

































by professors who know nothing about those students' prejudices, and the fears and hopes behind them. Our best hope for success in that endeavor is to create a community, an intellectual community, in which our standards of praise and blame suit people who seek the truth together.

I pause to acknowledge that this vision will have to contend with actual student communities, in which the weekend sometimes starts on Thursday afternoon. Despite our best efforts to bring the life of the mind into the dormitories, other concerns, with drink, sex, sports, roommates, and creative combinations thereof, often drown us out. Our goal isn't to make every college evening a night at the opera or every student into a pipe-wielding, monocle-wearing intellectual. It is rather to cultivate in our students an experience of and a taste for reflecting on fundamental questions, for following arguments where they lead, and for shaping their thoughts and actions in accordance with what they can learn from those activities.

Here is a second reason for returning to the theme of liberal education. Bloom reflected on "the kind of young persons who populate the twenty or thirty best universities," like those he taught at the University of Chicago.<sup>20</sup> That's not my sample. I've spent the bulk of my career at Ursinus College and Carthage College. Ursinus is, as I write, ranked eighty-two by *U.S. News* among national liberal arts colleges. Carthage, to *U.S. News*, is a regional rather than national college. Both provide superb educations but either might be, as Ursinus is, listed among "A+ schools for B students."

Most popular books on higher education are about super-elite students. Think of William Deresiewicz's *Excellent Sheep*, which is about how rough things are at Yale. Or they've been written by professors or leaders at super-elite colleges. Think of Andrew Delbanco's *College: What It Was, Is, and Should Be*



(Columbia), William Roth's *Beyond the University* (Wesleyan), and Anthony Kronman's *Education's End* (Yale, again).<sup>21</sup> I think Bloom was right that graduates of the top schools have "the greatest moral and intellectual effect on the nation." They demand our attention. But his book, a "report from the front" defined by our super-elite colleges, left room for a report from a different front, one occupied by students who haven't always been deemed suitable for liberal education. Perhaps they "lack the freedom to pursue a liberal education." Perhaps they "have their own needs and . . . very different characters from those" Bloom writes about.<sup>22</sup>

But perhaps they're not so different. I teach an essay by Earl Shorris, a public intellectual best known today for his work in education. The article isn't about my students, who on average are securely in the middle class, but about poor students who, at first glance, seem to lack the freedom to escape their neighborhoods, much less pursue a liberal education. Shorris did something that seemed crazy to me. Persuaded that the humanities, not job training, were the road out of poverty, he assembled a class consisting almost wholly of students at or below 150% of the poverty threshold. The class included homeless people. It included people who had been in prison and people who could barely read a tabloid newspaper. To this unlikely audience, Shorris proposed an education, which came to be called the Clemente Course, in philosophy, poetry, American history, logic, and art history.

Shorris told potential students that they would "have to read and think about the same kinds of ideas [they] would encounter in a first-year course at Harvard or Yale or Oxford." He told them, "You'll have to come to class in the snow and the rain and the cold and the dark. No one will coddle you, no one will slow down for you." There would be tests and papers and, upon suc-

cessful completion, only a certificate, which Shorris couldn't promise would be accepted anywhere for college credit. He told them that if they were to take the class, it would have to be "because you want to study the humanities, because you want a certain kind of life, a richness of mind and spirit." One might think this pitch would empty a room of people barely getting by, but of "about twenty students" to whom Shorris first made it, "all but one . . . applied for admission."<sup>23</sup>

As I said, Shorris's idea sounded crazy to me, and even the frighteningly optimistic Shorris worried, especially about his neediest students. Why should people struggling through the month "care about fourteenth-century Italian painting or truth tables or the death of Socrates?"<sup>24</sup> In fact, nearly half failed to complete the course. But fourteen earned credit from Bard College, which had signed on, and Shorris's students proved to be interested in fourteenth-century Italian painting, truth tables, and the death of Socrates. To take one of many examples, here's Shorris on what happened after students were presented with a complex logic problem:

When Sylvia and I left the Clemente Center that night, a knot of students was gathered outside, huddled against the wind. Snow had begun to fall, a slippery powder on the gray ice that covered all but a narrow space down the center of the sidewalk. Samantha and David stood in the middle of the group, still arguing over the answer to the problem.<sup>25</sup>

Here we have a small, engaged, community adjudicating a dispute about the truth by weighing the arguments.

