

Why a College Education?

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PERHAPS you have heard about the College Executives who were discussing what they wanted to do after retirement age. One hoped to run a prison or school of correction, so the alumni would never come back to visit. Another chose to manage an orphan asylum so he would not be plagued with advice from parents.

I can not afflict you with the views of a college alumnus for I never attended college. The reasons have long ceased to be important and the results are too painfully apparent.

I once knew a really great lawyer who liked to discuss his most perplexing cases with laymen. He considered that professionals always stood in need of the correction sometimes found in what he called "the reactions of the untutored mind." Notwithstanding the courteous terms of Father Sheehy's invitation to me, I had no difficulty in recognizing that he wanted you to hear, in reference to your own specialized educational problems, the "reactions of an untutored mind." He has assumed that, since our son has just entered college, I must have given the educational problem consideration. I can serve no useful purpose here except by a frankness, which is intended to be helpful, and in no case to be unkindly.

Experience makes it difficult for me to take it for granted that four years in a college is the best possible use of the four easiest learning years in a man's life. This is not because of a low valuation of college, but because of my very high valuation of those four formative years.

Any speaking on such a subject is bound to be autobiographical and it will let you appraise my views more ac-

curately if I consciously draw on personal experience, especially since there is so little else to offer.

If all goes well with my son he will emerge in four years from college, where he will have lived largely with books, removed from the struggle of life, and will then begin another period of book life to prepare for a profession. At just that age a considerate judge, was permitting me, although not yet admitted to the bar, to defend, as my first clients, some twenty striking street car men. The difference in viewpoint between a sheltered college youth and one tossed into the strife to sink or swim for himself is considerable. I know I missed much in not going to college. I wish I were sure my son will not miss much just because he does go to college.

In the north country the final test of a man is whether he can safely guide a canoe through "white water" as they call the swirling and rushing rapids. The world has an overabundance of those who paddle pretty well in still water. The world cries for men who can navigate "white water." I see plenty of it ahead for individuals and for society. It is this practical and tough test, unavoidable to those of small means, that makes men wonder about the adequacy of your instruction.

From this investment of his best four years of a young man's life, the hard-headed parent, who is not infatuated with the mere college tradition, demands at least three things.

The first is an equipment of factual knowledge, English, history, sciences and the like. The well organized knowledge factory of the university will teach this more quickly, more

efficiently and in better proportion than self-instruction or the hard school of experience. On this point I am fully convinced.

The second requirement is ability to learn by himself so that in later life when he shall meet a new subject or situation he may teach himself its mastery without a professor, tutor or advisor. He will find in private life, and especially if he should enter government, that new problems put him pretty much on his own resources with an amazing difficulty in getting competent, experienced and really disinterested advice.

The world over, government, as well as private industry, is expanding, changing, moving. Everywhere government is in difficulty to find men who will keep themselves big enough to carry out its more venturesome functions, men open minded and teachable enough to grow as fast as the complications they are asked to master.

What can we say of the teachability of the average American college graduate after he leaves college with its routine goadings? Does he add to his intellectual capital as he extends his operations in life? Neither a society nor an individual will get far if it limits its intellectual capital to that accumulated in the human mind before twenty. College commencement sometimes seems to operate as an artificial time limit on the urge to learn. Having no such dramatic day of certification that he has arrived at learning, the self-educated man plods on, carrying his habit of learning far into life. I would be willing to let youth neglect the minor poets, and most of the minor philosophers as well, if I could make sure that they would know how to go about solving the social, economic and governmental problems, as well as the personal problems of making a living, and living a life worth while, which they will face in 1950 or 1960 or 1975.

On this point I am only 51 per cent convinced. But when you are 51 per cent convinced, on a "yes" or "no" proposal, there is nothing to do but act as if you were 100 per cent convinced. That accounts for your having a freshman from our household.

The third requirement is: A working familiarity with, and an open minded acceptance of, continuous change in scientific and human relationships. To these he must steadily accommodate himself if he is to achieve an understanding of his individual place in this interdependent world.

