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CHAPTER ONE

Holding Harvard to Its Word

Convictions

This book is animated by several convictions. Here's one story, straight out of Cambridge, to cover them all. Late in 2015, at Annenberg Dining Hall, hungry Harvard undergraduates got a prize with their meals: the Holiday Placemat for Social Justice.¹

The Holiday Placemat for Social Justice instructed students headed home for the holidays on how best to pierce the resistant skulls of their unwoke relatives regarding various issues, including student activism, Islamophobia, and “Black Murders in the Street.” The placemat also covered a Harvard-specific issue, namely the title, “Master.” Harvard had dropped this title for dormitory heads because some students associated it with slavery, although, as no one disputes, Harvard’s use of “Master” had nothing to do with slavery. The complaint, articulated by elite students, was no more defensible than the demand, made by the regular folk students at Lebanon Valley College, to change the name of Lynch Hall because it reminded them of lynching.² Nonetheless, Harvard’s placemats urged students not to back down, no matter how much less awkward it might make Christmas dinner. They were to say, perhaps with a smirk,

that “it doesn’t seem onerous” to change the name. Uncle Trumpkin, one presumes, would be struck dumb.

This placemat had been distributed not by enterprising liberal students, but by administrators, the Freshman Dean’s Office and the Office of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion. When word got out, Harvard tried Harvard-splaining. Don’t worry that we’re mobilizing our students to proselytize for the left because, as one dean said, it’s “not that you have to believe in what’s on the placemat.” No coercion, no foul.

Another dean suggested that the placemats would encourage dialogue, which might also have been said of placemats that endorsed Jill Stein or denounced sex out of wedlock. A schoolchild could see through this defense. Accordingly, eighteen members of Harvard’s Undergraduate Council signed a letter reminding Harvard’s leaders of what they should have known—prescribing “party-line talking points stands in stark contrast to the College’s mission of fostering intellectual, social, and personal growth.”³ Perhaps administration officials looked it up in the catalog and realized that their undergraduates knew Harvard’s mission better than they did. More likely, Harvard didn’t want to dig itself a deeper publicity hole. The offices responsible for the placemats apologized.

What can we learn from this incident? First, it’s interesting that we know about it. Okay, it’s Harvard. But isn’t it strange that dining hall news caught coverage from major outlets, from Fox News to CNN? Journalists love a “Look, the campus lefties are at it again!” story.

One conviction, then, that I have about higher education is that its story is poorly told. Larry Summers, former president of Harvard, admits to “a great deal of absurd political correctness” at universities. But, he says, “The main thing that’s happening is what always happens: professors teach courses, students

take courses, students aspire to graduate, they make friends, they plan their lives, they have a formative experience, they are educated.” Anyone “who thinks that’s not the main thing going on on college campuses is making a mistake.”⁴ As a freelance higher education writer, I regularly scan the academic ocean for the equivalent of shark attacks. But as a professor with more than two decades of experience, acquired at four different institutions of higher learning, I know that Summers is right. Most days, there are no shark attacks. But even in higher education news, if it bleeds it leads.

Although news about campus activists occasionally makes the *New York Times*, one more often sees campus shark attack stories in conservative outlets, since professors are among the elites whom conservative populists love to hate. American conservatives have been taking professors to task at least since William F. Buckley’s *God and Man at Yale*. But that book could be characterized, in George Will’s words, as a “lovers’ quarrel.”⁵ Decades after *God and Man*, Buckley’s *National Review* published an article by Allan Bloom, which grew into the best-selling *The Closing of the American Mind*, a book that, whatever fault it found in them, was full of love for universities. Bloom, the teacher who got me into this mess, was no conservative,⁶ but the *National Review*’s association with him shows that it wasn’t so long ago that conservatives thought universities were worth fighting for. Such conservatives still exist, but the dominant strain in contemporary conservatism is done with the lovers’ quarrel, in the midst of a bitter divorce, and more inclined to murder its ex than to try to win her back.

Another conviction of mine is that conservatives shouldn’t give up on universities.

