

The American College as *the* Place for Liberal Learning

NOT BY THE PERCENTAGES

IN EDUCATION, as in most facets of present-day life, it is the best of times and the worst of times. We may infer that it is the worst of times from the multitude of jeremiads on the topic as well as from our common experience as teachers. Among students there is a perceptible decline of the privately nourished passion for deep and difficult reading; among parents, an anxious preference for career preparation over liberal learning; among officials, an unexamined rage for quantifiable results; among executives, an appetite for bending education toward the training of a workforce.

Moreover, the case for liberal learning and for the American college as the place where it is most naturally situated is not usually defended with anything like the vivid aggression that dominates the propaganda for job-related training. The latter appeals to American productivity and the global future and other such compelling articles of secular faith. But open a representative catalog of a liberal arts college and you will find commonplaces and compromises, embellished by arcadian pictures and references to the distinguishing local amenities.

It is not so much that “the best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity.” It is rather that the best lack *well-grounded* conviction and the others abound in clueless good intentions. Thus the American liberal arts college, that

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endangered species, has allowed itself to be driven into an alien terrain for its defense: graduation rates and completion times, advanced degrees and career choices, employment records and magazine ratings. Rarely does a college say to its public, especially its prospective parents: "Listen to us. These ways of gauging the value of an education are all wrong. Efficiency in learning is ineffective, and training for the future is, in the words of Octavio Paz, 'preparing a prison for the present.' We offer an education that is, to be sure, extended, expensive, nonutilitarian, uncertain (and certainly unquantifiable) in outcome, and possibly destabilizing. But here we love learning and are ready to help your children love it, and we are, moreover, prepared to tell you in detail why we do what we do: what the good of it is, and why we think that these four years are the proper completion to the upbringing you gave your children and the best insurance for a good life."

This rhetoric of conviction is failing in education as it is in many departments of American life. We live in a time when openness is understood as indeterminacy and accommodation is a last civic duty. The reason that the rhetoric of higher education is flaccid is that its defenders think it their duty not to know how to become specific, concrete, and—Heaven forbid—prescriptive. But it seems to me that it is the business of college teachers and the officials that speak for their colleges to have determinate opinions about the right shape of a liberal education—and not just about the prerogatives of their own departments, either. So from the point of view of both outside pressure and inside vulnerability, it is indeed a bad time for liberal education.

But from a different perspective, it is the best of times in the world of learning. Forget the dangerous decline in the number of students taking humanities courses; forget that the American liberal arts colleges, though still a few thousand strong in number, capture a declining share of students. Forget even that the conversion of liberal reading into theory and critique increasingly trickles down from the universities. Take instead as a criterion the least regarded of contemporary accomplishments—learning Greek. By the percentages it is a vanishing study, but in absolute numbers, those enthusiastic late learners

of Greek, Thomas More and Erasmus, would think themselves in a humanist heaven, with thousands of fellow students and a profusion of well-edited texts, ingenious textbooks, and convenient commentaries. The same goes for modern studies. Judge Woolsey decreed in 1933 that though *Ulysses* “undoubtedly is somewhat emetic, nowhere does it tend to be an aphrodisiac . . . [and] may, therefore, be admitted to the United States,” yet I remember that even in the fifties I had to scare up a copy in Europe, while now we have editions and commentaries galore, and the aphrodisiacs to boot. And though the best books shamefully go out of print, they eventually come profitably back in. Therefore, from the perspective of the availability of the tools of learning, this is the best of times. And it is not just the profusion of books and scores and visual aids that makes this a high time. Some fields are in their fullest glory: mathematics, for example, and the writing of novels, particularly of the kind pronounced dead by critics, the realistic genre, both magical and sober. But if the decline of liberal learning is not due to a dearth of fine means and great matter, what other reasons—at least institutional reasons—might be found?

