Why the Case for the Liberal Arts is Stronger than Ever

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If we are to make a persuasive case for the liberal arts, we must first have a reasonably coherent notion of what the liberal arts are, and what they are for. That means clearing away some persistent misconceptions.

To begin with, the term "liberal arts" shouldn't be understood as a synonym for "the humanities," or for those "soft" disciplines that are offered as complements to the "hard" disciplines of science and mathematics. In fact, the serious study of science and mathematics forms just as essential a part of a liberal education. And teaching the liberal arts is not just a matter of imparting certain analytical techniques, even if the liberal arts do impart those skills extremely well as a byproduct of their work, skills that are readily transferable to other areas of human endeavor. The "liberal arts" do not refer to a particular content area or a particular body of knowledge, although their exercise may well involve the acquisition of such a body of knowledge. They are not reducible to a lengthy list of books that must be read, or to languages that must be mastered, or to concepts with which one must be demonstrably conversant—

although all those things will contribute in indispensable ways to the pursuit of a liberal education.

Instead, the mark of a genuinely liberal education is that it aims at instilling a set of paradoxical qualities, which are often quite fiercely at odds with one another. Those qualities can be grouped under two broad rubrics: the capacity for *inquiry*, and the capacity for *membership*.

Let me illuminate what I am saying by providing a specific example.

A number of years ago, when I was still a fairly junior professor on the faculty at Tulane, I went to an academic conference in San Francisco whose subject was the purpose of the modern university. It was well-attended, and featured two outstanding plenary speakers, both of whom were received very warmly by their audiences.

The first was the historian C. Vann Woodward, who was receiving a luncheon award for his long and illustrious career, and particularly for his commitment to free speech and free investigation. In his remarks, Woodward put forward a bold and uncompromising view of what the university's appropriate work consisted in. "The university," he declared, "is the place where the unthinkable can be thought, the unspeakable can be said, the inconceivable can be conceptualized, and the

unfashionable can be entertained." (I quote from memory here, which may be unreliable in particulars but is entirely reliable in capturing the thrust of Woodward's remarks.) The university, and it alone, offered the world a place consecrated to the most precious and most imperiled aspect of human freedom: our freedom of thought, freedom of inquiry, and freedom of expression. Without strong institutional protections for such freedoms against the forces that always seemed to spring up against them, we would lose the benefit of them, including the benefits that come of a culture that is bent upon seeking and finding the truth, without fear or favor. Visibly stirred by these words, and by the distinguished career of the man who uttered them, the audience applauded loud and long, and I joined them.

Then later in the day came an address by the political scientist James Q. Wilson, also speaking on the theme of the university's purpose. In his speech, Wilson argued that the modern university was best understood as the chief conservator of the rich but fragile civilization of the Western world, the keeper of our chief intellectual, moral, and artistic treasures and our collective historical memory. That heritage had made us what, and who, we are; but our dynamic commercial and progressive culture was all too likely to toss that heritage aside, in the pell-mell pursuit of the next big thing. If the university did not take care to look after the older things, he asked, who else would? Without a strong institutional commitment to the conservation and propagation of that cultural inheritance, we would lose the benefit of it, including the

benefits that come of sustaining a vital connection to the past, and to the best that has been thought and expressed in the human experience. For these words, too, the audience applauded loud and long, and again I joined them enthusiastically, though by now experiencing a bit of puzzlement at them, and at myself.

Puzzlement, because it struck me that the audience, and I myself, seemed to be applauding, with equal enthusiasm, two entirely different, and seemingly incompatible, ideals of the university. Woodward seemed to be holding up the university as a place of constant unsettlement, even creative destruction, in which everything that is taken for truth today is open at every moment to being rethought, reframed, and reconstituted, and even discarded, a place in which no dogma is safe and no complacency is tolerated—a place in which ideas and ideals can have validity only so long as they can stand up to the intense and uninhibited refining fire of *today's* most impertinent questions and searing criticisms.

Wilson, on the other hand, was pushing for an ideal of the university which stood precisely against the arrogant and self-absorbed tendency of the modern world to appoint itself the plenipotentiary judge of all things, to deny and disparage the authority of all that has come before it, and in so doing, to ensure that those who come after it will accord it the same treatment, in the fullness of time. Wilson's university was instead a place where the young would be educated to take up the

fullness of their cultural inheritance, to become literate and conversant in its many features, and to fully appropriate all that it has to offer them.

These are two very different-sounding ideas about the nature of higher education. And yet we applauded them both with roughly equivalent fervor. Were we, the audience, being mindless fools, or emotional pushovers, or merely being polite to a fault, in doing so? Or might there be a deeper logic linking them, one that neither speaker sought to illuminate, but that we need to take to heart in our own attempt to understand what the value of a college education, and particularly one in the liberal arts, ought to be in the present day?

