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HUMAN COMMONALITIES: RESHAPING THE CORE

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**The Carnegie Foundation
for the Advancement of Teaching**

Community College General Education Association

12th Annual Conference

Lowell, Massachusetts

May 7, 1993

Thank you very much.

This morning I'd like to talk about an issue that has perplexed

- **educators**
- **and philosophers**
- **and parents**

for at least one thousand years.

- **Just what is an educated person?**

To put it more precisely,

- **is there a core of common learning?**

And, if so, how should it be defined?

And to put my remarks in larger context

- **I'd like to begin by telling you a story.**

I.

In 1972, I was sitting at my desk in Albany, New York.

It was a dreary Monday morning, and to avoid the pressures of the day

- **I turned instinctively to the stack of third-class mail that I kept perched precariously on the corner of my desk**
- **to create the illusion of being very, very busy—it's an old administrative trick.**

On top of the heap was the student newspaper from Stanford University.

- **And a headline announced that the faculty at Stanford had reintroduced a required course in "Western Civilization,"**
- **after having abolished this requirement just three years before.**
- **Bear in mind, this was 1972.**

The students, I discovered,

- **were mightily offended by the faculty's brash act.**

And in a front-page editorial, they declared that

- **"a required course is an illiberal act."**

And then the editors concluded with this blockbuster question:

- **"How dare they impose uniform standards on nonuniform people?"**

At first I was amused. And then deeply troubled by that statement.

I was troubled that some of America's most gifted students

- after 14 or more years of formal learning**

still had not learned the simple truth that

- while we were "nonuniform,"**
- we still have many things in common.**

They had not discovered the essential fact that,

- **with all of our diversity,**
- **there still are characteristics at the very core of our existence that bind us to each other.**

KEY POINT

And this brings me to the central theme of my remarks this morning.

Being an educated person surely means

- **becoming well informed.**
- **it means developing one's own aptitudes and interests,**
- **and it means discovering the diversity that makes us each unique.**

But there is another side to the equation.

Today, almost all students complete their distribution requirements,

- **which typically consists of a grab bag of disconnected courses,**
- **and they are handed a diploma.**

But what they fail to gain

- **is a more coherent view of knowledge,**
- **and a more integrated,**
- **more authentic view of life.**

The Nobel laureate Barbara McClintock wrote on one occasion:

- **"Everything is one.**

"There is," she said, "no way to draw a line between things."

I wonder if Professor McClintock has looked at college curriculum in recent years,

- **with all the separate academic boxes.**

Frank Press, president of the National Academy of Science, said in a recent speech that

- **scientists are in some respects like artists.**

And to illustrate the point he said that

- **the magnificent double helix—which broke the genetic code—was not only rational,**
- **it was beautiful as well.**

And yet, on most campuses, scientists and artists

- **live in two separate worlds.**

When the world-renowned physicist Victor Weisskopf was asked

- **what gives you hope in trouble times, he replied**
- **"Mozart and quantum mechanics."**

**But where in the college experience do students begin to see
connections such as these?**

But what we urgently need today

- **are students who can put their learning in perspective.**

And for this to be accomplished, we need a coherent curriculum,

- **one that goes beyond the separate academic subjects**
- **and uses the disciplines to illuminate larger, more integrative ends.**

HUMAN COMMONALITIES

But where do we begin?

Several years ago in a book called *Quest for Common Learning*,

- **I suggested—as one approach—that we might organize the core curriculum**
 - **not on the basis of disciplines and departments,**
 - **but on the basis of what might be called the human commonalities.**

By human commonalities I mean those universal experiences that are shared

- **by all people and all cultures on the planet,**

conditions that define the

- **life experience for all of us,**
- **and make us truly human.**

And while reflecting on the possibilities of this new thematic structure,

- **I concluded that there are, in fact, 8 human commonalities that bind us to each other.**

I. THE LIFE CYCLE

First, at the most basic level,

- **we all share the universal human experiences of birth and growth and death.**

And I've often thought that if you want to make connections in another culture

- **take a baby.**

The life cycle binds us all together.

