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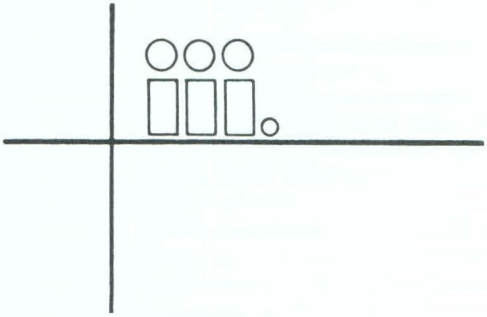

IMPROVING HUMANITIES EDUCATION: PHILOSOPHY AND DESIGN

Ronald W. Carstens

Both the Hebrew notion of the fall and the Greek concept of *hubris* have taught us that human endeavors are essentially acts of pride and possibly acts of arrogance. I suppose that a paper entitled "Improving Humanities Education" would be judged to be as at least impertinent in as much as it suggests that the teaching of the humanities can or ought to be improved. But I believe it is possible to improve the way that body of human intellectual and artistic study of man as man we call the humanities is addressed and actualized in the formal process of education. Indeed we would not be about the things we are about at this conference if we all did not believe in the possibility of this improvement.

Moreover, I begin with the supposition that humanities education *must* be improved: the reason for this imperative is the critical question I wish to address. Its importance inheres in the very *raison d'être* of the humanities and the connection they have to liberal education. And my remarks are intended to underscore this connection. Quite simply I shall argue that the unending attempts to integrate the humanities and by implication the values they represent into the lives of men and women is what constitutes not only a liberal education but the very core of life as human.

To those of us who are in the process of trying to do liberal education it is apparent that the imperative to improve humanities education springs from the place the humanities traditionally have had in the liberal arts endeavor. But it is not always so evident to us that the improvement of humanities education involves something more profound. It involves the justification of *the endeavor* itself. It is to this justification that I wish to turn.

In doing this my first task is to discuss these two related issues as I understand them, addressing the appropriate place of the humanities in the process of liberal arts education while suggesting the reasons why humanities education necessarily must be improved if we are to save our civilization from wreckage. This is an overly ambitious thesis but one I think worthwhile enough to ask you patiently to endure. Whether it is arrogant or not, I ask you to be the judges.

In order to make my point I shall describe what I understand as liberal education with the help of some who have preceded me, and offer a justification that hopefully will explain the necessity for and, indeed, the justice of this kind of education; and then briefly discuss the relationships of the humanities to liberal education.

First of all it seems to me that we must reject the traditional argument or the folk wisdom which maintains that liberal arts provide a very nice polish for individuals who are fated to live in a world which requires skills and techniques for survival and recognize that their study is necessary to the freedom of the person as well as to his or her personal effectiveness. In other words we must argue that liberal arts education is an essential part of the process of being human. It is not a mere accidental attribute which makes life a little less burdensome. Indeed, a truly liberal education prepares people to be upset with the world as it is and thus makes them uneasy about its imperfections; or so it seems to me.

That liberal arts education is not a mere gloss on life becomes evident when we remember that true education is not simply involved with training the individual for survival but rather it is that mode of activity which makes man a being unlike any other. My meaning may become clearer when we recall that civilization and education as dimensions of the same reality, the reality of mankind as humankind, are dependent on each other for their vitality. Ernest Boyer and Martin Kaplan put it more succinctly when they write: "Throughout human history, education has mirrored the state of civilization" and the state of education exemplifies the conditions of the times.[1]

This observation, when coupled to the problems we face in guarding the permanent value of a liberal arts education in a world enamored of technology and change, suggests one of the problems we face as educators. The problem is this: In our diversity and because of our uniqueness as persons, we have at times lost sight of the integral connection between personality and community.[2]

