

An Interview with Dr. Evan Simpson

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Dr. Evan Simpson is the new Vice-President (Academic). He studied philosophy at Amherst and Duke and, until his move here, spent all of his teaching career at McMaster University in Ontario, where his last appointment was Dean of Humanities. He is the author of two books (*Reason over Passion: The Social Basis of Evaluation and Appraisal*, 1979, and *Good Lives and Moral Education*, 1989) and has written many essays. He took up his new position at Memorial at the beginning of the year. As has become the custom with *The Dispatch* with new senior administrators, we interviewed him at his office on 3 February. Dr. Simpson is a quiet man who thinks carefully before he speaks, but who speaks very clearly and fully once he begins. And though deliberative in his answers, he has a ready smile. The interviewer was William Barker, from the Department of English.

Can we sketch out your background?

I went to Amherst College in Massachusetts in 1958 and four years afterwards took a BA in philosophy, which I followed by going to Duke University for another 4 years. I left there with a PhD in philosophy, and moved directly from there to McMaster University where I stayed for 32 and a half years.

So you were an American?

I was born in California, so I was American, though I consider myself half-Canadian since my father met my mother, who was a nurse at the Montreal General, when he was a medical student at McGill and took her back to California, where I was born. I suppose if it had happened a little more quickly I would have been born a Canadian.

I would think the Amherst experience would have been pretty important to you. The American liberal arts program is quite different from what is found in Canadian universities.

I only came to appreciate this later on because I didn't particularly enjoy my Amherst experience. I was challenged more than I really liked. It was hard work coming to a view of the world after my parochial upbringing in Sacramento, but subsequently I'm convinced that I learned how to think at Amherst, how to write and how to formulate independent opinions, and generally how to have or to hone those intellectual skills that we normally ascribe to university education. It is a painful process, going through that honing, and Amherst did it extremely well, but it was painful.

Did you get involved in extra-curricular activities?

I was involved in swimming and social things; I liked to explore in the countryside. I wasn't absorbed by my studies the way the most conscientious students were. Generally I used the time to find myself -- find who I was at that time anyway. I did moderately well in the courses that I took but I used a lot of my time in ways that weren't to scholarly advantage.

How one experiences the university as an undergraduate is important for the way one later conceives of its purpose. Would you say that coming from an American into a Canadian university, into a system that is more specialized at the undergraduate level -- that this helped you or hindered you in any way?

Well I have certainly tended to resist what I see as the excessive specialization of many of our programs. Yet I don't think that this specialization has to be a serious obstacle. It can be modified. Where I come from has provided me with a contrast that enables me to encourage Canadian university programs to loosen up a bit.

One of the things I like about Memorial is that a number of faculties do seem to value what a liberal education can

bring. So that the faculty of business, for example, encourages their students to take courses in the social sciences and the humanities. I like the complementary studies aspect of the engineering curriculum, and will, while I'm at Memorial, continue to encourage the faculties and schools, and departments within faculties to remember that, beyond Memorial, students have an opportunity to further their education if they wish to go to graduate school and specialize. But a lot that we can give to students comes from the breadth of experience that we can offer to them.

At McMaster I spent a number of my last years as dean suggesting to departments that sixty per cent of an honours student's final three years at university do not need to be devoted to a single subject. Maybe fifty per cent is sufficient. Some departments heeded me, and made adjustments, and others did not. But it's a debate we ought to have.

What kind of work did you do at Duke?

Well, Duke at that time was a strongly analytic department. There are styles in philosophy. Some approach it historically, some approach it through the philosophy of the Continent in ways which are deemed in the United States to be less rigorous than ought to be accepted amongst professional philosophers, and some departments are, as I say, analytic, having been influenced by Russell's logic, by logical positivism, and other tendencies prevalent in Oxford in the fifties. As a result my course work was focused tightly on logic and the analytical subjects, such as the philosophy of mind and the philosophy of science, and out of that early experience I decided to write a dissertation on an obscure controversy having to do with the nature of facts. There was a long-standing debate whether facts are what true statements state, or are what make true statements true. And I wrestled with that for a year. For some reason they gave me a PhD at the end of it. Again, looking back on it, I don't think I was the most studious person in the doctoral program, and indeed in my last year, I went off to the University of Innsbruck on a Fulbright to study some other esoteric things, and to write my thesis.

While I was in Europe, I got an offer from McMaster. Things were very different in those days. One could look forward to a career even if one didn't exhaust oneself in studies, and even if one didn't subject oneself to an interview. I got my offer by telegram.

Did you get into administration early or late?

I never thought about being anything other than a philosophy teacher until I'd been at McMaster quite some time. When the position of chair became open, as it periodically does, I was at that time a professor and I was encouraged to seek the job, agreed to be considered, and become chair of the department and after three years was re-elected. I still think of that as the best job I ever had. I was able to see definite improvements in the department and I was able sometimes to get on with my own work. At the end of that I took a research leave during which time the dean of the faculty resigned to become a vice president somewhere else. And the process repeated itself. I was encouraged to be interviewed. By that time I realized

I could do the job as well as the previous dean had, and thought that there were problems in the humanities at McMaster that I could ameliorate, and happily went ahead. I had a very pleasurable seven and a half years in that job. But shortly after I started my second term I found myself saying, I've done this before, and I started to feel a lot of it was routine. And people like my daughter began to tell me that I was getting restless. So when I got a call from Memorial, or the search company that Memorial had employed to look for a new VP, I was susceptible.

