Planting Olive Trees

Matthew Johnsen

In the past few months, I've spoken with a number of people about Worcester. You may not know that Worcester is approaching its 300th year as an occupied settlement. This has led me to think about where Worcester is and the possibility of shaping a long-term vision of Worcester 300 years from now.

Currently, Worcester is a city of great unevenness and inequality: marvelous cultural resources (museums, educational institutions, musical organizations, artists, newspaper, magazines, and variety of associations) but also tremendous problems (poverty, homelessness, foreclosures, crime). Some people talk about two Worcester's: Affluent neighborhoods abut impoverished neighborhoods—with little interaction between them. Despite being home to thirteen colleges and universities, our K12 students rank poorly relative in the state. Worcester attracts a diverse population from many parts of the world: we are home of the largest population of Ghanaians outside of Ghana.

As I initially started to think about the future of Worcester, another city came to mind: Oxford in England. Have any of you visited Oxford?? It is the quintessential university town, the "city of dreaming spires" seemingly built around the colleges that make up Oxford University. Founded almost 1000 years ago, there is a palpable sense of history as you walk around the city. It has magnificent museums, a tremendous library, beautiful parks, is located on a river that is used for races and punting. There seems to be a harmony between the city and the colleges. In short, a beautiful place. That seems quite a bit unlike what we think about Worcester MA. Even thinking about comparing Worcester to Oxford seems almost laughable – they seem so unlike.

But are they?

Table 1: Brief Comparison of Worcester MA and Oxford UK

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Oxford</th>
<th>Worcester</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>They have similar populations</td>
<td>165k</td>
<td>181k</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher Education students</td>
<td>21K</td>
<td>&gt;30K</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty and staff</td>
<td>18K</td>
<td>16K</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of colleges/universities</td>
<td>38 ind colleges</td>
<td>13 ind colleges</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City</td>
<td>Parks</td>
<td>Parks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Thames</td>
<td>Quinsigamond</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Indian Lake</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both have historic industrial base</td>
<td>Mini cooper</td>
<td>Storied past – barbed wire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Morris motors</td>
<td>Flush toilet, Happy face…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>and many other things</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One place where quite different</td>
<td>9M visitors/yr</td>
<td>1-2M visitors/yr</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If they are alike in so many ways, why do they seem so different? Why in one do we see the epitome of higher education and in the other do we find ourselves hard pressed to find students downtown on most weeknights... and is affectionately (or not so affectionately) known as Wormtown…. In this brief, I try to
analyze this question and put forward a plan that I believe has the possibility for fundamentally transforming Worcester. The plan is aimed at the next three hundred years, but many elements can be implemented in upcoming years to begin to make visible differences.

Ultimately, I believe that the crux of the difference lies in this: Collectively our higher education institutions have not as a whole taken on the responsibility that one would assume an industry that employs or educates a quarter of its population. One would expect that such an industry in a city would make itself felt in many ways: in good works; in motivating businesses to support its needs; in serving those affiliated with it; in finding ways of keeping educated citizens in the city.

For a number of reasons, our thirteen colleges and universities each think about their own very narrow portions of the pie and do not see the health and welfare of the city as their common goal and responsibility. A number of factors dilute the potential contributions that higher education could make to the city as a whole, including the separation of the colleges from one another, the relative lack of educational institutions in the center of the city, the transitional nature of the current downtown situation, and relatively weak connections (geographic, institutional, and infrastructure).

The "big idea" involves thinking about a more energetic role for higher education in the future of the city: In part by inspiring and tapping the energy of the 30,000 students and the 16,000 staff and faculty who make Worcester their educational home. I'm talking about projects that would make a visible, lasting difference for the city.

This includes: visible efforts by students and colleges to improve the city; visible efforts by the consortium to improve the city; creation of a vibrant center of the city; visible efforts to connect the colleges and universities with one another -- collaborations on key resources that could benefit students at all universities.