In this oversight we have developed an educational ideology, perhaps a philosophy, which courts diversity at the expense of commonality. This courtship is not without appeal. Our diversity as individuals and as people is the source of our uniqueness as beings. Indeed the very nature of the liberal arts endeavor demands a respect for difference, variety, and the myriad ways men and women have addressed their conditions. Respect for this diversity must inform our lives and, more especially, our tasks as educators. Human genius, any great idea or moment in history, results from the shared experiences we labor to make lasting. Our laboring over meaning comes to fruition only when we allow an ambiance of freedom wherein we reason, consider, discuss and choose those ideas and matters which best adumbrate truth. Our moral dimension as educators is derived from and is dependent upon our openness to the truth, which in turn depends on our openness to various and sundry realities. In the diversity of the universe we find truth; thus, we must

seek, respect and welcome all responsible attempts to search out and comprehend the truth.

But what is truth? With Pilate we must realize that truth defies adequate definition while we affirm that it does exist and that it is rooted in what is. Jacques Maritain very adeptly expressed the essence of this idea when he wrote, "Truth is not a set of ready-made formulas to be passively recorded, so as to have the mind closed and enclosed by them. Truth is an infinite realm — as infinite as being — whose wholeness transcends infinitely our powers of perception"[3] yet we are compelled to seek it out, and, therefore, we are compelled to entertain and allow the diversity which makes the search possible. Liberal arts education, if it is anything, is our involvement in the attempt to uncover the layers of truth which constitute reality, that which is.

Reality indeed involves diversity and uniqueness. In recognizing this we as educators must confront this diversity and in this confrontation we find many of the problems which riddle liberal arts education. Diversity is, as are all blessings, mixed. It is much more difficult to communicate and teach in a diversified setting. And those who argue for a common language and grammar for education are sometimes judged to be cowards in their confrontation with this difficulty. Moreover, it is sometimes argued that any common basis for intellectual pursuit is ideology in disguise and is, therefore, depending on one's point of view, heresy or dogma. Either the commonality of the terms of the dialogue is thought to stifle diversity or the diffusiveness of audience is believed to destroy commonality. That this debate has precedents is not disputed. Yet we need not give up hope if we recall that commonality as a basis of truth is never synonymous with sameness, nor is diversity the equivalent of idiosyncracy.

In light of this we need to remember that the connection between human personality and community inheres in their mutual dependence; that both are involved in the quest for truth which is, however obliquely put, the essence of both human uniqueness and human solidarity.

Liberal arts education, which assumes a common base for intellectual pursuit, is not a patina on brute matter; it is the participation of matter in the truth and, therefore, humanity and liberal arts may be said to depend on each other in as much as both participate in truth. J.F.A. Taylor puts it much better in his discussion of *Humanitas* when he says, "Essentially, *Humanitas* signifies the moral community to which all human beings are by exercise of right reason capable of belonging but to which no one belongs by the mere passion of heredity."[4] Humanitas is a moral estate, he says, and this when coupled with the propensity of man to seek the truth, constitutes the essential substance of human personhood.

All this leads me to affirm that a common core of liberal knowledge is possible because knowledge is possible. This epistemological postulate is the beginning of that real respect for the unity of knowing which has been the genius of Western civilization. But the question remains: what is meant by a general liberal arts education? What essential components go into the creation of a liberally educated person?

For your consideration the following ideas are proposed. They are adaptations of Ernest Boyer and Martin Kaplan's discussion of liberal education via a common curriculum and they represent my understanding of what a liberal arts experience does by way of educating the person to fulfillment.

To answer we must first ask what we should expect of a liberally educated, indeed, fully human person. To paraphrase Hannah Arendt, the educated

person is one who, existing in the present moment, is capable of understanding the past while preparing for the future. Education in Arendt's words involves "loving the world enough to assume responsibility for it."

