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We THINK We Can, We THINK We Can...

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We *THINK* We Can, We *THINK* We Can...

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One of the most enduring story books of my childhood, along with *Little Toot* and *The Little Train Who Thought He Could*, was the tale of *The Little House* in the city. It is no surprise that all these are stories of little guys, surrounded by big things, but coming out OK by virtue of pluck and innate value.

Some of you perhaps remember this yarn, written in 1943 by Virginia Lee Burton (also the author of *Mike Mulligan*, by the way), which I propose as a kind of allegory to kick off our discussion today. The book (for those of you whippersnappers too young to recall it) begins with a tidy, happy, even perky little house, chimney puffing away happy little clouds of clean smoke, yard well manicured, handsomely sited in an attractive bucolic country lot. Soon, the isolation of the little house is restricted as other homes, of comparable size and character, develop around it. The suburban phase. Things begin to get really serious, though, as the neighborhood is increasingly given over to taller and larger buildings, closer and closer to the little house. At the crisis of the narrative, the house cowers in the midst of the industrial and residential skyscraper development of what is clearly a major metropolitan area. Its sun is gone, its yard reduced to a junk lot, its happy existence now overshadowed by looming gigantic, even monster, buildings that leave the little house grotesquely disproportionate to its surroundings, lost in the big city, a tiny relic of a disappeared past. This story ends happily through the somewhat *deus-ex-machina* plot mechanism of moving the little house out of the big city, and back into the country, where it once again fits into the landscape and is proportionate to its surroundings.

It is not so clear that we are heading for that particular happy ending.

The point of this infantile prelude is pretty clear. It was not the little house which changed, but its neighborhood. The little house was a fine little house, but over time, it found itself surrounded by gigantic new growths which thrust up to the sky and took away its place in the sun. The little house didn't do anything wrong. It just stayed the way it was while the whole world around it was transformed. Indeed, the owners may have done extensive internal remodeling and kept the place quite up-to-date (you know, revised the curriculum, incorporated the latest technology, that sort of thing.) Nor, of course, is there anything wrong about office blocks and apartment houses and factories—at least there were very few folks who thought there was anything wrong with them in the post-War America in which I grew up having this little book read to me. The problem was not inherent in either type of structure: it derived from the competition over limited turf between entities which were created to do very different things and, hence, took very different shapes and made incompatible demands on the space they occupied together.

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The crisis faced by undergraduate colleges in America today is not that those colleges and programs have gone astray, but that huge, new, domineering enterprises have shot to the sky all around us and threaten to take away our place in the sun. And that those institutions all have their own, powerful, claims to legitimacy and valid service to the Commonwealth. Prior to the Civil War and the founding of Johns Hopkins University in the final quarter of the 19th century, “College” in America pretty much meant small, usually private and parochial, undergraduate liberal arts colleges.

A mere century and a quarter later—not much time at all in the historical sweep of things or even in the lives of colleges (or even, we sometimes suspect, in the calendar of decision making at small colleges)—institutions that focus on the baccalaureate four years are surrounded by a daunting variety of huge, new structures. These include: the major, flagship research universities, such as the land-grant Universities; regional comprehensive universities, often with 5-figure student populations, a smattering of graduate programs, free-standing “colleges” of education or business, as well as arts and sciences; a huge network of largely-public two-year vocational institutes and community colleges. Then there is an exploding for-profit post-secondary industry, often involving some deep commitment to distance learning, such as the University of Phoenix: corporate post-secondary options ranging from short training courses to virtual collegiate experiences under the aegis of, say, hamburger chains. We live in the era of the Mac-Baccalaureate. The four-year, undergraduate, often liberal arts learning career was for roughly half our national life the definitive collegiate experience; by the dawn of the 21st century, it seems perilously close to disappearing. We’re still here, but those industrial giants of higher learning which surround us increasingly block our sky. This really has been a rapid shift. In 1960 when I had just graduated from high school, if one said: “I’m going to college,” it was assumed that one probably meant Grinnell College, or Beloit or Coe or Kendall, or some similar four-year liberal arts institution. I propose that today, if a 19-year-old says “I’m going to college,” the default is much more likely to be the local community college, or the nearest state-affiliated regional comprehensive. In my part of the world, if you said you were collegiate-bound 40 years ago, you meant St.Olaf, or Concordia, or Gustavus Adolphus or Luther or maybe the Twin Cities campus of the University of Minnesota. Today, the chances are you are understood to mean St. Cloud State or Southwest State College, or Alexandria Tech or Fergus Falls Community College. Increasingly, it might mean you are going to sit at home in your bedroom and take courses off the Internet on your computer. And, of course, the largest collegiate institution in our country is the Community College of the Air Force. One recent article I read affirmed that, just prior to the Second World War, about half of all American college students were enrolled in small liberal arts colleges but that by the mid 1990’s that number was below 20%. Even allowing for a rather dramatic increase in the raw number from which those percentages are derived, this is a drop which, for example, in the commercial world, would signal abject bankruptcy!

