An Interview with Stanley Fish:
Aiming Low in the Ivory Tower

In a commencement address at Temple University last year, educator Stanley Fish alluded to the oft-quoted words of John F. Kennedy, but not for the reason you might expect. "The world outside the halls of ivy should not look at us and demand, What can you do for your country?" he said, "but rather say, in the words of the old TV commercial, 'Thanks, I needed that.'"

"I know that is not a fashionable thought," he admitted.

> The fashionable thoughts all go in the direction of engaged learning, community service, and political activism; but while these phrases name honorable activities, they do not name educational activities. Liberal Education, if it is to mean anything, if it is to be more than an appendage to politics and social reform, must stake its claim on the paradoxical property of being absolutely useless. Karl Marx once famously said, in more or less these words, "Our job is not to analyze the world, but to change it." But in the academy exactly the reverse is true: our job is not to change the world, but to analyze it. Analyzing it is what you've been doing for four or more years. Changing it is another matter entirely, and as I said at the beginning, as far as change and the future are concerned, you're on your own.

Literary theorist, professor, and former dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at the University of Illinois at Chicago, Fish writes a column for the *Chronicle of Higher Learning*. In his column, and more recently in the *New York Times,* Fish has voiced recurring doubts about the growing emphasis on service learning and civic engagement programs at colleges and universities. In an effort to better understand the "con" side of the service learning–civic engagement debate, we interviewed Stanley Fish in January 2005.

NCR: You wrote an article in the Chronicle of Higher Education *for which the headline was "Aim Low." I don't know if those were your words. . . .*

Oh, yes. One of the things I insist on when I write for the *Chronicle* is creating my own titles.

NCR: So we can hold you responsible for the provocative language of that title.

There are three *Chronicle* pieces, at least, that go over the same territory. "Aim Low" specifically addresses pedagogical and scholarly responsibility. Another is "Save the World on Your Own Time," which addresses the question of whether faculty should be concerned directly with the redress of injustices of the world or in the community, and I wrote another one called, "Is Everything Political?"

Those who believe that universities should be engaged in political activities argue that no form of human activity can really be isolated from political concerns. Of course, that is true. Any activity we engage in that involves dispute and disagreement could be characterized as political activity, but nevertheless there is a distinction between the kinds of political activities appropriate to different institutions. One must distinguish between the political activity you engage in when you go into a voting booth or when you contribute money to a candidate or campaign, on the one hand, and political activity that is appropriate to the academy on the other. In a university department, you argue about which approach to the subject matter should be represented in the curriculum. That too is a political activity,

but I would distinguish it strongly from the kind of political activity that we usually call partisan.

When I use the word *partisan,* I mean partisan politics of the kind that we've just experienced in spades in the 2004 election. Many things that go on in the academy are political in the strict sense. People in departments jockey for power or control of hiring decisions, and administrators fight over what direction educational activity will take. But there is a certain way in which the academy deals with questions that make it, in effect, academic, and this allows us to draw a line that should not be crossed. For example, most courses in a political science department will be by definition engaged with political matters, but there is an academic way to consider, examine, and explore these matters. In the course, you might be introduced to a whole series of political approaches to a set of problems—for example, environmental changes, affirmative action, welfare reform—but the instructor should not be attempting to steer you in a direction that will lead you to go out and vote in a certain way or to work for a certain cause.

NCR: Let's get back to the idea of "aiming low." What did you mean by that?

In a classroom situation, where you have designed and then teach a course, there are certain responsibilities that you take on. They are mundane responsibilities, but nevertheless they are at the heart of the experience. You must design the course and choose materials that are up to date and come up with assignments that make sense. You have to show up every day. You have to be prepared. You have to be able to return papers and quizzes promptly and, along with those papers and quizzes, helpful comments. You have to be available during office hours or at other times so students who need help can get help.

