

(Address delivered by the Rev. Theodore M. Hesburgh, C.S.C., President, University of Notre Dame, at the 287th Charter Day Convocation of the College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, Virginia, Saturday, February 9, 1980)

THE FUTURE OF LIBERAL EDUCATION

All of America must be grateful to Thomas Jefferson, then Governor of the Commonwealth of Virginia, and to the Board of Visitors of William and Mary who two hundred years ago "formed it into a university," to quote that famous letter of the student, John Brown, to his uncle in December of 1779. This enlarging of its educational writ was an important step forward in the history of higher education in America. This history, like that of this institution, is always intertwined with many other political, economic, social, and religious factors that characterize each successive age in the larger history of our country and our world.

It is particularly significant to me that at this present historic moment in the evolving life of William and Mary, the College is looking ahead in hope rather than exclusively backward in pride, and is particularly addressing the central reality that we have long called liberal education.

One questions the future of liberal education. In doing so, one must speculate, at least, as to whether or not liberal education really has a future. This is no idle speculation in our day when the most popular course in American colleges and universities across

the land is not literature, or history, but accounting. This single fact is perhaps indicative of many modern currents of thought, or the lack of it, regarding the purposes of higher education, what it might be expected to produce, what the country most needs at this time from its educated citizens, and how all of this relates to the position of America in a wider world context.

Speaking first to the purposes of education, what it is attempting to produce, may I say that we are given a mighty clue when we add to education, the adjective liberal. Liberal education is perhaps best described as that ^{educative} which liberates a person to be truly human. That is perhaps why those subjects which bear most directly on this process are called the humanities. But what does it mean to be human?

I have often speculated, most recently in a nationally broadcast debate with some Russians on the subject of human rights, about what it really means to be human, taking the word in its most universal sense. It seemed to me on that occasion, that unless our American team could induce the Russians to transcend the political, cultural, economic, religious, and nationalistic barriers that separated us, no real discussion of human rights, or more largely the human condition, could possibly take place.

There is a common technique, long used to create a good mental attitude for meditation, called "composition of place" -- putting oneself in a mental situation where meditation on a particular

subject is facilitated. In an attempt to create such a composition of place, I asked the Russians to imagine that our world had become so humanly impossible, in such proximate danger of total destruction, that a group of humans, of every possible nationality, race, and religion, banded together in a new rocket-powered Noah's ark and sought another planet where a new human world might be created. Finding one ample enough, although already inhabited by intelligent, though non-human beings, our planetary immigrants are asked a very key question by those in present possession of the new planet.

The conversation goes like this: "Before we welcome you to live among us, we really must know what you consider yourselves most to need as humans. We are speaking of spiritual rather than material realities. We know you need food to eat, water to drink, air to breathe, sleep, exercise, and so forth -- all these are readily and freely available here. But what do you really need to be human, that without which a truly human life would be unthinkable." No easy question. Not answered by mountains of gold and diamonds, exquisite nourishment, sensual pleasures of every imaginable sort. These all are freighted with material rather than spiritual realities. These will not answer the question.

I told the Russians that speaking out of our common humanity, I would answer our planetary hosts with one key word, freedom, and that I would add a phrase for their reassurance, freedom intelligently and responsibly used and enjoyed. If pressed for further elaboration

of this most basic human need, I would specify some central human freedoms that make human life worth living.

Freedom to develop oneself to the full extent of one's human potentialities, mainly one's intelligence and one's talents, artistic, cultural, humane, spiritual, scientific, to mention a few.

Freedom to have faith and to practice it freely in our traditional religious manner by prayer and worship, by loving God and all our fellow humans in loving service.

Freedom to organize our social instincts to achieve our common human welfare on all levels, civil and political society, economic endeavor, marriage and family.

In a word, to be truly human, we would need freedom to achieve a balance between our individual and social good, our particular and communal well-being, our happiness fundamentally, as human persons and as a human society. All of this in its particularity we sum up as human rights, not given to us, but inhering in our human personhood as created, both intelligent and free, and in this, mirroring our Creator who is ultimate intelligence and freedom, the ultimate source of our eternal destiny of everlasting happiness and fulfillment.

At this point, our newfound intelligent (and presumably free) persons might rejoice in our particular human kinship with them, but they might also ask, "Were all of these rights, so central to the human condition, respected and achieved on the Planet Earth that you left?"