It is one aspect of majoritarian democracy to rule life by percentages, and a complementary grace to care about individuals. The American college has no present chance of dominating by numbers, but it is good for—one might say it is our last best chance at—shaping well-formed human beings. The nonsectarian, independent colleges are sometimes attacked with that most thoughtless of charges, elitism. If elitism is willful exclusionism, no institution is less elitist or more anxiously diverse. We are, most unfortunately and not entirely by our own fault, prohibitively expensive, but even the so-called elite colleges make near-heroic compensatory efforts to be demographically inclusive. In fact, they might do better to recall that if it is the pedagogic benefit of diversity they are after, no two human souls are more diverse than siblings brought up in the same household, if diversity is taken in a humanly ultimate sense. For who presents the most impenetrable mystery but one’s nearest and dearest? It is an accompanying thought that these small institutions are not the right venue for effecting social change. Education is inevitably a social program in re-

spect to the public schools and that part of the great public universities that is not dedicated to pure research. Though their aims are not invariably in tune with those of the American public, at least they have the capability to work social change. The small independent colleges, however, ought not to have these aims and cannot have the power. Their immediate business is much closer to the salvation of the soul than to the rectification of the world. The Laputan large-think and the quantifying administrative language that goes with it—schools as delivery systems, students as clients, their education (or they themselves) as products—are particularly alien to these little places, and they compromise themselves in acceding to these terms.

One more reason that so much that issues from the colleges on liberal education is weak is that it has no real author. Blessedly, there is no system of higher education in this country. There are, to be sure, regional and national administrative organizations like the accrediting agencies and the governmental departments of education. There is also that marvelous exemplar of the Tocquevillian conformity that is so often the unintended consequence of freedom of choice in America—the almost total uniformity of administrative and intellectual organization of our schools of higher education: governance by citizen boards and presidents, departmental divisions following near-identical organizations of knowledge, specialized courses elected by students, and some unstable vestiges of cores, distribution requirements, or freshman seminars. The governance arrangements seem to me to be a spectacularly successful example of American civic life, the curricular plans somewhat less so, stymied as they are between the intellectual revisionism that trickles down from the universities and the conservatism of a professoriate whose members received their credentials by meeting graduate-school requirements as grueling as they are deforming to the liberal spirit of learning and teaching.

Consequently, colleges distinguish themselves by small differences—campus layout, local traditions and rituals, types of sociability. They show the same down-to-earth pluralism as does the American small town, a pluralism based on the stable particularities of place and the ever-fresh differences among

the human participants. These places attract lasting affection; in Daniel Webster's rousing peroration to the legal decision that made America safe for colleges, the Dartmouth College case of 1818, he states, "It is, sir, as I have said, a small college, and yet there are those that love it." The colleges really cannot speak with a common voice: on the curricular front there is not much news, while their human setting is rightly localized.

For the same reasons, they are not really a unitary addressee. The multitude of panel reports and position papers on the reform of higher education address no one and nothing. In any case, they are mostly flexings of the iron fist of economic exigency and government interference in the velvet glove of educationese. In fact, these productions often have no real author; they are produced by staffers collating the "input" of panel members who appear to be mostly untouched by the passion of learning.

It follows that an attractive exposition and a persuasive defense of liberal education is not very likely to come from the colleges speaking as a species and is near-certain not to come from concerned outsiders. Here is what is wanting and what is called for against all odds: reaffirmations of liberal education by the individual working communities where it is located, and a thoroughgoing, even radical review with specific reformulations of the elements of liberal education as practiced at each college. I do not mean vaporous mission statements or curricular tinkering, but rather localized and vivid expressions of such fundamentals as faculties can see their way to agreeing on with conviction. It is true in matters of education as in matters of faith that "because thou art lukewarm and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth."¹ Being both determinate and determined does not necessarily mean being closed-minded, but I think educational pluralism, that peculiarly American blessing, requires a certain sane schizophrenia: believing wholeheartedly in one way while entertaining an appreciative interest in alternatives.

LIBERAL EDUCATION, UNABASHED

An example is called for to explain what I mean both by the affirmation and the specification of liberal education. Liberal education is in need of reaffirmation not only because of the aforementioned unjust charge of elitism but also because of the vague imputation of “irrelevance”—usually without the benefit of the completing prepositional phrase required for definite sense.

From its very first extant description, the essence of liberal education was indeed to be irrelevant to something, namely, narrow vocationalism. Aristotle says in his *Politics*:

But that [the young] must not be taught all of the useful arts is evident, once free pursuits have been distinguished from those that are unfree—and also that they must take part only in those useful pursuits that will not make the participant [merely] mechanical.²

The negative distinguishing mark of “free,” that is, liberal, education seems to me still that it is not aimed at making a living or a career or even at preparing for a profession. It should not be defended to the general public or to paying parents on grounds of utility, not even of the nobler sort. To be sure, the facts skew even the purest intentions of those representing such an education. It is simply the case that our students almost universally declare their education to have been of the greatest use to them: in keeping them from being merely “mechanical,” it has made them both brave and versatile in facing practical problems. The kind of education I am about to delineate perhaps could not survive if not for the fact that learning undertaken for its own sake—not as a means but as its own end—turns out to be a means to moderate worldly success as well. This circumstance may not be a gratuitous accident but may instead speak to the logic of a world that is after all hospitable to liberal learning. However tempting favorable Graduate Record Examination scores, career statistics, and alumni tracking may be, they are not the right and finally not even the most persuasive defense of an education to which they are merely, if happily, incidental. And though I have great faith in the close relation of thoughtfulness to goodness, even the

development of useful citizens should not, I think, be cited among the *direct* aims of liberal learning; it is an obliquely achieved though ardently desired by-product.