Jacques Maritain substantiates the above characterization when he writes that the aim of education is

> . . .to guide man in the evolving dynamism through which he shapes himself as a human person — armed with knowledge, strength of judgment, and moral virtues — while at the same time conveying to him the spiritual heritage of the nation and the civilization in which he is involved, and preserving in this way the century-old achievements of generations.[5]

And again:

> . . .the objective of basic liberal education is not the acquisition of science itself or of art itself, along with the intellectual virtues involved, but rather the grasp of their *meaning* and the comprehension of the truth and beauty they yield . . . The objective of basic liberal education is to see to it that the young person grasps this truth or beauty through the natural powers and gifts of his mind and the natural intuitive energy of his reason backed up by his whole sensuous, imaginative, and emotional dynamism.[6]

Such an education is multidimensional. For our purpose, however, we can detect three major dimensions as critical to liberal education. Liberal education involves an appreciation of the history of mankind and of the collective ideas of that history; it involves an awareness of past and present institutions, cultures, sciences and arts; and it must present an informed, responsible and humane approach to the problems of the future. Simply put, liberal education must provide a vision, past, present, and future, that will move the person so educated to seek the fullness of his or her being. All this needs to be done with a degree of depth and in conjunction with an area of concentration that will enable each liberally educated person to support himself or herself.

Such a task, impossible as it may appear, may be accomplished by a liberal arts institution provided that the curriculum and direction exist to supply each student and faculty with what is needed. Ideally such a plan of education should include the following areas of concern:

1. strong professional programs that prepare students for fully human work;
2. some means of insuring that each person will develop the skills of communication, language, analysis, and sane, civil argumentation;
3. a systematic core of courses which bring the student and the faculty to a full awareness of the heritage of the past with a view of instilling in each person a respect for the commonality of that heritage;
4. a core of courses that confront each person with the problems of contemporary life in a world of diverse cultures, lifestyles, and values;
5. academic experiences in areas of philosophy, theology and human values that attempt to prepare the student for a future in which the enduring values of mankind have a place;
6. an experience in the process of self-evaluation and ethical choice.

The first concern, i.e., a need for strong professional programs, is predicated on the fact that the person is a being who not only reasons about the human condition but also is compelled to labor and work in the world. To neglect the fact that we produce and consume in the common material order is to neglect the material aspect of the human person. Most of us must work for a

living and this necessity compels us to responsibly address not only the requirements of the job market but also the question of how work relates to human personality and human development.[7]

Secondly it should be recalled that if we assume that human beings exist in a common world, we must also assume that communication, analysis, and argumentation are essential to that common life. Hence it is imperative that a liberal education expose students to what Boyer and Kaplan call the "broad range of issues raised by our common existence in a world of messages." They argue that students

> should have an awareness of how languages develop, of the symbols we use, of the process of receiving and interpreting messages, of breakdowns in communication, of the search for an internal language. They should strive for 'comprehensive literacy' — an ability to spot the hidden presuppositions behind an act of communication, to infer the intent and suasive designs of a message.[8]

The third concern of a liberal education involves overcoming the historical provincialism and the relationship this overcoming has to personal freedom. Each student needs to be "introduced to the events, individuals, ideas, texts and value systems that have contributed consequentially to human gains and losses."[9] Appreciating the past must be a part of any liberal education and its importance involves not merely an appreciation of the past for itself but it encompasses a development of the student's appreciation of the common heritage of mankind. All the sciences and arts need this integrating component if the unity of knowledge is to be insured.

The fourth concern of liberal arts for appreciating diverse values and common problems rests on the assumption that persons as social beings have a responsibility to master the institutional and organizational structures of the contemporary world. Social beings shape and are shaped by their institutions and

> living in modern society means interacting with institutions. Understanding our common plight means developing institutional literacy; no educational enterprise has done its job if it has not acquainted its students with the roles, rights, and responsibilities of the principal institutions — public and private — that make up their world.[10]

Finally, the spiritual and ethical dimensions of the liberal arts curriculum involve an appreciation of mankind's search for value.

As a being who has values and is an entity with an ultimate value, the person must be encouraged to engage in "frank and searching discussion about the choices people make and why they make them. . . ."[11] Such a discussion will augment, but not substitute for, the search for meaning which has defined man as a human being searching for God.

