

The Aims of Education

by Jonathan Z. Smith September 25, 1982

The Aims of Education," what a curious and portentous title to assign someone as the object of his summer's meditation, let alone to set before you as one of your first subjects for corporate inquiry and discussion upon entering this College.

I know that there is historical precedent for the nomenclature of this annual occasion, that the title was derived from that of the Presidential Address to the Mathematical Association of England in 1917, delivered by the famous philosopher and educator, Alfred North Whitehead, and revived, by then President Robert Maynard Hutchins, as the title of the first of three important lectures delivered at Louisiana State University in 1941—but this does not help. Even rereading Whitehead's original address proved to be of no assistance, despite the provocative and oft-quoted opening lines:

Culture is activity of thought, and receptiveness to beauty and humane feeling. Scraps of information have nothing to do with it. A merely well-informed man is the most useless bore on God's earth. What we should aim at is producing culture and expert knowledge in some special direction. Their expert knowledge will give them ground to start from, and their culture will lead them as deep as philosophy and as high as art.

THE AIMS OF EDUCATION

The problem, at least for me, lies in the word *aims*, both the noun itself, and the plural form.

If the difficulty is, in fact, a word, then the first stratagem ought to be to consult the shelf of dictionaries for clarification and, perhaps, relief.

Intention, intent, purpose, design, aim, end, object, objective, goal are comparable when meaning what one proposes to accomplish or attain by making or doing something, in distinction from what prompts one (the *motive*), or from the actual or envisioned outcome (the *effect*). . . . *Aim* implies a clear definition of something that one hopes to effect and a direction of one's efforts or energies to its attainment.

If "aim implies a clear definition of something that one hopes to effect," and if education be the object of the aim, then my assigned title puts me in double jeopardy. For it requires a "clear definition" of education (no small task), a clarity, even if attainable, that seems to be placed at risk by the pluralism of "aims." If education, in the context in which we gather this evening, means baccalaureate education or liberal education, the problem is intensified.

Let me illustrate my dilemma by citing the results of a survey, undertaken this year, on the aims of education as set forth in the catalogues of several hundred colleges in this country.

70 percent of the institutions surveyed listed intellectual development as one of their aims.

69 percent listed development of the students' human potential.

56 percent listed job preparation.

44 percent listed study of values.

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40 percent listed broad exposure to varied fields of knowledge.

40 percent listed development of religious values.

37 percent listed training in basic skills.

30 percent listed providing the foundations for life-long learning.

29 percent listed developing the capacity for critical thinking.

28 percent listed enhancing one's capacity for creativity.

22 percent listed preparation for citizenship.

21 percent listed the cultivation of aesthetic sensibility.

19 percent listed training in research.

18 percent listed development of specialized knowledge or exposure to "depth."

18 percent listed preparation for roles of leadership.

16 percent listed exposure to other cultures.

And so on, down to the utterly idiosyncratic.

This motley list of worthy goals accords well with the results of a similar survey from 1977, although the latter found more emphasis on preparation for fruitful leisure, on an "understanding of the basic principles for cultivating physical and mental health," and on what was termed "consumer efficiency," defined as "sound choice of values relating to style of life."

That there should be such a Babel ought to come as no surprise when one recalls that there are some three thousand

institutions of higher learning in this country, which collectively offer more than five hundred distinct bachelor's degrees. They range, in the standard alphabetical listing of their abbreviations, from the A.B. (Bachelor of Arts) to the B.W.E. (Bachelor of Welding Engineering). What could they possibly all have in common as an aim, as a "clear definition of something that one hopes to effect"?

Even if one focused only on the so-called liberal arts programs, the programs from which, in fact, the list of aims that I quoted was derived, the picture scarcely becomes clearer. This, too, is not unexpected. For, despite examinations, baccalaureate papers, the counting of credit hours, requirements, and so forth, unlike graduate studies, there is no clear terminus to a bachelor's program. There is no final "product." The degree is conferred at an arbitrary, though traditional, point, as an artificial interruption of a process. Regardless of what is taught, regardless of what (within certain generous limits) is achieved, regardless of what the putative aims may be, a bachelor's degree is conferred at the conclusion of the equivalent of four years of work. It often seems little more than certification of time spent "with good behavior."

No . . . I am uncomfortable with the requirement for "clear definition" and with the notion of terminus that seems to be implied by the word *aim*. I am equally uncomfortable with the cacophony that appears to be legitimated by the plural, *aims*. What, then, to do?