In *The Use and Abuse of History*, Nietzsche recommends to the latecomers of a great tradition that they exchange their “painful ironic modesty for a certain shamelessness.”³ Such uninhibitedness about our offerings seems to be indicated. Our students may become economically productive, civically responsible, personally fulfilled, and all the other good things the catalogs suggest, but the first and last unabashed answer to the question “Why engage in liberal learning?” is “To learn something worth knowing for its own sake.” It is said that someone who was beginning to study geometry with Euclid asked, “But what shall I get by learning this stuff?” and that Euclid told his servant to give the person three pennies, since he needed to get a profit from his learning. There are softer ways to send the message, but we should not fudge it. As I said, I am unsure of the ultimate defensibility of nonutilitarian learning if our natures and the world were not made so that such learning is also morally and practically effective. But as it is, we should unabashedly ask our students to study for the love of it. The implications for the form and content of such study are momentous.

Aristotle clearly saw liberal studies as easily distinguishable from those that are “mechanical” and useful. But I think that liberality can turn up in human activity in two ways. From one point of view, the one that should be taken by institutions of liberal learning, subject matter is of the essence. But for life in general, I would say that any pursuit can be carried on in a liberal spirit, from accountancy to ontology. I have seen a new initiate into double-entry bookkeeping as fascinated with it as I was when I first saw the Pythagorean Table of Opposites: here was a whole accounted for by a dual list of equally weighted correlatives. From this wide perspective the mark of liberality is simply disinterested delight-taking.

ILLIBERAL NOTIONS

The four college years are spent surrounded by learning that may be liberal in spirit but not in intention. There is a well-

known distinction between education and training, the latter being a sort of mechanical habituation for practical purposes. The upbringing of children is largely training, as is the instruction of professionals. These are nonliberal but not illiberal modes; they are necessary, and though graduate training, at least, often results in a permanent professional deformation of the intellect, this is not a direct or unavoidable result. I believe that recent efforts to smooth out the transitions of schooling, to erase the boundaries between high school and college as well as college and graduate or professional school, are more harmful than helpful. These four years of earliest maturity, when most have had some experience of erotic love—the indispensable psychosomatic prelude to higher learning (though also a chief distractor)—and when they are between their parents' control and the world's demands, should be distinct from the other periods of life: free for the alternation of study and reflection, the ups and downs of illumination and confusion, the oscillations of wasted weeks and midnight intensities. I do not mean that the college years should be a unique epoch in people's lives; on the contrary, it is a paradigmatic time, to long for and recapture throughout life. Thus alumni are indeed, as we so often claim, the perpetuating progeny of their college—if, wherever they are, there crystallizes about them a colony of free learning. But those four years are the determinative initiation into liberal learning, and they should be as unlike high school and graduate school as possible. (Once again, a happy coincidence beclouds the purity of intention. According to a well-informed consultant, certain kinds of applicants to liberal arts colleges look exactly for that break with high school.⁴) The intellectual counterpart of what is referred to in anthropology as culture shock is a good beginning in liberal education, and this opinion has real consequences for the subject matter chosen to study, as I will argue below.

There are also genuinely *illiberal* tenets of education. Many of them are currently espoused as educationist wisdom and recommended as guides to curriculum making. Since the *via negativa* is often a good way to reach the specifiable essence, let me list five curricular opinions that seem to me deleterious, however humanely intended.

First, there is the opinion that we must meet students where they are “at,” that the teachers must find the students’ level, and that the subject matter must be relevant, presumably to their present condition. As I intimated above, I think the cause of the soul’s freedom is served in just the opposite way. Students should be given the opportunity to undergo what in adventist religions is called a “rapture,” a seizing-away into a new and possibly higher realm. The books they read, the theorems they prove, or the music they analyze that can send them into these realms will not be of their world or on their level at all but above it—as they remain, if truth be told, above their teachers’. But their teachers’ calm assumption for them will be that if they face these works together, almost all will be carried beyond their presumed level by the masterful authors’ communicative intention.