Yet the Harvard placemat story backs up the academy’s conservative critics. The left is so embedded not only at left-branded

places like Oberlin and Berkeley but also at “grandees ‘r’ us” Harvard that one no longer needs student activists and radical professors with imposing beards to march around and demand things. After the shouts of activists subside, the news trucks depart; but the droning of deans, where the campus action is, continues. It’s hard to know whether the activists of the sixties, who worried about being co-opted, would feel triumphant or dismayed at how college administrators have, without fanfare, taken up their cause. “Of course we’re distributing social justice placemats,” they seem to tell us; “Why all the fuss?”

Another conviction that led me to write this book, then, is that colleges and universities harm their reputations and missions by adopting, even in this snoozy way, the language and priorities of one branch of the left. I doubt I’ll persuade many campus activists, who seem almost as hot to tear the university down as their conservative adversaries. But I hope to lure from the sidelines some of the many professors, administrators, alumni, and students who dislike controversy. The left has more power on campus than it has numbers because other stakeholders, as they say in the movies, don’t want no trouble.

One other observation about the curious case of Harvard’s holiday placemat: contrary to the widespread view that students, especially elite students, are coddled whiners, some of Harvard’s students are the heroes and heroines of the tale. Members of the Undergraduate Council, whether they agreed or disagreed with the points the placemats promulgated, didn’t want to be spoon-fed. They rebelled against their keepers for “telling them what to think and what to say.”⁷ They demanded to be treated as reasonable people.

College students aren’t, as some on the left would have it, moral exemplars at whose feet their degreed but clueless caretakers, born prior to the discovery of justice, could profitably

sit. But they also aren't, as some on the right would have it, cry-bullies who should be given a stern lecture about real hardship before we expel them without their suppers. Whatever closed-mindedness students exhibit isn't obviously worse than that of their elders. Whatever suspicion students have of the glories of speech and debate is partly justified by the stupidity and insincerity of what passes for public discussion. Without romanticizing college students, we should be able to imagine that a non-trivial number of them will respond to an education that makes free discussion seem at all attractive.

That brings me to a final conviction. Colleges and universities should respond to and cultivate in students that in them which responds to the summons, "Become reasonable!" Locke, the philosopher of freedom, was also a philosopher of discipline. In *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, he aims at the cultivation of "right reasoning [in order] to have right notions and a right judgment of things, to distinguish between truth and falsehood, right and wrong, and to act accordingly." The products of Lockean education will feel and think that there can be nothing so "misbecoming a gentleman, or anyone who pretends to be a rational creature, as not to yield to plain reason and the conviction of clear arguments."⁸ The discipline of yielding to and acting on reasonable arguments, rather than impulses, tribal loyalties, or superstitions, protects one's freedom and can be a source of pride. There's something appealing about education in such a discipline.

I don't claim that liberal education properly understood greatly resembles the education of Locke's *Thoughts*, much of which is about pre-adolescents. Nor do I claim that the intellectual freedom experienced by Lockean citizens is the peak of intellectual freedom. Socrates, the patron saint of liberal educators, about whom we'll hear more later, arguably guides us to

still greater peaks. What I'll claim is that even those who can imagine higher heights would raise a glass if we had in our colleges and universities communities of students and faculty who considered it a disgrace not to listen to reason. We'd raise several more if our students carried that standard of praise and blame into their lives after college. Universities, as if bored with what they call "critical thinking," have unfurled a multitude of other banners sporting other terms: diversity, empathy, world citizenship, civic engagement, and so on. But the work of cultivating the reason, and pride in being reasonable, of which Locke writes, is difficult. If universities, distracted by other things, fail at it, students and graduates marching under those other banners are unlikely to do themselves or others much good.

I aim especially to defend that last conviction. Colleges and universities will do better at justifying themselves, at guarding students against foolishness and fanaticism, and at preparing them to exercise good judgment, if they focus more single-mindedly on shaping students in the mold of the person Locke describes. We're no gentlemen, Lockean or otherwise. But we profess ourselves rational creatures. Our colleges and universities need to do everything they can to ensure that we're not mere pretenders when we claim to found our judgments about true and false, good and bad, right and wrong, on more than passion or prejudice. That's a worthy aim for liberal education.

