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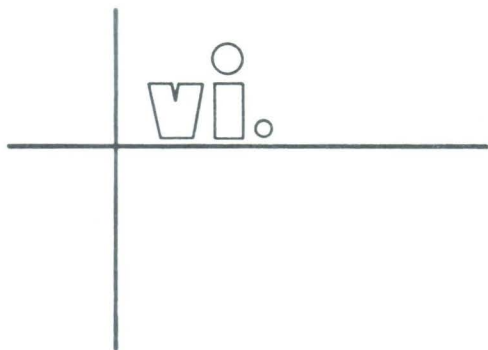


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A View on Three Days of General Education Summary Address, AGLS Convention, CBS 1976

Francis L. Broderick

Now at the end of our three-day consultation we look back for a moment to see where we have been and where we are going. When you hear what I say as summary, you may wonder if we both attended the same meeting. Think of it this way — whatever I say must have happened at a session that you missed. As a Republican friend of mine said during the first Kennedy/Nixon debate: "Don't think. Believe."

We looked at three serious perennial issues. We quested, sometimes implicitly, sometimes explicitly, for definitions. We argued again about the nature and function of disciplines. And we explored, inconclusively but I think productively, the generalist-specialist debate.

While everybody shied away from defining humanities or liberal studies or general education, some essential notions about these complex topics, so much a part of our lives and work, came through in what was said by us all. Let me try a couple of definitions. With appropriate nods to diffidence, let me just say flatly that the definition of the humanities should include at least the following elements: 1) centrality of concern on human beings rather than on structures of society or on the processes of nature; 2) attention to, probably focus on, the individual rather than the group; 3) awareness of the ways in which we know, ever mindful of Whitehead's dictum that we think clearly in proportion to our own perceptions of how we reach our conclusions; 4)

concern for moral values, whether drawn from God, man or nature; 5) insistence on the obligation to carry knowledge beyond description so that forthright judgments on values, on morality, find themselves comfortably enveloped within the processes of intellectual growth.

This definition focusses primarily on the humanities. So let us move along to the natural sciences.

For the purposes of general education, the natural sciences lay bare the processes of nature, including nature's man, in such a way that man may understand both nature and man, putting man in the context of his surroundings on the assumption that without that understanding man has no identity. The importance of this point, the centrality of the natural sciences within the tradition of general education, within liberal studies, indeed within the humanities themselves, I think has drawn our attention less than it should have.

Social sciences in the context of general studies try the same processes on institutions. But poor social sciences: Johnnies-come-lately, stretched between the other two, humiliated that they cannot match the methodology of the natural sciences and, therefore, tempted to confine themselves to quantification; but on the other hand, ashamed of not having the graceful impulses of the humanities, but knowing that they yield to them only at the risk of contempt from the lads with the hand calculators.

The point that the rich diversity of presentations here at the conference has made is that general education, liberal studies, must embrace all three areas of knowledge, communicating them not as disciplines that are the possession of the elite, but as essential equipment for all people who intend to examine their own lives.

Even as we remained unsettled on our definitions, we played continually with the demands and the limitations of disciplines, and to disciplinary we added multidisciplinary, crossdisciplinary, interdisciplinary, and (one I had never heard before) transdisciplinary. In a moment I shall offer you one more for your collection: nondisciplinary.

The basic stem is "the discipline," defined essentially by the historical development of the American university system over the past hundred years. In the old days college was a finishing school for the upper class and for the handful of upwardly mobile whose aspirations identified them with the upper class. Colleges were arenas where polite scholars competed for captive audiences, young men and women who were going to stay around for four years anyway before they took largely predictable routes into business and into professional schools, or into the home. In this comfortable sellers' market, scholarly disciplines developed their programs and their mystiques to suit themselves, and the four-year student weighed their comparative interest or entertainment value confident that society would award him recognition as a degree-bearing, and therefore educated, person when he came out the other end. In this situation the humanities flourished, only rarely challenged, though increasingly challenged, first by the natural sciences and then by the social sciences, all functioning as separate disciplines.

We have seen at the conference ample evidence of how competently the disciplines can serve liberal education. Not enough of you heard Kerr, Livesey, and Davis here at the BU College of Basic Studies talking about their two-year sequence in chemistry, physics, and biology, each part of which is taught as a disciplinary course. The two-year sequence was rich, many-sided, and humanist in the very best possible way. Snitgen at Northern Michigan

teaches a biology course that is unapologetically a biology course, still very much within the tradition of general education. The disciplines are here. They are functioning. They are educative. We do not necessarily need to move to crossdisciplinary or transdisciplinary in order to serve general education.

