

The Meaning of a Liberal Education

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THE MEANING OF A LIBERAL EDUCATION

Mr. President, Ladies and Gentlemen:

I never know whether to describe myself as a liberal or as a conservative. I believe that many of the alumni of Princeton would now describe me as a radical, yet I deem myself a conservative, for I believe that life is the only thing that conserves, and life is the only thing that does not stand still or retrogress. Progress, therefore, is part of the essential process of conservation. The constant renewal which is life is a part of the constant process of change. At the same time the processes of change, being processes of life, are not susceptible to very specific intellectual analysis.

There is one sentence with which I always open my classes, a sentence quoted from Burke, in my opinion the only entirely wise writer upon public affairs in the English language. Burke says, "Institutions must be adjusted to human nature; of which reason constitutes a part, but by no means the principal part." You cannot develop human nature by devoting yourselves entirely to the intellectual sides of it. Intellectual life is the flower of a thing much wider and richer than itself. The man whom we deem the mere man of books we reject as a counsellor, because he is separated in his thinking from the rich flow of life. It is the rich flow of life, compact of emotion, compact of all those motives which are unsusceptible of analysis, which produces the fine flower of literature and the solid products of thinking. And therefore when I think of the enormous and complex problem of education, it seems to me that it would be mere presumption to say that we can set it forth in complete analysis, to say that we can lay out a program which covers all the necessities of the growing mind, to say that we are certain at the outset of the exact means which we should use to reach the goal of which we can be only measurably certain.

I suppose that what perplexes every man to-day in every walk of life is the extraordinary complexity of modern life as compared with the life in the midst of which our grandfathers found themselves, as compared with the life in the midst of which the generation immediately preceding ours found itself. The life of the present day is incalculably complex, and so many of its complexities are of recent rise and origin that we haven't yet had time to understand just what they are or to assess the values of the new things that have come into our life. Not only is life infinitely complex in our day as compared with the previous age, but learning is correspondingly complex. In the old days of the fixed curriculum of the college and the school one could say with a degree of confidence that the elements of these curricula did contain the main bodies of knowledge, by specimen at least. But who can say that any curriculum that can be packed into the years of school life and the years of college life combined contains all the elements of modern learning? Modern learning has been so drawn into a score of consequences, has been so extended into a system of uses, that it is a sort of mirror held up to life itself, and the man of affairs now seeks in the laboratory, in the quiet places of counsel, from the scholar, those main elements which shall guide him in accomplishing the particular material tasks

which lie immediately under his hand. So that life and learning are equally complex, and they are interlaced with each other, they are related as never before. There is not the scholar on the one side with his door closed and his window open, and on the other side the manufacturer and the man of commerce beating the seas with his ships and searching the distant markets of the world for new stuffs. That is not the contrast which exists to-day. The man of learning has on his table a telephone that connects him with all the activities of the world, and his windows look out on smoky chimneys; he feels that he is one of the many servants to carry on the great tasks of to-day, whether they be material or intellectual. So that these complexities interlock and are the same complexities, the complexity of knowledge and the complexity of life.

It goes without saying that there is an equal complexity of economic effort, of employment, and therefore an infinitely greater difficulty than there used to be in calculating the future orbit of any young person. When you say a young person must be prepared for his life-work, are you prepared, is he prepared, are his parents prepared, to say what that life-work is going to be? Do you know a boy is going to be a mechanic by the color of his hair? Do you know that he is going to be a lawyer by the fact that his father was a lawyer? Does any average and representative modern parent dare to say what his children are going to be? My chief quarrel with the modern parent is that he does not know, and that he hands that question over to the youngster whom he is supposed to be advising and training.

I was at a country hotel, and occupied a room in the quietest corner of the house. A balcony ran around the house, and my room opened on this balcony. Because my corner was the quietest corner, a helpless father brought his boy there to reason with him. He was a small boy, only about five years old. The conversation I overheard was about like this—if you can call that a conversation where one person does all the talking. The father said, “Are you going to be good?” No reply. “Are you going to be good?” No reply. “Are you going to be good?” No reply. Finding myself unable to stand this thing, because I am a man of nervous temperament, I said from within the window, “If you will lend me the boy a minute I will find out.” Now, that is a picture of modern life. My course of action has never occurred to the parent—that there are means known almost from the beginning of the world for finding out whether a boy will be good or not. There is a predeterminant resident outside the will of the boy himself, and one of the straightest ways to a boy's conscience is through the cuticle of the skin. This is a type of a modern parent, and when he says he wants his son's training suited to his purpose of life he must admit his son has no purpose in life. Then we are asked to suit our processes to this undestined youth.

