AZUSA-19.DOC, (ELB,SPC/dmo,lb), February 14, 1991

PARTIES

~~LIBERAL LEARNING~~ FOR A NEW CENTURY

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~~January 29, 1991~~

INTRODUCTION

Let me begin with a personal reflection.

Thirty-five years ago, quite against my better judgment, I became academic dean at ~~a college just a dozen or so miles down the road.~~ Upland was, I suspect, the world's smallest higher learning institution. And, even though this little college closed its doors years ago, it was there that I first encountered compelling questions about the ~~liberal learning~~ that have haunted me to this day.

- Just what are the ~~purposes~~ of a college education? Does anybody really know?

- *Is* there, in fact, a core of common learning for all students? If so, how should it be defined?

- And, finally, ~~in the educating of undergraduates, what balance should be struck~~ between ~~the liberal and the useful arts, between~~ the private and the public purposes of education?

Three and one half decades have gone by since I first reflected on these intriguing issues and I must confess that, throughout the years, the answers have remained exceedingly illusive.

- Still—~~at this moment of special celebration—I should~~ like to throw caution to the wind

- and submit, for your consideration, four imperatives for ~~liberal learning~~ that ~~seem to me~~ absolutely crucial as we move toward the year 2000 and beyond.

I. THE UNITY OF ALL KNOWLEDGE

First, as we approach a new century, I'm convinced the nation's colleges and universities ~~must help students integrate their knowledge~~—make connections across the disciplines—and, ~~in the process, gain a more compelling view of knowledge and a more authentic, more coherent view of life~~.

Some years ago, I was strolling nonchalantly along Charing Cross Road in London, England, drifting in and out of those exquisitely attractive bookstores that line both sides of that busy street.

- Midway through my browsing I discovered, quite unexpectedly, a well-worn little volume entitled, *Essential Knowledge for All*—which incidentally was at the bottom of a box of discards.

- After handing over a pocketful of shillings—I became the proud owner of this neatly packaged compendium of essential knowledge—a kind of hip pocket version of a core of common learning.

There was a time, ~~of course,~~ when all of human knowledge could--in fact—be neatly ~~packed~~ filled inside the covers of a single book.

- ~~Consider~~, for example, ~~that~~ students in the medieval university confined their study to the "trivium" and the "quadrivium"—a "pyramid of learning" that held within it the essence of all essential knowledge—or so it was assumed.

- ~~Consider, also, that~~ And for a century or more, all colleges in America had a rigidly prescribed course of study with a capstone course in moral philosophy—a requirement that today appears to be hopelessly outdated.

It's true, ~~of course~~, that almost every college in the country still has a requirement in general education.

But it's also true that all too often, this so-called "distribution sequence" is little more than a grab-bag of isolated courses.

Students complete the required credits, but what they fail to see is the unity of knowledge ~~and what "eludes them" is the mystery and the majesty of creation.~~

Einstein said on one occasion that all religions, all arts, all sciences, are branches of the same tree.

- But in our fragmented academic world most students only rarely make this elegant discovery.

Frank Press, president of the National Academy of Sciences, recently suggested that scientists are, in some respect, like artists, too. And to illustrate the point, Frank observed that the magnificent double helix, that broke the genetic code, is not only rational, he said, it's beautiful as well.

- And yet, on far too many campuses, scientists and artists live in two separate worlds.

Barbara McClintock, the Nobel Prize-winning geneticist, declared on one occasion that "everything is one. There is," she said, "no way you can draw a line between things."

- I wonder if Professor McClintock has looked at college catalog in recent days.

And when Victor Weiskopf, the world-renowned physicist, was asked "what gives you hope in troubled times," he replied "Mozart and quantum mechanics."

- But where in the curriculum do students discover connections such as these?

Of course, the disciplines are important. And, of course, students should be encouraged to specialize and become competent in a special field.

- But, liberal learning also means helping students go beyond the hodgepodge of isolated, disconnected courses

- and learning to be—not just "analytic" thinkers—but "integrative" thinkers, too.