"Interdisciplinary" covers vastly ambiguous possibilities. It is a currently popular buzz word for a much-respected and, in many cases, highly successful development of new approaches to students when, usually, two people combine efforts and do something jointly. There may be genuine interpenetration of two disciplines. There can be a philosopher and an historian feeding each other, feeding the class, and raising different questions that neither of them would have raised alone. The offering may be joint; but it may also be simply two-layered, and if it is, then students not turned on by one person and his discipline will no more certainly be turned on by two persons and their disciplines in a course that simply duplicates within a single experience the disciplinary interests of two people operating separately from each other even though they may in fact be in the same classroom at the same time and may listen to each other. There is danger in thinking that a course may be innovative, and therefore successful, just because it is "team-taught" (another fashionable buzz word). In fact, it may be simply a Dagwood Sandwich course where you get history this week and philosophy next week. In such a course, the student leans just as much on his own resources in order to make the two interpenetrate as if he had taken two separate disciplinary courses. So, experienced practitioners that we are, we are not instantly overwhelmed by invocations of the words "interdisciplinary" and "team taught."

Nondisciplinary carries the implication that a teacher withdraw from his training and approach a piece of work, not necessarily in his field, as an educated person, bringing to it the perceptions of an educated person without bringing any of his scholarly equipment overtly to bear on it. He simply says, What would an educated person think of this work as he read it? He is now saying some very interesting things to his students. He is saying:

We're trying to make educated people out of you. Do you know what an educated person is? An educated person is someone like me. I can read something intelligently. I don't have to hide behind scholarly skills. I can look at this work, say things about it, react to it, judge it, pull it apart, not because I'm an historian but because I'm an educated person.

You do not say these things quite so arrogantly; indeed, the process says them implicitly. To the students you say:

To all these texts that we give you in college, these great things to read, these great things to look at, you too can bring all your resources. You don't have to be an English major to read a play of Shakespeare, pull it apart, analyze it, enjoy it. We do it. We're not Shakespearean scholars. We do it, We're relaxed. Come on. You can do it too.

We say that. We also say that when they make judgments on any text or on any situation that requires a decision, they are not now or in the future ever going to have all our disciplinary equipment to call upon. Let them become ready, then, to behave like educated people.

There is an interesting way to push this nondisciplinary notion one more step. When you team-teach with somebody and the text is squarely in your field, let him lecture on it. At the level of general education there is no need for

your bringing information that only you have because you are an expert. The students do not need that. Let your colleague make the presentation. It will be good for his education. It will undoubtedly be good for your humility. And it will prove a more exciting experience for your students.

Implicit in this discussion of nondisciplinary and explicit in many seminars here is the recognition that discipline, transdiscipline, nondiscipline are not the real issue. The real issue is the quality of teaching, the quality of the perception that goes into the teaching, and the willingness of us all as professional academics to lay ourselves bare and not hide behind the arcane vocabulary that we develop to bewilder each other. Remember Snitgen's biology course at Northern Michigan: Let students touch fundamental processes in biology, in physics, in chemistry. Let them touch greatness — in the lab, in the art gallery, in the *Federalist Papers*. One of you sent out an important signal on this topic: We should remind ourselves to *be* humanists. We can communicate humanist values even better by what we are than by what we say. We falter on this virtue when we deal with our colleagues in other areas, and we falter even in our relationships with each other. To paraphrase Nietzsche on Christianity: Don't talk to me about humanism; show me some humanists.

Much of what I have said about disciplinary and nondisciplinary spills over into the third topic that ran through our seminars: the gap, or the conflict, between specialists and generalists. We have said so much on this topic to each other that we know pretty much where we stand. Let me just say that there is much to be said for both generalists and specialists. The specialist has an intensity in his attention that is enviable and that is an antidote to the danger of doing too many things slightly well. The specialist, at least in part of his personality, is tending toward depth and excellence. He should not be faulted for it. The generalist, on his side, is obviously dealing much more realistically with the students where they are, for they simply do not share our scholarly interests. Nor should they. If they all shared our scholarly interests, they might start pouring into the profession, taking our jobs; that is not what we want. What they want, in their best moments, is to touch greatness in the world and to understand fundamental processes, to learn how to analyze them, how to deal with them, how to talk and to write as part of a literate generation. The generalists attend to this hunger, eagerly and, I think, significantly.