I think there is, in fact, a deeper sense in which these two different accounts of the university *are* merely different aspects of the same vision: a vision of education as a preparation for freedom, in the fullest sense of the term—freedom not as mere license, nor as a life lived unfettered by constraints or coercions or traditions, nor for that matter as a life lived in the easy-going, conflict-free adjustment of one's wants and expectations to the world as one finds it, but freedom as rational self-government, as a regimen of risks and rewards, a freedom grounded in a fruitful combination of membership and inquiry, of reverence and criticism—a freedom that releases us from the unquestioned tutelage of the past, but in a way that enables us to draw sustenance from the past rather than aiming at making us wantonly disdainful of it. Wilson's

university would bring to its charges the blessings of a more fully conscious and informed membership in the society of which they are already a part; while Woodward's university would give them space for skeptical inquiry, the ability to engage in the acts of radical questioning and criticism, including civilizational self-criticism, which represent one of the chief means by which that society has been induced to improve itself, and redress its deficiencies. The best university, the one that teaches the liberal arts, is the one that does both of these things at the same time.

Hence we were right to applaud both speakers at that convention, for we need both messages. Membership without inquiry is stale traditionalism; inquiry without membership is captiousness or kibitzing, living like the poker player who doesn't take a stake in the game. The end in view is that of substituting informed loyalties for blind ones, and substituting conscious reasonableness, and uncoerced love, for fear and dependency and superstition and reflex action. It is a freedom that comes of seeing all that one has formerly known in a larger arena, within a larger frame, as a part of a larger reality—not to reject it, but to see it all in, as we say, a new and wondrous light.

That image, of seeing all things freshly when they have been freshly illuminated by the emergence of profounder sources of light, will make many of us think of one of the greatest and most imperishable parables of education: Plato's Allegory of the Cave, in the seventh book of the Republic. You all know the story, a strange, even weird tale

of people who have been compelled since birth to view images cast upon a wall as if they were the only real things in existence, and of the disturbing revelations that come to them when they are released from their bondage, and brought into the blinding light of day—brought to see things as they really are. The same parable has been related in various ways: in the various understandings of the veil of Maya in Hinduism and Buddhism, or of the "evil demon" in Descartes's *Meditations*, who so orders the world as to deceive us, or the 1999 science-fiction movie called *The Matrix*, in which the mass of humanity has been constrained to experience only a simulation of reality created by all-controlling life-devouring computers. Or even in something as familiar to all Americans as the movie *The Wizard of Oz*, in which the title character turns out to be a purveyor of trickery. What all these narratives reinforce is a powerful, and sometimes haunting, apprehension that we might be living our lives under the spell of a complete illusion, whether imposed by others or by ourselves; that the process of freeing ourselves from that illusion is likely to be painful and unsettling, that it can involve a complete transformation of all that was familiar, and a complete redescription of reality itself, in the name of the search for truth. And the stakes are very high. Those illuminati who return to the cave, Plato warns us, are likely to be killed by those who have never left the cave, who prefer not to have their illusions disturbed.

But our experience is rarely as dramatic and extreme as that. And Plato's great allegory, and the other versions of this theme, do not tell the whole story about education, which is just as often a tale of delight and discovery and enchantment as it is one of painful displacement. I fear that Plato's allegory may mislead us by emphasizing only one part of the effort of liberal education, the process of disabusing and disillusioning, of weakening the stranglehold of the present and the past on us, for the sake of better apprehending the possibilities that beckon from beyond.

An argument I find more helpful and reliable comes from a small book by the late historian Jaroslav Pelikan, called *The Vindication of Tradition*. Drawing upon an essay by Ralph Waldo Emerson, Pelikan offers up a distinction between "tradition" and "insight," and then goes on to show how unsustainable that distinction actually is:

> A "leap of progress" is not a standing broad jump, which begins at the line of where we are now; it is a running broad jump through where we have been to where we go next. The growth of insight—in science, in the arts, in philosophy and theology—has not come through progressively sloughing off more and more of tradition, as though insight would be purest and deepest when it has finally freed itself of the dead past. It simply has not worked that way in the history of the tradition, and it does not work that way now. By including the dead in the circle of discourse, we enrich the quality of the conversation. Of

> course we do not listen only to the dead, nor are we a tape recording of the tradition….But we do acquire the insight for which Emerson was pleading when we learn to interact creatively with the tradition which he was denouncing.

And Pelikan concludes his examination with a charge to the reader, taken from Goethe's *Faust*:

> What you have as heritage,
> Take now as task;
> For thus you will make it your own.