And yet the sad truth is that

- **most students go through life without reflecting on the mystery of their own existence.**

They complete 12 or even 16 years of formal schooling

- **not considering the sacredness of their bodies,**
- **not learning how to sustain wellness,**
- **or pondering the imperative of death.**

My wife is a certified nurse-midwife and has delivered many babies,

- **including seven grandchildren of our own.**
- **Kay tells of delivering the babies of teenage girls.**
- **These are children having children,**
 - **who for nine months have fed their unborn infant Coke and potato chips.**

And who learn about the birth process

- **in between the labor pains.**

It's really shocking that young people in America today grow up knowing more about

- **their Walkman's**
- **or the carburetor of a car**

than they do about

- **the characteristics of their own bodies.**

And if I were reshaping the core curriculum to help all students see connections,

- **I'd have one major strand of study called**
 - **"The Life Cycle"**
- **at the very core of common learning,**
 - **with a focus on anatomy, physiology, nutrition, health, and wellness,**
 - **and with every student completing an applied project that would involve caring for some form of life.**

I'm suggesting that being truly educated means

- **learning about how one's own body functions.**
- **It means observing a variety of life forms.**
- **And—above all—it means reflecting sensitively on the mystery of birth and growth and death.**
- **Without such knowledge we remain ignorant and do violence to our own existence.**

II. LANGUAGE

This brings me to priority number 2.

In addition to the life cycle,

- **all people on the planet also use symbols**
 - **to express feelings and ideas.**

After our first breath we start reaching out to others.

- **And a quality education surely means becoming proficient**
 - **in the written and the spoken word.**
 - **And discovering that numeracy is a symbol system, too.**

The point is that our sophisticated use of language

- **sets human beings apart from all other forms of life.**
- **And that it's through the miracle of words**
 - **that we are all connected to each other.**

Consider the miracle of this very moment.

- **I stand here vibrating my vocal cords.**
- **Molecules are bombarded in your direction.**
- **They hit your tympanic membrane;**
- **signals go scurrying up your eighth cranial nerve, and**
- **there's a response deep in your cerebrum that approximates, I trust, the images in mine. But do you realize the audacity of this act?**

I'm encouraged that you're looking in my direction!

- **But I've been a teacher far too long to confuse**
 - **visual contact with**
 - **cerebral interaction.**

I'm suggesting that

- **language is not just another subject,**
- **it's the means by which all other subjects are pursued.**

And the new core curriculum should include

- **a second strand called**
 - **the use of symbols,**
- **which might include:**
 - **literature**
 - **the history of language,**
 - **a study of mathematics as a symbol system.**
 - **And surely it would include speaking and listening and reading and writing across the whole curriculum,**
 - **since it's through clear writing,**
 - **that clear thinking can be taught.**

ETHICS

But, above all, students in our schools also should be asked to consider

- **the ethics of communication,**
 - **since good language means**
 - **not just accuracy,**
 - **but honesty as well.**

Today's students live in a world

- **where obscenities abound.**

They live in a world where

- **politicians use 60-second sound bites to destroy the integrity of their opponents.**

They live in a world where

- **clichés have become substitutes for reason.**

And students urgently need to be taught how to distinguish between communication that is

- **deceitful**
- **and communication that is authentic.**

I'm suggesting that to be an educated person means

- **writing with clarity,**
- **reading with comprehension,**
- **being able to effectively speak and listen,**
- **and accurately compute.**

But—beyond all this—education for the next century also means helping students understand that

- **language is a sacred trust**
- **and that truth is the obligation we assume**
- **when we are empowered in the use of words.**

III. THE ARTS

This brings me to core commonality number three.

