Liberal Studies and Educational Reform

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Introduction:

One of the gratifying aspects of college life is that its rhythms fit well with the natural cycle of the seasons. In most walks of life, the changing of the seasons is not well marked. Time passes often with little need to mark beginnings and completions. The beginning of the fall term is a proper occasion on which to rededicate ourselves to our life of study and reflection at the college. I have always found that the prospect of cold weather and the brightly colored leaves draws me back to my books and the classroom with renewed energy.

We describe our life of study here with a number of formulations that we believe convey its essential core. We say we provide a liberal education according to a whole plan. We say the books are the teachers, and that we approach them directly with our questions, unaided by secondary scholarship. We say that we subscribe to no particular method, that we approach each book as seems appropriate at the time. We emphasize the importance of questions: What does this book mean? What is this author trying to say? What is the truth about this matter? What does this book have to do with me and my life?

These formulations and the others like them that you may supply yourselves are the best ways we have of keeping in focus what we think we are doing at this college. It is important that we repeat them often, but they can easily ossify into sterile and dogmatic slogans if we fail to reflect actively on them.

It would be easy on this occasion merely to defend our practices. It may be more useful to seek a fresh vantage point from which to reconsider what is to be hoped for in a liberal education. We may gain such a vantage point by considering some of the recent claims in the ongoing debate about what education ought to be. This paper will begin with a survey of efforts in the realm of educational reform and then look

briefly at a philosopher whose work lies behind some of the modern notions of reform. Finally, I will reconsider some of our notions of liberal education.

Though there have been periods of relative calm, the controversy over the most appropriate sort of education for young people in this country has continued steadily since at least the 1890s. To describe its poles as left and right, or as liberal and conservative, does little justice to the often complex and well considered positions taken by the parties in this controversy. The debate became heated again in the early 1980s, with the publication of a string of reports on the unfortunate condition of American schools. The reports were addressed by a raft of proposals for reform, including some that were off shoots of our approach here, such as Mortimer Adler's *Paideia Proposal* and the Touchstones project organized by three St. John's tutors in Annapolis. Though the debate often reduces to polarization, in fact, it is composed of a nest of intertwined issues and questions. It may be useful to sketch a few of them.

By some, matter and form have been curiously split apart. Some of the reformers claim that *what* students learn is of the highest importance. Others say it does not matter at all what they learn as long as they master certain *skills*. Another lively center of debate forms around the question of whether our human *similarities* or our *differences* deserve most attention in the schools. Finally, there is a contest between relative newcomers among academic disciplines for ascendancy: Where philosophy, theology, and science were at various times seen as the foundational studies, now such disciplines as anthropology and critical theory claim to provide the most fundamental insights.

Let me begin with those who emphasize skills over facts. They have had the easier time of it since they have managed to stay out of the mud pit where the relative importance of specific values is slugged out. Skills, generalized into value free method systems (methodologies, as educationists like to call them) have become the safe haven of public schools.

The Critical Thinking movement will serve as an example. The *Critical Thinking* newsletter describes critical thinking as "the art of self

monitored, self correcting, self disciplined thought." (8) Its proponents claim that it prepares students for problem solving and decision making in all areas. Critical thinking can be generalized and is transferable. It bears on academic, ethical and civic life. The power of this movement derives largely from its ability to subsume other promising educational ideas by giving them new names. It teaches such skills as critical reading, critical writing, critical speaking and critical listening. It is hard to see how these differ from reading, writing, speaking and listening, as we ordinarily understand them, though Critical Thinking does fight against the tendencies toward mindlessness and mere rote learning one often hears about in the schools. There are also critical approaches to teaching science and mathematics. The promoters of Critical Thinking say it is based on "universal intellectual standards of clarity, precision, accuracy, consistency, logicalness, evidence, relevance, and reasonability." They claim, "[it] binds all school activities into a coherent whole," and it builds, as one might guess, a "critical community of learners."

