

# PRISM

Higher Education and the Humanities

## What a Teacher Learns from Students

*Dennis Martin gave the following commencement address to the December 1998 PLU graduating class.*

**I**t was just thirty-five years ago that I went to my own graduation, and I remember the graduation speaker very well. He started by telling us that he had just the previous week given this talk to a Rotary club and so if, from time to time, he mentioned a Rotary club, we were to understand that he was referring to us, the graduates. My hope today is that I will be a tiny bit better graduation speaker than he was; but in fact you notice that I still remember him all these years later. I can't help but wonder whether thirty-five years from now any one of you will remember what I am about to say.

One of our best modern writers, Hannah Arendt, said about college that it was the place where you decided whether you loved the world enough to take responsibility for it. I like that way of putting it. She saw that underneath all the other specific choices you will have to make during your life – choices about jobs, and relationships, and about such virtues as honesty and integrity – lies what is perhaps the bigger question, whether you will choose this world as your place, and by choosing it make yourself author of it and of its future.

Another of our best writers, the poet William Carlos Williams, once wondered why so many people seem to treat the earth as though it were, in his words, "an excrement of some sky." He didn't just mean that people throw litter around in the world, though of course they do; he meant that when he looked around he saw that people simply didn't seem to love the world, they didn't especially treat it as if it were their home.

Please allow me, then, for just a moment, to speak of my affection for the earth and trees on this hillside in Parkland, Washington, where your education has taken place. The land was here long before you and I were, before the first people

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1. *Religion and American Education* (1995), 350; *The Good Society: The Humane Agenda* (1996), 69; *Cultivating Humanity, A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* (1997), 292.

## A Word from the Editor

What broader ends define a good education? What do church-related schools like Pacific Lutheran University intend through mottos like "educating for service"? The answers are probably not simple, but asking such questions is crucial. A vigorous conversation about them is certainly underway across academia. Philosopher Warren Nord asserts that "if we are to make this a better world, we must have some sense of what makes for the suffering and flourishing of people; our thinking must be informed by a broad understanding of the human condition." Economist John Kenneth Galbraith observes, "The good society cannot accept that education in the modern economy is primarily in the service of economics; it has a larger political and social role, a yet deeper justification in itself." And classicist Martha Nussbaum argues passionately, "All universities can and should contribute to the development of citizens who are capable of love of the neighbor . . . the religious universities have this mission at their heart in a special way; and it is presumably for reasons such as these that the major religions have founded universities, believing that love at its best is intelligent and that higher education can enhance its discrimination."<sup>1</sup>

The contributors to this year's *Prism* nurture insights from the traditions of humanistic education like so many embers from a mighty blaze. Each contributor "rekindles a dialogue," to recall a memorable phrase of one essayist. Today that conversation is expanded through many global voices, but is as old as civilization and as luxuriant as eternal human hope itself. Each contributor to this issue reflects a distinctive glow from this great conversation shedding light onto the meaning of education and its inner fires.

One group of essayists focuses on the purposes of the liberal arts classroom. Dennis Martin's moving commencement talk sparkles with a love for words and an eye for the significance of what seems inconsequential. He speaks eloquently about what he has discovered with and through his students. Patricia Killen's essay examines the rigors and challenges of an education that takes students "out of their minds" and into dis/integrating experiences that literally forge new human beings. Pauline Kaurin explores, vis-à-vis the thought of Nietzsche, the significance of the virtue of charity for keeping students and professors alike engaged in challenging conversations.

A second essay group concentrates on philosophical issues affecting the institutional contexts of higher education. Both Paul Menzel and Roberta Brown examine the liberal arts core within the vision of the New American College. The liberal arts here are not isolated from Luther's notion of vocation or the great concerns of pragmatic America. Dramatic opportunities present themselves, but potential pitfalls as well. Philip Nordquist, PLU's own centennial historian, reviews an uneasy institutional history that may be finding within the New American College concept a happier accommodation for both professional schools and the liberal arts faculties.

Each of these articles in its own way burns with zeal for the wisdom discovered when liberal learning is concerned with human well being. The authors re-stoke the fireboxes of pedagogy and fan philosophical coals into a roaring blaze of educational purpose once more.

Douglas E. Oakman for the Prism Board

walked along its slope and before homesteaders from Europe laid claim to it. I like to imagine that people wearing clothes made of animal skins built their campfires on rocky patches of this land and in my imagination I see people wearing homespun clothes wading across the creek flowing at the base of the hill, a creek filled with spawning salmon.

It was for a later generation to plant the honey locust trees whose yellow leaves canopy Red Square in October and the skyscraping firs that you have seen out your windows when you looked up from studying or eating pizza. It's the world right here around you that is always the hardest to see; I think you will often find that to be true in your life both of the places and of the people closest around you.

I have spent most of the thirty-five years since my graduation as a teacher, and I have sometimes been tired. Teaching is exhausting work and I have at times felt, like Hamlet, "How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable/ [are] to me all the uses of the world." But my students have rallied me and together we have read quite a few books and been involved in a lot of serious conversations. You and the students who came here before you taught me a great deal of what I know. I'm going to try to tell you in the next ten minutes what my students have helped me to learn about life. Among all the new ideas and feelings that I might talk about, I have chosen just eight to mention here. I am going to list them by number so you will always know how close I am to the end of my talk.

1. I've learned that everyone in the world is better than I am at something. The first time this occurred to me was when I was lying on a weight-lifting bench in the Names Fitness Center and noticed the young student on the bench next to me, who weighed about half what I did, bench pressing twice as much weight as I was. She just looked over and smiled. And I realized that this was a person who just the day before had earned a C grade on a paper for my course.

The best lesson I ever learned in this respect was when I took two years of French courses here at PLU while I was teaching my regular literature courses. As a student in the French courses, I saw other students regularly beat my scores on tests and papers. And these were the same students who seemed to be struggling to understand the material in my class where I was an expert.

When I traveled abroad with PLU student groups I always counted on my students to help me with things they knew more about than I did, like navigating our way through the London Under-

ground or appreciating the nuances of a French perfume museum. If you are around another person for a while, no matter who they are, you will learn what it is they are much better at than you and what they can teach you.

2. I've learned from listening to my students that your best friends are likely to be the ones you share your most difficult times with. Anyone who stays your friend when you don't have the time and energy to make yourself look good is a true friend. People who know you only from your happy times don't know much about you.

And I've learned that the best way in the

*[Arendt] saw that underneath all the other specific choices . . . lies what is perhaps the bigger question, whether you will choose this world as your place, and by choosing it make yourself author of it and of its future.*

world to make a friend is to ask someone to do you a favor. I'm always flattered when someone asks me for a favor because it shows me that that person trusts me — trusts that I will not take advantage of his or her being in my debt. On the other hand, it isn't always doing people a favor that makes a person into a friend; try to remember that putting yourself in debt to another person is a way of having confidence in them. Being that kind of good friend to someone often requires

from you far more courage than you might expect. Perhaps that's why a true friend is so valuable to us.

3. I've learned to stay curious about the world and have taken the example of my students' curiosity to think about most everything I see. We all know how curious and strange something like quantum mechanics can be or how intriguing far away places with strange sounding names can seem. But how about the many small curiosities right around you? Don't you wonder when you stand on the corner waiting for the light to change whether it makes any difference if you bang the button just once or many times? Isn't it funny how those little personal air jets above your seat on airplanes are just like the engines holding the plane up; and are you sure they aren't? What could be more satisfying than the feel of a well-made tool in your hand? Isn't it interesting how when you point to your dog's favorite toy she comes over and looks at the end of your finger as though the toy were there instead of where it is?

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And there are big things I've learned to be curious about too. When you stand out under a star-filled summer sky, remember that you are looking at both space and time, because some of what you are looking at, even with your naked eye, happened ten million years ago. If you all stay curious about the diseases that plague humankind, maybe one of you will find new answers to old questions. Stay curious about why war persists and why so many of our fellow humans go to bed hungry every night.

4. I've learned that after you tell other people what you think, it's a good idea to ask them what they think. People who ask good questions are often more respected and more productive than people who say a lot of smart things. And after you ask a question listen to the answer. Don't forget that listening is different from waiting for the other person to stop talking so that you can begin again. The ideas that other people have are not always great ideas, but there is almost always something in them that you should know. Asking others what they think is a way to respect the world and the people outside yourself.

5. I've learned that we often have the feeling that we have to pretend to be who we really are. You have to let people know that you are having the thoughts and feelings you are. Don't forget that people are not transparent; they are solid bodies who must act in the world to be knowable. Remember old Ben Franklin's sage advice that we not only have to be virtuous but we have to be seen to be virtuous. There is nothing at all hypocritical in this advice; it is common sense that you have to "prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet," as T. S. Eliot says.

Sometime in your life you will be given the advice that you should "act naturally." It's good advice but it's hard advice to follow. You can be natural, but then you are more likely to act distracted and uninterested. Or you can put on an act, but then you seem like a phony. The trick is to learn how to act naturally, to pretend to be who you are.

6. You will have to take my word for this one because rarely will anyone be brave enough to tell you they feel this way. But my students have told me this and it is true. Everyone will want to be you when you are in love. Of all the ways you will try to find happiness and make yourself the apple of your friends' eyes, nothing really works better than this. I don't mean that people will admire you if you are gushy and sentimental. Instead I mean that when people see you exchange a smile or

touch the sleeve of a sweater or even just look at each other in the way that reveals how real your feelings are, then they will know you are a great success.

