# Liberal Arts-the Last Hurrah?

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A celebrated singer was telling some friends the location of her Welsh castle. She said it was "twenty-three miles from everywhere, and very beautiful." This is about as precise an idea as many have of liberal arts education — "twenty-three miles from everywhere, and very beautiful."

The concepts which people hold, even college students, of the meaning and value of the liberal arts, are wondrous to contemplate. One day early in the school year at La Sierra College some years ago, I was leaving a chapel service and found myself walking behind two students. They were discussing the fields they planned to major in. One had his mind pretty well made up. The other said, "I think I'll major in liberal arts." The first one asked, "What's that?" The other answered, "Well, I think it's what you major in until you've made up your mind what you're going to do in life."

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My title raises the question of the survival of the liberal arts. This is of concern to many today. A recent annual meeting of the Association of American Colleges had as its theme "The Liberal Arts — Dead or Transfigured?" To be realistic we would have to agree that in recent times liberal arts have actually been the victim of overkill. The question now is "Will there be, or should there be, a resurrection?"

Any attempt to make a case for the enduring validity of the liberal arts might well begin with John Stuart Mill's classic statement: "Men are men before they are lawyers, or physicians, or merchants, or manufacturers, and if you make them capable and sensible men, they will make themselves capable and sensible lawyers or physicians."<sup>2</sup>

To this we might add the observation of John Henry Newman that a lib-

eral education, if properly conceived and executed, should teach a man to "see things as they are, to go right to the point, to disentangle a skein of thought, to detect what is sophistical, and to discard what is irrelevant.... He is at home in any society, he has common ground with every class; he knows when to speak and when to be silent.... He has the repose of a mind which lives in itself, while it lives in the world, and which has resources for its happiness at home when it cannot go abroad."<sup>3</sup>

From a leader in the highly competitive arena of big business we learn that those who are liberally educated "would not easily be misled by glib political promises because they had studied the rulers throughout history and become familiar with their tricks of persuasion — their platitudes and posturings, the adoption of pseudo-high moral levels, and the unfulfillable promises of demagogues. It is in the liberal arts college that men and women are being educated to understand people — not only our own people, but those of other countries and other civilizations."<sup>4</sup>

The plight of humane learning in our day can be best understood in the light of events in higher education in the decade of the 1960s. It was during these recent years that higher education wrote one of the darkest and most distressing pages in its history. On this point Sidney Hook has said: "It is not hard to predict that from the vantage point of the year 2000, if not earlier, the last decade in American education [the 1960s] will appear as the most bizarre in its history."<sup>5</sup>

Another academician has commented in a similar vein: "With the first [student] onslaught [the campus] fell into disorder. The teachers fell out with each other, the presidents and deans were thrown into confusion, the 'rightfulness' of the students' cause called forth much support, and those who denied it would not bring the university back to where it was. . . . Presidents, deans, professors, from conviction or cowardice, fell for obviously nonsensical arguments. No authorities under attack had ever gone so far in flattering and beslavering their insatiable antagonists and attempting to placate them."<sup>6</sup>

To compound the tragedy of these events on campuses across the nation was an erroneous attribution of the causes of this unrest. This led to hasty and often ill-conceived attempts to reform the curriculum and teaching methods. These no doubt needed some attention, but for better reasons than to quell student unrest. Such changes should be made for the sole purpose of improving the education of the young people, not for the sake of peace in our time on campus.

The recent report of the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education, en-

titled *Reform on Campus*, indicates that, of the colleges included in the study, 66 percent of the students were very satisfied with the educational program and only 12 percent were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied. The conclusion is drawn that the campus unrest was due to other things than the quality of the educational process. Thus the author reasoned that "whatever changes are needed should be undertaken for the sake of the students and for the society, not for the sake of peace on campus."<sup>7</sup>