And for this to be accomplished, I'm convinced we need

1. more seminars on campus that focus on cross disciplining themes.

2. We need more "college symposia" on the campus—times when faculty from different specialties present their own unique perspectives on a consequential topic. ~~We need integrative "centers of ____" of the sort President Felix mentioned this morning.~~

3. Above all, let's build a closer connection between general education and the major, asking seniors to write a final paper that would put their specialty in social, ethical, and historical perspective.

4. And is it too naive to suggest a capstone seminar in which all seniors would come together in small groups to discuss with one another their integrative efforts?

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The late Charles Frankel, in writing to a group of undergraduates, put the challenge this way:

- "If you have a liberal education," Frankel said, ". . . you will live at more than one level.

- You won't simply respond passively to events, and you won't be concerned about them *only* personally.

- At least sometimes you will see your fate, whatever it is, as an illustration of the human condition and of the destiny of man."

- You will, in a word, place your specialty in perspective.

And this, it seems to me, is what liberal learning is all about.

II. THE CENTRALITY OF LANGUAGE

This leads me to imperative number two.

Looking to a new century, I'm convinced that liberal learning means giving high priority to language and helping students understand that the quality of their lives will be shaped largely by the quality of their discourse.

Writing recently in the *New York Times*, Malcolm Bradbury captured the essence of my concern when he wrote:

- It is an old truth that if we do not have mastery of our language, language itself will master us. . . .

- "We discover life," he said, "through language."

Scholars throughout antiquity have understood, very well, this fundamental truth.

1. In the fifth century B.C., Plato described rhetoric as the "well spring" of democracy.

2. Quintillian's book on rhetoric has been called "the most influential textbook on education ever written."

3. Aristotle's Rhetoric remains the classic inquiry into the power of human discourse.

4. And, when Matthew Arnold was about to go to Oxford, his father, wrote to the university asking whether Aristotle's Rhetoric was still required study there.

   - "I could not," he said, "consent to send my son to a university where he would lose it altogether."

Well, I'm afraid that, today, we have lost it altogether. The sad truth is that "rhetoric"—once the centerpiece of education—has become a label of derision. But it's not just the term that we've debunked. What's most troublesome has been the loss of respect for language and the lack of proficiency in the written and the spoken word.

- A recent Carnegie Foundation survey of 5,000 faculty revealed that two-thirds of today's professors say their students come to college inadequately prepared in the basic skills.

- We also found that most faculty say they're teaching college students what they should have learned in school.

- Even more disturbing, a recent report from the National Assessment of Educational Progress concluded that only 20 percent of young adults in the United States today have the capacity to read, with comprehension, a "well crafted" newspaper editorial.

- And it's my conclusion that the inability of our students to write with clarity and read with comprehension is perhaps the most serious educational deficiency the nation's schools and colleges now confront.

But the problem goes much deeper.

Today we live in a world where language is increasingly debased, where obscenities abound. We live in a world where politicians use 60 second sound bytes to destroy the integrity of opponents and use slogans to conceal, rather than reveal.

Today we live in a world where cliches have become substitutes for reason and where prejudice is all too often frozen into epitaphs and hurtful slogans—even on the college campus.

- As some of you may know, the Carnegie Foundation recently was asked to study the quality of campus life. In the conduct of that study we surveyed hundreds of college presidents from coast to coast and 60 percent reported sexual harassment is a problem on their campus; half listed racial harassment as a problem.

- And when the presidents were asked what would <u>most improve</u> the quality of campus life, 80 percent said greater civility—and better communication.

The presidents had it absolutely right. Words can either harm or heal and the quality of community is inextricably linked to the quality of our communication.

Wayne Booth of the University of Chicago put the issue bluntly when he wrote:

- If we train our students in the arts of reading, writing, listening, and speaking, we shall inevitably empower them not just to do <u>good</u>,

- but (also) to <u>harm</u> the world—to use rhetoric for antisocial ends.