7. I've learned to always try to find room for beauty in my life, even if it is something as small as a single flower on the desk or a favorite image on the wall. This one is harder than it sounds. You will find out who you are by throwing yourself into your work, if you are lucky, but that same work can devour your time and energy like an insatiable animal. In your work you will be an instrument and there is joy in being used well; but remember that you are always more than an instrument. There is a part of you that needs to be fed as well as to feed. Remember that the injunction is to love your neighbor as yourself, not instead of yourself.

Make time for art and music in your life, and for beautiful language. In the arts you will hear and see that others have felt what you have felt, and because of that you will feel much less alone. And know that you will find beauty later in your life that you did not see earlier because it takes time to let some things teach us how to find them beautiful.

8. We all must learn how to live with a broken heart. I don't have to tell you what I mean by that because most of you — all but a lucky few — have already had your hearts broken by another person, by a deep disappointment, by the loss of someone you cared about, worst of all of course when you have broken your own heart. The question is not whether this will happen to us, only when. You will learn, if you have not already learned, that you can live, that you do live, even though the hurt can be so bad that you cannot believe it will ever end. Perhaps we are lucky that life hurts us as often as it does, because then it teaches us that we do survive.

Having a broken heart will give you insights into life that you did not have before. Not the shallow everyday life, but the deep parts of life, the mysteries that make life so hard to understand but, at the same time, so interesting.

But know that living with a broken heart is not the same as living with a whole heart that has yet to be broken. Life truly is a tragedy in the very best sense of the word. I mean that we are human and thus we will fail, but in failing we might help all of humanity find its way forward. It is always hard — impossible really — to see all the way to the end of this journey, our life, but it is almost always possible to see what the next step is that will take us forward.

In the toughest times remember that, being broken-hearted, we need to be loved, and our need for love is a most precious, most human need. And in the times of joy do find a few moments to simply enjoy what you have.

I started my talk by saying that college was the place where you decided whether you loved

the world enough to take responsibility for it. In closing I ask you now to think about how each one of you will answer that question to yourself.

Thank you, and thank you especially to our students who have also been our teachers. ♦



# Gaps and Gifts

Patricia O'Connell Killen

*The Artist, the thinker, the hero, the saint – who are they, finally, but the finite self radicalized and intensified? . . . The difference between [them] and the rest of us . . . is a willingness to undergo the journey of intensification into particularity to the point where an originating sense for the fundamental questions and feelings that impel us all, and a rare response in thought and feeling to those questions, is experienced – and often experienced as some kind of gift come 'unawares.'*

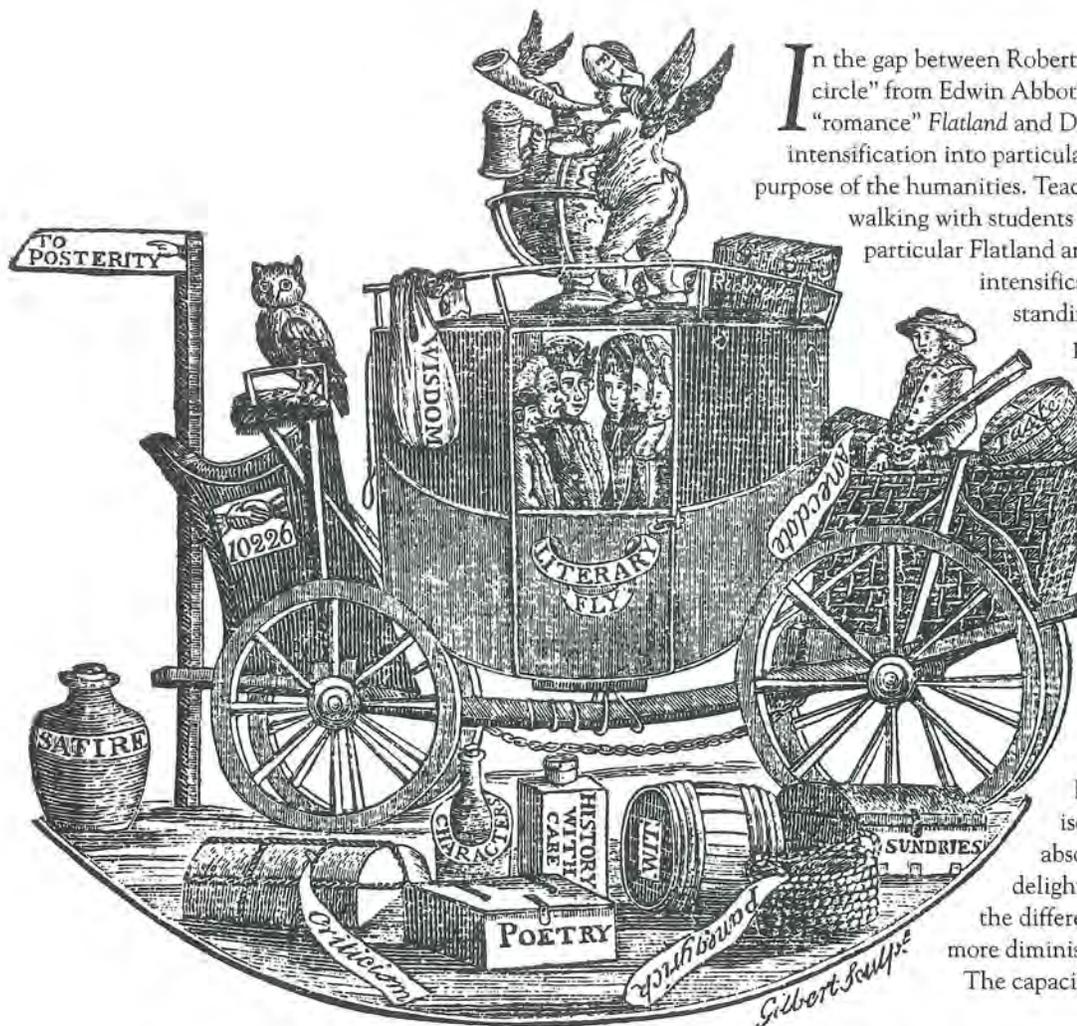
David Tracy, *Analogical Imagination*

*When the two-dimensional figure in Flatland meets the three-dimensional sphere, it neither sees a sphere nor has any sense that there is more than what it sees – namely, a two-dimensional circle, that piece of a sphere its plane runs through.*

Robert Kegan, *In Over Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life*

In the gap between Robert Kegan's "two-dimensional circle" from Edwin Abbott's Victorian philosophical "romance" *Flatland* and David Tracy's "journey of intensification into particularity" lies the passion and purpose of the humanities. Teaching humanities is about walking with students into the gap between their particular Flatland and a possible journey of intensification into particularity, standing there with them, and providing the support and challenge that makes it possible for them – if they become fascinated – to see, feel, sense, think, and act in new ways. In this gap between Flatland and the journey of intensification into particularity resides the possibility for students to develop capacities for discrimination that constitute the difference between hostility and hospitality, fear and courage, isolation and community, self-absorption and self-transcending delight – discriminations that make the difference between a richer and a more diminished life.

The capacities for such discriminations



do not come at will or on demand. Even more, they do not develop if one endures humanities courses only for some other end. They begin as part of insight. Insight arises when one has been grasped by a question or problem, lured into savoring an idea, stunned into stillness by language or art. Insight, especially powerfully transformative insight, is more than cognitive or intellectual, it involves one's entire being. Transformative insight tends to arise when a human being is in that all too rare and yet peculiarly human state of being fascinated by the other in and for itself. In that exquisite moment, one knows. When I invite my students into the space between their particular Flatland and journey of intensification into particularity my purpose is to increase the odds for such transformative insight to occur.

Anyone who teaches the liberal arts knows that it takes a well-honed sense of irony, profligate hope, and ruthless self-honesty to maintain such a vision of education's purpose. To start with the self-honesty. If my purpose as a teacher is to invite my students to walk into the gap between their particular Flatland and journey of intensification into particularity, the very act of teaching requires that I do the same. It requires that each time I walk into the classroom I attend cognitively and affectively to the chasm between what I desire for my students and what is possible in a course as students pursue their own desires. Finally, my students are free. The asceticism of teaching entails respecting their freedom.

While respecting the freedom of my students is prior to all else in teaching humanities, there still is much that I do to invite them into the space where the power of the humanities resides. I introduce them to the field of American religious history in the most engaging way possible, letting them see my own fascination with it. I show them issues; require them to translate material from one frame of reference to another using simple and then more complex conceptual schemes; provoke them to query the text, material, and concepts; expect accurate and empathetic description of the religious world views of others, even those they find objectionable; and finally, confront them with the task of making cogent and original interpretive claims of their own, claims defensible not by appeal to an individual's "opinion," but by appeal to the material.

I hesitate to list what I do because such a list is too quickly embraced or dismissed as part of a basic skills orientation. Certainly the pragmatically minded can make a case that the abilities I

ask my students to enact constitute useful skills for getting on in the world. Conceiving teaching humanities that way, however, yields too easily to the reductionistic instrumental reason that permeates all too much of our society today, including higher education. At the same time, purists who conceive the task of higher education solely in terms of presenting their disciplines with rigorous faithfulness dismiss lists such as mine in the name of disciplinary integrity or academic freedom. Both responses, however, are off the mark. Both responses miss the profoundly human drama that real learning entails, a drama of dignity, courage, risk, fear, loss, accomplishment, and sometimes surprising gifts.

