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General Education Structure and Curriculum: What Types Are Best For the Student?

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General and Liberal Education Today:
Problems of Person and Purpose

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If the real sin in colleges and universities these days is the making of promises one can't deliver, then the penance is going to be very, very heavy indeed. At the same time, I'm grateful for that reference to Edna St. Vincent Millay who sets a properly erotic tone that it would be pleasant to be able to sustain and at least gets us off—on, would it be correct to say—the right foot for our evening of thinking together. I am most grateful to all of you for giving me this kind of chance to think with you a bit about some of the turbulence that besets the enterprise of general and liberal education as we move into this curious decade of the 1970's in American culture. In many ways I feel I have no alternatives except but to apologize. Good food, good fellowship, and the kind of pleasant weariness that usually is dependent upon arriving someplace else from Seattle, Los Angeles, or Puerto Rico or New York or other exotic areas, really ought to be met by lightness, by wit, by gayety, by a bit of fun. Those kinds of terms are not terribly appropriate in my judgment either for contemporary American culture or contemporary American higher education. As a matter of fact, the problems of American higher education are caught, nowhere better for me I think, than in that very ancient fable in verse that has recently been discovered on old Egyptian papyri. It's vaguely Sapphic in tone.
as befits a piece of old literature that was created, of course, not far
across the Mediterranean from the isle of Lesbos where Sappho herself
made her commentaries on the human condition. According to this
ancient tale, a fairy,

A fairy who came from Khartoum
Took a lesbian up to his room.
She lasciviously said
As she leaped in the bed,
"Who does what
And with which
And to whom?"

That kind of puzzlement, that kind of confronting of a situation that
you really didn’t expect to come up seems to me to be the one primary
characteristic of the higher educational scene in the United States in
1971 and perhaps even more a part of the scene attendant upon those
enterprises that we call, despite their variousness, general or liberal
education.

Dorothy Parker, that acerb and insightful commentator on Ameri­
can art and culture, once began a review of a Broadway opening that
starred Katherine Hepburn with the harsh observation that “Miss
Hepburn last night ran the gamut of emotion—from A to B.” A little
grimly, a little wryly, and very unwillingly, many of us have an uneasy
sense that a similar phrase applies to the range of options now typically
exercised in our colleges and universities with respect to general and
liberal education. When we examine current programs and discuss
them with those who are responsible for them, we find, with only
occasional and often fragile exceptions, that the choices that these
enterprises reflect are little more than A or B. A is confusion tinged
with despair; B is tradition sturdily pursued in a manner that psycholo­
gists characterize as persistent nonadjustive behavior.

Yet one pokes fun at this state of affairs only to avoid profound
professional anxiety if not hot personal tears. For the questions posed
by the present crisis in general and liberal education carry, for most
of us who have taken seriously their mission as historically conceived,
a considerable freight of poignancy and alarm: What does a person do
when he discovers that a major aspect of his career may be slipping
into either memory or fantasy? How does one cope with the increas­
ing, and increasingly objective, suspicion that a prime raison d’être,
a basic rationale for one’s life, is losing its validity? How can a man
deal properly with a threatening probability of his being turned into an
anachronism at the very time that he previously anticipated as his
most productive working period? Tough and intimate questions, these—just the kind to arouse our defenses and to put at hazard our capacity for honesty in facing them. Yet are they not precisely among the issues entailed when we look at the disquiet and turbulence, the boredom and disinterest, and the tendency to turn on or to tune out that have defined, in ever clearer ways for almost a decade, a widespread reaction among undergraduates to our efforts in general and liberal education? Those of us committed to these anicient and honorable goals frequently feel that we sail dangerously between the Scylla of student dissatisfaction and unrest, that can either boil into violence or turn icy in the form of contemptuous apathy, and the Charybdis of financial stringency, that reflects not only the peculiar precariousness of our economy but that speaks for a public disaffection for higher education that contrasts in sudden sharpness with the very recent supportive views that we now remember as if from long ago. What has happened, and where can we appropriately go from here?

