

COMMITMENT TO COMMUNITY

A Community Day Sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan
Stanford Memorial Church
April 7, 2002

Leland and Jane Stanford's university was committed to the larger community from its very inception. Their founding grant of November 11, 1885, sets forth these purposes for Stanford: "To promote the public welfare by exercising an influence on behalf of humanity and civilization, teaching the blessings of liberty regulated by law, and inculcating love and reverence for the great principles of government as derived from the inalienable rights of man to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

What does it really mean for a major private university like Stanford to be committed to the community? There's been quite a debate in recent years about "service learning" in the academy. Since universities have often been referred to, externally and internally, as "ivory towers," and Stanford has always been called "the farm" or more recently (and more pejoratively) "the bubble," it seems almost by definition that the university is rather distant from its surrounding community. As a professor of urban

and regional planning at the University of Chicago has said, "Colleges and universities have been subjected to significant public criticism throughout the 1990's for pursuing research that has frequently not addressed the critical social, economic and environmental issues confronting local communities."¹ Some institutions were already concerned about this, though, because the presidents of Brown, Georgetown and Stanford² in 1985 established the Campus Compact "to promote greater community and public service and to better integrate the values of liberal learning, service-learning and civic responsibility within the core curriculum."³ 817 colleges and universities now belong to the Campus Compact.⁴

Meanwhile, critics of the service learning movement have pointed out that universities are not social service agencies and should do what they do well -- educate. Likewise, students have a short time to develop good theoretical understanding, an appreciation of intellectual methodology and a strong general knowledge base to apply later in their working life; society loses the benefit of liberally educated citizens if they spend too much college time working practically on problems for which they do not yet have broad enough or deep enough understanding.⁵ (King example)

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. is an important example in this regard. Contrary to what one might have thought, he was in no sense a social activist, nor involved in volunteering his time in the community, nor even much immersed in campus life as an undergraduate at Morehouse College in Atlanta, as a divinity student at Crozer Theological Seminary in Chester, Pennsylvania, nor as a doctoral student at Boston University. He had an excellent academic record in college as a double english and sociology major, but he joined only a few organizations, like the glee club, none of which elected him to high office.⁶ During those years "the Morehouse campus was alive with political and social ferment,"⁷ including two student strikes, but he didn't participate. He wasn't even traditionally involved in campus affairs through student government.⁸ Instead, he made very good use of higher education and the intellectual life in each institution he attended as careful preparation for his later work. Then, without planning it and without seeking it, within a year of his graduation from Boston University he had become a nationally known community activist as the leader of the Montgomery, Alabama, bus boycott.⁹

This is not to say that King was protected from experiences of racism growing up, some of them rather close to those of Rosa

Parks. For example, when he was a sophomore in high school, returning home in Georgia on a public bus from having won the Elks annual oratorical prize on the subject of "The Negro and the Constitution," he was forced to surrender his seat and stand in the aisle for white passengers at the behest of a white driver who cursed him as "a black son of a bitch." "It was a night I'll never forget," King later wrote. "I don't think I have ever been so deeply angry in my life."¹⁰ Yet, King used his time in higher education to pursue an intellectual quest for a theoretical method to eliminate social evil, rather than becoming involved practically in community service or activism.

Here's a very short explication of his pilgrimage to nonviolence as a philosophy, methodology and way of life. He first read Thoreau's essay On Civil Disobedience in a freshman philosophy course, later citing it as having had the greatest impact on him of anything he read in college. He was also first introduced to a detailed analysis of Gandhi's theory of non-violence in a college course on the psychology of religious personalities.¹¹ When he was re-introduced to Gandhi during seminary, he writes that he found Gandhi's "message...so profound and electrifying that I immediately went out and bought a half-dozen books on his life and works."¹² Ironically, though, King

didn't think of using Thoreau's or Gandhi's philosophy initially in the Montgomery bus boycott. It was only when a letter to the editor from a white woman appeared in a Montgomery newspaper a month after the boycott had begun -- comparing King's and Gandhi's tactics and citing Thoreau -- that King remembered his intellectual work and began using Gandhi and Thoreau explicitly.¹³

Even then, it was only with help from theorists from a pacifist organization, the Fellowship of Reconciliation.¹⁴

My point is that it was King's deep intellectual curiosity and engagement, developed in the classrooms and libraries of college and graduate school that allowed him to develop the theoretical tools which would later become so critical to him as a leader of America's first mass civil rights movement. His ivory tower approach to higher education immeasurably benefitted the nation and the world in the dozen years which followed his graduation before he was murdered at the age of 39.

This is not to say that plenty of students at Stanford and elsewhere don't come to college and graduate school, unlike King, without any interest in developing the intellectual tools "to promote the public welfare by exercising an influence on behalf of humanity and civilization," in the words of the Stanford Founding Grant. Those students come to promote their personal welfare,

conceived of as a high status, high-paying career, and a large suburban home to drive home to in a late model sports car. It's important that Stanford has been involved in the Campus Compact to promote greater community service since that organization was started in 1985. It's important that we have the Haas Center for Public Service which, as its 1994 mission statement explains, strives to "respond effectively to community needs as identified by community members" and to "develop in students the requisite knowledge, skills, and commitment for a lifetime of effective participation in public life."¹⁵

It's also important that Stanford has a wide variety of other, ideologically and professionally diverse organizations on campus like the Hoover Institution on War, Revolution and Peace, and the Institute for International Studies, Centers for Biomedical Ethics, Conservation Biology, Conflict and Negotiation, Social Innovation, Work, Technology and Organization, and programs in Ethics and Society, Youth and their Communities, and International Law, Business and Policy, just to name a few. Along with the special institutes, centers and programs, many professors and students are deeply involved, curricularly and through hundreds of student organizations, in promoting the public welfare.

