THE *Aims* of *Education*

THE COLLEGE
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The Aims of Liberal Education

by Leon R. Kass September 25, 1981

This is a rare occasion. Many of you probably will not return again to Rockefeller Chapel, and certainly not together, until you return to graduate. And unless you cut short your summer vacations to attend this annual event, you are unlikely to hear another public lecture on the aims of education. Once classes begin, both students and faculty are usually much too busy getting things done to think much about what they are doing and why, and that is as it must be—though there have been times and may again be times when such collective radical self-scrutiny becomes part of the everyday business of this campus.

Yet though rare, this is nevertheless a typically Chicago occasion. It is the legacy of this University, and especially of this College, to examine fundamental questions, and to do so thoughtfully, reflectively, critically—even self-critically. It is also typical of Chicago that there is no typical Chicago answer to any serious question: two professors, three opinions. We are suspicious of orthodoxy and simple-mindedness. We love diversity, independence, and originality. And having searched our own minds, each of us knows, or thinks he or she knows, what education is all about. Please understand, therefore, that I do not aspire to speak for the University or the College. I merely aspire to speak the truth.

Let me then start closer to the ground with a factual truth. Twenty-seven years ago, early in Orientation Week, I sat in your place here in Rockefeller Chapel, at the close of a tour of the campus, while the secretary of the University's Alumni Association discoursed on the construction and structure of this august building. I would not have remembered the occasion except that a photograph of the event taken from above later graced the University's alumni magazine, showing our very young and eager faces gazing on high at the tower.

If it were possible to elevate the soul merely by tilting back the head to look aloft on the ceiling, that part of Orientation Week could have been edifying and ennobling. Indeed, though I recall being filled with excitement and some apprehension at starting college, I do not remember that anything elevating was said during Orientation Week, but if it were, I was in all likelihood beneath response. I was too young, too shallow, too ignorant.

If truth be told, I remember altogether little in particular of what my teachers tried to teach me during my four collegiate years. Yet I have known for some time that, in decisive ways, my experience here changed my life. I encountered one skillful teacher who forced me to acknowledge to myself that there were important questions to which the answers I carried around unthinkingly were inadequate. I was introduced to the writings of great thinkers and teachers, nearly all of them dead, from whom in later years I have increasingly drawn sustenance in my pursuit of these questions. I made a few deep and lifelong friendships, friendships based in large measure on sharing in conversation the attempt to understand our experience of the world and of our own humanity. The College's thorough-going insistence on self-conscious and philosophical examination of basic assumptions and presuppositions left its mark, and eventually, I am sure, contributed to my exchanging a life of the *practice* of science for one of *thinking* about it and its multiple bearings upon human affairs. Though *my* liberal education began to grow in earnest only much later, the College planted the seeds. Accordingly, I have it to thank for many of the joys—and the sadnesses—of the life of reflection and self-examination to which it beckoned.

You now know much more than you need to about me. But I know very little about you, taken individually. Yet to speak intelligibly one must know to whom one is speaking. You, of course, know or have been told by others this week how unusual and exceptional you are, individually and collectively. I will begin by assuming that you are common. You are eighteen, plus or minus, and nearly all of you are Americans of the late twentieth century. Because you are young, your experience of the world is limited, largely to home and high school. Almost all of you have watched much television, many of you read the newspapers, some of you have traveled, and a few of you have read good books. You love novelty, care little for the past, and think less about the long-term future. In brief, you are smart, talented, and largely ignorant. Because you are Americans, you are tolerant, easy-going on yourselves and others, usually restless, and by and large concerned with what is useful and practical. Most of all, all of you pride yourselves on your individuality and almost certainly resent my treating you as part of a common group.

Yet there is in fact something uncommon about you, which, alas, you all have in common, and in which I too share. We have all chosen the University of Chicago. For you, it is the first of a series of important choices that will define or delimit your lives—like choices of career, spouse, and place to live—choices that necessarily exclude legions of other pos-

sibilities. You have, by choosing a college, closed many a door—to grow up means choosing one way from the myriad ways of life once open to you; but in having chosen Chicago, a road less traveled by, you have passed through a door which, as I hope you will discover, leads to a way of life that will permit you greater understanding of what you are and whither you are tending and will even enable you to appreciate in thought something of the roads you have not taken. The one choice that enriches all other choices is the choice for liberal education, an education open to us all, by the way, because of our *common* humanity. Let us, therefore, say good-bye to you and me, to our individuating differences, and think *together* about liberal education.

