Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

—W. B. Yeats, The Second Coming
Reclaiming Our Soul

Democracy and Higher Education

By Arthur W. Chickering

We don’t know the conditions that prompted Yeats to write those words, but they certainly seem apt today. As a nation, we have been struggling to regain our balance for more than a year in response to events, foreign and domestic, that were previously unimaginable. In higher education, we have been on a steady drift away from core ideals and behaviors that ought to define us as a community. Challenges to both democracy and higher education are very real. Neither institutions nor individuals claim their souls once and for all; we need serious reflection in these times more than ever if we as an enterprise are to reclaim ours.

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In 1981 I wrote in *The Modern American College*, Frenzied, unbridled passion, whether in love or work, seldom serves us well. Indeed, it often harms more than helps. To be enflamed, carried away, by an affection, ideology, or cause is easy, but such a state shrinks from reflective thought, public scrutiny, and tough-minded testing. Maintaining a steady fire that is critical as well as creative is more difficult, especially when it suffers frequent doses of icy logic and frigid resistance. Cool passion seeks fulfillment by joining the forces of heart and mind, commitment and critical analysis. Such passion pursues its purposes with tenuous tenacity.

This is the posture I believe we need in order to reclaim our institutional and professional souls as members of the academy, and thereby help reclaim the soul of democracy.

Let me be clear that I am not harking back to some “Golden Age” of either democracy or higher education. Both have come a long way in the past 100 years. Corporate greed was alive and well at the turn of the century. Women and blacks could not vote, whereas now they can. We have social security, more widespread access to health benefits, a 25-year increase in life span, better standards of living—make your own list.

Higher education, meanwhile, has gone from an aristocratic, through a meritocratic, to a currently egalitarian orientation. It is now accessible to a high proportion of the population, and professional and vocational preparation, supported by loans and grants, is almost universally available.

But all is not as it should be. We must engage in a constant struggle to do better, re-examining once again our core ideals and practices in the light of changing global, domestic, regional, and local requirements.

**THE SOUL OF DEMOCRACY**

Shortly after the events of September 11th of 2001, Bill Moyers wrote a powerful short article in *The Nation* entitled, “Which America Will We Be Now?” In it he said,

> The soul of democracy—the essence of the word itself—is government of, by, and for the people. And the soul of democracy has been dying, drowning in a rising tide of big money contributed by a narrow, unrepresentative elite, that has betrayed the faith of citizens in self-government.

But what has happened since the September 11 attacks would seem to put the lie to my fears. Americans have rallied together in a way that I cannot remember since World War II. This catastrophe has reminded us of a basic truth at the heart of our democracy: No matter our wealth or status or faith, we are all equal before the law, in the voting booth and when death rains down from the sky.

We have also been reminded that despite years of scandals and political corruption, despite the stream of stories of personal greed and pirates in Gucci scamming the treasury, despite the retreat from the public sphere and the turn toward private privilege, despite squalor for the poor and gated communities for the rich, the great mass of Americans have not yet given up on the idea of “We the People.”

But recall some of the administrative and legislative proposals of September, October, and November of 2001. While New Yorkers were still attending memorial services for firefighters and police officers, while many were still shedding tears for the dead and injured, and while the President of the United States called for “patriotism, prayers, and piety,” Washington predators were pursuing private plunder at public expense. How did they propose to fight a long and costly war on terrorism? Restore the three-martini, tax-deductible lunch. Cut capital gains for the wealthy. Eliminate the corporate alternative minimum tax—and don’t just repeal it but refund all the taxes that corporations have paid. Moyers goes on to say,

> Democracy won’t survive if citizens turn into lemmings. Yes, the President is our Commander in Chief, but we are not the President’s minions. While firemen and police were racing into the fires of hell in downtown New York, and now while our soldiers and airmen are putting their lives on the line in Afghanistan, the Administration and its Congressional allies are allowing multi-national companies to make their most concerted efforts in twenty years to roll back clean air measures, exploit public lands, and stuff the pockets of their executives and shareholders with undeserved cash....

Against such crass exploitation it is every patriot’s duty to join the loyal opposition. Even in war, politics is about who gets what and who doesn’t....The greatest sedition would be our silence. Yes there’s a fight going on—against terrorists around the globe, but just as certainly there’s a fight going on here at home to decide the kind of country this will be during and after the war on terrorism.

