

(Address delivered by the Reverend Theodore M. Hesburgh, C.S.C., President, University of Notre Dame, at the 41st Annual Meeting of the Association of American Colleges, on January 12, 1955 in Washington, D.C.)

LIBERAL EDUCATION IN THE WORLD TODAY

An educator may take several lines of approach to the subject of liberal education in the world today.

He may take a critical, patronizing look at all other kinds of modern education, weigh them in the balance, and find them wanting. The next step for the speaker is to conclude that all forms of education, other than liberal education, are not truly educative and that, therefore, he alone, with others of his kind, are truly educating students. This is what I would call the complacent approach. I must admit that it is satisfying, at least to the speaker and to those who happen to be of his kind.

Another common approach to liberal education in the world today is to assume that liberal education alone prepares students to face and to respond successfully to the crucial challenges of our times. This I would call the slogan approach. Unfortunately, like the four freedoms for all the world, or the earlier, war to end all wars, the desired goal is not obtained by the mere enunciation of the slogan. Nevertheless, this approach still

gives aid and solace to many liberal arts educators, even though the problems loom larger and more crucial and more frustrating every day despite the presence of ever-increasing numbers of liberal arts graduates in the modern world.

A third approach to liberal education in the world today is to accept and to bless it in its totality, for the above and other like reasons, but mainly because liberal education has been with us for a long span of centuries, back to the Greeks, as the saying goes. Liberal education has been the standard equipment of many very respectable people and, therefore, should continue to be in the present and future, as it has been in the past, the hallmark of respectability. I would call this the snobbish, or old family approach. Even more than the other approaches, this represents a very uncritical look at liberal education in the world today.

At this juncture, I should candidly confess that I have at one time or another in the past espoused all three of these approaches in speaking of liberal education. I have done so with a considerable degree of complacency on my part, and with some considerable applause from the unwary in the audience. However, somewhere along this primrose path of educational beautitude, I began to lose confidence, and was moved to take a long and

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critical look at the more harsh realities that lie beyond mere words and educational theory. The longer I looked, the less comfortable I became.

Perhaps in any human endeavor it is at least mildly shocking to place theory over against practice. Theory is always comfortable; practice somewhat disturbing. But I submit to you today that the shock is more than mildly electric when you look, long and honestly, at liberal education in the world today, and then try to reconcile what you see with what you read and hear on the subject. That is why I have begun by being slightly snide in assessing the usual approaches of educators to liberal education in the world today. It is not that I doubt our cause. I simply think that we could strengthen it greatly by being much more critical and less complacent. Even the words we use reflect tremendous changes that can ultimately render the very words meaningless unless we are conscious of what has happened and is happening in the world of reality.

Take the words liberal education. In Greek days, they signified the education of free men, as contrasted to slaves. In Mediaeval times, the liberal arts were the basic substratum of professional education. Later, liberal education became the prerogative of the leisure class. Today in our

country, all men and women, too, are free. Most occupations, even business and engineering, claim to be professional. All men and women have more and more leisure. What then was formerly conceived as the prerogative of the few must now attempt to be meaningful to the many. This change indicates a whole series of very real problems for liberal education in the world today. But not only has the clientele of liberal education changed and expanded, so has liberal education itself. Today it includes disciplines of natural and mathematical sciences that were largely undeveloped, and some absolutely unknown, during most of the former life time of liberal education. It also includes many social sciences that are of even more recent vintage. The very core of what was considered to be liberal education in former times, the classical tradition, has been largely submerged and lost. What is most important, the cultural unity of the Western World, formerly achieved by philosophy and theology, has been almost entirely disintegrated in the practices of current liberal education. In the place of this former unity of view and presentation, our modern liberal education is a melange of disaggregate parts, concocted by piling course on diverse course, without internal unity of the subject matter itself, and with even less external integration contributed by the various

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teachers who are prepared by highly specialized graduate schools and presently compartmentalized into the equally specialized structure of isolated academic departments.

The result is comparable to a tossed salad, except that to fill out the analogy we would have to admit that the component parts are seasoned with Russian, Rocquefort, French, and Thousand Island dressing all at once.

Clientele changed, new elements added, substance disintegrated, teaching fragmented - these are a few of the important changes included in a realistic appraisal of this proud old badge of liberal education. But the end is not yet.

One might market a deteriorated product if a monopoly existed and nothing else were available. But the hegemony of liberal education has long since ended. Competing with liberal education today are the many newly-arrived forms of highly specialized and yet rigidly unified vocational types of education that know precisely what they are trying to do and at least achieve a high degree of internal structural unity from their

pragmatic purpose. These new kinds of education are extremely attractive to a society whose norms have not been refined by a cultural tradition that is waning with the weakening and disintegration of liberal education. Just to take two examples, the business colleges had practically the same number of graduates last year as did the liberal arts colleges - and yet the greater number of these business colleges were only born in the 1920's or later. In one university I know of, there were just about double the number of applicants last Fall for the College of Engineering as there were for the College of Liberal Arts. And the engineering applicants were, on the whole, superior students compared to the liberal arts applicants.