I was about to give up and hunt for another title, when my eye was caught by the etymology of *aim*. Most modern dictionaries agree that it is derived from Latin through an Old French verb meaning "to guess" (related to the English, "to estimate"). Some older dictionaries argue for another derivation, likewise from Latin through an Old French verb mean-

ing "to value" (related to the English, "to esteem"). Indeed, both the redoubtable Skeat and the magisterial *Oxford English Dictionary* declare, with a touch of indignation, that there has been a "confusion"; "in the word *aim*, probably two verbs have been confounded." I prefer the modern derivation, although I glory in the fact that, built into the word *aim*, is "confusion," disagreement, and argument. Therefore, I propose to take as my revised title for this evening's address, "A Guess about Education."

Having thus disposed of one problem of definition related to my title, that attendant on the word *aim*, I am still left with another. It will preoccupy much of our discourse tonight and in the months ahead—the word *education*. I have already stipulated its domain when I said, earlier, that "education, in the context in which we gather this evening, means baccalaureate education or liberal education." But, what is that?

The species "liberal" of the genus "education" implies that there are other sorts of education, meant to be excluded, but which, by contrast, might help in understanding the term. Alas, in common parlance the term "liberal" has been so co-opted by sectarian politics that I would not be surprised if somewhere, someone harbors the delicious thought that "fascist learning" is the obvious antonym—but that is scarcely what is usually implied. I must confess that, at least for me, the original contrast is no less political, and in many ways more embarrassing.

Resorting again to the dictionary, that common resource of both learned speakers and authors of freshmen term papers, one finds that the original contrast was between the "liberal arts" and the "servile arts," the former being: "worthy of a freeman, pertaining to persons of superior social station, i.e., a gentleman." Worse yet, the *O.E.D.* goes on to illustrate

the meaning of the word *liberal* in the liberal arts with the following quotation from 1801: "Two centuries back, horseracing was conceived as a liberal pastime, practiced for pleasure not for profit."

Much of what I hear from colleges appears to continue this tradition of understanding. Liberal education is a "gentlemen's agreement" in every sense of the phrase. Robbed of but a bit of its social discrimination and snobbery, most of us in the academy remain faithful to this original sense—the "liberal" as opposed to the "servile"; "a pastime practiced for pleasure not for profit"—when we all but automatically juxtapose as polar categories "Liberal Education" to "Professional" or "Pre-Professional Education."

In the time of the old colonial colleges, admission to a profession was largely through apprenticeship, after or alongside of the baccalaureate course of study. What formal professional academic programs existed were remarkable chiefly for their brevity. College was where one acquired "character"; outside of college, or after college, was where one acquired a career. This understanding of a College of Liberal Arts was not only a "gentlemen's agreement," it was designed to make gentlemen agreeable.

Colleges were understood to be, primarily, finishing schools. Courses in general education (and most were), courses in the range of the liberal arts, were designed to impart a certain *savoir-faire*, a broad civil, cultural, and civic veneer to a group of largely middle- and upper-class students (predominantly male) for most of whom jobs were waiting and leisure time assured. Liberal arts colleges were designed to lay the foundations for the fruitful enjoyment of the nonworking portions of their students' lives by introducing them to an appreciation for, and conventions of discourse about, the arts;

to a broad range of intellectual and historical generalizations which would serve to make them informed, urbane lay persons and citizens. Liberal learning was the acquisition of the civilized art of gossip—both in the sense of intimate, chatty talk, and in the more archaic sense of *god-sibb*, "a kinsman." That is to say, putting the two together, it was the acquisition of skills in the sort of talk appropriate between closely related equals, either by birth, class, or station. The campus green, that inevitable feature of all old-line colleges, served as but a miniature version of (and, later, a substitution for) that genteel, civil space for leisurely discourse known variously as the "promenade" or "boulevard."

Despite the fact that, even in the most elite, private, traditional liberal arts colleges, at least since the early 1900s, more than half of their graduates intended a career in commerce; the bulk of the rest, in one of the professions—these "servile" goals were never to be explicitly addressed. The professors were to be revered; the professions, reviled. Outside of college was the proper arena for initiation into work.

With modifications, this understanding remained dominant in the curricula of American colleges through the 1950s. It still persists in the rhetoric of most liberal arts colleges, as well as in the practice and attitudes of, perhaps, a somewhat smaller number.