About this time came the ill-advised rush to place students in charge of virtually everything on campus and to accept as valid the demagogic slogan of the early leaders of the revolt at Berkeley: *Don't trust anyone over thirty*. Students have concerns of vital importance at stake in the educational process, and without question they should be consulted on various aspects of the educational program. This should not lead, however, to selling short the value of experience, dedication, objectivity, and goodwill to an expediency designed primarily to keep the boat from rocking. Frederic W. Ness, the president of the Association of American Colleges, dealt in a recent speech with the larger question of broadened participation in university and college administration. He said that faculty participation in administration (and by implication student participation also) often only replaces one irrationality with another; and under these conditions, leadership becomes so diffused that it seems to be nonexistent. In a choice between benevolent despotism and participatory chaos, he was inclined to choose the former.<sup>8</sup>

There emerged also at this time certain magic words that seemed to nullify the historical concept that a university campus is a place where reason is appealed to as the final arbiter in solving problems. Among these magic words (in addition to "youth") were *innovate*, *involvement*, *relevant*, *minority*, *interdisciplinary*, and others; and if these were not given deference, one's Americanism and even one's Christianity became suspect.

One perceptive member of the university community, commenting on the unreasonable demands made of universities, wrote: "No one expects a gas station to cater to pedestrians, or churches to accommodate atheists, or a bar to make teetotalers feel at home. People go into one of these places precisely because they are in accord with its known purposes."<sup>9</sup> But the university is expected to be open, relevant, involved, and responsive to all the latest notions and fads.

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We should remind ourselves, before proceeding further, that "the word 'liberal' comes from the Latin *liber*, meaning 'free'; that the proper meaning

of the phrase 'liberal arts' is 'the arts becoming to a free man'; and that from earliest times these have included the sciences." (In the Middle Ages the liberal arts consisted of the *quadrivium* (geometry, astronomy, arithmetic, and music) and the *trivium* (grammar, logic, and rhetoric). The only point that needs emphasis here is that "the liberal arts are rooted in freedom, not privilege, and they are broad, not narrow, in educational scope."<sup>10</sup>

Inevitably the question arises, "Is an education in the liberal arts practical?" It would not be realistic or helpful to advocate a revival of the *trivium* and the *quadrivium* or even some of the recent modifications of these historical disciplines. Reincarnation may not be the proper word to describe what is needed, but it does suggest that the essence of what was meant by the liberal arts deserves to be retained, but in a manner and in a form that will make them attractive and demonstrably "practical" in our modern times.

The following views were expressed, not by an ivory tower denizen, as we would surmise, but rather by a resident of the marketplace, whom we would expect to be impatient with all things that are not relevant to his materialistic objectives: "We sometimes hear the assertion that a liberal education 'leads nowhere.' Far from leading nowhere, it leads everywhere — into every mode of living, into every gainful effort. Indispensable in industry and the professions is the mind trained to think, the eye trained to see truth and the conception broadened to seize upon the main idea — and hold it. We need minds at work which are capable of rising above the tangible things we do to earn our daily bread, capable of grasping the intangible principles and truths that keep us moving toward finer, broader lives."<sup>11</sup>

A little girl wrote a letter to a bank president in Canada asking why she should go to college. The president of the University of Toronto wrote in reply:

People have said that training for a vocation is useful, but that liberal education is not useful. That is nonsense....

Huck Finn lost interest in Moses when he found out that Moses was dead, because 'I don't take no stock in dead people.' Today many 'don't take no stock' in dead languages, or even in living languages apart from their own. Latin, French, and German are academic and useless; but English is practical and useful. Then teach English, they say. Don't teach literature — Shakespeare and Milton are useless. Don't teach grammar — gerunds and participles are only for the pedant. Just teach English!

