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Unamuno Begs to Differ

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UNAMUNO BEGS TO DIFFER

President Richard Warch

In preparing my remarks for this matriculation convocation, I was struck by the fact that many of the issues I hope to raise for your consideration are concerns that easily become lost amidst the daily round of our lives at Lawrence and in the rest of the real world. Perhaps that is true of many concerns which strive to rise above everydayness, for all of us spend an inordinate amount of time and energy getting from one moment to the next. And as we do so -- preparing the next lecture, writing the next assignment, rehearsing the next lesson -- we can, and often do, become mired in the task as an end, rather than as a means. We forget the purpose for which the task is undertaken and identify the task with the purpose itself.

Maybe that fact alone is reason enough for occasions like this when we can pause to consider the larger context in which we engage in our individual work and to reflect on the larger issues that give meaning to our actions. For without such moments, we can become isolated from each other. With such occasions, we can -- for a brief but potent moment -- seek to affirm a communal sense of our mission and to contemplate the individual and social aims of our undertaking.

The conventional critique of that mission and undertaking argues that we pursue them in an ivory tower. This charge that the academy is apart from society, or that the world of the intellect is divorced from the world of action, is, of course, just so much nonsense. But it is nonsense that we hear frequently, and it is nonsense that, in various guises, accounts for much of the sound and fury about the future of liberal learning in the United States.

In the first weeks after my election as president, I fielded innumerable questions about the nature and future of the private college -- this one in particular -- so formulated that one would have thought that I had taken on the job of nurturing some exotic and nearly extinct and surely effete institution. The questions were not always hostile and some questioners seemed genuinely concerned about the future well-being of such institutions. Yet even the friendly concerns appeared on occasion to resemble the concern of people to maintain historic landmarks or to perpetuate quaint folk customs. These are worthy goals, but the future of private colleges ought not be left to the National Preservation Trust.

Now this hue and cry is, I believe, but one expression of a national malaise. It is a malaise that permeates many features of American life, although I would not for a moment invoke the theory of American exceptionalism to claim it as exclusively our own. But at

present we are in a period in which we have registered a vote of no-confidence in just about everything -- the economy, the government, the corporate sector, the public schools, the private college, the family, the self. And the anxieties and insecurities thus promoted have affected young adults most dramatically.

We may take some comfort from the fact that such moods have prevailed in other times and cultures. As when Aristophanes surveyed the social chaos promoted by the Peloponnesian War and declared that "Whirl is King, having driven out Zeus." Or when the British surrendered to Cornwallis at Yorktown, marching dejectedly to the tune entitled "The World Turned Upside Down." Or when Ralph Waldo Emerson reviewed mid-century America and proclaimed that "Things are in the saddle, and ride mankind."

Loss of confidence is not ours alone to claim. But the last twenty years have brought a series of cultural and hence personal shocks to our nation the sum total of which has left us shaken: civil rights, Vietnam, Watergate, the women's movement, inflation, energy crises, drugs, Third World conflicts, the arms race, new sexual freedoms, the rise of cults and movements of every sort. In both public and private life, verities have been challenged, assumptions questioned, institutions threatened, selfhood traumatized.

In the halcyon and not-so-halcyon Sixties, engagement was all and social and political reform the rage. This mood surged into the early Seventies, mellowed, and vanished. The moment had its triumphs well as its frustrations, but it is a moment passed. Now we have flopped from engagement to withdrawal. The ebullient confidence that could be both heady and potent has given way to mild timidity that can be both debasing and debilitating.

In 1914, Walter Lippmann wrote Drift and Mastery, a work that is testimony to the rigorous optimism of the scientific method applied to social and political affairs. Conditions have changed radically in 65 years, but we are today surely in danger of drift and with no seeming will to consider -- scientifically or otherwise -- mastery, at least not socially. The only mastery that sells these days relates to self.

One troubling expression of this period is the extraordinary proliferation of Reddi-whip solutions, panaceas, and techniques proffered for our consumption. As we wallow in ambiguity and doubt, we are bombarded on every side by experts, technicians, specialists, and self-anointed priests of personality who know the latest way out of the swamps of our personal indecision and onto the firm ground of surety and safety. The venerable "How to Win Friends and Influence People," first published in 1938, at least had the virtue of seeking to relate the self to others. Its present-day successors, however, appeal strictly to the trinity within each of us, Me, Myself, and I. Predicated on the assumption that none of us has the gumption or wherewithal to define a self and that self-realization is all we should crave, these books, seminars, and institutes play on our lack of confidence in our social situation and promise us personal fulfillment.

