



Beyond Expertise, The Good Society

America's foremost sociologist of religion talks to Seventh-day Adventists about the unique role of church-related schools.

by Robert N. Bellah

WHAT IS HIGHER EDUCATION FOR? MY university, the University of California, has been hovering on the brink of catastrophe for several years now. We hope for better treatment from the legislature this year, but that will not be clear until the summer. The strength of our American higher education derives, in part, from its diversity: its mix of public and private universities, liberal arts colleges, and colleges and universities that maintain a religious identity. The collapse of any one sector would be a loss to all and would threaten the survival of the rest.

In the education chapter of *The Good Society*, my co-authors and I were quite critical of

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American higher education. I think we should make a virtue of necessity and use the present crisis for some serious soul-searching. Just what is higher education for?

It is my firm conviction that in answering that question, denominationally affiliated institutions are in a far better position than most of the rest of us. While such institutions have been partially seduced into the disciplinary tribalism and narrow specialization that I think plagues all higher education, they also have rich resources to counter the dangers of those trends and offer genuine alternatives. In such institutions it is easier than in secular institutions to argue for combining intellectual excellence with ethical and spiritual reflection; not just calculating how to further careers, but linking the life of learning for both faculty and students with thinking about how to contribute to the common good. While there are many who teach at secular institutions, like the University of California, who teach with these ideas in mind, institutions with a conscious Christian identity have a long history of trying to actualize such ideas in higher education.

Technical Expertise vs. Common Sense

Our deepest problem is the profound gap in our culture between technical reason—the knowledge with which we design computers or analyze the structure of DNA; and practical reason—the ways we understand how we should live. We often hear that only technical reason can really be taught, and many of our educational commitments, from primary school to university seem to embody that belief. But technical reason alone is insufficient even to tell us what to do with technology. What we need to know is not simply how to build a powerful computer or how to redesign DNA, but above all what to do with that knowledge. Indeed, as the power of our ability to manipulate the world grows, the poverty of our understanding of what to do with that knowledge becomes more apparent.

My point is simple. Outside the laboratory, science has no trumps. Common sense, in the deep meaning of that term, takes over. Scientists with a sense of the common good must have a much broader range of expertise than their own specialties.

The task of higher education at the moment is to redress the balance between technical reason and moral-practical reason, to help us discern how to use the powers that science and technology have unleashed.

Vaclav Havel, the president of the Czech Republic and one of my few heroes in today's world, has outlined many of the most urgent issues:

All my observations and all my experience have, with remarkable consistency, convinced me that, if today's planetary civilization has any hope of survival, that hope lies chiefly in what we understand as the human spirit. If we don't wish to destroy ourselves in national, religious, or political discord; if we don't wish to find our world with twice its current population, half of it dying of hunger; if we don't wish to kill ourselves with

ballistic missiles armed with atomic warheads or eliminate ourselves with bacteria specially cultivated for the purpose; if we don't wish to see some people go desperately hungry while others throw tons of wheat into the ocean; if we don't wish to suffocate in the global green house we are heating up for ourselves or to be burned by radiation leaking through holes we have made in the ozone; if we don't wish to exhaust the non-renewable, mineral resources of this planet, without which we cannot survive; if, in short, we don't wish any of this to happen, then we must—as humanity, as people, as conscious beings with spirit, mind and a sense of responsibility—somehow come to our senses.

I once called this coming to our sense an existential revolution. I meant a kind of general mobilization of human consciousness, of the human mind and spirit, human responsibility, and human reason.

In this passage from his recent book, *Summer Meditations*, he names a series of problems facing our world, and suggests that we must “come to our senses” if we are not to be destroyed by them.

Coming to Our Senses On the Environment

Is there something inherent in technical expertise, when it comes loose from a larger context of moral reflection, that tends to exacerbate our problems? Let me borrow from a forthcoming book by my colleague in environmental studies at Berkeley, Richard Norgaard, to consider the story of pesticides in our society. Inorganic compounds were used as pesticides before World War II, but, to quote Norgaard:

The discovery of DDT in 1939, followed by organochlorine insecticides soon after, and their expanding use after World War II changed the dynamics dramatically. By the early 1950s, the organic insecticides had driven inorganics nearly off the market because the organics were really effective.