A distinction may be useful to get us started. Although often used almost as synonyms, liberal and general education imply somewhat different purposes and have been shaped by somewhat different social forces. Liberal education grew from elitist roots, concerned, in a time when personal freedom was by no means a common state, with increasing one's skill in the arts, the practice of which is becoming to a free man. Self-discipline, a sense of honor, and the obligations of leadership were among its key concepts; and its close association in the curricular sense with classical literature and great-man interpretations of history was based less in considerations of scholarship than in a faith (the word is used advisedly) that the exposure of young people to the great human models of Greek and Roman antiquity and to the illustrious figures in the development of western culture would mould character in desirable directions. The total setting required other assumptions and beliefs about such matters as the impact of athletic participation on personality, the developmental significance of college housing arrangements, the relationship of compulsory chapel attendance to tacit arrangements for the sowing of youthful wild oats, etc. But the presumed core of the liberalizing experience remained the curricular trust in the classics, their original languages, and a person-centered reading of history—meaning, of course, the history of Europe and North America.

With the dramatic rise of science, and as society became more technologized and managerial, the curricular foundations of liberal education shifted markedly, but its rationale remained much the same. Still in the interest of producing leaders and still in the interest of facilitating self-discipline and honor, programs of liberal education included increasing components of physics, biology, and the burgeoning social sciences. Even more importantly, because of the technical nature
of these disciplines, an emphasis on expertise swept onto the scene, bringing with it such transformations as the acceptance of the PhD—that Germanic form of testimony to scholarship thoroughly professionalized and conceived in explicitly technical terms—as the *sine qua non* of academic respectability and professorial fitness. Both massively and subtly, the changes taking place, far more significantly in the culture than merely on the campus, worked their alchemy: The arts, the practice of which is becoming to a free man, became equated with the scholarly disciplines and consequently with the academic professions; the stress on leadership and character, which was an emphasis of at least a kind of personhood, gave way before a concentration on subject matter and on highly specialized brands of technical excellence; and the institutional homes for the process of liberal education, our colleges and universities, turned steadily and, with the advent of World War II, at a spectacular rate toward the production of knowledge and toward extending the frontiers of discipline-based research as their primary focus of investment and concern. By the 1950’s, *education* had become largely a peripheral undertaking, a kind of fee paid by faculty members for congenial roofs under which to practice their academic professions.

One needs neither to identify a villain nor to infuse the history of the American academy with a halcyon romanticism here. In this brief and brutally oversimplified sketch, all that we must consider for the moment is an hypothesis about the dynamics of change in our higher educational values and priorities. To the extent that the hypothesis is a sound one, it constitutes a pointer to powerful vectors in the larger society as well as to modifications occurring within our colleges and universities. The encouragement, the support, and the rewards for intra-institutional shifts and restructurings originated in the perceived needs of the culture at large, and our apparatus of higher education, inextricably and inescapably a part of that culture, simply reacted.

In the case of general education, although its beginnings were strikingly different, its destiny has become bound up with that of liberal education in a fashion reminiscent of the Fate-determined characters in a Hardy novel. The challenge to which general education was originally a response was far more populist than it was elitist: For a society to stay together when it has sprung from heterogeneous roots and when it is affected by still other forces of heterogeneity like huge-scale immigration, what must its citizens know and understand in common? This question also underlay the establishment, both in public policy and at law, of universal and compulsory schooling; and some of our answers to it led foreign observers like D. W. Brogan to characterize the high school in the United States as no great success as a device for the cultivation of mind, but as a marvelous means for turning the children of immigrants into Americans. Because those answers were concerned
with language, a tradition, matters of economic self-sufficiency, the manipulation and management of political forms and processes, styles of interpersonal relatedness, etc., their extension at higher levels of complexity into the college curriculum was essentially inevitable once we had fixed on education as a major, central agency of socialization and acculturation.

Two sets of observations demand mention at this point. First, in the college and the university, the purposes of general education encountered the same thrusts and pressures that warped liberal education out of its original path. Whatever one chooses to say in 1971 about the “Americanizing” of undergraduates from Slavic or Italian or Irish backgrounds, it was a venture with a personal referent in it and conducted with a tone of pride and warmth in spite of frequent lapses into ugliness and bald coercion. Under the rapidly growing hegemony of the academic disciplines, however, under the ever more insistent requirement for expertise of purely technical varieties, and under the influence of a professoriate increasingly committed to disciplinary scholarship and progressively less interested in students and their personal growth, general education bore the impact of the same transformations as did liberal education. What the members of a viable society had to share in their general knowledge and understanding became an exposure to the academic disciplines; the personalized experience of learning new and dynamic folkways slipped into the labyrinths of technical proficiency, and the concern for a common cultural life was largely engulfed in the professionalism of the academy.

