Reflections on General Education

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Reflections on General Education

by Ollin J. Drennan

Life is a series of events into which an individual enters, modifying each event by his memory and his expectations. Each of us finds ourselves involved in all the things that happen to us almost as though we were observers standing aside and watching as well as participating. Through our culture we learn to separate our thinking about our lives from the living of them. Often our living seems to flow inescapably and inevitably along and all we can do is learn to understand the more important parts of it. That we might affect the way that flow of events proceeds often seems unthinkable and beyond any effort on our part. This is not true. There are many ways in which we can, and do, affect the path our lives follow. One of the benefits that can come from education is the understanding that to a great extent our lives are under our control and that we can determine their directions if we wish. Involved in this understanding is knowledge of a great variety of aspects of our lives: personal aspects and the effect of our lives as we impinge on others. Such abstract considerations as philosophy and religion must be related to such concrete topics as chemistry and biology. To learn that we can direct the flow of our lives means to learn also the variety of choices we may exercise and the different value systems that go with the various choices.

A part of the benefit that comes with education is learning that we are not totally fixed in the course our lives must take. Another part of the benefit is to learn, also, that there are constraints. There are aspects of our lives that we cannot change. There are needs, conditions and restrictions that govern the development of our lives that must be recognized and accepted. These limitations on our own direction dictate that every day each of us must eat, drink and sleep. Each of us
must associate with others in some form of social organization. Each of us must learn to cope with the effects of gravitation, the weather and the seasons. To know that there are areas of our lives that are beyond our own control should not hinder our appreciation that there are other areas where we can choose. Both understandings are necessary if we are to benefit fully from the greater awareness that an education can give us.

An education takes place as we live our lives and puzzle about what happens to us. The process that involves both the living and the puzzling becomes education when the puzzling leads to understandings that, in turn, lead to changes in the living. There is an interaction between these two functions that we carry on most of the time within us. The living and the puzzling affect, and are affected by, each other. The living is a dynamic, active aspect of the process. Puzzling is a reflective, after-the-fact aspect. If we are to direct the flow of living our lives, then we must puzzle about the past and our memories of it. We must seek to understand, to connect together, the various events and their effects and project that understanding or connection into the future. Such expectations of the future, modified by wishes for change, are the only guides we have for our giving conscious direction to future events that are to occupy us as we live.

The wishes that we entertain for our futures may be nothing more than day dreams. However, even daydreams must have their origins somewhere and if we are to believe that our past experiences include observation of the lives of others—either obtained by observing others or from reading about them—we might find the origins of daydreams in the lives of others rather than in our own. On the other hand our wishes may consist of very practical goals that we can use to determine our decisions. But they too must have their origins and to the extent that they consist of visions of our own futures that have not yet come to pass, they must have their origins in the lives of others.

Much that we have in mind about our own lives is the result of puzzling about the events that have occurred in our lives in the past. But much is the result of understandings we have learned about lives in the abstract. Instead of thinking about Joe, or Betty, or Bob, or Sue we thing about our own lives in terms of “Life is —.” Life, with a capital letter L, consists of all the knowledge that we have accumulated about many lives, with a little letter l. We watch others. We puzzle about what we observe. But more important, we read about a much larger number of individuals than we can possibly observe. We read about people who live in other countries and in other centuries. We read about what people have said about other people of other places and other times. And we read about what people say about other people in our own time. And we end up with ideas about what kind of a future would be most desirable—and we dream.
One of the factors that serves to determine whether our dreams are daydreams or are dreams that can become real is the clarity with which we understand the extent of the constraints on our decisions as opposed to those areas in which we can choose and direct our lives. Much of the lore that we have accumulated as we live has very little foundation in fact. The parlor game that consists of one person whispering a message to his neighbor who in turn whispers the same message to the next person in the group and so on until it returns to the original whisperer always illustrates how a message becomes garbled as it passes through a number of the best-meaning messengers. Such is the case with much of the information that we accumulate in the casual way of interacting with many other persons. It becomes less accurate as it passes from person to person and is influenced by the stresses of a particular time in history. The nature of our dreams is affected by this uncertainty in our information. The degree to which we might expect to realize those dreams is greatly affected by the accuracy and completeness of the pertinent information we have. Consequently the picture we accept of what Life is all about may need retouching. The ideas we develop about our role in life based on that picture will then need modifying. Until such needs have been fulfilled there is small chance that our dreams will be other than daydreams.