To forget or to ignore that human drama eviscerates the teaching of the liberal arts. Such forgetfulness characterizes too many contemporary visions of higher education. When education is conceived in terms of the instrumental reason of a market-driven world, students become consumers

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acquiring discrete packets of knowledge or skills. Education is reduced to training. Higher education becomes a Flatland where costs are conceived in terms of time, inconvenience, and money, but where the student as person — because in a two-dimensional world there are no persons — remains untouched. Ironically, the same kind of instrumental reason permeates many defenses of disciplines as communities of practitioners of procedures for producing new knowl-

edge. Such conceptions of higher education are deadly for our students, for faculties, and for our civilization.

In discounting what the liberal arts value most — humane persons — such visions ignore the fundamental human drama involved in learning. To ask students to learn anything is to ask them, in another of Robert Kegan's images, to "leave home," and to do so not once but repeatedly. Our students come to us with furnished and familiar mental homes. When we ask them to think (which is what the humanities at their best do) we are asking them "to go out of their minds" (272). We expect our students not only to learn new

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information, procedures, and theories, but to "develop more complex ways of thinking and knowing" (273).

Developing more complex ways of thinking and knowing, of perceiving and constructing experience and its meanings, changes our students irrevocably. This is the kind of knowing that cannot be unknown. For our students this is a process of reconstituting themselves as human beings, a process of disintegration and reintegration, for some welcome, for others not. For all, however, it is a process that usually involves their experiencing a sense of tension and even betrayal of family, peer group, social class, ethnic community, religious denomination, or political ideology. Whether and how students negotiate this process depends on many things: among them their perceptive acumen, the strength of their bond to a particular anchoring group, the capacity or willingness of those groups to welcome or tolerate new ways of thinking, and the possibilities for forming an alternative community that supports the life of the mind.

Two items on the list raise particular complications to teaching humanities at PLU. First, a significant and growing number of our students come to us with strong bonds to fundamentalist and Pentecostal subcultures, many of which traditionally have focused their identity around intentional resistance to new ways of thinking. Secondly, the dominant student culture at PLU is relentlessly anti-intellectual. Both factors militate against the purposes of the liberal arts and the mission of the university. PLU's credibility as a university in the twenty-first century will depend in large part on the way faculty, students, and administrators handle these nuances to the already formidable challenges of creating a context for learning.

Anyone who has had occasion to listen to freshmen students talk in an unguarded manner during January-term about being at home over Christmas break after their first semester at PLU gets a glimmer of the human costs of education. To have an idea and to know one has an idea can be a fearsome thing. To think one's own thoughts and be aware that one is thinking can be, at the least, unnerving. To formulate a question and to know that one's question is good is at once exhilarating and terrifying. To be able to articulate why one's question is good is to have passed a point of no return. In all of these acts a new and more complex consciousness emerges in a person, a consciousness that offers both promise and peril.

The promise includes richer, more nuanced relationships to whomever and whatever is, including oneself; the freedom to choose commitments out of inner integrity instead of imposed obligation; the experience of one's existence as gift; and the capacity for self-transcending delight in the other which makes genuine creativity and community possible. The peril includes loss of the comfort of a host of absolute certitudes; the burden of self-responsibility; the knowledge that one's

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knowing can be skewed and distorted; and the realization that one's actions, motivated by the best of intentions, cause harm. The wager of the humanities has been and still is that the promise outweighs the peril.

Despite the challenges and ironies of teaching humanities in the current climate of higher education, I persist in my profligate hope. Teaching humanities matters. I continue to profess a discipline that many of my students presume to be useless, establish and hold them to standards of excel-

lence, and persistently encourage critical and original thinking. In so doing I point students toward the gap between their Flatland and a possible journey of intensification into particularity that is the heart and soul of the humanities.

In the space of the gap some students become fascinated. Fascination overcomes fear. Insight arises, capacity for discrimination develops. Students begin to notice themselves perceiving and thinking and relating differently. Such is the beginning to "an originating sense for the fundamental questions and feelings that impel us all." That sense is in its own way a "gift come 'unawares'." ♦

# Liberal Education and the New American College

Paul Menzel

The term "New American College" was coined by the late Ernest Boyer<sup>1</sup> to refer to a new breed of unique, middle-size institutions that developed in the U.S. They share with larger research universities the provision of professional degrees and modest graduate programs, but they share with liberal arts colleges a strong commitment to liberal education. In fact they regard liberal education – cultivating as it does the whole person, for life generally and for critical and constructive citizenship – as vital for all students, including those pursuing professional or technical degrees. Along with twenty-one other private institutions, PLU has embraced Boyer's designation by its membership in the Associated New American Colleges, founded in 1995.

What are the roots of this now more self-aware breed of institution? What larger trends in higher education pose the greatest challenges to it? Why – conceptually and morally, not just in some historical contingencies – does PLU fit within it? What larger agenda might it help clarify for the humanities?

If Bruce Kimball is right about the historical character of liberal education in the U.S., the New American Colleges (NACs) truly deserve their identification as "American." Kimball describes the development of "pragmatic liberal education," finding its roots in the distinctively American philosophy, pragmatism.<sup>2</sup> For philosophical pragmatists (among them John Dewey and William James), not only does



1. Author of the widely known *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate* (1990), and former president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. On Boyer's relationship to the New American College, see Dale Coye, "Ernest Boyer and the New American College: Connecting the 'Disconnects,'" *Change*, May/June 1997, 21–29.

2. Bruce A. Kimball, "Toward Pragmatic Liberal Education," in Robert Orrill, ed., *The Condition of Liberal Education: Pragmatism and a Changing Tradition* (1995).

## Liberal Education and the New American College

and should thought direct action, but action does and should affect thought, and practice theory. Moreover, all thought and inquiry are evaluative, and education must aim at the formation and refinement of values, not just sophisticated analysis and belief. An Americanized, pragmatic version of liberal education grows in this philosophical soil. Liberal education is seen as needed for the intelligent formation of values generally, and for enlightened civic involvement and professional responsibility in particular. Moreover, teaching comes to focus on problem-solving learning and inquiry, not only or even primarily on transmitting the fruits of inquiry.

Classicist Martha Nussbaum, while not writing explicitly about the NACs at all, has described liberal education in the U.S. in ways that strikingly reinforce the direction of Kimball's notion of pragmatic liberal education generally and the NAC breed in particular. Nussbaum traces the Stoics' expansion of the Socratic conception of a critical education based on the conviction that the unexamined life is not (much) worth living. The Stoics not only fill out a richer description of the societal and civic aims that such an education serves, but they construe it as essentially important for every human being. "Indeed," Nussbaum then notes, "our own society has followed this Socratic/Stoic line more thoroughly than any other nation, attempting to construct a higher education that combines specialized pre-professional education with a liberal education shared by all students. . . . Students in Europe enter university to study one subject, be it law . . . or classics. There is no idea, in these curricula, of a core of common studies that is essential to the good life for each and every person."<sup>3</sup>

The NACs arguably represent this Americanized Socratic/Stoic ideal in its most ambitious and difficult form: providing a liberal education not just to those majoring in the arts and sciences but to those immediately pursuing professional education as well. The notion of "pragmatic liberal education" harbors an inherent complement, "liberal professional education." Socratic gadflies are not only to roam the society at large; they are to inhabit all professions. While the international understanding and capacities for imagination and critical assessment that are so enhanced by the liberal arts can undoubtedly aid professional success, the deeper point is that liberally educated professionals can challenge their fields to higher and truer contributions to human well-being.

Nussbaum warns colleges of the dangers confronting the ideal of a more universal, civic, and pragmatic liberal education. "Many institutions that call themselves liberal arts colleges have turned increasingly to vocational studies, curtailing humanities requirements and cutting back on humanities faculty."<sup>4</sup> The last point – curtailing and cutting back – is by far the worst. While PLU, like other NACs, has sizable professional education programs, it also has unusually substantial humanities requirements for all undergraduates.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, professional school requirements for humanities courses now sometimes extend beyond the GUR (business majors, for example, take business ethics above and beyond their philosophy and religion GURs).

There is no doubt that in these respects PLU is paradigmatically a NAC. That is not, however, just an accomplishment. It also carries high challenge – a challenge that inhabits the very concept of integrating liberal and professional education. As Nussbaum warns, we must not subordinate cultivation of the whole person to technical or professional education. This means that the various fields of the humanities at PLU need their own critical masses of major students (themselves *pragmatically* liberally educated), and that their role vis-à-vis professional programs is never one of subservient "service" but one of horizon-broadening, mutual stimulation.

PLU also finds in its Lutheran heritage an unusual resource for being a NAC. Most NACs have current or historical church connections, but PLU brings the especially rich, Lutheran notion of "vocation" to the enterprise. One cannot understand that notion of vocation – where higher mission intersects with societal function and personal meaning – without forever seeing in the phrase *vocational studies* something far more inspiring and demanding of liberal education than what the phrase remotely means in its typical use. Pre-profession educators at PLU are called to demand and celebrate the liberal arts, and faculty in the arts and sciences are called to help their students both gain vocational direction and see vocational pertinence in their liberal studies.