The second point that must be considered in this connection bears on a still larger issue. From the vantage point of hindsight, we can now perceive rather readily that both general and liberal education, as initially formulated, were indigenous and even spontaneous efforts to consolidate, sustain, and enrich a vital myth—the myth of the American dream. This statement is not a pejorative one. Few societies can long endure without widely shared articles of mythological faith—a sense of a positive corporate destiny, a feeling of collective identity, an acknowledged roster of heroes who embody a people’s most fundamental personal values, a comfortable belief in the continuity, stability, and steady progress of the basic institutions through which a society conducts its business. To at least a significant degree, common understandings are sought and a shared body of information is constructed precisely in order to reinforce these general human investments in the larger community. Similarly, the moulding of character as an educational goal is thinkable only when there are broadly held agreements about what contours of character are most desirable. Public support for educational forms that are not directly related to heightening the probability of vocational success depends in important ways on the
public credibility and endorsement that the overall society, in which higher education is deeply imbedded, commands.

And there, of course, is the rub. Over the past decade, the assent and loyalty commanded by American society have sharply declined. The discrepancy between the American dream and the American reality has become a loudly echoing and reechoing theme in our social commentary, and the vitality of our central myths has been profoundly sapped. The confusions, the anxieties, and the hostilities that pervade our efforts to discover or to create the patterns of general and liberal education more appropriate to our times are evoked more by our state of general cultural crisis than by issues peculiar to the campus.

In the long catalogue of events that have devitalized the myths of America, none has tarnished the dream more than the corrosive processes associated with that now powerful place name—Vietnam. Among the effects at home of the war in Southeast Asia, few have had a greater or more tragic impact than the perceptions formed by many Americans that the diplomats, generals, and statesmen who follow, like ball bearings rolling down steel grooves, our most orthodox and most richly culturally underwritten thoughtways make errors of awesome and fatal magnitude. With literal disasters and death coming on the heels of every optimistic official statement about the war in Vietnam since 1963 or 1964 and certainly since the bombing escalations of early 1965, increasing numbers of Americans have come to doubt ever more deeply the humaneness and social utility of professionalized competence, that most straightforward outcome of higher educational opportunity. In the eyes of many, General Westmoreland and President Johnson, simply because one was a professional soldier and the other a professional political leader, were incapable of attending seriously to evidence that flew in the face of their technically trained expertise and their previous professional experience. If cultivated proficiency takes one to the top rungs of military and governmental ladders of attainment, and if those who occupy those high places not only perpetrate the arrogant and murderous crimes of Vietnam, but cannot be turned from their criminal involvement, then proficiency be damned!

This juggernaut of psychological reaction, as it has rolled through our culture, has added its force to that of another source of disaffection from a basic article of faith. Perhaps the single most creative achievement of the human intellect has been the solving of the atom's riddle of power. Yet the primary and most dramatic consequence of that triumph of man's intellectual capabilities has been the setting of the great globe itself under a literal threat of doomsday. The multi-megaton thermonuclear bomb represents a modern sword of Damocles, suspended over all our heads. If this destiny defines the reaches of intellectual refinement and development, then—again, in the eyes of
many—the honing of the intellect is a dangerous undertaking. It must be cabined by considerations of value and morality because the brightest and most highly educated among us have proved their capacity for the greatest evil. And we are brought to a new brink of the most virulent anti-intellectualism and a disposition to enforce, by violence if necessary, constraints on the working of minds and imaginations.

