

"WHAT UNDERGRADUATES DON'T KNOW"

AN ADDRESS BY

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It's a pleasure to be here this evening at this gathering sponsored by the Program for Constitutional Government. With a group so distinguished making this event possible, I suspect that I do not have to begin in the way I often do: that is, by explaining what the humanities are. There is confusion on this point, as my mail frequently makes clear. I received a letter not long ago addressed to the Natural Endowment for the Humanities--a mistake that has a certain woodsy charm about it. My favorite misaddressed piece of mail, though, was a card sent to me recently at the National Endowment for the Amenities.

Now, that really is a very interesting slip, because while it is mostly an error, there is a hint of truth in it. There is pleasure in the disciplines that comprise the humanities. The study of subjects like history, literature, and philosophy has through the centuries brought satisfaction to human beings. Saint Augustine once said, in fact, that the only reason to philosophize was "in order to be happy." A twentieth century philosopher, Charles Frankel, explained the joy that the humanities can bring by noting that people's experience is enriched "if they know the background of what is happening to them, if they can place what they are doing in deeper and broader context, if they have the metaphors and symbols that can give experience a shape." Frankel went on to use a metaphor himself--a homely one--to make the point. "Think of what the lore and legend, the analyses and arguments,

that surround baseball contribute to our enjoyment of the game," he wrote. "They make the game, as anyone can discover by sitting next to someone who is uninitiated." The humanities he argued, with myth, story, and debate, initiate us into life.

The humanities are valuable to us not only as individuals, but as members of a polity. Knowledge of the ideas that have molded us and the ideals that have mattered to us functions as a kind of civic glue. Our history and literature give us symbols to share; they help us all, no matter how diverse our backgrounds, feel part of a common undertaking. A story that illustrates this well comes from the autobiography of a woman named Mary Antin, who, as a child, immigrated to America from Russia. In her book, called The Promised Land, Antin writes about going to school in the United States and learning about George Washington, a man revered by his contemporaries, honored above all others in his time. "I discovered . . . ," Antin wrote, "that I was more nobly related than I had ever supposed. George Washington . . . was like a king in greatness, and he and I were Fellow Citizens."

Communicating to the next generation the figures, ideas, and events of the past is, for many reasons, a deeply important task. And how well are we accomplishing it?

Certainly not as well as we should, according to a Gallup survey of college seniors that the Endowment recently funded. Twenty-five percent of the nation's college seniors were unable to locate Columbus's voyage within the correct half-century. About the same percentage could not distinguish Churchill's words from Stalin's or Karl Marx's thoughts from the ideas of the United States Constitution. More than 40 percent could not identify when the Civil War occurred. Most could not identify Magna Carta, the Missouri Compromise, or Reconstruction. Most could not link major works by Plato, Dante, Shakespeare, and Milton with their authors. To the majority of college seniors, Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice, Dostoyevsky's Crime and Punishment and Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "Letter from the Birmingham Jail" were clearly unfamiliar.

It is not only in the humanities that college seniors are found wanting. The National Science Foundation sent a film crew to a recent graduation here at Harvard. They asked bright, fresh-faced graduates in their caps and gowns to explain why it is that we have seasons. All of the graduates in the film answered the question with impressive authority--and complete inaccuracy. Most of them explained, quite self-confidently, that we have winter because the earth is farther from the sun then. Now, even if you don't know the right answer to this question, you can quickly figure out that this explanation doesn't make sense. If the earth being farther

from the sun is the crucial matter, then why isn't it winter everywhere, in Canberra as well as in Cambridge?

It is also important to note that college seniors' lack of basic knowledge of major areas of human thought is not simply the result of their experience in our institutions of higher education. The National Endowment for the Humanities Gallup survey, like the National Science Foundation film, shows the results of sixteen years of schooling, not just the last four. Still, it is possible to look at our nation's campuses and see part of the reason why we have college seniors who can't tell Churchill from Stalin or a good scientific explanation from a bad one: Students can graduate from almost 80 percent of the nation's four-year colleges and universities without taking a course in the history of Western civilization. They can earn a bachelor's degree from:

38 percent without taking any course in history,

45 percent without taking a course in American or English literature,

41 percent without studying mathematics,

33 percent without studying natural and physical sciences.

In the report issued by the National Endowment for the Humanities along with the Gallup survey, we recommended a required course of studies--a core of learning--to ensure that undergraduates have opportunities to explore in broad-ranging, ordered and coherent ways the major fields of human inquiry. This core, we suggested, might comprise about forty percent of the curriculum--or fifty hours, a figure that falls well within the range of what most schools require in "general education" credits.

