

Vocation: Where Liberal and Professional Education Meet

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The Clamor for the Practical

The clamor that higher education be “practical” has never been louder. This is to be expected in a time when social inequality is growing and entrance into the ranks of the fortunate middle class is almost entirely dependent upon holding a college degree. The cry is that today everyone needs to be well-credentialed in order to succeed in an increasingly unstable and uncertain world of work. This is widely diffused knowledge. So, at least a significant part of this clamor for practicality is directly “vocational” in the popular sense: a good education is believed to be one that leads directly into a good job. For many, perhaps most Americans, this translates into a concern that the subject of the education pursued be clearly related to the kind of job sought, so that the educational credential fits closely with the labor market niche.

On its face, the present hardly seems a propitious moment for advocates of liberal education. However, in what follows I argue that this moment can be a moment of opportunity for educators in the liberal arts as well as professional schools. The key to turning this apparent liability into an asset is the idea of vocation. Despite or perhaps because of the economic and social changes set in motion by what the pundits label “globalization,” there is an insistent hunger for making sense of what is happening, for learning how to build a meaningful life in the midst of uncertainty. This is the concern that the idea of the calling addresses. Seen in this way, the idea of vocation can, I believe, provide a new focal point for both liberal and professional education. In an earlier conference of the Institute for the Liberal Arts here at Westmont College, Bruce Kimball showed that educating for the practical was close to the heart of at least some influential traditions in the liberal arts. It is certainly also a common concern in professional education. By engaging the meaning of the “practical” through broadening and deepening it toward an authentic notion of the calling, educators can renew their own purpose while providing a service of great value to their students and the society.

Today’s common equation of “practicality” with economic efficacy reflects more than avid cupidity. It also stems from not-so-irrational, if often vague, fear of where our national embrace of competitive economic success is taking us. Compared to mid-twentieth century America, credentials really do matter more for individual well-being. The consequences of “falling” are more severe. Except for the most highly educated, access to the goods of middle class life have become less certain. A stable family life, good prospects for one’s children, dignity, health care and security into old age: all these have become objects of great anxiety. College education has become so expensive that most students enter the world of work or further professional training with substantial bills to pay. But especially, there is anxiety about the prospects for one’s children. Hence the sometimes obsessive worries about the “vocational” relevance of college subjects.

Among the families of the already college-educated, and in the high schools attended by their children, the pressure is, if anything, more intense. However, a somewhat different understanding prevails there. In such circles, it is common knowledge that the market value of educational credentials varies with the perceived “quality” of the degree-granting institution: hence the pressure to gain entry into the group of colleges and universities known as “elites.” These “elite providers,” meaning the Ivy League, leading research universities, and highly selective liberal arts colleges—about 200 out of the 3,500 institutions of higher education in the U.S.—provide nearly-assured entry into high-level career tracks: the running of national institutions in business, government, the arts, and the professions. Compared to the “mass providers” that serve most of the population, traditional liberal arts degrees are still the common credential among graduates of the elites.¹ There, a “practical” education is understood somewhat more flexibly than by most Americans: liberal arts education from the right kind of college is, as it always has been, perfectly compatible with entry into professional school or work in the emerging knowledge-intensive sectors of the economy. At that social level, liberal arts is the badge of status and ability.

Both at the elite or the popular level, then, practical education is understood to mean preparation for the demands of “real life.” The difference between the outlooks of social classes in this regard is largely a difference in the way knowledge is distributed in our society. At both levels, the concern is that higher education provide the knowledge, the skills, and the social aplomb that will make the credentialed graduate as employable as possible. Real life is therefore imagined as first and foremost economic practicality. In American middle class life, personal worth is understood and pursued to a large degree through individual achievement, especially economic standing.² Unfortunately, the decline of governmental support and increasingly intense competition for institutional status amount to a situation of the “marketing of higher education.” This exerts heavy pressure on colleges and universities to present—and reorganize—themselves so as to appeal to just these interests. The process erodes the cultural authority of educational institutions while making it harder for colleges to pursue the traditional goal of forming the minds and characters of students (Kirp). Yet, all the while, there is abroad a nagging sense that material advantage is not all that is important about higher education.

