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Our Changing Institutions: A Challenge to the Liberally Educated

Catherine Blanchard Cleary

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Our Changing Institutions -
A Challenge to
the Liberally Educated
The following address was given by Catherine Blanchard Cleary, president of the First Wisconsin Trust Company, at the 125th Commencement Exercises at Lawrence University, Appleton, Wisconsin, June 8, 1974.

It is an honor to share this happy occasion with the members of the graduating class and their families, the faculty, students, alumni, trustees and friends of Lawrence University.

After I had accepted President Smith's invitation to speak to you today, I suddenly remembered that I had spoken at the Milwaukee-Downer College commencement in 1957. You graduates were not yet in first grade. I got out a copy of that talk and it reminded me not only that the world has changed but, more importantly, that it can change. At that time because the average age of marriage for women in the United States had dropped to 20 – the youngest for any country for which data was available except Mexico, where it was the same – and because women were having their children earlier and closer together so that by the time they reached their middle thirties, their youngest child was in school all day, those of us who were concerned about the education of women were trying to impress on young women the lifelong importance of their education.

The title of my talk was "Living Happily Ever After" because that was the year of Cinderella on television, and, of course, my theme was that marrying the Prince – or not marrying him – was not the end of the tale.

As I re-read that speech, I was struck by how greatly our attitudes toward women's roles have changed and how the lives of men as well as women have been affected by this change. Girls getting married is low on the list of things we worry about today.

Because this is a time when the institutions of our society are under attack, when their legitimacy is being questioned – and because I have devoted a major part of my own adult life to working within those institutions – it seemed to
me appropriate to discuss this morning some of the relationships between individuals and institutions, particularly as they relate to the improvement of our society.

If one major concern of our society is the legitimacy of its institutions, another is concern for the quality of the life of the individual. These two concerns are, of course, related, because the basis for the attack on our institutions is largely that they are failing to serve the needs of individuals who have a legitimate claim on their resources.

I want to get back to this claim later, but first let me talk about possible reactions to the situation in which we find ourselves. One, of course, is to drop out and perhaps to return to nature in one form or another because nature is pure and unspoiled.

Believe me, I have no quarrel with getting back to nature. While the invitation to speak here today is a great honor, I would be less than honest if I did not say that I spent several weekends working on this talk when I would rather have been at my cottage on Lake Michigan, watching the birds and enjoying the wild flowers which bloom for such a short period each spring. Nature is for many of us a source of renewal and pleasure, of identifying with living things, but to retreat permanently to nature for one’s self alone is a way of turning one’s back on the world’s problems.

Most of us feel the necessity for a commitment to something beyond ourselves. The genesis of this feeling may lie in any one of a number of conscious or unconscious beliefs, but this kind of commitment is, I believe, necessary for the true fulfillment of a mature individual.

Recently I ran across this poem by Emerson entitled “What is Success?” —

To laugh often and much,
To win the respect of intelligent people
and affection of children;
To earn the appreciation of honest critics
and endure the betrayal of false friends;
To appreciate beauty, to find the best in
others;
To leave the world a bit better, whether
by a healthy child, a garden patch or
a redeemed social condition;
To know even one life has breathed easier
because you have lived,
This is to have succeeded.

Remember that what you possess in the world
Will be found on the day of your death
To belong to someone else.
What you are, will be yours forever!
The purpose of life is not to be happy.
It is to be useful,
To be honorable; to be compassionate,
To have it make some difference
That you have lived and have lived well.

Let me repeat those last words — “have lived well.” Part of our commitment to ourselves, it seems to me, should be pride in our own performance — not because we are measured by it or someone else demands it, but because we owe it to ourselves to develop our full potential. This is a cumulative process that continues as long as we live.

