

TOUGH-MINDED OR THIN-SKINNED
MATRICULATION CONVOCATION ADDRESS
SEPTEMBER 25, 1997

In his address to students at the University of Chicago in 1993, Richard Shweder proposed six commandments to save the soul of liberal education, the last of which contained the admonition that one needed to know only two things to be successful at the college: "If someone asserts it, deny it; if someone denies it, assert it." That prescription may seem at first blush to be a recipe for contentiousness, but it nonetheless points to a characteristic of liberal education that is in danger of becoming obsolete, or at least out of fashion, namely, that such education to be most effective is often argumentative and contrarian.

I have spoken before on this occasion and others about the need for civility in our interactions with one another, and I would state again the importance of that value in our public and private discourse at Lawrence. But civility should not be confused with the practice of mere politeness, or with the refusal to contradict one another, or with the avoidance of topics and points of view that are either "hot" or out of favor. Civility relates mainly to the willingness to engage others in disputes without resorting to *ad hominem* attacks or personal innuendo, to be willing to discuss differences openly and candidly with one another. But at a liberal arts college, when civility comes to be synonymous with timidity or with the fear of giving offense or with a reluctance to challenge another's point of view, then an important quality of education has been compromised and perhaps lost.

So this morning I will, in a sense, take Professor Shweder's advice. Having asserted the value of civility, I do now challenge it. Obviously, of course, it's not that straightforward, and I will hem and hedge in the course of these remarks. George Will, commenting on the virtues of etiquette, once observed that if everyone said what was on his or her mind at every turn, chaos would reign. I'm not urging chaos. But for the sake of argument, let's consider the virtues of the argumentative and contrarian mode.

It seems demonstrable that many people do not understand the nature and value of liberal learning. A recent survey undertaken to gauge attitudes toward this venerable form of education found that an alarming number of high school seniors and their parents not only didn't value liberal education, they had absolutely no clue as to what it was. Conventional wisdom has frequently portrayed such education as consisting of a smattering of subjects associated mainly with what we call the humanities, a kind of ornamental education that might enable one to engage in seemingly informed cocktail chatter about high-minded subjects with like-educated acquaintances. Indeed, some years ago a group of Lawrence students parodied this view by holding occasional parties called "Dress up and talk smart." The point was to be sophisticated, although being pseudo-sophisticated (perhaps that's a redundancy) would do just as well. Mark Twain gave his particular spin on this notion when he said that a cauliflower is just a cabbage with a college education.

Liberal arts education is not only labeled ornamental, it is also often perceived as irrelevant to the workaday demands of contemporary life, a kind of effete and precious undertaking that occurs in the ivory-tower of academe. As one student stated in that survey I just mentioned, "If I'm going to be an accountant, what do I care what someone did back in ancient Egypt?" If you care about ancient Egypt, this fellow's line of thinking seems to suggest, either you have rich parents or you intend to be a pauper. Not caring about ancient Egypt is a short-hand metaphor for why liberal education is demeaned and denigrated. Sure, liberal education introduces one to the unknown and the foreign, and hence refines one's understandings and tastes, but that's about it. Put another way, liberal education in this sense is conducted as a form of gentle and easy-going discourse, with nothing really at stake in whatever issues or controversies may be embedded in the subject matter. In short, the subject matter doesn't matter, and thus no one should get exercised about it. One should, rather, as my children tell me when I get heated up about some issue or another, "keep your pantyhose on."

A number of you may have read the two articles in the September issue of *Harper's* "On the Uses of a Liberal Education." One of them offered a robust defense of the liberal arts as offering a form of empowerment to the disenfranchised--blacks, Hispanics, and immigrants in the inner city. But the more dispiriting of the two articles defined liberal education "As Lite Entertainment for Bored College Students." The author of this piece, a professor at the University of Virginia, laments the ways in which the university culture has come to replicate the American culture, "ever more devoted to consumption and entertainment, to the using and using up of goods and images....the cool consumer worldview." Responding to mostly positive reviews of his teaching, he cringes when he reads that students have "enjoyed" his courses, have appreciated that he is "approachable" and that he makes complex material "interesting." That is not at all what he has in mind in teaching Shakespeare, or Freud, or Blake.

