THE CONNECTEDNESS OF THINGS

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Introduction

When the American Sociologist Daniel Bell was asked to give the Hobhouse Memorial lecture at the London School of Economics in 1977, he chose as his title: The Return of the Sacred? Significantly, he placed a question mark at the end of that provoking title.

In this lecture, Bell discusses what he saw as a dramatic resurgence of religious belief in modern culture. He quoted the great German sociologist Max Weber, who wrote at the end of the 19th Century:

With the progress of science and technology, man has stopped believing in "magic powers"--in spirits and demons. He has lost his sense of prophecy and, above all, his sense of the sacred.

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

But as Bell went on to note, this "inexorable progress" of science and technology shifted sharply in the 20th Century.

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

- The "flatness and dreariness" of a wholly utilitarian and secularized society has taken its toll on the human spirit.
Today the debate about the quality of education in the country is beginning to shift to higher education. We're being told that colleges are failing to educate the student. And we hear that colleges are graduating students who are technically competent but have no larger vision.

This brings me to the crux of my remarks today. How can we test the quality of your education? An education that goes beyond the flatness and drossiness of which Max Weber spoke?

The answer, I believe, lies in the simple word "connections."

Dr. Lewis Thomas said on one occasion that these are not the best of times for the human mind. He said "we are ignorant about how we work, about where we fit in, and most of all we are ignorant about the imponderable system of life in which we are embedded as working parts. If this century does not slip forever through our fingers it will be because learning will have directed us away from our splintered dumbness and will have helped us focus on our common goals."
I'm suggesting that all worthy values we pursue in education are best expressed in the imperative I call "connections."

This is true whether the connections relate us to the past, whether they relate us to the world of nature, whether they relate us, through language, to each other, or whether they relate us to the eternal--those occasions described by the great Jewish theologian Martin Buber as special "moments of silent depth."

But in our specialized, fragmented world is it possible to talk about connections?

Ten years ago, a Stanford University faculty committee proposed a new general education program. The student newspaper, in a biting attack on the proposal, said in a front-page editorial that:

To require a course carries a strong illiberal connotation . . . It imposes a uniform standard on nonuniform people.

Frankly, I was startled by that statement. I was startled that the student editor failed to understand that while we're all alone, we're also all together. After fourteen years he had not learned that while we are "nonuniform," we still have some things in common.
II.

But, how is the common agenda to be defined? In a Carnegie Foundation essay entitled, *A Quest for Common Learning*, we define the core of common learning as,

- Our shared use of symbols
- Our sense of history
- Our membership in groups and institutions
- Our relationship with nature
- Our shared activity of work and leisure

These we propose as universal experiences that shape the life of every individual. And during college these conditions—common to all cultures—should, I believe, be more fully understood.

Consider, for example, our shared use of symbols.

In the Carnegie report on high school, we say that the sending and receiving of messages separates human beings from all other forms of life. And we say that it is through the quality of our language that the quality of our lives is shaped.
Wayne Booth, of the University of Chicago, wrote that, all too often, our efforts to speak and listen seem to be vicious cycles...moving downward. But Booth went on to say that we have all experienced moments when the spiral moved upward, when one party's efforts to speak and listen just a little bit better produced a similar response, making it possible to try harder, and on up the spiral—to moments of genuine understanding.

Here I have a more personal, more painful illustration to present.

While Chancellor of the State University of New York, I was about to speak to faculty from across the state when about 250 students moved in with placards, chanting slogans, demanding that I help free a group of students who had been arrested on another campus. The microphone was grabbed and for almost an hour we went back and forth.

Finally (after an hour!) I concluded we weren't listening to each other. The meeting was in shambles. Even worse, I concluded, I was talking not to people but to a faceless mob. I left the platform and walked into the crowd. I began talking to a single student.

I asked her name,
I asked about her family,
I asked her why she was so angry.

Soon several others joined us. I described how I felt and what I could and could not do. To make the story short, the
session ended, a compromise was reached, and, in the process, I'd learned to know some most attractive students.

I am suggesting that our shared use of symbols connects us to each other and that, through liberal education, students should be asked to consider the quality of the messages they send.

And now let me say a word about our connections to the natural world.

The simple truth is that every form of life is dependent on all other forms and, through education, we must learn about the ecology of the planet earth.

In 1983--the year we had all of the reports on education, three other reports, by specialists, were released--statements that also had relevance on education.

One report from the National Academy of Sciences spoke about the so-called greenhouse effect, a gradual warming of the earth's atmosphere caused by an increase of carbon-dioxide in the air. Do we know enough about the ecology of the planet earth?

- Another report, from an equally prestigious body, predicted a nuclear holocaust could plunge half the earth into freezing darkness.

- And a third report said that many living species face extinction because of the deforestation of the tropical forests which are being destroyed at the rate of about 100,000 square kilometers every year.

- How may students even locate the tropical forests on a map?
Now let me comment briefly on the significance of history and on the perspective of the past.

Through history all students should understand that while we have our "separate" roots we have a common heritage as well. Such a study should include not just our own traditions--but the traditions of other cultures. And yet this world view has been scandalously neglected in the public schools.

Some years ago a survey of high school students revealed that a large percentage of them thought that Golda Meir was President of Egypt. I suggest that our vision in education at all levels must not just be national, but global.