Looking Out for #1, Your Erroneous Zones, Pulling Your Own Strings, Power!, Success!, From Sad to Glad, How to Be Your Own Best Friend, I'm OK--You're OK. The list could on on. One of my friends insisted that a more realistic title for the last would be "I'm Not OK--You're Not OK--But That's OK."

Among my favorite titles is Guilt-Free, with the jacket blurb telling us that "America's favorite couple offers a compassionate approach to conquering self-doubt and finding the life you deserve to live." America's favorite couple, of course, is well known to us all for having brought us Loving Free and its sequel, Life Scripts from Loving Free. All of these are books written for and purchased by men and women who do not have the remotest clue about themselves, are perplexed by their world, are ignorant of and indifferent to their collective past. And into the vacuum of their ignorance and anxiety rush the technocrats of self-realization.

Now Lawrence does not exist in isolation from these phenomena. No ivory tower removes us from these cultural traumas. And unless we are self-critical about the nature of our endeavors here, we may unwittingly contribute to perpetuating the social consequences of this malaise.

This university takes as its motto the dying words of Goethe, "Light, Light, More Light!" These words are imprinted on the university seal and are echoed in the Alma Mater. "Light, more light" -- an appropriate claim for a college devoted to liberal learning in the arts and sciences.

Unamuno begs to differ. In the concluding pages of the Spanish philosopher's work Tragic Sense of Life, he wrote:

Light, light, more light! they tell us the dying Goethe cried. No, warmth, warmth, more warmth! for we die of cold and not of darkness. It is not the night kills, but the frost.

The cry for more light, more intelligence, more knowledge is one that ought to earn our allegiance and devotion. Indeed, the university is predicated on promoting the acquisition of knowledge and the nurture of intelligence. The faculty and the curriculum engage in and embody that work. Here, happily, we are not victimized by the chain of professorial jealousy recently described by Leon Botstein in which "the high school teacher envies the college teacher's prestige and status; college teachers envy those who teach graduate students and who demonstrate high professional achievement; graduate faculties envy those at the Institute for Advanced Study, where no teaching is required at all." Here we value teaching first and foremost precisely because we value learning first and foremost. We encourage the quest for more light.

But Miguel de Unamuno begs to differ. I offer his words of caution and correction not to deny our motto or our aim, but to balance

them. And here I return to my earlier remark that we must remember the purpose that our teaching and learning serve. We must continually assert that our mission connects to the world to which the university belongs. Action without purpose is merely activity. Let our teaching and learning have purpose. To devote ourselves simply and solely to receiving light, without the accompanying intention to radiate warmth, is to sterilize the mission and to deny the tradition of the university.

The malaise of our culture, the lack of confidence in the future of our social order, and the compensating concern for our selves can be addressed and perhaps remedied if we have the courage and the conviction to acknowledge that what we think and know will shape what we are and do. A liberal education is for free men and women. It is, in its largest and most ambitious formulation, an education that preserves and examines the triumphs of human imagination, and experience, that values the worth and dignity of the individual, that affirms that a life of meaning involves a life of service, that believes that learned persons shape the social order in which they live. It is not an education designed to foster or pander to vocationalism that is merely self-serving.

We must, as a community of light and warmth, resist the narcissistic confusions of the "me" generation. Preoccupations with self make us prey to moral charlatans who seduce us with the message that a lone matter and to so-called hardheaded realists who insist that a vocation be valued solely on income-producing grounds. Let us not permit our teaching and learning and communal life to become divorced from the opportunities and responsibilities that education imparts to us.

At Lawrence, we resist a balkanized curriculum, we insist on breadth in a student's course of study, and we strive to make connections among disciplines and fields not because we possess some peculiar version of liberal learning, but because we posit some precious vision of the social order. It is a vision that insists that a democratic society remains free and viable when its people behave as citizens and when as citizens they are able and willing to manage its affairs intelligently and responsibly. We are not able without more light, nor willing without more warmth.

