

The Virtues of a Liberal Education*

Frederick Crosson (1926-2009)

I want to reflect on some things I have come to think about teaching, especially in a college of liberal education, as a result of my own education over the years as a teacher. Liberal education I will characterize for the moment as being for the sake of the student himself, the person herself. So it's not like professional education, it's not designed to prepare the person for a particular job or function in society, but rather to broaden and deepen the mind and heart of every learner, to help make them more informed, more reflective, more thoughtful persons. Every society, and especially every democratic society, needs as many as it can beget of such persons to be thoughtful citizens, voters, jurors, neighbors.

When you first begin teaching, you're just out of three, four, five years of study in a particular discipline, having immersed yourself, generally, in a small sub-field of that discipline for the last several years. And your first attention is focused on teaching Philosophy 101 or History 203 or Sociology 302. Your contribution to the liberal education of your students is to do the best job you can in that course, in that discipline. Only gradually do you begin to think about the wider horizons of learning, about the fact that you and your department are engaged in a common enterprise with all of the other departments in the college--and so begin to think about that common end.

So what kind of education is appropriate to that common enterprise? Well, generally, education that widens and deepens the range of our knowing and of our thoughtful understanding that broadens the horizons within which we think and live. (My favorite Gary Larson cartoon is of a group of cows munching in a meadow, and one of them raises its head and says, "Hey! This is grass we're eating!" Liberal education ought to get us to raise our heads and look afar.)

The more you know the more you can actually see and hear and feel. Marcel Proust, the French novelist, referring to travel as showing us new things, said that "The only true journey . . . lies not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes, in seeing the world with the eyes of another, of a hundred others . . ."

For liberal education to be liberating, of course, it's not enough merely to encounter, to come to know, new data, new information about the natural world and the human world, about what other ages and cultures and peoples thought was true and worth doing and being. That's the first responsibility of the teacher: to bring the student to know the organization of the solar system, what happened in the rise of Islam, what Plato wrote in the Republic. What is necessary to add in order to profit from those encounters is reflecting, thinking about the data and making connections, the meaning, the implications of what we have come to know.

Here's a contemporary example of that kind of bringing together: The Constitution says that any citizen over 25 years of age (30 for the Senate) is eligible to be a member of Congress. You might not be surprised to learn that more than 95 percent of the members of Congress are college graduates. But do you know what percentage of adults in the United States have bachelor's degrees? About 15 percent. So as a matter of fact, our legislators are chosen not from the citizenry at large but from a very small subset of the population . . . Is that good or bad? There we are with matter for thinking and discussing and understanding.

None of those examples of showing, of exhibiting implications and connections, are intended to end with a period. They're intended to open up a field of further inquiry, of further thinking. That's why my examples end with questions.

For myself, I love that kind of teaching by questions--though it's not the only kind of teaching I do and love--because it's the most human (face-to-face conversations about important things), it's the most effective pedagogy (when it goes well the students discover things for themselves) and it's the most fun. Moreover, I learn along with the students. Sometimes I learn from things that a student remarks on, that I had never thought about before; sometimes the discussion presses me to articulate an issue in a way I had never thought about before. And so in a way, I am the carrier of insights from generation to generation of students, the carrier of gifts, so to speak, to the students who come after this generation.

But I want to think about not just the mind of our student but about the heart. Can we speak to the heart of the learner?

By "the heart" here I don't mean the emotions or feelings of the student, but rather the sense of personal implication, the realization that this insight has a special meaning for me. There is an old Latin adage, "Where the heart is, there too are the eyes." The heart--in the sense I am using it here--the heart responds by appropriating what comes into view, by making that understanding my own, by thinking about its relation to my life. This may sound fuzzy and mushy, so let me tell a story to make it more concrete.

While I was in the dean's office, a legendary teacher of English at Notre Dame died; the funeral was planned for two days hence. I received a call the next day from the governor of a large state, who wanted to come to the funeral.

He told me that his life had been changed, reoriented, by his experiences in the classes of that teacher. The teacher not only lectured on and introduced him to works of literature that he found deeply significant, but more important seemed himself to reflect the goodness that was discovered to the young student in those classes. Indeed, to my astonishment during the drive in from the airport, he likened his teacher to the teacher of Dante, Brunetto Latini, to whom Dante speaks moving words in the Divine Comedy.

While this particular example may be unusual in the depth and duration of the effect on the student, it is not unusual for a teacher to function as a catalyst in the encounter of a student with a text or a topic, awakening the student to look more closely. It is not uncommon that teachers have such love and enthusiasm for their subject matter and at the same time concern for their students' learning that their love communicates itself and opens the eyes of the learner to the beauty and insight of what is loved.

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