To paraphrase Norgaard's story, DDT proved remarkably effective for a few years and then the pests came back, seemingly worse than ever. What had happened is that DDT-resistant insects had survived, and, in the absence of competition, rapidly reproduced. Not only the pests had been killed, but so had the natural predators that kept the pest population down. Norgaard tells us:

The response of agricultural researchers and the chemical industry to the occurrence of greater pest problems after the initial success of organic pesticides was to recommend more frequent and heavier spraying. More pests demand more pesticides . . . And, of course, heavier and more frequent spraying resulted in higher management costs, but now there was little choice. Many sensed that they were on a "pesticide treadmill," but few could see how to get off it.

As more and more lethal chemical compounds were used, the effects on wildlife became increasingly evident. Birds who feed on insects were one of the first species to be affected, leading to Rachel Carson's famous 1960s book, *Silent Spring*, to which many attribute the beginning of the environmental movement. As these chemicals entered the food chain, more and more of us have been affected, so that few of us lack traces of many of these elements, with consequences that are still far from clear.

Already, by the 1960s, both government and chemical companies had become alarmed and efforts to stop the treadmill, or what we might more accurately call the positive feedback, had begun. Positive feedback is like a heating system whose thermostat tells the furnace not to cut off at a particular temperature, but to increase heating no matter how high the temperature. But to go cold turkey now would not simply return us to ground zero; it would result in disastrous crop destruction because the natural ecological controls on pests had been so largely destroyed. What has been occurring is something like

handling withdrawal in a drug addict (this is no far-fetched metaphor): chemicals must still be used, but in decreasing amounts.

Further environmental examples referred to by Havel include the increasing use of fluorocarbons, leading to ozone depletion, and the biggest of all, our reliance on fossil hydrocarbon fuel for nearly 200 years, in the form of coal and oil. Our reliance on this energy resource has not only created the greenhouse effect but also allowed us to override the environmental limits in all kinds of ways: putting cities in places where there isn't enough water, such as in California; expanding agriculture in ways that involves massive soil loss through erosion and depletion of non-renewable groundwater.

Prudent Citizens on Star Wars and Tobacco

What is the connection between education and the horror stories I have been telling? In every case, highly trained experts thought they were doing the right thing when they carried what seemed to make sense in the laboratory or the think-tank into practical application. When the experts step outside the laboratory or the think-tank they become citizens and are vulnerable to the criticism of fellow citizens who are not experts if they have the courage to ask the often obvious questions.

I remember the first time one of my colleagues at Berkeley, a professor of mathematics, asked me to join a movement of protest against the development of SDI, or Star Wars, at Lawrence Livermore Laboratory, which is run by the University of California. My first and instinctive reaction was, how could I oppose such a project? I am not a physicist. How can I challenge the experts? My colleague got really angry with me. He showed me a diagram of the basic design of SDI and asked me

what would happen if enemy submarines surfaced offshore and began firing missiles. Star Wars was designed to defend against missiles coming from thousands of miles away. It would be helpless against anything originating close at hand. Such an obvious flaw should have made it clear to any layperson that the billions to be spent on the project would be wasted. As time went on, many of the key elements of Star Wars did not perform in actual tests as they were supposed to on the drawing board. In the meantime, billions more have gone down the drain.

Science has mesmerized us with the notion that it proves things to be true. But in the practical world of multiple variables, proof is very hard to come by and practical reason, Aristotle's *phronesis* or Cicero's *sensus communis*, the classical notions of prudence and common sense, take over.

Let me give an example. The tobacco companies have for years employed scientists to show that the connection between smoking and a variety of illnesses has not been proved in the laboratory, and they are right. But when study after study shows a high correlation between smoking and an incredible variety of illnesses, plus the irrefutable fact that smokers die significantly younger than non-smokers, who in his or her right mind would make a decision based on absolute proof?

In science, absolute proof is hard to come by; some would say it is impossible. We never prove anything; we only disprove hypotheses that don't work out. If this is true, then

scientism, the belief that scientific proof is the only valid form of knowledge, which is something very different from science, puts us in a complete double bind. We may wait forever for absolute proof, but life is short and the consequences of our present actions may be very long. What are we going to do? Act on our best judgment, not scientific proof. Neither scientists nor politicians can do anything else.