I. The End of Liberal Education

Let us begin by distinguishing liberal education from other sorts of education. Let us set aside that part of higher education which prepares one for one's future career, whether in the professions of law, medicine, divinity, engineering, or business or in scholarship or scientific research. In these cases, the mind is specifically prepared in the basic concepts and methods, either of practical arts, say, of legal reasoning or of healing, or of specialized investigation, in each case according to the accepted canons of the profession or discipline. Bodies of accumulated knowledge are transmitted, skills are acquired, and the particular methods of problem-solving are learned through practice. Expertise, competence, mastery are the marks of accomplishment. I do not for a moment discount the importance of such achievement and such training; but it is not liberal education. True, medicine or law or biology or politics *can* be studied, as we shall see, in a liberal way, but when taught professionally or pre-professionally they

are not. True, scholarly research can be an aid to liberal education—and vice versa—but the training or preparation of future scholars is not what liberal education is about or for. For the aim of liberal education is other than the advancement of the sum of human learning or the discovery of new truths or the growth of knowledge from more to more.

But neither is liberal education just the *transmission* of accumulated knowledge, the pouring of old learning into new receptacles, or even the initiation of new members into the great tradition, understood as tradition. It is, of course, hard to call someone well-educated who is ignorant of the Bible and the writings of Homer and Plato, Shakespeare and Locke, Rousseau and Tolstoy, Newton and Einstein, Darwin and Freud. Indeed, because of their depth, range, and power, these writings are the best materials for the practice of liberal education. But desirable though it is to know one's intellectual forebears, to know them as part of the tradition—or, in the current jargon, as part of the so-called history of ideas—is only to know *about* them and *about* what they thought, not to *think with them.* The history of thought, however valuable, is not itself thinking. And to regard the so-called tradition as authoritative, to accept its authority because of its venerability, is to give over the activity of thinking here and now. The same must also be said for the docile ingestion and unassimilated retention of the fruits of *contemporary* sciences, whether received authoritatively from written textbooks or even from the mouths of Nobel laureates.

I would also distinguish liberal education from those aspects of education which aspire to or attain a broadening of views, an elevating of sensibilities and tastes, or even the sharpening of intellectual skills. These are, of course, all fine things. It is good to be exposed to and to know about many varia-

tions in culture, beliefs, and human activities. But learning is more than exposure and collecting broad variations does not mean gaining deeper understanding. Liberal education is more than general education.

It is also more than aesthetic and cultural enrichment. Our tastes and sensibilities can certainly stand refinement; it should be one of your goals here to learn to recognize and to love the difference between what is noble and beautiful and what is vulgar and ugly. But even the love of Homer and Mozart or the growing taste for the beautiful in nature or in human character is not yet what I mean.

Liberal education also goes beyond acquiring the skills of careful reading, writing, listening, speaking, arguing, calculating, looking, and experimenting. These skills—often called the liberal arts—sharpen the mind and are invaluable *as instruments* for its proper work. But the skills alone are insufficient. When severed from the true work of the free mind, pre-occupation with skills can be enslaving, a kind of mental gymnastics which tones one's mental muscles and swells one's vanity, but which in fact is useless and vain. What is the point of knowing "*how*-to-think" if one never seriously engages in thinking?

What, then, could be left for the aim of liberal education, if we exclude professional training, research and scholarship, general broadening and culture, the arts of learning, and familiarity with the intellectual tradition? I have already hinted at my answer: Not the adding of new truths to the world, nor the transmission of old truths to the young, but the cultivation in each of us of the disposition actively to seek the truth and to make the truth our own. More simply, liberal education is education in and for thoughtfulness. It awakens, encourages, and renders habitual thoughtful reflection about

weighty human concerns, in quest of what is simply true and good. What this means I shall now try to make clear. We need to think about thoughtfulness.

II. What Is Thoughtfulness?

Thoughtfulness—indeed all thinking, from the most ordinary to the most technical—has its origin in efforts to understand our experience. Its most ordinary beginnings are in wonder or perplexity: we find something in our usually trustworthy experience remarkable, puzzling, or contradictory. Indeed, it is already thought which first recognizes strangeness or contradiction in our perceptions and seeks for clarification. The caterpillar disappears into a cocoon and emerges as a butterfly; the stick dipped into water is straight to the touch but bent to the eye. We are puzzled; we do not understand. Recognition of ignorance is the beginning of thought.

