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Sailing Toward Oceania

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Among the more prominent and lamentable features of higher education today is the fact that those of us engaged in it—as students, faculty, administrators, and trustees—can become so bogged down by the countless complexities of and challenges to the enterprise that we lose sight of its larger intentions and aspirations. Indeed, we run the risk of forgetting the stakes for which we are playing. Immediate preoccupations blot out larger purposes. Short-term problems preempt long-term priorities. The danger affects us all. We live as if in a primitive painting, with no perspective, no depth, the view foreshortened and confined.

That this is the case is not solely due to some peculiar lack of vision in our colleges and universities. Much of the difficulty springs from other sources—economic, demographic, social—that impinge on our institutions of higher education today. "Private Colleges Cry Help!" screams a headline in *Time Magazine*. "Colleges and the demographic Pinch" reads a more sedate title in the *Wall Street Journal*. "Colleges Told that Survival will require some Cutbacks" intones the *New York Times*. The table of contents of the latest issue of *Chronicle of Higher Education* is all too typical of what one reads in that paper these days. How are these for some uplifting headlines? "Growing Deficits Force Colleges to Eliminate Some Varsity Sports"; "32 Percent of Public Colleges Found to be losing Ground Financially"; "Higher-Education Price Index Up a Record 9.9 Percent in 12 Months."

These and scores of other articles and essays appear with depressing frequency these days. With the rising price of oil fueling inflation; with the economy plunged in recession; with
the Gross National Product stagnating; and with concerns about the crisis in American productivity abroad in the land, the economic climate is hardly wholesome for many individuals and institutions in the United States. Colleges and Universities have suffered with the rest and the economic effects have afflicted the public as well as the private institution. In Wisconsin, state-supported schools are grappling with the mandate to trim expenditures by 4.4 percent. Throughout the country, all institutions are seeking ways to cope with rising costs and diminishing resources.

Demographic data and predictions offer little comfort. The pool of college-age students is shrinking; the number of 18-year-olds in the United States has peaked and may fall by as much as 18 percent in this decade. Enrollment of full-time college students is expected to fall between 5% and 15% in the next ten to twenty years. While some optimists have argued that the shortfall can be made up by older students and a higher percentage of high school graduates going on to college, it is nonetheless clear that we are in for some challenges and changes. Perhaps the best we can hope for is that more parents will adopt the point of view offered by Peter Finley Dunne 90 years ago:

"If ye had a boy wud ye sind him to colledge?" asked Mr. Hennessy.

"Well," said Mr. Dooley, "at th' age whin a boy is fit to be in colledge I wudd'n't have him around th' house."

Exacerbating those problems that can be explained arithmetically are a variety of sensibilities that casts a pall over the entire landscape of higher education. These take many forms, but among the more prominent are a questioning of the nature and mission of our institutions of higher learning; a tendency for students to view their schools as providers and themselves as consumers;
extensive pressures—from parents, peers, and others—for young people to acquire specific vocational skills in college and to arrive at early career choices; and, finally, a certain loss of nerve and scrambling for competitive advantages on the part of colleges themselves. Indeed, this last may be the saddest fact of all.

Unhappily but inexorably, these are the characteristics of the climate in which we find ourselves, individually and institutionally. And—if I may be an environmentalist for a moment—that climate has affected the attitudes and actions of us all. We have not, I'm grateful to acknowledge, wholly succumbed to these climate pressures—at least not at Lawrence—and, as I shall argue in a moment, I believe it is our responsibility to resist them. But before addressing that point, let us linger for a moment longer on the rather insidious nature of our situation.