Furthermore, the Critical Thinking movement has been designed with the educational structure of this country well in mind. It brings an impressive array of new educational terms and categories to go with them: It promotes the lower order skills, and then moves on to higher order thinking. Critical thinking objectives can be prioritized, as educationists are fond of saying, and lend themselves readily to outcomes assessment. Spokesmen move easily between the proper and common-noun sense of the phrase: According to Richard Paul, a leading voice in the movement, "Critical thinking [lower case] is at risk from kindergarten through graduate school."(2)

Where Critical Thinking places its emphasis on skills, Cultural Literacy, another movement in educational reform, claims that facts are of greater importance. These facts are described by educationists who approve as *factoids*, and by those who don't as *factlets*. (*Critical Thinking* 24) E.D. Hirsh is the major proponent of Cultural Literacy. His book, *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* was published in 1987. Hirsh presents a case for the facts that he ties to recent studies in cognitive psychology and linguistic theory.

Cultural Literacy is an example of the drive to find a center for American education. Hirsh says, "Only by piling up specific, communally

schools, however, Hirsh let himself down into that mud pit where content is so hotly debated. His book *Cultural Literacy* was met with a barrage of criticism in the press. Some of the criticism makes sense: First, his emphasis on the facts seems at odds with the case he makes in his own book that people learn by building well organized webs of knowledge where the relationship of one fact to another holds the whole together. Second, critics complained that there really is no common body of facts. They argue that instead, people have a fairly extensive body of facts in common within their groups, that there is some overlapping among different groups, but that there is no essential core shared by all. Moreover, some argue that facts are just what we don't need: It makes no sense to give priority to a special set of facts. We are barraged by many thousands more facts than we can process every day.

Though Hirsh made a praiseworthy effort, he did not escape what has come to be the most dreaded charge: that he is merely promoting the values of a white, male, middle-class Eurocentric elite which, by an accident of history, happen to wield much of the political power in this country.

This criticism comes mainly from another camp of reformers: those who argue for something called multiculturalism and whose major principle is diversity. The multiculturalists begin with the notion that the differences between us are more important than those qualities and conditions of life all human beings share. These reformers too, are well-intentioned inasmuch as they strive for new civic virtues in a diverse world order. Multiculturalism is a major topic in educational journals at present, and there are many different efforts included under its banner. Two important branches of the multicultural movement should be distinguished, though they overlap at many points: First, there is the branch that recognizes the world is smaller than it was once. These reformers look beyond national boundaries and are working to construct school and college curricula that will educate citizens of the world. Their aims are well summarized by Marden and Engerman in the Spring 1992 issue of *The Educational Record*:

> To meet the world's challenges and avoid its dangers, humankind requires diplomats, analysts, scholars, journalists, and others who can understand, question,

> decide, and act in the international interest. We need persons who can appreciate the richness of cultures, the complexities of religion and ethnicity, the nuances of power, and the forces at work in the long, complicated histories of many nations. Preparing these persons is the responsibility of education. (42)

Marden and Engerman list fifty college liberal arts programs they find serving this end. They are primarily small, independent, residential colleges. Their programs, like ours, are aimed more at intellectual and personal development than preparation for a particular job.

The other important branch of multiculturalism interests itself primarily in empowering political subgroups within this country, such groups as those distinguished by sex, race, ethnicity, national origin, and social status. Diversity in colleges and universities is discussed as it relates to the student body, the faculty and staff, and finally for the curriculum. Some argue, in the service of the diversity principle, that in a student body or college faculty, women, or racial or cultural minorities should be present in the same proportion they represent of the general population—or at least the local population. Some go only as far as to say that opportunities should be made available to all on an equal footing. Others go farther, arguing in favor of quota tests for ethnic, racial, or sex-based groups. The principle of diversity extends also to the curriculum. Some multiculturalists argue that who the writers are, whether they are men, women, or members of racial or ethnic groups, is every bit as important as what books they write. They claim that in building curricula something like a standard of proportionate representation should be used.