To be successful, such an effort must also involve motivating and tapping the good will of the citizens of Worcester to join in such efforts, voting with their time and effort to help make changes that may create ripples.

The metaphor that I've arrived at is one of “Planting Olive Trees”: This is taken from a story by Helen Zughaib:

Visiting Jiddu (Grandfather) and Teta (Grandmother) in their mountain village was always a special treat. Teta would have special sweets and my favorite food prepared for me. Best of all though was Jiddu taking me with him to the fields. Sometimes it was just a brief trip to see how the plants were growing. But sometimes Jiddu would ask me to be "Jiddu's helper" and help him with some small chores. During one visit, Jiddu told me that we would be planting olive trees. Because we would be staying in the fields all day, we had to bring with us a zuwaidy (picnic lunch), water and other provisions.

The next morning, Jiddu and I set out for the fields much earlier than usual with a donkey carrying our provisions and small olive plants. We worked hard planting the young olive trees in furrows which Jiddu had dug earlier. My job was to hold the plant straight while Jiddu would dig a small hole in the ground for each plant. Then I would ladle some water from a water drum and water each new olive tree.

During our break for lunch, I told Jiddu that next year I would return to help him harvest the olive crop. He smiled and said that would be difficult because olive trees take many years before they bear fruit.
Disappointed, I asked him why we were bothering to plant olive trees if we would be dead before they would give us any fruit. He looked at me with a very serious expression and said: “Zara’u fa akalna, nazra’u fa ya’kulun.” (They planted so we would eat; we plant so our descendants will eat.)

Some olive trees take literally generations to mature to the point that they can be harvested. Why take the time to plant olive trees? In a sense, you plant them for future generations. I want us to begin planting olive trees for future generations of Worcester citizens.

This planting effort involves efforts to envision and create a future. This morning I will focus on 10 points:

1. **Greater consciousness about sustainability** -- and support to build a more sustainable Worcester. This might include various projects to reduce reliance on conventional energy sources and replacing them with sources that are greener, less polluting, and more sustainable in the long-term. We must also find ways of better connecting the city for walkers, bikers, bus riders must be a part of this effort. In many European cities, the emphasis on walking and biking is striking. In Amsterdam, there are more bikes than people, and bike lanes on virtually every street to make biking safer.

2. This will probably also involve efforts to promote **small but meaningful changes on the part of citizens to reduce their carbon footprints and to consider sustainability** as they make life decisions. Incremental improvements will add up in the right direction over time.

3. **Consciousness about the role of education in the city**: We need to develop a **central place** in Worcester where there could be more vibrant interaction between students and faculty from different colleges and universities and between them and downtown businesses and resources. Many buildings are currently unused or underused. Cross-institutional classes, centers, activities, and resources could at once provide greater resources for students and faculty, and also mark Worcester as a center of higher education in the state and nation and provide a reason for students and faculty to come downtown. Where might such a central place be? One candidate is Lincoln Square in the center of the city. The corner of Main Street where Belmont and Highland Streets meet, currently has dead buildings on three of its four corners: the former County Courthouse, the beautiful and majestic (but crumbling) Memorial Auditorium, and the Worcester Voke building. A WPI professor, John Wilkes proposes transforming a part of Memorial Auditorium into a museum in which colleges and universities transmit their visions of the future to generations of students. The area is increasingly surrounded by development related to WPI and the Mass College of Pharmacy.

4. In addition, the fact that there are equal numbers of college and K-12 students suggest that there might be an **important role that college students could play in educating and mentoring K12 students**. Imagine a future where each K12 student can draw on the support and mentorship of an undergraduate... it is theoretically possible.

5. **Focus on beauty -- both natural and manmade**: This could involve efforts to plant (replant) trees, especially given devastation of beetles and ice storms, beautify particular parts of Worcester in ways that are sustainable, work together to improve the cleanliness and the impression that Worcester makes. We must keep Worcester free of trash – but our efforts should go beyond removing trash to beautifying the landscape and our built environment. It could also involve architectural initiatives to rehabilitate key structures -- or design and build new buildings which add to the beauty and harmony of the city.
6. **Commitment to social justice:** We must find ways to lessen the chasm between rich and poor, black and white, new immigrants and established citizens. Perhaps this begins by making education more accessible.

