

## **Liberal Arts: The Future**

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My assignment is to talk to you about the future of the Liberal Arts. Now if there is any one thing left about which everyone who professes allegiance to the liberal arts agrees it is that a liberal arts education has the purpose of inducing and aiding thoughtfulness. So permit me to take my task seriously and to begin by thinking about what it means it consider the future—the future of any matter of human moment, and so also the future of the liberal arts. Let me say too that if, in the conversation to follow, we talked more about the nature of futurity—a deep philosophical question of universal human interest—than about our educational planning, we would, I think, have done more to insure the survival of liberal learning than any amount of proactive tinkering can do. For it would be a safer world for thoughtfulness if all of us concerned with education found ourselves, whenever we were put in the position to talk about liberal education, sliding by a natural and easy transition into engaging in liberal learning.

So I want to ask: By what conception do we come to ask about the future of anything? Do the things important to human beings, among which education certainly stands high, have a future? I hope not, because if the liberal arts have a future it is probably a bleak one.

Here is what I mean by this oracular saying: those who deal with the future as professional prognosticators or planners do the only thing they can do. They examine the past and present and from them try to discern trends. They try to anticipate what is coming and then to make the best of it. In other words, they regard the future not as an open time but as a fixed fate which is rolling toward them. They then prepare to meet their fate, to take evasive or defensive or anticipatory measures. At the bottom of their hearts, I am persuaded, people do not like obscure but massive juggernauts coming at them, but they have been told often and by those they consider the movers of the world that this future is both unimaginably wonderful and irresistibly inevitable. So they do the wise thing for those conditions: they anticipate what is said to be coming and accommodate themselves to it. And so they have really fixed their fate.

Let me give a practical example of what I mean, and see if you don't recognize it. A small school sees its liberal arts enrollments dropping; the administrators notice adverse demographic trends, read public opinion as favoring vocational training, see students' declining interest in book learning, are persuaded that machine-assisted learning is the wave of the future. They call in consultants who confirm their sense of the future. They partly scare, partly lure their faculty into proactive measures and, presto!, the future is here.

No one who considered that trends peter out, that the fall-out from massive movements is often a significant opposite trend, that the tastes of the young are not to be catered to but to be guided, and that consultants who can be amazingly right in the large and the quantitative tend to be clueless in the face of the small and the qualitative—no one who

had that sort of opinion was listened to. But that was the one who knew that there is not one future but none or indefinitely many. Or to put it briskly: the future is our choice. I would not be so foolish as to deny that sometimes the social, supposedly human, world acts like a force of nature, irresistibly. But in a country like ours, with free institutions and at the moment at peace and experiencing prosperity, nothing is coming that is not our choice, and by “our” I mean in particular the thousands of small educational communities of all sorts that make up the educational sector of a country that has, blessedly, no national educational establishment.

I think something of consequence follows from the view of futurity for the cause we presumably all have at heart, the liberal arts. It might be the determination not to be driven by bugaboos into measures for forestalling ruination that are themselves already ruination.

To put it more positively: the two profitable ways to look ahead that I can think of are 1) to have a purpose and 2) to have a plan for accomplishing it. The purpose, with respect to the liberal arts, has to be one of preservation rather than projection. We have really no idea what the world will be like even in a quarter century: It could be a world of climatic catastrophe, random terrorism, global financial confusion, a populace avidly retiring into private virtual worlds. Or it could be a world that is healing its environment, has found ways to disarm its rogue operators, enjoys universal prosperity, and has found its way back to nature. My guess is that it will be a totally inextricable mixture of all of these and a myriad of other factors, with trends going in every which direction—but what do I know? Well, I do know this: that the means for educating the sensibility and for eliciting thoughtfulness will not have changed very much. Some older people, who have spent their lives learning, will show some younger people, who have come to learn from them, the skills by which they can interpret nature and humankind, the arts by which they can appropriate works of beauty and insight, and the disciplines by which they can master the products of the intellect.

