

Thomas G. Palaima REGULAR CONTRIBUTOR

Of death and academics

The end of the academic year at the University of Texas at Austin is always a good time to take stock of successes and failures and to wonder where we are heading inside and outside the university. This year, we have greater cause for soul-searching. The academic year began with the terrorist murders of Sept. 11 and is ending with escalating terrorist and state-sanctioned violence against Israeli and Palestinian civilians. American soldiers are still stationed throughout the Middle East as coalition troops search and search for al Qaeda and Taliban forces.

The U.S. economy sputters. Our government officials finally show signs of grasping what U.S. Comptroller General David Walker told UT accounting students in October 2000: Revenue losses from politically popular tax cuts in boom times have severe consequences for all necessary government services in down times. Students who went through UT primarily for job training are wondering where the jobs went. Let's hope they acquired the resourcefulness and adaptable intellectual skills that come with a liberal arts degree.

Some Texas Exes may console themselves knowing that Longhorn student athletes, many of whom will never be Texas Exes, will soon be practicing in climate-controlled comfort year round. At least one big-dollar bubble shows no signs of bursting.

German citizens have become familiar with mass murder in their

schools. The Roman Catholic Church continues to struggle with its response to sexual abuse of children by some of its clergy. A disconcerting percentage of French voters find fascism attractive in a presidential candidate. Meanwhile my friend, philosophy professor Al Martinich, notes that the Austin American-Statesman has unintentionally — we hope — produced a metaphor for how much help in making sense of all this the average citizen of Austin expects from the state's flagship institution of higher learning. On page B4 of the April 29 Statesman was an eight-paragraph story about the annual UT Cooperative Society awards for scholarly achievement by faculty members. Prominent on page B1 was a photograph of a New York blonde said to be frolicking with an alligator at the 8th annual Louisiana Swamp Romp. I attended the Swamp Romp; the alligator was not frolicsome. It was tied down with two massive cables and zombified by the dust and heat. The story about real faculty achievement was squeezed onto the obituary page.

So in my semester-end stock-taking, I wondered what it would take to raise the dead. Why is it that even brief notices of engaging books on women's rights in Islamic cultures, on geological and anthropological studies in Ethiopia, on how to learn and use rhetoric, and on love poems from classical India are buried away pages behind a bound and bored alligator?

Part of the answer, of course, is that humanistic dialogue between town folk and gown folk on important aspects of our human experience has been reduced to a whisper. The Statesman rightly reports major endowment gifts

to the university, scientific discoveries, pro-business initiatives, learned opinions on widespread — but still no less deplorable — corporate accounting practices, and the politics of funding for higher education. But unless humanist academics take to writing on the op-ed page, their views on our shared human experience are rarely heard by the general public.

Higher education has also been demonized — in my opinion largely unfairly — as elitist and politically out of touch with mainstream America. So when university professors held informational seminars after the events of Sept. 11 and did what academics are trained and paid to do, namely bring out the subtleties in history and politics and economics and foreign affairs, they were castigated, for example at City University of New York, as unpatriotic. Media coverage immediately focused on the easy-to-report conflict between professoriate and administration rather than on the full range of ideas — from radical left to radical right — that the academy fosters and protects.

In my own half-century on this planet, however, I have found that when I am faced with a problem, I am part of the solution, because I am often part of the cause. Hyper-specialization within the humanities has made most of what we professors write for one another deadly reading for those outside the university. Next time, I want to explore more fully what the humanities has to offer to all thinking human beings in the year 2002 and what academics can do to be more valuable citizens, dead or alive.

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