Nor do I think that students’ interest is best raised by burning topicality. There is, after all, a difference between excitation and interest—the former being a sort of prurience of the reason aroused by framing human extremities in an academic setting, the latter being the long-term engagement of the intellect with the human condition viewed from some distance. Interest is harder to arouse but easier to sustain, first because there is the deep pleasure of finding human affinities over great spans of time and increasing levels of abstraction, and second because these longer perspectives eventually help students to see more significance in their world and to frame more coherent opinions.

But students do not easily pluck themselves from the roiling life that surrounds them; the community of teachers has to do that for them. It is a sort of unwitting self-indictment when faculties turn the choice of studies over to the election of their students. If students already know what it is good for them to learn, what are the professors but providers of expertise? That is a respectable but not very liberal view of teaching. I think that a certain amount of prescription is necessary. And the response to the ever-ready challenge of “Who are you to tell me what to study?” is to tell who you are, and why you are assuming responsibility.

A second illiberal tenet follows immediately: that good teachers are people who know things and tell them, literally “professors.” It is a strange fact that the same youths who “question authority” in real life are so willing to sit in rows before a professing authority. But perhaps it is not so strange after all. Attendance at lectures is to them a sort of time investment, present life given up for later redemption in good grades.

Teachers should practice the Quaker art of silence until students are moved to *be there*. And just as they should not quell the students’ intellectual motions by talking at them, so should they not keep students from confronting the works to be studied by interposing introductions, backgrounds, interpretations, and other intermediating paraphernalia. But more of the liberal mode of teaching below.

It also follows, third, that it cannot be a direct aim of liberal education to change the world, even for the better. The tenet I am criticizing here as illiberal is not so much the inadmissibility of engaging an institution of liberal learning in political causes as the notion that life and learning, practice and theory, are to be intermingled or concurrent, that society becomes an adjunct laboratory for the school or the school a proving ground for social experiments. Study and reflection, and theory and conversation about theory, are *really* different from practical intervention in the world. It is not so much that, in general, thinking should come before doing, and even less that students in action (on either end of the political spectrum, where they tend to be) are not at their most profitable station. What is at stake is the leisurely, long-term, deeply excited but not agitated development of thought that can eventually be brought to bear on issues. School, as is often pointed out, is an adaptation of the Greek word for leisure; school is time out, free from practical pressures and open to looking at foundations, a time for contemplation, for theory in the original sense, for pure viewing. I think every human being wants a time for this sort of contemplative delving, though not everyone wants it in youth. It seems a possible and glorious thing if in the next decades liberal arts colleges received more and more applications from older, even quite senior, would-be students, intending to begin life again.

It follows that “problems and issues” courses have an illiberal taint on them, from my point of view, for who but a sadomasochist of the intellect would study the current ills of society for their own sake? Such courses, even the most scrupulously nonideological, *have* to be conceived as means for amelioration, as seedbeds of prompt action. On the other hand, deep, disinterested theoretical thought seems to be the better prelude to worldly engagement.

Fourth, the very distinction between learning free of interested motive and training for practical ends implies a recognition of high and low, a hierarchy of worth in matters intellectual. I do believe that to an educated person all things, grand or pitiful, and all studies, pure and applied, are eventually interesting. But I also think that the young especially ought to learn how to live with the array of conditions associated with excellence: that what is finest often denies itself to easy access; that to live admiringly with things above oneself is a source of dignity; that genuine hierarchies confer respect on all their members; that even what is greatest, or especially what is greatest, offers itself for critical judgment. The familiarity with greatness I have in mind is only remotely connected to Arnoldian “culture,” familiarity with “the best that has been thought and known in the world”; it is a much more concentrated, particular, and laborious immersion. Its real point is not even to induce disciplined self-respect in the way just laid out but to stock the mind with exemplars of the highest quality, based on the hypothesis that in order to battle the bad you have to know some good. But even that aim is too purposeful. The real point is just that if learning is to be liberal, that is, for its own sake, its objects have to be ipso facto authentically attractive. The unfashionable assumption here is that differential greatness exists and is discernible, and that the teachers should in common acquire the experience to discern it.

