
Of Legacies, Legators and Legatees

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The article that follows is based on a draft written some years ago as a tribute to many former professors of mine who died without having left their students the immense wealth of their experience in writing. At that time, I felt that all that had been left to many of us teachers was the indelible imprint of their classroom work. I also felt that many more of us might have profited from these lecturers' teachings if those teachers had poured a part of their vast capital into pages and, more importantly, if there had been publications readily available to them. I have reshaped my old draft with renewed enthusiasm, in the hope that the birth of *IDEAS* may give talented academics the possibility of supplying the world of the written word with a tangible and perusable way of immortalising their legacy.

*So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,
So long lives this and this gives life to thee.*

William Shakespeare. *Sonnet XVIII.*

As time passes, we see our lives going along different roads and paths. At the same time, we also see our careers sometimes racing on fast expressways, driving leisurely along spring-scented country roads, being forced to turn into narrow side streets and perhaps into many a blind alley. With ups and downs, twists and turns, we evolve towards the

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much desired, or perhaps feared, moment of a well-deserved retirement. It is true that, on our way, we also see many colleagues depart. Some leave us while still journeying through shiny academic motorways. Others go away after their hard-earned retirement years.

Yet this humble article should by no means be seen as an entry into memory lane's parking bay. An encomium of nostalgia this is definitely not. The news of a colleague's departure, especially the departure of our old teachers, should prompt us to think about some key aspects of our teaching profession, such as the legacy bequeathed by our elders and the way in which their bequest is passed on to all of us, present legatees of past generations and future legators to younger vintages.

The first question that comes to my mind when the sad news is broken that a talented professor had died, and after all due obituaries have been published and perished, is why s/he did not write –or write more. Very fortunately some did write, and this is laudable and applaudable. Others surely had little or nothing to write about. Some others, I believe, did not like writing at all. Indeed, this was not their problem: the problem is altogether mine. Hence I can embark upon these reflections well aware of my worries. However, as I know the Latin adage that commands that nothing be said of the dead but what is good (*“de mortuis nil nisi bonum dicendum est”*), I perceive that the sometimes deceitful light of hindsight should direct my words straight into the realm of the living.

In spite of the wide spectrum of writing-related likes and dislikes briefly mentioned above, some of our senior lecturers who are still alive still have a lot to say, have researched into and reflected on so many topics, and have so much to give that the sole idea that they might not leave behind a hundred books seems to me a serious miscarriage of justice. I am using this term deliberately, because it is justice that appears to be a key element here. It is high time we all awoke to the grim reality that what can simply be taken as a trait inherent in our culture actually constitutes a treacherous academic vacuum that prevents many from becoming rightful legatees of our elders' teachings.

We do not write. I do not write. They do not write. A magnificent

though invisible corpus is passed down from one generation of teachers to another, and we sometimes cast a vacant look in another direction, as the century of the global village, knowledge society and knowledge management sees some professions in our country sink slowly back into the oral tradition of the so called “dark ages”. By the way, let us establish that our senior academics do not decide not to write the hundred books they might write: they have to teach to make a living. A butcherly system that engulfs and invisibilises certain areas of knowledge and certain practices prevents us from accessing what never began to exist.

No doubt many senior lecturers are about to retire, or have retired, and yet are either forced to teach fifty periods a week or have been downright pushed into oblivion. Yes, they have simply been used up or are being used up: they have given the best hours of the best days of the best part of their lives to the noble cause of training teachers, yet the system did not give them the opportunity of slowing down their teaching pace so that they might conduct extensive research into their academic concerns and write, write, write... Would it be fair to expect retiring teachers to write between 1 and 6 am? Would it be fair to expect retired teachers to themselves publish and market their professional experience and academic stature as a private operation?

When I think of names, a crowd of prominent figures and their fond memories flock to my mind, and it would be altogether pointless to mention even half of them. We all know that there are many of our old teachers present in our minds, some of whom may still be alive and perhaps ready to share their experience with the younger generations. It should be noted that there are many lofty attempts made by many institutions to support and encourage publishing. However, there is something too deeply rooted in our culture that, inadvertently or quite deliberately, has shoved us into the pre-Gutenberg days. Needless to say, I would not like to see my culture brutalised by the “publish-or-perish” tradition of other countries, a culture that sucks brains dry and makes the strongest and most youthful enthusiasm wane to nothing. This would push us to the other extreme. This would certainly make elderly academics look forward to retirement with a view to devoting their last days to fishing or bird-watching.

I would like to see our senior lecturers being invited to lead research teams and to write extensively. I would also like to see the state taking an active part in drastically reducing the teaching workloads of these professors so that they can undertake the kind of projects that might eventually crystallise into books that can honour our libraries. In short, I would like to see this portion of our culture definitely take a fresh turn for the better. If this were to happen, these people's teachings would somehow be immortalised. If this were to happen, we would be spared the responsibility of relying on our memory to keep our old teachers alive, knowing that, in two generations' time, they might be gone forever.

No doubt young teachers will be unable to consult any of their dead teachers about any of the topics that the latter never wrote about. Still, something might be done. What if we alerted our authorities of the untold damage that this vacuum can cause? What if we helped our elders' bequest take the shape of those precious objects made up of spine, covers and pages that have accompanied us for so long? In so doing, we might help reshape part of our culture. We might become very rich legatees now and perhaps richer legators when the time comes for us to pass the torch to the young.

The birth of a university publication always carries great promise. I do hope that experienced lecturers –both practising and retired– can find in *IDEAS* a haven for the transmission of the knowledge that they are imparting and/or have imparted.