"I want some of them to say that they've been changed by the course. I want them to measure themselves against what they've read," he goes on. "It's said that some time ago a Columbia University instructor used to issue a harsh two-part question. One: What book did you most dislike in the course? Two: What intellectual or characterological flaws in you does that dislike point to? The hand that framed that question was surely heavy. But at least it compels one to see intellectual work as a confrontation between two people, student and author, where the stakes matter. Those Columbia students were being asked to relate the quality of an *encounter*, not rate the action as though it had unfolded on the big screen."

And so he asks, "Why are my students describing the Oedipus complex and the death drive as being interesting and enjoyable to contemplate? And why am I coming across as an urbane, mildly ironic, endlessly affable guide to this intellectual territory, operating without intensity, generous, funny, and loose?" And he answers: "Because that's what works." The students at UVA--and, by extension, throughout American higher education--don't seem terribly interested in or capable of taking a novel idea

seriously, or of thinking that an idea matters, much less getting exercised about an idea one way or the other.

Students of this stripe are occasionally willing to entertain--and be entertained by-- an idea, they just don't want to take it home and live with it. This might be the consequence of cultural influences rather than characterological flaws--a product, say, of too much MTV, hundreds of cable channels, web-surfing, and the like--but when the reigning ideology suggests, as the *Harper's* article put it, that "judicious timing is preferred to sudden self-assertion," people become attuned to being low-key and nonassertive, "committed to a laid-back norm." No wonder, then, that they find argument distasteful, protect their privacy and personal sense of self, are self-contained and cautious.

Now I'm not suggesting that there was some golden age when all of this was quite different. Earlier academic ages in America were also characterized by a kind of casual and cavalier attitude among students. One only need to harken back to the earlier images of Joe College, of the Gentleman's C, of the days represented in the tune "Collegiate, collegiate, yes we are collegiate, nothing intermediate," of hat hunts at Downer and "Best Loved" competitions at Lawrence, and so on. Indeed, the Lawrence archives indicate that something of this spirit existed here in 1947, as exemplified by this light-hearted ditty by William Munchow, which appeared in *The Lawrentian*:

I'm a master of nothing and no one,
I no longer say dose, dem, and dese,
If you come down to cases
I've learned social graces
That come with the bachelor degrees.
It's a matter of paying the fees.

I've had four years of high pressure learning,
Some work and a great deal more play;
After all this endeavor
I'm confused more than ever,
But I have the degree anyway;
That wonderful, magic B.A.

I'm ready for all competition,
I think hence I am a Descartes;
I'm leaving the cloister,
The world is my oyster,
They can't stop a Bachelor of Art,
A singular Bachelor of Art.

That doesn't sound like evidence that high seriousness prevailed at Lawrence fifty years ago, at least not in every quarter.

But in addition to the ways in which the consumer culture of today has come to influence the student and hence affect the teaching and learning enterprise, there is another feature that interferes as well—or so some faculty would see it—something like the fact that students seem to take any criticism of their failure to take an idea seriously or rebuttals of the ideas they do profess as personal affronts to their self-worth. Being nice and decent, they wish to be treated nicely and decently, not challenged and criticized by mean-spirited professors seemingly bent on embarrassing them.

One member of the faculty, who recalls in his early years here as being perceived by students as “tough but fair,” is now hearing that he’s seen as “harsh and intimidating.” When he poses “shocking questions” about the material at hand, they do not necessarily enliven discussion and self-reflection, but dampen the students’ desire to engage in the debate. What students need to understand, he argues, is that “conflict and contradiction are the stuff of intellectual life, not to say life in general—indeed, that growing a thicker skin will be much to their benefit.” Embracing that fact will enable you to make the most of your education and your experiences at and beyond Lawrence. One of my college professors used to tout the virtues of what he called “uncomfortable learning,” which is a short-hand version of what liberal learning ought to be at its best and what this Lawrence professor seeks to promote.