Seizing the Educational Opportunity: Vocation as the Missing Link

These misgivings are echoes, however attenuated, of the Protestant doctrine of the calling. Vocation has been important throughout Christian history, but it was particularly elaborated during and after the Protestant Reformation. Through the Reformation’s emphasis upon the calling, worldly work acquired new value and moral seriousness. The duty of diligent and godly labor for God’s glory was made incumbent on all Christians in their daily life and not only, as in the Middle Ages, on those with a clerical or religious “vocation.” The calling was

¹ The terminology comes from a recent study of changes in the American academy and professoriate. See: Martin Finkelstein, “The Morphing of the American Academic Profession.”

² For a comparative view which highlights the heavy American accent upon competitive success, tempered by teamwork, see: Michele Lamont, *Money, Morals, and Manners: The Culture of the French and American Upper-Middle Class*.

understood, especially in the Reformed tradition stemming from John Calvin, as a kind of public service. That is, each person was under serious obligation to find a way to fit his or her talents with a state in life through which they could employ those talents for the common good. Natural talents were understood to be gifts from God. They were held in trust, to be used for the benefit of others and not merely oneself.³

This doctrine of stewardship continued to play an important role in American moral thinking. A century ago, Max Weber argued that the vigorous virtues of the “protestant ethic” had become largely secularized into the motive force driving modern capitalism. Weber chose the American Benjamin Franklin’s best-selling *Autobiography* as a classic illustration of this process. It is easy to overlook the persistence of the ethic of stewardship in Franklin’s thoroughly secularized moral teaching. For Franklin, the good life was to start with ambition, thrift, hard work, and investment, as is well known. But it was to culminate in service to the community, impelled by philanthropy, literally “the love of humanity.” By example as well as by word, Franklin exemplified a spirit of stewardship of his own talents and resources for the public good.⁴

The importance of vocation has continued to echo in American culture. The core idea remains widespread that in order to find fulfillment in life each person must discover his or her unique purpose. Both in its religious and its secular variants a true “calling” or life-project is one that contributes value for others while it also fulfills something deep in the self. The life-project of the calling can vary a great deal. It can range from raising a family to founding a company, inventing new ideas or serving society. As racial and gender roles have become less restrictive, the range of possible life-projects has expanded. But in every case the point is that absent such a project, the individual can never achieve wholeness; can never achieve a life well-lived.

In this form, vocation is a good candidate for the role of master narrative of middle class aspirations. Its prevalence, even amid the distortions affected by the narrow pursuit of “success,” is at the core what makes middle class culture the norm in the United States.⁵ Consider the tremendous popularity of biography (today a TV niche market of its own), the vogue of “inspirational” stories and speakers, or the attention given in popular media to examples of “genius” in the arts or sciences. In these secularized forms, the master narrative of vocation continues to exert considerable force in American life. The problem is that this narrative has decayed, so that its real significance has become diluted into a confusing mix of often ill-conceived and unrealistic fantasies and fears. The problem with today’s stripped-down versions of success is that they lack a larger horizon of meaning that could give lasting point and satisfaction to the fevered striving of so many.

Seen this way, the continuing belief that one needs to find a calling in order to lead a successful life has an important educational implication that is too often

³ E. Digby Baltzell has described the concrete meaning and variations of the several Reformation doctrines of the calling in the American colonial context in *Puritan Boston and Quaker Philadelphia: Two Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Class Authority and Leadership*.

⁴ See Edmund S. Morgan’s recent biography which emphasizes the consistency of Franklin’s vocational purpose throughout his long career: *Benjamin Franklin*.

⁵ For an extended argument for why middle class culture remains normative in the U.S., see: *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*.

overlooked. Today's concerns with "success" often imply a strong ambivalence about restricting the meaning of a practical education to purely economic criteria. Americans continue to show signs of bewilderment and displeasure at where the relentless pursuit of the values of individual freedom and achievement are taking their society (Hochschild). Americans, that is to say, remain ambivalent about the outcomes of their culture of individual achievement. Americans wish very much to be self-reliant. Indeed, they feel that they have a duty to be so, to "make something of themselves." They desire intensely to "find themselves" in highly individualized private life. Yet, they fear that a life without sustaining commitments to others and the larger society is empty and moribund. They are seeking larger contexts of connection and meaning that can "redeem" the significance of their efforts.

So, while Americans take pride in a kind of scrappy individual resourcefulness that distrusts institutions and commitments unless they can show obvious, short-term payoffs, they also long for the order and permanence they sense is lacking in their lives, with nostalgia for an imagined past of bucolic communities. This back-and-forth pattern is classic ambivalence, enacted on a mass scale. The educational opportunity is to engage this ambivalence as a point of entry into the contest of the practical meaning of the good life and of the kind of preparation needed to live it well. For educators concerned with authentic education for vocation, this ambivalence is an opportunity of great importance.