None of this is meant to deny that there are

3. *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* (1997), 31.

4. *Ibid.*, 297.

5. In the last two decades, these have even expanded. A combined history/literature requirement has been split into two separate requirements, and GURs have been added in diversity and freshman critical conversation seminars (in which many Humanities faculty participate).

growing and destructive pressures on even pragmatic and adaptive versions of liberal education. Bill Readings, for example, sees ominous horizons for American higher education after the past two inspiring centuries.<sup>6</sup> In Europe the university helped to secure national cultures. In the U.S. it even had to help create common tradition and mythologies before it could secure them. All that, amidst a pluralism of often conflicting component cultures, has been heady stuff. At its center, predictably, were the liberal arts. Now, Readings claims, we are entering an era of advanced international capitalism where culture is basically irrelevant to the most powerful forces. Production and efficiency are demanded, in cultureless, quantitative terms. The university will then have to shift from virtually running on culture and cultural intersection to bolstering a relatively shallow kind of economic management.

The New American Colleges, and PLU in particular, come to such a threat with notable conceptual and moral resources. The vision of pairing liberal with professional education, the Lutheran ideal of vocation, the Socratic (and philosophically pragmatic) openness to assessing and reassessing what should be learned, and the Stoic call to a universal and rich version of civic responsibility – these allow PLU and other NACs to carve out an attractive and culture-rich counter-ideal to Readings's bleak prophecy. ♦

6. *The University in Ruins* (1998). See also David Harvey's review, "University, Inc.," in *The Atlantic Monthly*, October 1998, 112-16.



"The Age of Intellect"

# The Pragmatism of the Liberal Arts

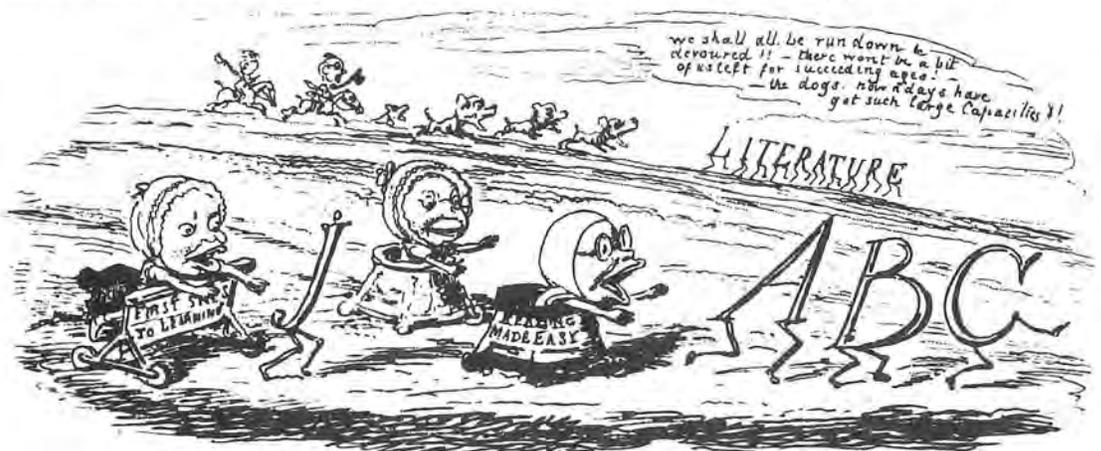
Roberta S. Brown

My lifelong commitment to the liberal arts took root in the fourth grade, when I fell in love with my classmate, Sally. During that entire year, Sally rode her bike to my house, and after school, we both rode our bikes to hers. We read books on her neatly made bunk beds and I spent the night there as often as possible. In junior high, Sally lugged her books around in an old Harvard green bag that she slung over her slumped shoulders. She had glasses, braces, greasy hair pulled straight back. She wore heavy brown and white oxfords with thin anklets, and her long hems were always crooked. Hanging around with Sally damaged my fragile popularity, but she was still my dearest friend. Today Sally is a world-class geneticist at an eminent university. During our rare encounters, we continue to share an uncanny unity of vision about education, and a resulting friendship.

A seemingly bland statement Sally made during our last dinner together clarified for me this shared vision. Our conversation with her economist husband had been tracing the jagged edges of the stock market when Sally suddenly bailed out. Changing the subject, she declared that whatever she's worth in stock, her greatest wealth and that of her family was in their education. At the time, I thought that she was demurring to the lowly undergraduate teacher and humanist sitting across the table. But upon reflection, I recognize that Sally had been talking about liberal education, an American ritual that is part of the "great American experiment in civil democracy."<sup>1</sup> On further reflection, I recognize that it was her home life that had prepared Sally as a seventeen-year-old to turn down opportunities to attend prestigious universities with professional orientations in favor of a small liberal arts college. In turn, it was her resulting strong foundation in the liberal arts that now helps account for Sally's remarkable success as a professional.

Sally's parents were no more religious than mine, but there was a religious aura in her home. Faith in the existence of ultimate knowledge was reflected in their humble curiosity about everything from the wires behind a light switch to particles smaller than electrons. They always listened to and genuinely seemed to value my comments, no matter how mundane or half-baked they were. I felt welcomed and even wanted. Faith in the existence of ultimate meaning to life gave her parents a vantage from which they could pluck those activities that really mattered from the distracting chaos of everyday life. Faith in their neighbor engaged them in local politics and civic groups. And a sense of gratefulness for their modest, middle-class comforts freed them from enslavement to the already rising god of consumerism.

1. Neil Postman, in *The End of Education* (1995), argues that American schools should "provide our youth with the knowledge and will to participate in the great experiment; to teach them how to argue, and to help them discover what questions are worth arguing about; and, of course, to make sure they know what happens when arguments cease" (73-74). He also suggests that education aim for the student "to become a different person because of something you have learned - to appropriate an insight, a concept, a vision, so that your world is altered" (3).



"The Pursuit of Letters"

For me Sally's home was nothing less than a temple of peace and inspiration. Like the best of teachers, her parents had perfected an environment that nurtured learning. Never lecturing, showing off their own knowledge, or being judgmental, they nevertheless continually questioned, then exemplified and shared, the excitement of discovering an answer. In this sense, they accomplished the most that any liberal arts professor can and should do, particularly in our Internet age when the sheer volume of factual information itself can seem to threaten human creativity and meaning. Interestingly, they both had graduated from a small liberal arts college in the Pacific Northwest.

Simple as it may appear, this story bears substantially upon a debate that is permeating all levels of education in the United States today. Embracing a culturally invasive consumerism, many students and their families have come to value their education only as much as the salary that their diplomas obtain. In response, administrators in many high schools and even in some private universities with strong liberal arts traditions are hoisting a banner of vocationalism. Here at PLU, there has also been a response. We have chosen to respond to this shift by claiming that our students can expect to receive both a strong professional and an excellent liberal arts preparation — in a mere four years. The question I wish to address here is whether, in our hastiness to please our consumers, we have overlooked some of the deeper questions and implications that arise from such an institutional claim.

It must be recognized in the first place that the ultimate burden of carrying out this unique response of PLU lies with the faculty. Thus, as a group of professionals, we must ask ourselves if we can in fact uphold such a claim in practice and with integrity. In other words, can we make it a reality in the praxis of our classrooms and programs? Although promoted in good faith and with the interest of the institution at heart, is the mixing of liberal arts and professional undergraduate education pragmatic or even possible? And though clearly honed in response to consumer demand, is it in fact serving the best interest of PLU, in terms of endowment and identity, and for that matter, of the minds and careers of our students? And finally, does it uphold, in practice, the tenets of our mission statement? In particular, does it allow a student's undergraduate education to provide "*the necessary and essential foundation* for the technical training and education in the

professions which modern society requires" [*my italics*]?

To date, we have begun discussions about new programs in which courses offered by faculty in the professional schools would be combined with courses traditionally offered by faculty in the College of Arts and Sciences. Professors in the professional schools are also being drawn into foundation courses, such as the Freshman Experience. Potential cross-disciplinary programs that result from such creative overlaps are the stuff that make for an exciting undergraduate education today. No matter what our claimed identity may be, it seems that we should be nourishing these bridges. My concern, though, is that inasmuch as such programs are based primarily upon administrative structural overlap, they skirt the issue that is at the heart of the national debate today about the significance and uniqueness of American education. That is to say, they do not address the knotty task of probing the ultimate ingredients that constitute and make pragmatically meaningful either professional or liberal arts education. In the remaining paragraphs, I would like to offer a few initial reflections as kindling for the dialogue that I believe to be vital to the integrity of our institution and to our identity. These bits of wood will undoubtedly reveal their source, which is deeply rooted in the humanities.

My hunch is that understanding the foundations of liberal arts and professional orientations in the classroom calls us to reflect upon what many world religions and psychological theories define as two opposing — if equally necessary — orientations to life. For want of a better term, these orientations might be termed the cultivation of the *me*, and the cultivation of the *I*. The *me* is the role or persona that we all hone in order to be accepted by the conventional society of our cultures and in order, quite simply, to earn a living. The source of this identity is in the conventions of the group to which we choose to belong. It is an identity molded from without. If transposed to the educational front, one might construe professional education in a parallel fashion, as the imbuing of factual knowledge and skills requisite for a career within a particular professional group. In this sense, an English course that might be based upon learning and using the bibliographical guidelines of the Modern Language Association would have a professional orientation. And a language course designed primarily to prepare students for state-administered proficiency exams would also be professional, even though it is

## The Pragmatism of the Liberal Arts

housed in a school typically identified with the liberal arts.

