Advising Pre-Dead Students: The Task of Critical Advising Today

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We remember the old saying:
Si vis pacem, para bellum.
If you wish peace, prepare for war.
The times call for a paraphrase:
Si vis vitam, para mortem.
If you wish life, prepare for death.
—Sigmund Freud¹

Abstract— Academic advising, to be “critical,” must be emancipatory. I argue that the task of critical advising today is to liberate students from the dominant conceptualization of higher education as pre-professional schooling in order to open them up to humanistic exploration and to help them make their education meaningful on their own terms. Inspired by Cornel West’s idea of going to college to learn how to die, I introduce the concept of “pre-dead” students to argue that the task of critical advising is to help students move from a premature professional narrowness to a maturation of the soul. Using Burns B. Crookston’s theory of education for human development, I argue that the task of critical advising is to open up students to self-examination by way of a deep, disciplined humanistic education

that many students avoid, often due to parental, social, and economic pressures that push them toward premature professional narrowness. I develop my approach to critical advising in contrast to Andrew Puroway’s overtly political Frierian-inspired approach. I also offer some practical advising strategies and examples of how advisors can help students open themselves up to the life-changing study of the humanities.

Keywords: critical advising; humanities; Burns B. Crookston; Cornel West

INTRODUCTION

It is no secret that in our market-driven society students entering college are eager to be on a pre-professional track, especially a pre-business or pre-med track.² But let’s face it, whether they like it or not, they are all on the “pre-dead” track; they are human beings on their way to becoming, well, corpses.³ It is understandable that young, anxious, career-minded students might ignore this grim truth. Focused on graduating on time, the last thing students want to think about in their academic advising appointment is their short life on earth. But in the time that they are in space and time they have to carve out their place in the world and figure out what kind of human being they are going to choose to be. What

¹ Freud, *Reflections on War and Death* 72

² For an insightful analysis of this trend, see Grubb and Lazerson.

³ My concept of “pre-dead” (as opposed to pre-professional) students is inspired by Cornel West’s lectures and conversations on the humanities and liberal learning that he gave from 2016 to 2019 and that are available on YouTube. See his remarks at: AEI, November 30, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SER_TrUGo2o&feature=emb_logo; Dartmouth, April 27, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zwwdUhgPpew>; The University of Denver, January 2018,

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K8vfyiN93jg>; MIT, February 8, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-Bc6TRjptKI>; Brown University, March 6, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-2ntOqoCUQk>; Brandeis, October 22, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZKi-mvW72sE>; St. Mary’s College, April 12, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UJxK6cmVwaA>, and Baylor University, November 15, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YwBxVjkOeV0>. See also the transcript of his October 5, 2009 lecture at Hobart and William Smith Colleges, https://www.hws.edu/news/transcripts/09/cornel_west.aspx.

kinds of virtues, visions, and values are they going to enact and embody in their life as opposed to merely landing a job? The idea of students on the “pre-dead” track is that when students go to college to get a better job, they are in danger of missing out on an education that offers them the opportunity to engage with the arts and humanities and to wrestle with existential questions about what it means to be a human being and to live a meaningful and happy life.

Whereas a pre-professional student comes to college with the belief that the ultimate goal and purpose of higher education is to provide them with current, marketable skills and ways to make money, a pre-dead student, by contrast, comes to college to learn how to die. As philosopher and critical pedagogue Cornel West explains, “You learn how to die in order to learn how to live by critically examining yourself, scrutinizing yourself, and when you give up an assumption or presupposition [...] that’s a form of death. And there’s no maturation, no development, no growth, without that kind of death.”⁴ But wait! Am I really imagining a student telling his or her parents: *Yes, it’s a lot of money to go to college, but don’t you want me to learn how to die?* Won’t this student be told by his or her parents that they sacrificed and saved money so their child could go to college, learn a skill, and earn the highest possible income? And won’t student and parents alike resist any academic advisor who suggests purposes and goals above and beyond securing a better job and more job security? Yes, they will! And this is precisely why I think academic advisors, whose job is to talk to students about their academic choices and goals, have a *critical* role to play in higher education.