We must define ourselves not by the lives we led until September 11 but by the lives we lead from now on. If we seize the opportunity to build a stronger country we too will ultimately prevail in the challenges ahead, at home and abroad. We will prevail only if we lead by example, as a democracy committed to the rule of law and the spirit of fairness....

We may not agree with Moyer’s analysis or with the political and social orientation that lies behind it. But I suspect that most of us can support the powerful call for civic engagement, civic learning, and individual social responsibility. There are
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no institutions in the United States better positioned to address
that call than our colleges and universities. Hence my call to
reclaim the soul of higher education, and with it, the soul of
democracy. Hearkening to this call will require significant in-
stitutional transformations—accompanied by individual levels
of professional authenticity, purpose, and spirit—that are not
seen frequently in our current culture.

THE SOUL OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Many of our colleges and universities are caught in dynamics
similar to those described by Moyers. How can these institu-
tions—supported by a capitalist economy and collaborating
actively with local, regional, and national corporations—pro-
vide the critical research and reflection necessary for the com-
mon good? Noam Chomsky voiced the dilemma cogently:
"Universities are economically parasitic, relying on external
support. To maintain that support while serving their proper
liberating function poses problems that verge on contradiction.
Universities face a constant struggle to maintain their integri-
ty, and their fundamental social role, in a healthy society" (see
Cornwell in Resources).

As the market mentality and its associated values triumph
nationally and globally, critical analysis of their intended and
unintended consequences becomes increasingly important.
But instead, we in the academy typically reduce ourselves to
dispensing information and doling out credit hours and
degrees—commodities to be delivered with maximum effi-
ciency. Administrators and faculty members become produc-
ers and students become consumers—while student affairs
professionals put out fires, cool the unruly, and struggle with
drug and alcohol problems to keep things running smoothly.
A faculty caste system is alive and growing, with a few highly
paid stars at the top and a modest middle class of tenured and
tenure-track faculty who work long hours and are stretched
thin across multiple responsibilities—all outnumbered by
masses of minimally paid adjuncts.

Higher education has come to be perceived as a private ben-
efit, not a public good. Our policies, programs, and practices
are increasingly framed solely around helping students prepare
for better jobs and meeting narrowly construed economic
needs. Meanwhile, our sources of support for those in need,
who want to attend college and are entitled to its benefits, have
become inadequate and inequitable. Many of us remember
when education at state colleges and universities was essen-
tially free. In many states, tax support for higher education
now equals only a quarter to a third of institutional revenues.
And each successive cut in state support is accompanied by
authorization to increase tuition, which we adopt simply to
break even.

Helping students prepare for good jobs upon graduation is
certainly important. But higher education needs to be more
than that. State legislators concerned about crime, drugs, voter
apathy, and public morality increasingly withhold support
for the very institutions that can foster critical thinking, multi-
cultural understanding, and civic responsibility.

And there is a big difference between preparing for a job
and preparing for a satisfying and productive career. Making a
meaningful career requires things like interpersonal compe-
tence and multicultural understanding. It demands skills in
problem identification and problem-solving. And it requires a
personal sense of purpose and the confidence to act in ways
that will make a difference.

These are the same competencies and personal characteris-
tics that are required for becoming effective citizens, creating
a lasting marriage, or raising a happy family. If we focus nar-
rowly on professional and vocational preparation, we sell both
our students and our society short.

Unleavened doses of objectivity and empirical rationality
only feed the materialism that has become characteristic of our
recent practices in higher education. Parker Palmer put it best
for me in a Change article, "Community, Conflict, and Ways
of Knowing: Ways to Deepen our Educational Agenda":

The mode of knowing that dominates higher education I call
objectivism. It has three traits with which we are all familiar.
The first of these traits is that the academy will be objective.
This means that it holds everything at arm's length....

Secondly, objectivism is analytic. Once you have made some-
thing into an object (in my own discipline that something can
be a person), you can chop that object up into pieces to see
what makes it tick. You can dissect it, you can cut it apart, you
can analyze it to death....

Third, this mode of knowing is experimental....I mean by ex-
perimental that we are now free with these dissected objects to
move the pieces around to reshape the world in an image more
pleasing to us, to see what would happen if we did....

