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John Bevan
Davidson College

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The Student: His Self-Satisfaction and His Sense of Permanency

By John Bevan

Among the joys of being an Academic Vice President is the opportunity it affords to talk to young persons, to hear about their plans and aspirations, to engage in dialogue about "becoming" and sometimes about the very "ground of being." One such conversation was my pleasure only a few weeks ago as I visited with a Davidson student who informed me that he was a Classics major. With raised eyebrows I asked, "Why Classics?" As a grin spread across his face, he replied, "Because it has come to my attention that in this field there is unusual opportunity; so few are going into it." He had deciphered the meaning of my querulous expression. I had been concerned about his professional future and my facial twitchings had betrayed me. "The real reason," he said, "is because I enjoy the Classics, I am happy in the Classics, and right now I am a bit more concerned about seeing myself in the light of manhood than I am in the reflections of manpower." Somehow his confidence reminded me of Dante's Ulysses, at the Pillars of Hercules, exhorting his companions to go on. "You have your lives not so you may live like beasts, but rather that you may strive for fame and knowledge." My spirit rejoiced and was exceeding glad for at that moment the future was intact.

In the quiet of my study and in the humdrum of my office, I am reminded that those of us in higher education are constantly dealing in futures with a view to humanizing humans. We are continuously forecasting and 1975 is not the most favorable time for gauging any forecast. Only a few years ago economists were predicting marvelous advancements in our GNP, but somehow they neglected to enter
into their calculations energy and food shortages that have carried everyone headlong into an extended period of double-digit inflation and sent the stock market bobbing and reeling. But how could they have known? Then again, who in the late twenties would have guessed we would be refiguring our figures in the late forties to include nuclear energy, antibiotics, jet propulsion, and transistors? Or who would have guessed in the forties that in the seventies the United States would be wholesaling armaments and nuclear power plants in the name of world peace?

It was only seven years ago that Glenn Seaborg, while addressing the student body of Howard University, spoke confidently of the ramifications of the Cybernetic Revolution, i.e., the extensive adaptation of computer equipment to industrial, economic, and social activity. Implicit in his projections was the setting up of a system of local computers, district and regional computers, national and international computers, and conceivably an ultimate computer which would translate the rudimentary expressions and chart the destiny of the lesser computers—a computer that would let us know where all other computers were leading us. Also implied in the advent of the Cybernetic Age was a new posture for man and society, a posture enshrined in a multitude of new freedoms, namely, the freedom from work, the freedom from ignorance, the freedom from thing orientation to human being orientation. Creative man, bound by the chains of work and the circumstances work creates, would be set free finally for leisure and in turn set free for other persons. It was inevitable in the encroachment of this age that slavery, poverty, revolution and war would diminish because persons would have time for persons and the cephalopod-like computer would forestall strife through its capability to identify latent and potential problems before they had the chance to become manifest.

Seaborg went on to say: "Let me be quite realistic as I turn to the one force which I believe can do most to help us understand ourselves in society or help us create and fulfill the highest goals which a Cybernetic Revolution might offer. I believe that force is education and that the university should play the leading role." He concluded that in the short decades ahead, there must be a huge re-evaluation of the goals and values of our society and it will be in our universities where such a re-evaluation takes place.

Could it be that Mr. Seaborg is seeing those short decades ahead more clearly than most of us wish to? Could it be that students are beginning to feel most intensely those forebodingly short decades ahead? Could it be that our colleges and universities are entrenched in a program compatible only with the fleeting industrial age, a program which has overstressed microscopic specialization and competence at the expense of humanistic excellence and the skills of being
human beings, a program which students suspect is preparing them for an even greater struggle down the road?

