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Our University - The Ivory Tower

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Our University - The Ivory Tower

The concept of “the Ivory Tower” is used in a negative sense when referring to universities to indicate a separation from reality and the practical concerns of the world. “Ivory Tower” first appears in the Song of Solomon 7:4, but I believe the reference there is more about the appearance of a women’s neck and its beauty, than the separation and neglect of practicality purportedly resident in universities.

Another passage, I Kings 22:19 says that King Ahab’s palace, a place of isolation, was “inlaid with ivory”. This is clearly a pejorative reference to the separation, high-mindedness and distance implied in the modern concept of the university as an Ivory Tower.

In one more case, the Proctor family, of Proctor and Gamble fame, was a benefactor to Princeton University and provided resources to build a graduate education facility and a dining hall named after William Cooper Proctor.

Guess what they manufactured for the unwashed masses? Ivory soap.

Where does the expression Ivory Tower originate? Trying to understand why Southern Illinois is referred to as Little Egypt is equally confusing. I can cite three stories all of which make sense, all believable and different. No matter, we know what we mean when we say Little Egypt.

I have a friend known to many of us in Southern Illinois - especially after our recent storms and his tireless reporting on the recovery process - Tom Miller. When discussing a particularly difficult and perplexing subject with me a few years ago, he suggested that one purpose of a university was to be separate and to focused on tough issues and problems.

Tom suggested that the implication of height was important. Sometimes, in order to see things clearly you need to get up in the air... survey the whole landscape. Tom gets it.

The momentary and fleeting detachment from the pragmatic realities of the day-to-day shuffle allows reflection and study that helps society sort things out.

That is our job.

I go to a great family physician in Carbondale. He is in a state of perpetual diagnosis. I went in one day and, after I had taken my shirt off, ready to be examined, he walked into the exam room.

He said, "Are you coughing a little?", "Yes" I replied. "A dry cough?" "Yup", was my retort. "Are your eyes watering?" "Yes". "Do you have a low grade fever?" I said, "I think so." He acted like he was going to write a prescription. I said, "Wait a minute! Don't you have to examine me?" He laughed and said, "The last forty people who came in had exactly the same stuff." And he examined me.

He did his job.

He was not an epidemiologist in the true sense of the word, yet he was. This was applied epidemiology. No theory, just enlightened practice.

When the epidemiologists at Johns Hopkins University undertake one of those Ivory tower studies for which the university receives over one billion dollars in federal funding per year - nearly twice that of any other university - they are expected to get up in the ivory tower and take a look around...see what is going on and why.

It is John Hopkins job.

And when they do it well, eventually it trickles down to my guy in Carbondale. Our university needs to provide theory, background, and foundation so that those who practice can do so with excellence.