There is a consequence for teaching technique associated with the choice of works of high art over documents that are valued not for their intrinsic quality but as testimony to a targeted human condition. Works of high art—from mathematics to music, philosophy to literature—appeal to the passions via the judging functions, and liberal learning addresses itself in

the first instance to the intellectual rather than the pathological nature of the student. Therefore the devices used to rouse passions and empathy, such as consciousness-raising and role-playing, really do not fit into a liberal pedagogy. Teachers may be themselves exemplars of intellectual passion but must never be the deliberate instigators of emotions in others.

The fifth, and my final, tenet of illiberality is most powerful and most pervasive in our universities and even colleges. It is the exclusion of truth from learning—the *search* for truth. In some sectarian colleges a “truth” is actually taught, and with perfect right since the students have chosen the school in order to learn dogmatically. In such colleges liberal education goes on to a point, after which it becomes theological. But I am thinking of a secular curriculum, in which truths are agreed to be the ultimate objects of a possibly unfulfillable desire. In most classrooms today the question concerning truth is proscribed. Factuality, validity, relevance, interpretability, influence, motivation—all these may be examined, but the question “Is it true, what this book says?” is not admitted. It makes teachers squirm and students snicker. The roots of this embarrassment, which is far more acute than that raised by the mention of more intimately private matters, are as deep as the roots of secular modernity. But the exclusion of the truth question from students’ classroom experience, and consequently from their studies, has a devastating effect: It turns all their studies into a high-class game, which they can take or leave.

It is part of liberal education not only to admit that question but even to put it at the center of the enterprise. The first questions will usually be: What is this book saying? What is the gist of this theorem? How is this formula capturing the physical phenomenon? How is this musical phrase related to its verbal text? Of course, in concrete situations the questions will be intricate and specific. But eventually some students will ask: Do I believe this? And do I believe—or reject—it because *I* want to or because the *matter* compels me. This latter compulsion is the initial experience of truth. A liberal setting will be eagerly receptive to such questioning, even if it holds up the works; leisurely delay is the defining tempo of liberal learning.

LIBERAL TEACHING

The mode of teaching that fits liberal learning, then, is just everything that is opposite to the points listed above. Teachers do not strenuously accommodate students' current preoccupations but instead take responsibility for heaving them out of their present contexts by means of hard but high learning-matter. They are scrupulously nonintrusive with respect to their students' emotional life. At most, they hope by the silent influence and the unembarrassed example of their own feeling to turn the students toward the objects of their common attention. These objects are chosen so as to engage the whole community of learning, teachers and students, above its level of comfort, so that the admission of ignorance becomes a virtue of necessity. This community acknowledges hierarchies in the intellectual world, but its practices in the classroom are deliberately egalitarian. After all, one principle of the education I am describing is that "a cat may look at a king," or that ordinary people may confront great matters directly. Before their magnitude, *sub specie aeternitatis*, the "best and the brightest," and the modestly endowed do not seem so different, not to speak of the fact that the quick, brilliant students are not always as thoughtful as the slow, deep ones. But what really equalizes teachers and students is the genuine questions they share. The teachers' perplexity may be better specified, better informed, but whoever does not possess the Socratic wisdom cannot teach in the mode I mean. That "human wisdom" spoken of in Plato's *Apology* is to know that one knows nothing, and to know it in two ways: as a highly specifiable lack and as an irrepressible longing.⁵ Such teachers consequently are not authorities or experts but amateurs in the literal sense, lovers of learning, who start students on their way by good questions and help them over obstacles with spare explanations. Above all, they do not postpone or skew the students' direct confrontation with the objects of learning by long, dull, or opinionated scene setting; they do not damp the life of their intellects by preempting the conversation, for conversation is the supporting fluid of liberal learning.

LIBERAL SUBJECT MATTER

It is not quite true that any material serves for a liberal education, and teachers who say that it hardly matters what students learn as long as they learn in the right way seem to me to be too easy in their curricular faith. But I do believe that the world is full of a variety of fine curricular objects—texts, theories, practica—and that these can be arranged in a multitude of ways. The point is to make coherent choices and to live by them with open-minded conviction.

That said, I also believe that there are objects of study and curricular arrangements that are essentially connected to the way of liberal learning. I am a teacher at St. John's College, in Annapolis and Santa Fe, known somewhat formulaically but not unjustly as a "great books school." What I am about to describe briefly is our program, though abstracted from the accretions of detail and tradition that an actual working curriculum will accumulate over six decades and from the strands of ever-continuing discussion that anchor the foundations of the program. It is here offered as one example of a coherent liberal arts curriculum to which a whole faculty has committed itself.

