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Antioch

by Deborah Meier — September 15, 2008

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Born in 1852, Antioch College closed at least twice before, also due to financial difficulties. In 1858 it was bankrupt and remained closed until after the Civil War. It was reborn in 1865, and led a quiet, financially unstable life until 1920 when Arthur Morgan was elected President and reopened the school with the co-op program for which it became famous. Designed to house 1,000 students (not all on campus at the same time), it struggled in recent years to maintain that number and in June 2007 decided to close, much to the surprise of its graduates and student body! There are plans for reopening it once again in a few years if the Alumni Association and the Board of Trustees can develop a workable plan. Meanwhile, the extended Antioch University, composed now of six other campuses, will continue—without its home base in Yellow Springs, Ohio.

My choice to go to Antioch, in 1949, was based on some of the virtues the college proclaimed. But my final decision was based on its innovative respect for the maturity of its female students. I had been stunned when I visited my older brother at Oberlin to discover that at 9 pm, Mondays through Fridays, the girls rushed away like little Cinderellas, to meet the curfew. They even had lights out times for girls in well-chaperoned dorms. But boys? As long as the girls had been locked away they were free to play. Antioch was the only residential college that didn't have different rules for male and female students. That settled it for me.

I transferred to the University of Chicago before I graduated Antioch, where I had been accepted into a maser's program in History (aided by Antioch's system for giving credit for exams passed for courses not taken). It's interesting to note that the graduate school at the University of Chicago turned out to be less intellectually stimulating than Antioch. Courses in the grad school were decidedly more boring and discourse between faculty and students was rare. My political life on campus was by far the more invigorating source of intellectual life than my course work (with an exception here and there). (And the old Hutchins system continued to fascinate me. Antioch and the U of Chicago have, in fact, both had enormous influence on my subsequent educational ideas.)

How easy it is to forget what a half-century has done to our prejudices. Girls and boys now share dorms, and the rules are the same at practically all universities and colleges. Few have any hours, and in many they even share living suites, bathrooms, and more. Of course, racial minorities were few at Antioch in 1949. And it was not until the 1960s that Antioch reached out to substantially increase its minority representation. Antioch has, since, graduated a host of famous and distinguished African Americans. (Coretta Scott was a classmate of mine.)

Thirty years later, in the 90s, when I was principal of an urban high school, it was a pleasure to send our graduates there. Antioch was still way ahead of the curve. The students felt comfortable and stimulated, and the school set them on interesting paths. Antioch, naturally, was also a place I turned to for teacher assistants when we started Mission Hill School in the mid 1990s in Boston. The faculty and student culture at Mission Hill School in Boston was good for them and us.

So, how did it happen that -- at this moment when its message is so timely and its experience so vital to school reform -- Antioch is going out of business? Despite support from graduates—including commitments for financial aid that stunned me—and a record of extraordinary academic success, the place is no more. It's worth some thought.

Many of the reasons are unique to Antioch--stuff I do and don't know about--that make its problems special to that school and of little consequence to the world. The decision to go from one to five campuses, the shift in focus away from Yellow Springs, the alienation of Yellow Springs alumni that followed, the particular talents of its leadership, and growing number of colleges

offering many of its same virtues—all played perhaps a critical role.

First of all, I believe that a part of its problem relates to historical amnesia, our failure to learn from our own history, to build on what has been accomplished rather than always starting anew. I have watched that happen in K-12 education. The faddish interest in "open education" in K-6 schools in the 60s and 70s paid no heed to the prior history of progressive education just twenty years earlier. Few were those who demanded that educators and politicians alike reread the stories of Dewey's own school and the work of previous heroic pioneers. As a result, "open education" lasted half as long and reached even fewer than its progressive predecessors. When Ted Sizer launched the Coalition of Essential Schools he was building upon an extraordinary earlier study of American high schools—the 8 Year Study. Conducted prior to World War II, it made the "data-driven" case for a major overhaul of high school along lines such as he proposed. Yet to this day he hasn't been able to convince serious mainstream school reformers to reread it. His call for standards has, instead, been turned into a call for narrow standardization, and his focus on learning to "use one's mind well" has become a call for the late 20th century cannons that are periodically recalled with nostalgia, alongside a new call for vocationalism! Sizer's call for greater depth that bridges the academic/vocational divide, has been refashioned into a call for "rigor"—with its roots in inflexibility and harshness.