Because much of our experience is filtered through our opinions, thinking also begins with perplexity about opinion. Whether we know it or not, all that we perceive or encounter we interpret—usually unconsciously, i.e., without thinking—in the light of our opinions about things, large and small. These opinions usually serve us well. But sometimes we find ourselves in contradiction with ourselves. For example, some of us may believe, as a matter of principle, that one should always be sincere and honest and true to one's beliefs. Some of the same people may also believe that it is wrong—or not nice—knowingly to hurt others. But can one always be both nice and honest? What should you say when your best friend asks what you think of her obnoxious boyfriend? How should you speak if defending your opinions about sex or drugs or the middle class at the family dinner table will only cause pain to your parents? If you take your

opinions seriously, you will be troubled by the tension between them. You will be moved to think.

Thinking—all thinking—seeks to liberate us from a slavish adherence to unexamined opinion and an unreasonable trust in our own perceptions and experiences. Make no mistake—thought depends on opinion and experience and does not reject them. Rather, thought seeks to understand what is strange and wonderful and to remove perplexity, doubt, and contradiction.

Yet there are at least two possible responses to the disquieting presence of perplexity and awareness of ignorance. Let me exaggerate and call them the willful and the thoughtful. The willful is *annoyed* with ambiguity, uncertainty, unclarity, and doubt. It seeks clarity and certitude, to make the ambiguity disappear. It wants to be in control of things, not to be puzzled, not to be at a loss. It is painful to be at a loss; it is natural to want to find a way. Willful thinking constructs hypotheses, stipulates definitions and axioms, and tries to deduce from these beginnings an order of relationships in which the various observations or opinions will fit without contradiction. Our modern natural sciences are splendid examples of such hypothetico-deductive thinking. They issue in laws that do indeed permit us to a remarkable degree to give an account of and even to predict and control some natural phenomena.

Yet such willful or constructive thinking differs from thoughtful thinking—though the former is often a necessary preparation for the latter. The thoughtful response to strangeness and perplexity is less interested in dispelling and removing the perplexity than in understanding its true grounds. Less insistent on system or certitude or indubitability, it considers the possibility that ambiguity and mystery are in the

nature of things. Though it esteems the sciences, it does not forget that their beginnings or first principles were stipulated hypothetically, and that these very hypotheses might themselves contain and conceal objects of the greatest wonder and perplexity, objects especially worthy of thought. Let me give two examples: physics, our most precise natural science, makes use of concepts of space, time, matter, and motion, and gives them operational definitions, usually thereby foreclosing further thought about what they are. But we may still wonder and ask (and at crucial times, physicists themselves have been compelled to ask), "What *is* time or space or matter or motion?" Or an example from politics: Much modern political discussion begins from the premise that there are certain basic human rights, and it proceeds to think about how they can be secured and made effective. But thought can also ask about what we mean by "a right," about where rights come from, and about what makes rights right. These sorts of questions do not lend themselves to deduction from given and fixed hypotheses. They seek instead the hidden but beckoning unhypothetical ground of these other hypotheses. They seek for what *truly* is and for what *is* truly.

Let me try, in a different way, to say again what I mean by thoughtfulness, this time by identifying thoughtfulness with the activity of questioning, for it is the asking of questions that is the heart of thoughtfulness. Here it will be helpful to distinguish the asking of questions from the setting of problems, two distinct modes of human thinking, which we often confuse. How does a question differ from a problem?*

Etymology provides a clue. *Problem* comes from the Greek word *problema,* meaning literally "something thrown out before" us. A problem is any challenging obstacle, from a fence thrown up before an armed camp to a task set before some-

one to be done. Problems are publicly articulated tasks that challenge us to solve them, which is to say, to do away with them as problems or obstacles. When a problem is solved, it disappears as a problem. Its solution is its dissolution. The solution is usually a construction, put together from elements into which the problem is broken up or, as we say, analyzed. We model the problem into a shape convenient for such analysis and construction; as we say, we *figure it out.* Further, a problem requires a solution *in its own terms;* the solution never carries one beyond the original problem as given. The model of such problem-solving is algebra. The equations containing unknowns are arranged, showing the analyzed elements in their constructed relations. The solutions which identify the unknowns dissolve the problem, and render the equation into an identity or tautology, which invites no further thought.

Consider a sample problem: Our task is to find the length of the side of a square whose area is twice that of the unit square. If we let X equal the length we are seeking, X^2 becomes the measure of the area of the square, which, we are told, is twice the unit. We construct an equation: $X^2 = 2$, and we solve for X. We identify X equal to the positive square root of 2, an irrational number which we cannot write out or speak precisely, but which we represent with the symbol $\sqrt{2}$. Our equation, our construct, now reads $(\sqrt{2})^2 = 2$, or $2 = 2$. It goes no further. It does not invite us to think further, e.g., to wonder why or how an irrational number could be the answer to a rational question, or what number could *be* if both 2 and $\sqrt{2}$ are equally numbers. Our problem is solved, and our thinking either ceases or goes on to some other problem. In a sense, the goal of all such thinking is to cease to think. It seeks to remove the *need* to think by removing all obstacles to our peace of mind. Its search for clarity and distinctness is, finally, a desire to see through everything, to become clairvoyant, to be untroubled in mind and unfrustrated in action.

