

Preparing Students for the Richness of Life

Manitoba Federation of Independent Schools

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Good evening. It is a pleasure to be here with you tonight and to have a chance to identify challenges and suggestions for educators from my perspective as the President of the University of Manitoba.

In her poem “Advising Myself”¹ Denise Levertov recalls something of how she felt at the seemingly advanced age of seventeen. This is a close approximation to the age at which young people pass from the K-12 system into our post-secondary system, or perhaps into other phases of their lives.

When the world comes to you muffled *as through a glass*
darkly – jubilation, anguish, declined into
faded postcards – remember how, seventeen, you said
you no longer felt or saw with the old
intensity, and knew that the flamelight
would not rekindle; and how Bet scoffed
and refused to believe you. And how many thousand times,
burning with joy or despair, you’ve known she was right.

One reality that these lines capture is the intensity of feelings – jubilation, anguish – that the young have, and the mistaken sense one can have that at about the time one leaves secondary school all of the emotional highs and lows of life have already been experienced. Well, as the poet tells herself, this just ain’t so. Nonetheless, life is lived intensely by the young, perhaps more consistently with emotional intensity than is the case for many adults.

In that intense phase of life, many attitudes and impressions are formed that shape responses to life, and that are only changed later with some difficulty. In your professional capacities you have many responsibilities and opportunities with respect to shaping character and attitudes, as well as with respect to teaching specific course content. These are all legitimate concerns.

But there are some attitudes about education itself that I hope you share with me. I have chosen tonight to remind you of what I expect you already believe, and to

¹ From *Sands of the Well*.

encourage you to inculcate these same beliefs in those students with whom you work. My comments are at the level of theory rather than practice.

In particular, I want to reflect with you on the value of education as a preparation for life. Not just economic life, but all of life. By this I mean that education is not just something that prepares one for finding a job, for generating an income, and for building financial security for retirement and for family.

Of course, education certainly *is* a preparation for economic life. I expect that almost all of us in the room here this evening have been given the opportunities in life that have led us to where we are now, because of the education that we have. Whether we have attended vocational programs, professional programs or more general educational programs, what we learned – and the certification that we *had* learned – was important in creating opportunities in our economic lives and in helping us take advantage of those opportunities.

Some careers require specific programs of study – one must study law to be called to the bar and practice as a lawyer, or study engineering to be recognized as an engineer – and some careers can be reached from different backgrounds – while political studies might be a good background for elected office, there are many other kinds of preparation that can be useful in that calling.

There is no lack of understanding of this value of education in a very pragmatic sense: as a preparation for work and career. In fact, this is so well understood that it is often the only view that seems to be known in our society. Students pursue higher education because of job prospects, sometimes public agencies want to measure only the employment outcomes resulting from education and there is a pernicious focus on cost as the only consideration in valuing education. This latter tendency denies the reality of every other part of our lives, where there are, largely speaking, relationships between cost and value, with many of us choosing to pay for perceived value.

There are other pragmatic advantages of education as well. I met my wife because of the career choices I made, and I made those as a result of the preparation for life that I was given in school and university. In one sense, then, I owe my present state of happiness to the University of Toronto, but there is no way the U of T can make me recompense them for that.

But beyond the pragmatics, education can and should be preparing students for the richness of life. This means that they must learn about the variety of human experience and the accumulated knowledge – perhaps even wisdom, when we do it well – of humankind. It also means that they must learn about how they themselves can fit into the larger society, about how their abilities and skills can be used in fulfilling ways, and about the personal fulfillment that comes from a life lived in this manner.

Surely, for example, this is the kind of thinking that led many of us in this room into careers in education – we saw how our own skills could be used to help others find their unique ways into personal fulfillment.

Now, of course, education that prepares for the richness of life cannot be accomplished quickly in any person. It certainly can only be accomplished gradually, and only as students mature. We are still working at this – or should be – when students reach our post-secondary institutions.

But having said that, it is also certainly important to inculcate in students of all ages a joy in learning for its own sake, a joy in understanding ideas and elaborating their entailments. It is important that students see education as something much more important than simply learning certain facts or skills.

We all need to know facts and skills, but they are not enough. Education that limits its attention to only facts and skills will encourage a way of thinking that is inherently limiting.

In the discussion of ideas this kind of education I am encouraging is often referred to as *liberal education*. This is not an education that results in a particular kind of political stance of course – it is not that kind of “liberal.” Rather, the word “liberal” in this context means free – specifically, free of the requirement to lead to a particular pragmatic result such as finding a job or solving a specific problem.

A commitment to this kind of education has many implications with respect to curriculum, budgets, staff development, and so on. This brief context tonight requires that we leave those unexamined.

I hope that you will forgive me for using the literature of my part of the educational vineyard rather than yours, which is not so well known to me. But with respect to this issue I believe that our two parts of the vineyard have much in common, so the few quotations I want to use should be relevant.

Bart Giamatti, former President of Yale University, spoke about the kind of education I am describing in this way.

A liberal education rests on the supposition that our humanity is enriched by the pursuit of learning for its own sake; it is dedicated to the proposition that growth in thought, and in the power to think, increases the pleasure, breadth, and value of life.²

² A Bartlett Giamatti, “The Earthly Use of a Liberal Education, in *A Free and Ordered Space: The Real World of the University*, New York/London: W.W. Norton & Company (1990) p.121.

That is the kind of education that I hope you can provide to the students in your schools. It is not easy, and it comes slowly. It is much easier to focus on facts. But this kind of education is also extremely valuable. Giamatti goes on in his essay to describe its value – its *practical* value.

There can be no more practical education, in my opinion, than one that launches you on the course of fulfilling your human capacities to reason and to imagine freely and that hones your abilities to express the results of your thinking in speech and in writing with logic, clarity, and grace.³

This work to which you are committed – and in which I want to encourage you – is important at a deep level both for individual students and for our society as a whole. Here are the words of another former university president: Donald Kennedy of Stanford University.

[Education]⁴ is above all else about opportunity: the opportunity to give others the personal and intellectual platform they need to advance the culture, to preserve life, and to guarantee a sustainable human future. Could anything possibly matter more than that?⁵

Advancing the culture, preserving life, and sustaining a future for the species are important. The major developments in human history that have led to significant advances in these areas have usually been made by persons who have been willing to pursue ideas for their own sake, and to work out the pragmatic entailments of those ideas afterwards. This is the pattern for which liberal education prepares one.

One might quite rightly respond that most of the persons we meet in life, including most of the students we will each influence, will not make pivotal contributions to the development of human history. However, I have been suggesting that liberal education not only serves the society as a whole, but it also prepares the individual for a life that is rich and fulfilling – no matter what problems and challenges are encountered.

In summary, I would encourage you to give the students with whom you work a balanced sense of the pragmatic and the more ethereal values to be found in education. And, since the pragmatic perspective clamors at them from all sides, I encourage you to stress the ethereal so that the voices may be brought into balance.

If you can do this, you will provide a base on which those of us in the post-secondary sector can build and on which the individual students themselves can build whether or not they pursue further formal education. A life built on such a base will be a life that is

³ P.122.

⁴ “The university”.

⁵ Donald Kennedy, *Academic Duty*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press (1997).

full. To take Levertov's image, it will be a life in which the flamelight is frequently rekindled, that is, a life characterized by richness and meaning.

If you can do this, you will have served your students and our society well.

I have highlighted one end among all the many legitimate ends that you must seek to achieve in the complicated environments in which you work – an end for which I am sure many of you are already striving.

My goal is to encourage you to strive for that end, to strive in ways that are appropriate to each of your schools – and to wish you every success in that difficult but most important task.