

9-26-1985

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Richard Warch
Lawrence University

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Recommended Citation

Warch, Richard, "Look Again, Look Again!" (1985). *Presidential Addresses*. 7.
https://lux.lawrence.edu/addresses_president/7

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LOOK AGAIN, LOOK AGAIN!

MATRICULATION CONVOCATION ADDRESS

RICHARD WARCH

SEPTEMBER 26, 1985

Welcome to the first convocation of the fall term, the first in the 1985-86 academic year, and the first with a new public address system. This year, the only problems with understanding the speaker will rest with the speaker not with the speakers. And I hope those problems will not materialize this or any other morning.

The "My Turn" column in last week's Newsweek contained a marvelous piece entitled "No Allusions in the Classroom" by a college teacher from the state of Washington who had given his students a general knowledge test. In the article, he lists some of the things that this group of 26 students, ranging in age from 18 to 54, thought they knew but which just aren't so. Here are some of the findings:

"Ralph Nader is a baseball player. Charles Darwin invented gravity. Christ was born in the 16th century. J. Edgar Hoover was a 19th-century president. Neil Simon wrote "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest." "The Great Gatsby" was a magician in the 1930s. Franz Joseph Haydn was a songwriter during the same decade. Sid Caesar was an early Roman emperor. Mark Twain invented the cotton gin. Heinrich Himmler invented the Heimlich maneuver. Jefferson Davis was a guitar player for the Jefferson Airplane. Benito Mussolini was a Russian leader of the 18th century. Dwight D. Eisenhower came even earlier, serving as a

president during the 17th century. William Faulkner made his name as a 17th-century scientist. Pablo Picasso painted masterpieces in the 12th century." And the list goes on, including some magnificently misplaced geographical locations, with the author noting that in the face of this ignorance, a game of Trivial Pursuit with this crowd would never end.

Not only that, but he also makes the point that with this kind of rampant ignorance on the loose, higher educational aspirations are seriously crippled and the individual's ability to understand what's going on in the news dramatically impaired. One commentator, reporting on the recent spy case, suggested that the Walkers will be the Rosenbergs of the '80s; one of the author's students thought Ethel Rosenberg was a singer from the 1930s. If we are entering what has been called the information processing age, he concludes, what kind of information is going to get processed? The answer, of course, is "not much" and it is that answer, among other things, which has prompted such a furor about the state and status of American education.

In the past three years, we have witnessed what almost amounts to a renaissance regarding the educational enterprise in our nation and the pursuit of excellence in that enterprise--at least at the rhetorical level. First it was A Nation at Risk, issued in 1983 and calling for fundamental and pervasive reform in our elementary and secondary schooling. 1983 was in many ways a banner year for such reports, with over a dozen issued by various commissions and entities. In 1984-85 higher education had its turn in the spotlight, with the publication of three major reports dealing with its present condition and future

prospects.

My aim here is not to rehash these several bills of indictment or to summarize their findings. But I do want to draw our attention to a persistent underlying theme in all of these studies and critiques, namely, their assessment that we are faced with curricula in disarray and appalling gaps in what students know. The analyses differ in emphasis from one report to the next, but the concerns are fairly uniform: that "scientific and technological developments have so outpaced the understanding of science provided by most college programs that we have become a people unable to comprehend the technology we invent"; that "the bachelor's degree has lost its potential to foster the shared values and knowledge that bind us together as a society"; that far "too many students are graduating from American colleges and universities lacking even the the most rudimentary knowledge about the history, literature, art, and philosophical foundations of their nation and their civilization."

In the wake of these several studies, there has been a flurry of educational reforms throughout our schooling system, from elementary through post-secondary. On one level, these reforms involve a fairly straightforward "back to basics" thrust. On another, they involve a rethinking of the unstructured curriculum that came into vogue about fifteen years ago and which, at worst, conveyed to the student the notion that a curriculum was merely a cafeteria where one sampled whatever dishes one wanted in whatever sequence or quantities one preferred. The ideology of student as consumer and professor as

merchant resulted in an abandonment of standards and shared expectations, a "loss of definition and rigor," as one report put it. In seeking to reverse this condition, the reforms have attempted, then, to recapture definition and to restore shared expectations; whether viewed in terms of so-called distribution requirements, general education requirements, or a core curriculum, there have been widespread efforts to restore commonality and cohesion to the course of study, to state what students should know, and to concoct requirements by which students would navigate the curriculum to obtain that knowledge.

At Lawrence, consideration of these issues has taken place over the past two years, with the faculty voting last spring to institute more specific and broad-based general education requirements in the fall term of 1986. This year, the work of reformation will continue with a review of the Freshman Program to be initiated by the Committee on Instruction. On the whole, this is a healthy and salutary moment for the college as it prompts a rethinking of our activities and a restatement of our purposes. The result should be an enlivened academic program.