What does one lose on going into administration?

One loses contact with -- this is not a law of nature, but it describes me -- one tends to lose contact with undergraduate students, because I did have some teaching relief, and it was difficult to meet with students three times a week. And for that reason my teaching tended to become seminars, either advanced undergraduate or for graduate students. One loses the classroom experience that is typical for those with a full complement of courses. And ultimately beyond the level of chair, one's research begins to suffer. I've managed to keep up an article a year or so, in decent places, but I have not written the book or two I would have written had I not been a faculty dean. And I believe vice presidents have it even harder in this respect. After I find my feet in this job, I hope to offer my services to the philosophy department and carve out a little time for maintaining my writing. But though I ask my staff to carve out a block of time on Friday mornings during which I could do some research, so far it's not been very successful. I may have to

reconcile myself to having no time for writing, but I am reluctant to acknowledge that, because I do have some things in my head that I would like to get down onto paper.

What kind of writing have you been doing lately?

Well, after freeing myself from Duke and the environment of analytical philosophy, I found myself drifting back to an interest I'd had in social and political philosophy, and some aspects of moral theory, so that in the past twenty years or so my work has been in those areas, with occasional excursions into the philosophy of mind and philosophical psychology. Moral education is connected and that emerged as an interest too. But that part is pretty much behind me at this time.

I'd like to change directions. There are two big rumours about you. The first is that you are good at cutting and slashing.

I never cease to be amazed at the capacity of the university to generate rumours. In our disciplines, we are so demanding of sources and evidence, and yet in our communal life we are remarkably prepared to take seriously whatever comes to us in the wind.

I guess that gets us back to your study of facts -- whether they are what true statements state ...

I am a little nonplused about this particular rumour. It may have emerged from the fact that at McMaster and other Ontario universities, faculty budgets were cut, during the time I was dean of the faculty, approximately 15%, with one cut of 11% coming at the end of that process. So it happened very quickly and we had to make speedy adjustments. But I never thought of those adjustments as slashing. They were achieved in a way that didn't draw blood. The changes, which were mostly through faculty downsizing, came as a result of comparing resources against demand for programs. And when we looked at the facts we were able to arrive at decisions that were generally regarded as fair. So while there was some cutting, there wasn't much slashing. I'm not sure one can be good at slashing. One can arbitrarily cut budgets, but the dissatisfactions that result pretty much outweigh any benefits that come from the savings. The only way to deal with these things is through as much discussion as possible, so at least people can see decisions are fair and just, even if they don't happen to like them.

So you operate as much as possible towards consensus?

No question that was a major part in my being offered the job. That's the record I presented, and that's the attitude I expressed.

And the other rumour is that you are the master of the retirement package. And there are a lot of people I know who would like one...

Well, again, I can claim much less credit for retirement packages than that rumour gives me. Deans at McMaster agreed amongst themselves a number of years ago that we would offer selected individuals significant retirement benefits if they were interested in availing themselves of the opportunity. This was one way of coping with that period of gradual attrition in our budgets. I found that there are always people who have become a little tired of their annual routines and welcome an opportunity to either retire or do something else. And the benefits made that possible for them. At the time of the major eleven per cent cutback the university developed a formal retirement package which was universally available to faculty and not to staff, though there was also a staff retirement package with conditions that were different -- they could only retire if the position was to disappear. But that condition didn't apply to the faculty, though it was understood that faculty renewal could only happen at a one for two ratio. As it happened, a number of people in my faculty decided to take the package. It wasn't necessary for me to persuade them. There were faculties in which there were fewer retirements, and they remain in financial difficulties to this day. I can only say that I was able to articulate the offer in a way my colleagues could understand, after which it was up to them. Many of them decided to accept it. It must have been 15% of my faculty who took early retirement at that period.

Do you see a retirement package in the near future?

It's a matter that's very much in the air. I haven't, the president hasn't, begun to formulate a proposal, in part because the university's experience of the previous offer was so unsatisfactory that a renewed retirement package would not necessarily be to the university's benefit. Having said that, I'm convinced that the question is not going to go away and that it requires active investigation.

If there's one thing that faculties desire right now, it's a form of faculty renewal that will allow us to hire some of the amazingly good people who are out there looking for university positions. It's very difficult for that to happen to any extent as long as there aren't a significant number of vacancies. So we owe it to ourselves to determine whether or not there is a way of fashioning a package which serves the purposes of faculty renewal and addresses the resource problems that are going to continue to plague us. So I think it's an open question.

Is there some other way to get this renewal, perhaps by making a stronger pitch to government to increase support?