Linked with the growing suspicion of technical, professional expertness and with the burgeoning mistrust of intellect, a more general de-authorizing reaction seems to have set in against whatever the culture has normatively sanctioned. If The Establishment approves of it, whatever “it” may be, then it is likely to lead to a Vietnam or a new bomb. So—once more in the eyes of many—variousness, difference from the socially and historically accepted, and the demolition of endorsed forms and structures become proper values or the avenues along which to search for either new decencies or simply for means to escape from the felt fears and frustrations of the intolerable things-as-they-are. Long hair and bears, scruffy or highly flamboyant styles of dress, the insistent rejection of language taboos and other rules of decorum, the vogue of encounter groups, the experiments with psychoactive drugs, and hundreds of other phenomena are witnesses to the yearning for freedom from mores that no longer enjoy a trustful asset and to desires, often less than fully conscious and frequently less than either richly informed or carefully considered in thought, to strip power, prestige, and access to our national resources from the dangerous men of technical and professional expertise who presently possess them.

This tendency to smash the structures that have shaped our national experience has been intensified—yet once again in the eyes of many—by the blatantly visible shame and terror, since the early 1960’s, of America’s most cruelly persistent domestic trauma. In the beatings of Freedom Riders and other civil rights demonstrators, in the murder of people like the Schwerners, in the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, and—perhaps most of all—in the finally inescapable visibility of the oppression and brutal constraints under which black Americans live and have lived, an essentially new insight has thrust its way into public awareness. The rigidities of our culture, maintained by the values of technical proficiency and professional competence, offend less by their inflexible qualities than by their apparent neutralizing of warm human concern and by the ways in which they sometimes simultaneously entail and mask a downright and cold brand of hostility and hatred. Among the central currents of our culture and along the tides of our history, an enduring and massive determination sails—a determination to exclude de facto millions of people from the category of human beings. When examined, the abolition of institutionalized slavery seems to have led less to a color-blind equality than to a segregation that is all the more severe because of its in-
formality; in at least some ways, its cruelty is increased by virtue of the removal of those regulating controls, deriving from a property owner’s interest in the maintenance of his chattels, that are at least predictable and minimally protective even when they are intolerably and unforgivably degrading. Helped by *The Fire Next Time*, by Malcolm X’s *Autobiography*, by the irrefutable wit of a Dick Gregory, and by other interpreters of the black experience, a considerable population of Americans, not all of them young, has run hard against distressing and imperative questions: If we are heirs of the history and inheritors of the culture that formed that experience of slavery and its sequellae, must we not, to demonstrate our moral manhood, reject that legacy entirely? Now that we apprehend, even dimly, the broken shapes of that experience, can we acknowledge any dignity or honor in the past that formed it? Is our tradition something to be lived up to or spoken of with shame as a burden that we are forthwith setting down, and can we do other than mark the faith of our fathers as barbarous beyond imagining?

It matters relatively little in this particular context whether the darkly disturbing perceptions that are implied by these questions are accurate in some factual or objective sense. It matters enormously that literally hundreds of thousands if not millions of Americans are asking them seriously and out of a shocked agony. The culture in which such issues come to a head in a fashion that is at once articulate and passionate may retain its basic strengths, but it suffers from grievous wounds. To regain its health or to achieve it in more authentic forms, it must act unflinchingly in self-diagnosis and subject itself to bitter medicines. The problem seems in many ways to be nothing less than the generating of new and invigoratingly persuasive myths in which the primacy of persons can be asserted in contemporary terms and in which technical competence can be harnessed to ideals of human development. New myths of this sort will demand the invention of more capacious social forms that permit human diversity to enjoy a wider play and that encourage a greater and more joyous celebration of differences than the relentless pressures that we have known toward an inflexible and inhumanely constraining norm of conformity. Perhaps most of all, this kind of cultural rebuilding will demand the inclusion and the engagement of all human beings in the process.