Similarly, Mayor Bloomberg comes to New York City, and appoints a new czar of education, Joel Klein. One hoped that as a man with no background in the field, he would be open to learning something about what went on before he came on the scene. But instead he "discovered" small schools nearly two decades after they had first been launched in NYC, and he promoted the various "alternative" works that NYC has always been famous for, e.g., City as a School, that—like Antioch—pioneered school-to-work education. Like too many even good politicians, for Joel Klein, life is divided into Before Me and After Me.

Antioch's story is similar, but also unique. Since we will be seeing new Antiochs pop up in the decades ahead as we try to bring together what are too often seen as conflicting trends, it is a good time to take stock of what Antioch did accomplish. It maintained a strong liberal arts program, and yet honored the career and vocational interests and passions of its students. Through its unusual structure it undertook to initiate the young into issues of governance and civic engagement first-hand. Turning these three absurdly warring strands into a coherent experience for young people was only insufficiently re-examined from time to time. The respect that lay behind its treatment of its women students carried over into a respectful climate that took conflicting ideas seriously, and to a form of self-governance that in turn struggled with contradictions.

Secondly, Antioch was tackling a new national obsession. At a time of powerful anxiety about the future, and concomitant competitive pressures to get into "the best" (i.e., the hardest to get into) schools with the highest SAT scores, parents, high school advisors and students were hard pressed to be explorative for fear of falling off their precarious rung on the ladder to success. Was Antioch's primary failing its inability to remain "attractive" to the top competition, to otherwise would be, could be, Harvard students? Was this, in part, a "marketing" problem?

I went to Antioch for another old-fashioned reason: because my mother, a Missourian, had a prejudice against the Ivy League and forbade us to apply for a northeastern school. Today, that mindset may be harder to find. "Seeing America's heartland" was part of her rhetorical language. Once the proud center of our power and world prestige, it is now a sad victim of globalization and bad domestic policy. Maybe Antioch was also a victim of some of that bad PR. That it attracted farm girls from small western Pennsylvania towns (my first roommate) and exciting would-be world changers, artists, and budding scientists was, perhaps, misunderstood.

None of these factors helped it withstand ordinary mistakes. Perhaps central to this was the rapid expansion of Antioch College into a University, at one point comprising 32 separate units, of which Yellow Springs became only one, and perhaps the most expensive. While a few of its student and faculty excesses may have been hurtful to the school, the addition of five chancellors and seven presidents over the last 14 years, plus the growing tension between faculty and alumni at Yellow Springs and the Board of Trustees in the face of such expansion, were reason enough for its demise.

Even in the midst of these problems, Antioch's academic record has been amazing. For those of us who went there, it changed our lives for the better—according to study after study. Its alumni include more MacArthur geniuses (seven) per student body than any school in America—by far. It produced Nobel winners and Fulbright scholars. It ranked among the top 5% in terms of post-graduate studies—startling given its nonacademic reputation. Until the end it attracted people who went on to make serious contributions to society—academic, literary, and scientific. Antioch did not find its Ted Sizer, to create a profound experience that transcends class, race, gender and prior academic success. It sounds trite and utopian when I put it into words. I stop and think, "who's kidding." But I believe schools can continue to achieve this form of academic experience for their students. We need more places like Antioch once was to show us how it might be done—and more Antiochians to put their mind to the task in this effort.

How to avoid sharp "either/ors" and yet not be afraid to take risks, how to honor old traditions while forging new ones, how to engage in tough disagreements but find ways to resolve them with the good of the whole in mind? This is what Horace Mann

and Arthur Morgan had in mind, in their own time and place, and it is what we need now in our particular time and place.