The answer, clearly, is not to do away with science and specialization. Yes, we must be specialists, but we must also be part of a democratic community of specialists. I have recently joined the Energy and Resources Group, the interdisciplinary unit on the Berkeley campus concerned

with environmental issues, and have headed a search committee for a new joint appointment between the Energy and Resources Group and Sociology. Environmental problems are not just technical: they involve belief systems, the social distribution of power, the way our institutions work. We need to cross the disciplines to begin to get a handle on them.

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Beware expertise! No one is entirely neutral—we all have preconceptions and particular interests. So we must move toward decisions relying on the *sensus communis* of the scientific, in the broadest sense, community in dialogue with concerned citizens. It often turns out that the farmer on the ground in the Amazon jungle understands the real problems of non-destructive tropical resource extraction better than the government expert in Brasilia, with his American Ph.D., who has never been to the Amazon Basin, yet is charged

with framing regulations for its agricultural use. Again, outside the laboratory, if all are not equal, at least no one can be legitimately ignored.

Here is where I have to bring in Havel's "coming to our sense." I do not intend "coming to our sense" to be a slogan by which some groups can badger other groups or attempt to dominate them. There is no final solutions or master plans. The level of complexity and the number of unknowns in the real world are too great to justify any such grandiose ambitions. To put it theologically, science has tempted us to imagine that we have the power of God, to the point where we are in danger of bringing on a premature Last Judgment to show us our error.

But giving up control does not mean giving up responsibility, the responsibility to take action when action is called for. We must not be deterred from tough decisions when a consensus based on reasonable judgment but not absolute proof has emerged. That is part of what Havel means by coming to our senses.

Let me conclude with a specific example of a responsible professional, a professional who is both expert and citizen, who, in her own life, in her own experience in higher education, illustrates the essential argument I am trying to make.

Teenage Violence and a "Larger Context of Meaning"

Deborah Prothrow-Stith, presently assistant dean for government and community programs at the Harvard School of Public Health, and formerly Commissioner of Health for Massachusetts, is author of *Deadly Consequences: How Violence Is Destroying Our Teenage Population and a Plan to Begin Solving the Problem*.

Dr. Prothrow-Stith was first drawn to the problem of teenage violence after she gradu-

ated from Harvard Medical School and was serving as a resident in a large Northeastern medical center. (I will be drawing on her book, but mainly on an interview with her conducted by my colleague and co-author, William Sullivan, who is currently completing a book on civic professionalism and found in Dr. Prothrow-Stith a splendid example.) At the beginning of her residency, she was overwhelmed by the number of terribly wounded young people coming into the emergency room, many of them African-American. She points out, "More violent crimes show up in the emergency rooms of our hospitals than make it onto the police blotters." What appalled her was that all the technical expertise she had learned in medical school barely made a dent in the problem. Sometimes she managed to save the victim; sometimes he died within minutes or hours of being admitted; and sometimes the same young man would reappear later with another terrible wound.

The sense that emergency medicine was not the answer propelled her to look elsewhere for solutions to the agonizing problems she was facing every day in the hospital. She turned to the criminal justice system, with its elaborate assortment of professionals, from law enforcement personnel, to lawyers and judges, to probation officers. But here, too, as she puts it, "There is a self-perpetuating industry built around putting people away, just as there is around various forms of acute care provision in medicine."

I don't know the situation in Massachusetts where Dr. Prothrow-Stith works, but in California we have trebled the number of incarcerated criminals in the past 10 years with no change at all in the crime rate, but at enormous cost to the state budget. In California it costs more to send a criminal to prison than to send a student to Harvard, and prison guards have a higher average salary than professors at the University of California. The state prisons