There is a way of talking about the young, about our students, that strikes me as sadly funny. Some people talk like Lamarckian evolutionists about this and coming generations. Lamarckism is, recall, the notion that features acquired under the pressure of a changing environment become part of an individual’s inherited constitution. So, because the world has grown more complex, fast-paced, diverse, accessible, and sophisticated, the young are thought of as having these characteristics ingrained in them. But that is all spurious; in truth they are—insofar as one can characterize them at all—as simple, clannish, inexpressive and plain naive as any other generation, for they were born as babies, just as we were, while controlled complexity and genuine sophistication are attainments of education, in particular of that education which dwells on the simple but deep beginnings of things, on the elements of mathematics and logic or language and literature. But that is just what is meant by the liberal arts: they comprise the root skills good for inquiry into the elementary and fundamental works which are their most perspicuous products. For example, mathematical demonstration is such a root skill and Euclid’s *Elements* is such a work, or the linguistic arts of grammar and rhetoric are such

root skills and a Shakespeare sonnet is such a linguistic product, or simple laboratory procedures are such root skills and the crucial experiments of science such products.

It is because disciplined learning has proper beginnings or elements that there is a liberal arts tradition at all. What is first in learning, whether in the order of thought or the order of discovery, has a priority it never loses. Because it marks the moment of transition from confusion to clarity, from inchoateness to explicitness, it directs and marks all subsequent progress. You can, in the pursuit of immediate sophistication, lose sight of the beginning, but you will be floating blithely above the ground. So, for example, someone who studies symbolic, that is, propositional logic without some grounding in the meaning of Aristotelian term logic may become an agile manipulator but will never know the advance in symbolic power and the loss in meaning behind this reconception of logic. This person may be said to be well-trained but ill-educated.

Because I have made my points too concisely for convenient listening, let me recapitulate what I meant to say about the way to look ahead that seems to me not overpowered by potent illusions. First I can give that way its traditional name: prudence. Prudence or providence means foresight, and that in turn means having a purpose, knowing what one wants—for wanting is by its nature futural—and then providing as best one can by wise planning to get it. In other words, it means looking to oneself and not to a hypothetical future and thinking of practical devices to master circumstances, not accommodations.

We are teachers mostly of the young and the young of even the most highly advanced civilization are always beginners, since civilized progress is not heritable. It seems to be possible to short-circuit the education of our young by throwing at them the high-level sophisticated achievements of the time into which they were born, on the plausible but, I think, mistaken notion that the state of knowledge contemporary with our lives is somehow congenial and natural to us. But such an education is groundless. People so trained know the hows but not the whys; they glide through the intellectual world three feet off the ground. Or to change metaphors: instead of climbing the mountain so as to know what its top is the top of, they have been set down on the summit by a helicopter.

I meant to argue, furthermore, that the liberal arts may be thought of as those skills and materials of learning that do reveal to students, and of course to teachers as well, the ground they stand on, and that this function implies that they deal with what is at the beginning, with the roots of knowledge, with what is elementary and early. By “early” I do not necessarily mean early in time, but early in the build-up of the science or discipline or art that is being learned. Sometimes the temporal development of a learning matter is indeed from the elementary and foundational to the complex and sophisticated. But often the most cogent beginnings and foundations do not appear until millennia of thought have gone into the matter, and in that case it is the business of the liberal arts to give access to both beginnings, that in time and that in thought.

Let us give a fairly familiar example. I suppose most people would agree that few things are more elementary to the science of physics than the concept of force, and we all know that it is both defined and measured in terms of a body’s mass compounded with its

acceleration. But what it took to come by the notion of a mass as distinct from a body, a rate of change as distinct from change itself and the strange operation of multiplying these by each other! My idea is that a liberal arts education gives us the skills and the exemplars by which to recover the conceptual history of these basic yet very advanced elements, but also to think our way back into the temporally more remote beginning when very acute but very naive inquirers first tried to discern how in the world it could happen that things that are dropped or thrown keep on going when you let go of them. And it is exactly that same set of liberal arts that presents to us and helps us think about poetry, for example in what way it is a brazen lie and in what way a beautiful truth when Romeo says “It is the east, and Juliet is the sun.”

But, to get back to the future, my argument was that the liberal arts so understood are of necessity traditional because they are mindful of what is early and what is in the beginning and what is elementary. To be sure, they are continually fed by new techniques and new works of reflection or of art. But the traditional arts and works can never become obsolete, for two separate but connected reasons. One is that in elegance, ingenuity, beauty they are simply unlikely to be surpassed—they are after all culled from thousands of years of human effort. The other reason is the one I have spoken about: that they provide students with the means needed actually to scale—by one route or another—the mountain that is the state of current knowledge. They will have to wait till graduate or professional school to reach one of its many summits, or they may never get near any, but they will have some notion of the approaches, probably enough for a critical appreciation of what the experts know.

