

MELODY MUST PREDOMINATE

What is the tune that holds all our work together?

By Lee Burdette Williams

I PLAY IN a bell choir. You might have seen one of these at a church or elsewhere: a group of people dressed like a mime troupe, waving pretty gold bells with a fly-swatting motion. We were rehearsing one recent day, and as always my mind began to wander. This is a constant danger when you're part of a musical ensemble. You might find yourself with several measures of rests when those around you are busy ringing, and you are just standing there, ostensibly following the music and awaiting your cue.

I found myself looking at the music and noting the phrase, "Melody must predominate," written in just below the treble clef. This was at a point in the music when a lot is going on, a lot of bells are ringing a lot of different notes, but those who are ringing the melody are expected to be heard most clearly. I find this a particularly important characteristic for a church audience. Those in the pews must be able to hear those familiar notes of "Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise" or they will quickly lose interest. From there it's a short step to apathy, to limited tithing, and ultimately, to the end of the church as we know it. So as one of those ringers responsible for the melody at that particular time, I feel a lot of pressure, and ring my F, F sharp, and G with gusto.

But at rehearsal on this particular night I found myself thinking about that phrase: "Melody must predominate." I realized that it was, in its own way, a profound

thought. "That is so true," I said to myself, at which point I lost count of the measure, missed my cue, and rang in heartily at the wrong time—and unfortunately with the wrong bell.

It is true, and it is hard. In our work as student affairs professionals it is easy to lose track of the melody of our work with all the clamor, cacophony, and false

notes ringing around us. I've come to believe that pursuit of this melody is therefore a task that needs to be at the center of our daily efforts.

What exactly that melody is might be the subject of a variety of interpretations if one were to ask around at a gathering of student affairs professionals. Some might refer to our official point of view and say, "The academic mission of the institution is preeminent." It would be hard to

argue with such certainty. But I will.

I think that the notion of an "academic mission" is quite purposefully value-neutral. It refers to the overall education of a student—primarily the academic learning that takes place—but it says little about the purpose of that learning. I recently read a fascinating book, *A Civil Action*, by Jonathan Harr. This lengthy work follows the efforts of a lawyer representing a group of families

Lee Burdette Williams is senior research associate and leadership education coordinator in the Center for Student Involvement and Leadership at Appalachian State University.

.....

IN OUR WORK AS STUDENT AFFAIRS
PROFESSIONALS IT IS EASY TO LOSE
TRACK OF THE MELODY OF OUR
WORK WITH ALL THE CLAMOR,
CACOPHONY, AND FALSE NOTES
RINGING AROUND US.

.....

from Woburn, Massachusetts, who sued two international companies, Beatrice and W. R. Grace, for their role in the contamination of these families' water supply. Each family had lost a child to leukemia, a disease that appeared in Woburn with frightening frequency.

Arguing on behalf of these two huge corporations were some of the best legal minds. Most were Harvard-educated lawyers working for prestigious firms; others were equally well-educated in-house counsel. Their apparent mission was to obfuscate the facts so thoroughly that a jury could not find these corporations guilty of this reprehensible act.

Beatrice was indeed exonerated by the jury, and W. R. Grace ended up paying a settlement that barely showed on their financial radar. This happened despite a compelling case based in part on thorough environmental investigations that indicated that both companies' Woburn subsidiaries had dumped toxic chemicals into the ground near the supplying wells.

I found myself wondering about these lawyers. Obviously they possessed brilliant minds and a wealth of experience. But did any of them stop to wonder about the rightness of what they were doing? Was it fair that these corporations' irresponsibility led to the chronic physical distress of numerous individuals, perhaps even the death of a group of children? And in utterly confusing a jury to such an extent, was their behavior much better than that of the companies they represented?

This led me to wonder about other, equally intelligent people engaged in abhorrent behavior in fields other than law—physicians, ministers, college presidents, stockbrokers, directors of other huge corporations. No profession is without its unethical members, but for a few professions the stakes are so high that they affect the lives and livelihoods of many other people.

A former student suggested recently that his alma mater offer a course called "The Evils of Corporate America." Maybe the title is a little extreme, but on the whole it's not a bad idea. I'd like to think that a student who has taken such a class would have the same reaction to corporate depravity and greed that a well-

educated English major would have to Danielle Steele's prose: alarm, incredulity, and an unwillingness to participate further. In a recent report from the Kellogg Commission, *Returning to Our Roots: The Student Experience*, the authors write, "The biggest educational challenge we face revolves around developing character, conscience, citizenship, tolerance, and civility, and individual and social responsibility in our students. We dare

not ignore this obligation in a society that sometimes gives the impression that virtues such as these are discretionary. These should be part of the standard equipment of graduates, not options" (pp. 12–13). It is not enough that we send our students out into the world well equipped to perform complicated tasks. It is far more important that we send them out well equipped to make judgments that show concern for others' well-being, for the environment, for the long-term financial health of their constituents, for truth and acceptance of responsibility. To put it too

simply, we need to care less that our students can add and subtract than that they can add to people's lives compassion and decency, and subtract from those lives poverty, injustice, and despair.

This is the one task that faculty and student affairs professionals should unequivocally perform together—ringing different bells, perhaps, but ultimately supporting the same melody. There is too much at stake to let our minds wander and miss our cue—our opportunity to come in, fortissimo, with a message of accountability, compassion, and civility.



IT IS FAR MORE IMPORTANT THAT
WE SEND STUDENTS OUT WELL
EQUIPPED TO MAKE JUDGMENTS
THAT SHOW CONCERN FOR
OTHERS' WELL-BEING, FOR THE
ENVIRONMENT, FOR THE LONG-
TERM FINANCIAL HEALTH OF THEIR
CONSTITUENTS, FOR TRUTH AND
ACCEPTANCE OF RESPONSIBILITY.

NOTES

Harr, J. *A Civil Action*. New York: Random House, 1995.

Kellogg Commission. *Returning to Our Roots: The Student Experience*. Washington, D.C.: National Association of State Universities and Land Grant Colleges, 1997.