

# **PHILOSOPHY AND INNOVATION**

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## **Philosophy and Innovation**

Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby  
some have entertained angels unawares —

Hebrews 13:2

### **Introduction**

Much has been written of late regarding the  
value of so-called liberal arts education, how top-  
drawer professional schools seek flexible,  
adaptive thinkers exposed to broad general  
knowledge trained in “rigorous critical thinking.”

We are often reminded, the value of higher  
education is not the learning of many facts but  
“the training of the mind to think something that  
cannot be learned from text books.”

## Against The Current

As will be clear shortly, I did not take the conventional defined, well-trodden path, not in my education, and certainly not in my careers, and I've had a few. First, at no time did I see an academic philosophy career in the cards for me, and in saying thus; I do not disparage those who have. It just wasn't for me. I took courses that challenged me like Ancient Greek to better understand the Art of hermeneutics, to study the text in their original.

My father died of a heart attack at home when I was 15; he was buried on my 16<sup>th</sup> birthday. I was

the youngest of 8 with 20 years between me and my oldest sibling and 8 years to my closest. I felt like I was from another generation and I was. In school my parents were the same age as my fellow students' grandparents. My mother was 48 when I was born, already a "senior citizen" at the time of my father's death. So when we moved to Guelph in 1969 to live with my brother Fred (the Political Science Professor and former student of Leo Strauss) and his new bride Carol, I was initiated into the early Guelph Academic culture.

At the same time I was immersed in the counter-culture of the late sixties, early seventies, when I moved to Guelph in August 1969, the summer of

love and Woodstock were mere passing clouds in the Age of Aquarius waning. I was a poet and musician, played guitar and made many new counter-culture friends in High School in Guelph and Ontario. Like many others of that era I wandered down Alice's rabbit hole seeking the enlightenment promised by Dr. Timothy Leary and others. Not everyone survived, I was lucky, I met my best friend and future wife Anne Hewat in High School, and we will have been married 42 years this September.

After a year at York University in Toronto studying music and humanities, Anne and I moved back to Guelph where I studied philosophy and

worked part time as an Emergency Vehicle Attendant at the University of Guelph Fire Department, these were the early days of paramedics post Vietnam War. I had no intention of studying medicine and a career of any kind was the last thing on my mind.

In 1976 Anne and I took the winter semester off and traveled to Guatemala to visit friends. On the morning of February 2 at 3 AM, an earthquake measuring 8.2 on the Richter scale literally rocked our world—killing 25,000 people. We awoke from our dreams in the middle of the night with the ground shaking, the roof shifting and our hearts racing as we took to the refuge of the central

courtyard of the downtown Guatemala city *pensión* where we were staying while I recovered from Amebic dysentery having just been released from hospital that day. By the way the hospital was a pile of rubble the next morning. With the limited skills to assist, I had a true vocational calling to medicine, so upon return to Guelph, I finished my MA in philosophy and prepared for entrance to medical school.

People often ask me was it a difficult transition from philosophy to medicine, and I have to say no, it wasn't, not really, because it was new to almost everyone no matter what academic area you came from, and McMaster was ahead of its

time. In fact I had an advantage I had studied Ancient Greek. As with any field of endeavor one must learn the language to acquire the skill, and so too with medicine whose language over 2000 years of western medicine is Latinized Greek. This was a big advantage for me, to understand the meaning of terms.

Because I had to support myself throughout all my education, to afford medical school I joined the RCAF, which paid for my medical education in return for 3 years of service post medical training, including an internship in Toronto. I ended up staying in the reserves for several decades including service with both Canadian and RAF



special ops in Sarajevo in 1994 during the war in former Yugoslavia, and culminating a military reserve career as a full Colonel and Colonel Commandant of the Medical Services Branch.

As the medevac flight surgeon for the Special Operation to Sarajevo in 1994, *The Apology of Socrates* was my constant companion, for as the saying goes military life is characterized by long hours of waiting, interspersed by moments of sheer terror. This was certainly my experience in theatre.

Over a ten-year period back in Guelph I opened the Yarmouth Street Medical Centre, the Guelph After Hours Clinics, Surrey Street Medical

Centre and MD TV, a news magazine show that appeared on Global TV in 1994.

In 1996 I returned to Guatemala with Anne on a medical mission during the cease-fire in the 35-year civil war to set up a primary care project in the Ixil triangle. From there my love of learning took me back to university this time to The Johns Hopkins University Bloomberg School of Public Health where I completed my Masters in Public Health focusing on health communication and new thing you may have heard of called the Internet, where I learned to code and scripted the second web site at Johns Hopkins. From there I was recruited back to Canada to head up the Canadian

Medical Association's professional affairs  
directorates including medical ethics, applied  
research, and public health communications.

