

A Contextualised Epiphany

by [Larry McCloskey](#) (February 2024)



The University of Lost Causes, Cara Lipsett, 2023

James Joyce's *Dubliners* is famous for its fleeting revelation. The epiphany in "The Dead" –set on January 6th feast of the Epiphany–is particularly poignant. This last *Dubliners* story stands out from the rest. At almost 16,000 words it is too long as a short story and too short as a novella. But it is brilliant for its use of language and is the culmination of Joyce's literary intent.

Much of *Dubliners* is a distillation of boring, sterile, suffocating Irish Catholic life in the early 20th century. In short, much of Joyce's short stories are a depiction of Dubliners' lives wherein nothing happens. In one story, pub life is so unchanging and inconsequential that the release of a cork is the only event occasioning reaction, and serves as the story's epiphany.

"The Dead" examines the minutiae that punctuates, orders and provides context to our lives, even if at the expense of living. Gabriel and his wife Gretta attend a dinner party with relatives and friends. Most of the story layers details about the guests, the house, the rituals of dinner, with Gabriel's speech noting the need to move forward with living, and advising against pre-occupation with the dead. It is the progressive way.

Due to heavy snow the evening of the dinner party, Gabriel and Gretta decide to stay overnight at a nearby hotel. Though there are no surprises left in their marriage, Gabriel has amorous stirrings towards his wife of many years. He feels some comfort in the control and predictability of his wife even if at the expense of revelation.

Towards the end of "The Dead," Gabriel notices his wife crying and sympathetically asks her for the cause. She responds that the song in the background reminded her of a boy she knew years before meeting Gabriel.

"Someone you were in love with?" He asked ironically.

Gretta responds that he is dead, died when he was only seventeen.

Gabriel asks, "And what did he die of so young? Consumption, was it?"

"I think he died for me," she answered.

Gabriel is immediately transformed, filled with terror and jealousy for the boy of seventeen who died for wife Gretta. "He had never felt like that himself towards any woman but he knew that such a feeling must be love."

Greater than the revelation of his wife's inner life is Gabriel's knowledge that he has lived a sterile, meaningless life. With recrimination, he painfully becomes aware of the epiphany moment. "Better pass boldly into that other world, in the full glory of some passion, than fade and wither dimly with age."

Otherwise put, and of particular relevance to the modern world, better to live an authentic life and to suffer condemnation of the mob, than to capitulate, and live a fraudulent existence.

"The Dead" is memorable for its depiction of the misunderstanding that often exists between intimates for whom knowing and being known is falsely assumed. I've always been fascinated by the mysterious, astonishingly taken for granted miracle of consciousness. We alone among species have awareness of our existence, can soar between time and place with a consciousness that can neither be accounted for by evolution nor located in our brain. And yet the miracle is limited, since we are substantially locked out of the consciousness of others.

Our thoughts and desires can be communicated—with potential for much lost in translation—but accessing each other's inner workings cannot. Even more challenging, research shows the number of close friends the average person has is between one and four. Think about that—the reality of life among eight billion is that we can achieve limited insight into a very limited number of people even if social media fraudulently says otherwise. Despite identity political reductionism of the present cultural wars, understanding our own consciousness and possibly a few others is where real identity exploration logically leads. It is a question of what it means to be human, followed by a determination to go beyond the depth of skin.

So why do progressives miss searching for the depths of transcendent identity for the frivolity of immutable identity parts? Even though identity politics concerns itself with exteriors, its fervent adherents are magically able to plumb the depths of individual consciousness and identify transgressions that are to be exposed and punished. I don't know how I got here, I didn't create myself, I didn't chose the life given and cannot take credit or blame for my various inherited identity parts. I've never regarded my individual parts makeup as defining me, as being special, for that would be hubris and not humanity. To give undue emphasis to immutable externals is to stop seeing people, to stop believing human essence exceeds the sum of our identity parts. And that I will not do.

