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Why I Didn’t Decline the Invitation?

Jeremiah Conway

Given the fact that I’ve been on sabbatical and have learned to guard my time, my initial response to Judy Spross’ invitation to speak today registered fairly low on the “sabbatical acceptance meter.” As you can tell from my being here, I changed my mind, a fact which has given me both the substance and title of my talk: “Why I Didn’t Decline the Invitation?” It’s not exactly a stirring, global affairs-type subject, not even a decent philosophical attention-grabber but, before you run to your emails or text messages, I can promise you: this isn’t strictly about me but about us.

Judy first contacted me by email, mentioning that she had read my book, enjoyed it and would like the chance to talk further. And, oh yes, would I be
willing to speak today? She followed up with a subsequent phone call, during which I discovered several other things: one, this lady has a real talent for eliciting participation and two, her comments about the book weren’t clever flattery. She had actually read it and knew that we shared a number of overlapping interests. She suggested that we continue our talk over lunch at that mecca of fine dining—the Miss Portland Dinner.

Over omelets (her treat) I learned more. Judy has been teaching here for ten years. We had never met. I had never even set eyes on her (if there is fault for this, it is most-likely mine for being a bit of a hermit). But the larger point is that this kind of isolation is nothing new, I suspect, for many faculty, staff, and administrators here. The title of a recent book by Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together, Why We Expect More From Technology and Less From Each Other*, is strikingly apropos of the situation of many people of working in large scale organizations. The isolation is not peculiar to USM, but it is characteristic, I fear. This isolation paralyzes certain things and, collectively, exacts a price—one that we may no longer be able to support. In short, there is a great deal we cannot accomplish unless we truly work together and realize our interdependence.

Some other seemingly trivial details about our lunch: I learned a great deal about things I wouldn’t have expected, for example, that the theme that interested Judy most in my book was the role of imagination, not only in teaching, as I tried
to develop in the book, but in modern society generally. She spoke about its critical role in nursing. I also learned things something about the darndest things—like Jerry Lasala's fascination with bicycles and Judy’s appreciation of his kindness in subsequently posting a 100 or so pictures of bikes to her that he had compiled on his computer. We shot the breeze about a course I teach on the nature of compassion and how it dovetailed with articles she had been reading on this theme in the education of nurses. We talked about the possibility of some common work. I came away from the lunch very happy, heedless of any lost sabbatical time. I told her I would do the talk.

So what? How do any of these details matter to anything broader? Let me suggest several things, starting with the obvious. The kind of unstructured, informal talk among colleagues, the kind Judy and I enjoyed, the kind that may happen here today is important. It is what makes possible and builds relationships. We need times and places where it happens more often, where our gathering is not driven by strict agenda and votes but by other things like enjoyment in each other’s company, the pleasure of learning about each other’s interests, even bicycles. This enjoyment isn’t secondary. I suspect it is closely tied to what drove us into education in the first place.

This enjoyment is self-justifying, part of what makes life zestful and worthwhile. But pleasure in the company of others is also instrumental; indeed, it
may be necessary to the accomplishment of other ends. One is better teaching. I vowed when I sat down to write this talk that I would not quote from my book. I’m going to break that promise. Early on in the introduction to the book I was reflecting on things that influenced me as a teacher. Let me quote briefly from one passage:

I went into college teaching without a single course in educational theory or practice (a fact of which I am not proud and which still leaves me scratching my head). Instead, I had to learn on the fly, which is to say through repeated trial and considerable error. If pressed to identify one factor that helped me as a teacher, I’d have to save that it was the company, early on in my career, of a group of senior colleagues who cared about teaching and talked willingly about their experiences. They had keen eyes for the humor in teaching. Many had overcome the need to appear impressive. They paid attention to their students and quietly recognized, more in deed than word, the importance of the educative act. They let me peer into their treatment of texts, issues, and classroom dilemmas. They admitted me to their struggles. (The Alchemy of Teaching, pp. 9-10)

Sitting around circular tables in a plain, faculty cafeteria in the basement of Payson Smith Hall with colleagues who were willing to share, helped me immeasurably as a teacher—in no small part, because I could witness the commitment that others had for the educative act. For a young guy, straight out of grad school, this lesson was formative.

But the decision to accept the invitation to speak was motivated by other things—harder to name. Let me work towards them.
It may be that in order to accomplish certain things—certain tough, broad, collective things—there must be a shared sense among people that they belong to a place and each other, that they are of it, that they are part of something worthwhile that is larger than themselves. Without a sense of real belonging, vital institutional work---like imaginative curricular design, effective governance, participation in demanding debate--either doesn’t occur or degenerates into exercises in frustration. Never in all my years at this University have I sensed greater need for depth collaboration at this institution than now. And never, to be honest, have I sensed greater challenges to it.