Twice this spring I have had the privilege of spending a day with Owen Gromme, the distinguished Wisconsin naturalist whose beautiful paintings of birds may be familiar to many of you. He is 78 years old, but he is more active than many people half his age. Building on his career in the Milwaukee Public Museum, now in retirement he is busy with his painting, sharing the accumulated knowledge of his life with friends, and supporting and encouraging the efforts of younger colleagues. But he could not be doing this at 78 if he had not worked so diligently at his profession when he was 28 and 38 and 48. Years ago a lawyer said to me that only when a lawyer gets to be about 45 does the quality of his work show the extra in-depth work he did when he was in his late 20’s. That depth of knowledge and experience can’t be faked. It has to be built, year in and year out, and the motivation must be largely internal.
If one response to the current problems of our society may be to drop out, another may be to devote one's efforts to those whom one regards as the victims of our present social order — the poor, the handicapped. Surely no one can argue with those who choose to spend their lives helping these unfortunate people, but —

Another way to help them is to try to expand our knowledge and improve the system so that there are fewer people unable to take care of their own needs.

If one wants to improve the system, then the choice becomes whether to work within our institutions or to attack them, so to speak, from the outside. Both roles can be valuable. Both can contribute to change. Some people are happier as observers, critics or protesters than as participants. In the last analysis, however, change and hopefully improvements will take place only when the people within institutions act, and that is why, I suppose, I feel the greatest challenge and the greatest opportunity to effect change lies within our institutions.

The reluctance of some people to work within our institutions is based on concerns about their legitimacy. Because our public institutions are now under the most intense scrutiny, I will relate my remarks to the private sector — to our private institutions, such as higher education, business, our health care delivery system.

At the outset, let me acknowledge that in the private as in the public sector, and more specifically in business, recent abuses of power in the political area have created the gravest questions as to the manner in which private power is exercised. No one can defend the abuses, and I reject the argument that politics is inherently a dirty business. One can only hope that from this experience everyone will realize once again the importance of the integrity of each individual and the public accountability of individuals and organizations for how their power is exercised.

The key question on the legitimacy of our institutions, as I see it, is whether they are in fact serving the interests of all the people who have a claim on their resources. An analysis of the process by which decisions are made and implemented in private organizations, either nonprofit or profit-making, might be broken down into this sequence —

input of facts and opinions
sifting and weighing the input to arrive at a decision or policy
implementation of the decision or policy
accountability for the results

While policymakers have always attempted to take into account the interests of all people affected by their decisions, in recent years we have moved toward greater opportunities for these people to have a direct input into the policymaking or decision-making process. “We hear you,” the Bell System says, and all of us would do well to keep that slogan in mind. This is a time when the definition of what people or groups are affected by certain policies or decisions is being analyzed and expanded, but the question of how they should be represented is far from solved.

I do not believe, however, that decisions can or should be made by all the affected people or even by their representatives. In my opinion a relatively small group not representing separate constituencies, with different backgrounds but dedicated to common goals, must make policy and be accountable for it. This to me is where, above all, we need liberally educated people. Policymakers should have the knowledge of history, the respect for facts, the sense of human and ethical values which characterize the liberally educated person. They must be able to deal with conflicting opinions in an atmosphere of reason and good will. They must relate present decisions to the past and to the future.

Once policies and decisions have been made, they must be implemented and then their results must be evaluated. This evaluation involves external as well as internal judgments. It also involves communication. Many institutions are doing a far better job than they get credit for, and this is in part their fault for not taking time to explain what they are really doing and how it serves the public interest.
In my judgment the question of the accountability of private institutions for what they have or have not done is the crux of the current concern as to their legitimacy. It relates back to the question of what people or groups have an interest in the particular matter and who represents them, as well as to the principles on which the decisions or policies were made. It also relates to standards for judging performance.

One thing that muddies the waters has been the tendency of the federal government to attempt to define the public interest by setting performance standards without an adequate factual basis or without a careful evaluation of the consequences or trade-offs involved. To take a very simple example, anyone who drives a car knows how mandated safety features have added to the weight of automobiles and how weight plus pollution control devices have cut gasoline mileage. It is not very hard to pass a law or promulgate a regulation in Washington, but it can be difficult and expensive for corporations to comply, and in the end it is the consumer who pays and who may get something he did not want in the first place.

Please understand that I’m not against legislation — although I think our current proclivity for passing a law to cure every ill is counterproductive and is turning into a disaster for practically everyone but the legal profession. My concern is that legislation and regulation shall be based on a realistic assessment of the facts and an understanding of what compliance will mean to all the affected parties.