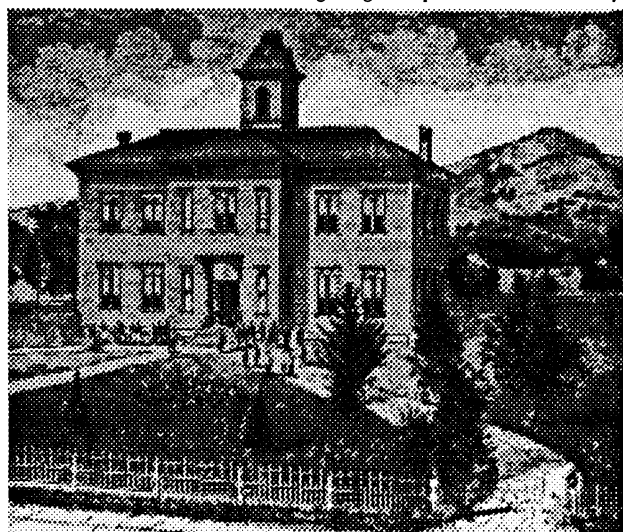
could be called the fourth system of higher education in California, after the University of California, the state university system, and the community colleges.

Prothrow-Stith next turned to the field of mental health as a possible answer to the problem of youth violence. Here it was not so much that such approaches were valueless—in particular cases they could be quite helpful—but they did not seem able to get at the systemic sources of the problem.

It was then almost by a process of elimination that Prothrow-Stith settled on public health as the institutional context within which to address her concerns. She found that a public-health approach could provide leverage to rethink more specialized efforts at problem solving. In this perspective, health becomes not exclusively a problem of medical intervention, but also of community responsibility, strengthening relationships that would counteract tendencies to socially destructive behavior. Public health perspectives can get officers on the beat to be concerned with reaching young potential offenders before they become involved in crimes, or organize groups like Town Watch that help create a community atmosphere where crime is discouraged.

Before leaving Dr. Prothrow-Stith, it is worth

Adapted from a woodcut of Healdsburg College, the predecessor to Pacific Union College, where Bellah delivered his lecture. Healdsburg College was opened in 1882 as an academy.



pointing out that her private and her public lives are intimately connected, that she is the mother of two school-age children and the wife of a minister. As Sullivan sums it up:

Dr. Prothrow-Stith seems to have come by many of her convictions naturally, as it were, having grown up in a strong family which, despite a long history of racial oppression, was supported by a vital religious and social community. With her generation, conditions of racial exclusion had finally begun to change, but it was from the context of family and church that she believes she drew the strength which propelled her career in the mainstream of professional life. She credits their Christian faith as the source of the moral truth that [as she puts it] “it was not OK just to be interested in me . . . that part of my purpose was to participate in making the world a better place.” Perhaps because of this larger context of meaning, Dr. Prothrow-Stith has been able to struggle toward an understanding of the vocation of healing that has called her, like other leaders, in forging a civic professionalism, to exploration and service beyond the comfortable boundaries of a conventional career.

The Need for “Something Higher”

Perhaps these reflections about the source of Dr. Prothrow-Stith’s odyssey can provide a link back to what Havel means by “coming to our senses.” Now I would like to add one more. There is in Havel a concern that without an ultimate value and purpose life doesn’t make sense. There is a Platonist background that cannot be denied. The question of the good in this tradition always leads to the question of the good society: in the end spirituality, morality, and politics all mutually involve one another.

Havel found in his years in prison that he was sustained largely because of his belief in “something higher.” When I met him briefly a few years ago I asked him if he still believed what he had written in prison and he said, “More than ever.” In the case of Havel, as with

Prothrow-Stith, such a belief nourishes hope. (In the Western tradition, hope is a theological virtue, quite different from the modern notion of optimism, which derives from the idea of inevitable progress.)

What is higher education for? In the dominant concept of the university, the answer is individual advancement through the control of specialized knowledge. Just as we have marginalized theology, we have practically banished judgment or practical reason.

I imagine that graduates of your Christian Adventist college know that that is not an

adequate answer, that higher education has the task of helping us grow in understanding of the common good in a democratic society, of the need to minister to the poor of the earth and our fragile planet. If your school can give your students a glimpse of that broader understanding of what human life is all about, then, in ways that go beyond giving them the expertise to get a good job, your college will have genuinely helped to prepare students for the "practical" world of career and family. To create an education that is simultaneously temporal and spiritual, technical and moral, that is our task.