To guard against possible misunderstanding, let me clarify at the outset that the whole point of introducing the concept of “pre-dead” students is to suggest that the task of critical advising is to help students focus less on what politicians and business leaders want, or what their parents and others around them want, and focus more on the existential question of what kind of human being they want to be in life. Getting students to think about higher ed-

ucation in terms of going their own way as intellectual, moral, and spiritual beings, guided by their own unique interests, desires, and talents, is an incredibly difficult task today, as students are encouraged to complete their education as quickly and effortlessly as possible in order to plug into the job market. For the sake of trying to secure a good job, pre-professional students tend to avoid humanist, liberal learning that is transformative of one’s perspective and character, thereby arresting their own growth and development. Any academic advisor who supports student learning and development should be critical of the crowding of students into the narrow confines of occupational training and pre-professional education.

In this article, I offer a way of thinking about critical advising that is guided not only by the idea of “pre-dead” students, but also by the work of Burns B. Crookston, the founder of the student development movement and a co-founder (along with Terry O’Banion) of developmental advising.⁵ Crookston offers a theory of education for human development that is critical of the seismic shift toward vocationalism and pre-professionalism in higher education since the 1970s. Building upon Crookston’s theory, I argue that the task of critical advising is as follows: to open up students to self-examination by way of a deep, disciplined humanistic education—engagement with the best that has been said and thought in the Western tradition, and in all traditions—that for the most part students avoid due to parental, social, and economic pressures that push them toward premature professional narrowness and a single over-arching human type, “the successful, upper-middle-class professional they’ve already decided they want to become” (Deresiewicz, *Excellent Sheep* 24). Assuming that the possibility for experiencing a transformative humanistic education still exists in most institutions of higher education today, I argue that the mission of critical advising is to help students realize that the humanities can change their lives as no other material can. In the section below, I develop my approach to critical advising in contrast

⁴ Cornel West at Baylor University, November 15, 2019 (33:30-33:45). For West, inspired by Plato, Seneca, and Montaigne, learning how to die means to engage in Socratic self-examination. On the idea of philosophy as learning how to die, see Plato, *Phaedo*, 64a and 67d-e; Cicero, *Tusculan Dispu-*

tations, 1.30.74-1.31.75; Montaigne; Hadot; and Jahanbegloo. For a useful portrait of West as a critical pedagogue, see Christensen and Durm.

⁵ For an overview of Crookston’s life and work, see Fried. For a chronicle of the time Crookston spent as Dean of Students at Colorado State University, see Morrill and Hurst.

to Andrew Puroway's overtly political Frierean-inspired approach.

CRITICAL ADVISING: A CROOKSTON-INSPIRED APPROACH

Why should advisors read the work of Burns B. Crookston to think about the concept of "critical advising"? The concept has been developed through Paulo Friere's pedagogy by Andrew Puroway. But I think we should look to Crookston rather than Friere for inspiration, and offer the following reasons: first, Crookston actually wrote about academic advising (Friere did not); second, Crookston grappled with the rise of vocationalism in higher education and its implications for human development (Friere did not); and third, Crookston's commitment to fostering human development by way of Socratic self-examination is a more appropriate commitment for critical advising than Friere's commitment to achieving social justice and other overtly political goals.