As it is now, the general education credits that could be devoted to a core are all too often organized into loosely stated "distribution requirements"--mandates that students take some courses in certain areas and some in others. Long lists of acceptable choices are set out in catalogs. Specialized offerings for the most part, they often have little to do with the broadly-conceived learning that should be at the heart of general education. Indeed, some courses seem to have little to do with the areas of human knowledge they are supposed to elucidate. At a public university in the West, it is possible to fulfill humanities requirements with courses in interior design. In 1988-89, at a private university in the East, one could fulfill part of the social science distribution requirement by taking "Lifetime Fitness." At a midwestern university, students can choose from almost 900 courses, with topics ranging from the history of foreign labor movements to

the analysis of daytime soap operas. The result, in naturalist Loren Eiseley's words, is all too often "a meaningless mosaic of fragments." In The Unexpected Universe, he writes: "From ape skull to Mayan temple, we contemplate the miscellaneous debris of time like sightseers to whom these mighty fragments, fallen gateways and sunken galleys convey no present instruction."

A core of learning can show the patterns of the mosaic. Taking what John Henry Newman called "a connected view of the old and the new, past and present, far and near," it provides a context for forming the parts of education into a whole.

50 Hours, the Endowment's report, tells of many colleges and universities that have established cores of learning. They can be found in every part of the country; and although their numbers are still relatively few, they are growing. Still, the pace of change is slow, no doubt in part because the task is hard. To design a rigorous and coherent program for general education is to answer the question: what should an educated person know? And that is a challenging question, indeed.

Moreover, we have found what seems an intellectually respectable way of avoiding the matter. We say that what is important is not what a person knows in various fields, but whether he or she understands the methods of inquiry used.

Knowledge is not the issue we say, but "approaches to knowledge"--a phrase from the Harvard College catalog's description of the courses this institution designates as its "core curriculum."

There has been debate about Harvard's core since its inception, and you no doubt know the terms of it better than I. Critics argue that no matter how good the courses in what Harvard calls its core, no matter how fine the faculty members teaching these courses, taken all together, the offerings do not provide the "connected view" Newman talked about. The courses are a miscellaneous assemblage, critics say, rather than a coherent framework for learning. You can satisfy history requirements by studying the Cuban Revolution or tuberculosis in the nineteenth and twentieth century, literature requirements with "Shakespeare, the Later Plays" or with "Beast Literature."

The argument on the other side has been that Harvard does not, as the catalog puts it, "define intellectual breadth as the mastery of a set of Great Books or the digestion of a specific quantum of information, or the surveying of current knowledge in certain fields." Instead, Harvard "seeks to introduce students to the major approaches to knowledge in areas that the faculty considers indispensable to undergraduate education."

Harvard is not unique in its allegiance to this idea. It can be found in many institutions of higher education and at other levels as well. Indeed, a focus on the process of knowing rather than on knowledge itself so permeates the nation's elementary and secondary school systems that the content of education sometimes seems to be entirely ignored. Basal readers are developed for students in early grades with the idea of teaching them "approaches to knowledge." The aim of these books is not to present a rich and well-considered array of literature, but to teach mental skills such as "how to identify the sequential order of events" or "how to follow directions involving substeps." One mental skill particularly stressed is "how to find the main idea," which is an aptitude we would all want our children to have. In looking through basal readers, however, I have many times come across pages on which children are instructed to find the main idea and discovered that there was absolutely no main idea on that page worth finding. This does seem to exemplify the difficulty of trying to teach skills without paying sufficient attention to content.

Another extreme manifestation of this syndrome can be found at education conventions, where publishers fill their display racks with row after row of books that promise to teach youngsters "how to think." These books are not quite content-free, but they come as close as possible. Their

mainstays are exercises in seeing analogies. Is a triangle more like a human being or a wheelbarrow?

Meanwhile, looming over our education landscape is the Scholastic Aptitude Test, an examination that, in its verbal component, studiously avoids assessing substantive knowledge. Whether test-takers have studied the Civil War, learned about Magna Carta, or read Macbeth are matters to which the SAT is studiously indifferent. The emphasis that the SAT puts on what is called "developed ability," as opposed to knowledge, makes this test unique among those used by industrialized nations. When the British or French or Germans or Japanese set out to assess students finishing secondary education, they test, rather sensibly, it seems to me, for what their students have learned.

One more instance of the elevation of process over content--this one from higher education--can be found in what have come to be known as "discourse studies," an approach to knowledge that has become enormously influential in literature and other disciplines as well. What counts most in such teaching and research is not the what. The subject can be anything: poem, play or bumper sticker. What counts is the how: How is this text, seemingly innocent, implicated in ideology? How can it be unmasked? At the University of Minnesota, the Humanities Department is currently proposing to

abolish its chronologically organized Western civilization sequences and substitute three new courses: "Discourse and Society," "Text and Context," and "Knowledge, Persuasion, and Power." In the old courses, the focus was on the works of Plato, Dante, Descartes, and Rousseau. In the new ones, the emphasis is on "the ways that certain bodies of discourse come to cohere, to exercise persuasive power, and to be regarded as authoritative, while others are marginalized, ignored, or denigrated." Instead of focusing on the writings of Wordsworth and Eliot, the new courses emphasize--and again, I quote--"hegemony and counterhegemony."

