

Front view of the Main Quadrangle of Stanford University, 1906. The Memorial Arch stands at the entrance to the quadrangle and a view of the steeple of Memorial Church can be viewed just to the left of the arch. Both Memorial Arch and the steeple of the Church were severely damaged in the earthquake of 1906 and were not rebuilt.

William James' Shaky Sojourn in Stanford

BY ALBERT BANDURA

When the developmental psychology team John and Eleanor Flavell came to Stanford in 1976, they rented a house that contained a dusty copy of *The Letters of William James*, edited by his brother, Henry (James, 1906). In flipping through the volume, John noticed a letter in which William James described his experience as a visiting scholar at Stanford University in 1906. The letter provides an engaging personalized glimpse of the renowned William James in his portrayal of the “primeval” West, the newly founded university, and the travails of lecturing.

In a letter to his friend and disciple, Dickinson Miller, James describes his trek Westward and the living arrangements in his new academic milieu:

“I got here (after five pestilentially close-aired days in the train, and one entrancing one off at the Grand Canyon of the Colorado) on the 8th, and have now given nine lectures, to 300 enrolled students and about 150 visitors, partly colleagues. I take great pains, prepare a printed syllabus, very fully; and really feel for the first time in my life, as if I were lecturing *well*. High time, after 30 years of practice! It earns me \$5000, if I can keep it up until May 27th; but apart from that, I think it is a bad way of expending energy. I ought to be writing my everlastingly postponed book, which this job again absolutely adjourns. I can't write a line of it while doing this other thing. I am expecting Alice to arrive in a fortnight. I have got a very decent little second story, just enough for the two of us, or rather amply enough, sunny, good fire-place, bathroom, little kitchen, etc., on one of the three residential streets of the University land, and with a boarding-house for meals just opposite, we shall have a sort of

honeymoon picnic time. And, sooth to say, Alice must need the simplification . . .

“You've seen this wonderful spot, so I needn't describe it. It is really a miracle; and so simple the life and so benign the elements, that for a young ambitious professor who wishes to leave his mark on Pacific civilization while it is most plastic, or for *any one* who wants to teach and work under the most perfect conditions for eight or nine months, and *who is able to get to the East, or Europe, for the remaining three*, I can't imagine anything finer. It is Utopian. Perfection of weather. Cold nights, though above freezing. Fire pleasant until 10 o'clock a.m., then unpleasant. In short, the “simple life” with all the essential higher elements thrown in as communal possessions. The drawback is, of course, the great surrounding human vacuum—the historic silence fairly rings in your ears when you listen—and the social insipidity. I'm glad I came, and with God's blessing I may pull through. One calendar month is over, anyway” (240-241).

James portrays the idyllic physical life in the Stanford “wilderness” but reiterates his fatigue with the demands of lectureship and its unceasing intrusion on his writing plans. In a letter to his colleague, the Swiss psychologist Theodore Flournoy:

“You ought to see this extraordinary little University. It was founded only fourteen years ago in the absolute wilderness, by a pair of rich Californians named Stanford, as a memorial to their only child, a son who died at 16. Endowed with I know not how many square miles of land, which some day will come into the market and yield a big income, it has already funds that yield nearly \$750,000 yearly, and buildings, of really

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beautiful architecture, that have been paid for out of income, and have cost over \$5,000,000. (I mention the cost to let you see that they must be solid.) There are now 1500 students of both sexes, who pay nothing for tuition, and a town of 15,000 inhabitants has grown up a mile away, beyond the gates. The landscape is exquisite and classical, San Francisco only an hour and a quarter away by train; the climate is one of the most perfect in the world, life is absolutely simple, no one being rich, servants almost unattainable (most of the house-work being done by students who come in at odd hours), many of them Japanese, and the professors' wives, I fear, having in great measure to do their own cooking. No social excesses or complications therefore. In fact, nothing but essentials, and *all* the essentials. Fine music, for example, every afternoon, in the Church of the University. There couldn't be imagined a better environment for an intellectual man to teach and work in, for eight or nine months in the year, if he were then free to spend three or four months in the crowded centres of civilization—for the social insipidity is great here, and the historic vacuum and silence appalling, and one ought to be free to change.

Unfortunately the authorities of the University seem not to be gifted with imagination enough to see its proper role. Its geographical environment and material basis being unique, they ought to aim at unique quality all through, and get *sommités* to come here to work and teach, by offering large stipends. They might, I think, thus easily build up something very distinguished. Instead of which, they pay small sums to young men who chafe at not being able to travel, and whose wives get worn out with domestic drudgery. The whole thing *might* be Utopian; it *is* only half-Utopian. A characteristic American affair! But the half-success is great enough to make one see the great advantages that come to this country from encouraging public-spirited millionaires to indulge their freaks, however eccentric. In what the Stanfords have already done, there is an assured potentiality of great things of *some* sort for all future time. My coming here is an exception. They have had psychology well represented from the first by Frank Angell [founder of Stanford's psychology laboratory in 1893] and Miss Martin [Lillian Jane Martin, a Stanford psychologist who later headed the department when Angell went abroad]; but no philosophy except for a year at a time. I start a new regime—next year they will have two good professors.

I lecture three times a week to 400 listeners, printing a syllabus daily, and making them read Paulsen's textbook for examinations [Friedrich Paulsen was a well-known and admired philosopher and student of G. T. Fechner]. I find it hard work, and only pray that I may have strength to run till June without collapsing. The students, though rustic, are very earnest and wholesome." (242-244).

In another letter to Miller, James wrestles with the decision on whether to extend his appointment at Stanford under the urging of his local colleagues to do so.

" 'Phil. 9' is going well. I think I *lecture* better than I ever did; in fact I know I do. But this professional evolution goes with an involution of all miscellaneous faculty. I am well, and efficient enough, but purposefully going slow so as to keep efficient into the Palo Alto summer, which means that I have written nothing. I am pestered by doubts as to whether to put my resignation through this year, in spite of opposition, or to drag along another year or two. I think it is inertia against energy, energy in my case meaning being my own man absolutely." (235).

The "half-Utopian life" at Stanford underwent a wrenching devastation when the long-dormant San Andreas fault rumbled unmercifully in the early morning of April 18. William James boarded the iron horse Eastward, never to return.

Reference

James, H. (Ed.). (1906). *The letters of William James* (Vol. 2). Boston: The Atlantic Monthly Press.