Somewhat shamefacedly, we would have to say no, that indeed the worldwide absence of these rights because of greed, violence, selfishness, and inhumanity was the main reason for our leaving, for our wish to recreate the human condition in its pristine promise, somewhere else in the universe.

We might then be asked, quite legitimately, "How do you hope to do it here, when you were such a miserable failure there?"

If I were to give the answer, it would not be unrelated to the future of liberal education, the education of free men and women, despite the fact that you may have thought me wandering from our central theme. My answer would be, not unduly apologetic I trust, something like this.

We did have our golden ages on earth, as well as our eras of dismal failure. We were at our best when we were most splendidly human, when our young men and women were liberated through education from that dark side of humanity that must most fundamentally be called evil. There were moments when education really liberated people from pride and prejudice, from greed and selfishness, from inhumanity and brutality and violence and destruction. Those were moments when education was really conceived as teaching young people how to be most nobly human, inspired by a vision no less than divine, and we would have to add, open to grace from on high. This was education characterized by attention first of all to ends rather than means, to substance rather than fads, to being human first

and foremost, and then doing humanly, because our purposes were clear, our priorities high, and the call to be heroic, even saintly, not diminished by a dismal mediocrity and lack of vision.

May I now bring us all down to earth by proposing that much of the malaise that affects the world today may precisely be described as a dark and foreboding evil, a mad chase for means -- money, power, pleasure -- rather than a pursuit of the high purposes of civilized human achievement, peace, freedom, justice; that selfish personal concerns, even good though single issue ones, have all but buried the over-arching concept of the common good. We do have a world to remake, right here, not up there. Either place, it would be difficult to imagine success in the making, unless liberal education is somehow engaged anew, reborn if you will, with a central place in the total educational effort, now largely without a central focus, without a unifying theme, without a deep concern for teaching young people how best to be human, in the best sense of that word.

I would now like to say a few words on what precisely should happen, or begin to happen to students today, if their education were less illiberal, vocational, strictly utilitarian -- how to do something immediately gainful -- or put positively, what beyond all that, and even before it, or concurrently with it, would we hope to accomplish through a central focus on liberal education. I should add that it is my own deep conviction that without liberal education, none of these qualities, or values, or characteristics I am about to describe

are likely to be achieved, in any great measure, in the life of the student.

What should liberally educated students learn? First, the ability to think, clearly, logically, deeply, and widely, about a variety of very important human questions, like the meaning and purpose of human life, the conflicting roles of love and hatred, war and peace (even in a family context), truth and error, certainty and doubt, reason and faith, building and destroying, magnanimity and selfishness, generosity and greed, integrity and perverseness, good and evil, life and death -- to mention a few. How-to-do-it subjects do not raise these issues, although many of these issues are inherent in almost everything we do. These issues are those that liberate the mind by stretching it to confront ideas that are really and fundamentally important to being human, in the best or worst sense of the word.

There are many ways of tracking these ideas and engaging the mind with them, most broadly through philosophy and theology, subjects almost totally neglected in much of what goes by the name of higher education today. How narrow a mind that has never had to wrestle with the thoughts of Augustus and Aquinas, Kant or Calvin, Descartes or Bonaventure, Tillich or Barth or de Chardin. Small minds grow when confronting larger minds; all minds become supple when following conflicting chains of argument, diverse solutions to complicated human issues.

The mind, like muscles, must be exercised to grow, and the lack of this growth is so widely evident today in the millions of college graduates who take their opinions uncritically from their favorite columnist or TV commentator. So many of them are completely innocent of philosophical or theological reasoning. Even more devastating, how many of them graduate without even having read the Old or New Testament? All of this came home to us in a most startling way when many of the key actors in the Watergate affair, young lawyers, graduates of our best and most prestigious universities, admitted that they had never questioned whether what they were doing was right or wrong. They admitted that they just did whatever seemed to get the political results they wanted, irrespective of any moral considerations -- which to them seemed irrelevant. This is hardly the mind at work in its most discriminating way.

In addition to philosophical and theological study, all of these basic human issues may be individualized, concretized, and personalized in the study of history and literature. Here we find the story of actual success and failure in the matter of being human, the heights and the depths of human endeavor, the great challenges and responses, as Tawney puts it, that spelled the rise and fall of human civilization, its greatest glories and its worst shame. Contrast the inhumanity of Buchenwald and Auschwitz with the dedication of a Mother Teresa. As Santayana said so well, we humans learn from our own history, or ignore it to repeat its follies. Each new war ^{every human tragedy} is a growing testament to this basic educational truth.