Since we have mentioned students, it might be pertinent at this point in our discussion to examine the recent findings of Yankelovich and Clark on how students in the 1970's see themselves. Their data indicate that today's students have had it with social reform; that they are preoccupied with career and self-fulfillment choices; that they are in a search for new norms; that they are changing their attitudes toward work and seeing differently the role and importance of money in defining the meaning of success; that they are realizing there must be more to life than making a living, i.e., struggling to make ends meet and being concerned with the needs of others. These researchers report young people today are attempting to consolidate their private values and synthesize them with career goals, perceptibly more aware that a marriage between the desire for personal fulfillment and a successful career is not nearly as impossible as might have been conceived by "job-success" oriented graduates of the 1950's. Nor does career fulfillment mean matrimony and a family. More likely this new breed will focus on challenging work, the freedom to express itself, and more time for outside interests. The emphasis even now seems to be on self directed-self expression, creativity, self development, physical well being, self fulfillment both on and off the job. Their report concludes that the current desire for new alternatives is strongly buttressed by the value structure and emerging cultural patterns of a new generation; conceivably, I would add, an emerging generation of Americans more closely attuned to the liberal learning tradition than recent generations.

There is another glimpse we cannot ignore, one contributed by contemporary social philosophers who seem to have a firm grasp on the time capsule. In the short decades ahead, according to them, we Americans will be characterized as urbancentric and mobicentric, i.e., we will live in denser population bands and move about frequently from location to location within the population mass. This being the case, and for the sake of maintaining our sanity, we will be obliged to learn how to develop intense and deep human relationships quickly, to learn how to enter a group and leave that group feeling not as an interchangeable part but as a unique and genuine entity, and to learn how to share roles that build satisfying experiences which provide sustenance and enrichment. For such persons, persons who move every four years to different and possibly distant locales, a sense of permanency must develop in something other than the land, or a place, or even a country. The center of stability may have to be in a conviction, in a commitment, in a set of ideas. We may have to be-

come more value conscious and from within that framework struggle to find new modes of adaptability. Existence may have to be defined more in terms of experience than data, less objective and more open to confrontations and feelings. We might have to become more tolerant of uncertainty without losing our posture of intellectual mastery, or without fear of losing identity, or without fear of the adaptation process itself which could make us agents of change, as well as subjects for self-discovery. Maybe this comes about when we take time for people and as human beings come to realize that what we become is determined by interrelationships, i.e., actions toward people, away from people, or against people—observing ourselves as participants in social evolution, resource persons tolerant of relevant irrationality and irrelevant rationality. Very likely we will be obliged to develop our interpersonal competencies so as to deal with information overload, to cherish persons for what they are instead of what they have and know, to be able to love everyone without knowing everyone or needing to be loved by everyone. Maybe we will come to enjoy our environment, as someone has said, because we are “living with it, not just in it.” Maybe after several more episodes of “brinkmanship,” it will become fully revealed to us that what persons believe about the basic nature of man is basic for all planning for all time.

Dealing in futures is a risky business. Where in society is the vehicle for making things happen as they should happen? Dare we take Glenn Seaborg seriously in his suggestion of the need for a re-evaluation of society’s values and goals? Dare we agree with him that the vehicle for such an evaluation is the college/the university? Why not? Can you think of any of society’s institutions more suited to engage in such a gargantuan undertaking? The college or university is a multi-faceted organization which has a specific social purpose. Its many segments and groups have differing but coordinating functions related to communicating knowledge, to discovering knowledge, and to using knowledge either in the services of those within the institution, or beyond it to related peer cultures, or in the service of those in society at large.

Think of the liberal learning setting in particular. The liberal learning or liberal arts setting has been viewed as a group or groups of persons, sometimes living together and sometimes not, sharing a common interest in communicating and developing certain concerns and skills: to know how to understand not just how to think; to distinguish fact and interpretation, probable and dubious, the descriptive and normative; to be sensitive to all the basic levels of meaning in human experience—the aesthetic, the sacred, the scientific; to translate everyday rhetoric in such a way as to be moved by what is tragic, pitiable, and honorable; to feel release and constraint, accomplishment and disappointment; to foster truth and to admit error; to discover the dignity of honesty and the corruptibility of falsehood. These skills and concerns

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are fostered under the tutelage of mentors whose visions relate ideas to life and knowledge to wisdom in the hope of instilling attitudes productive to the enhancement of humanity. These institutions we characterize as truth telling, truth seeking institutions and what is important is what truth they seek. Hopefully, their focus will be always on the search for the truth of meaning, i.e., the meaning that grows out of our knowledge and understanding of human relationships, human problems, and human destiny—the truth telling of persons that forms the basis of a common humanity and reinforces the vital self-renewing processes necessary for the survival of any society.