It would seem to follow from these facts that we should begin spending less time assuming and asserting the superiority of liberal education, and apply ourselves to the very difficult task of making our liberal programs in fact superior and more effective, as education.

I would suggest the old-fashioned approach of beginning as the Greeks did with the nature of man, whom we are attempting to educate. Continuing in this tradition, I would imagine that we can demonstrate that there are a few definite areas of new and old knowledge that must be mastered

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to some minimum extent, and some few basically human intellectual skills that must be perfected to some degree if man is to do anything in a specifically human and purposeful way, if indeed he is to be educated.

In the areas of knowledge, there will be little argument about the basic liberal value of literature and language, history and social science, mathematics and natural science. There will be considerable discussion about the inclusion of philosophy and theology, surprisingly enough even in institutions that began long ago as church-related colleges.

It has become fashionable to equate philosophy with confusion instead of integration. Absolute values have abdicated to relative values, truth to opinion, and certitude to agnosticism. Here perhaps is the place to take a stand, as a philosophy of education presupposed a philosophy of life, of man and of man's knowledge, values, and goals.

All this is even more true of theology. I recently heard two of the most famous intellectuals of our day relegate theology, one to the area of myth and folk lore, and the other to the area of poetic intuition. I fear for any possible reintegration and revitalization of liberal education

without a philosophy and a theology that can stand as valid, objective knowledge and discipline, and can be an honored, integrating part of the curriculum. Here, perhaps, the poverty-stricken church-related colleges can find their true riches. They, at least, have a key to the kind of intellectual leadership needed in our day if they will be true to their traditions which are as old and as rich as Western culture.

The cultural unity of our past is something objective that can be understood and taught. It carries its own seeds of integration. There is nothing narrow, restricted, or shabby about it. What is more, the new disciplines can be integrated into this unity of knowledge to make it even more meaningful - even though, in fact, these new sciences did emerge and develop in a spirit of exalted isolation as the new and only valid knowledge.

The very crisis of our times was heralded by the holocaust of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, where the first worldwide demonstration of the most startling scientific discovery of our age was applied to the destruction, rather than the ennoblement of mankind. The symbol of this new age might be the Greek statue of winged victory in the Louvre, a breath-taking sense of



form and power, without a head - and, therefore, without intelligent meaning and direction.

The task facing liberal education in the world today is to give this meaning and direction to all the new knowledges and skills that confront us. It can be demonstrated theoretically that liberal education, and only liberal education, in its truest sense can do this. For only liberal education proposes to teach a man what he is and can be, what he has been and why. Only liberal education can give a unified over-view of the world and man, of values, ultimate goals, and the broad truths that apply to every kind of human activity and guide every human aspiration.

I wish I could say that liberal education today does live up to its promise. I think I can say that unless liberal education does soon approximate its potential in actuality, it will be hard put to survive in the face of the strong competitive pressures of pragmatic vocational education.

I have spoken of the preferred position of liberal education relative to the broad areas of human knowledge that it alone encompasses. Liberal education may also have some advantage as to the inculcation of skills,

although here the case is not so evident. The vocational courses may teach some art of thinking, judging, analyzing and even communicating and evaluating - although within restricted areas, with restricted approaches, and with restricted technical standards. The real danger is that unless liberal education can do the broader task with some unity of impact, these restricted and technical approaches to knowledge and life, these narrow standards of value will become the characteristic approaches and standards of our day. I doubt that ultimately even the technicians themselves would enjoy this headless, less-than-human, winged victory.

My plea today is that all of us restudy the characteristic and traditional values of liberal education in the light of all the developments that have further complicated man's life since the Middle Ages. Complications need not be cursed, for they too may lead to the good life if understood and used wisely. I would underscore the need for unity of knowledge in our day, so that humanists and scientists, philosophers and theologians can begin to talk to each other instead of only to themselves. I would lastly suggest that our heritage of Christian culture may provide us with a workable key to the integration of the new and the old in liberal

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education. At least it provides us with a basic and unified view of man and his God, man and his world, man in the face of objective truth and value - all of which is largely garbled, disintegrated, and fragmented in much of liberal education today.

Liberal education, true to its best traditions, flexible in assimilating all that is humanly valuable in education, can be a great directive and inspirational force in the world today. But liberal education still has to find itself, despite the great changes, within and without, if it is to survive, much less light a beacon in the darkness.