Which is why the meaning of the Harvard Hamas-Israeli debacle and President Gay's subsequent resignation is revelation worthy of a James Joyce novel (*Universitylysses* working title?). Shocking as the October 7th Hamas attack was, the response from western ivory tower gatekeepers will be remembered as *the* defining moment. Harvard President Gay, University of Pennsylvania President Liz Magill, and MIT President Sally Kronbluth, were asked a seemingly innocuous

question on December 5th before a U.S. House of Representatives committee in response to protests and displays of antisemitism on their respective campuses. The university trifecta could not—or as appears likely, agreed that they would not—answer in the affirmation to Republican Elise Stefanick’s question: would calling for the genocide of Jews violate your code of conduct regarding bullying and harassment? The obvious question afforded a no-brainer obvious answer, and yet, their nuanced non-response blew up the room.

A five year old could have answered with conviction that one kid pushing another kid in the playground is wrong. She wouldn’t likely have thought, paused, and recanted, “Upon reflection and in consideration of the Harvard lecture I just attended, which emphasized the need to address historical grievance for oppressed peoples, one cannot assume that the indiscriminate application of a harassment policy can be applied in equal measure to all groups without inflicting further damage upon intersectionally disadvantaged groups...” Minus the insightful Harvard lecture, our fearsome five year old would more likely have opted for the dictates of Occam’s Razor; that is, the simplest choice is usually correct, all things being equal (which in university parlance, can never happen, for that would be to forego the need for correction and blame). Thankfully, the non-Harvard world is not oppressed by the need to weigh all possible things whether real or imagined, only to arrive at a left, and increasingly far left narrative, it was always going to choose.

The question is why? Why would this presidential trio present such obvious obfuscation and bias? What forces within the universities can possibly account for the triple presidential unified and dysfunctional front that was immediately recognized as failure to treat at-risk students equally, in the faux-spirit of equity? Universities have talked and theorized themselves into a pernicious corner of contradiction and deceit.

Reason for their deceptive answer is deceptively simple, as follows: until the December 5th hearings, they could do and say whatever they want with impunity. Gay's glib emblematic non-answered use of the word 'context' in response to Stefanick's question communicated a clear, *you (Joe public) can't possibly understand*. Its dismissive intent is epiphany precisely because Joe public can understand and may finally be unwilling to extend impunity.

Still, a further why is required. It too is simple, though if explained in universityspeak one would convulse with the contrived complexity of it all. In the safest, most affluent time in history, and with universities bleeding money, a constant disruptive narrative is needed. Universities used to have a tradition of opposing the ruling orthodoxy, and largely leaned left in ideological league with Marxist ideals for addressing economic and class inequality. But with the rise of a robust middle class (thanks to capitalism), the class narrative needed a relevance boost. And in the western world with civil rights fundamentally in place, and sexual orientation tolerance high, achieving relevance needed to be really out there to convince the world of the imperative for their seemingly subversive role.

Problem is, elites' instinct for subversive leadership has failed them. Rather than go against the flow, take it to the man, protest the tyranny of the heartless elites, it has become clear that university leaders are the flow, the man, the heartless elite—even if the purveyors of the world's worst ideas never bear the consequences of their own heartlessness.

People generally want to be fair, to look out for those with less opportunity—but that human tendency for good has been perverted into shaming the public for failing to follow unworkable utopian dictates and achieve an unattainable equality of outcome. Aspirational expectations untethered to work and merit—which differentiates the west from the rest in

terms of civilizational success—is the end of America's bedrock status as the land of opportunity. It is anarchy.

With the Marxist class struggle consigned to the back burner, what better way to divide the world than to create a binary world between oppressors and the oppressed anchored in the concept of systemic oppression—conveniently beyond an individual's ability to address—with a litany of anti this and phobic that to underscore societal impotence and university self-importance. It is a clever plan, if only life were that simple and binary.

The question remains, will the public continue to lower its head in unquestioning shame? Will we tolerate universities straying from their mission to objectively teach, allow for neurodiversity and critical thinking, now that they have been exposed? Will elites continue to rule from the ivory tower or will deplorables incrementally take back the classroom?

We have been losing this cultural war, gradually and then quickly. Woke orthodoxy is not new, kitschy and peripheral, it is mainstream, pervasive and has successfully taken over education, media, entertainment and corporate America. It has achieved cultural hegemony.

If Harvard's nuanced, non-answer about protecting its most vulnerable students (antisemitism is statistically the most frequent hate crime by far) depends on 'context' rather than say, history, ethics, and philosophy in pursuit of critical thinking towards an *informed* opinion, what does this cowardly inertia say about the university once assumed to be the best in the world? And if, as seems likely, the post secondary sector has become misaligned with the values that created itself and civilization, what can be done about it?

