

THE REAL WORLD
by Lester J. Start
April 18, 1986
Kalamazoo College
Founders' Day Address

There is a famous story back East about a crotchety old Vermonter who lived on a little island in the middle of the Connecticut river. Now, the Connecticut River marks the border between Vermont and New Hampshire, and so did the island. One year a team of surveyors went out to make an accurate check of the border, including border islands, and they discovered that the old fellow's land was not on the Vermont side of the line, as long thought, but on the New Hampshire side instead. Knowing the crustiness of the Vermont character, they approached him somewhat nervously with the news that he really lived in New Hampshire and not in Vermont. But the old gentleman surprised them all by saying, "Thanks be to the good Lord. I was beginning to think I'd never be able to stand another one of those damn Vermont winters."

Now, an introductory joke doesn't have to be too closely connected with what follows, but this old story is an allegory of my message here on Founders' Day. There is an arbitrary line drawn between the world of liberal education and what we like to call the real world out there, between the world of the campus on the one hand, and the world of career development and the cold real world following graduation on the other. This arbitrary line is being emphasized in the popular mind more and more today. As students and graduates we may thank the good Lord when we step into the real world - we couldn't stand another damn winter of education - but the line is arbitrary. The real real world hasn't changed a bit — and we were in it all the time.

My point, then, and I hope to persuade you of it, is that the world of liberal education is the real world. And, I think, this is the faith of the founders of this college, and the conviction of those who as teachers and students have caught the spirit it has taught. It is the spirit of the leaders over the years, clearly the ideal of the Stones, and of Stetson and Hoben, and of the leader I most remember in my years here, Weimer Hicks.

Of course, to argue that the world of liberal arts is the real world requires some convincing. The popular notion is that the liberal arts colleges are in trouble; they are out of step with the times. Their focus is either precious or antiquated or both. A major in English literature or art history may be nice, but the real world wants to know if you can run a word processor or program a computer. And what can you do with philosophy in the real world? The answer — what can you do without it? — but the real world isn't impressed. Plato dealt with that question long ago - and agreed - philosophers are useless, true - but only because they are not used.

Be that as it may, the perception is clear: the real world is a rushing torrent into the future while the liberal arts college spins idly in a backwater eddy, at best, a luxury, at worst, an irrelevance. And so we anxiously look at ourselves to see how we can be relevant to the real world. But we are tempted to do so, I think, in the wrong way

There is a text from Paul to the church at Rome which is relevant here. He writes, according to the King James version: "Be not conformed to this world but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind." Or as the New English Bible has it: "Adapt yourselves no longer to the pattern of this present world, but let your minds be remade and your whole nature thus transformed." Now Paul isn't thinking of the liberal arts college; he has a related theme, "the truth that makes you free". But the point that is important is this: liberal arts has stood for a liberating experience aimed at transforming the individual and through the individual the world. It is a failure of nerve, a failure of the humanistic nerve, to think that the direction must be reversed, that the college must follow the present pattern of this world. It is a failure of nerve to look anxiously for those features of the outside world clamoring most for attention and to copy those features in our goals and operations. Liberal education should lead, not follow - be a transforming not a conforming spirit.

Now we have done pretty well here in defense of the liberal arts by not capitulating to vocationalism and careerism in the curriculum. But it doesn't take much analysis to see the virus of vocationalism and professionalism behind recent changes. That is why I applaud the recent hard work and vision behind the plan for a common core of basic humanistic studies required of all students. My old college required Greek or Latin and four years of public speaking. There will always be questions about content - but this needn't or shouldn't be fixed. What is important for humanistic general education is that the basic values of our culture be somehow invoked and not simply techniques exercised. It may be as important to consider visions of virtue, for example, to argue the conflict of rights in the abortion issue - principles, not just practices. Argument is important, but so is insight. Hegel argued that rights is the most primitive foundation for a community from family to the state. A child, of course, has basic rights that must be respected - but that is not why we cherish and nurture our children.