First, whereas Crookston wrote explicitly about the practice of academic advising, Friere did not write about academic advising at all. Friere mainly wrote about "teaching" with an emphasis on dialogue, the posing of problems, and the development of critical consciousness. While it is true that in his *Letters to Cristina* (1996) he devotes a chapter (the 16th letter) to the role of thesis and dissertation advisors in a university, and sometimes calls thesis supervision "advising," this is not the same activity as "academic advising." Thesis supervision, as anybody who has written a master's or dissertation thesis knows, involves "the development of the advisee's research and ideas; the depth of the advisee's language; the difficulties the advisee faces with the topic, the bibliography, or the very act of reading and studying; and the loyalty with which the advisee writes about topics or people" (Friere 168). Advisees in the academic advisor-advisee relationship, by contrast, are undergraduates who are not writing a thesis of any sort and are not seeking help with their research or coursework (they go to their professors, peers, or tutors, for that). Put simply, thesis supervision is about research and writing, whereas academic advising is about registration and graduation. Friere wrote about the former but not the latter. While Puroway, for example, twice cites Friere's chapter on thesis supervision in developing his approach to critical advising, he is careful to note that Friere is writing about the supervision of master's

candidates and not academic advising (7, 8). Since I'm concerned with the work of professional academic advisors in (large) university settings, I do not find Friere's writings on teaching and thesis supervision relevant or inspiring.

By now you might be thinking: didn't Crookston coin the idea of "advising as teaching"? Although he did use that phrase in the title of his groundbreaking 1972 article, "A Developmental View of Academic Advising as Teaching," his actual discussion of the relationship between advising and teaching is far more complex than his title's simple equation of the two practices. Crookston reconceived advising under a collaborative teaching-learning model for the sake of facilitating the achievement of the goal of general education and of education for democracy—the student's own growth and development as a person. He argued that advisors should not be aloof authority figures who give advice to students whom they regard as lazy, immature, irresponsible grade-grubbers with no interest in learning. Instead, advisors should approach students as human beings who have the potential to become almost anything to which they set their mind ("A Developmental View" 13). The advisor-student relationship should be a transaction between two parties where the student is treated as an active, responsible, maturing human being who seeks not only the rewards of grades, credit, and income, but also the rewards of "personal growth, self-fulfillment, and humane commitment" ("A Developmental View" 14).

What Crookston says about the advising relationship is not that advisors are teachers or that advising is teaching. Rather, he argues that the practice of advising has a "teaching function" in the sense that its "product" is some "individual, group, or community growth and development" ("A Developmental View" 12). Crookston is absolutely right to think of academic advising as an educational practice whose product is human growth and development, which is a product of *all* educational practices, including teaching. But just because both advising and teaching have growth and development as their product, does not mean they are essentially the same practice, any more than a high-heeled shoe and a hammer are essentially the same thing because both may be used to drive nails into the wall. Crookston is mistaken in claiming that wherever individual student learning or development is taking place, "teaching" must be occurring as well. This claim leads him

to suggest that not only faculty, but also advisors and even students may be designated “teachers.” This overly broad claim about teaching is not necessary, it collapses the distinction between formal teaching and self-teaching, and it confuses the institutional roles of faculty, advisors, and students.

For Crookston, the whole point of thinking about the “teaching function” of advising is not to equate advising with teaching so much as to emphasize the kind of relationship that students want with their advisor, one that is not passive, reactive, hierarchical, bureaucratic, correctional, and status-based, but active, egalitarian, collaborative, and competent. As the student takes more initiative and responsibility for the advising session, Crookston argued, the advisor may serve as an expert, critic, facilitator, collaborator, consultant, or negotiator, all functions of human development “teaching” (“Education for Human Development” 54-55). Rather than approach advising as teaching (which inevitably prompts Lowenstein’s question: “If advising is teaching, what do advisors teach?”), Crookston wants us to think about how to make the advisor-advisee relationship more relevant to the development of the student as an individual who strives to give coherence and meaning to their life and world, and not just to their curriculum.

