

Preface

The thirteen essays published in this year's *TCNJ Journal of Student Scholarship* were selected from among a pool of very competitive submissions for their outstanding scholarship and writing. Indeed, they are a testimony to the riches of TCNJ's intellectual community. The thematic diversity of these projects is enormous: they range from the detailed evidence-gathering of the sciences to the more discursive investigations of the humanities and social sciences. Now, this diversity might, from one point of view, seem untidy. After all, what does the effect of binge drinking on liver function have to do with third world feminism, or radial velocity analysis of a binary star with George Martin and the Beatles? I'll grant that, topically, these essays may seem discordant and yet, at the same time, I hear a melody in their joined voices, a collective music. Let me explain what I mean by way of a short detour through one of the fantastical universes created by Ursula K. LeGuinn.

In her science fiction novel, *The Telling*, LeGuin invents a planet called Aka that has been taken over by an authoritarian regime. This regime closely monitors its citizens for obedience, and harshly punishes those who do not adhere to its ideology of technological advancement and wealth production. The main character, Suttu, is an official observer who has arrived in a light-speed ship from earth. Underneath the hard surface of the police state and its triumphalist ideology, Suttu discovers, when she travels into the hinterlands, that the traditional culture of the planet is still alive. In fact, an ancient religion is still practiced by many – a religion known as “the telling.” Suttu is both enthralled and mystified by the telling because it seems to have no content – no specific beliefs – but is based on a practice simply of coming together as a community and telling and listening to stories. Telling, they say, is what humans beings do, what they must do, if they are not to become lost. Animals, they explain, do not need words. They are not lost – they know the way they need to go:

But all we know is how to learn. How to study, how to listen, how to talk, how to tell. If we don't tell the world, we don't know the world. ... Without the telling, we don't have anything at all. The moment goes by like the water of a river. We'd tumble and spin and be helpless if we tried to live in the moment. We'd be like a baby. A baby can do it, but we'd drown. Our minds need to tell, need the telling. To hold. The past has passed, and there's nothing in the future to catch hold of. The future is nothing yet. How could anybody live there? So what we have is the words that tell what happened and what happens. What was and is.

In contrast to their government, the Akan people regard learning and knowledge as a *practice* in the present, not as an accumulation of technological know-how or extricable facts in the service of future wealth. Moreover, they regard the practice of telling and listening as sacred. It is what makes us human: it gives us our sense of location, identity, and purpose.

I was saying that I heard a collective music in the thematically diverse essays of this year's *Journal*. The music I hear is Akan in character. Imagine with me that these essays constitute a round of telling. They tell of many worlds. They tell of Physics and Biology, History and Psychology, Music and Women's and Gender Studies. Come and listen to the voices of our tellers, to the collective music of their words that tell what is and what was so that we can know the world and ourselves in it.

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