Institutions and faculty committed to liberal education, as well as those concerned primarily with preparing students for the professions, like their students, are implicitly struggling all the time with the narrative of the calling. The challenge is to shape that narrative in its concrete details so that it authentically embodies the full richness of the meaning of vocation, as against the simplification of it into constricting competition for status. The opportunity for advocates of liberal education and of genuine professionalism is to find common cause, along with mutual learning and support, through a focus on what vocation is and requires. The challenge is to develop a more effective pedagogical enterprise to prepare students to develop and pursue a sense of vocation over against the centrifugal tug of the "terrific deal" of our time.

Engaging American Ambivalence: Professionalism versus the "Terrific Deal"

The modern economy and polity are characterized by an increasingly intense division of labor and function. As many thinkers have emphasized, this tendency has increased efficiency in many dimensions, and permitted greater individuation than in past social orders. At the same time, it has also created persistent problems of meaning and ethical coherence. The idea of professionalism has been one response to this need for moral direction, social solidarity, and psychological integration. Echoing the religious ideal of the "profession" of a dedicated way of life, modern professionalism has continued in secular terms the effort to find vocation in work.

Professionalism aims to organize work so that workers can develop and express their individual powers through social practices that contribute to enterprises of social value. In this process, individuals are drawn into relationships of mutual responsibility with others practicing the same craft while they achieve recognition, in some of the central institutions of society, as worthy

contributors to the larger common life. Practices of teaching, healing, arguing and judging, inquiring, designing, managing, and others that require prolonged formal training and apprenticeship have received such official recognition in modern life by their designation as professional. In this way the ethic of professionalism has been, however imperfectly, institutionalized. In its social location, professionalism has always been closely related to the university and the aims of higher education.

However, higher education and professional life itself can be understood in quite a different perspective. That is the idea of “practical” education as passport to moving up. Success is viewed not so much as fulfillment in a calling as the ability to get what one wants. This, too, has a long history in America, but it is currently very much back in vogue. In *The Future of Success*, Robert Reich has called attention to how today’s more demanding and less secure conditions of work are actually the result of our new ability to pursue, as individuals, the “terrific deal for me.” “We are,” says Reich, “on the way to getting exactly what we want instantly, from anywhere, at the best value for our money.” Economically, this is a huge boon to everyone. But, he points out, “the balance between making a living and making a life is becoming harder to pull off because the logic of the new economy dictates that more attention be paid to work and less to personal life.”

So, the world of the terrific deal has a darker side. As Reich points out: “What it means for the rest of our lives—the parts that depend on firm relationships, continuity, and stability—is acutely problematic” (5). Of course, the forms of professional work and the way in which professionals typically deliver their services are highly dependent upon just such things as “firm relationships, continuity, and stability.” This culture of the terrific deal is in several ways antithetical to the premises that underlie the hope for meaningful vocation. The driving force of this culture is the exhilarating promise of unlimited wealth and opportunity to realize infinite desires. Or, at least, this is the vision of life trumpeted by many of the most successful and influential figures currently astride the world stage.

While the new communications systems enable individuals with economic resources the freedom to search for greater individual satisfaction in consuming goods and experiences, the same systems also provide the platform for tightening the link between the consumer market and the labor market. In order to obtain the resources with which to hunt for “terrific” deals—that is, better “deals” than we now have—we all face more and more pressure to scramble for the consumers’ fickle favor. We must be willing to make ourselves, and our institutions, into better deals, relentlessly, all the time. In short, Reich concludes, “the rewards of the new economy are coming at the price of lives that are more frenzied, less secure, more economically divergent, more socially stratified.... As our earnings become less predictable, we leap at every chance to make hay while the sun shines. As the stakes rise...we’ll do whatever we can to be in the winner’s circle and to get our children safely there as well” (6). What appears at first to serve individual freedom thus turns out to be a paradoxical blessing. What attracts me as a consumer puts pressure me as a worker. This deep contradiction looms over the promises of the “new economy” as a threat to personal integrity and life satisfaction. The economy of the terrific deal spreads anxiety and alienation along with its promise of plenty.