Beyond the life cycle and beyond the use of symbols,

- all people on the planet respond to the aesthetic.**

Dance is a universal language.

Architecture is a universal language.

Music is a universal language.

Painting and sculpture are languages that can be understood

- **all around the world.**

Isn't it amazing how Salvador Dali's painting

- **"The Persistence of Memory"**
- **can profoundly communicate to any person haunted by the relentless passage of time?**

Isn't it remarkable how the gospel song "Amazing Grace" can stir a common bond among people

- **whether they are from Appalachia or Manhattan?**

And isn't it inspiring how "We Shall Overcome,"

- **when sung in slow and solemn cadence,**
- **can stir powerful feelings,**
- **regardless of race or economic status?**

And I find it fascinating that

- **when archaeologists study past civilizations they examine the artifacts of art—**
 - **the pottery,**
 - **cave paintings,**
 - **and musical instruments—**
- **to determine the quality of a culture.**

The simple fact is that every student

- **has the innate urge and the innate capacity to be artistically expressive.**

And it's really tragic that, for most students, the universal language of the arts

- **is suppressed**
- **and then destroyed**

in the early years of learning

- **because school boards consider art a frill.**

—

I'm suggesting that for the

- **most intimate,**
- **most profound,**
- **and most authentic experiences in our lives,**

we turn to music and dance and to the visual arts to

- **express feelings and ideas**
- **words cannot convey.**

The arts are, as one poet put it:

- **the language of the angels.**

I'm convinced that to be a truly educated person surely means

- **being sensitively responsible to the universal language we call art,**
- **which should be the 3rd central strand of the core curriculum.**

IV. TIME AND SPACE

This brings me to human commonality number four.

While we are all nonuniform

- and while we differ dramatically from each other,**

the simple truth is that all people on the planet

- have the marvelous capacity to place themselves in time and space.**

We explore our sense of space

- **through geography and astronomy.**

and we explore our sense of time

- **through history,**
 - **which should be a key component of the common core.**

Historical perspective is essential, and yet how often we squander

- **this truly awesome capacity to look in both directions,**
- **even neglecting our own roots.**

Looking back, the most important mentor in my own life was my Grandpa Boyer—

- **who incidentally lived to be 100.**

Grandpa, at the age of 40,

- **moved his little family into the slums of Dayton, Ohio.**

He then spent the next 40 years running a city mission,

- **working for the poor,**
- **teaching me more by deed than word,**
- **that to be "truly human" one must serve.**

And yet, for far too many children, the influence of

- **these "intergenerational models" has diminished.**

Margaret Mead said on one occasion that

- **the health of any culture is sustained**
- **when 3 generations are vitally interacting with each other.**
- **A "vertical culture" in which the different age groups are connected.**

And yet in America today we're creating what might be called a horizontal culture,

- **with each generation living all alone—**
- **infants are in nurseries,**
- **toddlers in day care,**
- **older children are in schools organized by age.**
- **College students are isolated on campuses.**
- **Adults are in the workplace.**
- **And older citizens are in retirement villages,**
 - **living and dying all alone.**

For several years, my own parents lived in a retirement village,

- **where the average age was 80.**

But they also had a "day care" center there,

- **and all the 3- and 4-year-olds had adopted grandparents**
- **to meet with every day and have a sense of bonding.**

But beyond "their own extended family" all students also should

- **become well informed about the influence of the cultures that surround them**
- **and learn about the traditions of other cultures, too.**

I'm convinced the time has come

- **to break up the age ghettos.**

It's time to build "intergenerational" institutions

- **that bring the old and young together.**

And in the new core curriculum—with a strand called time and space—

- **students should discover their own roots**
- **and complete perhaps an oral history.**

To put it simply, in the years ahead,

- **students should study Western civilization to understand our past,**
- **and they should study non-Western cultures to understand our future.**

I'm suggesting that

- **a truly educated person is one who sees connections**
- **by placing his or her life in**
 - **time**
 - **and space**

through understanding our planet

- **and gaining historical perspective.**

V. GROUPS AND INSTITUTIONS

This brings me to core commonality number five.