The problems of a common core curriculum are many - the temptation is to oversimplify, to be relevant in the wrong way. Nietzsche would say, of course, if it's common, it can't be good - the good is the exceptional. But there is a rich heritage to draw upon. And we should remember that the greatness of classical liberal education (which I cherish) lies not so much in the discipline of the classical languages, but in the humanistic visions these materials evoked. One cannot read the satirical comedies of Aristophanes without finding him relevant to the absurdities of the human situation in any age. And the most poignant anti-war document of any century, I think, is Euripedes' tragedy, The Trojan Women. Of course, we can read these in translation, but we don't.

And we forget that what our forefathers read in their Latin essays and orations was the Stoic sense of civic duty that infused the great Roman leaders, so that it seemed a natural and fundamental duty to them to serve their society, their country - as that secular Puritan, Ben Franklin put it - to do good. Now this is some of the spirit of humanistic study we should stress in our curriculum, to transform ourselves and thereby the world.

Of course, it is tempting to be relevant - to respond to present concerns, but we must keep perspective. I can understand the student who wants to know what Plato has to say about women (and he has some advanced ideas for his age), but I cannot understand one's interest limited to

this. It is like reading the Bible to learn about plants cultivated in Biblical times - interesting, but surely there is more in it than this.

And it is tempting to think humanistic learning is for the young. We all could benefit from it. We cannot assume that every college teacher we hire today is liberally educated - or even interested in much outside his field. Maybe not just a core curriculum, maybe a program of all-college, faculty-student seminars on liberal arts topics or themes is what we need. Whatever - to keep faith with liberal education, we must trust the best in the tradition, not the noisiest or most clamorous in the present day and so be transformed and not conformed.

There is a second way in which the college tends to be conformed to the outside world, and that is to imitate the managerial style of the business world. The pattern of lines of command and accountability techniques are not, I think, the proper style for the college. And maybe it's not even the best for business, if we compare it with the Japanese style. But I've sounded off on this before. I am pleased to note, now, that the faculty council is studying the whole question of faculty governance, examining the role of divisional chairs and the council itself. Some of us remember how the council was formed in the last administration to serve as the only liaison between faculty and administration, replacing the Faculty Senate and the AAUP. It was effective in doing this, but although there was much talk of collegiality, the perception was that something of value, a feeling of closer community, was lost. It was like crying peace, peace, when there was no peace. Managerial techniques divide the community - divisions isolate departments from each other, and make another barrier. When departmental chairs met together, at least they had some idea of what colleagues in other buildings were doing, a greater sense of togetherness, community, a greater sense of decision.

I remember tense times in the 60's coming together to talk about what should be done in the face of some disorder. One had the feeling of real collaboration. We really should decide together how and when to put a lid on things.

The college ideal cannot go back to a picture of Mark Hopkins on one end of a log and the student on the other - some more order is needed. But we need not take on and conform to the individualism and divisiveness and impersonal attitudes that we see the business world.

This suggests a third area of concern - community. The ideal of a fellowship in learning is still a vital one though the language may be dated. Too many try to take quiet pride in being able to cope alone. We say, "I am responsible to myself alone" and feel virtuous. But this is like saying "I am friendly to myself alone". Friendliness and responsibility necessarily involve others.

There was a time when the college acted, as the phrase goes, in loco parentis. This does not mean parents are nutty - rather the college functions in place of parents, as being responsible. World War II really brought that policy into question. Those GIs returned from war, in a hurry to make up for the time they'd lost, didn't need any surrogate parents. And the conviction spread, becoming an issue on most campuses to be decided in favor of individualism. Societies on campus began to disappear. One was content to be on one's own. The problem is there is no real evidence that one can cope alone better than with support groups in a community setting, and the

college responsibility in loco parentis ironically now becomes a concern about possible litigation as a result of being legally responsible somehow for a student's misbehavior - a responsibility to be avoided.

