



Shaping the Futures of Learning in the Digital Age

The Castle and The Paths: A Story with Two Endings

A. Michael Berman

California State University, Office of the Chancellor

Abstract: The future of higher education is imagined here in the form of a parable. The reader is challenged to rethink the role and purpose of higher education and the potential paths for evolution in the future.

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ONCE UPON A TIME, a long time ago, in a town not too far from here, there was a castle. It was a large, imposing castle with high stone walls and a huge wooden door in front that was usually closed and barred, and a smaller door in back.

The Castle sat upon a tall, craggy peak with a few narrow paths leading to the front door, and a short straight path from the rear. At the base of the peak was a small Village that got along from day-to-day in the shadow of the Castle and the craggy peak.

The Castle was ruled by a rich King, who was mostly friendly and benign but had flashes of anger now and then. When anyone asked him how he became the King, he said it had always been so, and always would be.

Once a year, a group of young men (and only men, back in that long ago time) would make their way to the front door. It was a long hard trip from the Village to the front door, but

these men had many helpers to carry their possessions and smooth the way, so it wasn't really as hard as it looked. They would knock at the door and ask to be admitted, and the King would open the door, take a look and let most of them in.

The rules about who was allowed to enter weren't all that clear, but everyone in the Village could see that it was only the sons of the more prosperous men who were admitted, so most people never even tried to climb to the peak.

The men who were admitted would enter the Castle and disappear into the mysterious precinct inside. After four or five years the men would emerge from the other side, a bit older, and, it's said, a bit wiser.

But the biggest change was a special Badge that each man wore on his chest. Each man's Badge certified that he had completed his quest inside the castle and had been found of sufficient intelligence, character, and persistence to be named a "graduate" of the castle. A man with a graduate Badge could be assured of respect in the community and a good income. The other villagers looked upon these graduates with a mixture of reverence and envy – a true sign that the bearer was noble and true of heart.

Sometimes a child from a poor family would fight his way up the hill and manage to make it into the Castle, to complete the quest, and to earn the Badge. The King even helped out some of these men by paying for their food and lodging inside the Castle. The King liked to point these men out to the villagers and say "See? Everyone has a chance to earn a badge. You just have to be noble and true of heart."

The villagers would smile and nod, but late in the evening by the home fires and at the pubs they would mutter that a few lucky ones such as themselves might make it through the Castle, but everyone knew it was mostly the sons of the rich that got the chance.

But the appeal of earning the badge was great, and over time more and more of the young men, and even a few young women, would fight their way up the craggy peak and try to enter the doors. The King was happy with this because there just weren't that many who could make it, and he thought that the villagers would be satisfied as long as they had *hope* that their sons and daughters had a chance to earn a badge, even if only a few made it all the way to the back door of the Castle.

One day a message came from a land across the sea. The Kingdom had been challenged to a great war. The King was forced to mobilize the people like never before – nearly all the young men and some of the women had to fight in the army, and everyone sacrificed as never before. As the hard fighting went on, every family felt the loss of a son or daughter, and the King's purse was depleted of much of his gold.

To the great relief of all, the Kingdom won the war and the surviving soldiers returned to the Village. The King was grateful – he appreciated the sacrifice of his people – but also nervous – how would he keep these returning warriors happy and satisfied, and prevent them from turning against him?

Perhaps, he thought, if *everyone* had the chance to enter the Castle, the people would be happy with the King. So he decreed across his land that every soldier could come to the Castle, and the King would help pay for it.

The next day, thousands of soldiers began to climb the hill to appeal for entry. The King was forced to scramble and add new wings to the Castle to accommodate them all. It was a strain on his already depleted treasures, but more young men and many women managed to enter the Castle. And, to the King's relief, as they left the Castle they helped make the village richer and more prosperous than it had even been before, and their taxes quickly refilled the King's coffers.

Times were good, and many families that had never had a “badge-uate” were proud of their children and all the success and happiness they found upon leaving the Castle.

The King was happy, but nervous too. What had once been a privilege for the few now became an entitlement for the many. The King’s lords started saying things like “Everyone should have a right to come to the Castle” and “Nobody can succeed without a badge.” Soon the path to the Castle was crowded day and night as people made the climb up the craggy peak.

What had once been a somewhat difficult path became steeper and harder as the King got tired of spending his gold to maintain it. Even worse, many of the young men and women were being pushed up the path against their will, uncertain that they even wanted to enter the Castle. Every day, the Village would hear the cries as some of the bodies of their children tossed over the walls of the Castle and into the rocky moat below, because they were not noble and true of heart, or at least, that’s what the Castle guards would say.

Faced with an ever-increasing deluge at the door, the King started asking those who would enter to give up all the gold they had to get inside, or to promise to pay later for the expense of their time inside the Castle. Of course, many families had no money to pay, so he increased the taxes on the villagers.

At night around the home fires and in the pubs, the villagers that had a little money would complain that they were paying twice – they had to pay more for their own children, and they had to pay taxes for other people’s children too. Most of them were (reasonably) sure it was worth it for their children, but they really disliked paying for the children of others, especially since they were convinced that many were neither noble nor true of heart and would just end up tossed into the moat.