In addition to

- **the life cycle**
- **and the use of symbols**
- **and our response to the aesthetic**
- **and our shared sense of time,**

all people on the planet also hold membership in

- **groups and institutions**
- **that consequentially shape their lives.**

And this should be the 5th strand of the common core.

I'm suggesting that to be truly educated means learning about the social web of our existence.

It means knowing about

- **family life,**
- **about how governments function,**
- **about how the private sector functions.**

And it also means discovering how

- **group life varies from one culture to another.**

Our son, Craig, lives in a Mayan village in the jungles of Belize

- with his Mayan wife and four children.**

And when we visit Craig each year, I'm impressed that Mayans and Americans

- carry on their work in very basic, similar ways.**

The jungles of Manhattan and the jungles of Belize are separated by

- **a thousand miles,**
- **and a thousand years.**

And yet the Mayans, just like us, have their family units. They have

- **elected leaders,**
- **and village councils,**
- **and law enforcement officers,**
- **and jails,**
- **and schools,**
- **and places where they worship.**

At one level it's all very different,

- **but at another level it's also very much the same.**

I'm suggesting that all students should not only be introduced to the web of institutions in their own lives,

- **but also engage in a cross-cultural study,**
- **which would compare, for example,**
 - **Santa Cruz, California,**
 - **with Santa Cruz, Belize.**

VI. WORK

This brings me to human commonality number six.

The simple truth is that,

- **with all our differences,**

all people on the planet spend their time

- **producing and consuming.**

And a quality education surely means helping students

- **understand**
- **and prepare adequately**
- **for the world of work.**

The sad truth is that

- **today's young people grow up in a culture preoccupied with "consuming,"**
 - **with little understanding of what it means to actually "produce."**

Today students see their parents

- **bring papers home at night**
- **and carry more papers off in the morning,**
 - **which seems to procreate overnight,**
- **but what is it exactly that parents do?**

When I was Chancellor of the State University of New York, I took our youngest son, who was 8, to our cabin in the Berkshires on a weekend.

- **My goal was to build a dock,**
- **and all day, instead of playing, Stephen sat at the water's edge,**
- **watching me do things, I'd never done before,**
- **and hearing me say things I'd never said before.**

That evening, as we drove home, Stephen was quite pensive,

- **and finally, after several miles, he said,**
- **"Daddy, I wish you'd have grown up to be a carpenter—**
- **instead of you-know-what!"**

I'm convinced that a new integrative curriculum might also include a strand called

- **producing and consuming,**

with each student

- **studying economics and different money systems,**
- **learning how work varies from one culture to another,**
- **and completing a work project**
- **to gain a respect for craftsmanship itself.**

And, of course, adult students might be asked to

- **evaluate their own work experience.**

I'm suggesting that the new curriculum might include a study of

- **producing,**
- **and consuming to**

help students understand

- **both the economic system and**
- **how work is essential to the lives of all cultures on the planet.**

VII. NATURAL WORLD

This brings me to commonality number seven.

It's true that all people are very different.

But it's also true that we are all connected to the

- **ecology of planet Earth,**
- **in which we are embedded as working parts,**
- **as Lewis Thomas put it.**

And to be truly educated for the next century means

- **understanding our**
- **connectedness to nature.**

David, my 4-year-old grandson in Belize,

- **understands these connections very well as he**
 - **chases birds,**
 - **bathes in the river,**
 - **and watches corn being picked, pounded into tortillas,**
 - **and heated over an open fire.**

But David's cousins who live in Boston and in Princeton,

- **with the appliances,**
- **and asphalt roadways,**
- **and precooked food,**

find it enormously more difficult to discover their connectedness to nature.