While religious and psychological traditions have long recognized the inevitable need for all humans to develop a *me*, which they equate with the ego or the self-conscious individual, they also tell us that the fully developed person grounds and even selects this *me* upon a previously honed *I*. In religious traditions, the *I* is the deeply founded spirit or soul that lies in all humans; it is the authentic self, the seat of grace, that touchstone without which we cannot experience the presence of a divine spirit. Such a grounding is what frees the human spirit from unreflective conformity and self-serving ends. In Lutheran terms, it opens the soul to the source of faith that inspires love of neighbor. It also responds to the true meaning of Lutheran vocationalism: it allows one to select a profession through a sense of authentic calling or knowledge of self, rather than a dreamed-of salary. In short, discovery of the authentic *I* inspires professional creativity, and compassionate, reflective citizenship.

Creating an environment that promotes lifelong honing of the *I* is what liberal education is all about. As such, the undergraduate "liberal arts" skills that students learn, be they history, biology, a foreign language, or psychology, should in praxis be a mere framework through which an attentive teacher lays a path for students to discover their own authenticity. As an institution that claims to provide a liberal arts foundation, and moreover, as one with connections to a religious faith, I believe that we are beholden to furnish this groundwork for human growth.

It is such an orientation that Professor Martha Nussbaum has addressed in a recent, widely recognized publication entitled *Cultivating Humanity*. Making an elegant argument for American undergraduate education to retain its primary commitment to the liberal arts, Nussbaum claims that higher education is facing "the risk of being undermined by a growing interest in vocational, rather than liberal education."<sup>2</sup> In order to alert institutions whose integrity is being undermined by the temptations of such a risk, she provides instructive examples of successful liberal arts programs throughout the country, and bases a bold new proposal for the liberal arts upon her observations. Because her discussion is so germane to our dialogue, I will outline a few of its main components and what I perceive to be their implications for PLU.

Nussbaum begins by dismissing an older

definition of the liberal arts, which she describes as "an education that is *liberalis*, 'fitted for freedom,' in the sense that it is aimed at freeborn gentlemen of the propertied class." This pre-Socratic education, she reminds us, "initiated the elite into the time-honored traditions of their own society; it sought continuity and fidelity, and discouraged critical reflection" (293). Turning to PLU, it is my perception that increasing numbers of students enter my classes seeking a comfortable confirmation of their views, traditions, and habits of thought rather than pursuing the uncomfortable challenge to those views, which is the sign of real intellectual exploration. Many of these same students claim to have selected professional paths even before arriving on campus and are thus less interested in courses whose primary purpose is not to equip them with the skills of their hastily chosen profession, but to cultivate their minds more deeply. It is often not until their junior or senior years, if ever, that they discover their authentic calling, in the sense that Luther understood, and as a result, they often begin a new major late in their PLU careers.

What I fear is a new population of PLU students that does not recognize how a strong liberal arts foundation can provide the self-knowledge – the personal *I* – necessary for recognition of authentic vocation. And such a foundation – which may not result from a sparse scattering of courses in a freshman year program, however excellent – is the only practical solution to what I'd call such "premature professionalism." In short, I sense that we are not yet discussing the fact that our newly claimed orientation may attract a population of students unprepared for and ill-disposed toward liberal education. There is only a limited population of students in the Pacific Northwest. With schools such as Willamette and Lewis and Clark explicitly identifying their undergraduate curriculum with the liberal arts, students seeking such an education may not select PLU. And as a result, PLU may inadvertently become a stronghold for elitist liberalism.

To avoid such a risk, which could have ultimately financial as well as academic consequences for the institution, it is imperative that we examine Nussbaum's definition of the new liberal arts paradigm. Such an education, she states, "produces students who are free not because of wealth or birth, but because they have a mind of their own . . . they have ownership of their own thought and speech, and this imparts to them a dignity that is far beyond the outer dignity of class

It would be catastrophic to become a nation of technically competent people who have lost the ability to think critically, to examine themselves, and to respect the humanity and diversity of others. . . . It is therefore very urgent right now to support curricular efforts aimed at producing citizens who can take charge of their own reasoning, who can see the different and foreign not as a threat to be resisted, but as an invitation to explore and understand, expanding their own minds and their capacity for citizenship.

Martha Nussbaum

2. *Cultivating Humanity, A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* (1997), 297.

and rank" (293). Such ownership of one's mind is related to my earlier suggestion of cultivating the subjective *I*. A first step toward ownership, she states, is learning to think critically. Contrary to some today who fear it, she insists that critical thought does not mean that students will deny their heritage. Instead, it is only after rational examination and upon awareness of viable alternatives that they can in fact call a tradition their own. She assures us that through such a critical approach, students are not lost in a morass of postmodernist cultural relativism, nor are they circumscribed by doctrinal belief. Instead they have the intellectual foundation and sense of self that is a first step to becoming citizens of an increasingly complex, post-national globe.

Such citizenship also requires, however, that the student develop what Nussbaum calls a narrative imagination, that jump of faith that allows one to engage empathetically and without fear in a heritage or idea that is not one's own. "Our country has embarked on an unparalleled experiment, inspired by these ideals of self-command and cultivating humanity. Unlike all other nations, we ask a higher education to contribute a general preparation for citizenship, not just a specialized preparation for a career . . . People who have never learned to use reason and imagination to enter a broader world of cultures, groups, and ideas are impoverished personally and politically, however successful their vocational preparation" (294, 297). Through detailed descriptions of her research

on undergraduate programs, Nussbaum demonstrates that this imagination – not unlike the compassion and love of neighbor that accompanies the *I* – cannot be developed through an unstructured, distributive core with a sprinkling of "liberal arts" courses and a single diversity or cross-cultural requirement, such as we presently have at PLU. Instead, she argues that it is meticulously designed liberal arts core programs with cross-

cultural and global bases that attain this goal most successfully.

In her book, Nussbaum suggests to us at PLU that our journey toward preparing students for living lives of world citizenship has only begun. Until we require a substantial body of courses that will orient students to discovering and voicing with integrity their authentic beliefs and callings, to developing a sense of empathy for and understanding of those cultures that do not share their views, I am not sure if we can claim to uphold our mission statement. My hope is that perceived market pressures will not frighten us off course before we have even completed the first lap toward this very pragmatic goal. Our experiment with the New American College has been both bold and fascinating, but it is my sense that, at the deeper pedagogical level, it simply does not work. Ultimately what really counts is that we never cease to attract and enjoy the privilege of educating reflective and spirited students – students like my friend Sally – who are eager to cultivate their own souls in preparation for eventual devotion to a profession and to the world. ♦



# A Near Valedictory

Philip A. Nordquist

At the Faculty Fall Conference last September, in my second and last speech as faculty chair, I reviewed the working of faculty governance since its reform and reorganization in 1993. I then discussed at some greater length what I called “two deeper and more serious matters,” the assumptions underlying the Freshman Year Program (and perhaps much of the core curriculum), and the integration of liberal and professional learning. I welcome this opportunity to address those topics again.

Educational institutions typically cite strengthening “critical thinking” as one of the most important goals of their first year programs. Fundamental to the way critical thinking has been understood is the seventeenth-century change in world view connected to epistemology – the branch of knowledge that asks, how do we know? – growing out of the multiple intellectual crises of that century. That change is

often associated with the French philosopher and mathematician René Descartes and his assertion which all beginning philosophy students can repeat, “I think therefore I am” (I think rigorously and skeptically, therefore I am). Those philosophic views came to be called “foundationalism,” or perhaps a little more recently, “objectivism.” In this view, knowing was morally neutral, the enterprise of thought – critical thought – was launched by skepticism and doubt, and it was necessarily conducted by isolated individuals.

Launched by doubt, thinking in this fashion produced truths that were timeless, certain, foundational, and known by individuals. Since the seventeenth century these notions of thinking and epistemology have been fundamental in the western world, and they have made their way into university curricular systems. We want our students to think critically, colleges and universities have said over and over again, and most often they have meant foundationally or in a Cartesian fashion. Whether that has always been explicit is another matter.

This emphasis was strengthened in the United States at the end of the nineteenth century when the modern research university, shaped by German models, emerged. The German polymath Max Weber was a dominant influence with his reaffirmation of the Enlightenment in opposition to what he understood as the irrationality of his contemporaries. His emphases were important in what came to be called “modernism” with its inexorable conditions of specialization, rationalization, and intellectualism. Values in this way of



thinking could be clarified, but not promulgated; they were linked to moral and religious relativism. Foundationalism, and some aspects of modernism, have deeply influenced ideas and perceptions at colleges and universities in the United States for the better part of a century.

The problem – part of an interrelated series of crises in American intellectual life and higher education late in the twentieth century – is that foundationalism is intellectually and educationally bankrupt, and modernism has been seriously undercut as well. Devastated by a withering attack from many quarters, there has been a paradigm shift of major proportions. The Cartesian paradigm of moral neutrality, doubt, and skepticism no longer works.

