, he is without peer among contemporary musicians. Hearing him play is always memorable and inspirational, and the choirs and orchestra also gave performances worthy of the celebration.

After taking well-deserved bows at the end of the Dvořák concerto, the musicians assembled for an unannounced encore. I whispered to Robin that the forthcoming encore had to be We Shall Overcome. I was correct, but only partially so. Apparently spontaneously, Maestro Ma picked up his chair and his instrument and carried them to the back of the cello section, where he sat humbly in the last seat. He then began playing the elegiac, soulful Sarabande from Bach’s Suite No. 5 in C-minor for unaccompanied cello. Words fail me in describing the
performance, which was stunning, even transcendent. By the end of Maestro Ma’s solo, tears were streaming down my cheeks.

Then, immediately upon the conclusion of the Sarabande, the Morehouse choir began to sing its director’s inspiring and distinctive arrangement of We Shall Overcome. The Morehouse arrangement builds into an up-tempo crescendo in the verse proclaiming, “We are not afraid today.” The two compositions blended into one extraordinary experience that symbolized the losses, the challenges, and the triumphs that were embodied in Dr. King’s life and that have been amplified in the succeeding generation (I encourage readers to re-create this stirring event for themselves).10

So what is the significance of this anecdote? At an early point in this article, I said that I would end with some thoughts about the difficulties that institutes on children, families, and communities face. Institutes were created to have the substantive and social importance, were created to do what is difficult for universities to do but that they ought to do. Thus, institutes are created in struggle; they continue in struggle.

The power that energizes such struggles can be found not only in the once-in-a-lifetime expression of genius and caring by a heroic humanist like Yo-Yo Ma but also in the spiritual and human meaning of daily acts of greatness by exceptional commoners, as reflected in the evocative lyrics and tune of a simple but inspiring folk song like We Shall Overcome. What makes the Morehouse choir’s arrangement so special is not just the historical context that those of us who grew up in the American South a half-century ago know all too well. The Morehouse arrangement is not memorable because it stimulates a kum-bah-yah good feeling. Rather, it challenges us to find the courage to overcome our fears.

Of course, the fears that the composer put before the singers were much more profound than those that we face today. We do not risk life and livelihood. But we still are called to muster the courage repeatedly to assume the risk of failure (maybe even frequent failures) in order do the difficult, even the seemingly impossible, in transformational service to our communities.

Change toward greater sense of community is still possible, and it is worth the effort, even when the way is difficult, the access to tools is blocked (sometimes by academic institutions themselves), and the tide is flowing in the opposite direction.

We must diligently discover, understand, apply, and spread the contributions of successful people—exceptional servants—as the foundations for truly transformed, hospitable, and decent communities.

Suggestions for Further Reading
Melton, G. B. (2010c). “To such as these, the kingdom of heaven belongs”: Religious faith as foundation for children’s rights. In J. Garbarino & G. Sigman (Eds.), Children’s right to a healthy environment (pp. 3–30). New York, NY: Springer.
Tomlin, J. (2011, November). Pride of place: Granite Quarry Civitans. Our State, pp. 128–133. (The November 2011 issue of Our State, a magazine about North Carolina, includes several articles about the importance of civic clubs in small towns in the American South.)
that probably encompasses most or all of us at times.

In that regard, I can find no better words to conclude this last lecture than the admonition that I offered in my first essay in *The Community* 3 years ago:

Remember that all of us—yes, all of us—experience not only joy but also anxiety and grief in our families. Such is the human condition. Only some of us have the resources, however, not to feel so overwhelmed that children’s safety and well-being are often compromised, maybe even most of the time. In either case, all of us deserve the support needed to strengthen and preserve the relationships most important to us.

Although a sense of community—a feeling of ubuntu, an experience of neighborly love—may be increasingly rare in our society, such feelings of belonging are no less important than they have ever been. The human need for connection transcends the characteristics that divide us. It is fundamentally important, regardless of whether one is rich or poor, old or young, liberal or conservative, black, white, or brown.\(^\text{11}\)

*People shouldn’t have to ask.*

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**Keywords:** last lecture; Randy Pausch; centers; institutes; guild issues; psychological-mindedness; subjective experience; psychological jurisprudence; legal realism; human rights; *Bowers v. Hardwick*; Strong Communities for Children; neighborhood effects; fundamental attribution errors; child protection; child mental health; collective experience; Morehouse Glee Club; Yo-Yo Ma; *We Shall Overcome*