

EDUCATION & ITS DISCONTENTS CCAS 2003

I chose to title this talk “Education and Its Discontents,” not because – you’ll be happy to know – I wanted to make any Freudian points – or jokes – but because, unfortunately, it is a title that is good for all seasons. It may well be, as Socrates declared, that the unexamined life is not worth living. And yet, in every wind and weather, discontent and education live in close proximity. Education, indeed, seems designed to foster at least a local discontent rather than an easy satisfaction with things as they are. Things as they are, in turn, are often discontent with education’s discontent. On the other hand, maybe it would be better to allude to E.M. Forster rather than to Freud and simply call this talk “Two Cheers for Education,” as he raised Two Cheers for Democracy. I have a friend who said, on hearing that I’d be standing here before you, that at whatever costs I should be funny. Unfortunately, like Polonius, I can only promise that I shall be brief.

We live in a mean and nervous time. In the country, on the planet, it’s hard to think of a plane crash or a falling stock without thinking of a conspiracy. As we walk about our communities or campuses, going about our daily lives in the streets or in the classroom, we carry with us – naggingly, consciously – the knowledge of our own fragility, the certainty that we need to be prudent and that prudence can’t protect us from insanity or violence. Nor, it seems can education. The former CEOs at Anderson Accounting and Enron and Putnam Financial, I am sure, all have degrees to hang upon their walls. Would it matter to the course of current events if George W. Bush had

attended more or differently to his studies as an undergraduate at Yale (or, for that matter, if Hitler had been accepted into art school)? Did the fact that the late Paul Wellstone was a teacher, a professor, influence his politics? And, in any of these instances, how does one take account of such possibilities without crudely assigning virtue and veritas to positions that are just political and partisan?

More locally, it is clear that the job of deaning is not getting easier or purer. Jokes about the difficulty of cleaning deans aside, I think all of us know too many people lost to the position because they simply got tired of the fray, of constantly sailing too close to too many winds. Too many provosts in too little time. Too many Stakhanovite admonitions to do more with less. Too many difficulties separating educational mission from political expedience or pandering in fields that span a broad spectrum that includes area and language studies, as well as scientific and technical research.

In addition, it is also clearly true that education itself is not immune from the values of the market place, as the following vignette from J. M. Coetzee's newest book, Elizabeth Costello, suggests. In the scene, the title character – Elizabeth Costello, a successful and celebrated novelist – and one Professor Peter Godwin, teacher of English, are having a conversation.

“This is a secular age,” Godwin asserts. “You cannot turn back the clock. You cannot condemn an institution for moving with the times.”

Costello asks: “By an institution you mean the university?”

“Yes,” says Godwin, “but specifically faculties of humanities, which remain the core of any university.”

“The humanities the core of the university,” Costello muses, thinking “she may be an outsider, but if she were asked to name the core of the university today, its core discipline, she would say it was moneymaking.”

Nonetheless, I and, I think, many of us in this room went to college and chose a life in the academy out of a perhaps naïve and however unconsciously Kantian belief that the university was a place of rationality and reason. This, in contrast, to the ethos of my family of origin whom I love dearly but all of whose members tend to resort, in tight places, to squaring their shoulders and shouting down the table: “How can you argue with me when I know I’m right?” At a recent meeting with one of my departments, a faculty member squared his shoulders, looked at me across the table, and asked exactly that.

H.G. Wells complained, as Europe unraveled in the period between World Wars, that there appeared to have been no point in having given women voting rights, since now that we could vote – and did – the world was still going to hell in a hand basket.

Analogously, if higher education for a broad spectrum of American society doesn’t seem to have produced a rational universe at home or made us a force for Edenic happiness and pleasure elsewhere in the world, is it as useless a notion as Wells thought the franchise was? Can we say only, at best, that women voting haven’t actually been proven to make things worse and that, long before post-modernity, half of humanity was always already unhappy in Eden. Even if the expulsion from the Garden, which was, after all, the entry

into knowledge, didn't usher in a reign of universal rationality, it doesn't seem possible to un-eat the apple. I digress, but I think you get my point, which is to suggest that discontent is the unconscious underside of education – driving desire for it and hedges around it, imposing shapes and structures on it – and to suggest also that this country at this present moment has never been more in need of two cheers on its behalf.