In response to this challenge,

- I propose that all freshmen complete a course in expository writing—and oral discourse.

- I propose that all seniors be asked to write an essay on a consequential topic to test their capacity to think critically and integrate ideas.

- But, above all, I propose that all students complete a course on The Ethics of Communication.

  - a seminar where the use and abuse of language would be considered,

  - where mass media and advertising would be examined,

  - where political debates would be critiqued,

  - and where the integrity of one's own discourse would be thoughtfully confronted.

D. Elton Trueblood, that wonderfully inspired Quaker educator, former president of ____, wrote recently about the powerful influence a senior professor had on him while he was a student at Johns Hopkins. Trueblood said that,

- "For three years I wrote short essays for my mentor, Professor Arthur O. Lavery, always with the certainty of careful scrutiny.

- And then, Trueblood concluded with this punchline. He said that, "With every essay I had to face the question—is it really true?"—Is what I've written really true? His concern was not just with accuracy but with ethics, too.

I'm suggesting that liberal education surely means having the capacity to read with comprehension, write with clarity, and effectively speak and listen.

- But liberal learning also means teaching students that language is a sacred trust.

- And that truth is the obligation we assume when they are empowered with the use of words.

III. THE IMPERATIVE OF COMMUNITY

This brings me to priority number three.

Looking to a new century I'm convinced that to be liberally educated means going beyond one's own private interests, focusing on community concerns, and, in the end, using one's own knowledge for the advancement of humane ends.

In his provocative book, *The Mountain People*, anthropologist Colin Turbull describes a once-thriving North African tribal community in which

1. human relationships had broken down.

2. Common values had eroded,

3. the social glue had crumbled, and suspicions poisoned relationships at every turn.

There is troubling evidence that something similar to this is happening in America today. Individualism increasingly seems to dominate the culture, racial and ethnic separations are spreading, self-centeredness seems to overshadow service, and international understanding is shockingly restricted.

Several years ago, John Gardner—while speaking at a seminar at Stanford—urged a group of seniors to consider what their lives would be like after graduation. He put the challenge this way:

- "I have to tell you candidly," he said "that an education at any of the great universities,
- followed by a graduate degree,
- followed by a plunge into the world of young professionals moves you steadily further from the bedrock of everyday American experience."

"If you're lucky," Gardner continued, "you will escape the root ailments of the young urban professional" (and these ailments are):

- "an overvaluing of intellect—as against character,
- of getting there first—as against growing in mind and spirit,
- of food for the ego—as against food for the "hunger of the heart."

Today's students are, quite properly, concerned about getting credentialed and becoming productively employed. But undergraduates—like the rest of us—are also torn between idealism, on the one hand, and self-interest on the other.

And, is it too much to expect that in our dangerous interdependent world college graduates will move beyond the "single cell" of self, be committed to community concerns and to have a perspective that is global?

- As a first step, let's ask all undergraduates to complete a study of a culture other than our own. We simply must be better informed about Asian cultures, about our neighbors to the south, and about the Middle East—which until recently most Americans could not locate on a map.

- Let's have more international student and faculty exchanges.

- Let's also have occasional "time outs" on campus—one or two day all-college seminars that bring everyone together to talk about a global issue—a kind of town meeting on world affairs.

- Last fall, just after democracy swept through Eastern Europe, I spoke at a small liberal arts college in West Virginia and I was enormously impressed to discover that the institution had, quite spontaneously, rearranged its schedule. Students from five Eastern European countries had been invited to the campus to participate in a week-long seminar on Democracy in Eastern Europe—it was a dramatic example of global education that focused on history in the making.

- And finally I'd like to see all colleges and universities make "community service" a core requirement for liberal learning, to help students see a connection between what they learn and how they live.

THE IMPERATIVE OF ENGAGEMENT

IV. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE SACRED

This brings me to one final observation.

Looking to a new century, I'm convinced that liberal learning increasingly must help students confront the ethical and moral imperatives of their lives and inquire thoughtfully into the ultimate purpose of their existence.

