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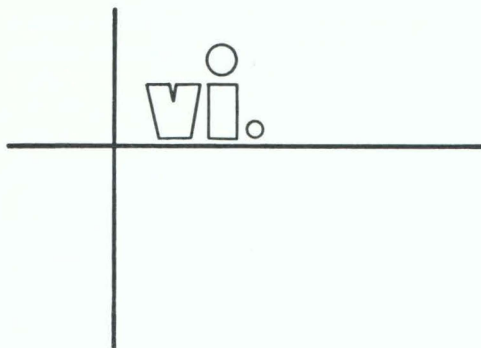


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Is the Lifeboat Leaking?*

By JOHN HICKS

After hearing Jack Bevan and Harvey Overton, each in his own persuasive way, tell you about his dream and devotion to General Education, you are probably ready to say "Amen!" and to wonder what there is for me to add. I too say Amen. But I might ask a few questions, questions that go back to the topic with which this panel was endowed by its founding fathers: General Education—Threat or Opportunity *for the Student*.

Now, everybody in college teaching and admissions knows that students presently entering universities and colleges (regardless of potential IQ levels) are more and more poorly competent in reading, in writing, in thinking. Stanford's admission director has recently been advertising this fact, gleaned from the Scholastic Aptitude Tests. Fewer students are in the top deciles than seven years ago.

"... In general, students coming to ... any college ... do not know how to write very well." "What students read outside of class and apart from class assignments does not seem to be terribly impressive. Criticism of students' writing ability comes from college faculties everywhere: admissions officers readily concur ..." "This is the generation of students affected most by media revolution ... 'viewing and listening' as contrasted with 'reading' types."

Some of us who have taught long enough to have antedated the prevalence of TV (or to have evaded it) recognize the "grasshopper" mind inculcated by TV—nothing very long; attention span short; entertainment, preferably laughs, with every unit of information.

* Our Spring Issue included the prepared remarks made by John Bevan and Harvey Overton at our co-sponsored section at the AAHE national conference held last March. Had time permitted, John Hicks was to have responded then, at the section meeting. Time expired, however, and it has taken us until this issue to include what Dr. Hicks would have said in response to his colleagues. We apologize for the delay. — The Editor.

All of this having been granted, what answer have we general educationists to the consequent questions—questions that constitute a kind of Catch 75 for the liberal generalist in a self-demand educational system.

What liberalizing educational course or curriculum is good for a student? Will the student see the opportunity inherent in a course if it assumes a degree of comprehension he hasn't yet been educated to? Will it do him good if he can't or won't grasp it *now*?

Can colleges start all over at the existent level, give elementary training, and yet arrive at language mastery and disciplined thinking and esthetic sensitivity? Can we ask a chronologically mature matriculant to defer graduation until still later?—Or are the lost quite lost?

If, then, a student is free to elect, with few institutional requirements or restraints, won't he choose what is patently entertaining and not very demanding? Or if a student is free to elect, yet inclines to something valuable, won't he choose what has apparent value to him *now*, and therefore something of present utility, not of long-range humane enrichment? How should he envisage such?

At a time when the mastery of verbal arts and intellectual arts seems to be weakening, we hear humanists boast that the young people are turning to the fine or non-verbal arts. Of recent years, arts schools and departments have been favored. Are the arts popular for their peculiar power and insight? Or because they seem to offer an academically respectable evasion of the rational needs and powers of mankind? The arts are demanding, both in creating and in experiencing, if the arts and the meeting with them are intense and meaningful. But arts can be taught and received in trivial and anti-intellectual ways, as superficial sensory or emotional pleasures. The popularity of the arts among undergraduates need not overwhelmingly impress us as the resurgence of popular yearning for spiritual and intellectual renewal.

For the faculty, there are equally self-serving questions: What course of study will rate well in the elections and student polls, and therefore count most strongly in that kind of student favor which produces student-hour productivity, and therefore administrative favor?

By what process are we generating administrators comparable to Jack Bevan, who understand the nurture and cherishing and promoting of specialists with a passion for interdisciplinary exploration such as he so persuasively called for?

