

Past and Future at the University of Dallas:
The Roadrunner, the Snake, and the Treasure

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Being near the end of my career here at the University of Dallas, I have taken the occasion of this talk to reflect on the past and the future of the University, on continuity and change.

I was walking across the mall one day, and for whatever reason or lack of one, I began a litany of the dead, those faculty members I knew and see no more. I make no claim for being comprehensive or even representative. Here is a partial list of our colleagues, in no particular order, who are now with the spirit that walks these hills:

June Welch
Mel Bradford
Sister Clo
Catherine Sorensen
Jack Paynter
Cherie Clodfelter
Fritz Wilhelmsen
Jack Gregg
Bob Sasseen
Louis Cowan
Donald Cowan
Father Gilbert
Father Chris
Bob Lynch
Father David
Rob Yale
Father Ben
Father Cain

I realize that you and I could add to the list. Just thinking of our dead puts me in mind of the end of James Joyce's story, "The Dead." Gabriel Conroy is looking out the window at the snow falling on Dublin:

His soul had approached that region where dwell the vast hosts of the dead. He was conscious of, but could not apprehend, their wayward and flickering existence. His own identity was fading out into a grey impalpable world: the solid world itself, which these dead had one time reared and lived in, was dissolving and dwindling. ... The time had come for him to set out on his journey westward. Yes, the newspapers were right: snow was general all over Ireland. ... It lay thickly drifted on the crooked crosses and headstones, on the spears of the little gate, on the barren thorns. His soul swooned slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead. (pp. 213-14)

Such sweet melancholy. That's the feeling-tone holding these reflections together. Melancholy coupled with gratitude for them and what they have bestowed on us, who follow them with mortal steps.

I also began remembering, with equal gratitude, those of the faculty who stayed with us for a while but then left to follow other paths. They too have contributed to making this place what it is. Then, how could I be so faculty-centric, and not remember administrators and staff members, without whom the faculty would not be here? Finally, there are our students and the alumni. They too are our colleagues in this endeavor of building the University.

These thoughts are about the nature of the University of Dallas, its fragility, its transitory character, its solidity. Its past and future. I am starting with the past and how our deceased and otherwise departed colleagues linger with us, reminding us that we too, me too, are "fading out into a grey impalpable world." Yet they made their marks, giving shape to this enterprise that is the University. Some of those marks we can identify, others we cannot. The past lingers with us, nonetheless, if in no other way than specifying the character of the spirit of the place that is distinctive. Fiercely intellectual; delighting in stories and rumors; a many-minded community of strikingly different views of education; a single-minded place nonetheless.

Years ago, when driving to campus, up Wildwood Road or Street or Avenue, whichever it was, I would occasionally see a roadrunner crossing the street in front of me, startled by my approach. Since I grew up in New Jersey, where birds of that size were seagulls, I was always delighted to see the roadrunner. It put an exclamation point on the sentence, "I'm in Texas now."

I haven't seen the roadrunner in ages. Even Wildwood is gone. I assume that the area is no longer hospitable to such a critter: wild wood is hard to come by anymore around here. This part of the county has been developed, as we say, meaning no longer hospitable to roadrunners. I used to see Scissortail flycatchers, too. I'm no birder, so I don't know if any of them remain in the vicinity. There were beavers too, down in the woods by Turkey Knob Hill. And I've seen a coyote over by 114 some time ago.

The roadrunner near our campus belongs to a bygone era. The days of UD's youth are over; the University is over 60 years old. Students today can still talk of the woods around campus, but concrete and steel and lawns have forced the wild into retreat. Early photos of the campus show very little in terms of an urban landscape between the hill where Carpenter Hall once stood and a much smaller downtown Dallas. The transformation of our environment raises questions for our future: How are we to address the unintended consequences of all this development? In terms of the place where UD stands, the campus is no bubble. Droughts, floods, excessive heat waves, and God knows what else, will confront this community soon. How do we prepare? How should the condition of the natural world become present in our curricula? How does a place *ex corde eccelsia*, care for our common home?

On another occasion, I walked across the mall, this time noticing the undulations of the brick, the result of our heavy shale and clay soil expanding and contracting. I remembered Lyle Novinski's remark about this feature of the mall: "creation is not over here," he said. Or that's

the way I remembered it anyway. Then an image came to mind: the mall is the back of a huge snake. The contours of the mall show that the snake has been moving. Being in the psychology department with a background in archetypal psychology, I thought, Hmm. What are the possibilities for this snake? And their bearing for the University?