The main objects—both tools and ends—of learning are the books: books of texts, symbols, notes, figures. The list changes incrementally, because each addition and subtraction is made by the faculty, and at least some of the members make it their business to read each book in question. The criteria for particular choices are well accepted; the modern public can read about them in essays by writers from Gertrude Stein to Italo Calvino. There is also an ancient tradition concerning the formation of whole canons, complemented by a fierce contemporary critique. For us, the primary inherent qualities of program books include indefinitely rich interpretability without a loss of definite meaning, artful melding of style and matter, and originality in the double sense of being at the origins or foundations of human knowledge and of being originative in bringing forth something new. The programmatically useful characteristics are a certain coherence—which might be dialectical, that is, oppositional—with other books and the likely spawning of a conversation. This last criterion usually means that the book

must have a good deal of self-sufficiency, so that students and tutors need no background preparation except perhaps the earlier books. But self-sufficiency, independent interpretability, is actually yet another mark of a great book for us. The principal effect of such books is self-knowledge in that expansive sense that includes the world.

The fact that the books stand in a coherent tradition suggests a largely chronological arrangement. The earlier books are the students' sole context for the later ones. The quarrelsomeness of this temporally successive tradition assures a balance of views. But the deepest motive for the chronological order is the hermeneutic null principle: mere dates dictate the sequence, and we need introduce no comparative or interpretative schemes. Of course in this, as in all our arrangements, we make reasonable compromises.

"Tutor" is the name we give to the teacher who tries to teach in this mode. There are no ranks, nor do students choose whose class they attend. What is more, they have to *be* in class because there is no making up a missed conversation: the whole program, with some carefully circumscribed exceptions, is required, and for two reasons. One is that we endeavor to prescribe books and subject matter that we think no human being should miss; the second is that we want students to talk and work with each other in and out of class.

The authors are supplemented by arts, those "liberal arts" after which colleges are still named. These arts of learning are very different from the "methods" or the "critical reasoning" sometimes taught in special courses; one might say that the liberal arts, as established in a long tradition and reconceived by us, reconcile the present pedagogical quarrel known as "process versus product." These arts are really exemplary subject matters that have the property of preserving within themselves the elements of their genesis, so that in learning the matter one also learns the way. The truly paradigmatic liberal arts are mathematics (which is Greek for "what is learnable"), science (Latin for "discerning knowledge"), and the arts of thinking and speaking. We choose what we think and have experienced for ourselves as the most revealing *and* accessible axiom- and theorem-sequences and the most significant scien-

tific theories with their crucial laboratory experiments. Of the arts of language, more below.

Here is what we do not attempt to do: We do not try to introduce our students to the “scientific (or any other) method,” giving them instead the means to think out what it means to bring method to matter. We do not set out to cover the field but rather make it clear to the students that their course of study is a set of choices, that is, exclusions, and that most of the world’s knowledge is left to their future learning. We do not reach sophisticated levels or do cutting-edge research; we have neither the training nor the equipment. So, for example, *all* the students can and do study the Special Theory of Relativity, but only a few tutors venture into the General Theory with their classes.

But the last omission also has a more positive cause. It is part of the liberality of the program that the teachers each teach nearly everything, on the hypothesis that what we require the students to learn we can surely learn ourselves and so teach it, and with special empathy. What justifies this venture is our conviction that liberal learning is, in its nature, elementary in a double sense. First, it begins at the beginning of a study and goes on in a leisurely, reflective way that almost everyone can follow. But besides this pedagogical lingering (which follows from the faith that, given time and the opportunity to ask every sort of question, almost anyone can learn some of anything), there is our wish to dwell on beginnings because they are also foundations, and we want students to be well-founded in their thinking. So we look for learning matter that is simple, elegant, and fraught with consequence. Our classes, while disciplined occasions for detailed learning, are always ready to burst into philosophic flame, to raise questions of the deepest and most naive sort. For example, a class in the freshman geometry sequence may suddenly be wondering in what sense a geometric figure is transportable and can be made to “coincide” with another, how timeless geometry seems to require a sort of matterless motion.