Suppose Seaborg is right when he concludes that the computers, the master instrument of the emerging technotronic society, will assure an existence in which leisure gradually displaces work. What is what when work is no longer the dominant concept and its structures the cohesive force? Who is the good person and the good student then? What value system pertains then?

Suppose the social philosophers are right in their prognosticating? What educational model is apropos in such a situation? Maybe it is one in which the student in his pursuits is mobile, i.e., arriving, doing, leaving on some sort of a self-determined regular basis. Maybe this is the new meaning of collegium or the new interpretation of the Psalmist's song, "How good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together." Maybe out of this arrangement is born a greater concern for community and concern for individuality. In this arrangement there is most likely much conceptionally new to be unearthed. One thing is certain: students and teachers live in the same world, are exposed to the same problems, and if they are responsive to the tasks in which they are enjoined, will know that they cannot succeed unless they work side by side with some clear understanding of what they are trying to achieve. Together, at least for now, they represent a community—a community which will be constituted sometimes by friendly dialogue, and sometimes by aggressive confrontations, but in either case the community about which only one thing may be predicted with certainty, namely its permanence. This is the case even when the tradition of a sharply circumscribed campus must be abandoned; or the tradition of a fixed age group to be educated must be abandoned; or the tradition of the classroom as the principal focus of instruction must be abandoned; or when self designed programs are given precedence over catalog prescribed programs, or when faculties include competent persons who have gained their knowledge by avenues other than those prescribed and ceremoniously protected.

In dealing in futures, whose truths or half-truths should we endorse? I guess we're always safe in being eclectic. The problem is time—"the short decades ahead. Furthermore, one observation is clear to all of us, i.e., the students now in institutions of higher learning will
be the citizens rising within twenty-five years to control society. For us in higher education, the fact of the matter is those short decades ahead are now. And if this fact is not productive of acute manifest anxiety, then we are insensitive to our mission and victims of a dehumanizing process that has already inflicted its paralyzing venom.

But let us assume that now represents the next ten years. What elements within academe must we focus, emphasize and exploit? In brief, I would suggest three.

The first is the questions we ask as truth telling, truth seeking practitioners. We must commit ourselves anew to stressing the importance of programs designed to prepare students to cope with the problems which the world in its chaotic semblance belches up and spews out. While preparing students for professional employment is important, it is more important to help them learn how to deal with the vital questions which can no longer be treated as mere pedantic exercises. The answers to “Who am I? Who were we? Where are we going and from whence have we come? What can we believe?” are crucial to the issues they face. What is requested here is not a reformulation, but a re-emphasis and rededication to the implementation of that dialogue which by definition identifies all persons pursuing truth, self-discovery and self-actualization; i.e., persons seeking a set of tenets pivotal to coping with life circumstances.

In an institution plagued by diversity, it’s important now for us to rediscover our common language, common voice, and common purpose [the humanizing of humans]; to emphasize not only productivity, but the role of imagination, fantasy and will in the transformation of persons and society; to give testimony to the satisfaction of adventuring in a continuous dialogue and search; to inspire students in the expressions of altruism and love; to persist always in the struggle between being and becoming; to discover that form of happiness, which according to René DuBos, “originates from persons’ deep awareness that their personal life is the realization of their dreams and their collective life, a creative enterprise which gives concrete forms to the dreams of humankind.”2 In essence, we need to rededicate ourselves to the goals of the institutions we serve.

Secondly, the most fruitful curricular explorations for coping seem to be interdisciplinary. It may very well be that the hopes for the future lie largely in this direction. This suggestion to this group needs no elaboration. It is, however, directly related to the third element for consideration: the concept of faculty as a resource pool.3

It should be remembered that the liberal learning situation attempts


3 In the development of this concept, I am indebted to Professor James Crane, a former colleague at Eckerd College.
to make the student more aware of what it means to be a scientist-artist-scholar human being. It provides rich and diverse opportunities for the learning of specialized knowledge and skills, but not at the expense of learning the "skills of becoming a human being." The general change agent for this situation is a specialist who can see ways of relating his knowledge, skills, and experience as a whole human being to the skills, knowledge and experience of other human beings from different disciplines. Out of this interchange come new formulations and reformulations, resulting in the propagation of ferment and growth. Of course, if specialists gathered are insufficiently groomed for this kind of enterprise, then they are only capable of operating within fixed disciplinary boundaries. Thus it is that a tight knit discipline system emerges which by its very nature gradually erodes the system as a whole, producing within the system satellite groups and subcultures which operate to the advantage of some disciplines [departments] and to the demise of others.