This process must be the capstone of a liberal education for it essentially deals with man as a being searching for ultimate truth. McCormick says it well:

> . . .advance in knowledge liberates the spirit of man when it leads him out of ignorance into the possession of that truth which is the origin of every truth because it is the principle of all things and the final end of all. And this is wisdom, to set all things in order with reference to the final end of all. And here alone, in wisdom, do we find the unity of truth.[12]

From this it is apparent that man is a natural entity endowed with a unique mind who creates an artificial, economic, social and political reality and who, in turn, usually in times of turmoil, questions these perennial issues of human existence and contemplates the ultimate purpose of it all. Man is then a being who must study science, psychology, art, economics, sociology, politics, philosophy and theology in all their variants. These are studies of the layers of sediment that constitute the rock of reality.

What, then, is the place of the humanities in this study? We can argue *ad nauseam* about disciplines which might be properly labeled humanities. All disciplines dealing with the various levels of human study carry on this debate in one form or another. Yet I think we can come to some understanding about what the humanities are if we reflect on the power of human beings to create values and argue that the humanities involve the workings of men and women as creators of values. The humanities are the compilation of man's commentary, whatever its form, on the human condition. Whenever we labor to give some meaning to the experiences inhering in any and all levels, we are involved in the humanities.

History, philosophy, religious studies, politics, sociology, economics, arts and letters, self-expression and questions about the value of the natural order all involve the human questioning about the moral state of *Humanitas*. The humanities are, then, essentially commentaries on the text of life; or to return to my metaphor of the rock of reality, humanities are the Sisyphian labor to move the rock of reality.

As all of you know, Sisyphus was condemned by the gods because, as one version relates it, he had defied fate and had tested human fidelity by ordering his wife to leave his body unburied. She obeyed and this obedience prompted Sisyphus to return to the earth to settle the score. But as Camus brilliantly portrays the myth, "when he had seen again the face of this world . . . facing the curve of the gulf, the sparkling sea and the smiles of earth . . ." he would not return to the nether world. As a consequence of affirming his allegiance to his worldliness, he was seized and assigned his labor: "The price that must be paid for the passion of this earth."[13]

The humanities express man's passion for the world and they are thus imbued with the awareness of his tragic nature. That Sisyphus' love for the world was translated into his torture is not merely ironic, it is a profound example of man's human condition. Reality presses upon us and we must labor to move it from a lower to a higher plateau. And like Sisyphus, at the end of our labor "measured by skyless space and time without depth, the purpose is achieved."[14] Yet the rock falls again to the plain below and we must return to the task of moving it aright.

It is not merely the labor with reality that marks man's triumph. It is not just, as Camus says, "the cheek tight against the stone, the shoulder bracing the clay covered mass, the foot wedging it, the fresh start with arms outstretched, the wholly human security of two earth-clotted hands"[15] which marks the human effort to understand reality; indeed, it is not merely knowledge of the facts of brute matter that makes us wholely human. But it is as with Sisyphus, our consciousness of fate itself that marks our triumph and our tragedy. In the momentary glance as the rock falls again to the lowest depth there is the moment of consciousness and commentary; that "breathing space which returns as surely as his suffering."[16] With Camus, I would affirm that the return to the rock, the continual return to and labor with it, begins and ends in understanding. "When," as Camus writes it, "the images of the earth cling

too tightly to memory, when the call of happiness becomes too insistent, it happens that melancholy rises in man's heart; this is the rock's victory, this is the rock itself. The boundless grief is too heavy to bear. These are our nights of Gethsemane. *But crushing truths perish from being acknowledged.*"[17] Thus, the acknowledgement of reality, implying as it does a knowledge of what is, is the beginning of understanding and in that understanding is "the universe suddenly restored to its silence" and to "myriad wondering little voices of the earth rise up."[18]

The question of how to revitalize the humanities within the liberal arts context becomes, then, very important. They are the foundation of the entire endeavor and, therefore, cannot be treated as addenda to the college curriculum. Of late much has been written about the need to improve humanities education. I need not belabor you with this literature. One need only look at the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. I could cite the recent *Directory of Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*[19] as evidence of the realization of the importance of the task. One thousand ninety-seven pages of selected programs all of which attempt in some way or another to contribute to the structure of this important human concern.

