



Corporate Retreat Offerings at the Dallas Institute

The Dallas Institute of Humanities and Culture announces a series of Corporate Retreats designed to help business leaders harness the wisdom and imagination of the humanities to enable them to lead more thoughtfully at a critical and bewildering time – when our ideas about work and our common values are undergoing profound shifts.

Introduction

We live in a terribly philosophical time. Questions that were previously merely academic have re-emerged today at the center of seemingly intransigent cultural and political contests. Many questions that were perhaps not even questions in the time of our parents have become urgent in our times – Questions of human nature, human dignity, our relationship to nature itself, our ethical and practical responsibility to each other, to the planet as a whole, and to future generations. Newly urgent cultural questions also involve sex and gender; justice and social justice; equality, equity, meritocracy, elitism. We share profound concerns about intelligence, both human and artificial intelligence, as themes once found only in science fiction become science fact on a daily basis.

As in the past, when such philosophical questions become urgent in everyday life, it means that our society has entered a time of crisis, a crisis of meaning. It is a moment of challenges and opportunities for leaders of all kinds. We wonder what will change next. How can we find our balance when the ground seems to be shifting beneath our feet at rapidly accelerating rates?

The Humanities. The humanities, in particular philosophy and literature, call our attention to the achievement of human wisdom and to the meaning of human life, especially in times of crisis.

Purpose and Goals

The purpose of the Dallas Institute Corporate Retreats is to give business executives an opportunity to deepen their own leadership abilities – and to experience directly how the humanities can awaken leaders to their own authority, their own discernment, in today's increasingly strange and bewildering world.

Participants will engage philosophical and literary reflections on the meaning of the enormous changes and challenges our culture is currently experiencing. Rather than supplying prefabricated answers, we engage the wisdom of the classics to offer perspective and insight. We aim to help leaders to clarify and deepen their sense of the essential questions posed in our times. Rather than offering untested solutions, we aim to guide leaders in sifting their own fundamental values and commitments. We seek to demonstrate that today's questions are new – yes – but also as old as humanity itself, and that many of the most profound issues that humanity now faces have been foreseen by some of the wisest writers and artists in our history.

Outcomes

Participants will leave our retreats with a shared, humanistic vocabulary for engaging the issues we face as a culture. They will have a greater appreciation for the wisdom and beauty of classic thinking on these issues. Participants will also gain a grounding sense that our problems today are not entirely new: Human beings have weathered similar challenges in the past and found creative ways to surmount issues confronting them, often by re-inventing, to one degree or another, the human world itself.

Course Descriptions

The Dallas Institute is committed to providing content that will be useful to each organization. Some possible topics for Corporate Retreats:

1) ***“The promised end?” Epochal Endings and Beginnings***

The poet Wallace Stevens remarked, “It is one of the peculiarities of the imagination that it is always at the end of an era.” This session will consider how great philosophical and literary thinkers have imagined both the ends and the beginnings of epochs. We will look especially at the beginnings of the modern world, focusing on Descartes’ replacement of the old worldview with one featuring science “mastering nature” in pursuit of unbridled technological power. We will wonder: Has Cartesian modernity now reached its promised end in our own times, or is it only beginning? Generally, to what degree does our own time correspond to previous epochal ends and beginnings, and thus what creative re-invention of the world, if any, is required of leaders today?

Possible Readings: Excerpts from Virgil’s *Aeneid*; Descartes’ *Discourse on Method*; Shakespeare’s *King Lear*; W.B. Yeats (“Second Coming,”; “Sailing to Byzantium”); Wallace Stevens (“The Plain Sense of Things”); Martin Luther King, Speeches.

2) ***“In his image...” On Human Dignity***

Prior to any discussion of ethics is the question of human dignity. Why are human beings entitled to be treated with respect? Why is a human being – even if old or handicapped or obnoxious or guilty – still worthy of respect, worthy of being treated with a special dignity not afforded to, say an insect? Why, if at all, are human beings special? This session will consider ethics and particularly the ethics of leadership, but from a framework of the question of human dignity.

Possible Readings: Excerpts from Sophocles, *Antigone*; the Bible, *Genesis*, Books 1 & 2; Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*; Shakespeare, *Hamlet*; Martin Luther King, Speeches; Singer, *Animal Liberation*.

3) ***“Until philosophers are kings...” True Leadership In Changing Times***

What sorts of men and women are best suited to lead and at what cost? Some great thinkers have suggested – paradoxically – that only those who are not ambitious to rule are ideal for leadership. This notion has been taken up, perhaps, in the servant leader model. Others, including Virgil and Shakespeare, have emphasized the *costs of leadership* on the psyche of a

true leader and the moral hazards of dedication to a mission. In this session, we will discuss the virtues, advantages, costs and trials of leadership in difficult times.

