

A Vision of Education in the Bluegrass State

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I live in Western Pennsylvania, not that far from Kentucky, but I have to admit that Kentucky is not a state I think much about. Asked what I know about the place, I would probably say what most Americans would say.

I would start with Kentucky's nickname "The Bluegrass State." Americans know the nickname partly, even largely, because America is a country of lawns, and America's prize lawn of flawless green grass is sown with Kentucky bluegrass. The American Lawn Care Industry (that's what it calls itself) helps homeowners spend a billion dollars a year on grass, much of it a variety called "Kentucky Bluegrass."

It goes without saying that the blue of bluegrass is partly in the eye of the beholder. My American husband tells me to think of it as the blue haze of lush green growth worth every penny of the fortune it takes to grow and mow a green grass lawn in a country as hot as America.

My husband can afford to make jokes about lawn care because we live in a high-rise condominium building, safe from lawn care worries and woes. All we do is pay our tiny part of however many thousands of dollars a year it costs to have a tiny bit of lawn around the bottom of the high rise we live in.

But let us return to Kentucky as it is known to every American. Every American, from the oldest and tallest to the

youngest and smallest, knows the name of Kentucky's most famous man: Daniel Boone. Boone was a complex figure, a shrewd pioneer and early example of that quint-essential American invention: the advertising executive. He promoted himself and settlement in the wilderness that became, in time, the state of Kentucky. His name and fame are commemorated in the Daniel Boone National Forest. It covers 672,000 acres in Eastern Kentucky. Wilderness adventurers have delighted in its 500 miles of hiking trails for many years. More recently, clever entrepreneurs have found a way to share the wilderness with a much larger audience: fans of two and four-wheel racing at the Daniel Boone Motorcross Park just off the Daniel Boone Parkway.

But, of course, pride of place belongs to a far older form of racing: the world-famous Kentucky Derby. The Derby celebrated its 126th anniversary on May 6th, 2000. This year's crowd of 153,205 spectators was the second largest on record. Untold numbers of Japanese joined the world-wide audience the race attracts in all the media, because a three-year-old colt stole the show. Fusaichi Pegasus lived up to his reputation as one of the finest thoroughbred sprinters racing today. Named for the flying horse of Greek mythology, he looked the part in the winning stretch. No wonder owner Fusao Sekiguchi could be seen on TV round the world, speechless

with excitement alongside a media celebrity.

I happen to be a runner, so I was outdoors running a longer stretch, not indoors watching the Derby. If I had been thinking of Kentucky-like things, I might have taken note of the Stephen Foster Memorial I pass, running between home and my office at the university where I teach.

For some odd reason, every Japanese Tom, Dick and Harry knows the Stephen Foster classic "My Old Kentucky Home." They probably assume that Stephen Foster was writing about his home state. Most Americans make the same assumption. In point of fact, Stephen Foster was born and lived most of his life right here in Pittsburgh. In fact, Foster visited the South just once in his life! Still, the songs that have made him a household world around the world are songs of yearning for the Old South of mid-19th century America.

No wonder the state of Kentucky has kidnapped the Stephen Foster of legend. Thousands of summer visitors to My Old Kentucky Home State Park applaud a musical featuring fifty Foster songs.

Not much is said about another Foster-Kentucky association. The composer died young, homeless and destitute, a victim of Kentucky's other famous product: whiskey. I never touch the stuff myself, but no lover of bourbon whiskey would think of visiting the state without a tour of its famous Austin Nichols Distillery located in the scenic Kentucky River Gorge. Just recently, everyone in town was treated to a free taste of 114-proof bourbon as charred oak barrels of aging whiskey exploded in a spectacular warehouse fire. The air of the town was richly bourbon-flavored for several days afterwards. Thousands of gallons of the famous Wild Turkey brand

bourbon poured from the exploded barrels into the Kentucky River. At first the news reported no harm done to fish or the environment. Then, as the days wore on, reports came in of a "plume" of bourbon seven miles long making its way downriver, causing great distress to fish of every kind.

I suppose a newspaper headline reading "**Fish Drunk on Wild Turkey**" would amuse some people, but not a dedicated angler like me. Now that I think of it, the idea of fishing in scenic Kentucky should have taken me to the state before Japanese cinema did.

Here's how it happened. My long-delayed rendezvous with The Bluegrass State began with the routine chore that is part of the price one pays for the convenience of e-mail. I was discarding e-mail junk messages left and right when the name Martin Holman caught my eye. Now here was an e-mail worth opening. Martin Holman was a friend and colleague last heard from in Ontario, Canada, where he was teaching. This e-mail was from Berea College in Kentucky where he now served as Director of International Studies.

Martin was organizing a Japanese film festival on campus in March and wanted to know if I could serve as a speaker. I checked my calendar, saw that I could fit it in, and e-mailed acceptance without hesitation. No need to think it over. I am always anxious to promote Japanese cinema. I wanted to catch up with recent developments in Martin's career. And, yes, I admit it: I wanted to fish whatever fish could be fished in Kentucky.