With this complexity, what has the modern school attempted to do? It has attempted to do everything at once. It has said: Here are a lot of boys and girls whose future occupations we do not know and they do not know. They must be prepared for life. Therefore we must prepare everybody for everything that is in that life. We haven't found it amusing. We haven't found it possible. We have attempted it and we know we have failed at it. You cannot train everybody for everything. Moreover you are not competent to teach everything. There is not any body of teachers suited in gifts or training to do this impossible thing. Neither the schools nor those who guide them have attempted to make any discrimination with regard to purpose or to settle upon

methods which will promise some degree of substantial success. That is the situation we are in.

I do not wonder at it. I think it is hardly just to blame those who have brought this situation about, because this change in modern life has come upon us suddenly. It has confused us. We are in an age so changeful, so transitional, I do not wonder that this confusion has come into our education, and I do not blame anybody. I do not see how it could have been avoided, how we could have avoided trying our hands at a score of things hitherto unattempted to determine at least if they were possible or not. Therefore this is not a subject for cynical comment, this is not a subject for criticism. It is a subject for self-recognition. The present need is that we should examine ourselves and see whether this be true or not; and, if it is true, ask ourselves whether the air has cleared enough, and whether our experiment has gone far enough, to make a definite program, to make a radical change, in the things we have attempted. This is the moment for counsel. The thing that is imperative upon our con-science is that we should ask ourselves whether it be possible to do it differently and better.

If we are going to do it differently or better it is imperative that we should distinguish between the two things. It is imperative that we distinguish between education and technical or industrial training. And before we distinguish between these two it is necessary that we distinguish between the individuals who are going to take the one and the individuals who are going to take the other. There is no method in American life by which the state or any public authority can pick out the persons to be educated in the one way or the other. The vitality of American life, and the vitality of all democratic life, lies in self-selection; it lies in the challenge put upon all to make up their minds as to what they want and what they intend to do with themselves. It is absolutely essential that we should start with that or we can never have any system of education.

For a system means a definite thing, it means an organic whole; it means the parts of that whole related to each other in rational fashion, some fixed kind and determined sequence of studies. You cannot get system in any other way. Miscellany cannot be jolted down into a system. If we are going to have any selection, we must have a selection of the individual by himself or herself. I think that the most fatal thing that can happen to anybody is to be taken care of by somebody else. To be carried along by somebody's suggestions from the time you begin until the time when you are thrust groping and helpless into the world is the very negation of education. By the nursing process, by the coddling process, you are sapping a race; and only loss can possibly result except upon the part of individuals here and there, individuals who are so intrinsically strong that you cannot spoil them. There are individuals into whose ears your suggestions are received, it may be, with polite attention, but upon whom you make no impression whatever, and those are the persons safe against the demoralizing processes you are attempting.

Let us go back and distinguish between the two things that we want to do; for we want to do two things in modern society. We want one class of persons to have a liberal education, and we want another class of persons, a very much larger class, of necessity, in every society, to forego the privileges of a liberal education and fit

themselves to perform specific difficult manual tasks. You cannot train them for both in the time that you have at your disposal. They must make a selection, and you must make a selection. I do not mean to say that in the manual training there must not be an element of liberal training; neither am I hostile to the idea that in the liberal education there should be an element of the manual training. But what I am intent upon is that we should not confuse ourselves with regard to what we are trying to make of the pupils under our instruction. We are either trying to make liberally-educated persons out of them, or we are trying to make skillful servants of society along mechanical lines, or else we do not know what we are trying to do.