What I have just described is readily recognizable as related to the traditional quadrivium, the arts by which products of reason are applied to the world of nature. The trivium, which

consists of the complementary arts of thinking itself and its expression, is exercised through the study of two languages. They happen to be Greek and French, but as six decades of debate show, they could be Latin and German or any other two languages—such curricular discussions always supply reasons not only why the subjects chosen are best but also why something similar is good in another way. These languages are not, however, studied with any expectation of real competence (which some students nevertheless achieve), but in order that students have the wherewithal to reflect on their own language and on language simply, on how thoughts become sounds, how words catch things, how sentences are grammatically structured, how grammar cooperates with or diverges from logic, how the same thing can or cannot be said in two languages (we do a lot of translating), how speech becomes persuasive or beguiling, and how a poem may both mean and be.

Our students also sing together and later study the elements of music so as to be able to make sense of a score, and to treat a composition, such as the *St. Matthew Passion* or *Don Giovanni*, as a work on which the liberal arts may be brought to bear. But the main object here is to consider how the passions can be brought into play by high artifice.

All these arts are, however, plied mainly in aid of the central activity, the reading of the chosen texts and their discussion in the seminar. Difficult philosophic works are read. In the junior year, for example, our students study Descartes, who founded the method of devising methods that captured learning and is now central to modern practice. Also read for the seminar are the long novels that students labor through and never forget, such as *Don Quixote*, *War and Peace*, and *Middlemarch*.

The way of the seminar is simple and direct. There are two tutors to prevent the students from directing their contributions to an authoritative teacher figure. On alternate seminar nights (seminars happen at night because that is when young people talk) each tutor asks an opening question. It is an art to devise a good question—not a “teacher’s question,” that parody of our most human activity where the answer is all too well known to the inquisitor, nor a dogma with a question mark, but the catalyst of an inquiry. It is an everlasting subject of tutors’

conversation whether such a question requires some prior interpretation; it certainly requires engaged reading. Once started, the seminar conversation can blow where it will. The tutors' function is to restrain the overexuberant, encourage the shy, maintain civility and responsiveness, and, above all, make people explain themselves. Tutors can enter their own opinions, which carry the weight only of their persuasive rationality. Thus the seminar is the most egalitarian of grounds, where even the greatest—or most sacred—of books is confronted with respectful directness. To me the “great books seminar” is the incarnation of liberal teaching and learning. It goes without saying that under this dispensation both the books and tutors get almost more than their just share of trust, and sometimes love, from the students.

THE PLACE OF LIBERAL EDUCATION

The sort of education articulated here requires an actual place. Neither the inter-institutional community of scholars nor “distance learning,” to name two examples of placelessness in higher education, have much to do with it. It requires conversation, human beings face to face with each other, a condition that neither typed words nor even transmitted images can reproduce. It requires presence (though to explain why that is so would demand a metaphysical inquiry into the difference between reality and virtuality). Liberal education needs classrooms, quads, and coffeeshops, all the appurtenances of a concrete community of learning. It needs residences where students, especially freshmen, may learn the ways of close conversational friendship (no matter what less-approved ways they will also learn). It needs smallness, so that people may run into each other often for spontaneous conversation. One mark of a liberal school is that its members carry the life of the intellect into casual encounters without the least shame, so that a student might run up to a teacher with any question ranging from puzzlement about some technicality in Ptolemy's epicyclic theory to a demand to know the reason why some fellow students, who pretend to have read the same books that this student has taken to heart, act so irrationally. Or a tutor at the lunch table may

ask another who “they” might be “that have pow’r to hurt and will do none”—and soon there will be five tutors and a discussion in full spate.

All these conditions, or similar ones, are most likely to obtain at a small American residential college. To be sure, not all colleges are liberal arts colleges, and not all liberal arts colleges have preserved the purity of their designation. Some have been pushed by financial exigency into losing what I consider the defining features of liberal education: its nonvocational, nonpreparatory, nonutilitarian aim and its contemplatively leisured, expansively communal mode. As Aristotle turned out to be right in supposing that liberal education has a special subject matter—namely, objects inherently worthy of contemplation—so, it follows, he is right in saying that such an education cannot be narrowly tailored as a means to a practical end. The liberal arts colleges, which have a good deal of residual independence and, moreover, an old tradition of liberality, are still the last best hope for such an education. The university colleges offer, to be sure, somewhat similar conditions, but they are continually under pressure from the containing giant on whose revenues they depend and from whom come the bright ideas that galvanize liberal arts programs with spasms that turn out to be death throes.