What happens when the tough-minded confront the thin-skinned, then, is that the first can come off as an intellectual bully and the second as a hapless victim. In my welcome to new students—which some of you heard a week ago—I state that if you leave Lawrence with your values and worldview unchallenged and unscathed, if you depart with your taste in music undifferentiated from your taste at entrance, if you graduate with your leisure reading preferences unchanged from those you possess at present, if you come to the end of your Lawrence career with a circle of friends and acquaintances just like the ones you knew at home, then you’ve failed to take advantage of the college and the community. So I encourage you to confront the unfamiliar during your Lawrence years. Those phrases trip easily from the tongue, and the presumption behind them and the objective they convey may seem easily accepted and realized.

But it really isn’t that simple. One of the hardest things to accept about liberal education—though it seems so obvious as to be unworthy of mention—is that it only occurs when you confront something you did not already know, or when you learn that what you thought you already knew isn’t quite as it seemed, or when you are told that what you think about a topic and the ways in which you express that thought are wanting. Henry Rosovsky, who led a curricular reform movement at Harvard over a decade ago, proposed the disarmingly and deceptively simple dictum that people do not know what they do not know. One of the purposes of college is to deal with that fact by introducing students to what they do not know, which means, of course, to expose them to the unfamiliar, the novel, and the alien and encourage them to confront and come to grips with what they do not know.

Writing in this week's *New Yorker* about five Orthodox Jewish students who wish to be relieved of the obligation to live on campus because the conditions in Yale residence halls violate their religious convictions, David Denby notes that this issue offers a fundamental challenge to the very nature of the university. "One thing that separates a faith community from a learning community," he writes, "is that in the latter one's preconceptions are constantly, and productively, under duress. The experience of confronting both new ideas and people who think differently from oneself has traditionally formed the heart of a liberal education."

Liberal education is violated, then, when students either avoid or seek to be protected from the unfamiliar and from challenges to their preconceptions and worldviews, wherever those are confronted, either in courses or in persons. Whether in the case of the so-called Yale Five, who wish to be removed from the company of people with values other than their own, or the case last year of the student at Baylor, who got the university to agree to substitute books she found objectionable in a literature course with ones she found acceptable, protecting students from the unfamiliar and uncomfortable may be seen as damaging the very purposes of the university. The aim of the university, rather, is to force students to come to terms with the "other," both persons and ideas.

That noble aim is accomplished in myriad ways. One of the current buzz phrases about the educational delivery system is that the sage on the stage has been replaced by the guide by the side, a notion that suggests a more user-friendly form of instruction. And, indeed, there is evidence at Lawrence that this idea has been adopted by some professors. Some of the faculty subscribe to this style almost all of the time, and—in certain settings, like conferences in their offices, seminars, and tutorials—other faculty subscribe to it some of the time. So students can expect a good deal of guidance.

But the stand and deliver mode by the sage on the stage is hardly defunct and many faculty members—on the grounds that they know what you do not—will promote your learning by sharing their knowledge and insight and point of view, hoping to enable you to develop *your* knowledge, insight, and point of view in return. In an e-mail from one recent graduate to a member of the faculty here, the author exulted that in her graduate program she had found a professor whose lectures demanded fast note-taking and who seemed "comfortable...that she knows a lot that we don't and part of her job is telling us about it."

This model certainly makes it clear that power is not equally shared in the classroom, studio, laboratory, or rehearsal hall. But the fact is that in whatever mode of teaching a particular professor may employ, faculty members *do* wield power, and those who are truly fine teachers do so honorably and with integrity and without punitive intent or nastiness. It's not that the sage is the bad guy and the guide the one in the white hat. Every faculty member shares an obligation to promote your learning by provoking it, not by intimidation, brow-beating, or intolerance, which subvert the very

process the faculty member is charged to pursue, but by posing tough questions about important, sensitive, even controversial and contentious topics in the spirit of free inquiry and open exchange.

We do not want said of the academy today what Henry Seidel Canby wrote about the education he experienced in the early part of this century: "We lived in a cautious society and caution bred timidity....That is why there was...in academic life, so much jealousy, so much vanity, so much petty intrigue. The faculty seethed with gossip. Some of our best professors were so vain that it was impossible to argue with them over any opinion they had made their own." At Lawrence, one should find it possible and even preferable to argue with professors about their opinions. That is what they want you to do. Each professor professes opinions, interpretations, positions, and each will, by various ways and means, demand that students not shirk their part of the educational compact, which is to engage your studies and your professors with energy and openness, and to accept the challenges inherent in coming to terms with what you don't know and what the professors assert through argument and debate.

