

It Occurs To Me that I Myself Am the Land Grant

Here find three braided claims built upon the *topos* of the Land Grant:

One is that at least two Penn State presidents renounced the Land Grant covenant, subordinating the university's public purpose to private gain.

Another, inspired by a phrase early in John Steinbeck's *Travels with Charley: In Search of America*, is that the Land Grant is a dream farm.

And the third, riffing on Allen Ginsberg's poem "America," is this:
It occurs to me that I, born 100 years after Lincoln signed the Morrill Act,
It occurs to me that I myself am the Land Grant.

I was able to go to college because my father was able to attend, thanks to the GI Bill, one year at Eckels School of Embalming in Philadelphia after returning from World War II. Austin H. Eberly is the Marine on the front right side of this float. He was a butcher, a Marine, and a funeral director.

That's my mom, Hope, and my three older siblings, Sarah Jane, Austin, and Martha, in front of the Austin H. Eberly Home for Funerals on Main Street in Dallastown. The photo, like so much else in my family's history, was taken BMT: Before My Time.

I am a first-generation college graduate, and when I was doing my master's at the University of Chicago, my mother called me one day and wondered out loud, "Why don't you come home and be a waitress like that nice girl you graduated from high school with?"

It's not that my family didn't value education. In fact, I attended a GREAT school district ~ my uncle was curriculum coordinator, and my grandfather, whom I never knew, was president of the school board. But boys were the valued ones.

When mom's family had a chicken, mom and aunt Jane got the wings; grandpa and mom's three brothers got the rest, except for grandma, who got the botzel, what Pennsylvania German immigrants - or Pennsylvania "Dutch" ~ called the half dollar-sized fleshy tail.

There was just nothing in their lives to enable them to understand higher education for women. My mother, born in 1920 ~ the year "the women" got "the vote" ~ never had a driver's license. That's not a criticism ~ it's just a measure, a ratio ~ between our generations.

I didn't just respect my school. I loved it. It and church were ~ well ~ livelier than home. My elementary school teachers taught me that I was worth attention, and, in middle school, my teachers literally saved my life.

But I couldn't wait to leave home. My father said I could apply to one college and, since my sister Sarah Jane had gone to Penn State, that one college was Penn State. Nonetheless, for me, Penn State and its

Land Grant covenant were indeed a dream farm. Compared to my small town, Penn State was a hub of diversity.

Penn State professors and fellow students taught, challenged, and inspired me. Penn State gave me career options and a sense that I might have a reason for being. Because of my work on *The Daily Collegian*, I learned to view Penn State from a critical distance. Critical loyalty eclipsed any other kind of so-called “undergraduate experience” during my four undergraduate years. And I learned to love to learn.

But I did not become a serious student until I had a class with Mrs. Ebbitt. Wilma R. Ebbitt was a teacher-scholar who wrote her dissertation on Margaret Fuller’s journalism and who, during her time on the faculty of the University of Chicago, trained graduate students and faculty, including Wayne Booth and Philip Roth, to teach written composition to undergraduates.

Though again blessed by one wonderful teacher, at The University of Chicago I found myself dizzy from being surrounded by such privilege, and that enclave of privilege being surrounded by such poverty. I was fascinated by the city but disappointed by the university. I never had to work less in my life.

Mr. Booth wrote in his autobiography that his one true church was The University of Chicago. For me, my one true church was *school writ large* ~ and particularly public education. After getting my master's I returned to Penn State ~ to the Land Grant, to the Dream Farm ~ where I learned about rhetoric by teaching writing to first-year students.

Andre Powell, a Penn State football player from York PA, six miles and a world away from my hometown, was a student in my first ever section of first-year rhetoric and composition. In a quarter century of living in and around Central Pennsylvania, I had never met an African American person from York before Andre walked into my class.

At The University of Texas, my crash course in race and higher education continued: I saw students from all corners of the immense state communicate across differences in the courses offered by the new Division of Rhetoric and Composition, which then had no major but taught every student at UT.

Hopwood v Texas expanded my skill set to activism, and seeing on CNN Penn State's inept response in 2001 to death threats against black student leaders reminded me of Penn State's own history of racial discrimination.

So in 2002 I returned to Penn State once more, encouraged by my successes at Texas and thinking that I could help re-invent the Land Grant for the 21st century ~ and this time do it right in terms of race and class. That was year I learned that, even at school, people will lie to you. How privileged I was ~ and am.

In a democracy, I was reminded via Fred Antczak's book *Thought and Character: The Rhetoric of Democratic Education*, it is the people who rule. Thus, nowhere more than in a democracy is equal access to quality education so intimately related to the quality of our shared lives.

As Antczak writes in *Thought and Character*, "In an explicit egalitarian spirit, the Morrill Act of 1862 created land-grant colleges to instruct farmers' children in both modern agricultural techniques and the enduring subjects of a liberal education. State-funded universities were founded to make higher education more possible for the common citizen."

In the years since Fred sent me his book, it has become clearer not only that an uneducated populace is less likely to resist plutocracy but that those in power will go to great lengths to dismantle public education in order to retain whatever power they have bought or stolen.

Just as I was leaving Texas, the whole country seemed to be turning into Texas. And Penn State had become Paterno State, sporting the highest tuition of any public university in the nation. It hadn't happened overnight.

In 1983 newly appointed Penn State President Bryce Jordan left Texas for Pennsylvania, declaring Penn State a "budget ivy" and beginning the university's first private fundraising campaign. The next year tuition revenues outpaced state funding for the first time in Penn State's history.

In 1988 vice-president George H. W. Bush, after having his nomination seconded from the convention floor by Joe Paterno, gave a speech extolling "a thousand points of light" ~ arguing that charitable giving and volunteer service could and should replace publicly funded social services. In the same speech we were told to *read his lips; no new taxes*.

In 1990 President Bush praised Jerry Sandusky's charity, The Second Mile, and named it the two hundred and ninety-third point of light. Two years later Penn State signed a \$14 million, 10-year contract with Pepsi, a then-"unusual" agreement giving the corporation the sole right to sell soft drinks on campus.

Penn State's deep ambi-valence about its state-related status, along with the preference at Penn State and elsewhere in higher education for private resources that do not require public scrutiny, are significant structural impediments to re-inventing higher education with the goal of building democratic capacity and serving the public good. But that's what President Abraham Lincoln intended when he signed the Morrill Act, with all its flaws, in 1862.

When Pennsylvania Governor and former state Attorney General Tom Corbett proposed historic cuts to Penn State's budget in early 2011, then Penn State President Graham Spanier declared that "Lincoln is weeping" ~ this despite a Faculty Senate speech seven years earlier which articulated the contours of Penn State's privatization.

When it comes to state universities and the failed liberatory potential of the Land Grant, Abraham Lincoln has likely been weeping for at least half a century.