Several weeks ago, the columnist Greg Kesich wrote an op-ed piece in the Press Herald. It stemmed from his experience as a newspaper man in an industry that has been profoundly affected, some would say, decimated by the digital technological revolution. The comment that caught my eye was a wistful one at the end of his piece. Kesich hoped that there were people in higher education who were up pacing the halls in the middle of the night about how to respond to the technological revolution pervading our world.

We are clearly in the midst of a digital tsunami that is overturning much that we have taken for granted in education, that is raising questions that a short time ago would have seemed nonsensical: Why we should meet in person, what is the function of campuses, why have a faculty, what does it mean to be a faculty?
Speaking for myself, I often sense myself overwhelmed by these issues and uncertain about the future to which they point. What effect will this technology have on our thinking, our relationships, our civility, and on the young, on how and whether they read, and whether our society preserves places for slow, deliberative contemplation, self-reflection, and careful attention to language.

I didn’t agree to speak here because of any driving set of answers to these issues. In fact, it’s more accurate to say that I wanted to speak because I don’t. I’ve lost any such confidence. The situation in which we find ourselves—with all of its economic, psychological, philosophical, sociological, implications—is so complex that the ground seems to shift under one’s feet. We all feel it. What I do know is that, as never before, we need in-depth, sustained, searching examination of the situation we’re in. Second, that the pacing of the halls at night that Greg Kesich called for needs to be a collective pacing. Third, that, in general, we haven’t paced together. We haven’t because, as an institution, we seem to careen forward, constantly reacting to immediate, pressing problems, so much so that we haven’t had—or more accurately—haven’t made the time for broad, deliberative dialogue about what we’re in the midst of and how to respond, especially across the party lines of faculty, staff, and administration. Instead, we wait anxiously for messages from on high.
I recognize that talks like this one mean very little. Talk is cheap. What will matter, I believe, are decisions on all of our parts, whether we belong to this place, and, if so, whether we commit to careful deliberation about what this place is and what it is for. It seems that among the qualities of life that digital technology is marginalizing today is deliberative slowness in favor of speed, authentic presence replaced by calculated performance and publicity, deliberate reflection buried by massive information. As far as I can see, higher education is one of the few spaces left in culture where we can do something more than simply use the immense and growing technology at our disposal and choose, instead, deliberative, careful, collective inquiry into its meaning and consequences.

In my book, I spoke about classrooms being among the few deliberative spaces in our society dedicated to the growth of human awareness. Today I am suggesting the need to extend the point: universities must become large, self-conscious classrooms where we deliberately build spaces worthy of what drove us into education in the first place.

Let me close with two things from the book I mentioned earlier—Alone Together by Sherry Turkle. The first is a quote. While reading it, keep in mind that Ms. Turkle is not another speculating luddite but an MIT research professor for over thirty years. She writes:
We are changed as technology offers us substitutes for connecting with each other face-to-face. We are offered robots and a whole world of machine-mediated relationships on networked devices. As we instant-message, e-mail, text, and Twitter, technology redraws the boundaries between intimacy and solitude. We talk of getting “rid” of our emails, as though these notes are so much excess baggage. Teenagers avoid making telephone calls, fearful that they “reveal too much.” They would rather text than talk. Adults, too, choose keyboards over the human voice. It is more efficient, they say. Things that happen in “real time” take too much time. Tethered to technology, we are shaken when that world “unplugged” does not signify, does not satisfy. After an evening of avatar to avatar talk in a networked game, we feel, at one moment, in possession of a full social life and, in the next, curiously isolated, in tenuous complicity with stranger. We build a following on Facebook or MySpace and wonder to what degree our followers are friends….On our mobile devices, we often talk to each other on the move and with little disposal time—so little, in fact, that we communicate in a new language of abbreviation in which letters stand for words and emoticons for feelings. We don’t ask the open ended “How are you?” Instead, we ask the more limited “Where are you? And “What’s up? These are good questions for getting someone’s location and making a simple plan. They are not so good for opening a dialogue about complexity of feeling. We are increasingly connected to each other but oddly more alone.” (18-19)

The second thing I want to point out is that the final chapter of Turkle’s book is entitled: “Necessary Conversations.” That chapter title is my point of my talk. If there is some alternative to stumbling confusedly into a future that may or may not have a place for us, it will require in-depth conversations about where we are and what we are for. It will require decisions on the part of faculty, staff, and administrators to inhabit this place, to cultivate habits of belonging together more thoughtfully, and for leadership that respects this belonging, encourages, and builds upon it. This is why I didn’t decline the invitation.