Today, I think it fair to assert that many of these older, "liberal" aims are beginning to be more successfully embodied in educational television, talk shows, and other media; and that, first prompted by the G.I. Bill of Rights (perhaps the greatest single force for innovation in the history of American higher education), the student body, its educational objectives and social niche has, in many institutions, radically changed. For almost all, the "gentlemen's agree-

ment" has been broken, although nostalgia for it remains strongly in place.

Beyond this social shift, there was a second perturbation, accelerated in the late 1950s and 1960s, which decisively altered the character of most liberal arts colleges. Unlike the first, social-demographic shift, this was a change from within the academy rather than from without. The colleges became, despite their rhetoric, pre-professional endeavors of unprecedented proportions in that they saw as their major function the preparation of their students for the vocation of being graduate students, for entrance (despite their students' actual plans) into the academic profession. To be a professor had become *the* profession.

It would require another forum than this to chronicle the consequences of this shift for graduate studies. In colleges, the curriculum became increasingly dominated by the major, with both general and specialized requirements, as well as electives, frequently being justified almost wholly on the basis of their presumed utility for graduate study. The baccalaureate degree had become a preparatory degree, rather than an end in itself.

I have given this brief overview, not as a dispassionate historian of education (I am not), but rather to make a point. We stand today in an uneasy compromise, if not in an impossible contradiction. Colleges' rhetoric of "general education," of what is "liberal" in what they do, largely reflects notions of liberal learning in vogue before the 1950s in which, as we have seen, colleges functioned as finishing schools, teaching a curriculum designed to provide for fruitful leisure (as opposed to sloth) and to produce civility. Colleges' rhetoric of "specialized education," or "education in depth," as it is sometimes misleadingly called, largely reflects notions of collegiate education current since the late 1950s in which preparation

for graduate studies and academic careers governed the design of curricula, if less successfully their outcome.

I would hold both of these understandings, their rhetorics and rationales, to be inadequate in principle. But, setting this aside in light of the forces (largely external) presently impinging on higher education, *both* are anachronistic, implausible, and impractical. Their present all too frequent confused and jarring combination can neither be sustained nor justified.

In light of these considerations, what can one say at an occasion such as this? Let me begin again, and attempt to expose some of the most general sorts of presuppositions that might be brought to the enterprise of guessing about college education.

I begin with an obvious detail. In the staggering diversity of colleges, there are a multitude of spatial arrangements—the ways in which the blocks of courses are organized: general requirements, major requirements, prerequisites, electives, and the like. Each is appropriate, or at least habitual, to the peculiar ecology of particular institutions. What remains more or less constant (even under our indefensible quarter system) are the temporal arrangements. Regardless of the academic calendar employed, there is almost always less than one hundred hours of class time in a yearlong course. And there is no reason to suppose that any student who takes one course on a given subject will necessarily take another one. Less than one hundred hours (not quite four full days) may represent, for a number of students, their sole course of study in a particular subject matter. It is with this "bureaucratic" fact that thinking about collegiate education must begin. For within such a context, no course can do everything, no course can be complete. Rather each course is required to be self-consciously and articulately selective.

We do not reflect often enough together on the delicious yet terrifying freedom undergraduate education offers by these rigid temporal constraints. Regardless of what we do, we must do it in the equivalent of four years. This is an article of numerological faith more firmly held by the academy than reverence for the number seven was by the ancient Pythagoraeans. What this means—once more—is that we cannot, we do not, have to “cover” everything. As long as we conceive of the bachelor’s degree as having a completion and integrity of its own, then there is nothing that must be studied or taught, nothing that cannot be left out. A college curriculum, whether represented by a particular course, a program, or a four-year course of study, thus becomes an occasion for deliberate, collegial, institutionalized choice. This, then, is what our common discourse needs to be about. This is what binds us together as colleagues. *How to responsibly seize this freedom?* This is not a question that can be resolved by recourse to some registrar’s formula. It can only be addressed by subjecting our guesses to mutual clarification and argument.

I take as a corollary to this that each thing taught or studied is taught or studied, not because it is “there,” but because it is an example, an *exempli gratia* of something that is fundamental, something that may serve as a precedent for further interpretation and understanding by providing an arsenal of skills and paradigms as resources from which to reason, from which to extend the possibility of intelligibility to that which may first appear to be novel or strange.

Given this—that that which is taught or studied is by way of an “e.g.,” that the curriculum is an occasion for institutionalized choice—then the primary choice, by both faculty and students alike, is what shall the things studied, what shall the things taught, exemplify? This ought to be

explicit in every academic endeavor, at every level of the curriculum.