Literature enlarges the human experience to live a thousand lives, and to learn from them. What educational folly not to dream with Dante, soar with Shelley and Keats, range most widely through every human emotion with the greatest writer in our language -- William Shakespeare. I remember telling a marriage class I once taught that they would learn infinitely more about what makes marriages successful and unsuccessful by reading Sigrid Undset's Kristin Lavransdatter than in drooling over Vander Weld's ponderous tome on the techniques of human sexual encounter.

In all of these encounters with history and literature, the mind is humanly enlarged, endowed with greater human understanding and compassion, but, most especially, a person learns the art of being human. Most how-to-do-it courses put students into a rut that may unfortunately constrict their doings lifelong. One should, of course, learn how to do this or that specific task well, though the this or that which we do is hardly the sum of our lives or the full meaning of our days.

Beyond enlarging the mind, challenging its power, developing its capacity, these liberal subjects of study do something that insures that learning becomes lifelong, intellectual joy and growth continual. What I refer to is a sense of curiosity that comes with enlarging the mind's sweep, a hunger to learn more, to keep on growing, an excitement that fills all our days in a world where

knowledge doubles every fifteen years, especially in the area of science and technology. The liberated mind does not merely fill itself with new information, it combines the new with the old, integrates the new into a larger scheme of things, even uses imagination and intuition to enlarge its perception of what is new to make it even newer^{And more meaningful}. For the educated and liberated mind, the total is much more than the sum of disaggregate parts.

A second great quality of the liberally educated person flows from the first. Thinking clearly is essential to expressing oneself clearly, logically, and, hopefully, with grace and felicity of language. These latter qualities owe much to one's acquaintance with great literature, especially poetry, another greatly neglected field. The multiple choice mania may make life easier for teachers who must grade students, but no one has ever learned to write well by making check marks on a pre-written test. We should also remember that, unfortunately, even liberal subjects may be taught illiberally with little growth for students who will be speaking and writing all their lives.

A third great quality of a liberal education is the ability to evaluate. There is no learning to do this if one's whole educational endeavor is taken up with means, not ends, techniques not purposes. Without a sense of value, the greatest scientist or engineer in the world may be the world's greatest menace. As Oppenheimer said ruefully after the holocaust of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, "The scientist has now known sin."

Without a sense of value and purpose, the lawyer may become a clever manipulator of the law seeking anything but justice. The doctor may forget the value and the mystery and the dignity of the person he treats as a mechanic would treat an engine. The theologian without values can easily forget that theology is the study of the quintessential Holy, the Sacred, notions and realities that may be lost in a totally secularized and materialistic life. Not all theologians can be saints, but even trying would greatly influence their theology. At least, it did not hurt Augustine or Aquinas. Without values, the multinational manager may forget that foreign profit without indigenous development is a formula for economic and political disaster, at home as well as abroad.

It should be mentioned here that nothing is more difficult to teach than values, or the ability to evaluate, to have a growing sense of moral purpose and priority in a world often devoid of both. All engaged in education, especially liberal and professional education, should remember that in the area of values, they teach much more by what they are and what they do, than by what they write and say. Students have a highly developed radar that quickly separates out the sincere from the phony, the conviction from the posturing. Intellectual honesty, rigorous regard for evidence, hard and unrelenting search for truth amid error, firm conviction about the sacredness of learning and teaching, openness to new ideas, even, perhaps especially, from students, caring about students,

not just passing, but growing, all of these concerns are value-laden and value-teaching, whether one is teaching mathematics, thermodynamics, or torts.

Finally, through a combination of all of these other qualities that alone, I think, can emerge from a liberal education, there is an elusive quality that for want of a better expression, I would call learning to situate oneself. This is enormously important in being human, for peace of mind and soul, for consistent growth unhindered by the excessive baggage of doubts, envy, uncertainty, and frustration. To situate oneself is to be at peace, undisturbed, accepting of what one is, qualifying one's humanity, as a man or a woman, highly or moderately talented, believer or unbeliever, but honestly knowing why, as white or black or brown, as American or Asian or African, to be all of these and many more realities, but still able to be superbly and broadly human. It is like being a saint and yet knowing one's weakness and the burden of daily temptations, a great athlete who always tries by sometimes loses, in a word, to be able to accept what humanly is, with all the limitations involved, while striving for the excellence that so often eludes us; to be able to cope daily with the ambiguities of the human situation. Liberation from life's frustrations and the special crosses that attend every individual life is no small part of the total liberation that can result from a liberal education.