Objective, analytic, experimental. Very quickly this seemingly
bloodless epistemology becomes an ethic. It is an ethic of com-
petitive individualism, in the midst of a world fragmented and
made exploitable by that very mode of knowing. The mode of
knowing itself breeds intellectual habits, indeed spiritual in-
sects, that destroy community. We make objects of each oth-
er, and the world to be manipulated for our own private ends.

Parker powerfully captures the link between now-charac-
teristic policies, practices, and institutional cultures in higher
education, and the policies, practices, and cultures that con-
cern Bill Moyers about our country.

This is the general cultural and higher-education context hit
by the September 11th attacks—the context within which our
national responses and public policies will be acted out in the
next few years. Times of crisis chill dissent in colleges and
universities just as in the body politic. Loyal opposition often
is stifled, if not by administrators by students and by public
outrage. Since the Middle Ages, universities have been safe
havens for searching out truth and for criticizing injustice and oppression. We must protect our ability to educate students about the changing world; the clash of cultures; the great issues of world poverty, hunger, and alienation; without political leaders demanding censorship or dismissal of faculty for treason when our teaching does not correspond to mainstream values. We must defend our institutions as places where policies can be fiercely debated and challenged.

For me, that’s the soul of higher education. Reclaiming it will demand transformations in both our institutions and ourselves as professionals.

**RECLAIMING OUR INSTITUTIONAL SOUL**

It seems fitting to let a Cardinal—Newman—define the soul of higher education. This quote comes from *The Idea of a University*, published in 1852, and is remarkably pertinent to our current needs. (Please excuse Newman’s sexist language. Remember, 100 years later, in the 1950s and ’60s, we were still talking in the same way he does here.)

A University train-ing...aims at raising the intellectual tone of society, at cultivating the public mind, at purifying the national taste, at supplying true principles to popular enthusiasm and fixed aims to popular aspiration....At facilitating the exercise of political power, and refining the intercourse of private life. It gives a man a clear conscious view of his own opinions and judgments, a truth in developing them. It teaches him to see things as they are, to go right to the point, to disentangle a skein of thought, to detect what is sophisticated and to discard what is irrelevant.

It prepares him to fill any post with credit, and to master any subject with facility. It shows him how to accommodate himself to others, how to influence them, how to come to an understanding with them, how to bear with them. He is at home in any society, he has common ground with every class; he knows when to speak and when to be silent; he is able to converse, he is able to listen; he can ask a question pertinently and gain a lesson seasonably when he has nothing to impart himself...he is a pleasant companion and a comrade you can depend upon....He has a repose of mind which lives in the world, and which has resources for its happiness at home when it cannot go abroad.

To reclaim that kind of soul, and to do so in ways that strengthen our democracy, calls for systemic changes in our institutions. Here are some of the things I think are required.

First, we need to focus on fostering those outcomes that are critical for civic learning and socially responsible behavior. My own candidates are pertinent knowledge, intellectual competence, interpersonal competence, emotional intelligence, integrity, and the kind of motivation that cuts through a sense of entitlement to create an identification with something larger than one’s own self-interest. To develop these attributes, we need curricular content that addresses the general structures, systems, and processes that characterize varied political and economic systems. And we need to teach by discussing things that are pertinent to significant local and global issues like prejudice, the environment, the economy, poverty, and morality.

This agenda cannot be pursued successfully simply by establishing special courses or programs. It must pervade all our curricular structures: general education; majors and concentrations; interdisciplinary institutes and programs; living and learning centers and communities; capstone experiences; freshman, transfer, and senior year experience courses; individualized degree programs; undergraduate research; and residential programming. It needs to cut across every one of our academic disciplines and professional preparation programs.

But curricular content like this “delivered” solely through texts, lectures, and multiple-choice exams will not have much impact—even if jazzed up with technological bells and whistles. Our pedagogical practices must elicit behaviors that are consistent with our desired outcomes and that generate learning that lasts. Possibilities include active learning situations that call for problem recognition, analysis, and synthesis; collaborative and problem-based designs for learning; case studies that employ learning and research teams based on

![Heart Image](image-url)
The major transformations required to reclaim our institutional soul will not be achieved unless our professional souls are similarly respected, supported, and celebrated.

