A dustpan, a desert, and a search for moral order

My theological education began at Deep Springs College, a two-year work school in California.

by Benjamin J. Dueholm in the February 2025 issue
Published on February 3, 2025

Students at Deep Springs College vote on issues of governance in 2003. Since 1917 the unconventional school has enrolled about 26 students at a time, making it among the most selective programs in the US. (Spencer Weiner / *Los Angeles Times*, via Getty)

Before I even saw the caption, I knew who I was looking at in the photograph of a member of Congress cleaning up debris in the Capitol rotunda late on the night of January 6, 2021. He was dutifully wearing a mask, and his unassertive hairline and paternal bearing were not distinguishable from many of his colleagues. But I was

certain it was Andy Kim, then a representative from New Jersey. Kim is now a senator and was previously a national security staffer in the Obama White House, a State Department adviser in Afghanistan, and a Rhodes and Truman Scholar. His instinctive embrace of cleanup work, however, marked him as an alumnus of Deep Springs College in California.

When I arrived at Deep Springs as a student, a few years before Kim, there were 26 of us in two classes. All of us, until 2018, were male, and our surroundings looked every minute of their 80 years. Decades of unaccompanied boys had transformed the main building into something akin to a late-period Keith Richards; it stood, but you didn't quite know how. The bathrooms had received a Reagan-era update, and before that—rumor had it, in the 1940s—the desks had all been nailed into the walls. Smoking, then a common vice, was centralized on the front porch around a multitiered vessel colloquially known as the "pagoda of sin" which, when it was knocked over and cracked in half, turned out to have accumulated multicolored sedimentary layers of old cigarettes, like the rock of the surrounding mountains.

The grit of the desert intruded at every strained seam and aching joint of the place. Cleaning up was a constant necessity. One day, those of us tasked with washing the pots and dishes decided to deep clean the kitchen. We made an event of it, getting enthusiastic help off and on from the rest of the student body. We were at it for 12 hours, pulling every table and appliance away from the wall, scouring every surface, degreasing everything we could reach. Three of us were left at the end, late in the evening, and as we put everything back and looked upon our handiwork, one classmate said, "It just doesn't look that clean." It was the sort of truth you can never forgive someone for speaking aloud.

That's what I felt in my bones as I saw that picture of Kim cleaning up someone else's mess. Deep Springs teaches its students two things above all else: (1) you are responsible for the world, and (2) you will screw it up. It brought me back, in other words, to the place my theological education began.

Perched in a high desert valley, Deep Springs has been forming its tiny classes of students through its distinctive tuition-free program of academics, labor, and self--government since 1917. It was the dream of an industrialist named L. L. Nunn, who made a fortune pioneering alternating current electricity and spent it on educational experiments. One, Telluride House at Cornell University, still stands. Another was a

short-lived residential college in Virginia meant to nurture young men of promise into lives of leadership and service. Its policy of strict isolation proved weaker than the lures of the nearby town.

But Deep Springs Valley was remote even from the dusty hamlets in either direction. After finding that high lonesome locale and naming his new school after it, Nunn's new experiment lasted, hurling its young students into the farm fields, desert pastures, and bare-bones classrooms of a strenuous life. The high Victorian idealism of the school's founder would persist, through cultural transitions and financial distress, in recurring debates about the exhortations in his writings. Seek "the moral order of the universe," Nunn told his young charges. Aspire to a life of "service to humanity." And perhaps most peculiarly, listen to "the voice of the desert."

From the beginning, Deep Springs has given its students a remarkable scope of responsibilities. The coursework centered on liberal arts, with a catalog that varied widely over the expertise of a shifting cast of faculty. Modern Poetry, Social Contract Theory, and Mann and Kafka were some of the popular courses when I was there. More recent years have featured courses such as Plato's *Republic*, The History and Future of Infectious Disease, and Linear Algebra and Data Science. They are heavy on reading and discussion, which is fine because as far as I know, smartphones still don't work there and there's still no campus Wi-Fi. Students vote on the course proposals offered by the faculty, a mix of short-term (one semester) and long-term (annually renewable up to six years) appointees. Students are free to take whatever classes they like, though public speaking is required of everyone for both years.

Just outside the classroom, the students fill roles like milking the dairy cows morning and afternoon, irrigating the alfalfa fields, feeding the animals, and cooking meals. The most demanding and competitive role is that of cowboy—the coeducational student body opted to retain the gendered title—who tends the herd of beef cattle through calving season and lives with it in summer grazing areas higher in the mountains. A few professional staff members direct and supervise the work and inevitably help with troubleshooting, but the student jobs are time-consuming, sometimes uncomfortable, and not infrequently dirty. One winter, as a member of the farm team, I helped make some hundreds of tons of compost out of hay, water, and lots and lots of manure. I pity the people who sat near me on my plane ride home for that winter break.