The second reason to look to Crookston rather than Friere for a conception of critical advising is that much of what Crookston says about college students in the late-1960s and early 1970s finds an echo in contemporary debates about the decline of the humanities and the rise of vocationalism among college students today. Like us, Crookston lived in times defined by “public support for career education and technical training” but not for “general education,” which seemed “nonutilitarian and remote” from students’ lives (“Education for Human Development” 52). From Crookston’s viewpoint in the early 1970s, the vocationalism of college students seemed to be caused by “the shortening of adolescence” and the desire to become an independent adult, for which it is important in our “utilitarian society [...] to have a skill that can produce something” (“Education for Human Development” 61). While vocationalism is driven by different causes today (Bok, *Our Underachieving Colleges* 26-27), the trend is only accelerating. As former Harvard president Drew Gilpin Faust observed in 2009: “Since the 1970s there has been a steep decline in the percent-

age of students majoring in the liberal arts and sciences, and an accompanying increase in preprofessional undergraduate degrees. Business is now by far the most popular undergraduate major, with twice as many bachelor’s degrees awarded in this area than in any other field of study. In the era of economic constraint before us, the pressure toward vocational pursuits is likely only to intensify.” Indeed, in his book *Liberal Arts at the Brink* (2011), a report on the dire situation of liberal arts education, Victor Farrell Jr. sums up the situation as follows: “There is no evidence that the movement away from liberal arts education to vocational instruction is temporary, or that it is cyclical and, over time, will reverse itself. To the contrary, it appears to be an accelerating trend. The demand for vocational instruction is skyrocketing. [...] [T]he time for liberal arts education now appears to be passing away, a change driven by shifting societal norms and values” (155).

Today it is not just humanities and the liberal arts, but academic learning itself that seems a luxury to students and parents who, often worrying about paying back student loans, consider fields of study in terms of career tracks, job stability, and financial futures. Envisioning themselves as future attorneys, doctors, nurses, pharmacists, journalists, accountants, consultants, investment bankers, computer programmers, engineers, and so on, pre-professional students seek out the few majors that seem to be tailored to their career aspirations. To these students, general education requirements are an inefficient hindrance to their “success.” Even in the most “practical” of majors, these students often resent the fact that they are forced to take courses that they care little about and see as a waste of time because they have no obvious and direct relevance to their career goals.

Crookston’s human development perspective is valuable for thinking about the task of critical advising because it illuminates how the intense vocationalism of today’s pre-professional students is a problem. The problem, as most academic advisors know from experience, is that students’ professional goals, especially those imposed on them by parents, have crowded out consideration of higher education as about deep learning, acquiring wisdom, and undergoing a process of self-examination and self-transformation. As Crookston explained in his famous 1972 article, one of the philosophical foundations of human development is that “higher learning

is to be viewed as an opportunity in which the developing person may plan to achieve a self-fulfilling life; that *the perspective of work and professional training more properly should be placed within the development of a life plan instead of the current tendency to prepare one's self for a profession and then build one's life around it*" ("A Developmental View" 12, my emphasis). Here Crookston targets "the perspective of work and professional training," and argues that "higher learning" should be approached not in terms of pre-professional training but as an opportunity to develop "a life plan"—a life plan in which vocation and career development play an essential part, but which is about achieving a self-fulfilling life and not just a successful professional career. Let's call this Crookston's critical theory of student development that is broader than pre-professional training, the primary aim of which is not political but existential: the development and actualization of the individual.

Consider, for example, the advice that one University of Georgia student offered to incoming students on reddit. If there is one thing that students entering college should know before they start, this student wrote, it is that college is an opportunity to "put yourself out of your comfort zone and figure yourself out. College is a 'safe place' to explore and find out who you are (and hopefully pick up skills for a career along the way) before you have a job, mortgage, and kids where shit gets real if you suddenly decide you don't want to be an accountant anymore." What this wise student is saying is that you are not in college only to gain access to a skill so you can plug into the labor force. You are in college to "figure yourself out" when you are young and have the time, independence, and support to do so. If you think of the value of a college education only in economic terms, you may very well wind up a wealthy and successful but miserable accountant or other professional who feels they are wasting their life doing meaningless work that they do not value or find satisfying on an existential level. Indeed, many people live their life like Cephalus, the satisfied old rich man that Socrates speaks with at the beginning of Plato's *Republic*. It is only when he is on the brink of death, and can no longer enjoy the physical pleasures of his youth—"sex, drinking parties, feasts, and the other things that go along with them" (*Republic* 329a5)—that he begins to examine himself and reflect on how he has lived his life. Knowing that individuals have a