Broadly speaking, the most prevalent consequence of the conditions I've described is that our educational institutions are perceived as both problem-ridden and problematic. Elementary and secondary schools are under attack for failing to teach—or, I suppose we should say, for failing to be sure that students learn—elementary mathematics, reading skills, and proper English usage. Perhaps the most dramatic example of this point was the lawsuit brought by a Long Island high school graduate against his former school for permitting him to receive a diploma—indeed, with high class rank—when he was, in fact, functionally illiterate. This case may be a rare and isolated one but it is nonetheless sobering. So too is the evidence of declining aptitude scores and the recent finding that high school seniors in Minneapolis
and freshmen at the University of Minnesota scored significantly lower than students 50 years ago on the same vocabulary and reading comprehension test. The back-to-basics movement is the most obvious response to this genre of criticism, and these recent findings.

Students are criticized—in what might on occasion be styled a "blame the victim" syndrome—for their lack of motivation, their distaste for and unfamiliarity with the rigors of intellectual inquiry, their appalling ignorance of science, history, and the arts, and their seemingly frantic preoccupation with the practical, the applicable, and the relevant. In some quarters, the pre-professional student is the most criticized of all: as Norman Cousins put it, "the great grade chase has put the students' emphasis on training rather than education" and the pre-med and pre-law students have been so preoccupied with achieving high marks that they have avoided difficult subjects and have engaged in cut-throat competition with their fellows. "As a result," Cousins stated, "we're producing barracudas, people who sharpen their teeth on one another . . . ."

Colleges and universities are suspect on many fronts and are scrutinized from many perspectives: for their relaxation of standards; for their retention of the tenure system; for their readiness to respond too quickly to the latest version of popular interest; for their contribution to the pattern of grade inflation; and for their search for and deployment of clever and even devious strategies to attract more students.

When major magazines carry such articles as "The Marketing of the Colleges" and "Selling the Sheepskin"; when the scandals associated with big-time university athletics dominate the headlines;
when the most prevalent news about education each fall is the recitation of teachers' strikes from coast to coast; when even Gene Shallit takes to the air to ridicule the graduate courses offered public school teachers in Omaha, Nebraska—with such titles as "Art and Stuff," "Puppets in the Classroom," and twelve courses on library topics, not one of which mentioned either books or reading—when these things occur, there is certainly fair reason to suppose that all is not well in academe.

Indeed, there is something disturbingly contemporary about the Reverend Joseph Buckminster's 1809 Phi Beta Kappa address at Harvard. Looking back on the American experience since the Revolution, he noted:

Our forms of education were becoming more popular and superficial; the knowledge of antiquity began to be despised; and the hard labor of learning to be dispensed with. Soon the ancient strictness of discipline disappeared; the curriculum of studies were shortened in favor of impatience or the necessities of candidates for literary honors; the pains of application were derided and a pernicious notion of equality was introduced which has not only tainted our sentiments, but impaired our vigor and crippled our literary eminence.

Now we might take comfort from the fact that lamentations of this sort occur with enough frequency over the centuries to make us a bit cautious about overreacting this time. But we cannot and should not be inattentive to the instances of criticism and concern which are so prevalent today.
Lawrence, I am persuaded, is exempt from the most obvious of these criticisms and concerns. But we do have our own homegrown varieties to contend with. For our own peculiar local reasons as well as because we are part of the larger world of American higher education in 1980, we often run the risk—as students, faculty, administrators, alumni, and trustees—of being overly preoccupied with these external and festering issues. As a result, we become seduced by the notion that the university ought to be understood and assessed strictly in terms of the prevailing climate of opinion. We devote our time to justifying ourselves in the face of contemporary realities and do not seize the opportunity to judge those contemporary realities in the light of what we believe in and stand for. In short, we treat the university as problematic. We might consider treating the current climate of opinion as problematic. Rather than expend energy and emotion in the worry of how we are doing, let us turn instead to what we are doing and why we are doing it. One of the more scintillating speeches I never delivered was to be titled: "Navel-gazing, Pulse-taking, and other forms of self-indulgence." I do not mean to suggest that we should not be critical of the enterprise. It is to insist that we keep in mind what the enterprise is.