Redesigning the core curriculum in multicultural terms, both of the international kind and of the kind that emphasizes political subgroups, has become a serious undertaking for many colleges and universities. The Association of American Colleges has received support from the National Endowment for the Humanities for a project it calls: "Engaging Cultural Legacies: Shaping Core Curricula in the Humanities." The project supports experimental core curricula in fifty-two colleges and universities. This project and some of the ideas that underlie it are described in the May 1991 issue of the AAC's journal,

Liberal Education. Carol Schneider, the director of this project, tries to balance her treatment of what she calls the "Western universalist" view with attention to the personal dimension of multiethnic experiences in this country. Three aspects of the AAC project deserve comment: first, the heavy criticism addressed at the canon; second, what seems a too easy acceptance of the term *culture* redefined; and finally, the emphases of the new experimental core curricula.

Canon is particularly useful as a pejorative term. It refers primarily to the *Bible*, but legitimately extends to any collection of sacred books; it also extends, legitimately, to describe any rule approved by the pope. Finally, it can be used to refer to the saints, taken all together. People in the educational debate mostly do not bother to specify what books they mean to include in the canon. The fight does not ordinarily descend to particulars, though the canon is usually presented by its detractors as something set in concrete and incapable of significant change. The term *canon* also lends itself easily to bad jokes; some speak of the canonization of books; others refer to the debate itself as cannon fire.

The canon is being replaced in the AAC's new multicultural core curricula by what Schneider calls, "rich, complex, primary works." (6) This new approach, she claims, makes the arguments about the canon "virtually obsolete":

> Across institutions working in the project, there is a strong commitment to using rich, complex primary works as source materials for courses. In marked contrast to the ideologies of the earlier "Great Books" movement ... almost no one proposes to teach a set of books either as ends in themselves, as arguments among "great minds," or as ways of testing independent philosophical and aesthetic standards. Rather, faculty members throughout AAC's project are selecting texts and other artifacts to explore cultural topics—for example, myths of origin and concepts of virtue or gender within Western society and, increasingly, across world cultures.(6)

These rich complex primary works are no longer to consist of just

books, but now include cultural artifacts and theories about such matters as concepts of virtue or gender that come from somewhere else, that is to say from the professors or the designers of curricula, and these educationists stand above books. That Schneider places the phrase "great minds" in quotation marks suggests that she thinks the authors of so called great books are no longer to be considered as greater minds, say, than our minds, but are to be put on the level of artifacts.

The shift in the accepted definition of the word *culture* may help to explain the enthusiasm for this curious notion of "rich, complex, primary works." The word *culture,* which, in the context of liberal studies years ago was restricted to meaning the collection of man's highest achievements in art, literature, and philosophy and was understood as the opposite of anarchy by such nineteenth century champions of liberal education as Matthew Arnold and Cardinal Newman. In the present debate culture is to be understood in accordance with the definition supplied by anthropology. As stated by Ralph Nichols culture includes "all the habits, patterns, and ways of thinking that human beings acquire as an extragenetic inheritance...the whole way of life of a particular human society."

Of AAC core curricula whose summaries I have seen, many really are making interesting new efforts. Many are emphasizing the reading of primary texts and there are efforts to get large numbers of students to read the same works at the same time. On the other hand, many are noticeably flinching to duck the most dreaded charge (of being predominantly white, male, middle-class Eurocentric elite). A quick survey of them shows some attention to what might be called a mini-canon, though the architects of curricula are quick to defend themselves. Schneider cites Jim Mirollo from Columbia University as saying: "Nobody's sacred on our list." (55) To my mind this is a clear sign of health. Though some theorists rail that canonists merely venerate the classics, no good canonist I have ever heard of would dream of doing such a thing.