Two options which are not available to us are, first, rolling back the clock and returning to those bucolic days of a century ago when we were the only folks in town. And, second, we can’t pack up and move out of town and back to the Jeffersonian rural isolation, which would at least let the little house be itself again. We cannot recreate in time or in space or in the national consciousness the world that we dominated, which is a “world we have lost.” One option, of course, is to try to become bigger ourselves, and, in fact, most

of the Regional Comprehensives began their lives as four-year colleges, often teachers' colleges, and have evolved a University structure and a graduate curriculum.

Some of us, though, believe that maybe we need something else—a different kind of zoning, perhaps, which lets the various mega-institutions have their space, but reaffirms the value of ours, too. Some of us believe that the missions which animate undergraduate colleges in America are anything but outdated or peripheral in this new millennium. Some of us believe in the cultivation of wisdom and the value of reflection, in the possibility of the kind of creative thinking which enables one to define a problem, imagine solutions, test them, modify them, and select among them. Some of us believe that lifelong learning can mean, in addition to older people coming back to school, teaching all undergraduates the methodological habits of self-instruction which make lifelong learners not just of those who come back to our colleges, but also of those who graduate from them. Some of us, in short, believe that the undergraduate experience, the baccalaureate four years (or some approximation thereof), is not just still valuable, but still rightfully claims its place as the core collegiate unit, the sun around which the rest of the educational planets, even the giants, revolve.

The reason we are meeting here today [at the Undergraduate Summit on Higher Education] is that, if we believe these things, the people in this room today represent the leadership which will have to reaffirm, to reclaim, this centrality of the undergraduate collegiate experience and the undergraduate college. Our colleagues at the Community Colleges, the Research Universities, the Internet learning providers, and the corporate training centers are not going to do it for us. Each of our organizations is focused on some important aspect of undergraduate teaching and learning: honors students, liberal learning, public or private colleges, etc. All of us occupy some larger or smaller part of that imperiled but sacred plot of ground around which have sprouted looming challenges. We can't move, and they aren't going to go away. Our goal today is to give us together the chance to talk a bit among ourselves about some of the ways we can work most effectively together to retain and restore our place in the sun.

Both President Ponder and I spent some considerable time at a Quaker college, where we learned quickly the lesson that I suspect just about everyone in our business gets to sooner or later: that the collective wisdom of a group focused on solving a problem is inevitably better than the most ingenious solutions which can be imagined by an individual. Which is to say, we don't know exactly where today's discussions are going to lead us, nor what outcomes will result from our meeting. We have considered the possibility of a statement or declaration or publication, a press release or a manifesto. We have wondered about other possible productive venues of cooperation amongst all of us or some of us, or some of us and others. We have NOT much considered starting yet another organization in an already crowded field. Part of our assignment today is to explore commonalities of understanding of the current situation of undergraduate education in American, of our beliefs in the value of that enterprise, and ask, if those commonalities hold, what we can do to articulate them most effectively and to advance them collectively. It is my personal conviction that this isn't really a large task: it is just that there are none larger.

I don't believe *The Little House* meant to decry hotels or factories or offices, nor even to say that the house was a better structure than those sorts of buildings. What the book claimed, and what we believe, is that only one of those many important and

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imposing sorts of places is built as a home for humans. Our undergraduate colleges offer places of a sort and scale in which our students can come to know themselves and each other, in which students and teachers live in humane proximity, with enough shelter to be safe and enough space to be free. We think this is a neighborhood we can't afford to lose.

(These remarks, in altered form, are the "Preface" to Sam's book *Old Main: Small Colleges in Twenty-First-Century America*.)

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