But it is the student of useless languages and literature who can use his own language with precision and imagination. Useless algebra, history, philosophy, and physics produce useful powers and resilience. The usefulness of liberal education is to develop useful, independent citizens, and in this process the longest way round is often the shortest way home. Education should enable a person to earn a living and to live a life.<sup>12</sup> During the French Revolution, when Lavoisier was executed, the young judge who presided at the trial said, "The Republic has no need for savants." When a half million dollars was given by an Englishman to found the Smithsonian Institution in 1844, the working classes living in squalor in England might have been benefited greatly by this money. The idea of short-term benefits might have deterred the donor from making this contribution that started the institution which has done so much good since that time. Relevance can easily become the greatest of shibboleths.<sup>13</sup>

The attack on the liberal arts, and I use the phrase advisedly, is not without its brighter side. When a man is about to be hanged, the saying goes, it concentrates the mind immensely. From their critics, colleges can learn what to renounce and what to recover, what to mend and what to reaffirm. Students of the humanities and social sciences will recognize the need to know more of the natural world in this exciting time when research is on the move and when 90 percent of all the scientists who ever lived, so we are told, are still living. Scientists will remember that probably 90 percent of all the great artists, composers, philosophers, moralists, and men of letters are now dead, and that a considerable art is involved in bringing them to life again.<sup>14</sup>

One purpose of the study of the liberal arts and their "heir and continuator," the humanities, is to develop in a person the capacity to survive change. One serendipity which the university might discover in the present crisis is to seek to do a few things well rather than to attempt to do many things that it ends up doing badly. Further, the colleges of arts and sciences might resist attempts to turn them into coaching schools for professional and graduate schools, at the expense of liberal education. Knowledgeable deans of professional and graduate schools are realizing that the greatest gift a college can send to them is a liberally educated young person.

If breadth of education is still considered to be an important objective, then the secondary school must begin to make its contribution in this direction. In too many cases, thousands of high school graduates have been turned out illiterate and unprepared to go on with their education. At the same time, of course, they have been exposed to classes in macrame, sensitivity training, and baton twirling. Educators of vision at the secondary level can assist vastly in providing a broad foundation of learning for the young. As for the colleges, they have turned out their own quota of illiterates, narrowly trained but not really educated.

It should not be overlooked that a liberal education can be found in professional schools and that illiberal education takes place in liberal arts colleges. Touching on this point, Ralph Barton Perry said: "It will not do, therefore, to say that a professional school is necessarily illiberal because it teaches law or medicine; . . . or even because its students are already largely committed to the career. It is quite possible that a law school or medical school should be liberal, and so-called liberal arts college be illiberal."<sup>15</sup> In further developing this point, this writer commented:

Even manual labor partakes of liberality at the moment when a man chooses to work with his hands; or when it becomes a skilled craft requiring taste and invention; or when it is attended with a sense of cooperation and social utility. As the professional or vocational school may be liberal, so the so-called liberal arts college may be illiberal, and will be illiberal in so far as it is pervaded with a narrow sectarian bias, or employs methods of mass appeal, or reduces study to the level of drudgery and routine, or otherwise fails to awaken the independent mind and exercise the student in the art of reflective and imaginative choice.<sup>16</sup>

The more educators devote their time and energy to the basic problem of how to do a better job of educating young people, the more successful will they be in reaching their goals. One writer makes some valid points in an overstatement when he says: "Although many undergraduate colleges no longer act *in loco parentis*, for many of their students they still act *in loco uteri*. Like wombs, most colleges offer a warm and cozy setting where the organism can exist protected from outside influences until parturition sends him or her screaming into the world." When this situation obtains, there is a comfortable relationship between college and student:

Students don't upset the college; the college doesn't upset the student. Students ride out the four-year gestation period in a comfortable womb, bathed by a continual flow of self-appreciation and self-gratification, nourished by the illusion of achievement resulting from a regular diet of grades and well insulated from disrupting outside influences. A kick now and then is no cause for concern. It simply indicates that the infant is alive and presumably well.<sup>17</sup>

A college of this type renders the least service to the student and to society. The writer offers the unorthodox suggestion that it may be the quality of its dropouts rather than the quality of its graduates that provides the more accurate index of the social contribution of a college.

# III

Space limitations will not permit my dealing with all the magic words that have been used and misused on college campuses in recent years. The term *relevant*, however, is one that demands some consideration. No reasonable or responsible person wants education to be irrelevant.