Formal academic and out-of-class programs like these must be peopled by faculty members and professional staff who are psychologically, physically, and temporally accessible to students. When some students reacted to a draft of this piece they told me, “It is very important that you say that faculty members themselves must be visibly engaged. It is essential that students see how faculty members are living their lives and that they be willing to share their lives with students. Whether we admit it or not, we look to our professors. We look to them to be living the kinds of lives we hope to live. They are more than just professors, they are mentors. It is really important to recognize this.”

Beyond our own specific roles, we must support student cultures that include peer tutoring, study groups, and multicultural friendships, and that emphasize mutual respect, reciprocity, active collaboration, and assistance. This means creating appropriate programs, deliberately allocating admittedly scarce budget resources to these purposes, providing professional staff support, and visibly rewarding faculty and student affairs professionals who invest themselves in such activities.

And after new policies and practices like these are in place, we must establish comprehensive institutional program evaluations to examine the degree to which varied interventions in curricula, pedagogical strategies, student-faculty relationships, peer interactions, and experiential learning actually improve civic learning and social responsibility among students, faculty, staff, and administrators. If these evaluations uncover shortcomings, we must seek to understand and rectify them in a spirit of ongoing inquiry consistent with academic values.

Similarly, we must encourage the scholarships of teaching and application that further such inquiry by broadening faculty reward systems beyond narrow definitions of research and superficial evaluations of teaching. Criteria and processes for faculty renewal, promotion, and tenure should reward contributions to improving teaching, as well as community contributions and civic engagement on and off campus.

Perhaps most important, we must practice, not just teach, the arts of democracy—dialogue, engagement, and shared participation. As Zelda Gamson put it in her afterword to Civic Responsibility in Higher Education, “Our ways of handling power differences and diverse points of view and cultures should be models of the civic life we wish to engender in our communities. Encouraging the articulation of differences, and then finding areas for collaboration, should be the norm rather than the exception” (see Resources).

To test our own democracy, we need to carefully audit our institutional decision-making processes, how we construct and act out faculty and student roles, and look for possible discrepancies between written policies and actual practices. And again, we need the resolve to act on what we find. Such transformations have the potential to help us reclaim our institutional soul. In so doing, they can help higher education reclaim the soul of democracy. But they will remain superficial if, as members of the academy, we fail to reclaim our professional souls.

Reclaiming Our Professional Souls

The first definition of “soul” in Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary reads: “An entity conceived as the essence, substance, animating principle, or acting cause of life, especially of individual life manifested in thinking, willing, and knowing.” This definition captures what many of us as academic professionals feel we have lost—or at least are in the process of losing. The “essence, substance, animating principle, or acting cause” that brought us to this calling—and that has sustained us throughout the ups and downs of challenging careers—seems increasingly out of touch with the dominant directions of change in our organizational cultures, our institutional priorities and practices, our departmental norms, and our collegial relationships. Reclaiming our professional souls is essential to reclaiming our institutional soul. They must go hand in hand.

On November 22, 2001, my wife Jo and I celebrated our 50th anniversary. Most of our good friends know that our marriage has endured significant challenges. We have survived diverse cultural contexts, personal and professional difficulties, deceit and disruption, injuries and illnesses. In many ways we are both quite different people from the two who married in 1951. We still go hand in hand because we have respected, supported, and celebrated each other’s soul. We give each other space. We learn from each other. We love each other.

The major transformations required to reclaim our institutional soul will not be achieved unless our professional souls are similarly respected, supported, and celebrated. Significant institutional transformations cannot be achieved in the face of organizational cultures that view administrators, faculty members, and student affairs professionals only as instruments of production, deployed to achieve maximum competitive advantage in a competitive, market-driven enterprise. They cannot be achieved if students are viewed only as consumers, generating credit hours and credentials.

In Let Your Life Speak, Parker Palmer suggests the orientation we need:

There is a simplistic brand of moralism among us that wants to reduce the ethical life to making a list, checking it twice—against the index in some best-selling book of virtues perhaps—and then trying very hard to be not naughty but nice.

There may be moments in life when we are so unformed that we need to use values like an exoskeleton to keep us from collapsing. But something is very wrong if such moments recur often in adulthood. Trying to live someone else’s life, or to live...
by an abstract norm, will invariably fail—and may even do
great damage....

