

Copycats of Mediocrity

By Theodore Dalrymple

Plagiarism is the highest form of flattery, and many authors ought to be flattered to be plagiarized, considering what rubbish they write. Such, at any rate, were my first thoughts on reading the allegations of plagiarism against Dr. Natalie J. Perry, brought against her by Christopher Rufo, the investigative journalist who has exposed many a case of such plagiarism in the higher reaches, or lower depths, of university administration.



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Dr. Perry is something called the “Cultural North Star Lead” (by their job titles shall ye know them) of the UCLA School of Medicine. It is possible, I suppose, that some ill-informed readers will not know what a Cultural North Star Lead actually does, or what the Cultural North Star actually is, so some description might help them. According to the medical

school’s website, the Cultural North Star:

helps us build and maintain an inclusive, mission-driven culture by mapping our decisions, actions, and interactions to a shared framework.

I am not sure that this brings us much closer to an understanding in concrete detail of what Dr. Perry does when she arrives in her office on Monday morning—if, that is, she’s not working remotely, or on sabbatical, or on maternity leave, or on one of the many other ways of absenting oneself on full

pay from one's position. To judge from a photo easily found on the internet, she is a very happy person, as I would be if I were paid a large salary for the not disagreeable job of forcing people to agree, at least in public, with my point of view.

I rather fear, however, that Dr. Perry might be both sincere and hardworking; and no busybody is busier than the one who thinks that he or she is engaged in God's work. A cynical careerist is far preferable, though it is possible that we have created—I almost said *built*—a culture in which true belief and ruthless careerism are happily conjoined.

Whether the charges of plagiarism against Dr. Perry are justified, I leave to others to decide. It is, besides, a rather minor question compared with the deep mystery of how the original passages allegedly plagiarized came to be written and published in the first place (if Dr. Perry is a plagiarist, she is at least an accurate one). I quote:

Leadership that addressed diversity issues and concerns in higher education is highly multidimensional and complex. Substantively, it is much more than a simple response or adaptation to demographic representation—it is about the intergroup dynamics that characterize colleges and universities, in both structure and culture. Leadership that addresses diversity issues and concerns in higher education is identified as diversity leadership. Diversity leadership primarily uses organizational values such as competition and success to incorporate diverse people or groups and enhance the organizational success in a changing environment.

Suffice it to say that if I were a plagiarist, this is not a passage that I would choose to plagiarize (though I admit that diligent search might find worse), for the passage is not one that I should have been proud to have originated. I am not sure, however, that I *could* have originated it; for try as I

might to imitate such verbiage, meaning keeps breaking through whatever I think, say, or write. Academics of a certain stamp, though, fight against meaning and triumph in the struggle; for meaning is their enemy, as it would expose the vacuity or banality of their thoughts.

As Richard II said, though, mock not flesh and blood, for though we may laugh at the absurdity of an academy in which drivel such as I have quoted is not only written but rewarded, yet it has a distinctively sinister effect and menacing tone. For example, it implies that the Zhdanovs and Vyshinskys of diversity, equity, and inclusion will not be satisfied with mere demographic equal representation between groups, for if they were, they might easily work themselves out of a job, which would never do. Such equal representation might at least be attainable (whether it would be desirable is another question entirely, of course), but if it were the sole target to be reached it would carry the risk of rendering the pullulating Zhdanovs and Vyshinskys of the academy redundant. Something less definite is required that they might keep themselves in employment forever, and nothing is better suited to this than the continuous surveillance of "intergroup dynamics," especially when everything has been done to ensure that everyone is as sensitive as possible to the slightest disobliging remark or suspect facial expression. In Romania, they used to say that a change of rulers is the joy of fools; in universities, spontaneous good humor or friendship is the despair of Cultural North Star Leaders.

A leader, or would-be leader, who maps our decisions in a mission-driven culture; such is the person whom Mr. Rufo now accuses of plagiarism. But the plagiarism is a small and insignificant matter compared with the overweening ambition of which she is, so to speak, a mere foot soldier. It would be no better—in fact, it might be worse—if she were *not* a plagiarist (I assume that Mr. Rufo has his facts right, and I apologize in advance if he has not). For if she were not a plagiarist,

she would be of marginally higher standing than she is as a plagiarist; and the last thing we want is for people of slightly higher standing to aim at evil.

For evil a mission-driven culture mapped by functionaries is, or would be if it ever came about. It aims at an enforced unanimity and uniformity, not only of thought but of feeling. To ensure this, it is prepared to institute a permanent ideological inquisition of the type that Elizabeth I rejected as her purpose nearer five than four hundred years ago.

I mistakenly thought ten years ago that at least medical schools would remain free from the posturing and power madness of the ambitious mediocrities who seem now to be turned out in such large numbers by institutions supposedly of higher learning. There is a rare genetic syndrome called the Lesch-Nyhan syndrome, among whose symptoms is uncontrollable self-harm such as the biting of the sufferer's own flesh, as well as mental retardation. It sometimes seems as if the whole of the West is now suffering from a kind of cultural Lesch-Nyhan syndrome.

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