While the reform movement both locally and nationally has many features, the one that strikes me as worth our attention involves a renewed respect for the content of the curriculum. One of the aforementioned reports lamented that the "anything goes" philosophy of college curricula of the recent past suggests that "we have reached a point where we are more confident about the length of a college education than its content and purpose." The message that colleges sent to students went something like this: we offer hundreds of courses; take 36.

Put in a nutshell, it could be argued that we have abandoned the educational philosophy expounded so pointedly by Mr. Thomas Gradgrind, Sr., in Dickens's Hard Times: "Now what I want is, Facts," Gradgrind proclaims. "Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else. You can only form the minds of reasoning animals upon Facts: nothing else will ever be of service to them. This is the principle on which I bring up my children, and this is the principle on which I bring up these children. Stick to Facts, sir!"

Some of the impetus behind curricular reform today has something of that same Dragnet "Just the facts, ma'am" conviction about both facts and students. The former are the stuff of all learning and the latter need to be filled with them. In the argument surrounding curricular revision, one encounters, on occasion, an almost religious conviction that the course of study ought to be a wholly prescribed one with its content clearly laid out for everyone to confront and master. Reformers who take that stance see themselves in opposition to the notion that one course is as good as another, that one discipline is as meritorious as the next, that one kind of knowledge equals any other kind. These educators give weight to certain facts, by which I mean certain skills, certain intellectual abilities, certain topics, certain knowledge. They argue that higher education and the pursuit of the bachelor's degree are not just the accumulation of so many courses and credits, but the mastery of certain skills and the attainment of certain kinds of knowledge. And, in large

measure, their view is an unexceptionable one that is generating few rebuttals.

In one sense, of course, we have here a classic instance of the pendulum swinging. Some of what is being proposed is therefore predicated as much on a desire to reverse direction as on an acceptance of a new direction, as much as a reaction to former practices as an adherence to new ones. At the same time, there remains the possibility that the new curriculum--wherever and however it appears--will be viewed as panacea, as the one true solution to the problems with American higher education and its students. Skepticism on this last point is fully warranted.

What is going to make any curriculum effective, here and elsewhere, has as much if not more to do with how we go about the practice of teaching and learning as it does with curricular structure and content. I firmly believe that the new structure is essentially important and that the definition of intellectual purpose conveyed by new requirements is of real significance. But I believe too that how we go about that business of promoting or gaining mastery and providing or attaining knowledge is the most critical element in this endeavor. There is, it seems to me, one major problem with an education that aims to convey "facts"--broadly construed. Such an approach invites precisely the kind of consumer/provider model that we are attempting to abandon, only this time instead of the student as the sovereign consumer, the faculty member is the almighty provider. To change the metaphor but to stress the point, the curriculum no longer becomes a cafeteria but a fixed-price meal. And depending on the nutritional convictions of the faculty chefs, it is also a

balanced meal with all the right portions of vitamins, calories, and protein. At worst, it can come off as a version of "eat these prunes, they're good for you."

At the end of the passage I quoted a moment ago, Dickens wrote that Gradgrind looked at a class of students as "so many empty jars waiting to be filled with imperial gallons of facts." In one sense, the authors of these recent reports and the critics of American education are taking a similar posture; they want today's students filled with facts. But our interest in achieving that goal need not lead us inevitably to adopt this "empty jar" approach. Let me suggest another approach, one that has always enjoyed a central place in the style of education at Lawrence, and one that we ought to affirm anew at this time of curricular change.

One of the great scientists and teachers of science in 19th-century America was the Swiss immigrant, Louis Agassiz. Agassiz had a special way of teaching his students, one that--eventually--earned him their lasting gratitude and one which--as will become apparent in a moment--made Agassiz something of a legend and his technique something to be emulated. His technique was actually quite simple and the first lesson he sought to impart was one in looking. Agassiz "gave no assistance; he simply left his student with the specimen, telling him to use his eyes diligently, and report upon what he saw. He returned from time to time to inquire after the beginner's progress, but he never asked a leading question, never pointed out a single feature of the structure, never prompted an inference or a

conclusion."

His students never forgot their initial dismay at this strategy. One reported that when he first came to Harvard, Agassiz sat him down in front a tin tray in which lay a small fish and said "Find out what you can . . . and when I think you have done the work I will question you." The student, in this case, thought he had found out all there was to discover in an hour; Agassiz kept him at it for a week. Another remembered that "in ten minutes I had seen all that could be seen in that fish" but was not permitted to quit. When at last the professor asked him to report on his findings, the results were hardly encouraging. "You have not looked very carefully," Agassiz told him; "why, you haven't even seen one of the most conspicuous features of the animal; . . . look again, look again!" And so the student dutifully looked, and poked, and examined and at last reported some findings of which Agassiz approved. Thinking he had at last passed this introductory test, the student asked what he should do next. And Agassiz replied, "Oh, look at your fish!"