Given the size of the mall, this snake is huge. We are dealing here with a mythological beast. So just calling it a snake is insufficient. The image needs specification. It has to be a cosmic snake. Three manifestations of a cosmic snake occurred to me, then: Naga, the Serpent in the Garden, and the Dragon.

Naga first. *Nāga*, a Sanskrit word related to the English word *snake*, has many manifestations in Eastern traditions. Naga is a guardian spirit, sometimes depicted as curling around the neck of Shiva, who protects, transforms, and destroys the given order. The undulations of the mall invite, at this juncture, reflections: On the necessity periodically to protect the campus (smooth the mall's surface from time to time) or, in other words, meditate on our origins and purpose; on the inevitability of transformations in the University—which many of us present today have witnessed; and on destruction of elements of the University that are no more. Nothing lasts forever. Naga's involvement in the cosmic struggle, however, led to the Elixir of Immortality. We should not take “destruction” only literally. It is not an end; it is a moment in a life that hopes to continue, in new forms.

But in the end, Naga is not the exact image.

Then there is the Snake in the Garden. As a Catholic university, we cannot forget this serpent, who leads us into temptation—many are the woes that accompany this sense of the instability of the mall, our ground. But again, this image is not right, as our ground is not evil. The mall snake is something grand.

The snake is a Dragon. The scale of the mall is just right for a dragon. If you walk the mall from south to north at night, you might even see the constellation of the dragon, circling around the Pole Star.

Now a dragon is a beast of the imagination, like the unicorn. Dragons are dangerous creatures, capable of vast destruction. Their power, however, exists in the imagination, where destruction means the break-up of fixed forms, allowing for renewal. We get reminders of this destructive power, with the necessity of smoothing out the mall from time to time. Without doing that, the mall would probably become unwalkable, a pile of misplaced bricks. Yes, our dragon is dangerous.

Nevertheless, the dragon as an imaginary creature, supports our movements across campus daily. It is our foundation. It calls to mind the foundation of our university in the imagination. Before the 1960s, the foundations of Catholic education were courses in Thomistic philosophy and theology. The innovation of UD was to ground the curriculum in the imagination. The literary imagination first of all. Since I am not a member of the English Department, I can say with gratitude and awe, that we found our identity on works of fiction, from Homer to the modern novel.

And not only in literature. All the disciplines at the University have their root images. Donald Cowan, I have been told, as a physicist, called mathematical formulas the poems of physics. So with all the disciplines, we imagine things like government, commerce, forms of life, material forces and energies, ways of speaking, to name but a few. In psychology, where, to use the terms I favor, we imagine the soul, the unconscious, being-in-the-world, as giving form to our particular apprehension of the real. Our way of imagining the real.

Which brings me to the end of the title of this talk: the treasure. Dragons are known to guard treasures, as Bilbo Baggins knew, as Carl Jung knew: it's a neverending story about the gifts that dragons protect. We walk on the back of a creature of the imagination, and those undulations of the mall signify the bubbling presence of the treasures of the University, in its curriculum, its dedication, its loves, and its aspirations. Those of us who have already headed west have contributed to this treasure, which signifies the identity of the university. Those of you who envision many years to come here, cherish what has been but do not hoard the treasure. The dragon in us may tempt such hoarding, freezing the vision of this place. When that happens, slay the dragon. Be heroic.

Renew the treasure by imagining the life of the mind and of the persons who walk these hills in forms beyond our present forms.

Edward Aloysius Pace, an experimental psychologist and Thomistic philosopher, wrote in 1895 words that I adapt for our present situation. He was concerned about the necessity and danger attendant upon increased specialization of disciplines in the university. He wrote:

“But the real purpose of specialization is ... to make research more thorough ... and to make it more valuable” as knowledge. “Though individual workers, absorbed in their specialties, may become oblivious to the general interest,” all must “keep this [general] interest in view.”

This “general interest” I am calling the treasure, the source of our academic prosperity. This treasure is the act of imagining the possibilities our common calling. The treasure is not a thing; it is nothing fixed. Our wealth lies in our desire to know, to teach, to learn. We renew the treasure through our teaching, our research, and our service.

To break fixed forms and envision the world afresh is a fitting task for us. We can remember this potential for the university each time we cross the mall. On the back of a dragon.