Versions of the Clemente Course have since been offered to many students in many places, including to "internally displaced persons" from Darfur, in western Sudan, the site of a conflict that has caused unspeakable misery. Ismat Mahmoud

Ahmed, who helped teach the course, looks back on it: “At the beginning of the class, there was a prevailing feeling of despair, but as the study progressed that feeling was replaced by hope [;] this might be one of the reasons that strengthened my trust in philosophy.”<sup>26</sup> This trust, as Shorris understands it, isn’t that there is a straight road from liberal education to the alleviation of suffering. It’s that even people in dire need and difficult circumstances can benefit from and experience happiness in the pursuit of what the social theorist W.E.B. Du Bois called the “riddle of existence.” That riddle was once taught “in the groves by Plato” to aristocrats. In Du Bois’s teaching days, at Atlanta University, it was taught to the children of freed slaves.<sup>27</sup>

Here, as a final witness, is a Clemente Course student, who had “escaped from a polygamous cult” some years prior to finding the course: “I was born with a giant question mark in my head.” She had been taught that her inquisitiveness meant that there was something wrong with her. “I know,” she said after experiencing the course, “that all the questions inside of me are freedom.”<sup>28</sup>

Most of my students, again, are in the middle class. It’s not absurd to think that this class is uncommonly cold to liberal education. On average, its members are comfortable enough not to yearn for liberation, but not so comfortable that they can easily be diverted from the question of how to make a living to the question of how one should live. Yet it is absurd to wring one’s hands, as my colleagues and I sometimes do, and wonder if we dare present our students with an old book that speaks to enduring questions, rather than a new one that speaks to the questions of the moment. I’ve rarely known students to think any better about the latter sort of book, though professors and students alike may find the sailing smoother. It’s not too much to expect that our students will prove as capable of entering into

a conversation with Plato or Lincoln, or as open to being governed by the stronger argument, as Shorris's were.

I propose that the health of our civilization depends in part on meeting this expectation. I suspect that I've already taught more schoolteachers than many Harvard, Yale, and Princeton professors teach in an entire career. Graduates of our super-elite colleges don't pursue a teaching career in great numbers, except at the university level. Yet our future teachers should have at least as rich an education as our investment bankers and management consultants do. Du Bois, speaking of a group in dire straits than the American middle class, said that the most important purpose of "higher training schools" was "to furnish the black world with adequate standards of human culture and lofty ideals of life." Such schools would have to be staffed by "teachers of teachers" who would "so far as possible, be broad-minded, cultured men and women." They would practice an education that, though useful for breadwinning, "seeks as an end culture and character rather than breadwinning."<sup>29</sup>

Can any serious person claim that the teachers of our children shouldn't be broad-minded and cultured?

### *A Cautiously Optimistic Personal Note*

I haven't always been optimistic about the prospects for liberal education outside of the top twenty or thirty schools. Like most people who pursue graduate training at those schools, I assumed—because attending top schools doesn't inoculate one from stupidity—that I'd teach at the kind of school I'd attended. But my first tenure track job was at Carthage College, of which almost no one I knew had heard. Not long before I started at Carthage, I heard an anxiety-provoking story from an acquaintance who had taught there, who was a dynamic, even fiery,

lecturer. During one class, as he channeled the spirit of whichever thinker was on the agenda, as he paced, gestured, and declaimed, a student raised his hand. Did he have a question?

“Dude,” the student drawled, “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Having come from the practically medieval University of Chicago, where professors were considered demigods, and where students were often turned on by old books, I wasn’t sure I was ready to teach at Carthage. I worried that Greg Campbell, then president of the college, had overestimated our chances of launching, as he planned, a successful great books major there. But he was the boss, and they paid green dollars, so I did my part to develop the program.