Rhetoric here is comparatively easy; the task itself is incredibly hard. Nowhere is it likely to prove harder than in education in general and in higher education in particular. The fundamental function of our schools and colleges is to serve society, but that function has always been shot through in America by a significant ambivalence. On the one hand, education has carried the conservative burden of maintaining a tradition and of preserving cultural continuity. On the other hand, it has operated as an engine of social change through the crea-
tion and discovery of new knowledge and through helping to develop a large fraction of the leaders (together with their supporters and their instigators) who have altered in some measure the shape and direction of our history. That inherent tension has imposed limits on the concept of serving society through criticism at the same time that it has provided legitimacy for it. Because we Americans have expected our institutions of higher learning to promote changes of particular sorts, we have accepted as a kind of concomitant to technological and economic inventiveness a degree of outspoken social and moral evaluation and judgment. At the same time, we have set limits on this side of the enterprise by charging our colleges—and funding them accordingly—with the responsibility for transmitting the American heritage. Until recently, that state of affairs simply brought us back to an ambivalence that was not entirely unproductive; with the disunity and disenchantment that have erupted through our culture in the last decade, however, the function of criticism has grown both more risky and more irresponsible. As society becomes more polarized, critical performance in the academy has been more subjected to reprisals in the form of harassment and financial cut-backs, but it has also moved itself increasingly into ideological and partisan channels in which the room for genuinely free intellectual exploration has been reduced. Seldom has the dependence of liberal and general education on a stable society been so strongly or so unhappily documented.

Yet the objectives remain. Skill in the arts the practice of which is becoming to free men is urgently called for today. One of our greatest needs is for a set of common understandings and shared knowledge that will pull us together more inclusively as a people. And above all, a culture in confusion can profitably take seriously the ancient Socratic injunction that the unexamined life is not worth living and that self-knowledge is the essence of education.

Seriousness in this context, however, returns us to the point at which we began—to the harrowing questions that academic professionals must confront if their behavior is to match the requirements of the times. For all of us intimately connected over a significant period with the academy, the problem, within the context of a broken culture, of how to cultivate the examined life and of how to expand one’s self-knowledge is both unfamiliar and alien. Our professional socialization has oriented us strongly toward the disciplines and has formed our values to the mould of disciplinary research and the concerns of the learned societies. For us, education has been essentially the transmission of disciplinary knowledge with little regard for the intrinsic merit or the urgent cultural significance of such information and ideas for the undergraduates to whom it is offered. It could hardly be otherwise. Whatever our political convictions, our social outlook, or our aesthetic commitments, virtually our full professional investment
and much of our own self-definition have ridden on our disciplines and their expansion, on attending to the problems of formal knowledge rather than to the problems of men. Trained as psychologists, literary scholars, or chemists, we have operated largely on the unexamined faith that the values of liberal and general education result merely from classroom contact with psychology, literary scholarship, or chemistry. At best, that faith is now beleaguered by severe challenges; at worst, it may have lost whatever validity and persuasiveness it once enjoyed simply by outliving them. For all of us, meeting those challenges or finding suitable alternatives may entail wrenching experiences of a deeply personal kind, and there is little point in winking at the very real hurts that individuals may suffer.

The question and the task, however, still confront us. If our colleges and universities have functioned primarily as great engines of disciplinary scholarship, as training grounds for the academic professions, and as screening devices for membership in the dominant middle class, are they now to shift their emphasis to authentic and contemporary forms of liberal and general education? If so, then thought and effort must be invested in the kinds of experience and the types of learning that instigate and support the style of the examined life and that generate self-knowledge. Obviously, that investment must come from many quarters and define a variety of options. Only some suggestions, presented essentially as stimuli to that broader-scaled attempt at the creation of educational alternatives, can be sketched here. Powered little by what can be called wisdom in the face of the doubts and the disorder that mark the culture to which higher education is responsible and must be responsive, the notions offered at this point must often amount only to formulations of some of the issues that must be resolved if we choose to focus anew on the educational, developmental, and liberalizing mission of our colleges and universities.

For example, throughout the twentieth century, higher education has emphasized cognitive processes to the virtual exclusion of affective and explicitly value-based learning. Arguing that colleges perhaps should have, but never be, psychiatric facilities, our institutions have typically regarded emotional development as a peripheral matter if it is worth attending to at all. Counseling centers operate as possibly necessary but completely ancillary units to care in remedial ways for students who suffer from some kind of psychopathology or affective handicaps. Rarely has the idea of self-understanding through the examination of one’s own psychodynamics or of growth through the analysis of one’s own feelings in relation to one’s social circumstances—the conditions of one’s family life, subculture, peer associations, etc.—received a warmer academic response than a massive snort of disapproval. The consequences have included an unfortunate contribution to the fractionating of the person, a kind of formal and insistent denial
of the inter-play of cognitive and affective elements within a unified personality; and they have similarly entailed an odd refusal to acknowledge the intellect as an instrument for solving the human problems posed by man's emotional equipment and his passions. Yet it was Freud himself who remarked that "The voice of intellect, although a small one, will not be stilled until it has had a hearing." And it seems quite probable that highly educative experiences, built upon genuine and often poignant student interests, can be generated out of the proposition that thought and information can be combined effectively with more personal searchings in the service of self-knowledge and of an extension of one's awareness and comprehension of the culture and the society that impinge formatively on one's life-style and one's potentialities as human being and as citizen.