All of us have a picture of what Life is all about. Often we are not aware that our picture has the many facets that it does. We accept the picture that is accepted by our families and by our neighbors with little question when we are young. The world is, for us, just as it is experienced and portrayed. As we grow older we realize that some parts of that received and accepted picture are distorted and we seek to correct that portion of the picture. Usually we find that only those portions that come to our attention as the result of very specific experiences seem to need correcting. Many other parts of the picture remain accepted as true and valid. We correct our ideas about only that small segment of our understanding without realizing that when we alter one portion of our pictures of life we inject change that should spread throughout our conception of what life is all about. In the same way that a rock dropped into a pool of water sends ripples of disturbance to the farthest edges of the pool, changes in the structure of our understanding of life sends ripples throughout the structure. If we fail to consider these ripples, we find that one part of our picture jars against another part leaving our ideas disjointed and incomplete. In the end this disjointedness interferes with our attempts to realize our dreams. What seems to support a dream in one part of our life will seem to do just the opposite when considered in another part. We will find ourselves confused and we will spend much of our effort and energy trying
to make sense out of our understanding of our own life rather than in furthering our dream.

It would be to our advantage, then, if each of us periodically reviewed our ideas of Life and our dreams for the future. Certain segments of our idea structure and our dreams will often be in constant focus because we have decided they are important and we do not wish to lose sight of them. Other segments may never come to our attention and we may not even be aware that they exist. If they really do exist—that is, if there are actually parts of our conception about which we are unaware—it would seem a part of common sense to seek them out so that we could understand more clearly their influence on our actions. Because a review of such a nature cannot be undertaken by ourselves—it would be expecting too much from each of us if we were expected to review those aspects of our lives and ideas about which we are unaware without assistance from someone else—it requires the aid of someone skilled in considering the total structure of life pictures and who is sympathetic with our individual needs and particular life and dreams.

Such a review constitutes a major aspect of education. It is not necessary that such a study take place within the structure of a formal educational system. It does not need to take place within a classroom or a laboratory. It only needs to be carried out by an individual so that in the end he has profited from the activity. The need to carry out at least parts of the exercise with the aid of another person suggests some form of cooperation. A formal classroom situation can be devoted to the type of study we have described as being desirable. It may be much more effective and efficient than casual considerations—at least in classrooms that have a study of this type among the considerations taking place within them.

Thus it would seem that there are several kinds of investigation or study that would be valuable to all of us.

1. A study of the conception of life, the picture of the world, that we presently have, how we obtained it and how that picture is similar and different from those held by others.

2. A study of the kinds of choices we have that allow us to give direction to our own lives and that suggests the manner in which we might assume that direction.

3. A study of the constraints that determine the arena in which we must live our lives.

4. A study of how we form dreams and may take steps to bring them into being by giving conscious direction to our lives.

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Education that does not have as its principal aim the orientation and particular training that is required for success in one or another
vocational category is often referred to as “general education.” Its purpose is to teach people more personally productive ways of living. Thus the four types of study listed constitute a major segment of general education and might serve as one statement of the goals of such education that is of value to every individual.

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Program AGLS Annual Meeting

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 18

8:00 p.m. Student Union Theatre

Presiding: Douglas Dunham, President of AGLS, Michigan State University

Welcome: President Robert B. Kamm, Oklahoma State University

Comment: Dean George A. Gries, College of Arts and Sciences, Oklahoma State University

Keynote Address: Harold L. Hodgkinson, President, American Association for Higher Education, “General Education’s Response to Changing Demands”

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 19

9:00 a.m. Concurrent Sessions

University, Student Union, Case Study Room A

Chairman, James E. Kirby, Oklahoma State University

Speaker, Dean Oakley J. Gordon, “The University of Utah’s Program of General Education”

Respondent, Malcolm Correll, University of Colorado