The real question is — relevant to what? To what the student wants as he sits in the classroom, or to what he will discover he needs, years later, after he has gone out and probably cannot return? Is building a general intellectual capability irrelevant be-

cause it is not *exclusively* relevant to the current headlines and slogans?... In the sloppy language of today, opposition to any particular pattern of change is denounced as opposition to change, as such, and extravagant statements are made about the rigidity of the academic curriculum. Actually the opposite charge would have more substance: that American education, down through the years, has spent so much time getting on and off bandwagons [to attempt to be relevant] that it has had little time for anything else... A look at the agony and progress of man over the centuries might suggest some value in the systematic development of the human mind and a continuing relevance of disciplined and informed thinking, in contrast to the kinds of visceral reactions, heady rhetoric, and grandiose visions which have spread so much blood and debris across the pages of history.<sup>18</sup>

The distinguished historian Henry Steele Commager has added this observation on relevance:

Just as colleges should resist the demand for more courses, they should resist the demand for "relevance," as undergraduates commonly understand that term. Almost the whole of our society and economy — and, alas, much of our educational enterprise is engaged in a kind of conspiracy to persuade the young that nothing is really relevant unless it happened yesterday, and unless it can be reported in the newspaper and filmed by television. It is the business of these and other media to be relevant; it is not the business of the college or university to be relevant. The academy has other relevancies. It must be relevant to the past and to the future, to our own society and to very different societies. It must be as relevant to art and music and philosophy as it is to urban problems or race relations, confident that neither urban problems nor race relations can be understood except through philosophy and history.<sup>19</sup>

A case in point might be the enthusiasm of some students to rush to the ghetto to right the wrongs that exist there. But the courses most relevant to solving these problems might turn out to be dry, tedious studies in the basic sciences, accounting, or law. This is certainly not the relevance that people have in mind when they use the expression. "They want to *talk about* the ghetto, or do the studies that take them into the ghetto, satisfying their own emotional needs, but doing little for the ghetto."<sup>20</sup>

All hail, then, to relevance. But let us not ignore the rest of the question. Are we seeking relevance to the latest fad, to instant, untested nostrums, to the morning news headlines? The relevance with which we should be concerned must be the larger issues of yesterday and of tomorrow as well as of today. The education we provide must be relevant to social injustice, to bigotry, to violence, to excellence as a way of life, and especially to the dignity and worth of men — all men everywhere.

There have been advanced several theses designed to explain the decline or demise of the liberal arts in our time. One of these sets forth the notion that the liberal arts have been eroded into "functional nothingness by the forces of recent history." Another is that our culture is now being ground between two revolutions, one not yet complete and the other just coming to birth, thus demanding a wholesale revision of liberal education. "The conclusion is that patchwork tinkering with the so-called liberal curriculum will accomplish little if anything of significance and that only a fresh image of the processes of liberation in our contemporary context will restore a constructive vitality to our campuses. . . . As for the liberal arts themselves, if they ever really existed, they have died in the process of becoming professionalized disciplines."<sup>21</sup>

The second of these theses has much to recommend it. If we are caught today between two revolutions, one going and one coming, our world must then stand at the juncture of two ages — the end of the industrial revolution, and the materialistic values that it spawned, and the beginning of the postindustrial revolution that has brought on a crisis in values, in cultural directions, and in the psychology of men in a changing time. Our colleges and universities are still deeply embedded in an industrial era. This has left little room for a meaningful engagement of the passions, including the passion of moral fervor. It follows that "there is little point, consequently, in discussing a possible revitalization of the liberal arts through improved teaching or through what are usually called interdisciplinary revisions of the curriculum."<sup>22</sup>

There are other magic words which in themselves have much to recommend them. *Innovation* is something that can improve our programs. It is easy to fall into the bondage of tradition or, in the case of teachers, of having notes all neatly worked out which would not be usable if things changed too much. The liberal arts, and within them especially history, should teach us to accept change, not only gracefully, but with enthusiasm and in good spirit.