tendency to avoid or indefinitely delay self-examination, Crookston insists that it is up to education, and, we might add, advising, to "provide the means by which such examination takes place early and often thereafter" ("Education for Human Development" 63).

This brings us to the third reason to look to Crookston rather than Friere for a conception of critical advising: Crookston's theory of education for human development is a far more appropriate way of thinking about the task of critical advising than Friere's theory of education for social justice and the common good. I have explained elsewhere why I think Puroway's Frierian-inspired approach is inappropriate and unworkable ("Letter to the Editor: Is Advising a Political Activity?"). My point here is that there is no reason to assume in advance that "critical advising" must involve a commitment to achieving social justice and other overtly political goals. Rather, I think that the essential criterion for advising to be considered "critical," following the tradition of "critical theory" of the Frankfurt School (Marcuse, Horkheimer, and Adorno), is that it must be guided by some sort of emancipatory task. For the followers of Friere, the emancipatory task of advising is primarily *political*: "advocating for common good projects in educational goal setting," to quote the fourth of Puroway's "four possible means to engage in critical advising" (9). In contrast, what I'm proposing via Crookston is that the emancipatory task of advising is primarily *existential*: for students to engage in the Socratic process of self-examination "to make sense, purpose, and direction for their lives while young" ("Education for Human Development" 61). What students are to be emancipated *from* is not oppression and social injustice but the dominant neoliberal ideology which herds students away from humanistic exploration toward preprofessional programs, and is hostile to the Socratic belief "that life has little meaning and purpose unless it has been examined by those who must live it" ("Education for Human Development" 63). A student on the pre-dead track needs to know that there will never be in the history of the cosmos another you—that is a beautiful thought, but it is also a terrifying one. It means you need to examine who you are and who you want to become.

Pre-dead students should take as their motto Socrates' claim at his trial that the unexamined life is not worth living for a human being (*Apology* 38a5-6). This claim, as the philosopher Richard

Kraut explains, does not stand on its own but is based on a picture of human development and human nature: “human beings are naturally attracted to pleasure and averse to pain. They seek power and status, and the wealth that brings power, status, and pleasure. It is no accident that these were the dominant values of Athens (*Apology* 29d-e); they are the dominant values of nearly every human community” (“The Examined Life” 238). Indeed, students coming to college today have been nurtured and educated by a commodified, marketized, commercialized culture to believe that to be human is to be obsessed with success, popularity, pleasure, power, and profits. Fearing disapproval, they are anxiously concerned about and consumed by their image—looking a certain way to their peers, potential life partners, and professional schools—rather than with the content of their character, mind, and soul. Without engaging in the Socratic self-examination that a liberal education offers, what awaits these students is not just physical death, but intellectual, moral, and spiritual death. Cold-hearted careerism, egotistical calculation, mindless consumption, meaninglessness, cowardice, callousness, all this awaits students unless they make an effort to learn how to die. So the task of critical advising, in short, is to help students on the pre-dead track, no matter what professional occupation they hope for, to understand that college is probably their best chance to learn how to die by wrestling with what it means to be human and to live an examined life.