A lot of teachers think the aims of teaching a course should be higher, that they should be trying to fashion young students into certain kinds of thinkers, that they should be engaging them in an activity they call "critical thinking." In many cases, people believe that you should be training students to be more tolerant, or more respectful of others, or aware of the differences between persons and communities and nations. I am not saying that any of those goals is necessarily in and of itself a bad goal. What I am saying is that they are not properly the goals of an instructor who comes in to teach a course as advertised. The proper aim in teaching a course is to responsibly teach and present the materials, put the students in possession of those materials and also in possession of the skills that will enable them to research both during the semester and, should they choose, after the semester is over, and that's it. But, of course, if you do that in a responsible way, as anyone who has ever taught knows, it's a heck of a lot of work, and you don't have much time left over for grand visions.

This nuts-and-bolts view of the matter goes against the grain of many in the academy (at least in the humanities and social sciences) who entered the profession in the 1960s or early 1970s and regarded the world of education as an arena in which the political hopes that they held earlier but weren't quite realized might be realized. They talk about the "transformative" power of education and the power of education to enlighten; I think of those possibilities as secondary by-products of what we do. It may be that some student comes out of my course not only in possession of the materials and the skills necessary to study those materials but also with a plan for life, and one that I would be happy to hear about. It may be that another student in the same class, reading the same materials, taking the same quizzes, producing papers according to the same assignments, instead becomes a white-collar criminal and lives a life that would make me both unhappy and censorious. What I want to say is that neither of those lives is my responsibility as an instructor. I cannot take credit for the person who comes out of my class and leads a life that anyone would regard

as exemplary; nor should I be blamed for someone who took my class and then goes on to live a life that anyone would criticize.

NCR: Well, that's quite a departure, isn't it, from the original purpose of the university?

That's true. In the most recent issue of a journal called *Critical Inquiry,* I wrote a piece called "Take This Job and Do It: Administering the University Without an Idea." In it I survey some of the recent books and essays on the decline of universities or the crisis of universities and they all point backward to a supposedly golden age when a university was informed by a coherent sense of what it was trying to do and all of those who were engaged in the university signed on to that mission. The lament is that this sense of coherence has in fact disappeared, and now universities are entities difficult to describe with a single overriding purpose. There are lots of reasons this has happened, one of them being the democratization of higher education. It was very much easier to have a coherent vision of what a university was when most of the professors and students came from a small class of persons, but after World War II and the GI Bill of Rights, feminism, and many other things—it would take too long to discuss today—the university and college in general, and especially community colleges, aren't that way at all. So in response there has been an effort to come up with a new sense of coherence. What I am saying is, "Forget it. It's not going to happen." The only coherence you can achieve is the coherence of a well-organized, well-taught course, or in the case of a department one that has thought through its course of instruction, offers it, monitors it, validates its results, and produces students who, with respect to the subject at hand, know what they are talking about. Anything more, and you risk not only failure but also not paying attention to those nuts-and-bolts matters. I find that as a general rule the higher the aims of an academic, the lower the level of his or her performance in those duties for which he or she is actually paid. Responsibility of a pedagogical kind seems to exist in an inverse relationship to noble aspirations in the education world.

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NCR: What do you think of the idea of service learning?

Service learning is a good idea so long as it doesn't count for academic credit. That is, I don't see anything wrong with giving students the opportunity to intern in a variety of ways that have now become available, but I don't consider that learning; I consider it social work.

NCR: What if you are a social-work major?

Let's take another example. Suppose you are studying the psychology of education, and you are interested in the reading process and how students in elementary school learn how to read, and you develop as part of a research project a new way of teaching reading that you think might improve test scores and reading ability. If you go out and hook up with a school and test your new theories, you are certainly doing work in the world, but the work you are doing is a direct extension of the academic project, and you go out as you would in any experimental situation: to try to verify your hypotheses. But attempting to get the state legislature to mandate the course of instruction that you and your colleagues have developed—a perfectly worthy thing to do—is not academic. You should not get credit for it, and you should not do it on the state's or the university's time.

NCR: What about civic engagement or civic involvement by universities themselves, say, in efforts to revitalize the communities around them?