These three issues — the problem of definition, the function and dysfunction of disciplines, and the tug-of-war between generalists and specialists — these are the issues we have weighed and argued about (argued rather amicably, for we have been sort of a friendly group).

Along with friendly banter and spirited exchange on topics that always stand at the heart of the Association's agenda, we kept ears cocked for hints on technique. In one area, critical thinking, the conference was host to a splendid presentation. In a second, skill in writing, we were all curiously reticent; but I did hear one useful hint over coffee.

Brown from Bowling Green was the featured speaker at the most stimulating session I attended. He was talking negatively about the existing models of critical thinking. The difficulty about the current emphasis on teaching critical thinking, which is becoming a vogue across the nation, Brown said, is that fundamentally what is taught is a "passive process" of naming the elements of critical thinking: deduction, assumption, inference, interpretation, evaluation. You put up a model and let the students pull it all apart, identifying the elements as they go along, but never integrating their skill in this process with

everything else that they study. Brown wants to plunge the process of critical thinking directly into substantive material — Brown is an economist by trade — so that rules are tools and not simply the content of a separate course. Teach form and content simultaneously. Identify questions; reorganize them for decision, make the decision on a basis that can be rationalized and defended. Brown has offered to share his materials with anyone who writes to him.

We talked curiously little about helping our students to learn how to write, perhaps because we know that step one might be to learn how to write better ourselves. Yet we know that writing must be viewed as something that you never stop learning. It is possible to learn how to write well. It is possible to help other people learn how to write well. And it is even possible to help other people learn how to help still other people learn how to write well. I heard only one optimistic foray on this topic: at Loyola University in New Orleans, they have borrowed Brown University's developmental writing program, and Johnson from Loyola claims fabulous success in taking people who are very unhappy about teaching writing and, within six weeks, substantially converting them into being tolerably good writing teachers. Every glimmer of success should hearten us all. But, as I said, Johnson's comments on writing were the only ones I heard all weekend.

Let me ask and answer where we go from here. First of all — and I have the permission of my host to turn this into a taunt — I think that we as professionals in general education are inadequately open to science. In fact, we have maintained a hostility to science. The hostility is deeply based in ignorance, and we tend to be supercilious about our ignorance. In my experience (including my experience at this conference), there are substantially more scientists who can find their way about humanist topics than there are humanists and social scientists, but especially humanists, who can find their way around science. We must be as open to science as scientists are to us. You may not think that is a very high goal; but it would take us many steps past where we are now.

Second, I think we must heed the charge of Pill from Oklahoma State (in what must have been the wittiest performance here) that universities these days "lay on the altar of general education many prayers but few sacrifices." He warned that general education might become the formula for creating the Ugly American, for as electives get gobbled up in one way or another, general education is finally called upon as a catch-all, a three-hour "transfiguration course" that carries all the weight of making decent human beings out of students. He feared that we are becoming increasingly parochial even as we seek greater universality in general education courses.

Third, it seems to me urgent to remind ourselves of what Brown from Bowling Green was telling us: Meld form and content to avoid being caught in technicalities, in accidents of our profession, for our goal is clear perception of the important ideas in the sciences and humanities.

And now a last word that falls under suspicion because it looks as if I am paying for my dinner. Nonetheless, I must say, on my own behalf but perhaps for most of you too, that the BU College of Basic Studies was a splendid place for our meetings because the College has faced up to most of the issues of general education and has dealt with them provocatively and productively. By being here, we are able to drink in a little of the aggressive confidence that the faculty and the dean feel: things are working here — and working well.

Thursday at dinner we had a substantial dose of Kant, even though he was never named. Today let me try you out on some Pascal, specifically Pascal's

wager about God: If he assumed there was no God and in fact there was no God, he gained nothing. If he assumed there was no God and in fact there was, he was in the soup for all eternity. Now suppose he assumed that there was a God and in fact there was not, what has he lost? He has lived a good life. And if he assumed that there was a God and in fact there was, he was golden. So we too: We must assume that the liberal arts and general studies have a great future and that we shall help create that future. If we are wrong, we have lost nothing, for our lives will be full of what we value dearly. But if we are right, we shall have helped create that future. The liberal arts are worth that easy gamble.

There will be no opportunity for public questions because the structure is so fragile that if you huff and you puff you may blow the house in. But, like Jimmy Carter, you may have two minutes for rebuttal.

Remember
The 17th Annual Meeting
Weber State College, Ogden, Utah
October 27, 28, 29, 1977
Information: Dr. Chandadai Seshachari