It may be helpful at this point to try to look more closely at the claims of the multiculturalist. A long article by Browne and Neal in the *Journal of Popular Culture* last summer provides an account of the governing assumptions of the second sort of multiculturalism, the sort

that interests itself primarily in empowering political subgroups in this country. Multiculturalism exists beyond the melting pot. The melting pot image that described the way groups of immigrants entered mainstream America is seen now according to Browne and Neal as wrongly "obliterating the ethnic and social heritages of the many subgroups that comprise the American system." (160) They go further:

> The same realities are not shared by all segments of the population. America is not the same society for the super rich that it is for those caught up in conditions of poverty. The experiences with many aspects of American life are not the same for men as for women, nor for racial minorities as for the white, middle-class majority. (160)

Browne and Neal attack not only Hirsh's list, but the very medium of print itself. They say "we are biased toward the word as word, not as communication" and "to be against print literacy is almost tantamount to blasphemy."(158) They claim that television is "the major unifying force," as though it should be obvious to all. They provide a long list of other media in which literacy should be sought: "music, art, photography, television, movies, archeology, mechanics, plumbing, medicine, "rapping," pottery, weaving, cooking, and scores of others."(178)

Among the literate forms they recognize, one finds the comic book. For Browne and Neal to suggest that comic books might be used to teach people to read is not so shocking. They draw, however, a startling conclusion from their observation that the Japanese are more literate than we are partly because of comic books:

> Japanese respect for the comics could profitably be copied by Americans, if we could ever flush out of our cultural system the Puritanical concept of some things being "better," some "worse" than others. (175)

Once *better* and *worse* are discarded, there is little left that we can use to decide what ought to be in the schools. One criterion remains. It has been there under the surface right along in this account of multiculturalism, and that is access to political power. Once *better* and *worse* have been

discarded, all hope is gone of looking beyond one's individual or group concerns to a common good. What remains is the makings of a bare-knuckled political free-for-all that ironically threatens the very conditions necessary for a culturally diverse democratic state.

It may be useful here to leave the arena of school reform and search for the roots of some of these claims. *Post-modernism* is an expression used to describe work in many areas from art and architecture to literature, philosophy, mathematics and science that has grown up since the early 1960s. It comes on the heels, as you might guess, of something called *modernism*, a movement primarily in literature and the arts in the early decades of this century that consciously made a break with the practices of its immediate past. T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, James Joyce are some of the more important modernist writers.

The term *post modernism* is used to describe a raft of new directions that have in common an interest in what one might call the in-between places. These in-between places were either disregarded or overlooked in conventional disciplines.

The topic of chaos in physics and mathematics provides a good example. Classical physics centered on those parts of nature like the description of moving bodies and electro-magnetic fields. These phenomena can be described by a relatively small set of well behaved functions and differential equations. Given these equations and initial values for the variables in them, past and future states can be calculated, and they come out the same way every time. Small changes in initial values lead to predictably small differences in the outcomes. Chaos theory is interested, rather, in such phenomena as the weather, patterns of plant growth, the stock market, and national and world economies that invite description by another sort of mathematical function altogether. Mathematical weather models work by an iterative process: Initial values are used to compute a second set of values. These second values are put into the same formulas and used to compute a third set. The process is repeated on and on. Here is the catch: Because of the iterative process and the nature of the mathematical functions used, quite different results are produced based on only slightly different initial conditions when the procedure is started again from the beginning.

Chaos is probably an overly dramatic name for this field, since it is interested in a kind of order. The order it discovers, however, is not deterministic in the old sense. Chaos theory finds itself looking at phenomena that not so long ago seemed beyond the scope of science, immune to the nets and spring traps of mathematics, standing free somehow in between islands of scientific and mathematical clarity.