In our more rational moments we will admit that it isn't the particular array of offerings or arrangements of disciplines which define liberal learning as much as it is the group of faculty members competent and secure in their own fields, faculty members willing to converse and plan with like-minded colleagues from other fields. What develops from the interchange of intelligent and competent men, regardless of the separateness imposed by disciplines, is what gives the particular style to any program. This being the case, there are in such arrangements as many limitless numbers of programs as there are human beings—professors, students, adjunct professors. Translated within a field theory context, the resource pool is always changing with the addition of programs or persons and the interaction that ensues insures diversity and uniqueness within diversity. Thus it is that any resource pool fosters and thrives on diversity. It does not ignore the contributions of any specialist, but a given specialist's contribution is made within the context of the whole. It further means that a faculty member does not fill a slot, but represents a source. The basic issue is never between the generalist and a specialist, but between conflicting models of human development. In such a concept the assumptions are that the geneticist grows out of the biologist, grows out of the scientist, grows out of the total human being.

This structure stands in contrast to the conventional setting in which typically disciplinary boundaries provide the framework for program building whereby disciplines mature, reproduce by fission, and become more complex. This happens because our traditional program development has proceeded pyramidally. Basic instruction is provided by specialists pouring over at the apex, supported by the assumption that only major students who have gone far enough up the incline can profit from work with the specialist. Thus in an expanding
period, such as we have recently gone through in higher education in the United States, the process produces a profusion of courses and departments based on separate disciplines. It usually follows that affairs of state freeze into static forms, almost immediately losing whatever evolutionary viability that might have been initially fostered. Frequently, the edge is taken off the thrust of generative people, the order of the day commands new ideas to be resisted, creative projects are under-funded and political harassment is released in the guise of academic responsibility and quality control. Conversation between the richly endowed is limited to disciplinary discourse within the same department and the purpose of the whole is not only lost, but the whole is reduced to the sum total of its separate parts.

If I had my way, the money being spent in faculty development would be for planning interdisciplinary exchanges that might help us refocus our primary institutional objectives and develop mentors, as I said earlier, whose visions relate ideas to life and knowledge to wisdom in the hope of instilling attitudes productive to the enhancement of humanity. I would be concerned about persons teaching within a liberal arts setting who themselves had never had a brush with liberal learning. It does seem to me that persons teaching at the undergraduate level in a liberal learning setting ought to be able to engage in a dialogue that carries them outside of the narrow confines of their specialty; if not, then I wonder how it is they found their way into a liberal learning setting and how conceivably they can maintain themselves or be maintained in it.

Those of us in higher education are dealing in futures and, I repeat, the risks are great. It’s time we realized that too often the price of narrow learning is broad ignorance, and the unanticipated consequence of ignorance through knowledge is easily documented. A biologist friend cited recently an illustration in which DDT was used to kill the malaria-carrying mosquito of Malaya. Mosquito specialists consulted did not know that DDT would kill off wasps which fed on leaf-eating caterpillars living in the thatch roofs of the native huts. The wasps expired, freeing the “exploding caterpillar population to munch happily away at the huts until the roofs fell in.”

In what might the student find his sense of self-satisfaction and permanence in short decades ahead? In a professional choice? Possibly. More likely it will be in a conviction, a commitment, a set of ideas—in the struggle between becoming and being. Considering what lies ahead, it had better be. Otherwise, it won’t be the roof over our heads falling in; it will be the ground underneath us caving in.

Incidentally, the text for this presentation is taken from Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*.

Never imagine yourself not to be otherwise than what it might appear to others/ that what you were or
might have been was not otherwise than what you had been/ would you have appeared to them to be otherwise. Or if you'd like it put more simply— Be what you would seem to be.