Please note: this mode of thought is not confined to algebra or to the doing of homework. It is, in fact, the dominant mode of everyone's thinking. We are always trying to figure something out, to find a way, to calculate the best means to a given end, to solve our problems. How do I get to Rockefeller Chapel? How can I get out of taking a foreign language? What does the teacher *want* by way of an answer to this essay question? Indeed, so dominant and familiar is this mode of thought that we come to regard it as the only way to think. We treat everything as a problem, from personality problems to the problem of poverty, from the mind-body problem to the problems of life. I leave you to ponder what it would mean to solve the problems of life if living is a problem to be solved.

How does the activity of questioning differ from problem-solving or calculating? There are, of course, many kinds of questions. Not every interrogative sentence springs from what I mean by the activity of questioning. We may ask practical questions—Can I borrow the car? Do you have a hammer?—in which our interest is in *action* and in obtaining the means needed to carry it out. We may ask personal or even gossipy questions—How do you like it here? Where are you from? What does she see in him?—in which our true interest, whether real or apparent, whether born of genuine affection, mere politeness, or even envy, vanity, or malice, is in the *person,* which interest we display by means of such questions. We ask rhetorical questions—that is, questions to which we know the answers—whose purpose is only to have others *publicly acknowledge* the answers.

None of these questions displays what I mean by the activity of questioning; for in none of them is the *answer in*

itself important to the questioner, is the answer itself the true object sought. In contrast, in a genuine question the verbal utterance bespeaks a *desire* for *an answer.* A true question is a *state of mind* in which *I want to know what I do not know.* Please note: a true question presupposes both a recognition of ignorance—somehow an act of intellect—and a desire—somehow an act of emotion or appetite. Indeed, a genuine question shows that the mind is not just an instrument activated by and in the service of the need for survival or the desire for pleasure, power, or recognition. It shows that our intellect also has desires of its own, or better, that *we desire* to know. A genuine question thus gives the lie to that widely believed slander perpetrated on the human soul, which sharply separates reason from emotion or desire, and which sees in the mind only heartless calculation and in the heart only mindless feeling.

Again, etymology is revealing: the English words *question, query, inquire* go back to the Latin *quaero,* and via its older form *quaeso,* to a Sanskrit root meaning "to hunt out." To question is to quest, to search out and to seek after, to be engaged in passionate pursuit. Like the hunting dogs' search for game—the original meaning of our word *quest*—questioning is an earnest activity. This insight is preserved in the Latin root: *quaeso* means to seek and search, but also to beg, pray, beseech, entreat. In true questioning, we seek for an answer and by our questions entreat being itself to reveal, to uncover, to make unhidden, the object of our search.

Unlike the solution to a problem, the gaining of an answer to our questions does not dissolve the quest, or at least, does not abolish the desire. Like other forms of genuine love, love does not vanish but even grows when the object is present. As the lover loves to gaze on the beloved, so the questing mind

delights in beholding the insights it receives. Further, a true question often leads beyond the terms in which it was first posed. The quest follows the quarry wherever it leads. It refuses to be satisfied with artificial or merely hypothetical constructs, logical or mathematical, or with poetic fictions designed to give it rest. It wants only what is finally true and real. No wonder so much of what educators try to feed us turns unappetizing and stale.

To question has also another meaning, about which a word must be said. To question or to call into question is to raise doubt. It may or may not be part of the other activity of questing. But its main effect is to tear down, to replace belief by confusion or doubt. The first question asked in the Bible is of this sort. The Fall of Man begins when the serpent asks the woman: "Yea, has God said, 'You shall not eat of *any* tree of the garden'?" His implication was clear: God *could* be the sort of being whose prohibitions are arbitrary or who even could make commands that would make your life impossible. Depending on what we make of the rest of the story, our susceptibility to the serpent's question led ultimately either to our enlightenment in eating of the forbidden tree of knowledge of good and evil or to our permanent separation from the home of true understanding. But, in any event, we all know—and I suspect you will soon know all too well—the doubt-inducing power of a simple question, "How do you know?" or, more simply, just "Why?" Expect such questions and ask them yourselves. But resist the counsel of those—and there are, unfortunately, many such serpents around—who think doubt and skepticism is itself the goal of thought, who argue that the discovery that there is more than one way of looking at things is *the* end of liberal education. I have *already suggested* that finding difference of opinion may be the begin-

ning of thoughtfulness, but it cannot be what we seek in our thoughtful and serious activity of questioning. Socrates, an unsurpassed exemplar of questioning himself and others, a man supremely impressed by his own ignorance in almost all matters, insisted that he *knew* that "opinion and knowledge are two different sorts of things." Not the difference of opinion, but the difference between opinion and knowledge makes all the difference for liberal education.