There is something very remarkable about the American college. It belongs not only historically but in its conception to those many all-American institutions that are mundanely marginal but spiritually central to American life. Americans appear publicly devoted to the pursuit of material happiness, but as every sympathetic observer of the scene knows, they are, perhaps preeminently among humankind, filled with private longings of a nonmaterial sort. That is why I emphasized the importance of rhetoric in the beginning: If some colleges stated boldly and specifically their nonvocational aims, making it clear that their education, however structured, is an end in itself that happens incidentally to be practically useful, that their pedagogy works by indirection, that their tempo is leisurely, their means bookish, their mood contemplative, they would attract some fierce denigration but also, I am persuaded, far more outspoken sup-

port from the American public. It is a risky choice, but the situation borders on the perilous.

The very modesty of means at all but the most prestigious private colleges is an advantage in the restoration of liberal education. Two elements that are truly deleterious to a community of learning are out of the question for them. One is star professors with astronomical salaries, who disrupt collegiality and at least on occasion display the intellectual vice of vices, the notion that they know something. The other is selectivity. By one of those lucky dispensations that turns disadvantages into opportunities, most small colleges only make a brave show of being selective. In fact, they take whoever wants to come, and since this sort of education is always relatively expensive, their applicants do, by and large, want to come to this particular school. But that is just the way it ought to be. The aforementioned “best and brightest” by the normal criteria of admission are not invariably the most thoughtful and the most teachable. Small colleges are afflicted with an unfortunate *de facto* exclusivity because they are expensive; they should not add to that a harmful *de intentione* selectivity. If the matter and the teaching are in tune with the meaning of liberal education, almost anyone who wants to learn will be a profitable member of the community of learning. In fact, it is a test of a good school that its students rise not only above all the standard indices but even above all expectations; selectivity is, conversely, a blatant admission of pedagogic inability. For liberal learning, desire is the chief index of capability. Consequently, informed self-selection is a better criterion for admission than testable scholastic aptitude.

I have one final observation concerning the relevance of liberal education, which tends to be temporally cosmopolitan, to the local conditions of modernity and its afterbirth, postmodernity. Are the liberal arts colleges, as we sometimes hear, little islands of decorative antiquarianism or, worse, of traditions that enshrine superseded dominances? This kind of questioning does not come from the public so much as from opponents within the academy, and more often from the universities than from the colleges. To me the following answer seems sufficient: There is general agreement that democracy and tech-

nology are two, perhaps *the* two, phenomena that dominate our lives, and increasingly those of the whole globe, for better or worse. They have their deep roots in the Western tradition and in the very books and arts that together constitute a liberal education. Since the recovery of roots—racial, familial, religious—is a current preoccupation, the digging up (desedimentation is the technical word) of these beginnings should be congenial to consciously contemporary scholars. This recovery has nothing to do with nostalgic antiquarianism, which is the love of the past insofar as it is bygone. On the contrary, it yields “effective history,” the past as it is present—the source of much of the matter particularly germane to liberal learning.

Thus, whether the enterprise is congenial or not, and whether your taste is for critique rather than appreciation or for deconstruction rather than reception, what our students surely need is to learn in some detail and with a minimum of ideological static how they came by the opinions they bring along, so that they may be able to choose whether to hold on to them or to change them. But even the possession of well-examined opinions is secondary to the sheer love of learning engendered by something that is of self-revealing intrinsic worth. That is the liberal learning for which college is the time and the place.

ENDNOTES

¹Rev. 3:16.

²Aristotle *Politics* 1337b.

³Nietzsche, *The Use and Abuse of History*, VIII (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1957), 51.

⁴Mark Neustadt of Neustadt Creative Marketing.

⁵Plato *Apology* 21b ff.

It has become the fashion to level the charge of Eurocentricity at the West for ignoring our debt to the achievements of other civilizations. Yet while fully acknowledging this debt, we must still ask why the West, after the end of the Middle Ages, so rapidly overtook the great civilizations of the East.

In the venerable civilizations of the East, custom was king and tradition the guiding principle. If change came it was all but imperceptible, for the laws of Heaven existed once and for all and were not to be questioned. That spirit of questioning, the systematic rejection of authority, was the one invention the East may have failed to develop. It originated in ancient Greece. However often authority tried to smother this inconvenient element, its spark was glowing underground. It was that spark, perhaps, that was fanned into flame by the awareness that our ancestors did not have the monopoly of wisdom, and that we may learn to know more than they have if only we do not accept their word unquestioned. As the motto of the Royal Society (dating from 1663) has it, *Nullius in verba*—By nobody's word.

—E. H. Gombrich
“Eastern Inventions and
Western Response”

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