

“Adding Value in Education”

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You and I are the past and your students are the future. The present lies only in the meeting of past and future – an engagement you are about to take up anew with the start of the academic year. At this moment of renewed beginning, it may be of value to reflect on why the past cares for the future and what we have to offer it.

Historically, human imagination has fixed on the material inheritance the rising generation received from the passing generation and could immediately set to use. There were always other legacies, of course, some more valuable than money or property. Morality, religion, and law have been the first of these greater legacies. But they have been closely followed by science, music, and art. In fact, when we use an expression such as western civilization, what we really convey – whether we know it or not – is that these are legacies that endure. Though it may be common enough to see families go from rags to riches to rags in three generations, it takes a far longer time to squander the capital of moral and intellectual progress. By the same token the slogan, “Dark Ages,” gives profound evidence of how hard and long it is to recover from such squanderings.

This opening tone may invite you to imagine that I’ve come to deliver a screed. My burden is really much lighter than that. I wish only to make a few practical observations and invite you to revisit and perhaps reformulate your own screed.

First among these observations is the little observed truth that, in the United States at least and perhaps throughout the west, the inheritance of money and property has almost ceased to be of meaningful consequence to the immediately succeeding generations. The fact is, we now all live so very long, and our offspring enter into productive lives so far ahead of our declining years – on average – that the worldly inheritances we might give are usually more relevant to our grand and great-grand children than to our own children.

This is a sea change. It may be less noticeable in the cases in which the parents, still living, are able to assist their progeny in starting productive careers and families. Perhaps they will pay down payments on mortgages, capitalize businesses, or, not insignificantly, help to pay for professional training. But it remains true that today’s youth will reach their professional peak – on average – while their parents yet live and therefore without inheritance.

No more, then, can the imagination fix on the inheritance – whether large or small – as life’s lottery. What this means practically is that the rising generation is required to

give thought to its mature adulthood – what it will make of its lives – without calculating on stepping into the shoes and paths of its forebears.

In this situation nothing is more important than urging our offspring to pay close attention to the moral and intellectual inheritance left by one's parents and their parents before them and so on to a time when memory no longer rouses. For the beauty of this inheritance is that the past need not have died before the future can enjoy full and undivided use of the inheritance. It is every bit as rich and fruitful in the hands of our children as in our hands, even while we still possess it.

The way to cultivate a moral and intellectual bequest to the growth of compound interest is through education. I invoke this theme today so that you might rededicate yourselves to the work of teaching the young how to cultivate a worthy inheritance.

Norfolk State University constitutes a particularly worthy venue for your labors, for it participates in the tradition of the most worthwhile example of how fruitful education can be. Folk who are ill or little informed conceive of this country's historically black colleges and universities as mere relics of Jim Crow, mere tokens of real higher learning.

That is a serious mistake. Although Jim Crow impoverished black higher education as it did so many other dimensions of black life, we must not forget that Jim Crow was not the father of HBCUs – or of black education at all. The real story here is the stunning rate at which ex-slaves, so soon after slavery, launched themselves into paths of education. The schools that followed – pre-collegiate and collegiate – grew at an unparalleled pace as long pent up energies and curiosities broke free. Early in this century we went from virtually none to more than one hundred and twenty HBCUs – and American found students and professors to fill them.

I use this example to show how a people could reclaim a long lost inheritance of moral and intellectual cultivation and turn it to good purpose. [My own relative, Emma B. Delaney carried the gifts she thus earned into missionary service in Africa by the opening of this century!] That early cultural renaissance was slowed by the emergence of more and more Jim Crow restrictions. But the truth revealed in the evidence of those first fruits is that ex-slaves could be fruitful and multiply morally and intellectually.

Hearing this it must distress us to hear everywhere else nowadays that American blacks trail almost all other ethnic groups in academic accomplishments. The President of the National Urban League, Hugh Price, very recently declared “that our children are decaying academically.” He has spoken most sensibly about these issues for a very long time, and I do not intend this morning to rehearse the drone of statistics that have given him and other observers just cause for worry.

I only want to ask a simple question: Have we bothered to ask our youngsters to do more? To rise to the greatest challenges? I may seem simplistic, and I don't mean to. But I have learned through time that the very young almost invariably respond to direct requests to perform at high levels. But I have also found that they must be asked, directly. It will not do to categorize and program them. One must rather, and quite literally, put before them the large ambition, if one wants the joy seeing their souls expand. When, then, students arrive at college less prepared than I wish to see them, I do not

shrink from starting them where they should have been instead of merely where they are – although this gets harder as we age.