III. What Is Thoughtfulness Thoughtful About?

Where are we in our search for the aim of liberal education, education in and for thoughtfulness? So far we have tried to say how thoughtfulness is different from other modes of mental activity, especially by pointing to the difference between problem-solving or figuring things out and what I have called genuine questioning, or perhaps better, just questing. But I have said almost nothing about the game or quarry, about the *object* of our thoughtful seeking. For what knowledge do we quest? What are we to become thoughtful *about?* What is the *subject matter* of thoughtfulness?

It should go without saying that there is no single or set curriculum for thoughtfulness. There are and can be no *courses* called "liberal education," in part because the necessary and proper demands of even the best courses—e.g., regular meetings, homework assignments, deadlines, examinations, all given by the instructor—are themselves much closer to the spirit of problem-solving than to the spirit of questioning. Moreover, no course can simply teach or impart thoughtfulness; questioning can only begin within the soul of the learner. But, equally important, there is no clearly circumscribed subject for liberal education because it can proceed with *any subject,* rightly approached.

This answer is both encouraging and discouraging. The good news is that almost anything can become the object of wonder and inquiry. This means that specialization need not be incompatible with thoughtfulness, though many specialists turn out to be thoughtless. Indeed, for some of us, the beginning of thoughtfulness comes only after we have learned a lot about a little and discover that we have not thereby captured its full meaning, often precisely because we have ignored important connections to other matters. In my own case, it was, first, the prospect of human genetic manipulation that led me to question my one-time conviction that the progress of science and technology would necessarily go hand in hand with an improvement in morals and society and, second, reflection on my activities *as a scientist* that led me to doubt the claims of some of my colleagues that the activities of living organisms, including man, could be fully understood in terms of non-living matter and the laws of physics and chemistry, or even in terms of behaviorist psychology, à la B. F. Skinner. But, really, one could start anywhere, and the growth of the various sciences attests to the multiple possible beginnings of human thought, however strongly scientists and scholars now tend to give up thoughtfulness about their own beginnings. One can ask questions about natural phenomena: What is light and what is seeing, what accounts for the motions of the heavenly bodies or the generation of animals or the origin of species, or, to provide more homely examples, why do dogs wag their tails or human beings blush? Or one can ask about the nature and properties of numbers and geometric figures, ratios and proportions. One can begin with the simple fact that human beings like to tell and hear and make up stories, and even enjoy tragedies and artless tales of plain horror. One can reflect on the common human experi-

ence of awe in the presence of overwhelming natural power or architectural grandeur. Or one can think about the power of speech, which enables the intelligibility of thoughts that arise in one mind to fly, as it were, carried on winged words—attached to sounds themselves meaningless—to awaken corresponding intelligibility in another. Why? How? What accounts for these phenomena? What if anything do they mean?

The bad news is, of course, the same as the good news: there is much too much to think about with any care and thoroughness. In our quest to understand, we are usually looking for some larger context in which to locate the disparate phenomena and things whose being and meaning we are pursuing. We intuit that at the end of our quest, beckoning us throughout, is some single and integral intelligible whole into which each of the objects of our inquiry fits. We cross-examine the multiplicity of world views, looking for the singleness of the world. Recognizing the vastness of the world and its holdings, the shortness of our life, and especially the weakness of our powers, we are saddened by the thought that perhaps we shall never *truly* know *anything* unless, contrary to possibility, we could know *everything*. Still, once we have tasted the delights of even partial insight, we are encouraged to continue. We want to know just what kind of a world this is and especially what kind of beings *we* are and how we do and should relate to that world.

It is this search for *what we are* and *what we can and should become* which, in my view, belongs at the center of our questioning, and therefore at the center of liberal education. True thoughtfulness will include *reflection*, a looking and thinking back on the thinker and his human situation. The quest for understanding must include the quest for self-understanding. Indeed, the inscription on the ancient temple to Apollo at

Delphi, *Know Thyself*, would seem to be a worthy motto of a college devoted to liberal education.