To repeat, the charge that educators by and large resist change cannot be sustained. To use a tired cliché, it is not change but change for the sake of change that should be suspect. "The only questions are whether the direction and content of changes are sound, and what the rate and magnitude of change should be."<sup>23</sup> Winston Churchill once said, "When it is not necessary to change, it is necessary not to change." We should distrust the fetishness of novelty. We should not exaggerate the value of newness in either ideas or things. "It is much easier to be original than wise," said Will Durant, who has spent a lifetime tracing the rise and fall of civilizations.

Several gifted students at Carnegie Institute of Technology joined in writing some free verse which expressed their feelings and which tells us much about students and the learning process:

I am amorphous. I am nerve ends, ganglia, squeezed, compressed. I must stiffen, toughen, yet stay flexible. I want to be steel, I am afraid of becoming stone. I drift into limbo, Sucking in fact, while I long for truth. As I turn over and over I seem to be shrinking --- Or am I coiling for a leap? And to where?

## A little later came commencement time:

All at once I knew a little bit about why. I was out from under the suffocating mass of knowledge; there was a direction to go, a way to do it, and I knew the way. I did know, had learned. There was the door, the handle to turn, the latch to lift — And all those years I had been finding, acquiring, filling my pockets with keys. Already the doors are opening. Through how many shall I finally pass?<sup>24</sup>

Many years before these lines appeared, one with almost no formal education wrote with insight and inspiration:

For ages education has had to do chiefly with the memory. This faculty has been taxed to the utmost, while the other mental powers have not been correspondingly developed. Students have spent their time laboriously crowding the mind with knowledge.... The mind thus burdened with that which it can not digest and assimilate is weakened; it becomes incapable of vigorous, self-reliant effort, and is content to depend on the judgment and perception of others.... The education that consists in the training of the memory, tending to discourage independent thought, has a moral bearing which is too little appreciated. As the student sacrifices the power to reason and judge for himself, he becomes incapable of discriminating between truth and error, and falls an easy prey to deception. He is easily led to follow tradition and custom.<sup>25</sup>

Where shall we turn for help in finding a solution to our educational dilemma? If we assume that the liberal arts concept is worthy of surviving, and perhaps of reincarnation, what form might this take? Is a new synthesis the answer? Surely the liberal arts will not, and should not, survive "hidden away in a napkin, undefiled by the busy world."

# IV

We might pose the question: What would the world be like without liberal arts? What kind of a society would it be if the liberal arts were done away with completely? The late Mark Van Doren, who wrote much on the subject, offered an answer: "It would be a society for one thing in which discourse did not go on, in which conversation had died, in which ideas had ceased to be exchanged, in which argument had stopped, in which there was neither agreement nor disagreement. I suppose it would be a world of beasts."28

To those who accept the counsel made available through Ellen White, the following guidelines are clear and unequivocal:

If placed under the control of His spirit, the more thoroughly the intellect is cultivated, the more effectively it can be used in the service of God.<sup>27</sup>

None should consent to be mere machines, run by another man's mind. God has given us ability, to think and to act.... Stand in your God-given personality. Be no other person's shadow.... The cultivated mind is the measure of the man.<sup>28</sup>

Have you thoughts that you dare not express, that you may one day stand upon the summit of intellectual greatness? . . . There is nothing wrong in these aspirations. . . . You should be content with no mean attainments. Aim high, and spare no pains to reach the standard. Balanced by religious principle, you may climb to any height you please.<sup>29</sup>

A much-quoted statement regarding Battle Creek College sets forth a principle pregnant with meaning for all who are engaged in the educational enterprise of the Adventist church today: "God designs that the College at Battle Creek shall reach a higher standard of intellectual and moral culture than any other institution of the kind in our land."<sup>30</sup> In this statement, emphasis is placed on two things that should command our attention, namely, *intellectual culture* and *moral culture*. A leading secular spokesman for the liberal arts tradition in American education has affirmed that the liberal arts "are studies designed to develop to capacity the intellectual and spiritual powers of the individual."<sup>31</sup> The value of vocational and professional training is assumed, not ignored, in this emphasis on developing the intellectual and moral capabilities of man.