When I was United States Commissioner of Education, Joan Cooney,

- **the brilliant creator of "Sesame Street,"**
- **came to see me one day.**
- **She said they wanted to start a new program at Children's Television Workshop**
 - **on science and technology for junior high school students,**
 - **so children could understand a little more about their world and what they must know to live.**
 - **The program subsequently was funded and called "3-2-1 Contact."**

In doing background work for that project, they surveyed some junior high school kids in New York City and asked such questions as:

- **"Where does water come from?" A disturbing percentage said "the faucet."**
- **And they asked, "Where does light come from?" The students said "the switch."**
- **And they asked, "Where does garbage go?" "Down the chute."**

Their sense of connections went about as far as

- **the VCR,**
- **the refrigerator door,**
- **and the light switch on the wall.**

I'm suggesting that

- **with all our differences,**
- **every single one of us is inextricably connected to the natural world.**

And all students—during their days of formal learning—should explore this commonality

- **by studying the principles of science,**
- **by discovering how technology has profoundly shaped their own lives,**
- **and—above all—by learning that our very survival on this planet means respecting and preserving the earth we share together.**

VIII. SEARCH FOR MEANING

Finally, all people on the planet,

- **regardless of their unique heritage or tradition,**
- **are searching for a larger purpose.**
- **We all seek to give special meaning to our lives.**

Reinhold Niebuhr put it most precisely when he said,

- **"Man cannot be whole unless he be committed,**
- **he cannot find himself,**
- **unless he find a purpose beyond himself."**

And, when all is said and done, to be truly educated means

- **examining one's own values and beliefs.**
- **And to state it in the old-fashioned way, developing convictions.**

During our study of the American high school, I became convinced that we have

- **not just a school problem,**
- **but a youth problem in this country.**

I was struck that too many teenagers feel

- **unwanted,**
- **unneeded,**
- **and unconnected to the larger world.**

And—without guidance and direction—

- **lose their sense of purpose**
- **at a very early age.**

And many college students, and even those in midlife,

- **are searching for direction.**

Vachel Lindsay wrote:

- **It is the world's one crime,**
- **its babes grow dull.**
- **Not that they sow,**
- **but that they seldom reap.**
- **Not that they serve,**
- **but have no gods to serve.**
- **Not that they die,**
- **but that they die like sheep.**

The tragedy is not death.

The tragedy is to die with

- **commitments undefined,**
- **convictions undeclared,**
- **and service unfulfilled.**

And with all the controversy that surrounds it,

- **I'm convinced that college must be a place where values are examined,**
- **not by dictating answers,**
- **but by making honorable the quest.**

And I'm also convinced that this search for meaning cannot be taught—

- **but is conveyed by great teachers who model values in their lives.**

Values can also be taught through service.

- **And I'm convinced that all students should complete a community service project working in**
 - **day care centers,**
 - **retirement villages,**
 - **or tutoring other kids at school.**
- **to make a connection between what they learn and how they live.**

CONCLUSION

What, then, does it mean to be an educated person?

It means

- **respecting the miracle of life.**
- **It means being empowered in the use of language.**
- **It means responding sensitively to the aesthetic.**

Being truly educated means

- **understanding groups and institutions,**
- **having an understanding of the natural world,**
- **affirming the dignity of work.**

And—above all—being an educated person means

- **being guided by values and beliefs**
- **and connecting the lessons of the classroom**
- **to the realities of life.**

These are the core competencies that, I believe, replace

- **the old Carnegie Units.**

And what I'd like to see is a more coherent core curriculum,

- **one in which the laundry list of isolated subjects**
- **would focus on larger, more integrative ends.**

Fifty years ago, Mark Van Doren wrote,

- **The connectedness of things is what the educator contemplates to the limit of his capacity.**

And Van Doren concludes by saying that the student who can

- **begin early in life to see things as connected**
- **has begun the life of learning.**

And this, it seems to me, is what it means to be

- **an educated person.**