A Failure and a Success at Explaining Liberal Education

Early in my career, on my way to a job interview, I was forced to talk to a man jammed next to me on the airplane. Like many professors, I shouldn't be allowed out in public, but at least I know it. So I had gone to great lengths to avoid conversation.

I buried my face in a book; I played dead. But my neighbor was persistent and got me to talk about my work.

Remember: I was on my way to an interview. Thus prepared, I told him that I'm a teacher and that I bring my students into close contact with great thinkers who challenge their prejudices, goad them to think for themselves, and exemplify how to think well about important and elusive things. I told him that I'm also a scholar, engaged in the same work I ask my students to do. At the time, I was writing an essay on the eighteenth-century political philosopher, Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Reading Rousseau, I explained, clarifies, and suggests serious objections to, the way in which certain politicians and philosophers have tried to found politics on compassion. This was, I must say, my best stuff.

After a long pause, my new acquaintance said, "I wish I could say that sounded interesting."

Fast forward to 2013. I'd written an op-ed for the *Wall Street Journal* about the anti-Israel movement in academia, about which I'll say more in chapter 5. Bob, an alumnus of Ursinus College, where I teach, wrote to me. My argument, he said, confirmed his opinion that a too-liberal academia was ruining young minds. Thanks to me, he felt great about his decision, made years earlier, to stop giving money to Ursinus.

Sorry bosses.

I responded to Bob's letter, making a pitch for Ursinus not unlike the one I'd made for myself on the airplane, refined, I hope, over the decades. We struck up a friendship. Bob is a retired doctor who served in the US Navy, just missing action in World War II, and who re-enlisted for Vietnam. After the war, he spent many unpaid hours helping people who needed medical care, near home and abroad. If Bob, who had risked his own life, saved the lives of others, and delivered many, many babies,

had said his life was more admirable than mine, I wouldn't have contradicted him.

Yet Bob, a self-described conservative, respected professors. At Ursinus, he'd focused on preparing for medical school and, since he had to work to afford his education, had time for little else. Later on, however, Bob sought out some of the same minds that I introduce my students to, including Socrates's student, Plato. He had struggled with Plato. Who doesn't? Thomas Jefferson once complained of Plato's "sophisms, futilities, and incomprehensibilities."⁹ But Bob was more than ready to believe that he'd missed something worth knowing. He thought and thinks that a person who can help him understand philosophers like Plato, and so help him make better sense of things, deserves high respect.

Perhaps Bob has more respect for professors than our capacity to educate warrants. But from my friendship with him, I draw two conclusions. First, even those most angered at the stories they read about universities may not be badly disposed toward them or the work that most professors and students do. It would be comforting, in a way, if contempt for higher education were contempt for the life of the mind. If our accusers were proud ignoramuses, sure, we might all go down with the ship, but we could at least go down with smug expressions on our faces. No doubt some haters hate even our best work. But I doubt that Bob is the only lover of learning who disapproves of colleges because we've failed to make the best case for them. Which brings me to the second conclusion: Such a case might change minds. It's not comforting to think that we bear some of the blame for our own woes. Still less comforting is the possibility that we're not only bad at communicating our case to others but also not confident in it ourselves.

We Can Do Better Than This

Allan Bloom, in *The Closing of the American Mind*, wrote that professors of the humanities, tasked with “interpreting and transmitting old books,” don’t “believe in themselves or what they do.” On the one hand, they’re “old maid librarians” who don’t imagine that the books they shyly love can be loved by the young. On the other hand, when they’ve tried to win the hearts of students, they’ve followed the un-shy example of 1960s professors, who looked for ways to incorporate “these tired old books” into “revolutionary consciousness.”¹⁰ This trend hasn’t diminished since *Closing* came out in 1987 and helps explain why the Modern Language Association, officially dedicated to the study of language and literature, makes news mainly when its members debate the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. I will, as is practically required in a book of this kind, bemoan the influence of the academic left later. But despite the persistent misunderstanding of *Closing* as blaming all of the academy’s troubles on leftists drunk on French theory, let’s not forget those old maid librarians. They tell us that humanists wouldn’t have gone in for politics if they’d thought they had something else of great worth to offer.