In any program of education that stresses intellectual and moral culture, there is inherent the need for inculcating excellence as a habit of character. "Aristotle says, 'One learns to be a good flute-player by playing the flute. One also learns to be a poor flute-player by playing the flute.' It all depends on the standards of excellence held up. To keep insisting upon quality and discouraging the second-rate, shoddy and mediocre in performance, is a drive which every teacher has to make."<sup>32</sup> The two objectives of intellectual and moral culture set forth by Ellen G. White, as well as by secular educators, are the valid goals of the Christian liberal arts college.

One educator who was concerned about the survival of Christian colleges set forth three basic conditions that he considered essential for their survival.

*First:* To be vital today, a college or university must be *adaptable without losing its integrity.* Both of these points are important. A university must be

willing to change; but at the same time it must not compromise its standards — it must not lower them to the point where it is no longer an institution of integrity. The decline from excellence to mediocrity to total intellectual and moral bankruptcy can be subtle and rapid, as one writer has expressed it in "Descent":

> No admission standards, No attendance policy. No requyred studies No Foriegn Language no english No histry no math, no Sceinse Noexams; (no greyds) No? oners nofalure's) N o buksno! lekchurs'' nO ree din: No/ritein NO NUTTIN<sup>33</sup>

Second: To be vital today, a college or university must take an honest look at its own values and then place its dollars where its values lie. This is extremely important for survival. To implement this point the faculty and the administration must be able to identify the values they jointly seek to promote, to have a clear understanding of the values they espouse, and to be firmly and unequivocally committed to these values.

Third: "To be vital today, a college or university must care deeply about the person of the student if the student is expected to care deeply about his or her education."<sup>34</sup>

In his story "The Keeper of the Light," Henry Van Dyke tells of a lighthouse built at the mouth of the Saint Lawrence River to keep ships from meeting destruction on the rocks in the gulf. Originally, the lighthouse was committed to the care of a Frenchman, with the admonition that the light should never be allowed to go out or to fail to blink once every minute. For many years the man and his family kept the light, even when the machinery was inoperative and it was necessary to turn the wheel by hand all night long. At length the Frenchman and his wife died. Two of the daughters married and left the little island, and Nataline, the youngest daughter, took over the responsibility of running the light.

The little village two miles across the water had always been hostile to the presence of the lighthouse. The light interfered with their trapping and shooting of wild birds. Also it warned away ships that would have been wrecked on the rocks, spilling cargoes that would have washed ashore to enrich the villagers. During one year in particular, things had gone badly for the villagers, and they faced the prospect of starvation during the winter

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because of crop failure and the inability to catch fish and seals. Their eyes then turned to the lighthouse with its supply of sperm oil for the light. Sperm oil was not tasty, but it would sustain life during the last hard weeks of winter.

A delegation approached Nataline and asked for the remaining oil to save the villagers. Tempted, but knowing that much depended on her keeping the light, she refused. Then they planned to break into the storehouse without her knowledge and steal the oil at night. Warned of this, she kept them off at gunpoint. When she was asked why she did not consider the lives of the villagers more important than the light, she replied that God had committed to her the duty of keeping the light, and she would not abdicate her responsibility for any persuasion.

The supply boat which would bring supplies for the light and also for the villagers was due at the end of April. Just before that time a fierce storm came down from the north. All night long Nataline cleared away the gathering ice and snow from the light and saw that it burned clearly through the darkness, blinking once each minute to guide nearby ships. In the morning as she came down from the tower, wearied to exhaustion, she saw the supply ship anchored in the harbor. Had her light not burned through the night, had she permitted the oil to be consumed when it was demanded by the fishermen, the ship would have foundered on the rocks, and much of the precious cargo would have been lost. In after years the lighthouse island came to be known as the Isle of the Wise Virgin.

Here is a fitting parable for our day. For seeming advantages that are only of short-term duration, many will barter away the long-range civilizing values of the liberal arts. Without these lasting values, disaster must follow, and the enduring benefits that are rooted in "intellectual and moral culture" will be lost to mankind.

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