On March 3, I flew from Pittsburgh to Lexington, Kentucky's second largest city. Founded in 1775, Lexington has always been horse country. Nowadays it commands a multi-billion-dollar horse industry. Japanese

industry is an important player, too. A huge Toyota plant turns out machines called "horseless carriages." Now, thanks to the Toyota connection, Lexingtonians have developed a taste for sushi—this in the state that lends its name to one of America's most famous fast-food chains: Kentucky Fried Chicken.

Lexington is a short hop from Pittsburgh by air, a little over an hour. The Lexington airport is tiny compared to Pittsburgh's, but I was struck by its tidy downhome feel. And there was Martin's smiling face. Last time I saw him was five years ago in Japan.

Berea College is a forty-five minute drive from Lexington on a busy interstate highway. Traffic was heavy, in odd contrast to mile after mile of peaceable green pasture grazed by privileged horses all the way along.

All I knew about Berea College was that it was founded in 1855 as the first interracial college in the South and now is considered one of the finest small liberal arts colleges in Kentucky. I had no idea that I was about to be introduced to a unique approach to American higher education.

The college takes its name from the small town of Berea, population 10,000. Martin checked me into the Daniel Boone Tavern Hotel, which dates back to around 1800. Part of its business comes from its proximity to the Daniel Boone Forest Trail.

I was struck by the youth of the front desk clerks. They were all college age kids. Martin explained that most of the hotel staff were students at Berea College. The Office of Admissions, in fact, lies just across the street from the hotel. Later in my visit, an admissions officer kindly explained the special working relationship

students have with their alma mater at Berea. This relationship is based on two premises: first, that high school students of proven academic achievement are entitled to a college education; secondly, that learning to do real work for a livelihood is one of the privileges of higher education.

This philosophy is rooted in the history of the college, which was founded to further the education of needy students from the Appalachian Mountains. Berea was a non-denominational Christian school from the beginning. Even more remarkable for its time, Berea paid homage to the American ideal of social equality by admitting blacks as well as whites, women as well as men. Its stated academic goal was to provide "an education for the head, the hands, and the heart."

Now, a century and a half later, that goal is unchanged. The school itself has expanded into a fully accredited four-year college. Its thirty-five majors and programs range through the traditional Liberal Arts and Sciences to Business Administration, Nursing, Agriculture and Natural Resources Management.

I was astonished to find out that Berea is one of a very few American colleges whose students are funded with full tuition scholarships. Each student receives a four-year education valued at something like \$60,000.

Since Berea's mission is to serve students most in need of help in getting to college, its scholarships are given to those families earning between \$12,000 and \$48,000 a year.

Applicants themselves must be students of proven capacity and dedication. One measure of high school achievement used is the Scholastic Aptitude Test, a standardized test used for college admissions in the USA. Berea accepts applications from

students with SAT scores of 930 to 1350 out of a possible 1600 points. The minimum high school grade average (GPA) considered is 3.0, an equivalent of the "B" grade

Even though students are admitted to Berea tuition-free, they are still responsible for room, board, books and living expenses. Most parents need help meeting those costs. Here too, the college is philosophically committed to dedicated self-help students work for a living/learning wage.

All students are required to work on campus for at least ten hours a week. Wages they earn go to defray the cost of room and board. This explains why the front desk clerks at Daniel Boone Tavern Hotel are so young. They are all Berea students, working for their alma mater—which happens to own the hotel. Student workers help run the library and school cafeteria. Student labor is an indispensable part of the college economy. The college sees this relationship as valuable in ways that go far beyond four years of formal education. The Berea work/study program is seen as preparing students for productive lives, no matter which career path they choose to follow. The college brochure puts it this way: "The work program teaches teamwork, time management, and work ethic."

Needless to say, some students need or want more money than they earn on campus. Some commute to the city of Richmond to work weekends at the usual range of college jobs. Some work as "wait persons," a term now used by Americans convinced that gender-specific terms like waiter and waitress are "politically incorrect."

All Berea students live on campus and take their meals in the school cafeteria.

The town itself appears to offer few alternatives. I found just two coffee shops and one Italian restaurant. The center of campus is more or less the center of town. I found myself walking half a mile to reach one of America's ubiquitous convenience stores. And I was looking for nothing more wickedly stimulating than bottled water! Another mile on down the road I found a fast-food place still serving breakfast. I really needed that, having risen too late to get breakfast at the Daniel Boone Tavern Hotel.

The Berea College campus itself is large and lovely as can be, with buildings scattered through a hundred and forty acres of classic Appalachian woodland. Its peaceful rural atmosphere offers a powerful contrast to my crowded urban university with all its distracting hubbub of choice and diversity. Some small part of me was shocked to find that students at Berea had no place to "hang out" and be rowdy, sloppy American youth. At the same time, some larger part of me—call it the middle-aged educator—was thrilled to the marrow by the spectacle of youth so willing to study and work in earnest.

In any case, it was easy to see why *U.S. News and World Report* has put Berea at the top of its list of the best regional liberal arts colleges in the South—a ranking Berea has earned not just once but six times so far

Fifteen hundred students attend Berea. Since the college was founded to serve the poor of Appalachia, most of its students come from that region. Some forty states are represented on campus, however. I spoke with several African American students from Los Angeles. They were majoring in business. I also had lunch with a sophomore from Colorado, a major in

International Studies and studying Japanese. Like all the students I met, he was strongly motivated. Anxious to improve his language competence, he was signed up for the year-in-Japan program in Kyushu.

