

Object:

ARTICLE SENT TO THE COMMUNITY COLLEGES HUMANITIES ASSOCIATION.

(Prepared by Bob Hochstein)

12/22/81

Message

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Thirty-five years ago, the German philosopher, Karl Jaspers, identified the goal of education as culture. Culture, Jaspers said is "a given historical ideal (and) . . . a coherent system of associations, gestures, values, ways of putting things. . . ." The educated person, Jaspers concluded, was one to whom culture--so defined--had become second nature. Today, a generation after Jaspers wrote, we find ourselves, as a nation, deeply hesitant about the aims of education. In Jaspers' terms, what are this society's agreed-upon values and "ways of putting things?" What, precisely, would characterize a person of culture in our fragmented post-modern society. The absence of answers is haunting.

There was a time colleges and universities felt no such uncertainties about their ends. Their task in education was to transmit--to the next generation--moral, cultural, and political values and traditions. This mission was once so vital that in most 19th Century colleges the presidents taught a "moral philosophy" course as the academic capstone. Even after the direct power of the church declined, schools and colleges continued as a bastion of the moral order. While the transmitting of civic obligations became a central obligation still the afterglow of religious loyalty lingered on. But early in this century, confidence in the unity of the established order began to fade. Historian Henry May demonstrates persuasively in The End of American Innocence, that the evaporation of Wilsonian idealism and the cultural upheavals of the 1920s hastened social fragmentation. Past certainties were shaken by scientific

inquiry and higher education's confidence in its own moral mission weakened. Commenting on this loss of coherence and conviction, Robert Hutchins, on one occasion, described the modern university as a series of separate departments held together by a central heating system; and Clark Kerr characterized the multi-university as an assemblage of faculty entrepreneurs held together by a common grievance over parking.

Still, deep down inside, the belief persists that education at its best can hold the intellectual center of society together. We still expect the university to bring together the views and experiences of all its parts, and create something greater than the sum. And this--it seems to me--is precisely the point where "the humanities" move center stage. There is, I believe, more than an accidental connection between such words as human, humane and humanities. They identify an area of inquiry with people at the center. The humanities focus on the consequential common experiences of the human race and in so doing they seek to integrate and give meaning to all the disciplines--including science.

Norman Foerster, writing in The Humanities and the Common Man, argues that "an education permeated by the humanistic spirit has always included science." There is no science, he notes, other than that which human beings produce, and they produce it because they value the passion to know. When American scientists were revolted by the Nazi's perversion of science, Foerster points out, they were reacting as humanists--who brought values to their work. Nearly forty years ago in Liberal Education, Mark Van Doren wrote:

"The connectedness of things is what the educator contemplates to the limit of his capacity. No human capacity is great enough to permit a vision of the world as simple, but if the educator does not aim at the vision no one else will, and the consequences are dire when no one does. . . . The student who can begin early in life to think of things as connected, even if he revises his view with every succeeding year, has begun the life of learning."

Seeing "the connectedness of things," is, it seems to me, the essence of humanistic studies. Let me describe still more specifically just what it is I have in mind. In 1972, a Stanford University faculty committee proposed a western civilization report, having dropped such a requirement a few years before. The student newspaper, in a biting attack on the faculty proposal, said in a front-page editorial that the new requirement would:

"remove from students the right to choose for themselves. . . This is not to deny that courses in western culture are valuable and that most students could benefit from them. To require such a course, however, carries a strong, illiberal connotation. . . It imposes a uniform standard on nonuniform people."

I find this a startling statement. It is startling that the student editor failed to understand that while we are indeed "nonuniform," we are at the same time interdependent. We do have a shared cultural heritage, a shared agenda of urgent contemporary problems, and a shared future that cannot be ignored. Uniformity and interrelatedness are not synonymous. A college curriculum cannot ignore or diminish this aspect of our experience. To deny our relationship with one another and with our common home, Earth, is to deny the realities of existence. It is as irresponsible to imply to students that they have nothing in common as it would be to suggest that they are alike.

Recently, in a little essay entitled A Quest for Common Learning, The Carnegie Foundation discussed six broad themes that students should study to understand themselves, their society, and the world in which they live. This seems relevant to the focus of this conference because they put humanities at the core.

First, the sending and receiving of messages separates all human beings from all other forms of life.

- o Language is the connecting tissue that binds society together and we propose that at the core all students, should study and become proficient in the use of symbols--indeed, there are those who equate humanities with language and its uses.

- o Students should understand why and how language has evolved, how messages reveal the values of a culture.
- o Students should explore, as well, how we communicate nonverbally, through music, dance, and the visual arts. They should understand how these forms of expression convey subtle meanings, express intense emotions, and how, uniquely, the arts can stir a deep response in others.

Second, all students should understand that we are born into institutions, we pass much of our lives in institutions, and institutions are involved when we die.

- o "We do not make a world of our own," Ralph Waldo Emerson observed nearly 150 years ago, "but fall into institutions already made, and have to accommodate ourselves to them..." Institutions are a fact of life. They touch almost every aspect of our being--economic, educational, familial, political, and religious. We are born into institutions; we pass much of our lives in institutions; and institutions are involved when we die.
- o The general education curriculum we have in mind would look at the origin of institutions; how they evolve, grow strong, become oppressive or weak, and sometimes die.

Third, students should examine the universal experience of producing and consuming and examine how work patterns reflect the values and shape the social climate of a culture.