In short, we should turn our energies and enthusiasms, our demands and desires to matters that are essential to what this university aspires to be and to accomplish. I am not saying that we ought not be aware of and alert to the economic and demographic realities with which we must cope; to be sure, all constituencies of the university have a right to expect that these realities will be acknowledged and addressed and that our plans, procedures, and practices will enable us to address them effectively. But
we must not fall into the trap of confusing the coping with those realities with the nature and mission of the university.

I believe—and I am convinced that we believe—that Lawrence University must continue to champion the ambitions of liberal learning, ambitions that Dean Hittle articulated clearly last Sunday and which, as Dean Murdoch argued forcefully last fall, can find expression and fulfillment in the conservatory as well as in the college. We must recognize and, where need be, reawaken our commitment to the fundamental principles of our mission, to provide an education fit for free men and women in a democratic society.

That commitment, which has been invoked in this chamber before and will be again, provokes scoffing disbelief from those who do not comprehend or value what we seek to achieve and even elicits a certain squirming sensation from those of us who do. But we do well to remember that that commitment is one whose power and import has been well understood by those who feared it. When a member spoke in the House of Lords in the 1790s and urged Great Britain to deny India the right to have schools administered and staffed by Indians, he did so because he believed that England has lost her American colonies because of the independence fostered by American schools and colleges. He did not want the power of education turned on the empire a second time.

When Hitler planned the Nazi takeover of Poland, he too understood the task at hand. Martin Bormann conveyed Hitler's views: "Education," he said, "is dangerous. It is enough if [the people] can count up to 100 . . . . Every educated person is a future enemy." And an earlier order was equally to the
point: not only were all intellectuals to be exterminated, but 
the Nazis also called for the "closing of all educational institutions, 
especially... colleges in order to prevent the growth of the 
new Polish intelligentsia."

Such historical episodes and facts have provided the impetus 
for imaginative projections of a similar sort and I suppose that in 
the year in which we welcome the Class of 1984 it is fitting 
that we pay heed to one of them. In Orwell's Oceania, the Party 
has two aims: "to conquer the whole surface of the earth and to 
extinguish once and for all the possibility of independent thought." 
In the brave new world of 1984, "there will be no art, no literature, 
no science... There will be no distinction between beauty 
and ugliness. There will be no curiosity, no employment of the 
process of life. All competing pleasures [we could say, all 
thought] will be destroyed." "In Oceania... Science, in the 
old sense, has almost ceased to exist. In Newspeak there is no 
word for 'Science.' The empirical method of thought, on which 
all scientific achievements of the past were founded, is opposed 
to the most fundamental principles of [Oceania]." But that is 
not all. When the Party finally triumphs, "the whole literature 
of the past will have been destroyed. Chaucer, Shakespeare, 
Milton, Byron—they'll exist only in Newspeak versions, not merely 
changed into something different, but actually changed into 
something contradictory of what they used to be... The whole 
climate of thought will be different. In fact there will be no 
thought, as we understand it now. Orthodoxy means not thinking—
not needing to think. Orthodoxy is unconsciousness."

I am not an alarmist. Nor am I so cavalier as to be 
unmindful of the warning that Orwell tendered. We may not have
to contend with O'Prien or Big Brother, but we should also be sure that we are not sailing toward Oceania without them. Oceania may be reached through indifference rather than terror; we spy its shores when we value training more than learning; we approach its beachhead when we fail to insist on those qualities of mind and character which are goals of a liberal education. Thus, we must cherish independent thought, we must demand distinctions and discriminations between beauty and ugliness, we must foster curiosity, we must welcome pleasure, we must nurture empirical thought, we must safeguard and transmit the literature and thought of the past, we must resist orthodoxy.

Surely that, in its largest and best sense, is what we stand for as a university and what we mean to achieve in liberal learning. We do well to be reminded that at the first commencement exercises at Lawrence University in 1857, two of the orations by graduates were entitled "Antagonistic Opinions" and "Intellectual Independence." Such were the beginnings of the tradition in which we stand. It has been and must remain a utopian tradition. The university derives its special nature from that tradition. Its reach is always beyond its grasp. Its hopes always exceed its attainments. Its purposes consistently outrun its performance. The university invites criticism because it perforce is not and never can be what it aspires to be. Such criticism is wholesome; concern for the quality and nature of the enterprise will always enable us to pursue that quality and understand that nature more effectively and sharply.

