

A Satirical Response to the Literal Left Brain World in Which We Live

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



Conspirators, are you saying it's me? –by Suthamma Byrne

Despite what the protagonist in my new novel *The Universities of Lost Causes* might say, I love universities, and mostly those who populate them. But, in channeling Machiavelli in recent years, much of the university sector has chosen to be feared rather than loved. University life used to be a time for immersion into the deep weeds of discovery—both of oneself and the infinite possibilities of learning—an exploratory reprieve away from the coarseness of the world. With rigorous application over a challenging period of trial and error, one's study of objective truths led to an informed, evolving, and dynamic point of view and sense of self.

But the intellectual safe space of university experience of past generations has been subverted by a metaphoric safe space obsession over perceived threats and correct thinking in a world too dangerous for individual exploration. Danger requires direction, which the modern university is only too willing to give, and often insist upon. Better go with the motto of the University of Bologna (the first university in the world, in continuous existence since 1088), Alma Mater Studiorum, Nourishing Mother of Studies.

Ideology is borrowed thinking, antithetical to what universities used to stand for and were conceived to do. In its closed loop, self-replicating fashion, the university modus operandi is often unhinged and one-sidedly political at the expense of relevance, utility, and inspiration. And, most importantly, this ubiquitous progressive bias comes at the expense of impressionable students who need to figure it out for themselves.

The University of Lost Causes is fiction, is satire, has humor tending towards farce and, in combining the trendy idea of dystopian fiction with my quirky brand of farce (the novel is set in the near, post-secondary dystopian future), I've coined the term *farcetopian*. Still, in Shakespearean tradition, the farcetopian fool may convey a message. Writers Albert Camus, Tim O'Brien, Henry James, and others have written variations of this truism: "The art of fiction is to take truth and tell a lie in order to tell a greater truth." My purpose is not to offend, but to expose—with absurdity alternatively packaged as fanciful, commonplace, exaggerated or understated—the inner machinations of university dysfunction towards the possibility for renewal. Solving a mystery and having fun are also on the docket.

The great satirist Jonathan Swift created a sensation when he wrote "A Modest Proposal for Preventing the Children of Poor People from Being a Burthen to Their Parents or Country and for Making Them Beneficial to the Publick." In this essay,

Swift advised impoverished Irish parents sell their wee babies to the rich for culinary consumption. "A young healthy child well nursed, is, at one year old, almost delicious, nourishing and wholesome food, whether stewed, roasted, baked, or boiled; and I make no doubt that it will equally serve in a fricassee, or a ragout." Still, the sensation was not from Swift's modest call for the consumption of babies, but rather from the immodest reforms he argued Britain must make to its heartless Irish policy. The British public understood that Swift was not advocating eating babies, that his satiric hyperbole had purpose, and that the real sensation was his audacious call for change.

The year was 1729; the public understood; Swift was not cancelled.

The public today—even or perhaps especially the university educated public—routinely misunderstands and cancels. (Worse, the implicit dictates of cancel culture ensures that most of what would be cancelled is never conceived in order to be cancelled). And, in modern counterintuitive fashion, those who most often self-identify as tolerant are first to reach for the easy intolerance of cancel culture. Why read, research and debate, when indisputably right?

Perhaps because we cannot unsee the naked emperor fawning over his vast collection of fine clothes, augmented by the admiring mob's naked willingness to see fine vestments where none exist. We cannot unnotice that the ignorant, poorly educated public of old were less gullible, less impressionable and more astutely able to discriminate between literal and satirical ideas than our multi-degreed, post-secondary graduates of today.

For many reasons—some complicated, some straightforward—how we perceive, process and judge, has changed. As to this last feature, we may think we no longer exercise that archaic brain-limiting function called judgment, but we do, and even

those who believe themselves to be non-judgmental have made the judgment not to be judgmental. But it cannot be done. We make judgments every second of every day. It is how we negotiate the world, and it is necessary. To actually pull off being non-judgmental is to be non-alive. It is only in understanding we have changed that we have any understanding about who we have become and where we may be going. The free flowing independent thinkers we credit ourselves to be, is undermined by the mob mentality we participate in with the predictability of a Swiss watch.

Iain McGilchrist makes a compelling argument about how contemporary society has been shaped and misshapen in his opus work, *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World*. McGilchrist goes to great lengths to chronicle the difference between left brain (utilitarian, rational, mechanical) and right brain (creative, metaphor, insight) function. Most impressive, he demonstrates how populations for whole periods of history have shown the prevalence for right or left brain brain dominance—with epoch defining results.

McGilchrist then argues that the modern world is in a deeply mechanical and utilitarian left brain phase —and we are in trouble as a result. What else can account for the immolation of the West over the progressive imperative to place people into binary categories of oppressor or oppressed at a time of unprecedented acceptance of difference? The question is not whether injustice, racism or intolerance still exists— they do—but rather why, at the pinnacle of historical progress, do progressives claim that corrective measures—that will not achieve intended results and will surely destroy the West—must be undertaken without reserve?