Possible Readings: Excerpts from the *Mahabharata*; Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex*; Plato, *Republic*; Shakespeare, *Henry V*, *Tempest*.

4) *What is it like to be a human? What is human intelligence?*

In the time of AI, we return to some classics of philosophy and literature to ask again about human intelligence. What is it? What was it? What light can the classics shed on the matter of how we can relate to the burgeoning AI challenges?

Possible Readings: Excerpts from Homer, *Iliad*; Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*; Plato, *Meno*; Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics*; Plotinus, *Enneads*; Searle, “Minds, Brains and Programs” Kubrick, *Space Odyssey*.

5) *“Let justice roll on like a river...” On Justice.*

In our time, fundamental concepts such as justice are again in dispute. Is justice equality? Is it equity? What is social justice and how does it differ from more old-fashioned conceptions of justice? How much does society owe today to descendants of persons oppressed in the past?

In this seminar we will cheerfully sidestep heated contemporary controversies, but instead quietly consider more classical thinking about justice, seeking its timeless relevance for us now. For example, Plato seemed to argue that justice is the rule of reason, whereas in Aristotle the emphasis is more on ensuring that reward is proportionate to merit. In the *Bible*, the Hebrew scriptures offer one view and perhaps the New Testament proposes another. The Indian epic the *Mahabharata* also has its own argument to make. Martin Luther King proposes his own perspective. We will consider a wide array of theories of justice.

Possible Readings: Excerpts from Plato, *Republic*; Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*; Bible, Hebrew Scriptures; Bible, *New Testament*; *Mahabharata*, *Bhagavad Gita*; Martin Luther King, *Speeches*.

6) *“... A city that has no ‘reason for being’...” What is Dallas? What will Dallas Become?*

In this session, we will consider the past and future of Dallas, Texas. What are some of its greatest advantages, opportunities, glories, shames and challenges?

Possible readings: Essays from *Imagining Dallas* (Gail Thomas, ed.); James Hillman’s *City and Soul*; Excerpts from Jane Jacobs, *Death and Life of Great American Cities*; Alex Krieger’s *City on a Hill*; Jim Schutze, *The Accommodation*

A note on difficulty: In seeking the wisdom of true classics, the Dallas Institute is committed to reading those works themselves. We avoid paraphrases or popularizing reports about them. The reason is that such summaries invariably “dumb down” the depth of those works, often misrepresenting or missing crucial nuances, and eliminating the flavor or tone of the classic work. To be sure, classic texts may be difficult to read, at first glance, and they might even seem intimidating to those not used to engaging them. But with appropriate selections and experienced leaders – professors– such works prove to be both accessible and worthwhile.

Think of seminar leaders like seasoned tour guides or sherpas. We know the terrain and can help folks over the rough spots. Through much experience teaching the classics, we have learned how to make them clear and relatable, relevant to the practical problems faced by human beings, both today and always. We will propose only readings that a person of reasonable intelligence can assimilate in a reasonable period of time. (E.g. less than 1.5 hours of preparation time per session.)

Seminar Leaders

These retreats will be led by two emeritus professors, Seemee Ali, Ph.D. and Michael McShane, Ph.D. Each of these leaders has successfully taught the texts mentioned above at the college level for over two decades. The two pride themselves on being able to render the classics delightful, both accessible and relevant to the concerns of contemporary human beings.

Dr. Ali is now the President of the Dallas Institute of Humanities and Culture. She holds a Ph.D. in literature from the University of Dallas. She has published articles on William Faulkner, Wallace Stevens, and Homer's *Iliad*. Dr. Ali is co-writing a book on marriage and epochal shift in Homer's *Iliad*.

Dr. McShane is the Director of Public Humanities at the Dallas Institute. A graduate of St. John's College, Annapolis, he holds a Ph.D. in ancient philosophy and an MA in Comparative Literature, both from the University of Pennsylvania. His interests include problems of transcendence in literature and philosophy. With Dr. Ali, he is co-writing a book on marriage and epochal shift in Homer's *Iliad*.

Session Information

The Dallas Institute will begin offering Corporate Retreats in September 2023. Most sessions will be in a half- or full-day format, and can be tailored to the goals of individual organizations.

For information on pricing and scheduling, please contact Dr. Seemee Ali at president@dallasinstitute.org.