Now, all through the years that the Castle had stood upon the craggy peak, there had been a few people who had figured out that if they made their way around the Castle rather than going through it, they could get to the back and have a happy and prosperous life without getting a badge. There were even some who had entered the front door of the Castle and been tossed into the moat, or who had jumped voluntarily, and had then made their difficult way on their own to a happy and prosperous life. But everyone knew that the path around the Castle was even harder than the path through the Castle, so they didn’t really pay that much attention to those hardy souls.

But as the path to the Castle got tougher and more crowded, and as the price for admission got higher and higher, and as the badge-uates left owing more and more to the King, the path *around* the Castle started to look more attractive than ever before. A new guild of mercenary guides began to stand at the foot of the path, offering to lead the way, and some young men and women paid to be led on an alternative path. Some of the guides were noble and true of heart, and they led their charges to a happy and prosperous life, while others would take all the gold that the young men and women had, and even some of the King’s gold, and then abandon their followers at the bottom of the moat.

Over time, more and more of the secrets of the Castle begin to spill over the walls and become available for free on the outside. Young men and women willingly traded these open “secrets” among themselves to help each other guide their way around the craggy peak. Some of the more sympathetic lords and ladies inside the Castle began to share their secrets with the young travelers. Many feet made the path around the craggy peak wider and easier to find, and the path became well-marked and much easier to traverse. It was still difficult, but nothing like it had been in years past.

At first, the King and his courtiers paid no attention to the young men and women making their way around the peak. “We know the Castle is the right path,” they would say. “Anything else is just inferior.” They could see that there were still thousands at the door every day with gold in their hands, clamoring to come inside, and they were convinced it would always be that way.

The villagers could see that many of the people who had made their way around the craggy peak were noble and true of heart, and they weren’t always so sure that the folks coming out the back door of the Castle were all that virtuous. They would say things like “those badges don’t mean what they used to” and “the badge-wearers were a lot more noble when We left the Castle.” But they still depended upon the badge as a true sign, and they were a little suspicious of those who hadn’t made the formal passage through the Castle.

Then one day, the villagers noticed that some of those who had made their way around the craggy peak were wearing badges of their own. These badges were awarded for the quests that had been achieved in the difficult path around the craggy peak. At first, the villagers were suspicious and even contemptuous of these alternative badges, but as more and more young people took the alternate path and earned the new badges, the Village began to recognize that the right badge could tell you who was noble and true of heart.

Some in the village even recognized that the feats that had been accomplished in the path around the craggy peak were more like the everyday challenges that they faced in the village, and they began to value the quest badges even more than the traditional badge of the Castle, which, everyone agreed, wasn’t all that it used to be.

The King and his courtiers sneered at the alternative badges. They were sure it was a fraud and a fad, and that the tried-and-true path through the Castle would always be the One True Way. He added a few extra badges himself, and made the path through the Castle a little more clearly marked and less mysterious, but he kept collecting gold at the door and tossing men and women into the moat if he thought they didn’t measure up. His courtiers assured him not to worry, this too would pass, and there would always be a Castle.

This story has two endings, and you can decide which one you like.

Some say that the King finally began to see the error of his ways. He saw that there were a lot of good things about what the Castle could do, and he started to tear down the walls. Over time, the Castle and the path around the craggy peak became indistinguishable, and people of all ages and from all families had the freedom to choose the right path. Everyone in the Village had a reasonable chance to take advantage of the good things that were in the Castle.

Of course, not everyone would make it to the other side – you still had to be noble and true of heart – but the villagers could see that as long as you had a good pair of shoes and were brave, and perhaps had a few brave comrades to help you, you could make it to a happy and prosperous life.

And everyone lived happily ever after.

But if you ask me, I think that the King never did understand what was happening. More and more people swarmed around the craggy peak, like a giant river. Their footsteps eroded the sides of the peak and the walls began to crumble.

In a panic, the King fled as a mob of angry villagers made their way over the ruins of the walls and destroyed the Castle. Much of what was in the Castle was vain and ugly, but there was also beauty and truth there too. Mobs don’t really care about that – everything was tossed into the moat.

A hundred years of darkness followed, as even the alternative path was damaged beyond repair. Eventually, the noble and true of heart restored the Village to happiness and prosperity, but that's another story.

The End

Author Notes

A. Michael Berman

California State University, Office of the Chancellor

mberman@calstate.edu

Guest Editor Notes

Sean M. Leahy, PhD

Arizona State University, Director of Technology Initiatives

sean.m.leahy@asu.edu

Samantha Adams Becker

Arizona State University, Executive Director, Creative & Communications, University Technology Office; Community Director, ShapingEDU

sam.becker@asu.edu

Ben Scragg, MA, MBA

Arizona State University, Director of Design Initiatives

bscragg@asu.edu

Kim Flintoff

Peter Carnley ACS, TIDES Coordinator

kflintoff@pcacs.wa.edu.au



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