A similar diffidence weakens the case for liberal education. Many four-year colleges and universities invoke liberal education to signal that they offer more than specialized knowledge, job skills, and artisanal food. Yet when one orders a meaty explanation of liberal education, one is usually served word salad.

Sometimes, the salad is assembled by well-meaning and experienced teachers and scholars who have logged hours in lonely conference centers, thinking and talking about liberal

education. Consider the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), “the leading national association concerned with the quality, vitality, and public standing of undergraduate liberal education.”¹¹ They meet regularly to discuss liberal education, have a journal called *Liberal Education*, and frequently communicate with the public about liberal education.

Here’s the definition of “Twenty-First Century Liberal Education” that this reflection, discussion, and experience have produced.

Liberal education is an approach to learning that empowers individuals and prepares them to deal with complexity, diversity, and change. It provides students with broad knowledge of the wider world (e.g. science, culture, and society) as well as in-depth study in a specific area of interest. A liberal education helps students develop a sense of social responsibility, as well as strong and transferable intellectual and practical skills such as communication, analytical and problem-solving skills, and a demonstrated ability to apply knowledge and skills in real-world settings.¹²

Inspired yet? If not, hear out Katherine Bergeron, president of Connecticut College, who, in an interview, pats her college on the back for, as the headline puts it, “Remaking the Liberal Arts.”¹³ This great remaking, like the AAC&U statement, assumes that the fresh new case for liberal education, the one that will grab the kids, their parents, and, let us pray, philanthropists, is that liberal education will henceforth help us deal with complicated things. With regard to its core requirements, Connecticut College’s faculty “asked the question, does this make sense for . . . a global and networked twenty-first century?” No, they concluded, it didn’t make sense because, although we’ve been

talking about an increasingly interconnected world since the eighteenth century, prior curriculum architects were unaware that things are complicated.

And so, Connecticut College professors said stiltedly to themselves, we “need to create some new structures that help students deal with complexity because the goal of an education is to prepare students to confront the increasingly complex world problems.” The main innovation of the new curriculum is the “integrative pathway,” made up of a group of courses, in various disciplines, linked by a theme, through which students pursue a question they’ve chosen. This way of organizing part of a student’s career builds on sensible propositions. Questions often have to be pursued across different areas of study, students are more likely to understand the importance of different modes of inquiry if they use them to pursue a question that interests them, and students should take some responsibility for shaping their own educations. That’s good. But it’s hard to see what the new curriculum aims at, apart from a graduate who is capable of dealing with complicated things and who’s nice rather than naughty, for Connecticut College also embraces the AAC&U’s goal of “social responsibility.”

I don’t mean to pick on Connecticut College, whose core looks better than most to me, or the AAC&U in particular, though campaigners for liberal education ought to be less diffuse and more inspiring. Unfortunately, from Harvard on down, the statements of purpose and principle that supposedly animate our colleges and universities may as well have been produced by Mad Libs. Adjectives, like integrative, interdisciplinary, interconnected, entrepreneurial, twenty-first century, complex, dynamic, and problem-solving, are distributed among brochures as if at random to make it appear that something buzzy is going on. In generating such language, we’re not putting

lipstick on a pig; there are many wonderful things going on at our colleges and universities. Rather, we're covering up our inability to state what the main aim of liberal education is by promising to tend to all aims and to be up to date, not to say cool.

Why This Book?

Liberal education is often explained poorly. But I've named one book that explains it well, *The Closing of the American Mind*. Allan Bloom wrote it more than thirty years ago.