We live in times when we are forever preoccupied with living in these times. We know that external realities drive us to a
significant degree. Our task, as individuals and as an institution, is to be attentive to those realities on the one hand but to resist their seductive implications on the other. As an institution of higher education, Lawrence should espouse principles consistent with its nature and encourage thought commensurate with its purposes. William Hazlitt's assessment may be both instructive and useful here. "Persons without education," he noted, "certainly do not want either acuteness or strength of mind in what concerns themselves, or in things immediately within their observation; but they have no power of abstraction, no general standard of taste, or scale of opinion. They see their objects always near, and never in the horizon."

Let us turn our gaze to the horizon and pursue with vigor and joy the grand if elusive goals of the enterprise. We cavil too much and critique too little: we stare at what is near and have no vision for what is on the horizon. We must remember our purposes. As teachers, we should insist that our students develop the power of abstraction, value a standard of taste, understand a scale of opinion. We should help them to know and appreciate that what we seek to nurture in them are skills and abilities of lasting worth and of critical importance in the long term not simply in the short run: to be able to present as well as to follow an argument; to analyze data; to value consistent logic and precise expression; to accept the challenges that rigorous inquiry offers. Bryce was right: "To the vast majority of [humankind] nothing is more agreeable than to escape the need for mental exertion. . . . To most people nothing is more troublesome than the effort of thinking." We want to invite our students to become part of the minority.
As students, the task is equally exciting: to welcome the liberation promised by liberal learning; to sharpen your intelligence and your sensibilities; to enlarge and enrich your ambitions, your abilities, and your commitments. The crippling anxiety provoked by career consciousness should be put in perspective; the object here is too near. To not know what you want to be is not one of the seven deadly sins. But to be open to the possibilities of a life enhanced and ennobled can be a virtue. You ought to know that an education at Lawrence can—and, if pursued rather than received—will open up possibilities you had not before conceived, evoke talents you had not before expressed, give you confidence you had not before possessed, suggest to you commitments you had previously shunned. No course, no discipline, no division has proprietary rights to any of these opportunities. They are opportunities of which we all have a share and in which we all have a stake. They inform and sustain Lawrence University.

To make that assertion is really to issue an invitation. The first and most essential task before each of us is to attach the aspirations of liberal education to the activities of teaching and learning at this university. As students we must be prepared to find and as faculty we must be prepared to convey through this course or that assignment the larger opportunities that Lawrence offers. In short, we must acknowledge and appreciate the connection between our ends and our means. The former is embodied in the latter. As teachers and learners (with students and faculty in both camps) we must realize that one begins to sharpen the ability to discriminate between beauty and ugliness in the close examination of the complexities of a poem, the structure of a symphony, or the composition of a painting; know that the laboratory experiment
or the field observation can reveal the processes of the empirical method; awaken to the fact that delivering or listening to a lecture can show how evidence is adduced and interpreted and an argument developed and achieved; accept that an essay or term paper are the appropriate vehicles for consistent logic and precise expression; acknowledge that an examination is an occasion to display mastery and achieve synthesis; and insist that the give and take of a seminar discussion foster independent thought.

Thus, our aims are not abstract and ephemeral but concrete and enduring. While we may lurch rather than glide toward their realization, while we may fail and falter along the way, and while we may be distracted by competing concerns as we pursue them, we must keep our eyes on that horizon and persevere. To be a member of this community and to shirk from this pursuit is to squander the heritage of liberal learning at this university. If we shirk and squander, we might as well be somewhere else.

But we are here. And as we permit ourselves to accept the enterprise for what it aspires to be, we will not only escape the shores of Oceania but will find pleasure and pride in shared purpose and common endeavor. We should strive for no less.