After decades of freedom from oversight and scrutiny, voters and legislators might finally want to look into how universities actually work rather than the innocent version we

have assumed. We have given benefit of the doubt for which there has been doubtful benefit. For my modest contribution, I decided to expose hypocrisy in a manner perhaps best suited to the absurdity of the problem coupled with the quirkiness of my mind. During Covid, and after working my entire career in the university sector, I wrote a murder mystery novel anchored in satire, humour and, perhaps most appropriate in these absurd woke times, farce.

After serving as Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger did a stint at Harvard whereupon he said, "University politics makes me pine for the relative peace of the Middle East." And when asked why are university politics so fierce, it is said Kissinger responded, "Because the stakes are so small."

The University of Lost Causes is a mystery novel that has the requisite murder and dead bodies, but—more pointed, more relevant, indeed so prevalent as to be ubiquitous—is the murderous intent of university politics. As such, the unfolding of events makes this novel less a whodunnit than a why'dtheydunnit. Underneath endless virtue-signalling and the swirling obsession with small stakes politics, are plain old ego, greed, and the maliciousness of the players. Identity obsession, and murderous university politics are really just cover for human nature run amok. All of which makes for a smorgasbord of satiric possibility.

Fictitious New England's St. Jude's (patron saint of lost causes, no seriously) University has not only embraced the woke tidal wave that has swept North America, but in the post-covid years is determined to become *the* exemplar of woke-ness, reframed as 'enlightenment.' Leading the enlightened charge is the Special Adviser to the President, Exceptional Student Experience, and her many enlightened minions. Still, there are some few unexceptional outliers and subversives who refuse to be among: "those who can be convinced of absurdities will commit atrocities." (Voltaire)

There are very few good satirical novels and films in the North American canon. Jerzy Kosinski's novel *Being There*, made into a film starring Peter Sellers is the best cinematic example, and John Kennedy Toole's, *A Confederacy of Dunces* is the best satiric novel. Interestingly, even for this most potent caldron of satiric possibility, there has been nothing noteworthy about the universities. (perhaps Canadian Robertson Davies' *Rebel Angels*, a rare exception, four decades ago).

It is for this reason, *The University of Lost Causes* exposes the trajectory of absurdities leading to atrocities as first barely possible, then believable, and finally inevitable. Still, in writing the novel, I quickly realized my fulsome treatment barely scratches the surface of fictional possibility of university function and dysfunction. Suffice to say, the well is deep—bottomless actually—with much more to come.

The University of Lost Causes throws down the gauntlet in a unique fictional rendition of our absurd and troubled times, even if its fiction is stranger than fiction. This character driven novel is both relentless in revealing issues as well as antithetical to taking entrenched, polarized stances that have become endemic in these uber serious times. Still, exposing absurdity and revealing humanity will be judged as extreme, even if the binary distinction that matters is this: humans are either limited or elevated by the expression of their humanity, and the politics of identity lacks humanity.

Laughter is important, even, or especially in the face of tragedy. We laugh so as not to cry— and then maybe we can get to work and fix the problem.

Note: The University of Lost Causes won a Word Guild Award in September 2023, as the Best New Canadian Manuscript. The award is sponsored, and will published by Castle Quay Books, in

April, 2024. The artwork for this article is the preliminary cover for *The University of Lost Causes*, by artist Cara Lipsett. In conscripting her for this consignment—for which I paid nothing—I am guilty of nepotism (the context of this epiphany is we are married).

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Larry McCloskey has had eight books published, six young adult as well as two recent non-fiction books. *Lament for Spilt Porter* and *Inarticulate Speech of the Heart* (2018 & 2020 respectively) won national Word Guild awards. *Inarticulate* won best Canadian manuscript in 2020 and recently won a second Word Guild Award as a published work. He recently retired as Director of the Paul Menton Centre for Students with Disabilities, Carleton University. Since then, he has written a satirical novel entitled *The University of Lost Causes*, and has qualified as a Social Work Psychotherapist. He lives in Canada with his three daughters, two dogs, and last, but far from least, one wife.

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