The conflict between the idea of professionalism and the pursuit of the terrific deal is a contemporary embodiment of the American ambivalence. As such, it presents an extended “teachable moment,” a commonplace around which both liberal and professional education faculty can make common cause. Embedded in the culture of the terrific deal is the notion of freedom as unlimited choice of experience. Beneath this view is a highly questionable, though currently widespread, understanding of human selfhood. It is the notion of the detached self, a spontaneous series of choices through which the self comes to be the sum of its experiences. Perhaps the most influential manifestation of this belief in a detached self is in the popular equation of identity with consumer preference, as a though a person really were just a sort of running tally (surreptitiously maintained in cyberspace by “cookies”) of clicks on a mouse, a “shopping cart” of choices and experiences.

Despite the ubiquity of this image of the self, it is a serious misunderstanding of identity and how people in fact develop. Here, perhaps is the sharpest contrast between the premises of the better deal and the ideals of professionalism, between simply getting ahead and taking up a vocation. Becoming oneself is more like apprenticeship than it is like choice in a market. What and who we come to admire, who we become involved with, what we learn to do, the kind of activities we immerse ourselves in, all gradually shape us, subtly shifting even our criteria of value and choice. Who we are is ultimately a moral question, bound up with the issue of whom we wish to be. It is also a question strongly shaped by the social and economic context in which the choosers are themselves formed. Recognizing this can lead to a deeper, because more realistic, understanding of the possibilities of contemporary life. Unlike a disappointing purchase (which most purchases are), the choices made in actual living have consequences. There is no “Escape. Undo.” command to click on.

There is in the professional ideal an alternative set of goals—and a conception of creativity and freedom—which promise a solution to the quandary posed by the culture of the terrific deal. That is, professionalism promises a satisfying sense of identity and personal achievement through contributing to values we hold in common. This idea of freedom as fulfillment in vocation is alive in popular understanding, though it is typically associated with exceptional callings and persons. Along with the idea of a religious sense of calling, it is widely understood that both in the arts and in science, contributions of value require nothing less than the whole of a person’s life and devotion. Professions, as forms of institutionalized vocation, make it possible to engage upon serious life projects in the same spirit. The promise of professional work is that it can enable many persons to achieve the freedom and fulfillment ascribed to the truly exceptional, the saints and geniuses of popular imagination.

Apprenticeship as Pedagogical Metaphor

Higher education’s mission has always included providing students with the intellectual wherewithal, and the moral understanding, to take their occupational and civic places in the larger world. This was the purpose of the medieval university and it has remained an essential goal of modern institutions that bear that name, including the liberal arts college. This is the authentic way in which education must be “practical.” In order to carry out this mission, the college or university has to take care that it presents and invites participation in those

intellectual and moral activities through which students can progress, metaphorically if not always literally, from apprentices to journeymen and eventually to fully-certified, contributing members of specific professional bodies as well as their civic and religious communities.

The metaphor of apprenticeship has its clearest application in professional education. Professional preparation must enable aspirants to acquire the knowledge and skill, both conceptual and practical, which the community of practitioners has built up over time and which define each profession. Throughout their careers, practitioners continue to reflect the influence of the pedagogical practices prominent in their educations, such as the style of Socratic questioning typical of law school made famous (or notorious) by the film *Paper Chase*, or the clinical training medical students receive “at the patient’s bedside” through hospital and clinic “rounds.” The intensity of the early phases of law school, like clinical training for physicians and nurses, or the competitions in design among students of architecture and engineering, provide modern analogues of the experience of personal apprenticeship through which all professionals were once inducted into their craft.

Cognitive psychologists have provided a rich account of how teaching and learning occur that draws directly upon the old idea of apprenticeship in professional training. The metaphor of teaching as a transaction between master and apprentice captures a valuable insight. Teaching is making visible to the learner ideas and habits of thinking employed by the accomplished practitioner. In particular, the idea of a “cognitive apprenticeship” has come to play an important role in contemporary discussions of how learning occurs (Brown). By representing in a public way the content and movement of thought, teaching makes it possible for “apprentices” to appropriate the thinking of “master” practitioners. It is this public representation, in gesture, action, word, symbol, diagram—“scaffolds” in the literature—that enables students and teacher to grasp what each is doing. Effective teaching thereby enables students and teacher to approach alignment of understanding.