College students are in trouble, too.

In a recent study of 5,000 college students conducted at The Carnegie Foundation, we found that:

One out of every four college seniors said that they had almost nothing in common with people in underdeveloped countries.

One out of three said they were not interested in international relations.

And last year about 40 percent of community college students surveyed in California could not locate either Iran or El Salvador on a map.

I'm concerned that education is becoming more parochical at the very moment the human agenda is more global.
I also suggest that a study of connections should include religion, a common experience that also shapes powerfully the human story.

- We cannot know, without discovering religious inspiration, from Hindu cave paintings and Buddhist art to the majestic cathedrals of the middle ages that so inspired Henry Adams and Chagall.

- We cannot know literature without knowing how religion has shaped great writers from Homer and Euripides to T. S. Eliot, John Updike and I. B. Singer.

- We cannot know music without grasping the power of religion from the amazingly gifted benedictine nun of the 12th century, Hildegarde von Bingen, to Leonard Bernstein's celebrated mass.

At every turn—from William James' great study "Varieties of Religious Experience" to Max Weber's classic work "The Protestant Ethic and The Spirit of Capitalism"—religion is a sustained and preserved force.

Here is my conclusion. Students, through the curriculum, should be introduced to those universal experiences and traditions that are woven into the very fabric of the human experience.
I have a second conviction to suggest.

We discover connections, not only in the classroom, but also through the climate on the campus.

Almost 30 years ago I became dean of the world's smallest higher learning institution. We had 150 students—if you counted the handful of adults who came at night. And we were very poor. But I must confess that I remember those days with great exhilaration. We had dedicated people, we had enthusiasm on the campus, and, above all, we believed—a bit naively to be sure—that our vision was unique. We had brown-bag lunches with the students and seminars at night. A sense of community prevailed—a feeling that we were all dependent on each other.

Now contrast that picture with the mighty U.S. Office of Education in Washington, D.C. with its 3,000 employees and $12 billion budget. Here I found people who had lost their zest for living—at least between the hours of 9 to 5. People who were not lazy or evil (as the critics like to say), but people who lacked a larger vision.

Soon after I arrived, the employees union asked if we could meet. The first question I received was: "Mr. Commissioner, can you tell us why we're here?" The employees had money and security but they were searching for a purpose.

I'm suggesting that if education is to exercise a moral force in society, the process must take place in a moral context. It must occur in communities that are held together not by pressure or coercion, but by shared purposes and goals, by simple acts of kindness and by the respect group members have for one another.
In the end, of course, teaching matters most. Teaching is the true test of education, whether it takes place on a college campus or in the nation's schools.

About 18 months ago I walked unannounced into a 6th grade inner-city classroom in New Haven. About 30 students were clustered around the teacher's desk. Moving closer I discovered they were reading Charles Dicken's *Oliver Twist*, totally absorbed. Every child knew the good guys from the bad guys and they were all cheering for little Oliver as he struggled in an urban jungle. In that classroom a miracle occurred. The teacher had, quite literally, brought 19th century London to New Haven.

Several years ago I couldn't sleep. Instead of counting sheep I counted all the teachers I had had. I then focused on the great ones, that handful of outstanding mentors who shaped the direction of my life. I then thought about what they had in common. I concluded that great teachers have a message to convey and that they communicate with care. But above all great teachers are sensitive and self-revealing human beings who make connections between the curriculum they teach and the convictions of the student.
Finally, liberal education means seeing the connection between what you learn and how you live.

During the past two years, The Carnegie Foundation completed a study of the American high school. During that study I became deeply troubled by the malaise among the students.

I was troubled that it is possible for teenagers to finish high school yet never be asked to participate responsibly in life, never be encouraged to spend time with older people who are lonely, never help a child who hasn't learned to read, or even to help clean up litter on the street.

One student told us that she had a job working at McDonalds.

"It's not very exciting but at least I'm feeling useful."

It's a sad comment that pushing hamburgers gives a student a feeling of being useful when there are so many important things to do.

In our report we propose a new Carnegie unit--a service requirement for all students.

We suggest, in our report, that during their four high school years students do volunteer work in or out of school. They could tutor younger students, or work in the library or cafeteria at school. They could move beyond the school to parks, hospitals, museums, nursing homes, day care centers, synagogues or churches. Students could meet the service requirement evenings, during the summer or on weekends.
I believe a service term for all students, whether at the school or college level, would uniquely bind the nation's youth together, helping them see connections between the classroom and the needs of people.

Vachel Lindsay magnificently addressed the point when he wrote:

"Let not young souls be smothered out
Before they do quaint deeds and fully flaunt their price
It is the world's one crime--its babes grow dull
Not that they starve
but starve so dreamlessly
Not that they sow
but that they seldom reap
Not that they serve
but have no God to serve
Not that they die
but that they die like sheep."

The tragedy of life is not death.
The tragedy is to die with commitments undefined, with convictions undeclared and with promise unfilled.
Conclusion

Nearly 40 years ago Mark Van Doren wrote that the connectness of things is what the educator contemplates to the limit of his capacity. Van Doren then suggests that "the student who can begin early in life to think of things as connected has begun the life of learning."

I congratulate the Class of 1985.

May your life be filled with joy and peace.