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Our University – A Monastery

Walter V. Wendler

Southern Illinois University Carbondale, wendler@siu.edu

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Our University – A Monastery

My friend goes to Jamaica for vacation every few years. Jamaica is a poor island nation, the third most populous nation in North America after the United States and Canada. Bob Marley may be its most famous native son.

When he and his wife go to Jamaica, they stay at a fancy destination resort hotel. They never leave the grounds of the place. Essentially he goes to a monastery although the focus is not faith; it is the comfort, entertainment, and enjoyment of guests. This goal consumes everyone's energy.

This singleness of purpose allows for focused rest.

Great universities function in essentially the same way. They are monasteries. Monastery comes from the Greek "monasterion", from the root "monos" or alone, and the suffix "-terion" a place for doing something.

Don't look too hard at this or over-think it...squint at the idea and tell me that is not what the fundamental purpose of a university is. To set a person apart and allow them to do something and discover purpose in their life. Create the opportunity for intellectual and emotional focus and growth.

Change.

Like going to Jamaica; but for the university it is about life-work. A profession. A reason for being. A way to live. Don't confuse a university with a trade school or a community college where access and a skill acquisition are king and queen.

Many excellent universities are set apart. Harvard is in Cambridge, not Boston. Texas A&M University is in College Station, not Bryan. Berkeley was founded across the great bay from San Francisco, a half day to get there, now ten minutes on the Bay Bridge. Michigan calls Ann Arbor home, not Detroit, and the examples go on and on. In every case the effort was made to separate the university from the daily flow of commerce and distraction and allow a place for students, without interruption, to focus.

Sounds like Jamaica again. Or a monastery.

In Southern Illinois, we need to recognize the fact that the separation we own from an urban area is not a cause for concern but for celebration. Southern Illinois helps provide a strain of educational experience that marks the best universities.

Positive isolation from the day-to-day is not something to apologize for, but rather something to herald as a means for a more powerful educational experience.

Our pastoral setting with small communities and hamlets supports reflection and introspection, better and more students.

Our job is to give our students the opportunity to change the way they think, and that requires reflection.

This is not about natural beauty, although in Southern Illinois we are bestowed with more than our fair share. It is not about centrality, although at the confluence of rivers and highways, railroads and bus routes, we have that too. Rather it is about separation and focus and, in this dimension, we have a special setting for a research university in our time, if we realize and exploit it.

Our distinctiveness is that we are a real place, not the no-place of a suburb of a major metropolitan area, or the energy of being downtown.

Our set-apartness is one of our greatest strengths and we need never apologize for it, nor see it as a burden. It is a liberating force for the purpose of reflection and focus.

As Kingman Brewster said "*Universities should be safe havens where ruthless examination of realities will not be distorted by the aim to please or inhibited by the risk of displeasure.*"

Just like a monastery.