Once there were many to say that a college education was impractical because it took a boy's feet off the ground. In the complicated modern world of today, college education may be the only practical method of getting a boy's feet on the ground. There is much more ground that he must now get under his feet.

A great expansion has occurred in our whole economy of life. An intelligent person once could grasp the meaning of his own work by merely understanding his relation to his particular job and to his immediate neighbor. The fellow who started right out of high school on his job or his profession had for a number of years a certain advantage over the bookbred college man. But technological improvements and scientific advances have so subdivided everybody's job or profession, have made every one so dependent upon numerous persons and things and places which he may never see, that one can not understand his own task unless he understands farflung relationships.

There was a time when self-education probably fitted a

boy better than college to walk through a chaotic world with a feeling that he knew his way around in it. Experience gave him an unconscious knowledge of the varieties and the vagaries of men and the unforeseeable caprice of events—and it gave him a calm adaptability to both. He learned how to get along without being passionately horrified by unpredictable and inevitable changes, and he got things done with the materials that came to his hand in a most practical way without worrying about precedents or consequences or what the Greeks and Romans did. For him the times were never out of joint, because for him the times were always what they were, and he was not worried by a departure from some academic notion of what they ought to be. He instinctively appraised theories by experience and events, while the college-educated man very often judges facts and events by his theories.

I want youth to have some of that practical pragmatic confidence in life. Twenty or thirty years ago he might have obtained it best by going to work in the world at sixteen. Today it may be that he can obtain it best by standing back from it all and from a college observation post see the whole world in proper perspective. But one way or the other he must cultivate courage so that his teeth will not chatter in the presence of unexpected events, great personages or new thoughts.

Much difficulty today is due to a sheer lack of courage to act to make changes even when we are intellectually convinced they are right. The average man in a preferred economic or political position is terrified at the slightest change anywhere lest it upset his balance. This is an unconscious expression of an inward doubt of the stability of his own position and distrust of his own survival value if a shake up comes. He feels confident of being able to hold his own so long as the set of circumstances in which he makes his living is preserved to its last detail. He is almost superstitiously afraid to take his chances along with other men in any change of conditions that the common weal may require.

That often appears to be true of businessmen and something like it is true of my profession. I have heard many lawyers frankly complain against law reforms—twenty-five years overdue—because the new statutes rendered obsolete their store of pre-statutory knowledge, and they were sheerly afraid of their ability to compete with their fellows in learning something new in the law.

A world of men, poor in what they know, or lazy about what they will learn, and unable from time to time to approach improvement of particularly bad situations for lack of confidence in the stability of the general relationships of men and things—such a world will be condemned to be confused and miserable.

A young man should acquire a start—and the independent ability to follow up that start—toward being the kind of an intelligent human being who can survive in whatever set of circumstances the accidents of the world may throw him—interested to understand new situations as they arise—unafraid to acknowledge unavoidable new facts—unperturbably resourceful in making the best of what comes to his hand.

Will college help develop such an attitude and such ability?

Sometimes I have doubts.

Today a political, economic and social problem, all

rolled into one, is to avoid the freezing of class lines, as they have already formed in Europe, while we try through government to bring greater opportunity and security to the mass of our people. They are strong enough to attain what they want—wise enough to know their strength—and determined that they will not be ignored. If education means even recognizing the obvious, you would expect every educated man to perceive both the promise and the danger in the problem, and to do his best to develop at least an intellectual understanding that would cross every barrier of class or caste.

But there sometimes seems an unconscious plan on the part of those of education and position to mark themselves off, by violent protestations against all popular movements, as a class minority who have interests opposite to the mass of Americans.

There is a story attributed to Colonel House about the visit of Balfour to this country in 1917. The story goes that after the conclusion of his business in Washington, Balfour had five days before his sailing. He asked House how he could most profitably spend those five days in acquiring the fullest possible knowledge of American public opinion for his own future use as a member of the British Government. The Colonel is said to have replied in substance: "You have, I know, friends in the so-called upper classes in New York and on Long Island. Spend all your five days with them and listen to all their views. Then you will know what the great mass of American men and women think, for they will think just the opposite of your Long Island friends."