In a related fashion, the question of values has characteristically been met in higher education by one or the other of two modal actions. One has grown out of the almost unconscious expectancies that derive from the extent that colleges and universities understandably reflect the dominant but now profoundly questioned lifeways of the age. Strong institutional pressures, some subtle and some intensely explicit, have reinforced on the campus the accepted norms of conduct and the styles of living sanctioned by the white middle class. On the other hand, especially over the past decade, those norms and styles have repeatedly been subjected—ironically, primarily by men who exemplify them—to stringent intellectual criticism of a negative sort. This situation has become progressively more complicated during the last several years, but three effects seem important. First, to at least some degree, the life of intellect and the life of responsible action have become—certainly in the perceptions of many and quite possibly in reality for some—divorced from one another. Here again we find roots of that tendency toward the mistrust and the derogation of intellectual concerns that we have previously encountered. Second, because negatively critical professors have also appeared as successful men, as persons who have "made it" according to society's dominant norms, they have seemed to a significant number of students and others to demonstrate the ways in which the value of success opposes the values of compassion and a humane conscience. Faculty involvement in research related to the war in Southeast Asia, the continuing and largely monolithic and unaccommodating hegemony of white life-styles in colleges and universities, and the remarkable slowness of thoughtful change in the patterns of higher education have all contrasted quite sharply for large numbers of people with the critical rhetoric of the academy. Consequently, our institutions of higher learning have not been exempt from the charges of hypocrisy brought against the Establishment generally. College, so the not uncommon inference runs, may provide a highly useful credential; it falls short as a place where one can clarify one's values in the context of
one's developing personhood. And finally, the overwhelmingly negative nature of academic criticism of the culture has helped to produce a sense of hopelessness. Increasingly aware of what wrongs and injustices may plague the nation, students find little help from their teachers either in learning how to think responsibly and at necessary levels of complexity about constructive alternatives. Likewise, they report scanty aid in forming for themselves positive values on which to base their lives. These conditions define the seedbed of anxiety and frustration, and the most probable responses to these affective states are destructive hostility and those forms of escape that psychologists call leaving the field and that are popularly identified as copping out.

These considerations suggest that hope may, in our time, be one of the liberal arts. Hope may be conceived as a sense of positive possibilities, personal in experience and unifyingly social when shared. Educationally, it rests on three foundations. One is an intellectual exploration of the problems of the contemporary world and of their potential solutions in a climate of rigor. Rigor implies not the rules of the disciplines but explicit and critical attention to the process of learning, to the ways in which thought becomes wishful or oversimplified unless responsibly monitored by the thinker, and to the value bases for choices among the range of problem-formulations and problem-solutions that may be considered. The second leg of this tripod entails a network of educative relationships both on and off the campus. If one accepts in any degree the concept of an educated man as a person of ever broadening experience subjected to increasingly informed and sophisticated habits of reflection, one readily perceives that a college or university may be a splendid place in which to develop reflective habits, but it rarely in itself facilitates the widening of experience. Involvement in the world beyond academe's precincts is called for. Work in actual jobs, internships, apprenticeships, and field placements represents one source of this larger set of educative relationships. Volunteer service in social agencies, civic enterprises, or such institutions as hospitals and schools defines another relevant resource. Two conditions are crucial: The activity must be responsible with a realistic and high level of accountability built into it; and there must be regular opportunities, through counseling or seminars, for perspective-generating reflection on these encounters with extra-academic society. Finally, students and faculty members must join in a careful evaluation of student growth in the ability to act in a fashion that is reasonably self-satisfying, that fulfills a developing valuational base, and that rests on a respect for information and ideas.