The world of practice demands a high degree of skill that can only be learned mimetically, through imitation and dialogue in settings of practice, actual or simulated. However, academic training heavily emphasizes the cognitive or intellectual apprenticeship. In some cases, it is so emphasized that students receive little initiation into the complex skills of practice. For this reason, it is valuable to differentiate the learner’s experience of professional education into three kinds of “apprenticeship”: first, the cognitive or intellectual one; second, the skill-based apprenticeship of practice; but third, apprenticeship to the social roles and ethical responsibilities of the profession. Through this third, distinctively professional “apprenticeship,” the student is introduced to the meaning of an integrated practice of all dimensions of the profession, grounded in the fundamental purposes of the domain.⁶

⁶ The concept of the three apprenticeships of professional education is a central organizing theme of the on-going studies of professional education underway at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. The Preparation for the Professions Program is a comparative examination of teaching and learning in five fields: law, engineering, medicine, nursing, and preparation of the clergy.

Conceiving professional education through this metaphor of the three-fold apprenticeship makes it possible to see the tensions and shortfalls as well as strengths of current methods of training in each field. The three dimensions of professional apprenticeship reflect contending emphases within all professional education. The tensions among the three dimensions of professional education are shared across fields. They also take on a distinctive configuration in each. In each domain, the cognitive apprenticeship is the special interest of the academic members of the profession, while the practitioner community generally places more importance than the academics upon apprenticeship in the skills of practice. The third apprenticeship has a less clearly organized constituency. Its advocates include members of both the academic and practitioner wings of most fields, but perhaps most importantly it represents the public's interest in the quality and integrity of professional preparation. The danger, as with the public interest, generally is that too few find it a compelling concern.

The aim of the third apprenticeship is to join cognitive learning to training in skills so that intellectual richness and creativity come alive within the realm of professional practice. By infusing both the cognitive and skills apprenticeships with the field's larger purposes, the practitioner can find a liberating alignment of personal motivation with the social purposes of the profession. It is this integrating aim that provides the point of entry for concerns with vocation. The final aim of professional preparation, now as in the past, is the shaping the future practitioner as a member of a specific community of practice, integrating learned competence with educated conscience. This provides the substance of the third apprenticeship: the formation of the requisite perspective on work and the self that marks a genuine professional.

The third apprenticeship is thus about providing insight into what it is to be a professional in a specific domain. If it is successful, the novice can gradually explore and critically begin to appropriate the full dimensions of the body of knowledge, skills, and perspectives that the profession embodies and hopes to pass on. Yet, it is this crucial third, professional apprenticeship that receives the least explicit attention in most professional schooling. Efforts are underway to correct that in the form of ethics movements in many fields and a new attention to "professionalism" in law and medicine. But these efforts need a broader base of understanding in order to succeed.

The Critical Need for the Liberal Arts in Educating for Vocation

For confronting this task, the apprenticeship metaphor with its guild analogy, is by itself inadequate. Today's professions face not only changing domains of knowledge, but shifting fields of practice within a dynamic and often confusing society. Therefore, the horizons of the professions need to be broad. Practitioners must be able to think critically about their own situation and that of their field in relation to its defining purposes. The institutions of professional education must both model and challenge their students to genuine involvement as experts and yet as citizens. Aspiring professionals need serious training in how to integrate a critical yet engaged standpoint into the guild's particular sense of knowledge, craft, and attitude. To preserve the professional social contract, we need to bring the perspective of the aware and critical citizen into the formation of the members of the community of practitioners. The opposing pulls of specialized

expertise versus the broad sympathies needed for active citizenship define this crucial aspect of learning for vocation.

For these reasons, professional judgment has to be open to the expanding horizon typically associated with education in the liberal arts. At its best, liberal education means inquiry that points the inquirer toward wider, more expansive perspectives, adopting what Immanuel Kant called a cosmopolitan point of view. Liberal education has also, in several of its traditions, insisted upon the importance of learning how to interpret context with a view toward deciding upon action, moving not only from earth to heaven, as it were, but also returning to earth with new understanding. In that sense, liberal learning is like professional apprenticeship: both are species of formative education. American professional schools, uniquely, have long demanded evidence of competence in liberal arts disciplines either as prerequisites, as with law, medicine or the ministry, or in the cases of teaching and engineering, as collateral studies. In both forms, liberal education can make a vital contribution to professional preparation by promoting an understanding of relationships among the disparate domains of knowledge and to probe the sometimes equally disparate fields of endeavor as these affect professional practice.