Given the pervasiveness--"hegemony," perhaps I should say--of the view that ways of knowing should have preeminence over knowledge, the time has come, let me suggest, for a thorough and thoughtful examination of this idea. Many questions might be asked; let me begin the discussion by posing just two.

First: Even if we posit that the various fields of human inquiry are at the highest levels of scholarship distinguished by differing approaches, is this a matter of interest or use to most undergraduates? I come at this question from literature, and I have to say that most undergraduates I have known--most people I have known--who love plays and novels and poetry are not interested in them as methods of discourse but as

sources of insight into their lives and into the human predicament. "Why are we reading," Annie Dillard asked recently, "if not in hope of beauty laid bare, life heightened and its deepest mystery probed?" There is satisfaction, of course, in seeing how language achieves beauty, heightening, and revelation--but it is the achievement itself that draws most people back time and again.

A student of Harvard Professor Robert Coles recently described the value of literature this way:

When I have some big moral issue, some question to tackle, I . . . try to remember what my folks have said, or I imagine them in my situation--or even more these days, I think of [characters from novels, like] Jude Fawley [in Jude the Obscure] or Jack Burden [in All the King's Men]. . . . There's a lot of me in them, or vice-versa. I don't know how to put it, but they're voices and they help me make choices. . . . Why don't college professors teach that way?

Many professors do, of course, including Robert Coles. But to the extent that we allow "approaches to knowledge" to distance us from knowledge itself--in this case, from the novels themselves--shouldn't we ask whether we are serving our students well? Shouldn't we ask whether we are teaching them

in ways likely to encourage them to find in the humanities the wisdom and solace that generations have found?

My second question is this: When, throughout our system of education, we emphasize "approaches to knowledge," what kind of young people are we likely to produce? If we assume that it is possible to teach processes of knowing without emphasizing knowledge itself, then we can hypothesize quick-witted, nimble-brained generations that, not knowing as much as they should, nevertheless have the ability to learn quickly.

But it may also be the case that not knowing as much as one should severely hinders ability to learn at all, much less to learn quickly. Bernard Lewis, Princeton's distinguished professor of Islamic studies, told recently of teaching a graduate seminar and finding that the students in it did not know what the Crusades were. They had the modern meaning--a crusade as a cause--but no idea of the word's historical significance. This would, one would think, be a rather great hindrance to students engaging in advanced study of Middle Eastern history.

Lack of knowledge can be an obstacle to understanding the present as well as the past. A story in last Saturday's Washington Post was headlined, "East European Events Leave Busy American Teenagers Unmoved." It told of teachers across the

United States trying to engage their students with the dynamic and moving events of these past few months in Poland and Hungary, Germany and Czechoslovakia--and of those teachers finding their students confused and indifferent. The students didn't have sufficient historical context to understand the significance of changes in Eastern Europe. As one teacher put it, "They don't understand what communism is in the first place. So when you say it's the death of communism they don't know what you're talking about." During a discussion in which East bloc countries were referred to as "satellites" of the Soviet Union, one student raised her hand to ask, "I'm sorry, but what is this talk of satellites? . . . Are we talking about satellite dishes or what?"

The emphasis in our educational system on approaches to knowledge as opposed to knowledge itself is not the only culprit here. All of us in this room can think of many reasons why young people in this country do not know as much as they should. But surely the emphasis on process and the neglect of content that we can see at all levels of education is an important factor. If we do not emphasize that there are some figures and books and events that are important to know, then we shouldn't be surprised when young people don't know them. If we don't undertake the hard work of setting out a framework for learning, then we shouldn't be surprised when students

don't have one and when they have difficulty making sense of new events.

Concentrating on knowledge, concentrating on what should be taught and learned, as well as on ways of teaching and learning and knowing, is not easy work. But it may be among the most worthwhile efforts that those of us concerned about education can undertake.

The generations, Bernard of Chartres once observed, are like small figures "seated on the shoulders of giants." His point was not to diminish the present and glorify the past, but to stress the enormous benefit to the present that knowledge of the past offers. By focusing on what is important to know and helping the next generation to learn it, we lift them up so that they can in Bernard's words, "see more things than the ancients and [see] things more distant."

I would like to thank the Center for American Political Studies for encouraging a broad range of discussions on issues affecting our national life.