Behind such a view of education stands a set of suppositions, of guesses, if you please, concerning knowledge. Chief among these is that the world is not “given.” It is not simply “there.” We constitute it by acts of interpretation. We constitute it by speech, and by memory, and by judgment. It is by an act of human will, through projects of language and history, through words and memory, that we fabricate the world and ourselves. But, there is a double sense to the word *fabrication*. It means both “to build” and “to lie.” Education comes to life at the moment of tension generated by this duality. For, though we have no other means than language for treating with the world, words are not, after all, the same as that which they seek to name and describe. Though we have no other recourse than to memory, to precedent, if the world is not to be endlessly novel and, hence, forever unintelligible, the fit is never exact, nothing is ever quite the same. What is required at this point of tension is the trained capacity for judgment, for appreciating and criticizing the relative adequacy and insufficiency of any proposal of language and of memory.

What we labor at together in college is the production of individuals who know not only that the world is far more complex than it first appears, but also that, therefore, interpretative decisions must be made, decisions of judgment which entail real consequences for which one must take responsibility, from which one may not flee by the dodge of disclaiming expertise. This ultimately political quest for paradigms, for the acquisition of the powers and skills of informed judgment, for the dual capacities of appreciation and criticism might well stand as the explicit goal of every level of the college curriculum. The difficult enterprise of making interpre-

tative decisions, and facing up to their full consequences, ought to inform each and every course, each and every object of study.

In this regard, college is not unlike the work-a-day world. Perhaps the major difference is that we are allowed the privilege elsewhere limited only to television cameras when they cover sports. For we can make our decisions in "slow motion," we can have the benefit of "instant replay," in order that the processes of arriving at a decision, as well as its outcome, can be carefully studied, evaluated, and argued.

The fundamentals of a collegiate liberal arts education, from such a viewpoint, are decisions between interpretations, the skills attendant upon the understanding of particular interpretations, and the ability to translate one interpretation in terms of another. Above all, they are that which leads to the capacity for argumentation, and, therefore, to responsible judgments. My guess about education is that it is, essentially, argument. *Education is argument about interpretations.*

Despite what you may have been told, college is not a "learning experience." Planaria, bees, mice, perhaps even machines can all learn. They can process information and retain it. They can discern repetitive, significant patterns on the basis of past experience. They can undertake efficient and effective action on the basis of such information and patterns. And, if this fails, perhaps they can innovate. But no other being than man, as far as we know, can argue. For argument is not based on the world as it is, but rather on what the world might imply. It is the world refracted—no longer *the* world, but rather *our* world—a world of significance, interpretation, and, therefore, of argument. It is a world of social beings, not biological ones. For significance, interpretation, and argument are impossible without fellow men. Even as words, they seem strangely naked without their attendant prepositions: signifi-

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Such a notion of "interesting" is appropriate to that genteel social world constituted by gossip. Here, what is "interesting" is the unexpected, the slightly out-of-place. "Is he handsome?" "No, but he has an interesting face." "Isn't it interesting [raised eyebrows] who she was with last night?"

This understanding of "interesting" reminds me of those sixteenth-century "cabinets of curiosities," direct ancestors of "Ripley's Believe It or Not" and "That's Incredible," more remote ancestors of our contemporary museums. The cabinets displayed a hotchpotch of exoticia, arranged in pleasing

aesthetic patterns. Thus sea shells, coins, fossils, a coconut, a shrunken head, a dried sea horse, a mermaid's hand, an Oriental dagger, and a "fragment of the Tower of Babel" (to quote one catalogue) would be juxtaposed, one to the other, with no reason except that they "catch the fancy" of the spectator. Note that, with the possible exception of the mermaid's hand and the fragment from Babel (which were genuine artifacts, mislabeled), everything in such a collection was "real." The objects were factual, but they were meaningless, they were insignificant in the strict sense of the word. For they told no story, they raised no questions—they were inarticulate. Or, at best, they provided an occasion for gossip. "See that? *Très amusant!*"

Translated into the world of collegiate education, such a gossipy, inconsequential understanding of "interesting" is what often governs the elective curriculum, and, all too often, the survey course.

What I have described, thus far, is the notion of "interesting" as often trivialized in common discourse. But, there is another understanding, one closer to its original meaning as continued in the legal and commercial term, "interest." In this understanding, things that are "interesting," things that become objects of interest, are things in which you have a stake, things which place you at risk, things which are important to you, things which make a difference.