My skepticism increased when my friend, Chris, suggested that a two-course sequence required for the new major, Foundations of Western Thought, should be taught in the style of seminars he had taken at his alma mater, St. John’s College. In such team-taught seminars, one of the “tutors” poses a question meant to initiate a conversation about the book under consideration. Although tutors step in from time to time to participate in or guide the conversation, the seminar puts more responsibility on students to reason together about difficult questions than occurs in any other kind of class I’ve taught. St. John’s students, though, are the kinds of weirdos who choose to attend a school built entirely around a great books curriculum. How would our Carthage students, who had made no such choice, fare with questions like these, which we confronted in different class sessions: (1) Why, according to Martin Luther, must we live on faith alone? How can one live on faith alone? (2) In *Anna Karenina* (our students read this vast Tolstoy novel in its entirety), Stiva and Levin exemplify different understandings of happiness and different understandings of love. Who is the

superior man and who has the superior understanding? (3) What is nobility, according to Friedrich Nietzsche? What characteristics do noble people have? If Nietzsche is a fan of nobility, why does so much of what he says seem to undermine it?

Each of these questions included prefaces that helped our students to see why it might occur to thoughtful readers and to notice parts of our reading that could help. But our students didn't have the questions or any of the prefatory material before class began; having been asked only to read carefully, they were presented with the opening question in class. Thereafter, they were on their own for much of the session. We all, students and teachers, got used to, and began to take pride in, what teachers and students often find humiliating, namely, long silences. Several minutes would almost always pass before the first student, having gathered her thoughts enough to begin the conversation, spoke. But I was surprised, repeatedly, at the extent to which our refusal to seize the wheel was rewarded by our students. They'd uncover the same quotation or observation we might have brought in to advance the discussion, or find their footing in some other, unanticipated, way. I doubt that those students retained less than they would have had I lectured for the entire hour and forty-minute class period. I'm confident that many of them retained the experience of exploring, with the aid of the books and their peers, difficult questions whose bearing on their lives they could grasp.

At Ursinus College, I was lucky to work with President John Strassburger. Strassburger loved Abraham Lincoln and, like many such enthusiasts, had a high estimate of the possibilities of democracy and of democratic peoples. My experience at Carthage notwithstanding, I was skeptical of Strassburger's faith that our students, coming in with mostly modest high school accomplishments, could be made to embrace a required

two-semester program, the Common Intellectual Experience, already in place when I got there. My Carthage students had at least elected to take a great books course. Every Ursinus first-year had to take the Common Intellectual Experience. All would be asked to pursue, with the help of texts like Plato's *Euthyphro* and Descartes's *Discourse on Method*, the questions around which the course revolved: How should one live? What does it mean to be human? What is the universe and what is my place in it? I was interested in those questions when I entered college, but I was, like those St. John's students, a bit of a weirdo.

As with most anything required, not every student embraces the Common Intellectual Experience. If you serve ice cream in a required course, there will be those who step forward to declare the flavors ill-chosen and the temperature intolerably cold. There are days when I wonder if it would be wiser to teach Rock Divas and their Discontents, which my students might find amusing, rather than the Book of Job, which my students find less "relatable." Yet on the days when the course works, and there are such days, my students seem to have the experience, which many of them recall as alumni, of becoming absorbed in and taking responsibility for a conversation that is no longer about school, or jumping through hoops for a good grade. The conversation is instead about how their convictions, of which they may have been only half-aware before they were asked to explain them, measure up under scrutiny and against competing convictions.

I now think that Presidents Campbell and Strassburger grasped something I didn't. I don't think that everyone should go to college, or that all students are capable of the same degree of intellectual independence, or that the quality of academic work on average can be the same at a Carthage or an Ursinus as it is at a Princeton. But I'm convinced by my experience in the

programs those presidents championed that the capacity to benefit from a liberal education, and to become the kind of human being who takes pleasure and pride in trying to distinguish the true from the false, is widely distributed—a thought, as I noted in the preface, that informs the kind of conservatism I favor.