From *Closing*, we learn that liberal education responds to the question "every young person asks: 'Who am I?'" which means, "'What is man?'" Teachers assist students in fulfilling "human nature against all the deforming forces of convention and prejudice." But in "our chronic lack of certainty" about how to answer the question of what we are and what the best way of life is, liberal education "comes down to knowing the alternative answers," many of which are to be found in books, "and thinking about them." The "liberally educated person" is free enough of the prejudices of her time and place to "resist the easy and preferred answers" to these questions.¹⁴ Liberally educated people will almost certainly be good at dealing with complicated things, and may even be nice. But they'll also know what it's like to put the questions of what one is and of how one should live at the center of their concerns, and be familiar with the pleasure, usefulness, and freedom of conversing about those questions.

I think that liberal education so conceived can shape reasonable people, the shaping of whom I've proposed as liberal education's aim. I agree with Bloom, as I'll explain in chapter 3, that liberal education entails, though it's not exhausted by, attention to old books. Among the vices Tocqueville finds in modern

democracy is that it fosters an “instinctive distaste for what is old.”¹⁵ This prejudice, “the belief,” as Bloom puts it, “that the here and now is all there is,” protects every other prejudice of our time by discrediting in advance appeals to the wisdom of other times.¹⁶ This presentism isn’t the only impediment to becoming reasonable, but it is among the most formidable. As the examples I use will make clear, I’ve been influenced by Bloom’s charge to teach and learn from old books. *Closing* is still in print. So why make a case, again, for liberal education?

First, my book is concerned with the case for liberal education in this urgent moment. To be sure, when you read of, or, in my case, live in the midst of, debates over whether there are enough women or people of color in the curriculum, you might think you’ve stepped out of a time machine and into the early 1990s. But the challenges of one time are never quite the same as the challenges of another. The here and now isn’t all there is, but sensible people attend to it.

In my career, I haven’t witnessed as much anxiety about the future of colleges and universities as I see now. The first essay I wrote about higher education concerned the Massive Open Online Courses—MOOCs is their delightful acronym—that some commentators thought would upend, or just end, traditional higher education. If the most distinguished and charismatic professors could lecture to hundreds of thousands of students, each taking in the lecture and doing coursework on his or her own time, and the cost of that experience could be reduced to a tiny fraction of the cost of a class on a residential campus, many students, the argument went, would abandon brick-and-mortar colleges. Disruption was the word of the day.¹⁷ Sebastian Thrun of Google and self-driving car fame had founded Udacity and was racing to offer college credits on the cheap. Thrun had predicted that there would be, in fifty years,

only ten colleges and universities left in the world. My colleagues and I sat nervously in our offices, listing other jobs for which we were qualified. My list was short.

I thought then and think now that professors—we are as fretful as we are socially inept—were overreacting to MOOCs. It hardly seemed likely that saying “Look, now it’s on a screen!” would cause many students to get better at absorbing lectures and educating themselves than they’ve proven to be historically. And Thrun was singing a different song the following year: “We don’t educate people as others wished, or as I wished. We have a lousy product.”¹⁸

Still, there’s more pressure to explain the value of liberal education now than there has been. People for whom the long recession was a fresh memory even before the pandemic struck want, understandably, to be shown the money.

But there’s also more opportunity to make a case for liberal education. Colleges and universities are desperately seeking to distinguish themselves.

I don’t mean, although I wish to save my job as much as anyone, an opportunity to better the market position of liberal arts colleges like mine. No moral law requires my continued employment. Cathy Davidson, of the City University of New York, has the right idea when she says, “If we profs can be replaced by a computer screen, we should be.”¹⁹ The bosses will have to pry me out of my office with a crowbar, but they’ll be right to do so if no good case can be made for choosing the kind of education I practice over cheaper varieties.

But I’m convinced that the guidance required to cultivate the kind of human being I’ve described with Locke’s help doesn’t scale. However good some televangelists may be at reaching into the souls of people they’ll never meet, it’s hard to see how reason and attachment to reason can be cultivated in students

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.²⁰ 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), Michael Roth's *Beyond the University* (Wesleyan), and Anthony Kronman's *Education's End* (Yale, again).²¹ 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.²²

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."²³

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?"²⁴ 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.²⁵

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.”²⁶ 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.²⁷

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.”²⁸

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."²⁹

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.³⁰

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.”³¹ 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.³² 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.³³ 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.³⁴

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.”³⁵ 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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