ADVISING PRE-DEAD STUDENTS

So what can academic advisors do to advise pre-professional students as pre-dead students who seek out opportunities to engage in Socratic self-examination? Or to put the question another way: if the goal of critical advising is to emancipate students from the neoliberal ideology that is hostile to Socratic self-examination, how can advisors help students open themselves up to the life-changing study of the humanities? There is no magic bullet or single strategy, of course, and advisors have little power within higher education, but they do have one-on-one conversations with students, and they can and do affect the choices students make when they register for classes. During these conversations, advisors can ask the kinds of questions that J. S. Mill asks his readers in chapter three of *On Liberty*—questions

designed to urge his readers to stop thinking about their class status and financial anxieties and to start thinking about their individuality as a crucial element of their well-being and happiness. Mill suggests that his readers ask themselves with respect to their own way of life: “what do I prefer? or, what would suit my character and disposition? or, what would allow the best and highest in me to have fair play, and enable it to grow and thrive?” (61). An academic advisor could put these questions to students in the spirit of self-examination: what do you prefer to study? what job or discipline would suit your character and disposition? what job or discipline would allow the best and highest in you to have fair play, and enable it to grow and thrive? It’s okay if students cannot answer these questions. Simply by putting these questions to them you get them to engage in self-reflection.

Beyond asking students questions to prompt them to reflect on their unique character and preferences, another strategy to get students to reflect on their lives is to bring in the perspective of death.⁶ The perspective of death is an effective way to prompt students to think about what values, virtues, and visions will guide them through their life. An advisor could ask a student: when you are dead, what do you want people to say about how you lived your life? If the student does not seem receptive to such a question, an alternative is to ask: what do you plan to do with your life when you are retired? The point of both questions is to get students to think about their life as a moral, spiritual, and intellectual person apart from their life as a money-making worker. When I’ve asked students what they want people to say, when they are dead, about how they lived their life, they spoke about being a good, kind, hardworking, virtuous person who cared more for their family, friends, community, and the world than about fame, money, and power. Being asked such a question in the context of choosing their classes could help them reflect on their motivations for their class choices. Are they choosing classes based on shallow dreams of “easy As,” ready riches, and living a luxurious lifestyle, or are they choosing classes that will help them articulate and actualize their values and vision of themselves as the person they want to become? This moment of reflection provides an opportunity for advisors to expand a student’s understanding of

⁶ For an illuminating, book-length meditation on death, see Tisdale.

higher education from merely a means to get a better job to an opportunity to search for truth and to better understand themselves, others, and the world in which they live. It is also an opportunity for advisors to help students connect their courses to what they say is meaningful and important to the bigger picture of their lives beyond getting a job.

Richard J. Light provides an example of what I would call pre-dead advising in *Making the Most of College: Students Speak Their Minds*. Light recounts the story of a first-year African American pre-med student who had an advisor who changed his perspective on what he could study beyond taking science courses for medical school. As the student explains:

My advisor made a real difference. He asked me very hard questions about why I was doing what I was doing. He asked me whether I had thought about alternatives. He pointed out that I could complete all the requirements for medical school and yet concentrate in a more traditional liberal arts field. When I told him my mother had urged me to focus on preparing for medical school, we actually sat over medical school catalogues, and for the first time I understood that I didn't just have to load up on science courses. As it turns out, my true love is philosophy. [...] I realized that I am using philosophy and some of the dilemmas it raises to understand more fully some of the questions that had led me to want to go to medical school in the first place. [...] But the point I want to make is that my advisor kept pushing me to relate my coursework to my own interests. After we had met several times I confided to him about how my interest in medical school began. My mother has severe emphysema. [...] I see that she will struggle to keep a decent quality of life for herself. And I would like to help in any way I can. In retrospect, my advisor's pushing me to relate my work at college to my personal concerns is what encour-

aged me to do philosophy while preparing for medical school. I am sure I will be a better doctor because of this good advice. And I think I can be a better son too. (90-91)

This example shows one way to advise pre-professional students as pre-dead students: encourage self-reflection by asking questions about why they want to study what they are studying, point out that there are other ways to do what they want to do and ask them if they've considered these alternatives, show and tell them that in addition to the courses required for their intended career they can also take humanities and liberal arts courses, and then push them to relate their coursework to the interests and concerns that led them to decide to pursue their chosen career in the first place. The result in this case is not just a successful student but a more actualized human being—a son who will take better care of his mother and a doctor who will take better care of his patients because he did not avoid his love for philosophy but embraced it with the help of his advisor. Isn't this what you would want for your son? Isn't this the kind of doctor you would want to have in charge of your health? Isn't this what we, as advisors, want for our students?