Both in curriculum and in instructional patterns, the cultivation of hope demands some large-scale rearrangements. Instead of imparting predetermined packets of knowledge, teachers may find themselves listening more carefully, joining in a mutual quest for as yet unrevealed
possibilities, and sharing doubts and visions in a search for those ques-
tions that merit student effort and that have personal significance for
unique individuals who are known in some degree in their uniqueness.
Such an educational context means relatedness and the investments of
time that relatedness requires. Curricularly, it means not only a re-
duced emphasis on the disciplinary divisions of the world and the con-
ceptions of reality that the disciplines imply, but a surrender of the
annually repeated specialized course or seminar in favor of the con-
tinuing and laborious reformulation of important issues around which
meaningful learning, often of an unpredictable sort, can take place.
This kind of uncertainty may be central. The nurturance of hope calls
for increasing familiarity with a widening and increasingly complicated
range of data and observations together with the analytic and syn-
thetic capabilities and the perspective that permit a person to invest
his information with significance and human utility.

If academic prac-
tice for the past half-cen-
tury has done well on the side of data, it has
given relatively short shrift to the matters of vision and valuation. We
may have offered the courses; but their content, for the most part, con-
cerned itself with the issues of our professions, which are not the same
as the issues of our culture and the people whom it comprises. Re-
dressing that balance—exploring potential futures, examining alterna-
tive possibilities, attending to what can be as well as what is and what
may be statistically projected from what has been—seems to be a main
order of business if liberal and general education are to fulfill in
modern practice their ancient and humanizing goals.

The costs will surely try many of us who have tied our destiny
to that of the academic world. The formal status that we enjoy will
probably decline; the social distance that separates faculty from stu-
dents and that insures professorial privacy will diminish, and the con-
fession of bewilderment before the fractures in our culture will entail
the risks and anxieties from which our titles and our technical discipli-
nary involvements ordinarily protect us. When we begin to stress the
processes of thought and learning, when we address ourselves seriously
to the great normative questions of our time, we admit that we are as
much at sea as our students, and this admission devalues what is dis-
tinctive about us—our mastery over the substantive specialties that we
know better than anyone else. But in many ways, the appropriateness
of that devaluation constitutes the central thesis that has been tendered
here: In pursuit of a liberalizing education that is fit for our age, those
technical specialties, regardless of how important they may be in a
context of formal scholarship, will no longer serve. If we are not to
become anachronisms in our professional prime, we people of the
academy must cope more imaginatively than has been our wont with a
compelling invitation to share with students (and with others) in a
quest for the conceptions and the visions that nurture and maintain
hope while we all seek the cultural restructurings suitable to a decent future.

FOOTNOTES

1 Adapted from an address given at Southern Illinois University, Edwardsville, Illinois, on 21 October, 1971, at the annual meeting of the Association for General and Liberal Studies.

2 W. I. Thomas's old dictum that "If men define situations as real, then they are real in their consequences" has a grimly precise applicability here. The point stands as it is stated, but it could be read as an avoidance of stating a personal position. For the record, I do indeed regard our culture, one that has been particularly generous to me, as dangerously fractionated and in extremis; I have great fears about the new forms of anti-intellectualism spreading through our country; and although I mistrust and dislike much of the rhetoric of so-called radical social analysts, and although I find much greater complexity in the issues of social change than do many critics of our culture, I share many of the suspicions, much of the shame, and a significant degree of the sense of alienation that I have tried to sketch here. Obviously, this kind of decline in cultural integrity impinges on much more than our enterprises of higher education.—EJS

3 Evaluation does not imply a conventional grading system. Grades are objectionable on a number of grounds: One is that they typically operate as a means of social control rather than as a facilitator of learning; another is that they are simply a poor feedback device. An A may suggest that a student is doing something right, but it hardly tells him what; and it rarely predicts anything whatever except other grades. The suspicion is inescapable that a grade-point average, far from serving as an index of growth or authentic accomplishment, simply indicates one's capability to deal with the academic system. For a splendid review of the evidence, see the monograph by Donald P. Hoyt, "The Relationship between College Grades and Adult Achievement," published as Research Report No. 7 in 1965 by the American College Testing Program in Iowa City, Iowa.