When I became CEO of the CMA in the late 1990s I  
started a subsidiary company to deliver health  
information technology to physicians in Canada, a  
company CMA recently sold to Telus. I was then  
recruited to be President, WebMD Canada, the  
health Internet company during those heady days  
of the dotcom era. When the dotcom bubble burst  
Anne and I decided to move to Nova Scotia.

In 2007 I rounded out my education at  
Queen's University School of Business Executive  
Program, and later worked with Accreditation

Canada to develop a subsidiary company  
Accreditation Canada International (ACI) to  
deliver Canadian style health services  
accreditation programs around the world.

The past 10 years I've been working on health  
services improvement as President, CEO and  
Medical Director of a health authority in Nova  
Scotia, and just over a year ago I was appointed  
Deputy Minister, Nova Scotia Department of  
Health and Wellness.

Daily I call upon my background in  
philosophy. One current example you will  
understand is physician assisted dying. However,  
I will not dwell on that issue today.

Before I conclude I would like to share five personal benefits of studying philosophy.

## 1. Inspiration

Who among us was not immediately smitten upon first reading the Apology of Socrates? Then re-reading it, striving to learn ancient Greek to devour it in a Leon Kass sense to incorporate it into our being, to better understand the unexamined life is not worth living, and carry it with us, if not literally, at least in our hearts, the way some business schools extol the virtue of Machiavelli's The Prince.

## 2. Practice

Like many before me, I came to philosophy first attracted by the historical narrative, the larger than life figures, lovers of wisdom East and West who struggled with the biggest questions, the origin of the Universe, humanity, nature, morality, ethics, wisdom and the quest for knowledge, an amorphous heady community of thinkers that stretched across continents, centuries, a lifetime and beyond, seeking always seeking for newer ways of expressing, understanding the human condition over a lifetime.

### 3. Community

There is an immense need in our world today to better understand and develop a sense of moral and ethical responsibility to one's community both locally and globally. I would argue the need for education grounded in philosophy has never been greater in this regard, this is been a major force for me as a social entrepreneur, seeking to improve society, not for personal gain.

### 4. Compassion

Aesthetics, appreciation of the beauty of art and literature, inspiration and solace, lessons from the past help us to shape a future we want to see, to avoid unnecessary misadventure, empathy is

needed more than ever as we race toward  
convergence of biology and technology. Empathy  
up! Aggression down!

## 5. Rigor

The ability to reason clearly, to think  
rationally, to analyze information intelligently and  
to continue to seek new ideas and concepts over a  
lifetime is to me the practical skill one derives  
from a philosophical education, a true classical  
education in every sense of the word.

## Philosophy and Innovation

The study of philosophy does not impart  
special or arcane knowledge, the ability to turn



lead into gold or always make the right choices  
but we can appreciate the human need to  
understand the Universe around us and to  
appreciate our place in it, and in so doing to  
improve the public good, this is the road I have  
taken.

In the future perhaps philosophy and  
innovation will be an important and critical  
science as we explore terra incognita of human  
endeavor, including the as yet unknown maladies  
of a 120-year old brain. Forty years ago we didn't  
have CT, MRI and PET scans. Will we be scanned  
in our own homes in the future? Most likely. That  
might be okay, but what if we're scanned without

our knowledge, or our DNA analyzed and modified for us? Will programming disease right out of us, increasingly integrated with electronics, nanotechnology combining stem cells and delivery vehicles to manipulate brain and other cells, even the eye and retina manipulation will challenge our very notions of reality, perhaps even space and time itself. As former Astronaut Dave Williams, President and CEO of Southlake Regional Health Centre said, “I wouldn’t be surprised if bionics becomes a reality. For that matter, are humans going to be species that remains on earth forever, or will humans become a spacefaring species? Our imaginations shouldn’t have limits.”

In the University of Toronto Medicine (Spring 2015) devoted to The Future Dr. Jim Woodgett, Professor of Medical Biophysics writes, “In 100 years, hospitals as we know them won’t exist. We’ll still have medical needs but smaller, specialist ‘hotels’ will provide them. Chronic care will be provided autonomously, including through life-sustaining mobile machines. Quality of life will be better appreciated and people will have far greater say in their fate. Physician-assisted death will evolve into patient-empowered end-of-life care.”

Will future health care providers be mentor-philosophers helping individuals create a

meaningful and purposeful lives? I hope so. We are living in a fascinating time, the evolving digital age is compared to the *beginning* of the industrial revolution. We need philosophy to help us understand our world, the implications of the rapid pace of change, as much today, *maybe* even more so, than ever before.

Philosophy and innovation will become an essential field of study.

Thank you for what you do, and for your love of wisdom, it takes true courage to lead the philosophical life, the first virtue that enables all others. Thank you.