That thought is one plausible inference from an observation made by Tocqueville, who visited the United States in 1831–1832 and went on to write the most insightful work on democracy I know, *Democracy in America*. Tocqueville, who fears that democracy will snuff out greatness, nonetheless argues that it can make manifest “the natural greatness of man.” Only in democracies does humanity itself, “man, taken apart from his time and his country and placed before nature and God with his passions, his doubts, his unheard of prosperity, and his incomprehensible miseries,” become a fit object of poetry.<sup>30</sup>

Not that Tocqueville argued that universities should take the human situation he describes as its object. He thought that, at least in the nineteenth century, “the education of the greatest number” would have to be “scientific, commercial and industrial.” The study of Greek and Latin literature might cause its practitioners, spoiled for moneymaking, to “trouble the state in the name of the Greeks and Romans instead of making it fruitful by their industry.”<sup>31</sup> But we can only chuckle at the danger that our political world will be unsettled by pissed-off classicists. We are free to conclude that liberal education is one of few ways democracies have of raising up a present-minded, materialistic people to a kind of greatness.

This idea, democratic even in its recognition of democratic vices, helps explain why Locke inspires my argument. Locke’s *Thoughts* concentrates on the education of gentlemen, who have the leisure to study and who, as members of England’s



governing class, will determine England's course and set its tone. It is not only a gentleman, however, but also "anyone who pretends to be a rational creature" who should learn to yield to "plain reason and the conviction of clear arguments." And, as Locke says in *Of the Conduct of the Understanding*, "Every man carries about him a touchstone, if he will make use of it, to distinguish . . . truth from appearances." That touchstone is "natural reason," a "noble faculty" possessed by "men of study and thought" and by "the day laborer," the differences between whom have more to do with experience and education than with inborn talent. Not everyone can be Einstein. But anyone can learn to "make use of better and surer principles" in deciding what to think about and how to act in matters that greatly concern them.<sup>32</sup> This is one way of understanding the natural greatness of man.

Perhaps, as two of Locke's most able interpreters observe, we can't help but ask whether Locke is too optimistic about the power of reason in human affairs.<sup>33</sup> Optimism about the capacity of students to be reasonable, for which I see some grounds in my teaching career, can't be a dogma for educators. But it seems the right starting point for liberal educators within democratic polities, which depend on the capacity of their citizens to be reasonable.

### *What's Not Coming and What Is*

Two disclaimers. First, yes, I know. The higher education sector is vast and varied. We award more bachelor's degrees in parks, recreation, leisure, and fitness studies than we award in English. The eighteen- to twenty-one-year-old students I work with are different from the many older students attending college. Some students are homeless. Some struggle to afford nutritious food.

I wouldn't have brought up Earl Shorris and the Clemente Course if I thought that my argument mattered only to affluent eighteen- to twenty-one-year-olds. But as a preemptive attempt to fend off commentators who take any intervention in the higher education debate as an insult to their work, I acknowledge that my book won't solve all of higher education's problems. It won't house the homeless, feed the hungry, forgive student loans, or prevent the spread of mumps in the dorms. There's plenty of work to go around.

Second, and here I address my political philosophy friends, this isn't a work of high theory. I understand that in lumping together Du Bois, Locke, Socrates, and others, I'm neglecting important distinctions. There is a height at which the merit of an education that produces a Benjamin Franklin should be compared to an education that produces a Plato. But we're so far from that height that what those educations might have in common is more important for our purposes than what they might not. If my colleagues and I could shape a few Franklins, we wouldn't beat our breasts over not having shaped a Plato. We're modest that way.<sup>34</sup>

In this chapter, I've explained why I think my book is needed. Skepticism about, and even hostility toward, our colleges and universities may not be as deep as educators fear, but the bland and scattered justifications even liberal arts colleges offer for themselves do us no favors. And I've introduced becoming reasonable people as a worthy and inspiring aim for liberal education.