That story has not lost its point today. You know, as well as I, the very limited and narrow understanding of public movements possessed by too many of the so-called educated—the products of our colleges and universities—who have had all the leisure and advantages that ought to make for real disinterestedness, detachment and imaginative understanding.

There is no doubt about a growing cleavage in opinion and feeling between the body of Americans and those who have had the most prized advantages of education both in preparatory school and in higher education. Indeed this is one of the most significant and one of the most menacing aspects in the evolution of our democracy.

At the bottom of it are dividing forces in college life, and also between college and non-college life, due to differences in wealth, and the prestige and separateness that wealth brings. Justice Holmes was profoundly aware of it and called attention to it in his speech at the 50th Anniversary of his class when he said, "It was a good thing for us in our college days . . . that we were all poor, or at least we lived as if we were."

I wish our colleges could take that wisdom to heart. At least those who join in intellectual endeavor should merge class differentiation in a community of interests and of feelings, the fundamental requisite of an enduring democracy.

In the United States the absence of class distinctions in fact as well as in form has been the glory and the promise of American life. There are several forces at work in universities today that do not help in that direction. One of them is the predominant influence of mere money in so many of the institutions of higher learning, particularly in the East. Another is the perfectly honest but narrow influence of powerful financial interests in the affairs of our educational

institutions. Another is the tendency of some of our universities to restrict their scholarship too much to things of the past, or too remote from life's hard realities. Often their graduates go forth unconscious of the great economic and social forces that science and technology have released to play about their lives. They do not even see the underlying identity of their interests with the interests of Lincoln's common people.

There is no answer except a relentless insistence that scholarship concern itself as coldly with critical analysis of the institutions and events of our own times as it is disinterested about the issues of the Punic Wars or the Crusades.

This generation will just have to fight out the battles that are compelled by our own inadequacies of understanding.

So far as the next generation is concerned, I hope the colleges will let every wind of our controversies blow full force upon them. I hope that instead of keeping political controversy out of academic halls, they will let student life be thoroughly charged with it just because at this stage of the world the decision of large public policies is perhaps the biggest single reality in our individual lives.

I hope that the colleges will go a step further and try to illuminate the immediate political controversies of the present by showing their roots in the past. Youth should see the lineage of controverted present day relation between business and government in the struggle between Andrew Jackson and the Bank of the United States. Conversely, I should like to have college ground them in the political issues of the future—to teach them, for instance, the tremendous implications in cheap electric power resources, or in the deterioration of our soil, and in the thousand other developments that vex or cheer us, and influence the kind of life we are going to lead on this continent.

It is as the deliberate stimulator of such informal education in the four years invested in college that I see the function of a true student adviser. His task, I should hope, would be to fill the chinks between the few things that can be formally taught with informal and interesting inquiries in the current developments about. I should hope he would be enough interested himself in the movement of the world to let the student miss as little of it as possible. I should hope that he would have enough patience to let my son and his fellows talk themselves out to him as they reformulate ideas in their own way, and that he would be adroit enough in the technique of conference to help young minds catch fire from each other.

Henry Adams complained that he was educated in the 18th century to live in the 19th. It would be a greater tragedy to educate our children in the 1930's to live in only the 1940's. They must travel far into the unknown after we have fallen by the way. We can not blaze the trail, nor map the road, nor light the way. We can only teach them to take their courses by the stars.

Our great universities must save our democratic process by giving us men wisely educated to run it. But they must also have sympathy and understanding of the needs and aspirations of humble men or they will not be allowed to run it. The universities must give us acceptable leaders or they will succumb, along with that democratic process, to some form of authoritarianism. The education of my son's generation is linked to the preservation of free learning and free government. I pray we shall succeed with all three.