One of the most delightful people I met was Maria, who served as the Foreign Students Admissions Officer. Like so many of the Berea faculty members I met, she was friendly and out-going. In her case, this was a tribute to her stamina, since she had just emerged from a three-day marathon first run-through of three thousand applications from abroad. Only forty can be accepted, so Maria had that hard work of final decision-making yet to do. Somehow forty acceptances out of 3,000 applicants strikes me as difficult on a scale of try-to-get-into-Tokyo-University.

Thanks to Berea's global outreach, its student body now includes students from sixty countries. The work study student who showed me around campus was from Russia. She had been at Berea three years, working at the campus International Education Center.

Many urban colleges in the United States, like many in Japan, have fallen on hard times financially, leading to a sorry business of mass-producing graduates taught by teachers faced with classes impossibly large. Berea does just the opposite, thanks to its astonishing student/faculty ratio of eleven to one. The resulting close interaction contributes to the student's academic and personal growth in ways scarcely imaginable in hectic "multiversities" like my own. Certainly students at Berea are in a position to benefit greatly from collaborative research with individual faculty members.

This highly personalized education is especially effective in the area served by my friend Martin in his capacity as Director

of International Studies. He is especially proud of the Study Abroad Program, which sends students to France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Japan, Thailand and many other countries. Many students take advantage of this opportunity—one their parents' generation would never have dreamed possible.

The Study Abroad Program is an example of the kind of extended educational experience formerly reserved for students from wealthy families. Berea's solid endowment makes it possible now. The college's directly personal approach and sense of mission has had the effect of building a steadily increasing support from alumnae.

In fact, the Berea College philosophy has attracted many other benefactors as well. Some have never visited the campus. Many such contributors to the endowment have been influenced by hearing of the Berea student philosophy of trying to "leave behind more than they take."

Among the practical workaday projects managed by the college is an important regional water system. The large reservoir I was anxious to fish turned out to be college property.

The city of Berea itself has been designated as "The Folk Arts and Crafts Capital of Kentucky." That distinction, too, is college-related, since the school's arts and crafts center has extended its expertise to the surrounding community. Locally produced work like intricate quilts and wooden turnings fetch good prices, sometimes quite high prices, so arts and crafts contribute significantly to the town's educational economy.

The film series I had been invited to participate in was a four-day affair. Each evening I spoke briefly by way of introducing a contemporary Japanese film. Fea-

tured works included Masayuki Suo's box-office smash hit, *Shall We Dance?* (1995), and Yoshimitsu Morita's *The Family Game* (1983), a satirical look at Japan's nose-to-the-grindstone educational system.

I spoke to a small, but enthusiastic audience of faculty, students and townspeople. All listened attentively to my lecture. No one left during the showing of the film and all appeared willing to participate in the discussion that followed. I am afraid my large, general-enrollment film classes at the university rarely show signs of being as receptive as this small group in the wilds of Kentucky. Only a very few in the audience had ever been to Japan, yet all seemed to share the same lively curiosity and eagerness to learn about a culture so different from their own.

And speaking of eagerness to encounter, I have to admit that the angler in me took up where the cross-cultural ambassador left off. I had just one day to fish before I left. And lucky me, one of my hosts, a professor of Chinese history, was a fanatic angler, too. He got his start in graduate school. Looking for a way to ease the pressure at Harvard, he thought he would try fishing—and was hooked for good.

We headed for a lake in the city of Richmond, a reservoir famous for warm water fish like bass. Too bad for us, the water was still too cold. The bass just plain refused to rise to our bait. We caught just two Kentucky bass, both pitifully small. That was pitiful as in pity me, too, since of course, I was hoping for a trophy bass, a fish big enough to write home about. By home I mean Japan, not Pittsburgh. I am lucky that way. Any big fish I catch can be news on the other

side of the world—to readers of a Japanese fishing magazine I write for.

Never mind. Friend Martin, saying goodbye, invited me back to fish in warmer weather. Besides, as the plane lifted up and away from Kentucky, this thought occurred to me: that the trophy I had to show for this trip was an idea—or say an ideal as large and beautiful and rare as the educational mission of Berea College.

I was especially moved by what I had read in the college bulletin. In it an African-American student from the Appalachian region spoke about wanting to be part of the Berea College mission to build a better world.

High above the ancient Appalachian Mountains rising and falling gently as far as the eye could see, I could hear her words coming back to me. Nothing I could say about the achievement of this remarkable little school could match her declaration of faith and hope in the future opened up by her education there. Here is what she said:

“[Before I attend graduate school], I want to return home to be a part of my community. I want to do something for the children who tell me (sic), ‘Nobody cares about us.’ They need a library and a playground. They feel disillusioned. It will make me feel so much better to know I’ve done something for the people who have stood behind me, who have supported me with their prayers and kind thoughts. I feel like I need to return the favor.”

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