It is hard to know what builds community. Part of it is doing things together. Daily chapel used to fill that function - and somehow chapel is different with real community representation. It was different when faculty used to sit up front, like the Pharisee, "to be seen of men". I like to think Tom Walton adjusted his hearing aid to better hear what was going on - and did not turn it off. Of course, things were different - we forget. This was before the days of copiers - one went to hear announcements, as well as scripture. There were no daily bulletins to do the job. And young men and women used to go to church Sunday evenings to meet each other. There was no place else to go.

Of course, incentive was always lacking. Only once have I heard of a college community going eagerly to chapel. It was at my old college, Hamilton, in upstate New York. One fall the administration was astounded to see almost every student in chapel almost every morning for the 15-20 minute service. Students weren't using their cuts. It looked like a real religious Renaissance. The more alert faculty noticed a decided hush at the beginning of the service, but then the usual shuffling and coughing after the first hymn. It was puzzling, until one day a freshman at the back gave it away - when the first hymn number was announced he leapt up and yelled, "I hit it! I hit it!" Students were making book on the first hymn number. The administration responded, of course, by dropping the hymns, and watched attendance drop.

This all illustrates a point of Emerson who said we all need something or somebody to require us to do what we can and should.

When the special committee on the K plan met all that summer of '59 to plan the K College quarter system, there was concern about keeping a sense of community. One decision was to focus on community concern by requiring a student to work in some service capacity for a quarter, to express this commitment to the larger community. It was felt, however, that one off-quarter should be left free. And so the service quarter was combined with the career experiential quarter. For years it was known as career-service. Now, of course, it is more clearly recognized by the outside world as career-development. Also, there was a proposal back then, that every student involve himself in some way in campus life, that he or she be required to get involved in sports, or theater, or music, or the newspaper, and so on, so that no one would be isolated and a loner doing studies alone - so that the campus community would be furthered. Again, it seemed to many just one more requirement — to others unnecessary. But participation builds community, and such a requirement would make it easier to find people to put out a paper in the winter quarter.

What I have been doing, at too great a length, I am afraid, is showing how we have tended to overcome the perceived difference between the liberal arts college and the real world by adopting or conforming to certain features of that world. What I want to argue now is that the spirit of liberal education is indeed the same thing as the real real world. Consider how our colleges got started. The statement of purpose of Harvard College bears quoting: "After God had

carried us safe to New England, and we had builded our houses, provided necessaries for our livelihood, rear'd convenient places for God's worship, and settled the Civil Government; one of the next things we longed for, and looked after, was to advance Learning and perpetuate it to Posterity, dreading to leave an illiterate ministry to the churches, when our present Ministers shall lie in the Dust."

So began the church-related college concerned not simply to preserve and perpetuate the faith, but to advance Learning that would shape the growing world. The same spirit is seen in those liberal arts schools not sponsored by churches, like the University of Pennsylvania supported so stoutly by Ben Franklin or Jefferson's University of Virginia. The aim was to inculcate knowledge and improve society - to transform, not conform. "To do good". This may well be the basis of practical American idealism. And it was widely shared. A paragraph from the Ordinance of 1787 setting up the Northwest Territories expresses it well: "Religion, morality, and knowledge being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged."

The tradition of liberal education does relate to the real real world. It is its very life. Its concern is for service in this world. Its conviction is that problems addressed by the philosophers, visions described by the poets, patterns of events traced by historians are all part and parcel of this world. It sees mathematics and science as liberating forces, pushing back the horizons of possibility; it sees music and art as part of the essential meaning of the world. The eternal questions of ultimate meaning, life and death, duty, freedom, justice - all of these are real.