Many other sorts of efforts are included under the umbrella of post modernism. The one that may bear most directly on the work of the educational reformers is to be found in a discipline called critical theory. The word *critical* must be taken in quite a different sense here than for the Critical Thinking movement mentioned earlier. Critical theory has to do with methods for reading texts. It began as a sub-domain of literature departments. The texts it treats now, however, include not only works of literature, but those of philosophy, history, and even science and mathematics. The branch of critical theory that has had perhaps the greatest impact on educational reform is called *deconstruction*. One's first reaction to the claims of deconstruction is likely to be horror. Christopher Norris gives a popular account of what it means to deconstruct a text:

> To 'deconstruct' a text is to draw out conflicting logics of sense and implication, with the object of showing that the text never exactly means what it says or says what it means. . . . philosophy—like literature—is a product of *rhetorical* figures and devices. What defines philosophy as a discipline. . . is precisely its reluctance to face this fact; its desire to ignore the omnipresence of figural language in the texts of its own past and present. Deconstruction is the process of rhetorical close-reading that seizes upon those moments when philosophy attempts—and signally fails—to efface all knowledge of this figural drift. (7)

One of the main tenets of deconstruction is that all of western thought, including mathematics and science, is informed by "logocentrism." Logocentrism is a form of male dominance. Philosophy, it is claimed, cannot do what it pretends to do, that is, generalize from particulars in such a way that particularity is left behind and philosophy

holds on to pure ideas that are represented in language, but not conditioned by it. The notion goes further; it may not be possible to get outside the domain of language at all. The realm of ideas may itself turn out to be no more than a metaphor. There is more: Writing, it is claimed, is inferior to the spoken word. By Norris's account, "Speech is the proper, authentic form of language; writing not merely derivative from speech but in some sense a parasite, an alien body which exploits and perverts the very nature of language."(10)

From this brief note of some of the fundamentals of deconstruction, it is easy to see how university departments of English and comparative literature that subscribe to it have gotten themselves into a position where discussing meaning and intention in texts is seen as virtual heresy, perhaps naive heresy. Where students once read and interpreted books, they now deconstruct them. The exercise often takes the form of showing how some elements of meaning cancel out others, yielding a zero-sum conclusion. This is where deconstruction gets its bad name for trashing books. It is also where some of the extreme positions in the politically motivated part of multiculturalism find a good deal of their theoretical justification.

Who shall we blame for this? A likely suspect is the father of deconstruction, Jacques Derrida, a Frenchman who has been writing prolifically in his peculiar way since the early 1960s. As a sample of his work, we may wish to consider his influential essay on Plato's *Phaedrus*. It is titled "Plato's Pharmacy" and appears in his book *Dissemination*. In it he gives a brilliant and unconventional reading of *The Phaedrus*. He explores the notion of writing as a *pharmakon*, which means in Greek either a medicine or a poison. This *pharmakon* is presented as a gift from a father figure in a myth. By pursuing what he judges to be the central metaphor of the dialogue, Derrida arrives at speculative conclusions about myth, logocentrism, and the status of the written word that bear implications for the whole of western metaphysics. The following passage from "Plato's Pharmacy" gives something of the flavor of Derrida's endeavor.

> Is writing seemly? Does the writer cut a respectable figure? Is it proper to write? Is it done?

> Of course not. But the answer is not so simple, and Socrates does not immediately offer it on his own account in a rational discourse of *logos*. He lets it be heard by delegating it to an *akoe*, to a well-known rumor, to hearsay evidence, to a fable transmitted from ear to ear: "I can tell you what our forefathers have said about it, but the truth of it is only known by tradition. . . . [*Phaedrus*, 274c]
>
> The truth of writing, that is, as we shall see, (the) nontruth, cannot be discovered in ourselves by ourselves. And it is not the object of a science, only of a history that is recited, a fable that is repeated. . . . One should note most especially that what writing will later be accused of—repeating without knowing—here defines the very approach that leads to the statement and determination of its status. One thus begins by repeating without knowing—through a myth—the definition of writing, which is to repeat without knowing. (*Dissemination* 74)

A second passage from "Plato's Pharmacy" illustrates the difficulties Derrida sees with respect to an author's authority, or the problem of how much a writer can control the implications of language. It also shows how a new area of inquiry emerges in between a text and the language in which it is embedded:

> Finely regulated communications are established, through the play of language, among diverse functions of the word and, within it, among diverse strata or regions of culture. These communications or corridors of meaning can sometimes be declared or clarified by Plato when he plays upon them "voluntarily," a word we put in quotation marks because what it designates, to content ourselves with remaining within the closure of these oppositions, is only a mode of "submission" to the necessities of a given "language." None of these concepts can translate the relation we are aiming at here.Then again, in other cases, Plato can *not* see the

> links, can leave them in the shadow or break them up. And yet these links go on working of themselves. In spite of him? thanks to him? in *his* text? *outside* his text? but then where? between his text and the language? for what reader? at what moment?(95-96)

I apologize for this crude and inadequate sketch of Derrida's exploration, which itself is subtle, insightful and witty. It is not at all obvious that Derrida's conclusions are worthwhile—I say *worthwhile* because *true* and *right* are clearly inappropriate categories for judging his work. What is clear is that Derrida has engaged Plato's books with an intensity of thoughtful interaction that demands our respect. His interests go beyond Plato. His writings show his abiding engagement with a host of books and writers from a breadth of fields in the Western tradition. Though we may raise an eyebrow at Derrida's peculiar idiom, what we must not fail to notice is his rediscovery of great books.

I was looking for someone to blame for the dangerous frame of mind that some American educational reforms have fallen into. But having traced their notions all the way back to Derrida, I am surprised at what I find. Derrida constantly takes a reader off guard with his coined words, puns and self-referential word games, but he is, nonetheless, a man who reads the classics deeply, thoughtfully, and imaginatively. He is at quite a removal from those educational reformers who want to throw out the classics, never having read them, in favor of educational materials whose main merit is showing a particular group in a favorable light.

Derrida does not seem to be the problem. The problem begins when American universities build departments using Derrida's speculations as the foundation of their programs. Something odd happens when the vitality of an active mind is codified into an "-ism," "-ology," method, or school of thought. The problem intensifies when these premises are hardened into slogans by politically motivated educationists.

I have looked briefly at a few current trends in educational reform and have found many of them, including the international version of multiculturalism, cultural literacy, and critical thinking, useful and good. The impetus for changing education that begins with a desire to promote the political interests of ethnic, racial, or sexually based groups

in schools and colleges is more problematic, particularly if it is not balanced with attention to a center of some kind, some core that all citizens should work toward sharing. What exactly such a core should be remains a problem. Even if such a core cannot be discovered, there is considerable interest in inventing and establishing a nationwide core of which a student's mastery could be measured with a standardized nationwide test.

It may be useful to look at our own program at St. John's against the backdrop of these reform efforts. In much of the educational press, great books are portrayed as the very bastion of everything white, male, middle-class, logocentric, Eurocentric, elitist and dead. The St. John's program does not escape this criticism. One might think that only a part of the program could be addressed by this charge, that is, those literary works, in which one's individual experience of the world, as an individual is the matter of central importance. In such works, it may be fairly argued, that the cultural or sexual identity of the author is of great importance. Personal experience of the world surely varies considerably between men and women, people of privileged or non-privileged status, those with differing social customs and different languages. What gets understood as history, too, may depend largely on who is telling the story; it is not clear that a woman would have written anything like *The History of the Peloponnesian War*.

There are whole expanses of the program, however, where one would think that the accidents of ethnic origin, sex, or social status would play no part at all. Those studies that strive for pure objective description and explanation in mathematics, physics and philosophy, would seem to stand exempt. What difference could it possibly make who wrote these books, where they lived, or when?

If one accepts the premise that all of western thought is dominated by logocentrism, however, then even mathematics and science must be listed among those subjects where the sex, social upbringing and all other particular features of an author contribute significantly to the character of the thought. The implication here is that the intellectual pleasure we take in watching Euclid or Newton work toward their conclusions is a male pleasure in male dominated logocentric terms. An argument against this view that relies on logically framed deductions is

itself tainted by the same logocentrism. Thus, even mathematics, science and philosophy fail to escape the charge.