Vocation does not come from willfulness. It comes from listen-
ing. I must listen to my life and try to understand what it is truly
about—quite apart from what I would like it to be about—or my
life will never represent anything real in the world, no matter
how earnest my intentions.

That insight is hidden in the word vocation itself, which is
rooted in the Latin for "voice." Vocation does not mean a goal
that I pursue. It means a calling that I hear. Before I can tell my
life what I want to do with it, I must listen to my life telling me
who I am. I must listen for the truths and values at the heart of
my own identity, not the standards by which I must live—but
the standards by which I cannot help but live if I am living my
own life.

Parker’s emphasis on listening for our own identity, for our
own standards, suggests some specific things that we and our
colleagues can do to start reclaiming our professional souls.

But there are tough obstacles to giving these problems the sus-
tained attention they require. Structural limitations and reward
systems are bedrock issues. There is little financial support to
recognize and back the values that we need to foster. Discre-
tionary time, energy, and emotion—which need to be invested
over many years—are in short supply. The prevailing cultural
mindset works against open sharing and exploration. And it is
hard for us to frame our malaise articulately in ways that res-
sonate with wider publics.

Our overwhelming valuation of rational empiricism—a
conception of truth as objective and external—and of knowl-
edge as a commodity de-legitimizes active public discussions of
purpose and meaning, authenticity and identity, or spiritual-
ity and spiritual growth. Meaningful dialogue around these
topics requires communities of trust and candor in which
participants can expose their vulnerabilities as they search,
knowing that they will be heard and supported. Limited self-
understanding and self-reflection—as well as fears about be-
ing left vulnerable in the current competitive and individualis-
tic environment—leave us mired in conflicting impulses and
ambivalent about appropriate actions.

Prevailing structures and organizational assumptions make
institutionwide change extremely difficult in higher education.
Conceptually, our institutions are systems made up of interlocking
and interdependent units, bound by shared policies and prac-
tices, and glued together by a host of noble (yet usually unex-
amined) assumptions. But at the operational level, they are col-
lections of schools, colleges, institutes, centers, and departments
populated by individual scholars and diverse professionals who
value and strongly defend their autonomy. They all compete for
limited financial resources, while reward systems reinforce bar-
rriers to change already in place because of dispersion. They re-
ward unit productivity based on credits generated and the dollar
value of grants and contracts. Individuals are rewarded similarly.

External recognition for research and publication far out-
weighs teaching and direct involvement with students, while
community engagement and service barely get a nod.

WHAT WE CAN DO

Despite these powerful obstacles, there are things we can do
individually and collectively as professionals. As individuals,
we can seek out trusted colleagues and create times and spaces
in which to share our experiences and feelings, our conflicts
and ambiguities, and our preliminary ideas about finding reso-
lutions. We can legitimize such conversations between our-
selves and our students, and among our students themselves.
We can encourage students to organize such activities among
their peers to help determine what they truly value about us.
We can read pertinent literature, write for ourselves and for
others, and speak about these matters in public settings when
given the chance. We can encourage faculty, administrators,
and staff to become public intellectuals and active learners, and
not just scholars in their own circumscribed fields. We can un-
dertake systematic inquiries of our own institutions and units to
determine gaps between ideals and realities, between espoused
values and values-in-use.

Collectively we can work with regional and national orga-
nizations to surface and explore these concerns more system-
atically. We can survey the higher education landscape and
create a vision of what it might become, in terms that are rele-
vant and tangible for our constituents. We can tackle the cul-
tures of our graduate schools to help future professionals
recognize the importance of addressing issues of purpose and
meaning, authenticity and identity, spirituality and spiritual
growth. We can develop new publications, principles for good
practice, and state-of-the-art reports about progress. We can
create a national teleconference that brings some of our most
thoughtful and active leaders together with professionals
drawn from diverse institutions. We can recruit high-profile
presidents and administrative leaders to build a political action
base for sustaining our efforts. We can bring these issues to the
attention of audiences outside of higher education, and togeth-
er explore their significance for the larger cultural context
within which we work.

Despite significant obstacles, there are many individual and
collective initiatives we can pursue to reclaim our souls. We
must do so, and soon, to fulfill the "essence, substance, ani-
mating principle, or activating cause" that first brought us to
this calling.

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RESOURCES

- Moyers, Bill, "Which America Will We Be Now?" The Nation, November 19, 2001.

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