Emerson once boasted to Thoreau that Harvard now teaches all of the branches of learning. "Yes," said Thoreau, "but what about the roots?" True liberal arts is concerned with the roots of our culture. It draws from the best of our past in Athens and Jerusalem, and links it with today to prepare for a future of mystery and dread. It reminds us that those who will not learn from history will be bound to repeat it. It liberates us from prejudice and bias. It gives us new languages to speak, new worlds to inhabit. It gives wings to our thoughts and hope that the visions of our prophets and seers may yet come true. As Hegel said, "the insight to which philosophy is to lead us is that the real world is as it ought to be, that the truly good, the universal divine reason, is not a mere abstraction, but a vital principle, capable of realizing itself."

Over 60 years ago Whitehead wrote truths that are even truer today. He said, "There are two points which differentiate our present age from the past. In the first place, the rate of progress is such that an individual human being, of ordinary length of life, will be called upon to face novel situations which find no parallel in his past. The fixed person for the fixed duties who in older societies was such a godsend, in the future will be a public danger." And, in the second place, "modern professionalism and knowledge produces minds in a groove and there is no groove of abstractions which is adequate for the comprehension of human life. In short, the specialized functions of the community are performed better and more progressively, but the generalized direction lacks vision. We are left with no expansion of vision and greater need of it."

That is why we need the liberal arts. Its discipline trains in one flexibility and imagination for the novel and unexpected situation. And its liberating power provides vision for our expanding horizons. That is why we must not lose faith in it. Without vision the people perish.

This insight, this vision, this commitment is symbolized by this chapel on the hill. I am pleased to see it appear as the new logo for the college; whether it calls particular attention to Baptist roots or not, its meaning is clear. Let there be light. Learning in the service of the world. Truth that makes men free. I am pleased, too, that the chapel tower now has its bells. Its message can be heard as well as seen.

Now to a personal note. This is a confessional. I am not a life-time Baptist. I became one only after my college years. Like many of you I had thought religion unnecessary in the modern age. Then I went to Quaker or Friends country to study for a master's degree at Haverford and Swarthmore. I lived in a Friends school, a community, where I soon discovered how the Friends were quietly bringing in and caring for refugees from Nazi Germany. This was before Pearl Harbor. I remember talking with them, I still see their faces, hear their voices, remember their stories. I especially remember a young Jewish philosopher, broken-hearted because his beloved teacher, Heidegger, had become a Nazi and rector of the University of Berlin.

What I suddenly realized was this: we do not move from the temples of faith to the halls of science, leaving superstition behind. Rather, we desert the faith of our fathers to embrace new monstrous, demonic faiths - faith in race and power and domination. I was later to hear Tillich talk about the temptation to live by faith in less than the highest and Niebuhr speak of the religion of our century as the religion of the state. But what defense can we have against this, if not an appeal to an authority higher than the state? So, like Santayana, I began to take religion and politics seriously. Maybe religion is relevant.

But why be a Baptist? One reason, I couldn't accept the Quaker peace testimony and American Baptists were most liberal theologically with no fixed creed. It is interesting to note when the Stones were ousted from this college by the Baptists downtown, it never occurred to anyone to accuse them of heresy or false doctrine. It can't be done. Besides, like the Friends, Baptists had stood since the time of Roger Williams for freedom - religiously, politically, socially.

So I applaud the new logo and hope that it will inspire us to take seriously what is happening in our world and our obligations to it. There are powerful movements at work in our world - radical political and religious faiths. There is a great third world coming to self-consciousness looking for a justice that transcends their states.

Only liberally educated people can deal with the uncertainties ahead with creative understanding. We cannot rely on Reagan Rambo responses in such a world of change and danger, terror and promise. The liberal arts are now, as always, the hope of civilization. They must keep the faith alive.

I close with another text from Paul:

Keep safe that which has been entrusted to you. Turn a deaf ear to empty and worldly chatter, and the contradictions of so-called knowledge, for many who lay claim to it have shot far wide of the faith.

Or, in the King James version:

Keep that which is committed to your trust, avoiding profane and vain babblings, and oppositions of knowledge which is falsely so-called which some professing have erred concerning the faith.

Keep that which is committed to your trust. Keep the faith. We need it in the real world.