We made our best pitch to government recently. It did not include an appeal for renewal, for there was evidence that they would laugh us out of court. We have a long way to go to explain to people what it is that we do and how it gets done. One thing I'm most interested in is developing our capacity to account for ourselves to people who are not ourselves, and that certainly includes the government, though it also includes the people the government listens to, that is, the voters.

In the recent discussion, it was obvious that the people the government listens to include the students, because the government was unwilling to put the university in a position where it would have to raise tuition rates again.

So we're carrying on. But carrying on doesn't get us those new positions that we're talking about. In my first month here I haven't formulated a plan that would help us hire those people within our existing staff commitments and budgetary resources. I think it's possible to look at various forms of bridging appointments in which new people could come and learn their job from their senior colleagues shortly before those colleagues retire. But I haven't done the arithmetic on this so I'm not yet sure if these bridging arrangements will get us very far. It's certainly something to look at as one alternative to, or complement to, the early retirement possibility that's the first thing that comes to people's minds.

I believe that for some older colleagues, the excitement of the job drops off, even though in some cases they are better at the job than they've ever been.

People become susceptible to early retirement offers because the job satisfaction becomes less as the work of research, the activity of meeting students, the routine of service, all conspire to make the work less invigorating, less exciting, than it at onetime was.

There has in the past at this university been a distrust between faculty and administration. How can this be resolved?

I want to say first of all that it's important that we try to resist demonizing the administration. The administration is just a number of mostly academic people who have undertaken particular functions. To suppose that there is an entity called the administration is just bad metaphysics. We ought to try to get beyond the idea that we as faculty are one thing and that the administration is something else opposed to us. I couldn't do this job if I thought that way. I'm a faculty member. I look forward to ordinary faculty duties. I think that's generally true of people who have decanal and vice-presidential positions, and those who are heads of departments.

Having said that, I recognize that this opposition does exist in some people's minds and therefore has to be contended with. I made one of my first acts deliberately to visit the president of MUNFA in order to express an openness on the part of the administration to talk through problems as they arise. And generally to establish a dialogue that I realize has not always existed in recent years at Memorial. I've also tried to explain to other people who have managerial roles in the university that one way of improving morale in the university and undermining suspicion of one another is to respect the Collective Agreement, to treat union leaders as rational people, because if we do, they'll tend to act as rational people.

Uttering those words by themselves won't have any effect, but if we can keep talking, honour our agreements, and try to forge new agreements as they may be demanded by the current context, then we're moving in the right direction. I think the two assemblies the university had over the past nine months or so reflect a desire on the part of everybody to try to identify and address a number of problems as collegially and collectively as we can. If this process works then I think we'll come out of it in a position where there's far more willingness to view one another as collaborators rather than as obstructions to what we want to accomplish.

My sense is that the vast majority of our colleagues want things to work and see no reason why they can't work. And I have no choice but to operate on the assumption that that is so, because the alternative is despair.

I'd like to end with questions about the general use of the university. There has been an increasing emphasis over the past few years on the vocational aspect of the university, on jobs, and so on. I wonder how you feel about that.

As I've already suggested, I belong to an old school according to which a university education is personality-shaping, an opportunity to find out who you are or what kind of person you want to be, after which you can worry about things like making a living. Far better to make a living after you've determined that you've got a life. At the same time, any realistic person has to recognize that university students these days are powerfully motivated to get a job. The natural response to these two things is to put them together somehow, and I'm not alone in emphasizing that what one takes away from a course of study that involves real inquiry is a set of intellectual skills that will be vocationally very useful. What we learn in the way of specific techniques and specialized knowledge is information that is easily dated, whereas the intellectual skills that come along with the acquisition of detailed knowledge don't date at all. It's those skills that I'm inclined to emphasize as critical to a student's education and which we as faculty members ought to focus on, rather than looking more narrowly at ensuring that people leave here with a specific body of knowledge. A body of knowledge is important of course, and you can't separate these two things, but to focus entirely on the outcome of a specialized course of study is not to give students everything that we can.

Many of our students come here from families that are not familiar with the university, and see the university as an important step in attaining a secure vocational future.

People can go to a community college, and walk straight into a job if they choose their program wisely. We ought to make it clear that in coming to a university there's more to be gained than that. Even if students don't recognize it explicitly when they come, we owe it to ourselves to have them leave here with that recognition. I say explicitly, because I think many people implicitly understand that a university offers something that narrower forms of training don't. Families who don't have a long history of university education seek out the university for their children because they recognize that there are values in that form of higher education that extend beyond simply stepping into a profession at the end. And they recognise that if their children do step into a profession at the end, the professions themselves embody a form of humane knowledge that makes them something more than just a job.

I think the hard part is that many students and even families don't quite have the vocabulary for their experience. You almost have to be telling them why the experience is important as they are having it, in order that they have the language to speak it. This is a feature of the liberal arts program in the US -- you are told all the way through exactly what it is you are supposed to be experiencing.

Yes, this takes us back to the point of the university's obligation to explain clearly to the outside world what really happens here, what the point of the whole thing really is.

Thank you very much.

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