Knowing – epistemology – is not morally neutral. All intellectual work is done in the framework of the communities, traditions, commitments, and beliefs in which the scholar lives and works. Knowledge and truth are communal terms; knowing and thinking are done in communities, not in isolation. Over the last few decades many thinkers have concluded that the question of community has replaced the epistemological question and is basic to all other inquiries. The educational thinker Parker Palmer, for example, says all epistemologies have moral trajectories and that foundationalism – or objectivism as he calls it – fractures communities and tends inherently toward violence. He sees truth in terms of relationships.

This withering criticism has caused many thinkers to conclude that truths are historical, not timeless; they are probable, not certain; they are systemic, not foundational; and they are shaped and known by communities, not individuals.

There is much in this new perspective or paradigm that squares quite remarkably with Lutheran theology and certainly with the “critical” tradition of Lutheran higher education as it was described by the late Sydney Ahlstrom, a longtime professor of history at Yale, and as I attempted to summarize it in the first chapter of PLU’s centennial history. I concluded in my speech last September that some or all of these new themes should be incorporated into our university core curriculum and Freshman Year Program and that we should attempt to connect them in appropriate ways to the larger tradition out of which PLU comes. There are exciting possibilities here.

The “recovery” and “rediscovery” of tradition – as Jaroslav Pelikan phrases it – could be especially helpful in that effort. Tradition, much

criticized and misunderstood in the 60s and 70s (and perhaps still misunderstood by faculty members who emerged out of those heated decades), is what holds societies together and gives them identity. What could be more useful amid the multiple crises and confusion of the late twentieth century and the major initiatives we have been addressing at this institution than such recovery and rediscovery? Pelikan says such knowledge is not a “sufficient” preparation for the twenty-first century, but it is a “necessary” preparation. Fundamental to understanding tradition at PLU is, of course, the tension-filled

relationship of Athens and Jerusalem. It is a counterpoint that is unique to western civilization and essential to its understanding.

Ultimately, Pelikan stresses, “tradition will be vindicated for us, for each of us as an individual and for us as communities, by how it manages to accord with our deepest intuitions and highest aspirations.” To engage

*Tradition will be vindicated for us, for each of us as an individual and for us as communities, by how it manages to accord with our deepest intuitions and highest aspirations.*

those intuitions and aspirations explicitly and self-consciously would be a worthy goal of a Freshman Year Program and a core curriculum. Pelikan concludes his discussion of tradition by quoting Goethe:

What you have as heritage,  
Take now as task;  
For thus you will make it your own!

The second, “deeper and more serious matter” I discussed last September was the integration of liberal and professional learning that we have been wrestling with for the last several years, energized as we have been by Project Focus and pushed along by our marriage to the New American College notion. Provost Paul Menzel’s description of “pragmatic” liberal education provided a back drop for my remarks last fall, and I tried to put this whole question into a larger historical context peculiar to PLU.

I argued that a more self-conscious and successful fusing of liberal and professional education could repair a long-standing ambivalence or dissonance in our identity that many have found, and perhaps still find, disturbing. At crucial moments throughout our history that ambivalence has made our identity and purpose

## A Near Valedictory

more problematic than they probably should have been.

Some institutional history will help. Those who established Lutheran higher education in North America brought a classical linguistic emphasis from Scandinavia. It prevailed in PLU's first curriculum, which was modeled on that of the University of Oslo (PLU was founded by Norwegian Lutherans) and Luther College in Iowa (the first four-year Scandinavian Lutheran college), where the early PLU presidents and faculty had been educated. In fact, Luther College did not give up its Greek and Latin requirements for all students until 1936. But in the raw northwestern corner of the United States in 1890 other educational needs also had to be met, so without embarrassment or pause additional programs were provided – business courses, teacher training, English as a second language, and more. They soon dominated.

That pattern continued through the academy years (1894–1918) and into the collegiate years (1920–1960). Teacher training flourished, and while the liberal arts remained alive, they increasingly seemed primarily to serve students pursuing teaching careers. There were no special disagreements or complaints from the arts and sciences, especially in the 1930s when institutional survival was a constant problem, but that began to change after World War II. Higher education boomed in the wake of pent-up wartime energies, the G.I. Bill, and millions of veterans returning to school. At PLU the Department of Education flourished as never before. Business administration was still in a formative stage, and the liberal arts remained subsidiary.

By the late 50s, however, a postwar generation of scholars wanted to cooperate with but not be dominated by teacher training, and many faculty leaders of the next few decades emerged out of this struggle. The dissonance or ambivalence reached a climax in 1964. Spurred on by a national movement concerned about undue influence of inappropriate theories advanced by “educationists” and “educationism,” many pushed for reform at PLU. It is interesting to remember that one of the most aggressive attacks on educationism came in the book *Educational Wastelands* by University of Washington history professor Arthur Bestor. At a heated faculty meeting the Educational Policies Committee successfully proposed changes in the education curriculum and a reduction in required courses. There were heated protests, resignations, and by the next year a new Education dean.

Teacher training certainly didn't disappear, and enrollments remained high, but its influence waned a bit after 1964. The liberal arts, on the other hand, advanced significantly, and by 1970 all departments in the Arts and Sciences were relatively strong. At that time a third player burst on the scene as well – the modern School of Business under the leadership of Dean Gundar King. When PLU became a university in 1960 it had a kind of tripartite structure; many thought it was not organically whole.

So what was PLU? A School of Education? No, but the preparation of teachers remained very important. A liberal arts college? No; it never had been despite the hopes and ambitions of some noteworthy faculty leaders. Was it a School of Business? Despite graduating many students in the past three decades, business did not overwhelm the rest of the university, although sometimes it seemed to want little truck with the rest of the institution unless there was some benefit to be gained. I don't want to overdramatize the differences, but while faculty members were typically congenial and cooperative, the differences – the dissonance – remained real.

Occasional claims that we were a liberal arts university didn't have much resonance, and neither did other descriptive words or phrases that emerged. We couldn't produce an entirely coherent or singular definition of ourselves. This failure was not a constant source of uneasiness, of course, but it was an irritation at accreditation times, when we launched five-year plans, in the midst of fund drives, or as we drafted statements of objectives.

When we began learning about “The New American College” I saw an institutional form that I recognized; it had been around Parkland for a century. Insofar as I had any influence I pushed to have it included in *PLU 2000* (1995) and hoped it would become a more clearly articulated part of our public consciousness – our tradition, if you will. It resolved a century-long confusion. We have always, perhaps imperfectly, been a New American College, an institution that takes both liberal and professional learning seriously and that carries on an ongoing institutional conversation about that relationship. By embracing the ANAC concept, we can more self-consciously be what we have always been, and we can provide the kind of education that students will need in the next century, liberating, but also marked by professional competence.

The ANAC language and categories can help

### Additional Reading

Sydney E. Ahlstrom, “What's Lutheran about Higher Education? – A Critique,” in *Papers and Proceedings of the 60th Annual Convention* (1974).

David W. Lotz, “Education for Citizenship in the Two Kingdoms: Reflections on the Theological Foundations of Lutheran Higher Education,” in *Papers and Proceedings of the 65th Annual Convention* (1979).

Philip A. Nordquist, *Educating for Service: Pacific Lutheran University, 1890-1990* (1990).

Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Vindication of Tradition* (1984).

Mark R. Schwehn, *Exiles from Eden: Religion and the Academic Vocation in America* (1993).

us at PLU to produce a more unified and singular vision of who we are and what we want to do. Such opportunities come only rarely in the history of educational institutions, and I hope we seize this opportunity with enthusiasm and imagination. It will take effort. The Freshman Year Program and core curriculum, the tradition of Lutheran education and PLU's institutional history, and the dimensions of ANAC identity need to be fused together in a clear and imaginative fashion. It won't happen in a moment.

What we do or fail to do will be with us for a long time. I often wish I was one of the younger members of the faculty ready to take on this task. ❖