Like the idea of universal suffrage – suffrage based on citizenship or even residency and on a shared participation in the community of human beings, rather than on property, wealth, or hereditary caste – the idea that there should be universal access to education is of relatively recent origin. In America, there are several convenient prototypes for talking about this expansion of educational access and offerings. Two are institutional. They are the late 19th and early 20th-century networks of state Normal Colleges for the education of teachers and Land-Grant universities for the education, specifically, of students described specifically as artisans and mechanics. The third is a non-institutional governmental initiative – the GI Bill of Rights, enacted into law during the Second World War. Collectively, over the course of more than a century, these developments engaged mass society with higher education for, I believe, the first time in the history of the world.

Each of these developments clearly builds on, but also challenges and changes, an older idea and traditional ideal of a university as a place for the education and socialization of a class of hereditary elites. The brainchild of Justin Smith Morrill of Vermont, the land grant university is an expression of Morrill's belief that it was

fundamentally necessary “to offer an opportunity in every state for a liberal and larger education, not merely to those destined to sedentary professions, but to those much needing higher instruction for the world’s business, for the industrial pursuits, and professions of life.” This belief found expression in the Morrill Act of 1862, which was signed into law by President Abraham Lincoln at a moment when the future of the American republic and the outcome of its unprecedented – however flawed and incomplete – experiment in the possibilities of democracy was very much in doubt. Actually, the land grant university was *enabled* by the Civil War, since those states most opposed to its educational vision and social aspirations were in the process of trying to secede from the Union and, hence, didn’t vote, while many of the representatives from the remaining states who *did* vote – and did vote in favor of the Bill -- did so in support mainly of its provisions in favor of the new universities offering military training.

Morrill himself, however, was clearly interested in more than militarism. In his view, the rural farmers and urban artisans whom he envisioned as the sources of the new universities’ composite student body were in danger of being excluded from civic power and participation by the developments of the Industrial Revolution with its tendency to accumulate vast amounts of money – and along with money, influence – in the hands of single individuals and private corporations. Still sounds familiar, doesn’t it? Morrill found himself and at least some of those who voted with him voted as they did out of a conviction that a middle class needed to be created, sustained, and educated in order to resist in America the tendency to oligarchy.

Like the Morrill Act, the G.I. Bill of Rights, officially known as the Serviceman's Readjustment Act of 1944 also has its roots in War, its passage in irony, and its consequences in profound social alteration. Proposed and drafted by the American Legion (which chartered a plane to fly the deciding vote from Florida to Washington) and ardently supported by William Randolph Hearst, the Bill called for the federal government to subsidize the cost of veterans' tuition, fees, books, and educational materials and contribute, as well, to their living expenses while attending college. Veterans were free to attend the educational institution of their choice, and colleges, in turn, were free to admit those veterans who met their admissions requirements. Prior to its passage, detractors – who included the presidents of several elite colleges – argued that paying the educational expenses of veterans would bankrupt the government, lead to irremediable overcrowding on college campuses, and wreak havoc on educational standards by overrunning classrooms with students unprepared for the rigors of higher learning.

The campuses *were* crowded. Traditional dormitories gave way to Quonset huts, decommissioned barracks, and row on row of prefabricated housing. In 1947, slightly more than 49% of all American undergraduates were veterans. Classrooms, laboratories, and facilities expanded. Not only did the government spend billions of dollars without showing signs of going bankrupt, but a vast economic engine began to warm up and get ready to drive the country into prosperity. The fear, however, that connects government spending on education with the fear of governmental bankruptcy still persists, as does the

concern that a more open and socially equitable admission and support process will lower the academy's intellectual ceiling.

Despite these fears, enormous changes – in access, in financing, in curriculum, in the nature of student bodies and the professoriate, in the location of institutions of higher education – have been wrought in the country in the wake of the kinds of expansions enabled, in part, by the Morrill Act and the GI Bill. As a result, an unprecedented number and percentage of the country's population has had exposure to some kind of liberal arts education, frequently to fulfill requirements variously labeled as Core, General Education of Distribution. At the same time, the vocations for which higher education served as either training or social prerequisite also expanded at an unprecedented rate. Higher education, even in institutions committed to the liberal arts and sciences came to include courses of study that were obviously vocational or that served to prepare students to undertake such courses of study in the future in pursuit of graduate or professional degrees. Fueled by an ethos of democratization, higher education became much more directly implicated in the creation of a national workforce and the management of almost every other socially important institution in the country. At the present moment, I think it is fair to say, higher education as it is presently organized in the United States, whether that education is offered by the state or by the private sector, whether its bedrock is secular or religious, is overwhelmingly and officially committed to admitting and educating students without prejudices pointed at the students' wealth or social status.