There's another kind of commitment to community at Stanford that I want to speak about. I refer to seeing the university itself as a community of scholars, regardless of whether we call ourselves students, faculty, staff, alumni, or friends of this institution. Universities have traditionally used other words too, like "fellows" or receiving a "fellowship," to indicate that sense of being companions, colleagues and partners in a common enterprise. The very word "university" -- etymologically from unus, or "one", and the past participle of vertere, "to turn" -- means "turned into one" or combined into one whole.¹⁶ The words read earlier as the wisdom of Jane Stanford, carved into the walls of this church express the vision of community in spiritual language: "Thoughts and words travel just as God's life travels. They do not travel like an individual, but you breathe your spiritual life into the atmosphere as you do your breath, and someone breathes it in."

As I interpret her words, none of us in this university work alone. As each of us "creates and disseminates knowledge,"¹⁷ we owe a debt to generations and generations of scholars, on whose work we build, for what we think now; virtually each and every word we use now is also shaped by a long intellectual tradition. Our thoughts and words have a history and a pedigree; they are

molded by an academic lineage. Even more, perhaps, our thoughts and words are shaped by our relations now with those around us in this institution, our teachers and students and colleagues. And certainly, our contributions affect others here on a daily basis, and may continue to do so well into the future.

Jane Stanford was quoted by President Branner in 1917 as having said that "moral and spiritual instruction is more important to our young people than instruction of any kind,"¹⁸ and the founding grant required that a church be erected at the university.¹⁹ Her view of religion, again as carved in the walls of this church, was very broad and central to her vision of the Stanford community: "Whatever form of religion furnishes the greatest comfort, the greatest solace, it is the form which should be adopted, be its name what it will." So this church, even with its Christian iconography, was established as a gathering point at the center of campus for the whole community, regardless of their spiritual proclivities. She asked that it be "entirely free of all denominational alliances," that the services "be simple and informal in character," and that all "worship and receive instruction therein not inconsistent with their individual beliefs."²⁰

Rabbi Jacob Voorsanger of San Francisco's Temple Emmanuel was

one of the clergy that Jane Stanford invited to officiate at the dedication ceremony in 1903, and he was a regular guest preacher in the early days of the church. This is how he described her vision of spiritual community and the early years of Memorial Church: "Mrs. Stanford has sat at the feet of preachers of every possible denomination and of no denomination. There has not been a single instance where the University would even permit criticism of its guests. Unitarians, trinitarians, infidels, Brahmins, Buddhists, Mohammedans, materialists, atheists, all have been heard, all were welcomed, the main condition of their welcome being that they must have something to say."²¹

As the current Dean of Memorial Church, now called the Dean for Religious Life, I am very grateful for Jane Stanford's founding vision, and hope I can remain true to it. My own intention is for this church, situated at the very center of campus, to model a commitment to community that is truly all-inclusive and collegial. This kind of multifaith service, held here monthly, with participation of people from a wide variety of religious traditions, and from none at all, is very much in line with my intention and, I believe, with Jane Stanford's founding vision. I'm especially grateful for all the friends of Stanford from the wider community who come here on a regular basis. To

have people here who are not students, faculty, staff or alumni, but who are drawn to, and appreciate the unique educational mission of Stanford as represented in Memorial Church, is very gratifying. I look forward to all of us together continuing to define and express our mutual commitment to community.

NOTES

1. Ken Reardon, as quoted in News from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (April 1999),
<http://www.admin.uiuc.edu/NB/99.04/servelearntip.html>
2. "Structure and Organization," Campus Compact web page,
<http://www.compact.org/aboutcc/structure.html>
3. Ibid.
4. "Membership," Campus Compact web page,
<http://www.compact.org/membership/>
5. John Elby, "Arguments Against Service Learning,"
csf.colorado.edu/forums/service-learning/jul97/0059.html
6. David L. Lewis, King: A Critical Biography (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970), p. 24.
7. Lerone Bennett, Jr., What Manner of Man: A Biography of Martin Luther King, Jr. (Chicago: Johnson Publishing Co., Inc., 1976), p. 27.
8. King, A Critical Biography, p. 24.
9. Stephen B. Oates, Let the Trumpet Sound: The Life of Martin Luther King, Jr. (New York, New American Library, 1982), p. 64.
10. Ibid., pp. 14-15.
11. Lewis, King, p. 20.
12. Ibid., p. 29.
13. Ibid., p. 69.
14. Ibid., p. 72.
15. "Mission Statement," The Haas Center for Public Service (Stanford University, 1994), <http://haas->

fmp.stanford.edu/default.htm

16. Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary, Second Edition (Springfield, MA: G. & C. Merriam Co., 1960), p. 931.
17. Quoting Howard Wolf, President of the Stanford Alumni Association, on the central mission of Stanford University, April 5, 2002.
18. John Casper Branner, "Founders' Day Address," March 10, 1917, pp. 4-5, as cited by Robert L. Young in God and a Woman at Stanford (Cupertino, CA: Dime Publishers, 1991), p. 41.
19. Stanford University, The Founding Grant, p. 8.
20. Jane Stanford, Address of October 3, 1902, as cited in Stanford University, The Founding Grant, p. 21.
21. As quoted in Gail Stockton, Stanford Memorial Church: An Appreciative Guide for the Non-so-casual Visitor (Stanford, CA: Memorial Church and Office of Public Affairs, 1980), p. 8.