

Palaima: Higher education in need of more good shepherds

By Tom Palaima

Posted Sep 4, 2016 at 12:01 AM

Updated Sep 25, 2018 at 9:32 AM

Austin American-Statesman

<https://www.statesman.com/news/20160904/palaima-higher-education-in-need-of-more-good-shepherds>

Have you ever watched children play with building blocks? It takes them a long time to build something impressive. Yet it can be knocked down instantly by accident or childish frustration.

It is easy to destroy things that take long hard effort to create. We Americans know this. Our nation's hopes can be derailed in seconds by rifle fire on Dealey Plaza in Dallas or near the Lorraine Hotel in Memphis. We can head down the wrong track at the invitation of violent hatred piloting two hijacked airplanes into twin skyscrapers.

Where are we now after our leaders 15 years ago decided to seek vengeful justice through what is now a forever war in Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria? We wanted to bring mythical apple-pie democracy to a culture that is virtually unchanged since Alexander the Great fought his own costly Vietnam War there. When the blocks predictably were not fitting together, we picked them up like petulant children.

Four years ago, George Steiner in his book "The Poetry of Thought" traced the human capacity for abstract thinking back to metaphors in the song poems of Homer and pre-Socratic philosophers. What Steiner does not say — but what 25 years of studying, teaching and writing about the effects of violence on human beings and their societies has taught me and my students — is that we need metaphors to live by and that enrich, guide and remind us what it means to be human.

We need to revive, revise and truly respect an old key metaphor as a model for leadership in all of our institutions, religious, secular, private and public, government and business. That vital metaphor is the good shepherd.

We are now well into an age that can be called a pro-business and anti-humanist age. The New York Times reports a “rising call” nationwide to foster science, technology, engineering, and mathematics fields and decrease liberal arts funding. Preoccupation with career training is conspicuous at all stages of education.

The manifestations of this at the University Texas are obvious. Contrary to the widely applauded initiatives of our past two presidents to grow the permanent tenured and tenure-track faculty — they added 240 such positions over a 16-year period — the university is now downsizing its permanent faculty. Its president proudly told the Board of Regents that as an economy measure UT-Austin is relying more than ever on part-time instructors. This occurs despite the long-established correlation between quality of education and degree of personal contact between students and core faculty and graduate assistants — also known as student-to-faculty ratios. The College of Liberal Arts has plans to shrink its faculty from 544 to 467 in five years.

What is a leader as a good shepherd? The underlying notions are the same in humanistic thought as in specifically religious thinking. The Greek and Latin words for shepherd — “poimen” and “pastor” — both convey the basic meanings of nurturing, feeding and protecting. War leaders in the “Iliad” are called “shepherds of the male fighting forces.” They are thereby reminded that they should above all take care of the sheep in their flocks. The entire “Iliad,” the touchstone social hymn of what it meant to the Greeks to be human, is a glaring counterexample of what happens when a leader is not a good shepherd, but focuses narcissistically on his own image, power, wealth and sense of self.

In the New Testament story, the good shepherd risks his own well-being to save one wayward sheep. Professor David Laude, UT’s so-

called graduation czar, acts like a good shepherd in his large chemistry classes, focusing not on academic stars among his students but on those who struggle with the concepts of the course. He makes sure they remain healthy members of his flock.

Elsewhere at UT-Austin, however, the Faculty Investment Initiative singles out a few special departments in each college to hire supposedly star, purebred sheep. The faculty sheep in all other departments are being culled; those remaining are kept on fixed or diminishing diets.

In society at large, good shepherds would strive to keep their whole flocks safe, secure and healthy behind the gates of their sheepfolds. They would not retreat with a few select sheep into gated communities and leave all other sheep defenseless against life's many predators and dangers.