It is no small task to understand, much less to heed, this cryptic and weighty injunction. It would seem to require, at the very least, that we understand not merely our *individual* peculiarities but also our shared nature as human beings—if, indeed, we have a common human nature: Not only who, but *what* are we human beings? That, in turn, would seem to require that we understand not only our *human peculiarities*, e.g., that we are thoughtful animals, but also the nature we share with other living things—not least, our embodiment and mortality. On the other side, it would mean asking questions about the relation between our nature and our nurture, that is, about culture—not only in its variety as the plurality of cultures but also in its universality, everywhere shaping human life with rituals and customs governing birth and death, language and song, marriage and education, justice and duty, and beliefs about the divine. It would mean pondering the human propensity to make images and artifacts, tools and stories, statues and temples. It would require looking into the way culture shapes our native passions, our fears, hopes, desires, loves, and hates, and also into why our nature sometimes resists such shaping, leading us often to do that which we would not. And it would involve thinking about thinking. The charge to self-knowledge is admittedly a tall order.

But I believe it is taller still. We need one more addition to our answer to the question, Thoughtfulness about what? For thoughtfulness about what we are includes thoughtfulness about what we *can* and *should* become. The quest for self-knowledge, for an answer to the question "What is man?" embraces the further questions: "What is a *good* man?"; "What is a *good life* for human beings?"; "What is a *good* community

and a *good* citizen?" Liberal education must encourage the thoughtful, reflective, self-conscious pursuit of the meaning of what is good.

No doubt this suggestion will cause you difficulty. Most of you are too sophisticated (or is it corrupted?) to believe that there can be truth about good. You know, or think you know, that good is always relative. "Good" is a so-called value: that is, something is deemed good because someone values it; it is not valued because it is good. Just as I like apple pie and you like cherry, what we say is good is a matter of taste, sub-rational in origin, not amenable to rational inquiry. Some of you know the famous fact-value distinction, and will accord truth—or, as we say, objectivity—only to facts. All of us know that beliefs and tastes are culturally influenced; but some of you are so impressed by the mere fact of cultural differences in beliefs about "good" as to assert that what is deemed "good" is, at best, just a product of culture. At worst, some of you think that beliefs about "good" are a cruel hoax, foisted upon the weak by the strong to enable the strong to exploit and oppress the weak. And many of you have had your fill of those figures of authority whose pronouncements about what's good for you don't square with your own perceptions—though I hasten to add, if the usual experience of mankind is to be trusted, that you will in many cases discover that they were right, and in any case, you will make similar pronouncements to your children.

Nevertheless, I submit, the question about what is good should be open. Despite your professed skepticism, deep down, you also know that it *is* open—else in the name of what do you dispute with your parents regarding your own good. You defend and argue about your opinions about justice—about capital punishment, race relations, the status of

women, or international politics—whereas you would never argue about whether I like apple pie, or even whether I *should* like it. You do not behave as if the differing opinions about the right and the good are just matters of taste, mere preferences. If you really believed that your opinions were good only because they were *your* opinions, you would not argue to defend and justify them with reasons. Does not your willingness to justify your opinions about what is good imply the possibility—and for now I would insist only on its being a possibility—that there *is* an answer, or *better* and *worse* answers, to that all-important question, made famous by Socrates, "How *should* I live?" If there are possibly better and worse answers, if there are perhaps some objects that would satisfy our longings and would make us truly happy, if there is a way of life that would enable us to say at the end that we had not only lived but lived well, would it not be foolish before you had quested to decide there is no such knowledge to be had by inquiry? Think it over.

A word of caution: this quest for what is good is incompatible with intolerance, self-righteousness, smugness. It requires listening to, respecting, and taking seriously the opinions and ways of others, precisely because all opinions seriously held and defended probably embody a certain intimation of what is true, and, at the very least, attest to the human concern with what is true and good, a universal concern more significant than the disparity among the opinions held on these matters.

IV. What Good Is Thoughtfulness?

I have now completed, albeit hastily and crudely, an explication of what I mean by *thoughtful reflection about weighty human concerns, in quest of what is simply true and good.* But, on

my own principles, our reflection on thoughtfulness and its content must face the question about its worth. What *good* is thoughtfulness? I offer three suggestions.