In short, many matriculants in college and university do not belong there; or else we must admit that the idea of education of a strenuous and mature kind is no longer good for any citizens in a democracy. That everybody should receive an education suitable to his intellectual and spiritual potential and his will to learn seems to be decent. That everybody should receive the highest education conceivable can only require that the highest education conceivable be, of necessity, reduced to what the common matriculant can master. When the college-age population started burgeoning perhaps two decades ago, the United States undertook to build

enough collegiate institutions for everybody but the patently imbecile, and to make their offering fit the quality of the great democratic average of their abilities. I doubt that this is the *general* of general education that we wish to espouse.

Harvey Overton rightly focused upon the retreat of higher education from the demand made during the academic turmoils of the 60's, a retreat back to the imposition in the 70's of the *status quo ante*. But the protests were right in principle—to break through the petrification that keeps a new meaningfulness from emerging; to crack away the established empires and entrenched fiefdoms so that intellect and reality may continue the human task of growth and truth and reality.

Throughout the land in the 60's we heard news of student upheavals and student protest movements: against regimentation, against meaninglessness and non-entirety; against the irrelevance of their collegiate programs. At professional meetings it was commonplace to hear: "Have your students been protesting? Have you had a student revolt on your campus? How in the world do you forestall them?"

Much of this rebellion was serious, however much immaturity and negativism it might enlist. Students held real resentment against real academic weaknesses. Revolt enfolded a plea for humanity in their education, and for attention to the quality of teaching they received; they wanted what they are taught to be relevant within itself, one part with another in some meaningful pattern of integration. They wanted to associate with master scholar-teachers who are humanly inspiring.

Somewhere here was the plea by the neophytes in intellectual life against the rejection they widely suffer from the academic community, a rejection by entrenched scholarship which has no time or temper to bother with mastering the art and extend the self-devotion that teaching deserves—if teaching were a collegiate profession.

The 70's are showing the logical consequence. John Bevan asks: "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 . . .?" Harvey Overton answers: "The major focus of university concerns in the seventies appears to be on neutralizing undergraduate education as a value-free academic process and on expanding institutional contributions to career education."

The answer is a solid yes. All I see happening to those general education programs in the creation of which I have had a hand, or those I know much about, leads me to surprise if they have escaped being resubmerged under vocational pressures—industrial or departmental.

Many faculties have given up the belief that they *can* validly create an adequate curriculum for young men and women today. Institutions have largely surrendered the authority to impose any specific educational process or prescription on young citizens, except in those areas where stringent specialization has given credence to fixed sequences and requirements. Why

has learning and maturity not bestowed on the faculty any sense of greater wisdom as to what constitutes a human curriculum? Or of what can be conducive to increase of the spirit and the imagination needed by fully reasonable humanity? Obviously we are evading the diligent search of learned people for the humane interrelationships that Jack Bevan talked about.

I want to believe with Harvey Overton that we might enlarge the significant liberality of liberal education by enhanced use of unemployed Ph.D.'s. Yet I know that only a fortunate accident leaves a specialized Ph.D. liberal and humane and deeply committed to the kind of teaching that moves across borders to integrate and reconcile man's diverse needs, as Jack Bevan so persuasively envisages. On average, most Ph.D. projects are too trivial or narrow or esoteric to give the holder a claim on our faith in his saving power for student or society, or his aptness to broaden the horizons of wisdom by talk with fellow Ph.D.'s in a language of vision. Now—if we could just transform the Ph.D. process . . .

Well, when Ph.D.'s are always humane and engaging, and when students come to college prepared for imaginative and intellectual adventure—and are shown that education *is* an adventure—then we will know what kind of education offers real opportunity, not a threat, to real students.

But who will protect the generalist in the academic jungle presently ruled over by empire-controlling interest? Who will protect the specialist after he breaks the rule of his order to spend time in general dialogue and teaching, when he might be preparing to print one more article of a recondite nature? What happens to these people when they face evaluation for promotion, tenure, salary? I have seen too much of my answer, and so probably have you. Do you think bright students, watching the fates of teachers, don't read for themselves whether general education is threat or opportunity to the faculty—and why not, consequently, to themselves?

I know I have been asking unpleasant questions, because there are unpleasant answers. Yet, in defiance of fact, I have always been, and I remain, a crusader—probably a Don Quixote. I warm instantly to Harvey Overton when he says: "If we are beyond freedom and dignity, then we are beyond any possibility of liberal education in traditional terms, for freedom and dignity are finally what liberal learning has been all about."