This is a difficult example to imitate, to be sure, and there is only so much an advisor can do one-on-one with a student to facilitate self-reflection. Students need to read poetry and philosophy, study religion and art history, and wrestle with what is best in Western civilization, or any civilization. To this end, critical advisors can urge students to gain a background in the arts, humanities, and social sciences—the disciplines that give our short, fragile lives meaning by raising fundamental questions about being human. Advisors can urge students to take demanding courses that challenge them to read, write, and think critically. And after a student has taken a class in the humanities, an advisor can ask them: What did this course tell you about who you are and what you would like your life to be or to mean? Self-reflection is not the only thing the humanities contribute to an individual's path in life, but the process of transforming the individual to his

or her own humanity has historically been the task of a humanities-focused liberal arts education.⁷

If this sounds like a defense of the humanities and liberal arts today this is indeed what it is. For the point of a humanities-focused liberal arts education is to liberate you from your pre-existing and unexamined beliefs, desires, and interests that have been deposited in you by your society and culture, and in so doing to effect a process of self-transformation and maturation in which the nature and structure of your beliefs, desires, and interests are changed and become more enlightened. Cornel West characterizes this transformation as “moving from the superficial to the substantial, moving from the frivolous to the serious, and then cultivating a self to wrestle with reality and history and mortality and, most importantly, promoting a maturation of the soul” (*Examined Life* 2). West’s idea of going to college to learn how to die specifies and supports the task of critical advising that I am proposing here, which seeks to liberate students from the dominant conceptualization of higher education as pre-professional schooling in order to open them up to humanistic exploration and to help them make their education meaningful on their own terms. While this task is ultimately the work of the entire university, academic advisors have their own part to play in helping pre-dead students move from a premature professional narrowness to a maturation of the soul. As I have evolved and developed as an academic advisor, especially as an advisor of pre-medical and pre-pharmacy students, I’ve come to think of my task in more critical terms as advising pre-dead students. While I don’t have pre-dead advising all figured out, I believe it is a promising approach to critical advising today, and I welcome further discussion from all perspectives.

CONCLUSION

A critical advisor believes that students are first and foremost human beings on the way to becoming corpses, and what matters is the education of their hearts, minds, and souls. As Margaret Atwood once quipped, “You can take the humanities out of the curriculum, but you can’t take the humanities out of the humans. They are built in” (131). Indeed, the humanities are too important to be left to

the humanities majors; they are useful for all students insofar as they are human. If you see your job as an academic advisor, in the words of Mark Yudof, former President of the University of Minnesota and the University of California, and former Chancellor of the University of Texas System, to be to “minimize friction between the students and the institution and its requirements” (8), as if students were commodities coursing through the institution, that’s fine, and your institution will be pleased with your performance. But to be a critical advisor you must believe that it is wrong to justify the time and expense of a college education merely as a training ground for career opportunities, and you must believe that the justification for the teaching that goes on in colleges and universities is not to provide access to job skills, but to educate students in the life of the mind, in the best humanity has to offer, the best traditions, individuals, and movements. To be a critical advisor you must believe in the ideal of learning for personal growth, self-fulfillment, and humane commitment and not just for a grade or a better job. You must face up to the grim fact that despite what the op-ed writers say, the liberal arts and humanities are not dying—you are, and so are your students. And whether they know it or not, they’ve come to college to learn how to die.

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⁷ Philosophers and political theorists have written eloquently and extensively on this topic. See Gutmann; Hankins; Murchland; Nehamas; Nussbaum; and Roche.

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