

The Chronicle Review

Present at the Demise: Antioch College, 1852-2008

By RALPH KEYES

Nearly two decades ago, my wife and I fulfilled a fantasy by returning to the Ohio town where we went to college, met, and got married. In addition to our fondness for the town itself, Yellow Springs — we hoped to be of service to our alma mater, Antioch College. Muriel worked there in various capacities. Outside her office window she could see the Friends meetinghouse where we were married in 1965. I took part in programs for prospective students, spoke to classes, and helped organize events for alumni. Coming back to Antioch and Yellow Springs felt like a dream come true.

Antioch had changed dramatically. Its student body was now heavily pierced and tattooed. Antiochians seemed consumed with gender issues and boundary testing. In the student union I saw a flyer posted for a workshop on "fisting," the insertion of one's fist into a vagina or anus.

Soon after we arrived, Antioch's vaunted ask-before-touching sex policy was enacted. When *Saturday Night Live* did a hilarious sendup of this policy, few on campus laughed. Like many, I found my alma mater's approach to sexual activity somewhat absurd, but defended it nonetheless as a well-intentioned attempt to cope with the serious problem of sexual abuse.

If I'd dared to risk looking like a disgruntled alum, I might have paid more attention to things about Antioch that raised my eyebrows. By the early 1990s, its once-packed library was nearly deserted. The campus itself was beyond seedy. Some buildings were crumbling, others were vandalized, and many walls were spray-painted with edgy graffiti. Beer bottles and cigarette butts littered the grounds. Antioch's president at the time told me that nearly half of its students smoked cigarettes, twice the national rate. Stories of rampant substance abuse could be heard, if one chose to listen. But Antioch and its students have always lived dangerously, so I tried to be tolerant, to look away from things on campus that made me uneasy.

After we'd been in Yellow Springs for several years, my son David and I visited half a dozen colleges that interested him. While David attended classes, I visited libraries, assuming they could tell me something about an institution's intellectual atmosphere. Upon our return, I noted that Antioch's own library was literally collapsing, even as administrators' offices were being renovated. Bricks that had popped from its walls lay outside the library's entrance. Weeds grew through cracks in its front steps. Some sections of the ceiling inside were water-stained, and linoleum tiles were loose underfoot. The library's collection was sparse and dated, rich with pre-1970 books and serials, poor on materials thereafter. All of this had less to do with negligent

librarianship (library employees are among the hardest working and most conscientious at the college) than with the fact that its library was so low on Antioch's resource-allocation ladder.

Compared with students David and I had seen on our college tour, Antiochians now struck me as more bizarre than bohemian. Nor did their campus culture seem as understandable as the one I'd been part of from 1962 to 1967. I remembered Antioch as a lively, demanding institution, full of contentious students and professors. Many, including myself, were ardent left-wingers. Others stood elsewhere on the political spectrum. As we understood it, one's political convictions were beside Antioch's point. Its emphasis was on thinking for one's self and keeping an open mind. "Re-evaluate your basic assumptions in the light of new evidence" was a campus cliché. I felt constantly challenged to justify my points of view. But I didn't assume that reassessing those views would move me left. It might move me to the right, or toward the center, or nowhere at all.

The Antioch Muriel and I returned to did not emphasize that kind of open inquiry. The assumed endpoint was always to one's left. As a result, Antioch's emphasis had gone from searching for the truth to propagating the truth, from asking questions to teaching answers. One alum told me of asking a women's-studies professor at Antioch if she ever assigned Camille Paglia. The professor recoiled, saying "I wouldn't!" Why not? "Because she's the enemy."

In promotional pieces, Antioch billed itself as a "progressive" institution. Accepted applicants were invited to share notes on an online message board called "Radical Chat." Inevitably Antioch's appeal narrowed to an increasingly esoteric group of progressive-alternative students. When a longtime history professor reminded colleagues that Antioch was a college, not a "boot camp for the revolution," students began wearing *Boot Camp for the Revolution* T-shirts. Eventually this became a campus credo.

Antioch was now for those who "got it" — the faithful. It was not for nonbelievers, nor for those who questioned the way business was conducted there. Antioch gave an increasingly cool reception to anyone — townspeople, alumni, parents, even trustees — who wasn't considered *one of us*. When a townsman complained about Antioch's replacing a basement air-conditioning unit with a loud, outdoor one not far from his bedroom windows, a college administrator commented that "sometimes you can't push Big Brother." (I'm not sure this administrator realized the Orwellian allusion, which in some ways was worse than if he had.) The college finally resolved this matter by persuading a conservative judge to nullify Yellow Springs's noise ordinance.