In the next, second, chapter, I clear some more ground for myself by addressing friends and critics of higher education on the left and the right. My fellow conservatives are right about the outsized influence of the left at many colleges and universities. Those who sympathize with the idea that universities are

schools of reason should know how the embrace of left politics, though often half-hearted and bureaucratic, undermines that idea. But many conservatives overestimate the extent and depth of the problem and consequently consider universities lost. That hasn't always been the case for conservatives and shouldn't be the case now.

But enough ground-clearing. In the third chapter, I develop the idea of liberal education as the shaping of reasonable people and investigate its relationship to leading alternative ideas, that liberal educators should teach students to deal well with complexity and that liberal educators should shape students for citizenship. And I defend the aim of becoming reasonable as desirable, possible, and consistent with the aims of nearly all conservatives.

Here, though I know dissent is possible, I assume agreement that when we think, as in physics, about relations of cause and effect, we have reliable ways to distinguish between strong and weak arguments. Together, they constitute what we call scientific reason. Relations of cause and effect aren't limited to particles, and so this kind of reason has proven useful in my own field of political science in assessing, for example, whether a given policy has produced its desired outcome. But politics, and not only politics, turns in part on questions with which scientific reason doesn't much help, questions that present themselves to free persons trying to understand themselves, to make sense of their relations with others, and to form judgments where much is necessarily unknown to them. This abstract idea finds concrete expression in doubt, on the part of students and others, that there can be a rational approach to such questions. I follow others in arguing that there is such an approach, even if it doesn't offer the laws and formulas that scientific reason

sometimes provides, and in naming this aspect of reason “judgment.”

Long experience in the classroom gives me sympathy with the cry: “Great plan! Wake my students up when it’s over!” In the fourth chapter, I consider students, what they are like—though I think they are much harder to know than one might imagine—and what they need from our colleges and universities. There are grounds for optimism about students, whom we’re too apt to patronize or denounce.

Here I also take up the vexed issue of free speech on campus. We’ve been asking students to love a Wild West of speech in which they’ll derive truth from the clash of white-hatted and black-hatted partisans. That approach barely distinguishes college campuses from public parks. We should ask students to join a community for whose members speech is not a weapon to deploy against the enemy, but the means by which people who pursue the truth and hope to live according to what they capture of it teach and learn from each other. The members of such a community may or may not turn out to be free speech warriors. But because they benefit from a diversity of opinion and depend on the freedom to follow arguments where they lead, they may prove more deeply attached to campus free speech than those who know only the standard free speech arguments.

In the fifth chapter, I use the debate over Israel in the academy as a case study. I began to write about higher education and the campus wing of the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement at around the same time. I came to the Israel question through the back door, not as a pro-Israel man but as a concerned academic, convinced that the influence of BDS, whether one loves or despises Israel, compromises the missions

of our colleges and universities. I see the BDS fight as closely connected to the issues raised in the other chapters. Other movements—the Palestinian issue was only a small part of the protests that swept through American campuses in 2015—would make fine case studies, but there is much to be said for dealing with what one knows best. Reflecting on how leading BDS advocates think of universities and their work there, and on the various ways in which BDS detractors have tried to combat it, will help us better understand why it can be difficult to do the work of becoming reasonable on our campuses, and how it can be done nonetheless.

That will be a bridge to my conclusion, in which I reflect briefly on prospects for reform.

*The Closing of the American Mind* was “written from the perspective of a teacher.” The case for liberal education has been damaged by overuse of the term, as if it’s a perfume one dabs on preprofessional degrees to make them more presentable, or a mandated kid’s trip to the museum to absorb “culture.” Liberal education is hard to describe, but it’s connected to a vivid teacher’s vision, the “divination” that “there is a human nature, and that assisting its fulfillment is [our] task,” that “students are only potential, but [that] potential points beyond itself; and this is the source of the hope, almost always disappointed but ever renascent, that man is not just a creature of accident, chained to and formed by the particular cave in which he is born.”<sup>35</sup> Understanding human nature and aiding in its fulfillment is a goal that is both unavoidable and just out of reach for people who care about young people. This problem, which would seem to require our undivided attention, is a problem from which we’ve become distracted.

My aim is to make us focus on it.

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