Perspectives (1969-1979)

Volume 8
Number 2 *Winter*

Article 6

1976

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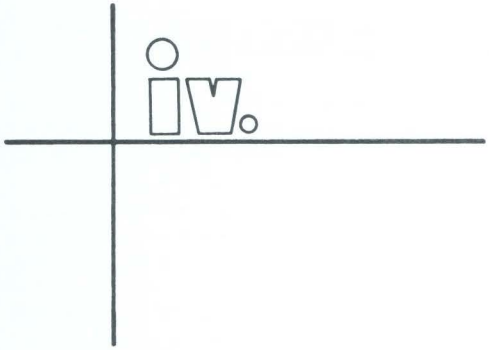

Humanities in an Age of Uncertainty

Norman Penlington

The substance of this paper was given at the recent (Oct. 1976) conference of the Association of General and Liberal Studies held at the College of Basic Studies, Boston University.

In the few minutes at my disposal what can I, who am approaching the end of my formal teaching career, tell you who are just beginning or who are midway? Although I have spent a lifetime finding my way in this age of uncertainty I can relate some useful teaching experiences.

First, the instructor of humanities needs knowledge — an immense amount of it — an *extensive* knowledge of a vast subject matter. At Michigan State, where we teach over a 3,000-year period of Western experience, the need for knowledge is endless. The instructor also needs an *intensive* knowledge of a person, a period, an idea, or a problem that he can sink his teeth into — the subject that he can write on professionally. I found that the general knowledge of humanities supplied me with bushelsful of insights for my own narrow field of history on which I have written. The instructor in humanities, also, unlike the instructor in most disciplines, should keep up with the significance of what is going on all around him from a newspaper, television, and a weekly journal. All our reading and reflection not only ought to increase knowledge but also understanding of the significance and interrelationships of that knowledge. Furthermore, we have to bring that knowledge to life, to animate it with meaning. For our job is not simply to purvey mere knowledge but meaningful knowledge. Meanings in the knowledge we teach are broadly speaking of three kinds: first historical meanings; accurately to represent a contemporary background of what we are studying. For example, Pericles, "Funeral Oration", cannot be taught or interpreted without a brief explanation of Periclean imperialism and the writings of Thucydides. Secondly, there are universal meanings concerning the nature of human beings: for example,

Homer's insights on human nature. Thirdly, there is meaning in the lives of instructors and students that explicitly or implicitly reveals itself in teaching.

What do I mean by meaning in life? It signifies that life has a worthwhile quality, and purpose, and a direction that gives satisfaction to the individual. As a product of the Western tradition I would qualify that explanation by adding, with due regard for the rights of others.

Why do I emphasize meaning? Albert Camus asserted in the 1940s that he had seen many people die because life for them was not worth living. From this he concluded that the "question of life's meaning is the most urgent question of all."

In ages of stability — like early Roman times, early medieval times, the 18th and 19th centuries, for example, when group values predominated, the question of meaning for most people rarely arose. There was almost no difference between group meanings and values and individual meanings and values because the individual found satisfaction in group values. He did not feel alienated from them or desire to challenge them. A classic description of this placid situation, when group values dominated most individuals, may be found in Walter Lippmann's *Public Opinion* — a description of the United States at the time of President Wilson and of the early 1920's.

Today the converse is becoming the situation. Collective meanings and values in the West are under unprecedented attack from minority groups and individuals who feel that the old meanings are meaningless and oppressive. Many students are aware that they have been indoctrinated with meanings that they disbelieve. Many unable to resolve their dissatisfaction evade the problem of meaning by turning to hedonism, drug-taking, alcoholism, or even violence. Perhaps the situation forces some to seek new meanings; or in rare cases a few may do so deliberately.