Students also staff some of the administrative roles and most of the committees that allocate labor duties, interview and hire faculty, invite new students, and produce the college publications. At all times, two students serve as full voting members of the board of trustees. The whole student body holds an official meeting every week to conduct its business, which—improbable though it may sound for such a small group so far away from anyone but each other—can last late into the night.

All of this is surrounded by shocking contrasts: between a tight-knit circle of buildings and the immensity of the desert, warm communal spaces and the night sky full of stars, people you both love and can't stop quarreling with, ground rules prohibiting substance use and going to town and their periodic infraction, high ideals of leadership and service and their inevitable betrayal.

Those ideals felt old-fashioned long before my fully ironized cohort arrived. Like the original 1917 furniture, they were things out of time, showing the effects of hard use, beheld and discussed and used with an attitude that spun quickly and imperceptibly from sarcasm to admiration and back. "Leadership and service" could be a comical refrain when you were fixing a dumb mistake or doing something pointless. Did all of it make any of us better people? Even now I can't really say. But at its best, it opened us to possibilities within ourselves we never knew were there.

Our alumni have embodied this legacy in a sometimes unnerving diversity of ways. Kim is one of two who have been elected to Congress. (A third, Thomas Fairchild, tried unsuccessfully to unseat Joseph McCarthy in 1952, an experience he discussed philosophically with me during a visit to campus.) There have been engineers and entrepreneurs, scholars and researchers, ambassadors and spooks (confirmed and suspected), nonprofit executives and journalists. One died in action in Vietnam. Clergy careers are rare, though Tim Oslovich, the Lutheran bishop of Alaska, is a Deep Springer, and a onetime pastor to the English-speaking community in 1960s Moscow was too. And not a few follow the eccentricity of the place and whatever inner wanderlust brings us there and disappear from the worlds of professional accomplishment altogether.

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When I hear the stories of alumni, however, whether from the early days still remembered during my years as a student or from among my own contemporaries, I

am struck by a shared inclination toward the bold gesture, the inexplicable risk, the dogged fixation that turns even the most successful of us to the left or the right before we get quite as far up a vocational ladder as might have been expected when we were shiny young people of putatively great potential.

Perhaps this just reflects the tendency of an unconventional school to draw unconventional personalities. But as I look back, and as I see myself and my friends tamed by the requirements of our lives, I grant more importance to those hoary maxims of our founder. Words can be so big that they demand to be thought about and argued over, deconstructed, mocked or embraced, lived up to or rejected in varying degrees.

“Gentlemen, for what came ye into the wilderness?” Nunn asked his early charges, quoting Jesus in Matthew 11. Jesus is asking a rhetorical question of people who came out to hear John the Baptizer, going on to negate small, probably foolish motives. I don’t think Deep Springs’ founder was especially orthodox in his approach to Jesus; nor was I or most of us in those days. But if the talk of moral order and the voice of the desert was the closest most of us got to anything like religion, he at least borrowed the right words for the right reason. What is this all for? It could not be merely for academic credentials or technical training. It had to be a preparation for a certain kind of life, one dedicated to the vigorous pursuit of the greater good. The inchoate pathos of the place is what spurs us on, what makes us pick up a broom and a dustpan when the scale of destruction seems too great for any set of hands to remedy.

Higher education, and particularly theological education, is going through monumental transitions. Some, perhaps many, institutions won’t survive. And to beat the trends, many institutions seem to be betting on broadening their purpose and de-emphasizing their founding ideals or religious identities, whatever they may be. I suspect that will prove to be a mistake. The Deep Springs model isn’t for everyone. It isn’t even for everyone who seeks it out—one year, all but three members of one class left. But its endurance through calamity, obscurity, and irrelevance may have a lesson for schools that seek not just to provide a service to students but to form students for service. One need not run away from high ideals, even if they’re old-fashioned or awkward to speak aloud. It may not help to slice up a program into the most digestible pieces. All education, especially theological education, is ultimately about love. And most of the time, when we are learning, when we are in the transit zones of our life that school occupies, that love is still

restless. No school can control where that restlessness leads, but any school worth anything at all has to honor it.

That was the second step of my theological education. I was a somewhat reluctant student in the only history class being offered that semester, meeting in a makeshift classroom while the haggard main building was being rehabilitated, and I opened a copy of Augustine's *Confessions*. I wasn't a Christian and had no great hopes for what I would find. But Augustine wrote about his soul being in ruins and asking God to restore it, and he said that our hearts are restless until they rest in God. I didn't know where he was going with that. But I knew what he meant.