Now, what do I mean by education as contrasted with what I shall call training? Of course, the word training should lie on both sides of the distinction. I will use the word training, however, to indicate specific tasks, as contrasted with what is called liberal education. One of the interesting things about liberal education is that it leaves out of the view altogether the question how anyone can directly make money out of it. We boast in our own time that mind is monarch, that we analyze things before we do them; and yet we give ourselves away in every discussion of this particular thing, and show that we have not analyzed it at all. When we discuss what the elements of a practical training are, and what the elements of a liberal training are, the advocates of a practical training all, you will find, include mathematics in their list of studies. And they do not stop at Arithmetic; they include Algebra, Geometry, and Calculus, even; and they confidently maintain that these higher imaginative portions of mathematics are parts of a practical education. Now, leaving out some of the technical professions like engineering, how many professions can you name that use any mathematics above arithmetic? I do not know of any. They may occasionally. A man who is acquainted with the intricate processes of mathematics may take a short cut in some calculation, but it is not an essential part of his equipment for the business he is engaged in. I can show you a place half-way through the arithmetic where it would be perfectly feasible to stop so far as nine-tenths of your pupils are concerned if they are not going to undertake an engineering profession. Yet you tell me that this is a practical training. I take it on faith from the geometrician that there is no such thing in nature as a straight line, that it is a purely imaginary thing, and yet you tell me that this is a very practical study. Of course, I admit that the imagination plays a practical part in life. But you mean that the principles of geometry used literally are a part of the practical facts of the world. I deny it; they are not a part of the practical facts of the world. And so I say that all that you are doing in using higher mathematics (and I approve of your using them) is to train the human mind to such processes of precision as will correct that loose-jointed, wobbly, incorrect, indiscriminate reasoning to which we are naturally inclined; which will make it demand processes clearly connected with premises, and make it impatient of conclusions that do not flow from the premises. We are trying to rid the human mind of its tendency to accept vague propositions.

Take the gymnasium. I think the gymnasium is intensely practical, and that everybody ought to make more or less use of the gymnastic apparatus. But I never heard of anybody doing things in his office that he had done in a gymnasium. If he did, he would be taken for a lunatic. And when I see men doing the double trapeze with grace and precision, and then am told they are doing this in order to fit themselves for life, I take it for granted that you do not mean that they are going to do the double trapeze

in the office with their partners. They are doing simply this: they are getting their nerves and muscles in such shape, they are getting the red corpuscles in the blood so encouraged and heartened, that afterwards they can stand the strains of business, can stand the impact of disappointment, can hold steady in the midst of desperate effort, can work in season and out of season and come out of the greatest trials in possession of their full resiliency and return again to health and efficiency. That is what makes the gymnasium intensely practical; it is meant that those who use it shall be in fighting trim and conquer the world so far as their bodies are concerned.

Let that serve as a figure for a liberal education. A liberal education consists in putting the mind in such shape that all its powers, like the muscles of the body, will have been called into exercise, will have been given a certain degree of development, a certain uniformity and symmetry of development, so that the mind will not find itself daunted in the midst of the tasks of the world any more than the body itself, and will be able to turn itself in the right direction, even as the athlete, quickly and gracefully, not overwhelmed by the strain, and able to accommodate the several faculties so that they will unite in carrying the strain. The thing is a mere figure of speech, but it is a figure of speech which in some degree illuminates the matter which I want to elucidate for you.

A liberal training is not a complete body of information. I have never met a man who had a complete body of information, though I have met many who thought they had. But I have never met a man who thought he had whom I would employ to do anything of importance, because I do not go into the lumber room to find a workshop. Every workshop has had rigorously shut out from it all the things that do not belong there. A man who resembles a museum or a lumber room does not resemble a workshop; and the perfectly informed individual. If you can find him, may not be an educated person. Some of the best minds, some of the minds that I have been most afraid of when it came to any kind of intellectual contest, are minds that would have to look up almost every fact they needed to use; but they had so fed upon reason based upon definite facts that the moment you presented the fact to them they would produce something like a finished work of art. The facts are the crude raw material of the mind, and for the process of training one fact will do as well as another of the same kind.