- o The urge to be active and useful is found in every age and culture. Throughout life, almost everyone is kept busy producing and consuming. We need the contributions of our fellow human beings and they need, from us, something in return. George Bernard Shaw caught the point when he said: "We have no more right to consume happiness without producing it than to consume wealth without producing it." Students should understand that everyone produces and consumes and that, through this process, we are dependent on each other. This is an essential part of common learning.

Fourth, all life forms on the planet earth are inextricably interlocked, and no education is complete without an understanding of the ordered, interdependent nature of the universe.

- o Lewis Thomas, in his Phi Beta Kappa Oration at Harvard University, said that: "There are no solitary, free-living creatures; Every form of life is dependent on other forms. The great successes in evolution, the mutants who have, so to speak, made it, have done so

by fitting in with, and sustaining, the rest of life. Up to now we might be counted among the brilliant successes, but flashy and perhaps unstable. We should go warily into the future, looking for ways to be more useful, listening more carefully for the signals, watching our step, and having an eye out for partners."

General education means learning about the elegant, underlying patterns of the natural world and discovering that all elements of nature, in some manner, are related to each other. This is an essential part of humanistic learning.

Fifth, all students should understand that our common heritage is a bridge that holds us all together in ways we hardly understand.

- o It is more than this. It is what Edmund Burke termed "a pact between the dead, the living, and yet unborn."
- o It is essential that the human race remember where it has been and how, for better or worse, it got where it is.
- o An understanding of our heritage should be expected of all students.

Finally, all students should explore values and beliefs.

- o Education, by its very nature, is value-laden. Any institutions committed to inquiry into the human experience must inevitably confront questions of purpose.

- o The refusal to face those issues openly and directly is, itself, a moral decision with far-reaching implications.

The late Jacob Bronowski, in a vivid description of his 1945 visit to Nagasaki Harbor, raised deeply unsettling questions about education's response to humanity's most profound concerns:

"What I had thought to be broken rocks was a concrete power house with its roof punched in. I could make out the outline of two crumpled gasometers; there was a coal furnace festooned with service poles; otherwise nothing but cockeyed telephone poles and loops of wire in a bare waste of ashes. I had blundered into this desolate landscape as instantly as one might walk among the craters of the moon. The moment of recognition when I realized I was already in Nagasaki is present to me as I write, as vividly as when I lived it. I see the warm night and the meaningless shapes; I can even remember the tune which had been popular in 1945, and it was called "Is You Is Or Is You Ain't Ma Baby?"

For Bronowski, the lyrics of the dance tune took on macabre overtones. It was, he felt, a "universal moment," one in which modern man's knowledge was transformed into horror. At that

instant of confrontation, he later wrote, "each of us in his own way learned that his imagination had been dwarfed." Hiroshima and Nagasaki--not to mention Buchenwald and Auschwitz--may, from one perspective, be irrelevant to the educational issues we confront today. Still, they have the odd effect of forcing us to inquire once again into deeply troubling, and perhaps unanswerable, questions about knowledge and its uses; about the relationship between education and human conduct. The destruction Bronowski witnessed was a technological achievement built on trained intelligence, and we cannot help wondering what discipline of mind, what knowledge more adequately comprehended, what values more effectively conveyed could have an equally powerful impact for human betterment?

Howard Munford Jones wrote in 1958 that, "perhaps nobody knows how to make any human being better, happier or more capable, but at the very least, the humanities. . . help to sustain a course of thought in which these questions have meaning. . . ." Indeed, in the end, one might argue that education's primary mission is to develop within each student the capacity to judge wisely in matters of life and conduct. This imperative does not replace the need for rigorous study in the disciplines; but neither must specialization become an excuse to suspend judgment or interfere with the search for worthwhile goals. This is not to suggest a program of indoctrination in place of investigation; it is not a prescription for a rigid code of conduct for all students. We need no cultural and moral bandmasters striking up the tune to which everyone must dance. Indeed, we view with

grave concern the growth of censorship and repressiveness and the crusades of righteous zealots who seek to impose on others their own brand of morality. To counter such narrow and reactionary thinking, colleges should not push for particular conclusions; rather they should create a climate in which the values of the individual and the ethical and moral choices confronting society can be thoughtfully examined. The aim is not only to prepare the young for productive careers, but to enable them to live lives of dignity and purpose, not only to generate new knowledge, but to channel that knowledge to humane ends; not merely to increase participation at the polls, but to help shape a citizenry that can weigh decisions wisely and more effectively promote the public good. John Gardner said on one occasion that "The deepest threat to the integrity of any community is an incapacity on the part of the citizens to lend themselves to any worthy common purposes." Gardner goes on to reflect on "the barrenness of a life that encompasses nothing beyond the self."

In response to such barrenness, America's colleges and universities need an inner compass of their own. They must perform for society an integrative function, seeking appropriate responses to life's most enduring questions, concerning themselves not just with information and knowledge, but with wisdom. This, it seems to me, is education's most essential mission and such a mission vigorously pursued places humanities at the core. At a recent meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, Dr. Lewis Thomas, acknowledging that

these are not the best of times for the human mind, went on to observe.

"I cannot begin to guess at all the causes of our cultural sadness, not even the most important ones, but I can think of one thing that is wrong with us and eats away at us: we do not know enough about ourselves. We are ignorant about how we work, about where we fit in, and most of all about the enormous, imponderable system of life in which we are embedded as working parts."