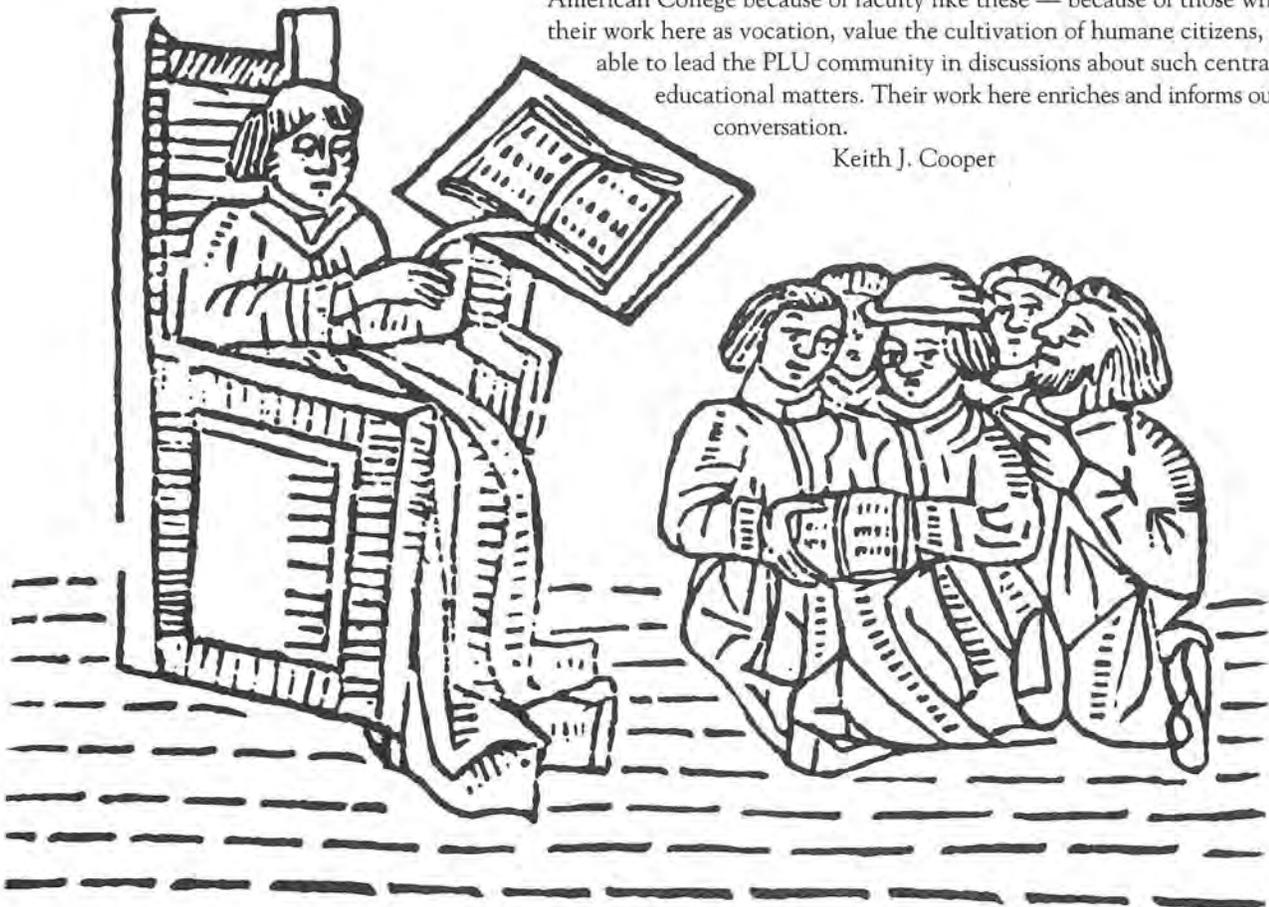
## Comments from the Dean

Few know it, but the seventeenth-century scientist Galileo deserves his place in science's hall of fame for something other than his infamous dispute with the Church. Rather, his studies into the realm of mechanics (*how* things move) and dynamics (*why* things move as they do) were instrumental in the development of what came to be known as the Newtonian theory of motion. It had been rather embarrassing to scientists that the Copernican account of the universe — which put the Earth into motion around the sun — took away the only plausible account of physical motion, that of Aristotle. Galileo helped fill that void, but along the way he had a serious concern with those who would speak of *gravity* as the reason why objects fall toward the earth. "Gravity," he said, is only a term; to say that objects fall because of gravity is not yet to say anything at all . . . one needed to figure out what this thing called gravity was, and how it resulted in such movement.

I hope that the analogy is clear. As the essays assembled here explain, Pacific Lutheran University is now calling itself a "New American College." But to call ourselves by this label is not yet to say much of anything at all. We still need to figure out what this thing is, and how it results in movement — in a change in the way PLU provides undergraduate education.

You have the honor of reading in this issue of *Prism* essays by some of PLU's finest teachers and scholars. Ultimately, we will succeed in being a New American College because of faculty like these — because of those who regard their work here as vocation, value the cultivation of humane citizens, and are able to lead the PLU community in discussions about such central educational matters. Their work here enriches and informs our ongoing conversation.

Keith J. Cooper



# A Lesson in Charity from Nietzsche

Pauline M. Kaurin

A metaphor used by philosopher Carol Simon is apt for describing the essence of education: she describes the Bible as a story of slow and difficult learners and the persistence of their teacher. We might see the journey of learning described in the Bible as similar to the journey of learning many of us share, whether as teachers, students, or both. The teacher gives us a lesson to master, we try to apply ourselves, fall short, reject the advice of the teacher, and go our own way, only to eventually return for help. For me, this complex understanding of education as a journey, like the journey in the Bible, is what makes church-related education a unique kind of educational experience. It is also this metaphor I find myself continually struggling with: as a Christian, as a teacher, but especially as a student.

In my classes I teach my students what I call the virtue of charity, the idea that we need to look at and try to understand a text from the point of view of the author before embarking on critical comments. Mark Schwehn calls this idea "hospitality" and in political circles we might think of it as the modern virtue of tolerance.<sup>1</sup> This idea is extolled both explicitly and implicitly by many philosophers (Plato, John Locke, David Hume, Søren Kierkegaard, and Friedrich Nietzsche, to name but a few) throughout the history of Western philosophy as a crucial part of philosophical inquiry, of how one "does" philosophy.<sup>2</sup> The idea has a long history and has been the subject of lively debate because it concerns a central issue in philosophy: how do we conduct our discipline?

Whatever it is called, the essence of charity is the same: in order to have a meaningful discourse with another person, you must try to fully understand their view, to put yourself in their place, before you

can embark on either critique or defense. To give an intelligent and informed view on Plato's political theory, it is necessary to understand not only what he is saying, but also why and how he is trying to make this point. To proceed without this is to risk constructing an ill-formed and superficial or, worse, a false view which can be easily dismissed or heard only as sloppy scholarship, obscuring what valuable insights may be present.

While it may seem that this is obvious as necessary to good scholarship, it is easy to overlook how hard it can really be to be charitable, despite the fact that we preach this virtue to our students and try to model it in class. In fact, I had no idea how hard this was for me, as a student of philosophy, until I embarked upon reading the work of Friedrich Nietzsche last summer. I intended to look at Nietzsche's views on war and the warrior, which – to say the least – are controversial; I thought that



1. See Mark Schwehn's *Exiles from Eden: Religion and the Academic Vocation in America* (1993). On political tolerance see John Locke's *A Letter Concerning Toleration*.

2. This is certainly not to suggest that this idea is uniquely philosophical. There are, no doubt, corollaries or versions of this idea in most disciplines.

they would provide a useful foil for some of the arguments I intended to make about ethics and war. Starting with some fairly general ideas on how I might utilize Nietzsche's views, I began to read Nietzsche's works: *Ecce Homo*, *Beyond Good and Evil*, *Genealogy of Morals*, *Will to Power*, *Birth of Tragedy*, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

While I was reading and thinking about Nietzsche, an odd thing happened. I actually heard my own voice telling my students that they should never base an argument on what other people say about a philosopher, that they should always read and decide for themselves what they think. The voice I was hearing was not an early warning sign of insanity (I hope), but a clue that I was slowly and painfully learning that lesson I had tried so hard to teach and model for my students. Rather than first reading Nietzsche and then making up my mind about what he said, I had done precisely what I told my students *not* to do. I had relied on other scholars' interpretations of Nietzsche's ideas on war and the warrior, and based the general strategy of my argument on what was essentially sophisticated hearsay.<sup>3</sup>

As I began to piece together Nietzsche's views for myself, it became clear that many of the arguments I had heard and on which I was relying were at the least questionable and, at most, inaccurate and uncharitable. One statement taken out of context, as I often tell my students, is not sufficient evidence for an argument, nor is interpreting the views of a nineteenth-century philosopher in terms of twentieth-century atrocities. The picture I had assumed, the picture that I had taken on face value from others, simply did not fit with the larger context of Nietzsche's work. In addition, I had been seriously uncharitable to Nietzsche, in a way that prevented me from giving his view the kind of consideration and attention that I should have from the start. It was only when I heard my own voice urging my students to be charitable that I realized the extent of my own lack of charity.

My painful summer lessons from Nietzsche not only point out my own struggles as a scholar, but highlight the larger point of how the virtue of charity can get lost in the struggle for the critical and analytic work seen as central to the academy. This struggle is all the more pronounced and crucial at an institution that claims the Church and its values as part of its identity. If we see education as a journey akin to the journey of faith, then I believe it becomes clear why charity, hospitality, or tolerance are so crucial. If we take

the Bible as the analogy of this kind of journey, we can see that God has been very tolerant and patient even with slow learners. God does not just bestow his glory upon the best students, but spends time, energy, love, and even blood upon the slowest and most recalcitrant students to remind them that they too are an important part of his classroom. While we cannot be as charitable as God, part of our vocation as teachers in a church-related institution, whether we are religious ourselves or not, must be to take seriously this virtue and the unique educational experience that it can generate.

But surely, one might argue, teaching our students to be critical is just as important as being charitable? After all, the hallmark of good scholarship, and a liberal arts education, is the ability to critically question the world and perhaps, in light of the faults we see, to change it for the better. Of course, as a philosopher I am the last person who would deny that the ability to question and think critically is an *essential* part of any education, especially a liberal arts one. However, I think it would do us good to examine the purpose and value of the questioning and critical thinking, as well as to clearly communicate these notions to our students. I do not want to teach my students to think critically only for the sake of being able to tear apart another's views or their own, but this too often can be what the students perceive as the value of critical work. Critical thinking and questioning are valuable tools, but when used improperly they can be more destructive than productive. Our students see this and are right to resist what they see as criticism for the sake of criticism.