A liberal education should have the elements of modern learning in it. It should have in it the element of language, it should have the element of philosophy (I follow education to the end of the college period), it should have the element of physical science, and it should have a touch of history. Now, you can, in the school curriculum and in the college curriculum, when they are combined, have all those elements in large quantities, provided you will make up your minds to deny yourselves and not have too much of any one of them, provided you will make up your minds what is the best portion of each, and stick to it.

Establish something like a habit of thought and action in the youth under your instruction, so that if the mind thinks of the phenomena of nature it thinks in a precise way by means of the definite observation characteristic, for example, of the chemical laboratory. Do not, if you haven't the time, try to teach him both chemistry and physics. They are quite unlike each other, but the processes of the one laboratory will

establish the habit of mind just as well as the processes of the other. What you are after is to establish those methods of thinking and observation which are characteristic of the modern laboratory.

In the field of mathematics, which I have just used for illustration, you have no laboratory. You have nothing that you can see; you have nothing that you have ever seen when you get into the higher regions of mathematics. Therefore, this is one of the best trainings in the world. That mind is best trained which is obliged to move independently of the easy processes of observation. The pupil can separate with a knife what you put on the table before him, and if you give him a magnifying glass he can see what is invisible to the naked eye, and after a short period of training he can pick out all there is there. But when you submit a complicated proposition nowhere to be observed in physical existence, and ask him to analyze it, then comes the tug-of-war, then you learn whether that mind has precision and discrimination.

And this invisibility of subjects lies in many fields: for instance, the field of government. Nobody ever saw a government. You may in certain places see some one who deems himself the whole government; but, quite contrary to his impressions, he does not constitute the government. There was one occasion when a government was visible,—when all the officials of a government were withdrawn from Richmond on one train. It was a government in dissolution; it was a corpse of a government; the lines had closed in upon Richmond, and this was all that was left. You never see politics. Your imagination cannot conceive it unless you have studied widely enough, and read widely enough, to understand your fellow men.

The peculiarity of a politician is that he is a fellow very much like what you would be in the same circumstances. Therefore, the beginning of your understanding of a politician is an understanding of yourself, and of the broader aspects of psychology. I use the word “psychology” with diffidence, because so many queer things are done in the name of psychology nowadays that I have stopped taking off my hat to it; it has turned into a crank, and when I see a crank I walk on the other side of the street. Psychology in its old, respectable, sedate sense I have great regard for.

The bases of our lives and of our understanding of life is the interpretation which our own experiences put upon it, and the interpretation which the experiences of others put upon it, and the experiences of others as contained in literature. The best expounders of politics I have ever read outside the pages of Burke have been some of the English poets, who have understood politics better than any systematic writer on that subject with whom I am acquainted. They have felt those great impulses of life which really constitute the consciousness of the nation. When you get into the consciousness of a nation, and see the favorite pursuits of a nation, you begin to understand its politics; and practically only the seeing poet can interpret these things to you.

You wish physical nature interpreted to you, and history interpreted to you; and the handmaid of history is literature. You wish the philosophy of life explained to you, what men have said life is, what they have surmised of its origin, what they have forecasted its end to be, and what the philosophers from the beginning have said of

this complex and interesting game we are playing. That is the field of philosophy. And you cannot go forth into life with any touch of literary education unless you have heard or comprehended something of that. Here are five or six of the elements of a liberal education, and you can wisely select the representative processes which will acquaint the mind with these various pieces of the modern intellectual content. That is a liberal education, and anybody can go out from a liberal education and at once make money by means of it. The most liberally-educated man can go out and at once make money because one of the elements of making money is to have sense, to know what you are, to know where you are, to know what you want, and to be able to understand a thing when it is explained to you.

