Thoughts About a General Studies Program

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Thoughts About a General Studies Program

OLLIN J. DRENNAN

One of the often repeated goals of a program of general or liberal education is that of promoting an awareness of the meaning of being human. The following thoughts were stimulated by the question "What does it mean to be human?" They represent an exploratory, not a definitive, statement. If they excite a response, they will have served the purpose for which they were placed on paper.

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Dogs bark and trout jump, and it seems that neither dogs nor trout bark or jump because they are aware of the need to bark and jump and thus will the actions. It is presumed that they bark and jump because it is the nature of dogs and trout to do so. They may develop a consciousness of their actions, but it is severely limited. Human beings, as far as we know, are the only living things that have the capability to become increasingly conscious of their actions; to become aware of themselves self-consciously and to plan deliberate, complex actions such as speaking. Human beings do much of what they do merely because it is their nature to do so without becoming aware of their actions. They behave in their early life in ways that lead to inferences by observers about their perspectives but they may be essentially unaware of those perspectives. Their actions have an unconscious, unpremeditated air about them which seems to deny their own awareness of those actions. But because of the very capability within each human being for awareness—the potential for awareness may be one definition of humanness—normal human beings experience a time in their lives when they seem to awaken to themselves and to their
surroundings. This is the time of adolescence and does not last for just an instant but may extend over weeks, months, or years.

Each individual has within himself a potential for the development of characteristics that cannot be realized unconsciously. The potential must be perceived by the individual and its development must be deliberately fashioned. This can only follow the individual's "awakening" to awareness. The "humanness" of the individual human being is a measure of the degree that he has consciously become more than he would have become without the "awakening."

Because of the innate potential of the human being, the process of becoming "human" begins for almost every individual at some point in the course of his growing older. Whether or not every individual will inevitably "awaken" without some external assistance is a vital question for the planning of a general education program. It may be that the awakening happens whether or not the individual attends school. It may happen whether or not the individual is formally "educated." The process begins; how far it advances depends on the particular circumstances surrounding each individual human being.

Education, in general, and general education, in particular, enters the process of "humanizing" each individual as a vehicle to promote and broaden the growing awareness that follows the "awakening." General Studies does not cause this growth; it can only augment and sustain it once it has begun. For most, if not all, students entering a general education program, the process has begun. Freshmen, entering a University in their late teens, have experienced their "awakening" and have already begun the process of reorienting their conceptions of their lives and their worlds.

Thus a General Studies program can become a means of concentrating upon this newly perceived, self-conscious feeling of relation to self, others and the surroundings. A part of the responsibility of general education is that of suggesting by precept and by action, ways of perceiving this relationship in a variety of contexts. Perception and meaning are reciprocal facets of awareness, and personal meaning is enhanced as perceptions from alternative viewpoints or perspectives are explored. Particularly the General Studies program should not, by its structure or its instruction, act to "turn off" or to "shut down" awareness for individuals as they pursue the program.

A part of the responsibility of General Studies is to pass beyond the exploration of perceptions to the consideration of behavioral responses to the perceptions. Behavior and choices of behavior have consequences that are perceived and choices of behavior are made in anticipation of the reactions that may come in response to the chosen behavior. Perhaps the most important end result of an educational program is the correspondence achieved between the perception of a situation, the conscious and deliberate behavioral response to the percep-
tion, and the succeeding perceptions of the consequences of the behavioral response. The higher the degree of correspondence between the anticipated perception and the actual perception the more successful the educational program.

Personal goals and values are involved in the choice of behavior, and when the choice of them is seen as providing guidance for a realistic correspondence between perceived circumstances and consequences of action, the individual is far along the road to achieving "humanness."

The initial task of a General Studies program, then, is one of making the nature of the individual "awakening" explicit to individuals who have just recently arrived to their own personal self-awareness. Their awareness is felt, sensed, appreciated, feared and to some extent understood. The intellectual study of it has most often been absent. Thus feelings are to be verbalized to the extent that it is possible to do so and terms, concepts and abstractions are supplied to allow sufficient understanding to be achieved so that forms of behavior in response to self-awareness can become more deliberate and planned.

At that point in the program the nature of behaviors, reasons for them and their consequences can be considered meaningfully. This will involve a constantly broadening consideration of circumstances and their relationship to the individual students. Much of what has been traditionally considered the backbone of a liberal education will become significant as it is fitted into a developing framework of meaning as the subject "What does it mean to be human?" is pursued farther and farther and deeper and deeper. As the study progresses it will become necessary to introduce a gradually increasing complexity in conceptual patterns. It will be necessary to extend the ways in which consequences are assigned and evaluated. And it will be necessary to refine conceptions of behavior so that subtle responses to circumstances can be devised and enacted.

The degree of abstraction and conceptualization envisioned above seems consistent with the traditional thrust of a liberal education. Is it possible that it is unrealistic in the nineteen seventies to expect all students who attend colleges and universities to engage successfully in this degree of abstraction? Is it possible that present heterogeneity of student bodies demands a broader and less taxing conception of the end results of general education? How these questions are answered will determine in great measure the nature of any particular general education program. A further question would seem to be necessary: With rapid change making tradition less and less effective in providing satisfactory guides for action, can any less be tolerated as an end result of education?

The end result of the entire process is persons who perceive their world to an appropriate degree of complexity and from a variety of
perspectives sufficiently large to allow their conscious response to that world to bring a personally satisfying degree of success. This success in the end is measured by how closely the behaviors acted out result in consequences that were desired and anticipated in terms of the perception of the circumstances.

Thus the General Studies program should have a structure that begins with a consideration of the maturation process of growing self-awareness: including psychological, physiological, philosophical and physical aspects of the process. This initial study should be followed by a gradual expansion of the conditions and circumstances that enter into the self-awareness. The process should be considered incomplete until that self-awareness has been expanded to include at least the following aspects that affect an individual's behaviors:

1. the historical antecedents of the present and the flow of time into the future
2. the physical and social environmental factors that limit and prescribe aspects of behavior
3. the nature of resources within individuals for creating personally satisfying periods of non-vocationally occupied time. [Perhaps this can be construed to include the development of personal appreciation of a variety of activities that might serve to supply aesthetic, physical and emotional enjoyment and satisfaction during recreational and leisure time periods.]

A General Studies program should be a student-centered program; centered around a deep and enduring sensitivity to the individual nature of the learning process and the impact of the total program on individual students.