The point of my examining Nietzsche's views should not just be to prove Nietzsche wrong, but to examine his ideas in hopes that errors or problems highlighted may generate new ideas and new insights. For this to happen there must be a genuine conversation where I attempt to charitably understand what Nietzsche was trying to do and why. If Nietzsche did make a mistake somewhere, it might then be possible to see how that error might be resolved or what new ideas and insights the error might produce. If we – as scholars and students – critique only for the sake of critiquing (or even appear to be doing so), we will miss the idea or question that could lead us out of confusion. Had I continued to proceed with my preconceptions of Nietzsche, I could have come up with some criticisms of Nietzsche, but I would have also missed interesting ideas and valuable

Education makes a people easy to lead, but difficult to drive; easy to govern but impossible to enslave.

Lord Brougham

3. There is a great deal of controversy over Nietzsche, especially in the context of how some of Nietzsche's ideas seemed consistent with Totalitarian political philosophy. This led to confusion and some misinterpretation of Nietzsche by philosophers sympathetic to some of the Totalitarian causes and ideas (Mussolini, Ernst Bertram, Alfred Rosenberge, Anthony Ludovici, and Oscar Levy) as well as by influential mainstream philosophers like Bertrand Russell. The number of books written in the last thirty years (led by Walter Kaufmann's influential writings) which have sought to remedy this problem also indicate how widespread these misinterpretations appear to be.

## A Lesson in Charity from Nietzsche

4. I realized that many of Nietzsche's views on war and warriors were valuable for talking about the value of military honor (and that I had misjudged what he was saying), but I also discovered his valuable criticism of the Christian tradition, which closely mirrors many contemporary critiques of Christianity – criticisms that I believe are essential for Christians to address.

insights that provided me the opportunity to productively reassess and revise my own views.<sup>4</sup>

This brings me back to where I began, to our roles as teachers of learners, slow and otherwise. What makes this kind of education unique is that it is a journey of learning, a journey that is about relationship. Teachers build relationships with students, they build relationships with one another and their teachers and hopefully, they build a relationship with texts, authors, ideas,

concepts, and the world. These relationships include the slow learners as well as the quick ones, the headstrong as much as the eager. Relationships, as we are aware, are at the same time vulnerable and resilient; everything that happens on the journey becomes part of that relationship: the good, the bad, and the ugly. A gentle reminder to be charitable, in my own case from a philosopher long dead, can make that journey more meaningful and interesting. ❖

## Recent Humanities Publications

### James M. Albrecht

"'The Sun Were Insipid, If the Universe Were Not Opaque': The Ethics of Action, Power, and Belief, in Emerson, Nietzsche, and James." *ESQ: A Journal of the American Renaissance* 43 (1997): 113–58.

This article traces some of the broad and fundamental similarities between Nietzsche and the pragmatic tradition of American thought running from Emerson to William James. Without denying the important differences between the three writers, and without claiming that Nietzsche is a pragmatist, it is still important to recognize that their philosophical projects share many essential concerns, attitudes, and conclusions. These similarities revolve around their common desire to establish a new standard of moral or ethical valuation, to reject the absolutisms of traditional religion and science in favor of an ethics that measures human values (or truths) in terms of their effects on the vitality of human life. For all three, such an ethics must locate our primary value in the struggles through which people develop,

exercise, and express their active natures – in what Emerson and James often call "work" or "action," and what Nietzsche (also like Emerson) calls "power." This insistence that moral value is not an absolute entity (divine "goodness" or "truth"), but rather a mode of existence we achieve in struggle with the resistances and limits of our material environment, is in effect a *tragic* ethics. Emerson, Nietzsche, and James

each renounce traditional religion's promise of certain meaning behind (and compensating for) the sufferings of our world, in favor of a view that accepts the limits and failures of material life as real and unrecoverable losses – losses that are meaningful, however, indeed necessary and beneficial, as occasions for human performance and power.

"Saying 'Yes' and Saying 'No': Individualist Ethics in Ellison, Burke, and Emerson." *PMLA* (January 1999): 46–63.

The allusions to Emerson in Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man* usually are read as a scathing indictment of Emersonian individualism. Yet even as Ellison satirizes the Emerson canonized in Lewis Mumford's 1926 study of American culture, *The Golden Day*, the career of Ellison's narrator extends a pragmatic tradition of individualism leading from Emerson through Kenneth Burke. Though often accused of ignoring tragic limits, Emerson describes the self as existing only within the material limitations of culture – and thus as always socially implicated and indebted. While Emerson claims that a pursuit of one's own most vital work is a moral end that fulfills one's social duties, Burke and Ellison demand a more complex scrutiny of our ethical connections to others. Burke insists that the social context of our individual acts requires a "comic" ethics of "identification": we must identify with others across social conflicts and recognize how our individual acts may be "identified" with those conflicts. Ellison's narrator progresses toward this Burkean ethic: in his final confrontation with Mr. Norton (who had recommended Emerson to him), the narrator adopts a mode of communication that asserts the democratic connection of all Americans while confronting the systemic discrimination that separates us.



**Denis G. Arnold and  
Paul T. Menzel**

"When Comes 'The End of the Day?' A Comment on the Dialogue between Dax Cowart and Robert Burt." *The Hastings Center Report* 28 (January-February 1998): 25-27.

This article is a commentary on the first Heather Koller Memorial Lecture delivered at PLU. This lecture was delivered jointly by Donald "Dax" Cowart and Robert Burt on 21 November 1996. Cowart and Burt agree that there is a time when a competent patient's request to cease lifesaving treatment should be granted. They differ regarding the time at which that point is reached. In this comment we articulate a conceptual procedure for determining the "end of the day" that balances the interests of patients and clinicians.

**Thomas J. Campbell**

"The Other Mrs. Radcliffe: 'The Female Advocate' in her Memoirs," *Studies in the Humanities* 24 (December 1997): 65-74.

This article examines the epistolary memoirs of eighteenth-century polemicist Mary Ann Radcliffe as a site where competing and contradictory autobiographical discourses reveal the way that ideologies of gender and class shape the writer's understanding of self. While presuming to present her experience as a kind of negative exemplum for young women ("Do not do as I have done"), what breaks through her attempt at producing such a normative and unitary "life" is a transgressive voice of feminist defiance—resisting patriarchal definitions of the female domain and opposing male usurpation of capitalist enterprise.

Review of *Christopher Isherwood Diaries Volume I: 1939-1960*. Ed. Katherine Bucknell. In *Literary Annual 1998*. Salem Press, pp. 249-253.

This essay reviews the first of a prospective two-volume edition of Isherwood's huge and hugely fascinating diary, the record of the British Writer's life after emigrating to America in 1939—over one thousand pages of mercilessly candid portraits of literary, stage, and film personalities from the years during which he found his way professionally to Hollywood's expatriate screenwriting colony and spiritually to the Hindu religion.

**Stewart D. Govig**

*In the Shadow of Our Steeples: Pastoral Presence for Families Coping With Mental Illness*. Haworth Pastoral Press, 1998.

A ministry of presence attempts to analyze chronic illness and promote "rehabilitation in the absence of cure." This book seeks to move parishes away from public stigmas and to bring clergy and mental health professionals into a collaborative arena of care. The foreword is written by Donald Capps, William Hart Felmeth Professor of Pastoral Theology at Princeton Seminary and a former student in a class taught by the author at Pacific Lutheran University.

**Paul O. Ingram**

*The Sound of Liberating Truth: Buddhist and Christian Dialogues in Memory of Frederick J. Streng (1933-1993)*. Edited by Paul O. Ingram and Sallie B. King. Curzon Press, 1999.

This volume contains a collection of dialogues written in honor of the late Frederick J. Streng, the former president of the Society for Buddhist-Christian Studies, by well-known Buddhist and Christian scholars on topics that were of primary interest to Streng. A group of outstanding scholars and dialoguers have written essays from a Buddhist or a Christian point of view on topics including interreligious dialogue, ultimate reality, nature and ecology, social engagement, and ultimate transformation or soteriology.

**Sharon L. Jansen**

"The Matter of Britain" and "The Stanzaic Morte d'Arthur." In *Medieval England: An Encyclopedia*. Edited by Paul. E. Szarmach. Garland, 1998.

Two solicited articles on Arthurian romance.

**Douglas E. Oakman**

"The Lord's Prayer in Social Perspective." In *Authenticating the Words of Jesus*. Edited by Bruce Chilton and Craig A. Evans. E. J. Brill, 1999.

This essay explores one aspect of the social history of the synoptic tradition as it pursues the argument that Jesus's concrete material concerns were taken up by literate scribes who accommodated them to abstract, theological interests by the time the Prayer appeared in the two different versions of Matthew and Luke.

*Palestine in the Time of Jesus: Social Structures and Social Conflicts* (with K. C. Hanson). Fortress Press, 1998.

This introductory volume examines the primary social institutions and structures of ancient Roman Palestine, with a view to how they are reflected in and shaped the early Jesus movement. The major domains and institutions of family, politics, economy, and religion are explored. Documentary materials are supplemented by archaeological data, and the discussion is enhanced by extensive charts, diagrams, study questions, glossaries, and suggested readings.

**Jeffrey L. Staley**

"Fathers and Sons: Fragments from an Autobiographical Midrash on the Gospel of John." In *The Personal Voice in Biblical Interpretation*. Edited by Ingrid Rosa Kitzberger. Routledge Press, 1998.

"The Politics of Place and the Place of Politics in the Gospel of John." In "What is John?" Volume 2: *Literary and Social Readings of the Fourth Gospel*. Edited by Fernando F. Segovia. Scholars Press, 1998.

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Prism logo design by Paul Fortner

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