In this view, the point of studying the tradition is not to absolve us of the need to think for ourselves, or relieve us of the responsibility to build things of our own. On the contrary. The tradition helps us to recognize the work we are meant to do. Our heritage *is* our task. It gives our world its defining contours, its horizons, and its specific possibilities, its problems to be solved. We cannot know or undertake our task without the benefit of our heritage. But it is by doing our task that we can come into the full possession of that heritage—thereby perpetuating the tradition as something living, rather than something moribund—and thereby making it possible for us to have a free and full relationship with that heritage, like that of children who

have fully grown up, and can at last see and embrace their parents and forebears for the people they actually are, and can come into fully adult possession of their inheritance.

So the Platonic allegory is not fully adequate to the task of description here. But then neither is Woodward's description of the university as a relentless and unsparing critique, or Wilson's of the university as an agency of reverent cultural transmission. What might fit Pelikan's description best is the idea of education as a *Bildungsroman* or narrative journey, but only if one adds the qualification that it is a narrative journey that culminates in a homecoming, the kind of story that we call an *odyssey*. "We shall not cease from exploration," wrote T. S. Eliot, in "Little Gidding," "And the end of all our exploring/ Will be to arrive where we started/ And know the place for the first time." Such is the task of a liberal education, rightly understood, as a liberating exploration that results, not in our being made permanently uprooted and alienated, but in our becoming more fully at home in the world that we already inhabit, and more fully able to enhance it, beautify it, ennoble it, and sustain it. An inquiry that draws upon, challenges, but ultimately affirms and strengthens, our sense of membership in that world. In fact, an inquiry whose pursuit is part and parcel of our belonging, and which makes tradition and insight into partners, rather than foes. The truly wise cosmopolitan knows, as Dorothy told us, that there's no place like home.

I think the contribution of liberal education to our public life ought to be clear enough from what I have said so far. Of course, I recognize, as does everyone at this conference, that the educational institutions that are the principal venue for liberal education are imperiled on all sides by problems of excessive cost and uncertain results, and that there are hard questions to be asked about questions of access and economic feasibility and practicality. I don't mean to brush those questions aside. But I think that before we make a potentially fatal decision to change forever what we do, and adapt the end to the means, or the perceived means, we need to think very hard about what the end of liberal education really is.

We should also consider the fact that we live at what is arguably the most prosperous moment in the entire history of the human race. The standard of living that even the most common among us enjoys today would be the envy of kings and queens in ages past. Is it really credible then to say—at precisely this moment—that the pursuit of the highest and best kind of education is something that much poorer peoples and times were right to seek, but that we can no longer afford? Can we hear how absurd it sounds for us to be saying such things?

The chief public benefit of liberal education, when it is functioning successfully, is the formation of a particular kind of person, someone who is also capable of being a particular kind of citizen, who robustly embodies the virtues of both inquiry and

membership, and therefore is equipped for the work of truth-seeking deliberation and responsible action that a democratic form of government requires. Such a person has an ability to draw back from the flow of events and reflect upon them, the ability to consult the voice of reason and the wise testimony of the past. Such a person has the cognitive and moral strength to see the world as it is, and not be fooled into mistaking a succession of images projected onto the walls of caves, or conjured on screens, for reality, no matter how large the images or how pervasive their presence. And no matter how many others around them have been gulled or deceived into believing in those images.

Which is a way of acknowledging that Plato's great allegorical image of liberation remains at the core of education, even if it does not constitute the whole of it. Before we can do anything truly magnificent and lasting, we must be drawn out of our various caves. We must be liberated from the sirens of propaganda, or the enchantments of virtual experience, before we can accomplish anything worthwhile. It is probably too extreme to argue that we are inhabiting our own soft-core version of the Matrix. But it is not at all extreme to believe that an unhealthy proportion of our experience, and particularly the experience of the young, has come to be mediated and directed and channeled and simulated by the artificial instrumentalities we use to apprehend the world, instrumentalities that compel our imaginations to believe in a world that they—and not we—conjure into being. Such a tendency carries with it

great dangers, both for our ability to think clearly and attentively, and our ability to draw on our own imaginations with vividness, intensity, and independence, not to mention its undercutting the patterns of restrained and civil public deliberation that a genuinely democratic society requires. In the years to come, it will be a greater and greater part of a genuine liberal education to counteract these less benign effects of our ghostly electronic cave, and restore us to ourselves—restore our ability to hear and see and touch the earth for ourselves, to gaze at the night sky for ourselves, and bring us back into contact with the exhilarating, wind-swept heights of our human freedom, in which the game of life is being played for keeps. And give us, through hard study of old books and the hard but delightful work of conversation, an enduring and unsimulated participation in human excellence, a drink of our own, drawn from that deep reservoir of shared wisdom of which Herman Melville was speaking, when he wrote that "Genius, all over the world, stands hand in hand, and one shock of recognition runs the whole circle round." That study, that drink—that shock—usher us into a profoundly public world, a shared world, the highest common denominator—a world beyond all caves and matrices, and yet a world to which we can belong fully, if we wish to.

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