Antioch's indifference to outside concerns could be seen in the commencement speakers invited by graduating seniors. Those speakers included the convicted police murderer Mumia Abu-Jamal (attracting hundreds of demonstrators, including current and former police officers, as well as widows of slain officers), the former Black Panther Bobby Seale, and — until the interim president intervened — the poseur-professor Ward Churchill. Antioch's commencement speaker this year was Cynthia McKinney, the former congresswoman best known for wondering aloud if members of the Bush administration had advance knowledge of 9/11 and for slugging a U.S. Capitol police officer.

One byproduct of Antioch's self-absorption was that it made little attempt to communicate with the world beyond its borders. A strategic plan composed in the mid-1990s did acknowledge a need for better communication but addressed that need primarily in terms of sharing information within the institution.

Friends of the college tried in vain to call Antioch's attention to its increasingly problematic reputation outside Yellow Springs. There, the most common perception of Antioch was as a place where you had to ask for permission before initiating sexual contact and where criminals were invited to address graduating seniors. Not that Antiochians cared. At the graduation ceremony where Mumia Abu-Jamal's remarks were played (via a prerecorded cassette), a student speaker said Antioch took pride in being a home for "freaks," and whoever didn't get that could "fuck off."

The atmosphere on campus grew wary, secretive, and suspicious. Antioch had come to resemble a cult more than a college. Faculty and staff members and students were warned not to discuss sensitive internal matters with outsiders. A highly critical accreditation report was put under lock and key with only a scrubbed précis being circulated on campus. This was stamped INTERNAL DOCUMENT — NOT FOR DISTRIBUTION. Journalists could visit Antioch only when accompanied by a minder, as if this were Moscow University circa 1949. Even as private industry had begun to accept the need for greater transparency, Antioch College grew increasingly opaque.

Antioch's administrative approach could best be termed "management by wishful thinking." Budgets too often were based on anticipated donations that didn't always materialize, and on projected rather than actual enrollment. That approach created internal pressure to manipulate data to conform with desired outcomes. During several years as a financial-aid counselor, Muriel watched fanciful enrollment figures being tossed about. Young Antioch graduates and dropouts who staffed the admissions office worked short days and didn't always return phone calls. Financial-aid awards were often mailed well beyond the promised date, long after competitive colleges had mailed theirs. Muriel found it a constant struggle to keep her office from becoming too friendly with loan-making banks, a struggle she lost after her position was eliminated. Within months bankers' logos began to appear on Antioch's financial-aid forms.

Even as entities such as IBM and General Electric were recognizing the need to change their organizational culture in response to painful assessments, Antioch did not. A group of alumni I organized, some of whom were ex-employees, met with one of Antioch's recent presidents to express concerns about the college's management. We were treated like interlopers. During the discussion, this president said that one of the main jobs of Antioch's chief executive was to meet with alumni around the country and "counter" their criticisms of the college. In the midst of an earlier gathering convened to consider how to choose a new president, I suggested that Antioch search outside academy walls — in government, say, NGO's, or even corporations — for an enlightened, capable executive. This was quickly dubbed "the pinstripe option" and referred to that way throughout the discussion.

Turnover was constant at all levels of Antioch's administration. "Acting" and "Interim" became virtual job titles. In 2006, as Warren Wilson College inaugurated its sixth president in a century,

Antioch installed its sixth in just over a decade (including an interim). A trustee told me of observing over 12 years' time how little emphasis the college put on job performance, how much on fitting in. After a year of employment, a dean of students returned to the University of Kentucky, having been unable to implement minimal standards of deportment on campus. Students felt this dean did not "understand" Antioch's ways.

At a meeting on campus, I got a taste of those ways. Even in the midst of routine discussion, students interrupted each other with angry outbursts. Presumably this was part of "calling each other out," a popular campus pastime ("I'm calling you out as a product of privilege," "I'm calling you out for wearing Nikes," etc.).

After getting called out for calling Inuits "Eskimos," an exchange student from Poland conducted a survey of language taboos among Antiochians. He and a colleague found that anyone thought to have used inappropriate words was liable to be ostracized. One student described being verbally assaulted after she innocently addressed a gay student as a "guy." Many told the surveyors how fearful they were of saying the wrong thing. "If you say something wrong," explained one Antiochian, "other people will have no mercy."