Like the professions, liberal education aims at human betterment, but in a distinctive way. Its mission is essentially pedagogical, toward shaping participants to join a public able to inquire, deliberate, and judge. Liberal education promises the development of wide understanding and reflective discernment. Serious investigation of issues of identity and purpose, the traditional focal issues of liberal learning in all fields, opens up the world of learning by demonstrating that knowledge applies to life, and that inquiry can powerfully enlighten the way life is lived. The disciplined pursuit of these issues is ultimately more than a benefit to individuals. It is a public good. Liberal education is in principle, then, not only the complement to professional learning, but its natural context.

Developments in medical education suggest how this relationship needs to work. In his history of Western medicine, *The Greatest Benefit to Mankind: a Medical History of Humanity* Ray Porter has emphasized that the unique curative powers of modern medicine derive, paradoxically, from its narrowness of focus. Porter lays great stress on the notion that Western medicine, like much of modern Western thinking, departed sharply from the effort, common to most peoples and cultures, to understand disease and health within the larger context of how human beings fit into the world. Unlike most traditional healing systems that have, according to Porter, "sought to understand the relations of the sick person to the wider cosmos and to make readjustments between individual and world, or society and world, the western tradition explains sickness primarily in terms of the body itself." This emphasis began with classical Greek medicine, received further impetus during the Renaissance, with its interest in anatomy, and finally created a science that has achieved its explanatory and curative successes "by probing more deeply and ever more minutely into the flesh, its systems, tissues, cells, its DNA" (7).

Yet, today's medical practice seems to be rediscovering the importance of connections in even modern healing. This is true not only in the realm of public health but in the therapeutic process itself. It is simply not possible to activate or deploy the powerful knowledge that modern biomedical science has made

available without embedding it in the social practices of communication and collaboration, especially the building and maintenance of trust among participants in the healing enterprise. Seen this way, physicians must be able to function well within two quite different perspectives. On the one hand, as scientists they probe the causes of disease. As healing professionals they must embody the fiduciary relationship between the doctor and the patient, as well as the profession and the public. Performance in these tasks is greatly aided by the development of the capacity to understand and enact the physician's mission in ever more complicated institutional and social conditions. Under contemporary conditions, that is, liberal learning is directly rather than only indirectly relevant to the training of competent physicians.

In contrast to today's heavy emphasis upon specialized knowledge and skills, liberal education reminds us of the need to link and integrate knowledge and skills with criticism and purpose. Several of the traditional pedagogies of the liberal arts, especially the analysis of texts, cases, and exemplars, overlap in important ways with professional skills. These natural connections between liberal learning and the professions are important and need to be strengthened and developed. For example, the analysis and criticism of texts is basic to the training of both clergy and teachers, while each also must learn how to make sense of texts so as to "apply" them in various social and personal contexts. Medical schools have for some time involved literature as well as ethical reflection and social scientific methods in such forms as "medical humanities," seeking to stimulate the development of a kind of practical imagination and "cultural competence" among physicians. Some law schools have employed the techniques of oral history to engage students in inquiry into how law can be a meaningful and socially valuable calling. Engineering courses have begun to use anthropological insights to challenge students to explore the cross-national differences in the organization and practice of their field. Nearly all professional schools have become more aware of the value of modern ways of teaching communication, especially interpersonal sensitivity and writing skills.

These experiments at integrating liberal education into the formal professional curriculum typically remain at the margin. A serious concern for vocation could begin to move them toward the center. At the same time, a focus upon education for vocation—including even the academic calling—could start to move much of liberal education away from its current thrall to the disciplinary specialization typical of the elite research universities where most faculty have been trained. Bringing these two separate streams of educational practice together, even into serious dialogue, is a very large project. However, it is not one that is foreign to the history and traditions of the American academy.

A "Pragmatic" Conclusion

The stream of educational and social thinking that we have come to know as classical American Pragmatism, identified with philosophers such as William James, C.S. Peirce, John Dewey and Josiah Royce, as well as psychologists such as George Herbert Mead, always conceived the intellectual life as the reflective moment of the larger social life. For such thinkers, the university was a specialized institution with a general purpose. The university was to be a great agency for "bringing critical reflection to bear" on both the understanding and improvement of the basic institutions and practices of modern society, all in the

interests of “the transformation of a civilization” (Anderson 8). The classical Pragmatists stressed the connections between doing and thinking, between individual meaning and participation in the social whole. Their vision of the research university emphasized teaching as well as research, both illuminated by civic responsibility and an ethos of public service (Carnochan). In the inaugural lectures of this Institute, Bruce Kimball said that he discerns in many new emphases in liberal education a renewal of the Pragmatist spirit. I want to close by suggesting that such a revival will remain unanchored and incomplete unless it engages the realms of professional preparation and the theme of vocation.