First, the habit of thoughtfulness is good, even urgent, for our common life as citizens of the American Republic. Our situation late in the twentieth century finds our effort at self-government, not to say survival, increasingly dominated by technical matters requiring the advice and competence of experts—about, among other things, the economy, defense, energy, health, transportation, communication, and pollution. We steadily are acquiring ever more powerful technologies, including those which increasingly permit deliberate and sophisticated manipulations of the human body and mind. Yet we also recognize, more than we have in some time, and perhaps due to these same dramatic new changes, that the decisions we need to make are never merely technical. They are also always ethical. They all involve judgments of better and worse; they are informed by our opinions, often tacit and unexamined, about what is right and good, for ourselves and for the community. Our technical experts need to be more than technical experts, at the very least in order to know the limits of technical expertise. The technical expert who is liberally educated to the habit of thoughtfulness is less likely to become that most dangerous fellow, a specialist without vision, who knows how to get the rockets up but who cares not where they come down.

These more dramatic social and political problems of our day should serve to remind us that there are *always hard* choices to be made, that there is no invisible hand that guides destiny in favor of progress or that safeguards liberal democracy. We will live no better than we choose. Our choices are frequently presented as problems to be solved, but some of them are

rather questions and difficulties that can only be faced. And even our genuine problems are so thoroughly interconnected, that the thoughtless and single-minded pursuit of a solution to one often gives rise to or exacerbates numerous others. If liberal democracy means government by popular choice, if choice involves deliberation about means to ends, if the ends themselves are especially matters for thoughtful reflection, then the habit of thoughtfulness, in its quest for coherence and wholeness and in its willingness and ability to be articulate about matters of better and worse, would seem indispensable if popular government is to be good government.

The usefulness of liberal education for citizens in liberal democracy is, you should note, not confined to national and international affairs. For though few of you will be more than voters—though I hope thoughtful ones—regarding our national government, most if not all of you will be in positions of leadership and responsibility in your local communities, school boards, businesses, or universities. There you will find ample need and opportunity for the exercise of thoughtful citizenship.

Second, thoughtfulness is not only good for our life as citizens. It might also be good for our lives as human beings, in the numerous choices, large and small, that we must make and in our numerous relations with others. I am not sure that you believe me. You certainly believe that professional training or other acquisition of skills will be useful in life, not least because it will enable you to make a living and a good living at that—a fact not to be despised. We can make no such claims for liberal education. Further, on the basis of what you know about formal education from your own experience to date, you probably don't believe that school or book-learning or thinking has much to do with *living*, as dis-

tinguished from *making* a living. Though your schooling has formed you—and deformed you—in ways you don't even realize, you locate living in the context of family and friends, at home and church, on dance floor and athletic field, and I readily believe that little of what you have studied, in the way you have studied, enters into those human relations. Moreover, self-consciousness, in the sense that it is most frequently experienced, is not often welcome, accompanied as it is by feelings of self-doubt, embarrassment, awkwardness, and fear. Indeed, some of our contemporaries like thoughtful self-awareness so little that they deliberately scramble their brains with chemicals in search of some preferable state of mindlessness. Even at Chicago, we sometimes hear, and you probably from time to time will share, a contempt for what is derided as "the so-called life of the mind." Nevertheless, I put it to you that we all in fact believe, deep down, that it is better to know what we are doing than not to know; that ignorance is not bliss, least of all self-ignorance; that thinking through hard choices—no matter how difficult it may be to reach a decision—is sounder and more satisfying than to have these choices made for us or made by us thoughtlessly and blindly.

Moreover, in any serious matter, we would rather have dealings with people who are thoughtful, who are reflective, who have enough detachment from their own inchoate impulses and the immediacy of the moment to respond morally, sensibly, considerately. There would seem to be a connection between thoughtfulness and character. Indeed, as you know, the English language itself makes such a connection: thoughtful means "given to, disposed to, engaged in thinking" or "disposed to consider matters," that is, "prudent, reflective." But thoughtful also means "showing thought or consideration for

others; considerate, kindly." Thoughtfulness, in both senses, is the core of the best of friendships.

Now that I have led you to consider favorably the usefulness of thought and reflection for action and your own private lives, I fear I must cause you to reconsider. We all know of circumstances in which too much thinking may lead to indecision or paralysis. Thoughtfulness also requires detachment and may augment it beyond what is reasonable. Ironically, not even all of the great thinkers have thought that thinking is good for human beings, especially for morals and politics. Says Rousseau, "If nature destined us to be healthy, I almost dare affirm that the state of reflection is a state contrary to nature and that the man who meditates is a depraved animal." He makes a powerful attack on philosophy in the name of decency:

> Reason engenders vanity and reflection fortifies it; reason turns man back upon himself, it separates him from all that bothers and afflicts him. Philosophy isolates him; because of it he says in secret, at the sight of a suffering man: Perish if you will, I am safe. No longer can anything except dangers to the entire society trouble the tranquil sleep of the philosopher and tear him from his bed. His fellow-man can be murdered with impunity right under his window; he has only to put his hands over his ears and argue with himself a bit to prevent nature, which revolts within him, from identifying with the man who is being assassinated. Savage man does not have this admirable talent, and for want of wisdom and reason he is always seen heedlessly yielding to the first sentiment of humanity. In riots or street fights the populace assembles, the prudent man moves away; it is the rabble, the market women, who separate the combatants and prevent honest people from murdering each other.