My institution, Ohio Dominican College, is currently in the process of constructing as an integral part of our general education requirements an interdisciplinary program in the humanities that will provide the beginning of the liberal arts experience. That beginning as we see it, is constituted of an historical, philosophical, theological, literary and artistic appreciation of those perennial issues with which all must grapple. I will be happy to share our design with any who are so interested. But designs are endemic to each institution and I suspect that here is not the appropriate place to discuss Ohio Dominican's design.

However, one point must be underscored. Approaches to humanities education as I have already said, must begin with the premise that they are the basis for all true education and they are not decorations on the edifice of liberal learning. Hence, the interdisciplinary method, pervaded as it is with shortcomings, can be a very effective way of supporting the endeavor of the humanities by disregarding those academic walls that shut us off from our real task. But this is yet another title for another paper.[20]

By way of conclusion I should like to say that the need to improve the humanities within the liberal arts context is part of the imperative to save civilization with which we are faced. Hence the humanities must be understood as part of this endeavor for they represent man's essential expression of and quest for meaning. Moreover, liberal arts education can legitimately exist only if the humanities are seen as fundamental to the whole endeavor. They are the very fiber of the cloth of knowledge. They form the warp and woof which weaves the complex and varied pattern that reveals the direction of our civilization. Without a fiber of high quality the cloth will have no strength, texture, or wearing quality and the pattern and cloth itself will disintegrate.

Yet another way to underscore the necessity of seeing the essential relationship of the humanities to the liberal arts and therefore to civilization is to recall the ancient notion of understanding as always couched in the metaphor of sight and vision. The humanities offer us a vision of how we are and how we can be. To lose sight of them is to become blind. To quote Ionesco, we will in our blindness go "round in a circle in the cage of (our) planet, because (we) have forgotten that (we) can look up to the sky . . . Because all we want is to live, it becomes impossible for us to live. Just look around you."

[1] Ernest L. Boyer and Martin Kaplan, "Educating for Survival," *Change*. (March 1977) p. 22.

[2] cf. John McMurray, *Persons in Relations*, and *The Self as Agent*. (London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1961).

[3] Jacques Maritain, *Education at the Crossroads*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1943) p. 12.

[4] John F.A. Taylor, *Masks of Society*. (New York: Meredith Publishing Co., 1966) p. 14.

[5] Maritain, *Ibid.*, p. 10.

[6] *Ibid.*, p. 71.

[7] Boyer and Kaplan, *Ibid.*

[8] *Ibid.*

[9] *Ibid.*, p. 26.

[10] *Ibid.*

[11] *Ibid.*, p. 29.

[12] John McCormick, S.J., *St. Thomas and the Life of Learning*, (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1937) p. 18.

[13] Albert Camus, "The Myth of Sisyphus," *Existentialism*, ed., Walter Kaufman (Meridian, World Publishers: 1976) p. 313.

[14] *Ibid.*

[15] *Ibid.*

[16] *Ibid.*

[17] *Ibid.*, p. 314.

[18] *Ibid.*, p. 315.

[19] Elizabeth Bayerl, ed. *Interdisciplinary Studies in the Humanities: A Directory*. (Metuchen, N.J. & London: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1977).

[20] See David Hilliburton, "Curricular Design;" William Barquest, "Curricular Practice;" Jack Lindquest, "Curricular Implementation;" in *Developing the College Curriculum: A Handbook for Faculty and Administrators*, eds., Gary H. Quehl and Marguerite Gee (Council for the Advancement of Small Colleges: Washington, D.C. 1977).