When a book, an idea, an object is found "interesting" in this sense, it is not because it titillates, but rather because it challenges. Ultimately, because it challenges the way in which you have construed the world. It is "interesting" because it may compel you to change.

In contradistinction to the objects displayed in the "cabinets of curiosities," objects of interest are supremely articulate, or, rather, they require you to be articulate. They call forth speech and discourse, not gossip. They provoke argu-

ment. As such, they cannot be allowed to stand alone as isolated specimens, or be arranged in superficially pleasing patterns. They must be integrated into a coherent view of the world, or they must challenge your previous proposals of coherence and integration. Things may be most "interesting" when they are capable of being construed in a variety of ways, and when we may tot up the gain or loss of each proposal. Things are "interesting" in the fullest sense of the word when they exemplify, when they signify, when they criticize, when they entail—in short, when they have consequences, when they are consequential.

Such objects of interest ought to be the focus of a liberal arts collegiate education. To allow such "interest," the curriculum as well as each course must be coherent and integrated, or be critical. Each must strive self-consciously to be consequential. This cannot be left to chance or whim, to the random accretion of distribution requirements and the like. Courses must be designed to be "interesting." For, students cannot be asked to be consequential while the faculty abstains. Students cannot be asked to integrate what the faculty will not. Students will not be critical if the faculty is not.

In a few days, many of you will begin courses in the "Common Core." It is the place in the curriculum of this College where this understanding of "interesting" is most clearly, articulately, and persistently striven for, if not always achieved. It is possible to view these courses as introductions, as beginning moments in the study of particular subject matters or disciplines. It is possible to view many of these courses as surveys of great books or great ideas in the development of our culture or its many aspects. But to do so, I would hold, would be to trivialize them. We do not undertake such studies for the sake of gossip, but rather for the sake of argument. We do not participate in courses in the sciences, the social

sciences, and the humanities in order to learn a smattering about each to enliven future cocktail parties, or to make us better consumers of the evening's news.

I do not care if months from now you no longer recall what particular thing Aristotle or Weber said, if you no longer remember what a virtual proton is thought to "be" according to some perturbation theory. But I would insist that you gain some sense of the arguments between these major forms of human knowledge. What if man and the world is as the humanities, or the social sciences, or the sciences would have it? What then? What would it be like to live in such a world? What modes of speech would you have to master in order to translate your perception of the world and your humanity into theirs? Or, to translate these rival perceptions into each other's terms? Is man and the world constituted by speech and by symbols—as some would have it? Is man and the world constituted by actions, by behavior as some would have it? Is man and the world constituted by processes, by growth and transformations—as some would have it? Is man and the world constituted by both indeterminacy and law—as some would have it? In each of these major arguments, although the data may often be the same, what "counts," as well as the methods and strategies of persuasion, will be quite different.

So too with the rest of the curriculum. Despite the staggering array of courses that we offer, you have not entered some supermarket in which a variety of cultures, ideas, techniques, and world views are displayed in order to tempt you to pick this one for today and some other for tomorrow; a supermarket in which you will cheerfully pick up the special of the week, pay the cashier, hand in your coupons (i.e., your credits), and receive your "green stamps" in the form of a diploma. We are here to traffic in "interesting" matters; at times,

in life and death questions for ourselves and others. There are arguments and decisions to be made as to "what is the case" and how we should treat with it. For we have the option—you and I—of living in a world that we think of as being merely "at hand," or a world in which we have chosen to dwell. A world that is constituted by our arguments, and ratified by our accepting full responsibility for the consequences of the critical, interpretative decisions we have made.

I do not speak of some conversion experience by which you accept this or that interpretation as true for all time, some "Eureka!" after which everything will become clear and plain to see. Each proposal, no matter how imperialist its claims or persuasive its justifications, is but partial. That is why, after all, there is argument about, and between, interpretations. That is why there is education.

Indeed, there is more. Above all, there is the never-ending work: the task of mastering the diversity of objects of interest, and the acquisition of the varied languages for intelligent discourse about them; the labor of constructing integration and coherence; the exertions of criticism; the responsibilities of judgment. This is the work of a lifetime, and it is the work of life.

For, in the end, to guess about education is to guess about the world. To undertake the work of education is to undertake the work of the world. In challenging you to accept these tasks, I charge you in the words of an ancient teacher: "If not by us, then by whom? If not now, then when?"

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