To hasten the process of seeking meaning students need deconditioning from the herd. The teaching of humanities should be filled with a genial skepticism but not cynicism: mock the fads and fancies of today and yesterday, but refrain from destroying the faith of students in their capacity to find meaning in life. The cynical professor, on the other hand, may unconsciously be projecting his own cynicism on to students or like Shakespeare's Iago do so for reasons of self-justification. One way to make students skeptical is to keep looking for basic collective and individual assumptions in every document. This is usually a difficult task for sophomores to find on their own. If possible, elicit the significance of that giveaway sentence, "We must believe this." The obvious question is, "Why must we?" And the obvious answer is, "Otherwise the basic assumptions of the author's point of view would be undermined."

It follows from the foregoing that if meaning is essential for life we must find it in the documents we teach. We can teach documents where the discovery of meaning is the key problem in understanding the document: Homer's *Iliad*, Augustine's *Confessions*, Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Goethe's *Faust*, etc. In other words, what is being suggested is the teaching of the Socratic Doctrine of "Know Thyself," and the raising of Montaigne's question, "Is that true?" Montaigne meant, are a document's basic premises true? And by extension, is the document true to the nature of man?

Let me illustrate with Dante's *Inferno*. One of our books of readings (Karl Thompson's *Classics of Western Thought*, Vol. II) contains some of the cantos of the *Inferno*. I teach the poem as a kind of depth analysis and as an example of

the positive mystic way. The *Inferno* marks the beginnings of Dante's vision of that way. In the *Inferno* Dante must first face his own sins, his potentiality for sin, his own false meanings, and the meaninglessness of his own life before being ready for purgatory. Several times Virgil, representing Classical Reason, commands Dante to look at the sinners in hell. Since the *Divine Comedy* is Dante's own vision he has to look at the hell in his own being. Dante as everyman, having followed Virgil and become aware of his own sins and the possibility of their expression, is now ready for purgatory. In purgatory he will be purged of his sins and false meanings and made ready to progress in paradise.

To encourage students to search for their own meanings, my teaching also tries to avoid a pattern-imposing approach; it follows an existential one, that is, knowledge is regarded as a living reality — like a Platonic dialogue. For example, after an historical introduction to the background of a document, I try to confront the students with the living, existential truth of the document. In other words let the document speak in its own language, as far as possible, with a minimum of intepretation from me. It may be necessary to identify with the author in order to expose a student ot the raw power of a classical document. But you may well say, is not the raw power of a great author above their heads and perhaps too much for them? Of course much of Homer, Shakespeare, Goethe, Nietzcsche, T. S. Eliot, etc., etc., is above their heads. But is it not the task of the Humanities instructor to bring an otherwise obscure passage to life by means of modern comparison and vivid illustration?

For example, many of you will recall one of the passages of Plato's "Phaedo" where Socrates says that the soul of the true philosopher must be "gathered into itself" and that the soul should not be too much tied to the body. No doubt many students think of that idea — if they think about it at all — as a bit of irrelevant Greek folklore. But Socrates' analysis resembles almost exactly Jung's idea that growth in maturity consists in absorbing one's projections. That is, your soul, your psyche, your life cannot mature so long as you have a crush on something or someone. (Excuse me, a projection on something or someone!) In this explanation do you notice that a difficult ancient idea has been explained by a modern one — itself difficult to many students and in turn explained? These comparisons will thus enable many students to see their own problems mirrored in the great writings of the past.

So far we have discussed three characteristics of teaching humanities: the necessity of knowledge, of meaning, and of an existential approach. A fourth characteristic is the necessity of a humanities instructor to speak in vivid, simple vocabulary without cheapening the profound ideas of the document being taught. The ideas and the depths of the documents we teach are difficult enough without our students having to hack their way through lifeless jargon. The complexity of our documents must be presented in utter and accurate simplicity. We should speak "natural language," not jargon language. Natural language is not only more interesting to listen to and to comprehend but is also more accurate than jargon. My authority for this statement is the atomic physicist, Werner Heisenberg. In his Gifford Lectures of 1958 he spoke as follows:

> "One of the important features of the development of the analysis of modern physics is the experience that the concepts of natural language, vaguely defined as they are, seem to be more stable in the

expansion of knowledge than the precise terms of scientific language, derived as an idealization from only limited groups of phenomena. This is, in fact, not surprising since the concepts of natural language are formed by the immediate connection with reality; they represent reality. . . "

"Keeping in mind the intrinsic stability of concepts of natural language in the process of scientific development, one sees that — after the experience of modern physics — our attitude towards concepts like mind or the human soul or life or God will be different from that of the nineteenth century, because these concepts belong to the natural language and have therefore immediate connection with reality. . . ."

Following Heisenberg, therefore, humanists should avoid the "precise terms of scientific language" because they are an "idealization from only a limited group of phenomena" and use "natural language" because of its "immediate connection with reality." We learn natural language from everyday speech, literature, poetry, history, religion. Thus by our use of natural language, our presentations will be more accurate, more interesting, and more vivid.

There is a second reason for our cultivation and use of natural language. How can our teaching and writing exhibit accuracy, interest, and vividness if every time we open our mouths a cliche drops out? It is true, of course, that we must first learn to recognize a cliche. This means that early in our academic careers we must learn to write good prose well, that is, with accuracy, conciseness, and grace. Every young instructor, assistant professor, and anyone else whose English style needs improving, which means all of us, need practice, continual writing. It has taken me 45 years to learn such ideas and style as I now have, and I am still learning. Incidentally these few remarks of mine today required re-writing at least 10 times. Surely a large part of Representative Barbara Jordan's effectiveness lies not simply in the power of her thought but in the magnificent language with which she expresses that power. Therefore I suggest, nay I urge all of you, to take a summer off from regular work to do the exercises in a good style manual, to study how great authors learned to write, and to learn what constitutes good style and why. Among other consequences of that summer's practice and study of style will be that your comments on students' essays will be terse and tactful, fresh and incisive.

Let me conclude with an account of the greatest teaching experience in my life. Last year and this year I taught Carl G. Jung's autobiography, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections,* (Vintage), which I believe will come to be recognized as one of the great autobiographies of history. Last year I taught it first to 7 honor students — all 4-point — an engineer, a mathematician, a journalist, a musician, etc. These students were utterly cynical about politics and the mass media, but they did not boggle at Jung's report of "exteriorization" — a knife split in a drawer because of emotional forces. I was astounded at their enthusiasm, which appeared both in discussions and in essays.

Last spring I introduced the same book to my three regular classes with the same enthusiastic result. Three students said it was the most interesting book that they had ever read. Two students said they, like Jung, had two personalities: an extravert one and an introvert one. This was not something they could reveal to their parents? One unexpected result of their studying Jung was student recognition that one of the great men of our time had the same

kind of difficulties in his childhood and adolescence with his parents as students have with their parents. They also continually complain that their parents do not understand them. Jung, who had 8 uncles who were clergymen, described how his father, who was also a clergyman, prepared him for confirmation and encouraged him to believe that it was to be a great experience. The service bored him to death. How many of our students have been confirmed or bar-mitzvahed to boredom? Thus Jung's autobiography was a book which students could identify with fully, but which left them free and gave them courage to be their most creative selves.

This age of doubt at the collective ideas and feelings of our day makes it possible for a courageous individual to break from the herd to struggle for his creative best, and having reached that best give back the fruit of his best to mankind. In other words, as the Chinese say: CRISIS EQUALS OPPORTUNITY. The study of the humanities is one way this may be done. It is one of the tasks of the instructor of humanities to help students begin reaching for this goal. But we can only really do so if we see its value and are doing it ourselves. Broadening the meaning somewhat of the saying of the great Spanish mystic, St. Dominic, and the motto of the Dominican Order, our task is "to contemplate and to pass on to others the things contemplated."