At the same time, I ask you, as faculty and administrators, what differences you are making in the lives of your students. What increment of value do you add to their self-understanding, their career prospects, and even their lifetime earnings? This is a most meaningful question, which became evident to me a long time ago, when I awakened to the realization that I had settled into a career of teaching geniuses – the brightest students in the country – and then taking credit for their accomplishments. But what did I really, except to give them a road map?

Since those days I have been inspired by the land-grant vision to assure the sufficient intellect full opportunity to flower into genius by dint of effort and careful cultivation. That is the true meaning of Virginia's guarantee of access and our insistence that access and excellence are not in tension. That is the reason I challenge rather simplistic, uninformative statistics like graduation rates that measure nothing but nominal progress without attention to the pacing – the changes in velocity – that do or do not occur to students arriving at this opening gate (this convocation). If one student drives up to your doors this month in a four cylinder, and remains in that mode, he is not going to get through faster than his eight-cylinder neighbor will. If, on the other hand, he does get through just as fast, that means he acquired an additional four cylinders along the way, while his eight-cylinder neighbor went through unchanged. That is what I mean by value added.

The tax-paying public and the tuition-paying students and parents are paying for the added value, not merely the name and certainly not the custodial care. The change over time is profit from the investment in education, and that is what we aim to document at the Council of Higher Education. Moreover, that is what the past is interested in giving to the future.

I should say a few words more about this gift, this inheritance of education that the past gives to the future. We care about education on account of the young. Although we accustom ourselves to speaking of the contribution education makes to our lives, our economy, and our civic practices, we actually mean to avow an unconditional commitment to posterity – to lives, economies, and civic practices that we adults will know only indirectly at best. One generation forms this bond with succeeding generation because our posterity takes place first as our young, our offspring, and in a moral community all the young are our offspring. When we pray for their future accomplishments we pray not to prescribe them but to ready the young to accomplish them as their own work. That is the reason our prayers all take the form of provision for their education. We see in the education of the young the only gift we have that properly expresses our unconditional love. We know that before they can enjoy the “Blessings of Liberty” they must first enjoy liberty. Nor can they enjoy or benefit from liberty unless their souls first grow into able agents. They must grow to govern themselves, to attain such moral command of themselves as to be at liberty to structure their lives in accord with the “Blessings of Liberty.”

If we, the present generation, perform our work well, our posterity will perpetuate the way of life we know not because they will have inherited it from us but because they

will see and embrace its virtue. Accordingly, this very abstract account of the reason we care about education is in fact the most concrete way we have to remind ourselves of what we seek in building schools, faculties, education partners, and communities in which the young see themselves as both cared for and directed. In effect, we hereby explain why we speak to the young as we do when we encourage them to study and learn. The cultivation of good habits of decision on sound moral and religious grounds is the single most important gift that education conveys. Insofar as we are able to offer such a gift, we have a moral duty to do so. The best schools, the best education, provide exactly such a gift.

That best education provides a power that enables us to see with clarity our own circumstances, our own understandings—if we mean by education liberation from all prejudice. We seem sometimes to think that it suffices just to convey prejudices and otherwise to leave people *Ba* Jean Jacques Rousseau, to follow their natures. To leave people without discipline is a terrible mistake. An era of good feelings or preachings about harmony, or preachings about respect are very poor substitutes for hard earned respect through diligent effort and demonstrated merit.

Our education would fail, if we are not called upon to demonstrate merit in any way that is tied to our relationship with our fellows. We may be often asked to demonstrate merit, often given hard tasks, but insulated from any connection between our accomplishments and our relationships with our fellows it amounts to an incomplete education.

Mr. Jefferson thought that human nature could not avoid the eminence of merit once it had demonstrated itself. Bring us all together and have us all do the work and take whatever exams or challenges apply; then we would look around and see among us those who shine and pay true deference and respect to them. The great impulse today often appears quite the opposite. While there is respect of one sort for those who shine, there is likely to be more envy than deference, or, worse still, there are likely to be greater attempts to define away the shining. For example, we use race norming and other forms of invalidating testing procedures, or we attack the idea of testing itself. Any challenge that produces distinction, insofar as the distinction is socially visible, comes under attack in the age in which we now live. That amounts to an abandonment of the gift education.

I think, then, that we have a great responsibility as individuals and also as educators. That responsibility is to try to free ourselves from prejudices inconsistent with education. Our first responsibility is to try to give ourselves what we alone can give ourselves, and that is a true education, bearing in mind that we know better than any that it is a lifelong process. As educators, we bear an added and noble responsibility to bestow this gift upon our students in the best way we can. To do so will add a value to our lives, and to theirs, that cannot be diminished.