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BOOK OF THE WEEK: NO UNIVERSITY IS AN ISLAND

We'll Swim Together or Sink Separately,

Finds Charles R. Middleton

Academic freedom, as embedded in the customs and practices of institutions of higher education, is an essential ingredient of intellectual life. It ensures remarkable progress in all disciplines and underpins the vast changes that have collectively defined the world in which we live. It is difficult, if not impossible, to imagine that the modern university could exist, much less succeed, without it. Yet its history is a paradox in which the fragility of the principle is juxtaposed with its sturdiness in the face of some of the strongest challenges ever encountered on campus.

I note this because therein lies the issue of its future. How you view the current concern about that future depends upon your vantage point. To add complexity, the principle itself is not static, evolving just as the disciplines do; nor are the participants and observers of the debate fixed always in a single position. For some, it is at times hard to discern where true north lies, and so we look for guidance.

Cary Nelson seeks to provide it in an engaging book that starts with the premise that academic freedom is under attack and that it needs "saving", as the subtitle suggests. But from whom or from what? From just about everyone, it turns out, although for Nelson the most serious challenge comes from the "economic and cultural force of corporatisation".

No University Is an Island begins with a useful introduction to the

history of academic freedom. The scholarship is extensive and makes several telling points. Among them is the fact that the courts historically have not differentiated between academic freedom as an institutional versus an individual right.

One way to devolve it on to the individual, and clearly the preferable one in Nelson's view, is to recognise the interconnectedness of academic freedom and two other distinct values of higher education: shared governance and tenure. This "three-legged stool" ensures that academic freedom prospers by granting job security, which in turn leads to effective institutional governance through shared deliberation that strikes a balance between the primacy of the faculty in academic matters and the needs of the institution as a legal entity.

The rub comes when Nelson argues that writing these principles into union contracts - such as those with the American Association of University Professors, of which he is president - is the preferred way to embed them into institutional governance. Even casual observers know that there are many places where the principles are vigorously at work without such contractual obligations. Local cultures ensure this on many campuses, including my own. So while unionisation is no doubt one way to attain the goal, given the overall complexity of the collegiate enterprise there are others too.

Nevertheless, danger lurks. Nelson identifies 16 threats to academic freedom that are "current and emerging". These include student careerism, authoritarian administrations, political and religious intolerance, assaults on disciplines and "claims of financial crisis". Perhaps the most interesting is the growth of contingent or adjunct faculty and the corresponding decline in full-time and tenured positions. Recent developments suggest that this issue is finally getting the attention that it deserves. The publication last month of *One Faculty Serving All Students*, a report by the Coalition on the Academic Workforce, a group of 13 disciplinary organisations and the American Federation of Teachers, certainly opens up that conversation.

What's missing in Nelson's threat assessment, however, is the declining public support for higher education in general, or at least an increase in public reluctance to pay the fare as tuition increases capture the headlines. This phenomenon stretches back over at least two decades. But in today's economy, and especially given the importance of post-secondary school education for success in the future, it has taken on a new intensity. In my discussions with parents and others over many years and in several different institutional contexts, furthermore, this is all too often coupled with puzzlement that they are paying for one service - high-quality teaching by distinguished faculty members - and too often getting something else even when those faculty members are on campus and teaching a "full load". These issues are likely to merge as the discussion moves forward, further stressing institutions in the process.

It would be understandable if all this led to paralysis, and Nelson worries that it might. So he asks: "Is there really a choice between acquiescence and activism?" The answer is self-evidently no, but that raises other issues about what sorts of activism and for what purposes. For him, the answer lies in his own personal history with the AAUP, stretching back to the early days of his career.

Coincidentally, he and I began our academic careers at the same time (I in 1969, he in 1970) and so I have more than a little empathy for his view of the transitions in academic life over the past 40 years.

We agree that activism on behalf of academic freedom is always essential. There is a mantle to be passed, but to whom? Nelson justifiably worries about the disconnect between the world of the most senior faculty and their younger colleagues. There has been "a fundamental change in faculty identity. Widespread emphasis on disciplinary identification and competitive careerism over two generations has curtailed young faculty members' identification with the professoriate as a whole". And with, I would add, their institutions as well.

Nelson's solution sees a revitalised AAUP as the champion of a return to these core values. The chapters dealing with the story of its internal reforms are compelling histories of his efforts to ensure organisational rigour. His account of the initial years of his presidency in chapter eight demonstrates how one leader can take an office which is behaving like "a terror cell within a kindergarten" and transform it.

Read as a whole, these final chapters serve as promised "as a narrative warning to the AAUP of the danger of backsliding". But there is also another lesson in them, at least as I interpret his stories. It is the danger of putting too much reliance, to say nothing of sole reliance, on faculties across the land to do the necessary work to promote academic freedom and shared governance, especially through unionisation. If the task is worth the candle, then it should be a shared task.

Caution on this matter is unavoidable for anyone who reads chapter four, "Barefoot in New Zealand: Political Correctness on Campus". This chapter, which ends in the recounting of a controversy over allegedly inappropriate comments by a candidate for a position in Nelson's own department at the University of Illinois, is a must-read for all who are interested in civil discourse on our campuses and the importance of codes of conduct, written or informal, that constrain all of us and keep us from demonising each other. If academic freedom is truly to be preserved and not become merely a hologram, then those who benefit from it must both advocate for the principle and refrain from actions that at their core threaten it.

Wherefore the future? Nelson's final chapter is a call for collective action on behalf of the enduring values and principles of the academy. Whether or not one agrees with him on how to attain these purposes, his devotion to all that higher education stands for at its very best is admirable. His overall point is irrefutable. No university is an island, and we shall all swim together or we shall sink separately.

THE AUTHOR

Cary Nelson is president of the American Association of University Professors and Jubilee professor of liberal arts and sciences at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. He has been fighting for academics' rights for many years and has been national AAUP president since 2006.

He has written 25 books spanning higher education, poetry and literary theory, in which he is also a specialist. His *Manifesto of a Tenured Radical* was published in 2007 and a collection about his work and its impact, *Cary Nelson and the Struggle for the University: Poetry, Politics, and the Profession*, was published in 2009.

He lives in Champaign with his wife Paula Treichler, also a University of Illinois faculty member, and his dog Laika, named after the famous dog that the Soviets sent into space.

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