I think there are two ways of thinking about it. You could think of it as a good-neighbor policy for universities, which is an excellent idea and hasn't always been followed. Alternatively, there is the idea, which is very old, that part of your function as a college or university is to fashion character or mold citizens.

NCR: You wouldn't have the same level of concern about the idea of a university trying to promote community revitalization?

Not at all. There have been classic instances—let's say, Columbia University—where decades of hostility and an adversarial relationship between town and gown have been no good for either. I know that Columbia University is attempting to address the problem. My own university, which is in the middle of a neighborhood that was once considered dangerous by some, at least after hours, has played a role in the revitalization of several neighborhoods here in Chicago.

NCR: So, perhaps you are not such a contrarian, after all.

Well, it depends. Since I published "Aim Low" and another piece in the *New York Times* called "Why We Built the Ivory Tower," there have been very strong reactions, usually of a negative kind and usually reinstituting old charges of the ivory-tower syndrome, to my supposed desire to be entirely divorced from the world—the illusion that the university stands apart and has no relationship with the rest of society. All these characterizations have been prompted by these pieces.

What set me off in all of this was the book called *Educating Citizens: Preparing America's Undergraduates for Lives of Moral and Civic Responsibility,* a multiauthored book and a product of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. The authors believe that it is in fact a function of American education to produce citizens who will perform in certain ways. The book begins with a large complaint that this commitment, on the part of education, to producing civic behavior of a certain type has waned in recent decades, and then it goes on in the next two hundred pages to explain why it is that we should in fact teach students ethics and morality and citizenship. I think we should teach students ethics as a subject, morality as a subject, citizenship as a subject. I'm teaching a course starting next week called Religion, Citizenship, and Identity, but I do not believe that we as instructors should be concerned with producing moralities, or civic responsibility, in our students.

NCR: In other words, you wouldn't mind having a course on civics, but to say, "Go out and be good citizens, students," that's where the line is.

When I was in high school, which was a long time ago, there was a course in civics. It explained how the various forms of government work in the United States. You learned about how local governments work and how states work, and to some extent the structure of the judicial system; you learned those details and the history of how some of these institutions were established. This seems to me to be a perfectly good kind of civic education. It informs students. It gives students information. But it falls short of inculcating a sense of civic responsibility or of morality.

I'm often accused of trying to remove morality or moral concerns from the university. To which I would respond no. I think there are moral concerns that relate to academic life, and to some extent they have to do with the forms of responsibility I've already detailed, and also with a certain sense of what you don't do: you don't plagiarize. You acknowledge the work of others when you publish your own work. You don't allow students in your classes to cheat. All of those are moral imperatives, but they are moral imperatives that directly flow from the educational context, and it is an open question as to whether or not your operating in a moral

context of the academy then translates into your being a moral person in other areas of behavior.

Ethics is a topic in philosophy. You study a number of philosophers on a range of questions, and you compare how the various philosophers address these ethical questions and you relate their answers to movements in the history of philosophy. The next step is the one I would not want to take, the step in which you take time deciding which of them is right. It doesn't mean your students may not, in their own mind and reflection, have been persuaded by one rather than the other, but that's not what you should be doing. It is a question of professional training. For me, part of the issue is, What is it that we as scholars and educators are trained to do? Are we trained as therapists? Are we trained pastors or rabbis? Are we trained in the art of civic government? The answer in most cases is absolutely not, so we should not be practicing these other arts without a license. We should instead be paying attention to the art we have been trained to perform, which is the art of teaching, the art of introducing students to the academic or intellectual consideration of issues as they have been discussed in the course of whatever period of history you're interested in.

In a way, what I'm saying is, I myself don't finally *believe* in education. I do believe that you can introduce people to bodies of material and ways of considering the material, or to experimental techniques. You can, that is, provide knowledge and skill, and there are ways of measuring whether you have done so. But as for fostering the moral fiber of community life, I don't see any particular relationship between education and that. I don't want to look to education for salvation. I don't think you'll find it there. I think you should look to education for education, for training and introduction of bodies of knowledge of which students were before ignorant.

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