So the sum total of my thinking about the future of the liberal arts as a purpose we share is not to think about the future at all but to preserve and protect the good things we have and to improve them where we can as if we were living under the aspect of eternity. To put it another way, we should think from time to time about the best skill, and matter, and works our students can study; we should think continually about the nature of learning, but we should not re-think our curricula under the pressure of anything but our conviction that we can do better. “Preparing for the future” is a non-starter for the purpose of preserving the liberal arts, but reflection on their nature is a duty of our vocation. Foresight, prudence, does, however, imply practical planning. There are many specific things wrong with higher education as a set of administered activities, and they affect the liberal arts. Let me set out some plans we might make that would make liberal arts teaching both better grounded and more student-friendly. I won’t pretend that these are small or innocuous plans, but I think they are feasible; they might just catch on.

The first has to do with the doctoral degree as a desideratum for employment as a liberal arts teacher. Who is there that doesn’t know deep down that the process of getting a PhD doesn’t make you a better-educated person or a good teacher? It does train you in something: how to articulate a diminutive area of investigation, how to do the research required to master its problems, how to handle secondary literature. None of these skills are really useful in thinking about basic questions or approaching works of stature with critical appreciation, or in arousing in students the desire to do likewise. What if we, the smaller schools, were to get together to announce to the public our misgivings about the

highest degree given to scholars as a requirement for college teaching? What if we together or by ourselves developed a set of serious alternative criteria for getting good teachers: evidence of wide but not superficial interests, of being able to write clarifying and revealing prose, of enthusiasm for teaching, and above all, of continuing learning not driven by academic necessities? The public, I know, is very receptive to statements of independence from teaching communities; we could not only get away with it but endear ourselves to parents and—believe it or not—influence the practices of graduate schools, perhaps even to the point of changing altogether the nature of the doctoral dissertation, that onerous superfluity.

Second, what if we modified the criteria for internal promotion, putting far more weight on devoted teaching carefully defined so as to exclude performances and grandstanding but to include the art of asking good questions, a propensity for careful listening and the systematic encouragement of classroom participation? What if we forgot all about publication as a criterion for tenure but substituted internal non-publications, such as the circulation of interesting discoveries, the delivery of occasional informal papers, the writing of sets of notes helpful to students and colleagues, and above all, the ability to hold one's colleagues' interest in willing conversation about intellectual matters?

Third, what if we de-emphasized what professors now call “doing their own work” in favor of fairly frequent common learning, across or beyond specialties? What if rather than writing yet another article we had regular faculty seminars in which we read parts of books or papers together, with the unabashedly admitted ignorance of people who have thrown pride to the winds in favor of learning together?

I could go on and on with such mini-plans for aiding the survival of the liberal arts. They all tend in the same direction: to make an actual community of learning out of a disparate collection of specializing scholars, to turn teaching from the imposition of the voice of a highly trained authority to the conversation of people inquiring together, to give the edge to well-educated young teachers over narrowly specialized academics.

One wonderful bonus would be that when a colleague takes to writing a book it is done from sheer uncontrollable fullness of intellect, the kind of liveliness of mind that is infectious to the community, colleagues and students. But that would not be the point. The point would rather be that a community of learning so constituted would be ideal for carrying the liberal arts, as I have delineated them, into the future. I have spoken of liberal learning as the learning of elementary, never-ending, common inquiry especially, that would mean, inquiry into questions that have no definitive, authoritative solutions, and as the skillfully critical appreciation of the works in which such questions find their most fundamental treatment, be they works on mathematics, physics, biology, or books of poetry, fiction and philosophy. This kind of learning is not in principle opposed to individual, result-driven research, but in educational practice we usually have to choose between the one and the other for our students.

I am saying that through reforms of the sort I have listed, or some approximation to them, we will have the kind of teaching environment to which a liberal arts approach comes naturally, whatever the skills and works chosen. But even without very large changes, the

best way, I think, to keep the liberal arts safe for the future is to keep our own learning alive and our students in mind, and to carry on with faith in ourselves and our students.