7. **Commitment to universal design:** We must create a future in which disabilities and impairments have less of an impact because we have designed our environments, our buildings and our processes in ways that are universally accessible.

8. **Celebrating Worcester’s illustrious past -- its multifaceted present and its vibrant future.** We must develop ways of helping people celebrate and develop a wider understanding of Worcester’s past, highlighting its many public resources and cultural amenities, and forging a vision of Worcester that moves beyond pessimism that things can’t get done. Worcester has enormous cultural capital--music, museums, art, and arts schools--that should also be celebrated and play an important role in redesigning the city.

9. **We should build connections of all sorts between the colleges and universities.** Some may be physical connections (bike lanes that join schools with one another). Some may be educational (joint graduate programs, greater ease of cross-registration between colleges). Some may in the long-term forge a different picture of the organization of higher education in the city.

10. We should forge a **joint understanding between leaders in the city and higher education** about the importance of higher education in the city and the responsibility that comes with employing or educating a number of people equal to a quarter of the population of the city.

Ultimately, one of the few things that we can be reasonably sure of in 300 years is that these colleges and universities are going to be in Worcester: They are not leaving. It is in the interest of both the city and the colleges to make long-term improvements in the city to make it more viable, more livable for all its citizens. Our colleges depend on the viability of the city and the future viability of the city depends on the viability of the colleges!

I have presented a few high points about what these efforts to create a more livable city in the future might look like and have begun to speak with a variety of folks who have their own ideas. I am convinced that many current efforts that are aimed in the right directions – I am also convinced that the infusion of the energy, intelligence, and will of 45,000 citizens involved in higher education could make an astounding difference to our city’s future.

_The anthropologist Gregory Bateson tells this story:_

```
Founded in 1379, New College, Oxford is one of the newer Oxford colleges. It has, like other colleges, a great dining hall with huge oak beams across the top, as large as two feet square, and forty-five feet long each.

A century ago (1879), an entomologist went up into the roof of the dining hall with a penknife and poked at the beams and found that they were full of beetles. This was reported to the College Council, which met the news with dismay: beams this large were now very hard, if not impossible to come by. “Where would they get beams of that caliber?” they worried.
A Junior Fellow stuck his neck out and suggested that there might be some worthy oaks on the College lands. These colleges are endowed with pieces of land scattered across the country which are run by a
```
college Forester. They called in the College Forester, who had not been near the college itself for some years, and asked him if there were any oaks for possible use. He pulled his forelock and said, “Well sirs, we was wonderin’ when you’d be askin’.”

When the College was founded, a grove of oaks had been planted to replace the beams in the dining hall when they became beetly, because oak beams always become beetly in the end. This plan had been passed down from one Forester to the next for over five hundred years saying “You don’t cut them oaks. Them’s for the College Hall.”

Ultimately, while the story is perhaps apocryphal, the idea of replacing and managing resources for the future, and the lesson in long term thinking is not.

I am interested in thinking together with people in this congregation – and people across the city (and the country) about the kind of deep sustainability and long-term thinking reflected in this story. If we want to create the cities of our ideals, today we must plant the seeds for the olive trees to be harvested generations from now. Dear friends, as we approach our 300th anniversary, let us each consider the seeds of the kind of city (and world) that the grandchildren of our grandchildren – and their grandchildren as well will harvest.

This presentation was given at Unitarian Universalist Church of Worcester December 12, 2011 in a service entitled “Planting Olive Trees.” The guest speaker for this service was Matthew Johnsen, Ph.D., Chair of the Sociology Department at Worcester State University. For further information, please contact him at Matthew.Johnsen@worcester.edu, @JohnsenWSU,