Agassiz insisted that his students pay attention, to discover the facts of that fish, and having done so, that they look again. The approach is not confined to the study of nature. Nathan Pusey, when a teacher at Lawrence, had much the same philosophy and indeed--as a Harvard graduate himself--may have known about and deliberately copied Agassiz's strategy. President Wriston told this story of Pusey, who had assigned Aristotle's Poetics to a sophomore class. When one young woman came to class, "he asked her what she had learned, and she said "Nothing"; so, without changing his tone of voice, he said, "Do

you live in Ormsby?" and she said "Yes." He said, "What did you see when you came over here?" and she said, "Nothing," so he said, "Go back to Ormsby and then return here and tell me what you've seen." In the course of the trip she managed to observe Main Hall, around which she had to detour to come. So he sent her back eight times and after eight times she was able to tell him with a good deal of detail what lay between the library and Ormsby, whereupon he said, "Now read the Poetics that many times and see if you don't find out what it's all about." With this, Wriston concluded, "a great light dawned and she became a student."

The point of both of these stories of great teaching is that each involves an emphasis on independent learning. While both Agassiz and Pusey were keenly interested in the student's knowledge of certain facts, their emphasis was not so much on the fact as on the mode of accessing and assessing it. That mode, in short, involved disciplined, repeated, and persistent inquiry. That intense and persistent looking, that insistence on precision, that style of independent investigation--finding out the facts of the fish or the meaning of the Poetics for oneself by close and sustained study and observation--are, in both of these stories, the first principle of learning. In neither case does learning take place by being told about the specimen or hearing a professorial exegesis of the text. The exhortation is not to receive, but to get, not to listen, but to look--and look again.

This point deserves particular emphasis, and especially at

Lawrence, where individual initiative and independent investigation have long been a central value of our educational mission. And as we anticipate our introduction of new general education requirements and our further review and reform of the curriculum, that is not a feature we are going to abandon, but cherish. The most erroneous view of this time of curricular change is to read it as merely a moment for the faculty to tell the student what to know or for the student to abrogate responsibility for learning by assuming that the "facts" need not be sought but only received. There will always be times, of course, when you will be told certain facts--in a lecture or through a text--in both the narrow and extended senses of the term. But even then, you must go through the struggle to possess those facts for your own. That exercise is what we call education.

At Lawrence, we have made choices in describing our new general education requirements. We have made choices in the definition of the Freshman Program and in the books selected for Freshman Studies. In these ways we seek to demarcate our best understanding of liberal education today, our expectation of the meaning of the baccalaureate degree at this college, our view of what kinds of knowledge, analytical and expressive skills, and intellectual attainments the educated person ought to possess. But we have--wisely and properly, I think--stopped short of providing a totally rigid or wholly imposed set of requirements. We have steered a middle course, in which definition is balanced with freedom, and in which structure is complemented by openness. There is not only room for initiative; there is room for nothing

but initiative.

In Agassiz's Harvard laboratory, the purpose of describing the fish was to take that first necessary step toward becoming a scientist. In Wriston's tale of Pusey's teaching, the consequence of the young woman looking on those eight trips between Ormsby and the library was that "she became a student." In larger existential terms, however, the result in both instances is that the individual transcends the role of passive recipient/receptacle and becomes a self-reliant individual, capable of independent judgment and mastery. In either construct, two conclusions emerge: the integrity and importance of the thing to be studied--which I've here referred to by the generic term "fact"--and the necessity of the individual confronting that fact on his or her own. In that respect, we are adhering to Ezra Pound's claim that "real education must ultimately be limited to [persons] who insist on knowing; the rest is mere sheep-herding."

Whether viewed as mastering certain knowledge, perfecting a particular skill, understanding this theory or that principle, or developing modes of critical thinking and analysis, the process of confronting that fact--of insisting on knowing--involves patience, persistence, perseverance. It also involves adherence to the message of the Danish proverb: Whoever is afraid to ask is ashamed of learning.

In present-day educational parlance--or at least in the words of one of those reports I mentioned at the outset--the value we hold here is one of student involvement in learning.

The Study Group on the Conditions of Excellence in American Higher Education used that phrase as the title of its report and touted this concept as something remarkable. Remarkable it may be; at Lawrence, it's also embedded in how we have long conducted our version of liberal learning.

And because we have valued it for so long, we therefore know that while student involvement in learning is something which the college may foster, it ultimately is a behavior for which the student alone is accountable. The college's task--the faculty's obligation--is to assure that that involvement is with material of substance and significance, with texts of value and vitality, and with facts of interest and import. At bottom, that task, that obligation, and that assurance have been reaffirmed by the faculty's recent action.

The novelist and essayist Walker Percy has argued that "the highest role of the educator is the maieutic role of Socrates: to help the student come to himself not as a consumer of experience but as a sovereign individual." In its own way, that is a pretty fair rendition of what liberal education seeks to promote. At Lawrence, that is a role the faculty embraces, and it is a destination toward which each of us should strive.

Curricular reform is a good thing; it brings new energy and purpose to what we do here. But it is a better thing, a necessary thing, that you look and look again. For with looking comes knowledge, and with knowledge mastery, and with mastery that individual sovereignty that will serve you all your days. Best wishes to each of you in your looking in the year to come.