The superintendent of one of the chief branches of the Pennsylvania R. R. said to me the other day, "We can get any number of men who can do what they are told to do after it is fully explained to them; but the men we will pay anything for are the men to whom a general system of tasks can be explained and who will not afterwards come back for instructions.!" The kind of men American industrial society craves is illustrated by one of the homely stories from the repertoire of stories about Abraham Lincoln. Lincoln was sending a gentleman on a very delicate mission, and this gentleman had sat up until a very late hour with Secretary Seward and the President going over all the possible contingencies of the case. When midnight came and they found themselves jaded and tired, the gentleman, rising to depart, said, "Well, Mr. President, if there is anything that we have overlooked, are there any general instructions you can give me as to what I shall do?" Lincoln answered him in this way: "When I was in Springfield I had a little girl neighbor who was presented with some beautiful alphabet blocks. She was so fascinated with them that she did not want to part with them even at bedtime, so she took them to bed with her. After she had played with them until she was very sleepy, she recollected that she had not said her prayers. So she got on her knees and said, 'O Lord, I am too sleepy to pray, but there are the letters, spell it out for yourself.'" Now, that may serve as an illustration of a liberal education. Here are the general instructions; for the rest, spell it out for yourself. You have spelled it out in the laboratory, in the philosophy exercise, in all of these sample processes; you are a fool if you cannot spell this out, the particular case. I have been told by an eminent railway official that so far as the administrative staff of the railway was concerned he would rather have men with a classical education than men with a scientific education. They want men who can understand from a ledger the whole system of a great railway; and those are the men who have been accustomed to deal with the invisible things of thought, those are the liberally-trained men.

On the other hand, what is technical education? It is one which condemns all but the extraordinary individual to a minor part in life, to a part not of command or direction but of specific performance, to the difficult manual tasks of the world which require skill, a perfect command of the muscles, a trained eye, a definite knowledge of physical relations and of complex machinery; its pupils are men schooled precisely in the particular processes which they are to apply. One of the drawbacks to American industry is that we do not make such men because we overshoot the mark and try to make them something else besides. The consequence is that neither side of the task is completed or perfected, and we make neither liberally-educated men nor serviceable experts. It is not that we should not wish to do it, it is that no matter how hard we wish

we cannot do it. It is absolutely an unpatriotic thing to waste the money devoted to education by trying to do a thing which we know is impossible. The majority of men have to be drawers of water and hewers of wood. The mechanical tasks of the world are infinite, and they must be performed; and that nation which does not perform them with skill, which has not a great body of trained mechanics, is going to fall behind in the race of modern civilization. You may build tariff walls as high as you please, and the tide will come over any wall that you build, provided the men inside of the wall cannot work as intelligently as the men outside of the wall. One of the things we ought to be ashamed of is that we have reason to prefer an article labelled "Made in Germany." We prefer it, not because it is made in Germany, but because the Germans train men to know how to make it. America has not been so thoughtful to train men to know how to make things. We have the stuff with which to make them, but we do not give our men the skill to make them. We try to do everything at once, and do nothing well enough.

Of course, there ought to be combined with technical education just as much of the liberal education and of the book explanations of life as it is possible to combine with it without taking the efficiency out of the thing we are trying to do. I have in mind the Hampton Institute in Virginia, where the literary training is not neglected but subordinated. Where you are trying to give sufficient technical training you must subordinate the literary training, just as, when you are trying to give a liberal education, you must subordinate the technical training. Nobody ought to get married, I suppose, who isn't a bit of a carpenter and is likely to mash his thumb when he uses a hammer; because one thing that results from mashing a thumb is a mental state inconsistent with the peace of the household, and certain remarks which are highly unparliamentary result. I suppose nobody is an acceptable husband who cannot at least drive a nail on occasion, provided he drives it into things and not into persons.

There is another matter which is of as much consequence as all this. We must select the way in which we are going to do these things. I have been talking so far only of programs. We have got to communicate education; we must make up our minds as to the best way to give it. The best way to give it is to make the pupil do the work, instead of having the teacher do the work, as is the case nowadays. Our teachers are becoming more and more educated, and by the time they have turned out fifteen or twenty classes they will be extraordinarily well-trained persons. But what about the classes they have turned out? I remember speaking some years ago—doubtless to you on another occasion¹—and citing with approbation the case of a teacher who made the boys in his mathematics class do all the work themselves. He refused to do any example for a pupil. He was willing to explain the rule and illustrate it; but the specific examples given out he would not assist them in solving. If a boy did not understand he had to go to one of the brighter boys of the class for assistance. This put the boy on his mettle: he did not care to go to one of his chums for assistance. Now, it happened that those boys learned mathematics, and that the boys in neighboring schools did not learn mathematics. After I had cited this case, a man approached me with a sad countenance and said, "Why that is a radical unkindness to the dull boys; it is a mild kind of torture for them; it makes the dull boy do an unreasonable amount of work." I said, "If you want the boy to go to school to excuse him for using his mind, then using his mind should be against the rule; but if he is sent to do things, then I say