While claims continue to be put forward, it is not at all clear how they should be treated. The claim of logocentrism undercuts the very apparatus of reason that one might use in defense. That is, to frame a reasonable case against the charge of logocentrism is itself to be prejudiced by logocentrism. Response is particularly difficult if the forms of rational argument, the rules of logic, the principle of contradiction and so on are specifically disallowed. Without the framework of reason, the grounds for discussion will become personal and speculative, and they will depend on certain claims about language, not thought, as fundamental. The danger here is that, with all possibility of objectivity denied, the argument will become a simple fight; each voice will argue what it feels to be its interest.

The chivalrous approach would be to address these claims in their own terms, but the very form of the charge makes reasoned consideration impossible. There is nothing for it but to deny the premise. We must strive to be reasonable and to continue to believe that reason is not just a name for a particular kind of prejudice. We must do this for the sake of what reason allows to remain possible and worth exploring. As the tenets of the politically motivated branch of multiculturalism have trickled down from philosopher to university scholar and from there to school reformers and finally to the popular press, they have taken the form of simple, unassailable truths. We must take care to be as skeptical of these claims as we are of any others.

We should also take care that we, ourselves, are not drawn into a defensive political posture. We should continue to be willing to learn what we can from the post-modernists and not see them as mere adversaries. It is not easy, however, for reason to retain its character when it is confronted by the passion of political conviction and interest.

In the face of this assault, how does one begin or presume to defend a stable program that focuses on books it judges to be better than others, a program that prefers the old definition of culture, that is culture as the best that has been thought and said?

Perhaps, the most we can hope to do is to work to put ourselves on the same footing as Derrida himself, a careful student of the great writers, and avoid the shortcuts suggested by the educationists. To read and appreciate Derrida, one must have read and understood a good many books from the Western tradition, the so-called canon. What holds for Derrida holds also for many other postmodernist efforts. In order to understand the in between places, it is necessary to realize that they are in between something: Chaos theory comes necessarily after classical physics; fractal geometry after geometry in the usual three dimensions.

What liberal college education ought to be is surely a question about making a good beginning, since becoming liberally educated is a lifelong pursuit. Certainly we must learn some facts along the way, and we must develop some skills. These skills might better be apprehended under the notion of arts, by comparison with the productive and fine arts. We might even consider them as "critical skills," though I'm not sure we get much service from that poor overworked word. The facts and skills must be bound up together in the fabric of knowledge we weave for ourselves day by day.

Our principal task here remains clear: to make the best beginning of a liberal education we can. It makes sense to begin simply; to read a handful of fine books, say one hundred or so; to address each book seriously, starting where we happen to find ourselves and asking those first questions: What does this book mean? What is this author trying to say? Is he right? What is there of truth in this book? How does this book help me to understand the world and myself?

We say that the books are the teachers; that does not mean that they are the ultimate authorities. The books are the teachers because their authors have gone farther in their investigations of important questions about us as humans and about our world than any of us, including the tutors. But that certainly does not mean that the books should be received uncritically, as venerated memorials. Only we, each of us, one by one can serve as our own final authority.

There is nothing like mathematical precision about these matters. The ring of conviction occurs for each of us individually. It is not completely reliable. Though we should question the authority of that ring of truth, or

sense of conviction, we must not discard it. It is the best guide we have and, for the most part, it serves us well.

No one can make you believe that Achilles is more than selfish and petulant if you don't see it for yourself. No one can settle for you the problem of the creator in the book of Genesis: Is he both omniscient *and* capable of changing his mind? Is Don Quixote mad? Does the shape of world events really turn on the actions of a man like Pierre in *War and Peace*? You must judge. It is also important to remember that you too can change your mind, and not just once.

In this season of autumn, as the days grow shorter and the night hours increase, we rededicate ourselves to the life of the mind which is the center of our life here. We begin where we happen to be and hope that by reading a few very good books together, asking our own genuine questions about them, and engaging wholeheartedly in the give and take of conversations with our fellow students and teachers, that we will somehow manage to see further and more deeply in the company of friends.

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