What makes education work--and fun, for it is that too--is precisely the rough and tumble and the spirited give and take of argument and of taking contrarian positions, asserting what's denied and denying what's asserted. One of the paradoxes of a Lawrence experience is that the faculty who engage in those arguments and provoke those contrarian moments are not your enemies, but your greatest allies. They ask hard questions not to humble you but to energize you. They criticize you and correct you not in order to demean you but in order to encourage you. We boast--justifiably and properly--of the close contact between faculty and students, of the ways in which the faculty support and nurture the student's pursuit of an education. But that aim is accomplished not just by affirmation--though affirmation occurs--but more frequently by challenge, by putting students under duress. Like that University of Virginia professor, Lawrence faculty members are less interested in your approbation of them than in your engagement with your intellectual pursuits and with how they affect you. They would much prefer you to tell them how a text, a problem, an idea, a discussion, a course, something they said, or some criticism they offered changed you, compelled you to think in a new way, not that you merely found it interesting or entertaining.

Part of what makes all of this problematic may be a function of the current rage regarding self-esteem, in which individuals are encouraged and bolstered by "positive feedback," not by being held to high standards and expectations. No one denigrates the importance of positive reinforcement, but the fact of the matter is that genuine learning is more likely to be a product of criticism than of praise. We often progress more through failure than through success, a point made repeatedly by coaches and others who remark after a loss that the team is going to "learn" from the experience. When, as a senior in college, I received a paper back from Professor Robert Waite on which he had scrawled, in red ink in letters two inches high "You must [underlined three

times] learn how to write! [four exclamation points]" I was startled into the quest for improvement. Not for a moment did I think that Professor Waite didn't "like" me, or that his concern about my abysmal writing represented a condemnation of my person. He simply wanted me to work harder at thinking more rigorously and expressing myself more clearly. His attitude puts me in mind of that wonderful line from the first *Godfather* movie, when they're taking one of the Mafioso off to be killed, and one of the killers says to Michael Corleone's associate: "Tell Mike, it's nothing personal, it's only business."

I encourage students here to adopt a like attitude. To engage your liberal education fully is quite different from engaging in the gentle consideration of arcane subjects. It is hard work, and while you might not develop calluses on your hands, you do need to develop some calluses on your mind, indeed, some calluses on your psyche. The rhetoric of the teacher is not meant to demean you personally but to challenge you intellectually. It may not be personal, but it is proper when faculty members behave in this way, for only in confronting such challenges does learning take place. Those who argue with you or who take contrary positions from yours or who challenge your assumptions or performance are those from and through whom you are most likely to learn. Simply put, if in four years at Lawrence you only dealt with those who tell you what you already know, agree with your every statement, and praise your every utterance or written expression, you're likely to leave here pretty much as you came. It's like the fellow said: I find that I don't learn much if I do all the talking. So it is in your liberal education: you won't learn much if you don't listen to those with different and novel—even troubling—points of view.

Professor Waite, who assaulted me for my poor writing, told a story during my college years that has stuck with me since and that I've repeated more than once. He reported that at a Parents Day, a mother came up to him to exclaim how happy her husband and she were with their son's experiences at college. "Why," she said, "he's turning out exactly as we hoped, he hasn't changed a bit." To which Professor Waite replied, "Madam, someone is perpetrating a great crime against your son. Get him out of here."

I do urge you not to let anyone at Lawrence perpetrate such a crime against you. In your studies here, do not be afraid of being under duress, of experiencing uncomfortable learning, of confronting ideas that may compel you to change. That's the whole idea. Relish the challenges and be receptive to the criticisms. Rejoice and engage in the argument. Respond to the people and positions different from you and yours. Know the distinction between criticism and insult, and seize the opportunity criticism gives you to become better than you are. Don't be thin-skinned but tough-minded. When and as you are, your education will be well begun. Best wishes to you all for a robust and challenging academic year.