But perhaps we can learn from our Pragmatist past. In closing, I want to propose Josiah Royce’s late writings as a kind of anticipatory sketch of the dynamics of new education for vocation. In *The Philosophy of Loyalty* and *The Problem of Christianity*, both written early in the twentieth century, Royce approached the problems of identity and meaning in modern life from two, complementary points of view: that of the individual and of the evolving community, respectively.

From the individual’s perspective, the problem of life is to achieve coherence and significance. Royce argued that this could be best described as the problem of finding and cultivating loyalty to a purpose or cause. He argued that only such a loyalty, freely and wholeheartedly embraced, could make life worth living. The cause had to be at once a purpose that enhanced the larger good of humanity and yet something the individual felt as fascinating and deeply attractive. The experience of the intense life of teams, work-groups, families, or intentional communities comes to mind. Royce’s surprising point was that, paradoxically, only such commitments can empower individuals to develop their unique gifts to their fullest and find ethical as well as psychological significance in their lives.

This is to say that to be meaningful, individual freedom has to find itself represented in that which is beyond the self: a meaningful world that stirs and calls the individual into ethical life. Concretely, this means that personal freedom must be mediated through collectively created and sustained institutions. Royce’s chief example of such a larger life, recalling Hegel’s notions of “substance” and “objective spirit,” was the Christian churches in their historical struggle to interpret and realize the meaning of the new life they experienced “in the Spirit” of Christ. The church, in this perspective, became for Royce a kind of model institution for modern society, representing in its aspiration if not necessarily its practice, the collective effort to realize the dignity and freedom of the individual in the “beloved community,” as Royce styled it, a concrete actualization of the anticipated but never fully realized Reign of God.

Like other classical Pragmatists, Royce was continuing in a secular idiom, many of the concerns that long tied liberal education with religious communities in American history. The tradition of liberal learning is animated by a Socratic sense of pedagogical responsibility that places priority on examining one’s life and one’s world in order to take a worthy place in within it. Indeed, as Alan Ryan points out, liberal education in the United States has “embodied an ideal of cultivation” with not only a “clear religious background” but one which has “retained a diluted religious quality” (78). It is this close link between liberal learning and the bedrock of much social and individual life that explains why it is unlikely to disappear. A good society finally cannot exist without institutions

built on the principle of responsibility rather than gain. However, in the age of the “terrific deal,” it is obvious that this aim remains as difficult to achieve within American society, including American academic culture, as ever.

How, then, can the issue of vocation be engaged so that it becomes a guiding concern of the enterprise of liberal education? Rather than specify an approach in generalities, I would like to pose a set of questions as a way of probing the range of possibility that exists here at Westmont. Though I believe these questions could become the basis for investigation in any setting of higher education. First, where in the curriculum is the relation between preparing for a profession or specialty explicitly related to the themes of liberal learning we have been talking about? Second, where and how is the issue of vocation explored? Is it approached in a “big picture” sense perhaps; or through the critical examination of specific kinds of work and life choices; and how is the matter of evaluation and judgment addressed?

Third, assuming that vocation is being actively addressed somewhere in the educational program, what are the kinds of teaching employed there: is the approach largely through case studies, or through historical or contemporary exemplars, or through theory and investigation, or through some practical experience plus reflection? What do we know about how effective each of these approaches is in stimulating students’ own reflection? Finally, we need to ask about how central or how marginal the focus on vocation is to the institution, as reflected in public visibility, in research, and most of all, in budgetary allocations. These questions, or others like them, could serve to recall the enterprise of liberal education, as well as professional preparation, to their own best hopes.

But Royce would remind us that a profession, such as teaching or research or healing or the law, is a social embodiment of a cause. So is an institution such as the college or university. If it is in reasonably good order, the profession or institution serves this cause while it calls and supports its members to acquire the knowledge and skills as well as to practice the virtues needed to promote its fundamental reason for being. What better way to engage that purpose than by asking how a college or university can better achieve its core mission: fostering its students’ ability to develop mature and reflective judgment about some of the most important commitments of their lives, their several callings? Upholding and creatively adapting this purpose in difficult times is our unavoidable challenge. It is also our joy, our honor, and, not least, our high calling.

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