Clearly, this commitment works imperfectly, at best and, currently, it is showing signs of fraying altogether. A student loan and a trust fund are manifestly not identical. Parents or scholarships not based on economic need support some students, while others must rely on their own paid labor or go deeply into debt to provide funds to pay the bills, even as escalating tuition costs and fee increases have made it virtually impossible for students truly to work their own way through college. Nonetheless, it is important to realize and support this commitment – and urge its realization closer to, not farther from perfection – precisely because the compact IS so fundamentally different from that offered by either the older universities – organized along lines that replicated and guaranteed social stratification – or the emerging narrowly proprietary for-profit institutions. In addition – and particularly in the absence, really, of any other competing social institutions – military service and imprisonment are the only two alternatives that I can think of – institutions of higher education offer the largest, most legitimate, and most hopeful opportunity for students – especially of the age of traditional undergraduates – to move in some combination of literalness and imagination beyond the confines of their immediate neighborhoods and test themselves against measures – personal, as well as intellectual – that don't spring simply from the traditional assumptions of their local clans.

The genius of this system is not invested in any particular curriculum and still less in any particular conclusion. Precisely on the contrary, the genius of this system rests in its capacity to help us live with ambiguity and conflict. To the extent that we can truly understand that in human life and social intercourse what you see is limited by

where you stand, that interpretations – and even facts – vary with time and circumstance, that what is taken-for-granted and natural in one time or place is questioned and contested in another, we become prepared to admit that someone will always be there to argue with us when we're most sure we're right. And we're able to live -- in peace, if not always in harmony -- inside the argument

The expansion of access to higher education that I have been tracing in this talk, is rooted, I believe, in democratic values and in the assumption that democracy requires an educated citizenry not so much to understand today as because you don't know what's going to happen tomorrow. Set against this position, it would be naïve to deny, there is a competing view that see education not as a public good but rather as an economic benefit to the individual for which, ultimately, the individual student, not as citizen but as consumer, must be responsible. The distinction between these two belief systems can be read also in the struggle within higher education between those who see the curriculum as making a direct connection between the present student and the future worker and those who see it, in precisely opposite terms, as enabling a space between the present and the future, the human being and the worker. It is visible in the competition within and between disciplines for programming support, in the divisions on many campuses between science and technology on one side and the “softer” liberal arts on the other, in the semi-serious assertion that research is defined by its capacity to bring in overhead money. It can be read, as well, in the tension between the desire to maintain the university as a place designed to take the long view, value intellectual ferment, and foster

social critique and the discontent with that desire that is registered by a focus on short-term efficiency, production, and the bottom line.

When times are hard and circumstances dangerous it is tempting to lower our sights, pull in our horizons, hunker down, and focus narrowly on what appears to be immediate self interest. Specifically, when the dissenting views universities permit become too noisy or disruptive it is tempting – and certainly easier – to blame the universities rather than reform the world. The noise that started on college campuses in the 1960s finds its opposing echo in the current economic retrenchment and a sense of public hostility towards academe.

I began by saying that I know it is foolish to confuse education with virtue and wicked to conflate intellectual knowledge with either ethics or morality. Wisdom, however, seldom springs from ignorance. And it is certainly both true and useful to remember that one of Philosophy's goals is to enable the individual to think about the nature of the Good in relationship to the leading of his or her own life. Jacob in the Old Testament wrestled all night with an angel until the angel blessed him and gave him a new name. I've also thought the image of that epic battle was a perfect metaphor for the process of acquiring an education: a struggle between worlds, fueled by discontent and outrage, with the prospect of transforming triumph. Democratic access to higher education enables both the struggle and the victory. Education, inevitably imperfect, inevitably a work in progress, is worth its discontents. Two cheers.