The Teaching of Oriental Civilizations

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When I came to New York in 1964 from Denver East High School, I arrived at Grand Central Station dressed in cowboy hat, boots, and jeans and brimming with enthusiasm. Reading Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* had convinced me that New York was the place where I could sample the exciting lifestyle of the remnants of the Beat generation. School was definitely not my first priority and it was only because I could think of nothing better to do that I declared myself a major in English literature. However, while I enjoyed reading novels, I did not enjoy analyzing them. I was more interested in actually doing writing and drawing myself, and even tried (unsuccessfully) to transfer to Cooper Union. In other words, I was becoming very bored at Columbia.

My increasing ennervation at school was offset by my pursuit of pleasurable experiences in New York. I soon realized that Chinese food was much tastier than hamburgers and hot dogs, and that Indian music and Middle Eastern dance could be far more exciting than rock and roll. Reasoning that other aspects of Asian culture might be equally intriguing, I began taking courses in Oriental Humanities and Civilizations, where I soon found that I was no longer bored. Instead, I wanted to know as much as I could about the
worldviews and aesthetics of these exotic societies, and I took as many classes in Oriental Studies as were allowed. Unhappily, I never risked studying any Asian language. Just learning French was proving to be a severe trial for me, and the thought of trying to master a language with a completely different script and grammar was very intimidating. Today I regret my cowardice, but one of the major strengths of the program has always been the productive collaboration between the Oriental Civilizations program and Columbia University Press; a collaboration which provided students with brilliant translations of classic texts, so that even the linguistically challenged could gain some basic knowledge of the essential works.

The courses I took were all taught by extraordinary professors, such as Theodore deBary, Ainslee Embree and Peter Awn, who patiently helped me to find my way through difficult and challenging material. I especially remember being introduced to the doctrine of the mean, which was a striking antidote for the contemporary dogma of excess; I also learned the valuable lesson that hierarchy and authority were not all bad. The I Ching confirmed for me the dialectical and fluctuating nature of reality, and I began to understand as well the painful truth that different times and conditions produce different characters and different moral challenges, that answers are never simply black and white. Hindu philosophy further challenged my sense of identity and reality, while Japanese aesthetics heightened my awareness of the beauty of the transient.

Just as important as the lessons I learned from books were the examples I took from my teachers, who responded seriously to what I had to say, nonsensical as it usually was. They made me feel that I too could participate in a dialogue not only with my fellow students and professors, but with men and women of entirely different cultures and eras. That experience set the model
for me of what good teaching and good learning ought to be, and I have tried to live up to it ever since.

I was taught some other important moral lessons as well. During the student unrest of 1968 I was taking a colloquium with Professor deBary. I remember passionately explaining to him that the ongoing political uproar made it impossible for me to continue attending classes, that other professors were simply granting student grades of "pass", and so on - in response, he informed me that the disciplined quest for knowledge could not to be subordinated to the fervor of the moment. In other words, I had to live up to the Mandarin ideal, and keep coming to class and writing papers. At the time, this seemed terribly unfair. But I now am grateful that he obliged me to recognize the priority of scholarship over partisanship: an ideal I have also tried to maintain.

When I graduated from Columbia I won a Henry Evans Travelling Fellowship with a proposal that combined my artistic interests with my new knowledge of Asia. I wanted, I said, to study Japanese brush technique in Kyoto. This laudible ambition never was realized. Instead, I tried to travel to Japan from East to West and found the trip so interesting that I ended up wandering through Afghanistan, Pakistan and India, settling at last in Northern Pakistan. There I lived for many months in a small tribal village, learned to speak some Pukhto, and experienced first-hand a sense of detachment from my own taken-for-granted world and the desire to understand the culture and experiences of others that is the first prerequisite for humane scholarship.

When I finally came back to New York, I had a new sense of my vocation. I wanted to return to Pakistan for further study, though I didn't know in what discipline that study could be undertaken. My language ability (or inability) made Oriental studies unlikely for me, though that was my first choice. I decided instead to apply for graduate school in Anthropology, where immersion in
culture was favored over textual knowledge. After a remedial semester in the School of General Studies, I was admitted to the Columbia Graduate Program and, in a few years, I did return to my village, wrote my thesis, and became an anthropologist specializing, oddly enough, in Islamic societies, which had interested me the very least of the great civilizations I had studied as an undergraduate. My first publication was an article in a collection compiled by my mentor Ainslee Embree.

But even though I did not go into the study of Asian texts or history, the lessons I learned as an undergraduate have remained central to my scholarly work as an anthropologist. The wide-ranging, comparative and catholic approach favored by the Oriental Studies program has inspired my own refusal to specialize or compartmentalize, my passion to compare and contrast different cultural worlds, and my impulse to render the strange familiar and the familiar strange. Nor have I forgotten the specific texts I studied as an undergraduate. In fact, I recently had the opportunity to use two of my favorite authors from Oriental Humanities - Kenko and Sei Shonagun - in an essay about what is often called the `sociocentric self' in Asia. The idea behind the premise of the sociocentric self is that Asian peoples have wholly different inner lives than `we' do; lives in which individuality is non-existent and the collective is all. There is certainly some truth in this assertion, but memories of my own undergraduate reading convinced me that it was far too one-sided, and that it was more than possible to see authors such as Kenko and Sei Shonagun as unique and passionate individuals, different from `us' certainly, but not so different as to be completely alien. I ended that essay, as I shall end this one, with a quote from Kenko that I think characterizes the true spirit of Oriental Humanities, as I experienced it:
"The pleasantest of all diversions is to sit alone under the lamp, a book spread out before you, and to make friends with people of a distant past you have never known".