A concrete consequence of modern epoch left brain dominance may be the ubiquitous decline of student mental health. The American College Health Association has conducted a survey of first year college students for decades. The National College

Health Assessment receives mental health self-assessment responses from 69,130 students at 129 institutions. Decades ago, the self-assessment of poor mental health was single digit, but by 2019 it had risen to 47% for women, and 46% for men. The post-covid figure was even more disturbing at 76% for women and 66% for men, making poor mental health the new majority population normal. And what can account for such a stark rise of mental health fragility? A 2024 Finnish study with a robust survey sample of 6000 respondents concluded that people of the 'woke' left have higher rates of depression and anxiety. Woke preoccupations with causes such as climate change are cited as particularly predictive of poor mental health.

Nietzsche famously claimed that "God is dead ... and we have killed him," not as argument for belief or disbelief in God, but because he foresaw that the extended left brain mechanistic world would destroy the concepts of transcendence and wonder—most prominently expressed in Christianity—without recognizing its value upholding civilization. Feeding the nihilistic machine without allowing for creativity, an inner life and individual expression, has its far-reaching consequences.

John Kennedy Toole expresses a complimentary thought in his posthumously published satirical novel, *A Confederacy of Dunces*. "With the breakdown of the Medieval system, the gods of Chaos, Lunacy and Bad Taste gained Ascendancy." Unlike in the modern age where charisma and aspirational groupthink rules, Kennedy's farcical antihero forges his own independent and heroic path. "When a true genius appears in the world, you may know him by this sign, that the dunces are all in a confederacy against him." Though the protagonist's pronouncements were intended to offend, people loved Toole's daft use of satire—which in winning the Nobel prize is a self-evident truth. As late as the 1960's when the novel was written, uncensored right brain satire was appreciated in a

manner barely tolerated today. Consequently, all the more need for satire, and all the more likelihood for satire to result in cancellation. It is our inclusive way.

In the modern world we are led to believe in unquestioning primacy of progressive ideology whose best definition is: uncritical thinking in the service of utopian causes for which outcomes need not apply (okay so my definition, but hey, at least I've still got some non-utilitarian right brain creative urges).

Which may help explain why we like literal. So, a low point for satire, comedy and farce. And this lack of humour has a direct impact on history. History's chronicling of murder, mayhem and atrocities has shifted its contemporary focus towards offending words. Without intending, without words that speak of offence, the hearer's (since we no longer read) sensibilities are the absolute arbiter for what constitutes offence, violence, crimes and misdemeanors. We have devolved.

So, is satire and farce still relevant in a literal world? Seems both a formula for being misunderstood as well as what is needed for understanding. Still, it is true that many among us have right-brain appreciation. Even moderns educated into left brain Stockholm Syndrome, have the potential for a right brain reprieve into a non-polarized, independent thinking world where doubt, uncertainty and wonder are welcomed possibilities. For those who dare to be discriminatingly judgmental, a willingness to offend in the name of truth might be a most liberating experience.

I'm sometimes asked by progressives just what is wrong with the aspirational, utopian ideals of the progressive agenda? Long answer short: they have never worked, are unworkable, and therefore will not work (exhibit A being the entirety of the Twentieth Century). This reality check sentiment was echoed by Robertson Davies in *Rebel Angels*, a satirical novel levelled at the university (and let's face it, there really is no more

worthy and easier target). For all the self-importance of degree holders, Davies writes, “How much more complicated life is than the attainment of a Ph.D. would lead one to believe!”

The question is, where do we go from here? Do we remain left brain literalists unable to see subtlety, contradiction, metaphor and hypocrisy, or do we explore for more? There is a Jesuit saying, “Give us a child till he’s seven and we’ll have him for life.” So what happens to a long-past-childhood child who is progressively captive from K-12, and then through the four year duration of a post-secondary degree? Just how do we disrupt the idea that we exclude people in the name of inclusion, that neuro-diversity and the diversity of ideas are not the very essence of diversity, and that equity can only be realized by a reordering of the world towards equality of outcome regardless of merit?

I know people who are concerned but not convinced that progressive left brain consequences are as damaging as evidence suggests. They assure me that the pendulum will swing back to a left/right brain balance. My rhetorical retort is, to where will the pendulum swing for 20 year-olds who know nothing other than their vacuous progressive education?

We are losing these cultural wars. Still, even with that uninspiring pronouncement, mine is a call for action and not capitulation. Let’s not lose hope, hopeless as things might seem. If the soap box of active persuasion doesn’t work, we can always try a right brain indirect approach and search for an audience willing to listen, think and laugh outside the soap box. *The University of Lost Causes* is my best work, and is—at the very least— argument for not taking ourselves too seriously in a world gone seriously mad.

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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* (Castle Quay Books, June, 2024), 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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