If liberal education does, or can alone do, all of this, why is there any possible problem about it having a future? I suppose the answer to this question is that for some centuries now, liberal education has been slipping from its former central role in the whole field of higher education.

Some would trace the downfall of the humanities back to Bacon's Novum Organum (1620), and the growing preeminence of the scientific method from the Seventeenth through the Nineteenth Century, especially with the advent of the Industrial Revolution. Philosophically, this is best expressed by Auguste Comte's positivism that makes three basic assumptions, namely, that nothing is really knowable except by the scientific, not the humanistic, method; that science alone can tell us man's place in the world; and, finally, that anything supposed learned about reality by religion, art, or humanistic studies such as I have been describing, has the status of fairy tales, not conforming to the established criteria for scientific truth. So pervasive has this philosophy become that even professors of admittedly humanistic studies do everything possible to bend them into scientific methods and to glory in the description of their "value free" disciplines.

I believe that the time has come for a change. It is obvious that the scientific method is fine for science and technology, that it has revolutionized the world in which we live, and has given us new and exciting perspectives on the world still a-borning. But it

has also given us the specter of a value-free world that is on the brink of destroying itself, that is divided by massive discontinuities of the few rich and many poor, the few Ph.D's and the many illiterates, the few over-fed and the many starving, the few with hope and the many hopeless. It has placed great power in the hands of those who have few priorities beyond their own political, social, or economic aggrandizement.

The world is in many ways a technological wasteland today, not because science and technology or the scientific method are bad, but because they can tell us nothing about values, or the meaning of life, or what it really is to be human. Even the great philosopher, Wittgenstein, who would agree with the positivists about what can be spoken about as truth, also believed that everything that really matters in human life cannot be spoken of in verifiable (scientifically) or analytic propositions.

To me at least, this is a call for faith on the religious level, and humanistic studies as central to all education. There is, to my way of thinking, a need to reassess our total concept of higher education, adrift today, to re-establish the centrality of such subjects as philosophy and theology, literature and history, art and music, and the inevitable value content of political science, economics, anthropology and sociology.

I do not suggest this to depreciate the scientific method, but only to state that as a single path to truth and the knowledge

of reality, it has not, as a single road to truth, served this world and its growing challenges, even its survival, well. We must begin anew to appreciate the centrality of the human person, intelligent and free, in time but yearning for eternal life, as Maritain has said so well, "To say that a man is a person is to say that in the depths of his being, he is more independent than servile. It is to say that he is a minute fragment of matter that is at the same time a universe, a beggar who communicates with absolute being, mortal flesh whose value is eternal, a bit of straw into which heaven enters." (Principes d'une politique humaniste, Paris: Paul Hartmann, 1945, pp. 15-16)

James Billington, Director of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars at the Smithsonian in Washington, recently wrote:

"(A) return to religious roots is the most important of the 'back to basics' for the survival of our type of system. The 'clear and present danger' to our survival today is not some modern form of the Spanish Inquisition, but the well advanced dry rot that has atrophied character and purpose in our society. We are living on accumulated spiritual (as well as economic) capital; and, unless our generation accumulates something to reinvest, our children may have to accept increasing spiritual subordination to future Ayatollahs, even as we already accept technical subordination to Sony and Toyota." (Belmont Estate Conference, December 1-2, 1979)

Daniel Bell who is also being honored today has suggested that "in the serious realm of philosophers, physicists, and artists ... the journey is now being undertaken." What journey? "A return to a simple morality in the fundamentalist faiths -- and in my own as well, I might add. A return to the continuity of the tradition of moral meaning; and a return to some mythic and mystical modes of thought in a world which science and positivism have deprived of the sense of wonder and mystery that man needs. He perhaps says it best by declaring that having declared God dead and having taken over from Him and performed so poorly, man now may be ready to place a limit, even on man's hubris." (D. Bell, The Return of the Sacred)

And so the future of liberal education is somehow dictated by the most profound need of our age: to rediscover man and the meaning of human life, to give meaning, purpose, and direction to our days, to reinvigorate our society and our world by the kind of human leadership that can only come from a human person conscious of his ultimate destiny, his vision beyond time, his idealism that transcends power, money, or pleasure, ultimately, the awareness of what men and women can be and the determination to recreate the world in that vision. If all this adds up to our human imperative, then liberal education ^{indeed} does have a future.