

Off the Fence / Jennifer S. Simpson  
Living Together Well: Obligation and Opportunity

At academic conferences, I often start presentations by asking those in attendance “What is at stake for you related to [topic of presentation]?” This question ensures that the conversation begins with practice and the concrete: what do you care about, where do you have a sphere of influence, what matters to you? Typically, audience members quickly engage with the question. Asking what is at stake brings priorities to the forefront, and reminds us that our agency has significance.

I also enjoy asking colleagues how they became interested in a life in academia. What drew you to teaching, to analysis and reflection, to study of a particular subject area? This question also typically elicits thoughtful responses. I find that there are all kinds of avenues by which we direct ourselves to work in higher education— a favourite or challenging teacher; a sense of curiosity or dissonance in relation to a particular situation; an experience that prompted us to ask: What is going on here?

I began considering a life in higher education as a student when I realized that universities can be places to grapple with hard questions about difficult social issues. As a kid, and throughout high school and into university, I was rarely without questions. I was curious. I have a distinct memory, from when I must have been six or seven, of my dad drawing attention to the Watergate issue in the States when it was featured on the news one evening. I grew up close to the California-Mexico border, and on a trip to Mexico when I was in high school, I was struck by the economic gap between where I was growing up and the communities in Mexico that I visited. These impressions stuck. They unsettled me. I also learned that at home and in certain high

school classes, conversations about these issues were not always welcome. Arriving at university, where my curiosity and questions were unremarkable, offered relief. More than this, all of it—attending courses, hanging out with other students, talking to professors after class, getting involved with student organizations—felt like I had walked into a situation that I had not fully grasped was even possible.

That excitement I felt as an undergraduate—recognizing the university as a place to think carefully, feel deeply, and work at change—has persisted and been in the foreground in my life as a scholar, teacher, and administrator. I continue to view the university, and the space it offers for reflection and the possibility of different ethical and relational practices, as a gift that holds both obligation and opportunity. The humanities and social sciences often foreground attention to pressing social issues and questions of public life. After more than a decade of work on this subject, and the publication of a book on the topic (*Longing for Justice: Higher Education and Democracy's Agenda*), I have determined that one useful way to articulate the value of our disciplines is to assert that we attend to the practices of living together well. Areas of study in the humanities and social sciences address the complexities and possibilities of social interaction, of how we live as “associated individuals” (*The Political Writings of John Dewey*, 1993, p. 46).

Indeed, in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at Memorial, I see research and creative work that, across 15 departments, repeatedly turns toward questions of living together well in rigorous, sophisticated, and compelling ways. Faculty members in HSS, with the support of administrative staff and often in collaboration with students, are making significant

contributions to communities in the province and beyond. In working with students, faculty members demonstrate the value of reflection about issues that matter, and provide possibilities for habits of inquiry and engagement that can shape students' orientation to the world around them.

As Dean, a significant portion of my day-to-day work involves listening to colleagues, both within and outside of the Faculty. This listening makes it clear that a sense of frustration with the reality of budget cuts exists. Faculty members are concerned about the ways in which reductions have and will continue to impact the very core elements of teaching, research, and creative work. It is crucial to be attentive to and thoughtful about the implications of budget reductions, to ensure that we are using the resources we have in ways that best serve the Faculty as a whole.

At the same time, in the midst of budget reductions and the often decreasing public support for universities, both resources and possibilities remain available. Faculty members continue to have considerable levels of agency as well as opportunities, through teaching, research, and creative work, to contribute to public life and to students' education. Budget reductions in no way lessen the urgency of the work of living together well, the need for attention to how we live in communities and as "associated individuals." Further, reductions do not need to result in forms of teaching, and research and creative work that are less consequential or significant. We might opt to both be vocal defenders of ongoing support for higher education, and to be as resourceful as possible with existing support.

In between the question of “What is at stake?” and the reality of budget constraints is the obligation and opportunity of “What can we do with what we have?” This question is currently squarely in front of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences. Living together well is a set of practices we enact both within and outside of the institution. Within HSS, in many instances—on search committees, at Faculty Council, in considering departmental programming and curriculum—academic and administrative staff repeatedly consider how we will work together as colleagues and live as “associated individuals”. How we choose to interact with each other in the Faculty has significance, bears on what we accomplish as a Faculty. In the midst of difficult financial realities, we will do well to continue to focus on the ways in which we can best serve our students and engage with questions of social significance.

Universities are one of the few spaces in public life which prioritize reflection about and attention to pressing social concerns. In such spaces, we can continue to explore: What is going on? Where is change possible and desirable? There are multiple settings in which such questions, and thoughtful responses, can and do make a difference. What can we do with what we have? In considering this question, as a Faculty, we can continue to attend to the practices of living together well, and to think carefully about how to contribute to the shape of the future we want to inhabit.