

Editorial: Separation of the Eternal from the Immediate

Academic journals are well known for being several years out of date with their publications, but the reason for that being the case is perfectly straightforward. The academic approach quite properly sets the subject of study in the scholarly framework of the day, sees it through a careful analysis to a logical conclusion, and is subject to critical peer review all along the way, with an intermittent series of revisions leading to an ultimate publication that is necessarily out of date when it is published a few months later, after years of planning, conduct, analysis and criticism.

Other sections of the publication industry deal with the urgency characteristic of television and everyday print journalism, representing a totally different view of the world. And they should be separate worlds, many people say, because one deals with the eternal and the other with the immediate.

But it is unwise to separate the eternal from the immediate! To separate them is to say there is no connection between arctic bugs and arctic sovereignty, no connection between arctic people and north warning systems, no connection between arctic resources and arctic music, no connection between arctic politics and arctic reality! To separate them is the same as saying that it is rational to spend \$10 billion on a fleet of arctic nuclear submarines while allocating only \$5 million for arctic research and development. It is the same as saying we are protecting our arctic resources while approving the sale of the major resource holder.

What is needed is some kind of circumpolar vision. A little flagpole sitting at 90 degrees North allows us to consider what could be done by diverting the monies destined for a couple of nuclear submarines to something eternally useful. An ordinary, well-adjusted university costs about \$500 million and another \$100 million per year to operate. Thus, monies allocated for one nuclear submarine could more than provide the physical plant, and a second could provide an endowment to operate the plant forever.

Now, obviously, the traditional design for an urban university would not suit a circumpolar university serving all the circumpolar peoples. Great scope exists, therefore, for truly innovative design in a university system to serve all circumpolar peoples. We would find ourselves going back to eternal values, particularly as they have evolved in the circumpolar North — values of social organization, values of environmental wealth, values of a top-of-the-world view, values of a common northern culture, values of responsible resource management. We could draw (cautiously) on the technologies of the industrialized world in long-distance and multiracial communication, and with these resources we could erect a unique university system addressing the eternal topics of humankind in a direct and revealing way.

One of the greatest challenges in establishing an international circumpolar university is the actual organization of the people involved — students, faculty and administrators. The traditional way is to site a university in the middle of a concentration of people and throw the doors open for business. Students crowd into the classrooms, and instructors deliver their material in a very classical way. The circumpolar regions, however, have no obvious concentrations of people, so the system must be designed for students and faculty to come together in some other way. Advanced learning methods now deal directly with “distance” education, whether it is a course on physical anthropology or a tutorial on computer methodology. Computers, telephones and satellites are available virtually everywhere, including the circumpolar North, so they offer the mechanics of getting it all done. But everyone knows that the greatest increments of learning take place in personal interactions between student and student, student and instructor, and instructor and instructor. These commonly occur in social settings. So what is the circumpolar analogue of a Berkley student coffee shop? And how do we make it work when there are 70 languages involved? It is possible: we just need a little innovation, a lot of travel, and a fair degree of high technology for real-time translation.

In a circumpolar setting, the mythologies of East and West, North and South, black and white, rich and poor will stand out in their empty nakedness, and in their place will emerge a strong coalition of understanding among the circumpolar people, eternally compelling but not indifferent to the urgency of the moment.

Universities have departments and institutes, but most importantly, they have students, and students come in all sizes, shapes and colours, with some kind of universal will to learn what is important — not so much in the fields of rampant consumerism, regional militarism or resource exploitation, but in other areas of human importance. Given half a chance, they will deal with the eternal values also, whether they lie in the area of astronomy, philosophy, natural science or fine arts. The circumpolar students will present a real challenge to their instructors, because they will bring with them an entirely different set of cultural baggage, one that is mercifully free of much of the superficial trappings of the industrialized world. Significantly, the students will be able to learn extensively from themselves and from their own people in the proposed international circumpolar university.

And, yet, the international circumpolar university must offer to the students a good understanding of the rest of the world. That will be part of the challenge to the instructors. How does the rest of the world look from the top of the North Pole? Perspective is a great tool, and regional jealousies, which give rise to local wars in the “developed” world, will stand out in all their insanity when viewed from afar. So, also, wars by proxy will be revealed in all their inhumanity when viewed from above. The danger of the circumpolar region itself being increasingly militarized by the “developed” nations will be obvious to all the circumpolar students.

The circumpolar university will bring to the rest of the world a remarkable view, with eternal values clearly stated in the urgency of the moment. It is an idea — just an idea, at the moment — that deserves dedicated pursuit among all circumpolar communities in Europe, America, Asia and the Nordic seas.

— Gordon Hodgson