And I warm instantly to Jack Bevan's vision of the interdisciplinary enterprise: "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 . . . It is more important to help (students) learn how to deal with the vital questions . . . truth, self-discovery, and self-actualization . . . a set of tenets pivotal to coping with life circumstances . . . the role of imagination, fantasy, and will in the transformation of persons and society."

Modern society is divisive. It imposes upon one person many roles which threaten his self and fracture his integrity. If one has no firm center, no self

of assured and unified humane values, how shall he resist dispersion? One must know that he means something, as a whole and integrated being, possessed of a relationship with human values—experienced, weighted, self-accepted. One must mean something to himself, a self that he can accept in spite of a world of disruption and confusion.

For good or evil, man has his intelligence, his power of symbolical envisagement, which puts on him a burden that purely alert, realistic creatures do not bear—the burden of understanding. He lives not only in a place, but in Space; not only at a time, but in History. So he must conceive a world and a law of the world, a pattern of life, and a way of meeting death. All these things he knows, and he has to make some adaptation to their reality.

Now he can adapt himself somehow to anything his imagination can cope with; but he cannot deal with Chaos. Because his characteristic function and highest asset is conception, his greatest fright is to meet what he cannot construe—the “uncanny,” as it is popularly called. It need not be a new object . . . under mental stress even perfectly familiar things may become suddenly disorganized, and give us the horrors. Therefore our most important assets are always the symbols of our general *orientation* in nature, on the earth, in society, and in what we are doing: the symbols of our *Weltanschauung* and *Lebensanschauung* . . .

There are relatively few people today who are born to an environment which gives them spiritual support. Only persons of some imagination and effective intelligence can picture such an environment and deliberately seek it. They are the few who feel drawn to some realm of reality that contains their ultimate life-symbols and dictates activities which may acquire ritual value. . . .*

Meaning is not something given to us by life—as though we should be betrayed to find that our lives have had no meaning! Meaning is what human beings create by conceiving of the potential of life in creative ways, making structures of facts or events or commitments which symbolize and embody a peculiarly human element—meaningfulness. Because we human beings have been so similar in neural-electrical-organizational structures, we can exchange symbols which embody the significances which many human beings find a need for. This is our process of making human beings of this particular animal species, ourselves. When we refuse to make meaningful symbols, meaningful new structures of the facts and events of living, we very rightly find that life rewards us with no meaning—blah!

Instead of intensive study, self-discipline, contemplation, imaginative exercise, we see today a rage for easy certainties—not a rage for reason, nor

* Suzanne Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key*, 3rd ed, Harvard, 1957, Ch. 10.

for intellectual endeavor, nor for painstaking artistic pursuit—but for instant certainty; instant achievement in the arts without discipline, and inner search; simplistic religious dogma; astrological guidance; Jesus freaks; foreign gurus with one item of assertive positiveness (preferably also with panache); pseudo-psychological hucksters by the dozen; and faith that the latest health food or delusionary drug is an open gate to salvation.

We are facing a cultural disruption, a chaos resultant upon a new world and a new reality imposed upon us by such poet-thinkers as Einstein or Freud or Darwin or Malinofsky, or Pirandello or Picasso, but not yet digested and integrated.

Turning back is simply not possible. Reality has shifted while we contemplated it. We are at the point where old facts—as believed—and old myths—long believed—give way to chaos, unless we can find imaginative new symbols by which to embrace as-yet-unintellectualized truths that can integrate the masses of new insights forced upon us. We are at an interface between the permanent nature and need of man, and his awareness that he is embarked, wish it or not, into a whole new world of outer space and infra-matter and extra-rational self, into which his intellect and his curiosity have immersed him unawares. Time-worn disciplines are inadequate equipment for thinking and imagining this world into spiritual order out of chaos. If a general education can even begin to equip one to live into this new orientation without falling into madness, it will be valid enough to serve modern man for the interim.

A season of barbarism may be inevitable to such a cultural transition. Yet the pains might be alleviated by painstaking forethought.

Higher education, to avoid being trivial, can set its curricula and its models for the future by humane needs; or it can maintain its drift toward further disjunction, and further carelessness about the human spirit of our thousands of undergraduates—and toward further chaos.

Whether the average present undergraduate will see this general education as threat or opportunity seems of meager significance beside the urgency that paths through chaos be defined, that higher education be not a mere handmaiden of chaos, and that some undergraduates are offered a chance to see the excitement and value in maintaining humanity rather than barbarism among the realities of a world still forming. General education still demands this kind of elitism.

