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Book Review: Teaching in Eden: Lessons from Cedar Point

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Judging from the title, one might expect this book to offer some resolution to America's ongoing debate regarding the teaching of evolution, creationism, and intelligent design. It is, instead, Janovy’s attempt to shake higher
education by the shoulders and bring it to its senses, asking that university instruction shift its focus from content to larger questions of process and values (for want of a better term: liberal arts and sciences). As Janovy states, “I contend that the arts and sciences ideals—breadth of understanding, courage to explore anywhere, patience with disagreement—are the best antidotes to our current afflictions of banality, specialization, and information overload.” Janovy’s goal is to transfer field experience learning to the campus classroom, applying it to “real stuff.”

Janovy challenges college teachers of all disciplines to re-discover the passion for instruction that he found each summer for almost thirty years at the University of Nebraska's Cedar Point Biological Station in the state’s western Sandhills. Although he never takes on the role of a Creator, he does document the genesis of this Eden as the inspirational jumping-off point for reflection on the current condition of higher education in America, and never identifies the mega-versity as Gomorrah or Babylon. And he doesn’t preach only to teachers; parents and their college-age children, deans and university administrators, anyone interested in contemporary higher education should read this book. Even politicians focused on standardized assessment would do well to reflect on Janovy’s demonstrations that some failure is good for the learning process.

As he states in his preface, “I began purposefully trying to create the Cedar Point atmosphere in places far from the prairie wetlands: I started trying to build another Eden. This book is my attempt to explain exactly how that was done, in hopes that it will be done over and over again in places far from Western Nebraska, and by people other than scientists.” Those familiar with Janovy’s Keith County Journal (1978) and Back in Keith County (1981) will immediately identify the maverick naturalist who is nearing the end of a distinguished career still trying to bring those valued field experiences back into the urban department chair’s office and the three-hundred-seat lecture auditorium. If Janovy is not a Creator, he is certainly a prophet crying out in the wilderness, unlikely soon to find honor in the homeland of academe. But in the same way it took years to rediscover the value of Aldo Leopold’s Sand County Almanac, this book may yet find its larger audience among academics who value teaching first.

Janovy remains the plain-spoken professor (he never uses the words “postlapsarian” or “antediluvian”) who knows that a good geology professor can conduct a profitable lecture based on a single rock found on the side of the road (chapter 10). He offers numerous examples of successful classroom and laboratory prompts and techniques, and even stresses the role that the university art gallery can play in stimulating students to relate biology classroom concepts to campus artwork. All teachers could benefit from his suggestions for good writing projects and from emulating the compassion he brings to his work of getting students to think and to know.

Teaching in Eden also offers a pleasant if brief return to Keith County; in the end, as he does in his earlier books about the Sandhills, even Janovy has to come back to his real life in the university workplace. But that doesn’t mean the instructional success in the prairie wetlands can’t be applied to the urban university classroom. While Janovy’s reflection on his Eden doesn’t explicitly acknowledge the existence of a serpent in the garden, Temptation may well be represented by an annoying cell-phone going off in Janovy’s lecture hall, drawing all attention to itself and abruptly ending the discussion under the Tree of Knowledge.

A small error or two (the founders of Doane College, part of the original web of donors of the Cedar Point Biological Station, were Congregational, not Methodist) in no way detract from the powerful passion of this straightforward book, which is a pleasure to read even when it shouts a bit loudly. It should be part of any science educator’s library, and most university libraries.

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