During the past 2 weeks, while reflecting on the future of liberal learning, I watched with unspeakable sadness as the world—once again—marched off to war.

And as I watched I wondered what it meant as rockets rained down

- on the Tigris and Euphrates Valley,
- on the cradle of civilization,
- on the birthplace of Abraham,
- and on the region where the Garden of Eden has been placed.

Rheinhold Niebuhr put the challenge this way: "Man cannot behold," he said, "except he be committed. He cannot find himself unless he finds a center beyond himself." And I'm convinced that the young people of this nation are ready to be inspired by a larger vision.

I'm suggesting that, when all is said and done, the quality of liberal learning must be measured by the willingness of graduates to be socially and civically engaged

- and have a perspective that is global.

And I asked myself what, if anything, all of this has to do with liberal education.

Have we, with all of our erudition, prepared ourselves

- not for civility,
- but mass destruction.

When the American sociologist, Daniel Bell, was asked to give the Hobhouse Memorial Lecture at the London School of Economics, he chose as his title, "The Return of the Sacred?"

Early in his lecture, Bell quoted the great German sociologist, Max Weber, who wrote at the end of the nineteenth century,

1. "With the progress of science and technology, man has stopped believing in magic powers. He has lost the sense of prophecy."

2. And above all, Weber wrote, "he has lost his sense of the sacred."

3. "Reality," Weber wrote, "has become dreary, flat, and utilitarian, leaving a great void in the souls of men which they seek to fill with frivolous activity."

Bell went on to note that, with all of our achievements,

1. "Man's reason did not prevent the holocaust or the mushroom shaped cloud under which we huddle."

2. And he concluded that "the flatness and the dreariness of a wholly utilitarian, secularized society, has taken a terrible toll on the human spirit."

Since the Renaissance,

- Rational inquiry has "exponentially expanded" human understanding

- and we should celebrate the stunning progress that's been made in unlocking the secrets of the natural world.

But we are also beginning to discover that while science can tell us <u>how</u> things work it cannot answer the most essential question—<u>why</u>.

- And, increasingly, we are beginning to understand, as George Steiner has reminded us, that a man who is intellectually advanced can at the same time be morally bankrupt.

- We now know that such a man

  - can listen to Bach and Schubert at sundown,

  - he can read Goethe in the evening,

  - and the next day go to his work at the concentration camp to gas his fellowmen.

"What grows up inside literate civilization," Steiner asks, "that seems to prepare it for the release of barbarism?"

- What grows up, of course, is knowledge without wisdom, competence without conscience, and learning without values.

I realize that whenever a discussion turns to values, a strange embarrassment seems to overtake us all. Somehow we have deluded ourselves into believing that we can be responsible people

- without ever taking sides,

- without expressing firm convictions about fundamental issues.

In his penetrating book, *Faith and Learning*, Alexander Miller commented on this curious timidity when he wrote:

> "A decent tentativeness is a wholesome expression of scholarly humility. We seem to have a sort of dogmatic tentativeness which suggests that (in matters of moral judgment, at least) it is intellectually indecent to make up your minds."

I'm suggesting that if higher education hopes to be a moral force in society, learning must take place in a moral context. This means creating a climate on the campus in which students confront life's most fundamental questions: Why am I here? What does it mean to be human? What is it that ultimately gives purpose and dignity to my existence?

The goal in such a climate is not to impose a single set of values, but to make honorable the quest.

Bertrand Russell put the issue squarely when he wrote:

- "Without civic morality, communities perish;
- but without personal morality their survival has no value."

Inquiring into the essence of our existence, it seems to me, is the final and most essential imperative of liberal learning.

Here then is my conclusion. As we enter a new century, I propose a vision of liberal education that affirms

- the unity of knowledge,
- the centrality of language,
- the imperative of community,
- and the significance of the sacred.
- And above all, liberal learning means helping students find purpose in their lives.
- Students who, in the words of Micah, act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with their God.