Students were not the only ones being called out. Soon after he arrived on the campus, in early 2006, President Steven W. Lawry was the target an e-mail message from an Antiochian that said, "Fuck you, asshole." This was not untypical of campus discourse. When the student newspaper asked readers what they would say to a "narc," answers included "Stop snitchin' snitches get stitches," and "Die motherfucker Die."

Granted, that type of gangsta posturing was simply a variation on, "Mommy, I said 'doody!'" Still, it made for a hostile, intimidating campus atmosphere. A student's relatives who visited the campus expecting to find an open and tolerant setting found just the opposite. They later wrote a letter to Antioch's student newspaper lamenting the suspicion and mistrust they'd witnessed, in the form of insults, name-calling, and profanity. As if to illustrate their point, the same issue of the student paper in which the couple's letter appeared included this piece of neo-haiku among its "De-Classified Ads": "Arrogant Schmuck please/Leave if you want to maintain/Your balls. Chop chop chop."

One summer I showed a friend from Colorado around my alma mater. When we got to the second floor of Antioch's student union, with its crack-house décor, my friend — a liberal-minded psychologist — blanched. What was he thinking, I asked? "That I want to jump on a plane and go home to protect my daughter," he replied.

High-school seniors determined to be Antiochians applied to the college despite its uneven academic program, trashed dorm rooms, graffitied walls, crumbling library, and student union that looked as if it had been decorated by John Belushi. Antioch's appearance may have said *Beware* to parents, but to a certain type of prospective student it said *Awesome. Anything goes!* Those whom Antioch attracted reinforced and amplified its nihilistic culture, shrinking even further its institutional reach.

I came to see my alma mater as akin to an overspecialized organism that can survive only in a narrow, protected ecological niche. Antioch College had become the snail darter of higher education. In its not-too-distant past, Antioch's strong academic program, well-administered campus, and unique work-study plan appealed to applicants with a wide range of outlooks and lifestyles. In its late-60s-early-70s heyday, the college's enrollment rose to nearly 2,500. By 2007, even as enrollment soared at comparable liberal-arts colleges, Antioch's had fallen to about 300 students.

Fitful attempts by myself and others to call attention to problems we considered potentially fatal routinely came up against an attitude familiar to anyone who's raised a teenager: "If you want to help, just send money and butt out." Eventually I came to feel that donating to my alma mater was a form of enabling, like giving spare change to a stumble-down drunk, hoping he'll spend it on a bus ride to AA. (For a long time, we designated our donations for the library, until discovering that even funds so earmarked sometimes got used for general operating expenses.)

I began to have less and less contact with Antioch. Going there was just too demoralizing. On rare visits, I was struck by the sparsity of human bodies. Occasionally a student would amble from one building to another, or a small clump could be spotted outside a doorway surrounded by clouds of smoke. Other than that: nothing. Stillness. Antioch had become a ghost campus.

That was what greeted the current president, Steven Lawry, when he came to Antioch from the Ford Foundation last year. Lawry made a concerted effort to right Antioch's ship, to restore some civility to its discourse and coherence to its management. But by then it was too late: The college was already in its death throes.

For us, what began as a dream ended as a nightmare. Rather than being able to help our alma mater grow and flourish, Muriel and I witnessed its collapse. This was excruciating, like watching a beloved relative decline, lose memory, and ultimately go mad. Most dismaying was how few of those involved were willing to acknowledge Antioch's dysfunctional condition: not the administrators, the faculty members, the trustees, nor local journalists, who swallowed whole Antioch's repeated assurances that things were in hand and on the uptick. As recently as September 2005, Antioch's interim president told a reporter that the college was "on a straight road toward fiscal vitality." That's why so many were so shocked when its Board of Trustees announced in June that Antioch College would suspend operations in a year's time.

I've been asked often whether the demise of my alma mater surprised me. It did not. I was startled and alarmed years ago, when it became apparent that Antioch was driving off a cliff. I braced myself for its impending disintegration. But Antioch's slow-motion decline felt worse than its sudden collapse. When loved ones age and fail over an extended period, their departure can come as a relief. After years of sadly watching my alma mater self-destruct, that's how its actual demise felt: less a shock, more a relief.

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