



The Pilgrim

“All the trumpets sounded for him on the other side”

—PILGRIM’S PROGRESS

O. P. Kretzmann

To the Bitter Roots

March, 1971

Dear son... March was to be the month for me to come in like a lion with our fourth topic, “Faith and Reason”... But I think my part in our spring donnybrook might as well be a backward glance on our January and February columns when we were swapping views on our third topic, “Education”...

You were right to observe that universities are meshed with other institutions in our society... It would be astonishing if they were not... But, if I understand you, you want universities to tangle with the problems of our time and to be relevant to those very problems which university graduates have helped to bring into our world... This sounds to me dangerously close to the ancient and modern demand to politicize the universities... “Are things going badly in our academic groves?”... Answer: “Leave them and go and lobby before the town council, the county board, the legislature, the congress. Take the universities up against militarism, racism, and all the hurts of the under-represented minorities.”

May I say that this is heady but deadly stuff?... The real task of universities, also and especially in our time, is much higher, deeper, wider, and longer... It goes to the bitter roots of our days and years... And universities must deal with the roots of our troubles — not with branches and weeds...

Our strange fear of the roots is the reason why our age is rootless and sick... We have been shocked away from a courageous search for our origins in the depth of life and history... Therefore, we have the curious sense of darkness, of the fragility of existence, man’s final finitude, the unpredictabilities of history, our loneliness and trappedness — all because we have no roots for ourselves and our world... No wonder that the black rainbow over our time is the single word “Angst”... A cosmic anxiety steals into our souls from Wall Street to the American campus to the darkened corridors of the White House... On troubled nights we remember the telling names of terror: Selma, Berkeley, Dallas, Harlem, Hiroshima, Leningrad,

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Suez... And we are ashamed and alone...

And now, if I understand you correctly, you suggest that universities step into the forlorn place of the great failures of our time: Big Business, Big Labor, Big Government... All centers of power like nothing more than to have universities join them either as their servants or partners...

To such a suggestion, which would make us seemingly relevant (really totally irrelevant) to the agony of modern man, I react with horror... It fails to get at our root problem and the question which we avoid with a childish fear... “What really is Man?”... This is what I mean by the “root question”... What holds together, what commonality of origin and destiny, the black man idling unemployed on the corner of 55th Street and Indiana Avenue and the professor of nuclear physics in the university laboratory?... Both of these men must receive our attentive empathy if we are really to see the trees in the forest... And by “Man” I mean total man with no abuses by our ancient devices for dividing him into layers like an onion...

This is why I have talked, these latter years, about the need for the “prophetic” university... This is the school which goes behind immediacies to the realities of history and revelation... This is the school and the one remaining place that hears beyond the demands of the market place and the moneygrabbers the cries of “Man”... The cries of the lonely and dispossessed, the have-nots, the not-yets and the never wases, all the backwash of our immediacy... The “Man” for Whom Christ died... This is the truly relevant school, a prophetic place, through whose students and teachers the crying of “Man” goes out prophetically into all the world...

Some of this you have caught with remarkable insight and some humor in the hortatory part of your February column... Your education has been too good for you to be permanently wrong... You say and I can only agree: “Connect — connect again — connect yet again”... All I can add is that you be sure to connect on a higher level than that of government, business, and labor... I decline to be a boring, hollow echo of Mr. Nixon, Mr. Ford, and Mr. Meany...

Finally, I appreciated especially your injunction to “Enjoy”... Here you really threw your sociology courses out the window and spoke with the accent of angels... “Court surprise and failure — Induce ecstasy — Have an epiphany or two — Laugh in class — Sacrifice a bit of efficiency — Live forty hour days”... Here is where I joined you, clapping my hands and beating

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my ancient drum...

Many of these imperatives hit our root question concerning the nature and destiny of “Man”... He is born to surprise and failure, to have an epiphany of two, to laugh, to sacrifice, to experience the lull and lift of ecstasy... In short, to live and to be the ever moving intelligent audience for the living God...