This challenge cannot be neglected. A college education does not guarantee decency and good character. Perhaps the

most profound philosopher of our century—a man noted in fact for his attempt to restore thoughtfulness—was a member of the German Nazi party and even its articulate defender. Indeed, the dominant source of our Western beliefs about how we should live morally, biblical religion, is rather dubious about the benefits and even about the need for questioning or for autonomous philosophizing, especially about what is good. "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom," says Psalm 111. And, from Micah: "It has been told thee, O man, what is good, and what the Lord doth require of thee: Only to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God." And when Jesus said, "You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free," I rather doubt that he was thinking of liberal education, or for that matter, of what we mean by free. Is free thought really and always good for morality?

We cannot dissolve this question. Once it is raised, we cannot send it away or solve it by some artful hypothesis and deduction. We really have no choice but to *think* about whether and how thinking is good or bad for character or piety. Those of you attached to one of the religious traditions will no doubt be moved to consider more deeply the traditional teaching about human life and the cosmos in the light of all you learn here. Those of you who are unattached might at least try learning what those religions teach, and to ponder whether so-called unaided human reason is a sufficient guide for human life. We might all consider whether thoughtfulness that does not think on the possibility of the eternal and the divine is thoughtful enough.

Finally, however, the case for the goodness of thoughtfulness cannot rest only on its *utility*, whether to politics or morals, to public or private life. Thoughtfulness is not only

good *for;* it is also simply good. It is not only good *for* life; it *is* also *good living*. It expresses, in activity, a certain deep longing of the human soul. As Aristotle put it long ago: "All human beings by nature desire understanding." This desire can be thwarted, distorted, and almost crushed—by lack of encouragement or opportunity for its exercise. But anyone who has looked into the eyes of very young children straining to understand, anyone who heard their genuine, spontaneous, and marvelous questions, born of wonder, anyone who has witnessed the delight they manifest when they have understood something, cannot but believe that Aristotle was right. My experience as a teacher assures me that you too are still youthful enough to experience the child's delight in discovery. Happily, the very youthfulness which makes you inexperienced and ignorant also makes you supremely open and eager for learning, much more so, I am afraid, than many of us who will be your teachers, burdened as we are by worldly cares and the care of this university, which makes it possible for you at least freely to learn.

Commit yourselves, therefore, to the careful, disciplined cultivation both of that embryonic desire and of your innate, human powers to understand. Do not be content to be intellectual muscle-men, thinking down all obstacles. Strive not to see *through*, but to *see* things as they are. Find your questions and follow them. Do not regard college merely as preparation for career or even as preparation for life, if by living you imagine something different from how you can begin to live *here*. Become thoughtful. For the formation of the lifelong habit of thoughtfulness is that preparation for human life which is liveliness itself. Thoughtfulness is the serious—but also playful—business of life. May you make for yourselves a lively time in our College and beyond.

* This discussion owes much to the educational writings of Eva Brann, St. John's College, Annapolis, Maryland, especially to her lecture, "The Student's Problem." See also her *Paradoxes of Education in a Republic* (University of Chicago Press, 1979).

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Coeducation at Chicago—Whose Aims?

by Janel M. Mueller September 26, 1994

Welcome to and within the University of Chicago, men and women of the College Class of 1998. I am happy to have this opportunity of greeting your entry into this remarkable institution. And I am sobered as well as honored by the responsibility given me by Dean Boyer this evening, to address you on the aims of education. Let me start, because English is my academic specialty, by inviting you to consider the plural form of the phrase, "the aims of education." Why "aims"? Perhaps the quickest answer would be, Because there is more than one purpose for educating anybody. This is a plural of the facts of the matter—in grammatical terms, an objective genitive. But a less quick answer might proceed by first asking another question. The "aims of education"—whose aims? "Whose aims?" takes this plural to be a so-called subjective genitive, and it assumes a perspective that I want to take in speaking to you now. I hope it will also carry over into the colloquia that we will be having afterwards in the College houses.

The "aims of education" is a proper plural, for the persons who have these aims are multiple. There are your aims for education here, and your parents' aims in the support they