Thus your education should be broadly conceived not simply to meet the degree requirements, but to prepare you to cope intelligently with the issues and concerns of our world. For if a Lawrence education means only that you know a great deal about a very little, you will be a victim of, not a participant in, your community. A liberally educated citizen should have the skills and the sense not to fall prey to the specialists and technocrats who pose as the new elite of our troubled times. A society that turns its affairs and purposes over to that class is one in which the grounds for common discourse have been conceded and the possibility for understanding and compassion rendered remote.

In that brave new world, the experts will communicate with fellow experts and will instruct the rest of us. Too often we thus find ourselves governed by an ethic that is the reverse of Kant's dictum. For him, ought implied can. Today, can often implies ought. And in that climate, the experts flourish. They tell us how, but not whether. And we are lulled into moral complacency by the combination of their expertise and our indifference. Socially, we are beguiled into begging the prior questions, which are "why," "for what purpose," and "toward what social good" do we do what we do? Personally, we too seldom ask, "What is the life I should lead that will give meaning to the living I will make?"

Light will illuminate but it will not energize those questions. And not to recognize such questions is to sell the birthright of a liberal education. The issue at stake rises above, it encompasses, Main Hall, Science Hall, the Conservatory. It is the province of no one of these but of all of the "types" by which we often characterize the denizens of this university. We must unify our fragmentation seriously and spiritedly. Let it not be said of Lawrence as was said of Harvard, that it is a community bound together only by a common interest in parking. There is a city, a nation, and a world of which we are an integral part. Let us be prepared to shape them, let our aspiration be equal to our talents, and let our values be as sharp as our intelligence.

Disarmament, American investments in South Africa, energy policy, genetic engineering, Third World turmoil, nuclear power, the distinctions and divisions between blacks and whites in America, the future shape of downtown Appleton, and a host of other issues confront us, affect us, trouble us. And somewhere in the bright college years should be world enough and time for engaging them rather than ignoring or retreating from them.

Society will -- as it has -- look to Lawrence and to similar colleges for a significant share of the men and women who will contribute to the general good creatively and critically and conscientiously. Woe to our nation and to ourselves if we respond only with a self-serving value-free intelligence that professes neither competence nor inclination to render judgments.

I am not calling for a curriculum devoted to current events, nor am I making any devious plea for the kind of easy relevance that some would have colleges provide. But I am asking that we understand the continuity and connectedness among our learning, our doing, and our being. Just as I believe that we need to affirm the harmony of our curricular and extracurricular life -- which can mean permitting and encouraging joy and pleasure in the classroom and thought and engagement in the residence hall -- so we must affirm the harmony of liberal learning with responsible living.

The Lawrence University curriculum has no political persuasion to teach to you and no sectarian doctrine to preach to you. It predicts

no single job and premeditates no single career to any of you. It will not offer you a formulaic position on the day's headlines. It will not prescribe a morality for you to adopt. To those extents, then, the university curriculum mirrors the society in which we live -- open, pluralistic, democratic.

But despite these apparent signs of neutrality, the university imposes expectations and embodies values for all of us that go beyond the standard conditions of employment, criteria for admission, and requirements for graduation. These expectations and values are difficult to express, easy to denigrate and disparage. They are readily set aside or neglected as we go about the business of getting from one moment to the next.

We protect free inquiry because we value freedom. We insist on precision because we cherish truth. We endorse an honor system because we are a community of trust. We foster cogent expression because society needs clear thinking. We employ high standards because we desire excellence. And we teach classics, political modernization, genetics, topology, aesthetics, art, literature, existentialism, developmental psychology, macro-this and micro-that, and a wide variety of other subjects and methods because we affirm that coming to terms with and attaining mastery of the richness and diversity of achievements and knowledge bring us closer to the full possibilities of our humanity and hence capacitate us to act humanely. We receive light so that we may radiate warmth.

Such affirmations about liberal learning and the purposes of our communal life and work are unverifiable in ways that would satisfy the statistician. But it will not do, out of either embarrassment or reluctance, to deny their presence and power. The critics and skeptics say that the difficulty we have articulating the nature and aspirations of liberal learning is proof of the muddle-headedness and abstraction of our endeavors. In fact, it is testimony to the magnificence and importance of our undertaking and aspiration, that they cannot be reduced, packaged, and presented in 25 words or less. The consequences of liberal learning can be evoked, not produced. We can only have faith that responsible analysis will lead to responsible action and that our learning will prompt our living. For we die of cold and not of darkness. It is not the night kills, but the frost.