It is important that there be within institutions sufficient flexibility to be responsive to change. It is important to all of us to keep that flexibility and to protect it from unwarranted interference and control. This means that the policymakers must listen to the voices of change and anticipate public demands.

I remember attending a luncheon here at Lawrence some years ago when Bishop Ralph Alton [University trustee emeritus] in the invocation gave thanks for living in a world that is unfinished. An American businessman expressed a similar thought when he said that perhaps our greatest national asset is our sense of dissatisfaction.

What I have tried to say this morning is that our institutions are changing significantly and, for most of us who are not creative artists, to have the opportunity to work with other people, to have the benefit of other people’s capital investment and to have a personal input into the improvement of our institutions is not only a challenge but a chance to be where the action is.

One final word to the women and men in the graduating class. Obviously your work will be only a part of your lives. I listened to a panel discussion on work at Smith College last year, and one of the participants cautioned that we should not think of ourselves, for example, as bankers or students but as a person who has a job in a bank, a person who is studying in college. One test of the impact of Lawrence on your lives will be the diversity of your interests and talents as you grow older.

At the same time, I hope you will not be reluctant to make a personal commitment to the institutions in which you work. We have only two choices — to destroy our institutions or to continue to work for their improvement, their relevance, their legitimacy — whatever you want to call it. Some people really advocate destruction. But for a person who believes that institutions should continue and should be improved to say “I will not give my loyalty to them, I will in effect leave this task to people of lesser talent, lesser virtue” — this to me is laziness or arrogance beyond belief.

Working within an organization, working to make it function efficiently and to serve the interests of all the people affected by it involves a sustained effort and not infrequent yielding to the opinions of others. One learns to accept these decisions, recognizing as an educated person surely must, that individuals of intelligence and integrity can hold differing opinions and that events have a way of turning out differently from what even wise and educated people predict. One learns, too, that one can’t just walk away when the going gets rough. A personal commitment to an ideal, to other people, keeps one going even when one is publicly identified with decisions he privately
opposed. If institutions must be responsive to change, so must individuals. People who want to be heard must also listen.

Only those of you who have given commencement speeches know how hard it is to avoid the cliches. In a newspaper last week there was a cartoon of an elderly commencement speaker sitting on a platform, looking out at the graduates and whispering to the person next to him—

"I'm going to tell them that the world is theirs.
That ought to scare the hell out of them."

No one can give you the world, but you can make a significant place in it for yourself if you really want to. The liberal arts education you've received at Lawrence gives you the best possible background for being an effective person in our society. And so I say to each of you graduates: Good luck! Work hard! Keep learning! Don't be afraid to give your loyalty to the people and the causes and the institutions you believe in! And remember that the first line of Emerson's definition of success was "To laugh often and much."

Catherine Blanchard Cleary

Since joining the First Wisconsin Trust Company in 1947, Catherine B. Cleary has risen from assistant trust officer to president and member of the board. In the April, 1973, issue of Fortune magazine, she was cited as one of "The Ten Highest-Ranking Women in Big Business."

Miss Cleary, born Dec. 19, 1916, in Madison, Wisconsin, holds an A.B. degree from the University of Chicago and an LL.B. from the University of Wisconsin. She holds honorary degrees from Lawrence and Marquette Universities, the University of Wisconsin, and Ripon, Alverno and Smith Colleges. She taught school in Massachusetts and Connecticut before attending the University of Wisconsin Law School. Later, she worked in the legal department of the Kohler Co., Kohler, Wisconsin, and for a Chicago law firm before joining the First Wisconsin Trust Company.

She served as U.S. Assistant Treasurer in 1953 and was assistant to the U.S. Secretary of the Treasury in 1953-54.

Miss Cleary is a trustee of Lawrence University and of Northwestern Mutual Life Insurance Company and a director of the Krafteco Corporation, Kohler Co., American Telephone & Telegraph Company, General Motors Corporation and First Wisconsin Bankshares Corporation. She is on the board of governors of Mount Mary College and on the board of directors of the University of Wisconsin Foundation. She is also a trustee of The Johnson Foundation, The William F. Vilas Trust Estate and the Committee for Economic Development, and a member of the Wisconsin and Milwaukee Bar Associations.