if he cannot do them he ought to go to some other place and find something more suited to his intelligence. You cannot tell whether he can do it until he has made the effort. I do not know of any other way of bringing out a mind than by obliging the person who is alleged to have one to use it; that is the only way in which you can determine whether he has one.” What we are now engaged in doing is coddling undeveloped minds by developed minds; and that is not a process which develops, it is a process which smothers. I know there are some teachers who help and at the same time stimulate, but they are very rare; and most teachers are most of the time very tired, and stimulating draws blood. You cannot stimulate when you are dead tired, and if you help the pupil when you are dead tired he gets nothing out of it except to be excused from exerting his own powers.

I know that teaching would be a more difficult thing than it now is if these suggestions were acted upon. It is a great deal harder to stimulate other minds to do things than it is to do the thing yourself. If a man cannot find the means of making a subordinate do the work he wants him to do, he is not fit for the job. If a subordinate keeps asking for instructions from his superior, and the superior says, “Never mind, I will do it myself,” I think that man is unfit for the job. Never carry him beyond a certain point, for the business will break down if you do. And a teacher who cannot find a means of making a pupil do the work is unfit for the job.

I know a good deal of this is futile, that the public schools of this country are not sustained by the school boards in dropping anybody: society won't pay the taxes if you turn their sons out. Very well then, the only thing we can do is to keep the boy in the same grade for his lifetime, refuse absolutely to stultify ourselves by advancing him. We are willing to teach him this thing until he loses his teeth, but we are not going to falsify the returns and say he is ready to advance to the next grade. If the public wishes to maintain schools which will harbor their children for a lifetime, it is no concern of ours except that they will have to enlarge the schoolhouses and the teaching force.

In other words, Ladies and Gentlemen, we are now face to face with a thing just as complex and just as imperative as that which the statesman is face to face with. Here he finds- a complex society in which something is the matter, in which a great many things can be done and are done which are against the public welfare, and it is absolutely obligatory upon him to make up his mind what is wrong and, without trying to upset society, prevent the things which are wrong. And his confusion, his unfortunate experimenting in the field of legislation is due to the fact that he has not analysed to the bottom the economic changes that have come upon society. The school teacher is in the same position. He is trying to carry in his hands more than his hands can hold. He is trying to bunch all the elements of education in one process, and they cannot be bunched in one process. He cannot bunch all the elements of one process in a scheme which will readily accomplish the objects of that process. We must make an analysis of this matter, differentiate our schools, our processes; make it perfectly definite beforehand what it is we are trying to do and how we are going to do it; because education is, as I began by saying, merely a means to life, and the

life of the modern world is in danger of nothing so much as the counsels of men with untrained intelligences.

Modern society depends upon the two clarifying processes of reasoning and of counsel which are to make or unmake modern society. I do not mean we are to supply the elements of counsel, but we are to supply the minds capable of discrimination, suitable for the residence of wisdom, able to find the light, responsive to the light; men who know how to think and where to find the substance upon which their thought shall be constructed. If we do not do that society will some day look back upon the history of an age of catastrophe and ask: Where were the wise teachers in those days, where were the men who should have come to the front in the face of no matter what opposition, in the face of no matter how great a body of prejudice, and have said, "We have got to begin at the bottom and analyse it, reorganize it from top to bottom"? We have all the elements, but they are not used with discrimination. We have all the ends in view, but they are not properly related to each other in value and sequence. And unless the spirit of statesmanship enters into our schools and our colleges, we shall not have an age of statesmen but an age of darkness, compared with which the dark ages shall some day seem bright; for there were men then sitting in silent and quiet places who did see the vision of truth; but we of our day, having no quiet places, overwhelmed by the dense smoke, confused by the din of modern industry, will have gone groping about nowhere, not knowing that in the midst of all that turmoil if we had but opened our windows to the right light, there would have come in the full illumination of wisdom.

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