LIBERAL LEARNING*
HENRY M. WRISTON
PRESIDENT, BROWN UNIVERSITY

ONE of the most common assumptions about education is that it must take its color from its environment, and serve those wants of which society is most acutely conscious at the moment. If that were really true, there would be no reason to speak of a liberal education today, for the contemporary world is not organized around forces directed toward freedom. Politics, international relations, and social controls are largely predicated upon economic determinism in many nations. Once economic determinism is accepted as a philosophical principle, totalitarianism becomes the necessary program in government. And the totalitarian spirit is so antithetical to the liberal ideal that whenever practice approximates, or even approaches, totalitarianism, everything liberal that falls across its path is destroyed. When the state is supreme, liberal education is almost impossible.

Economic determinism, in one of its crudest forms, appears in the current emphasis upon the distinction between the "haves" and the "have nots" among nations. Of course there are differences in wealth, in natural resources, and in size; no one would deny that there are differences in the quality of economic opportunity, and strategic location. Not all the wisdom in the world, nor all its resources, can ever erect mountain barriers in the plains, or throw down ranges of mountains when they exist in inconvenient places. Nor can natural resources be extemporized. But the distinction between the "haves" and the "have nots" is utterly dishonest when used as a basis for unethical action. In private life it encourages theft; in public life it has condoned the most savage international brutalities.

The results of this presumption of the domination of education by its environment are profoundly apparent in America today. One is tempted to say that they are disastrously apparent. We have had ten years of economic hardship; memory of them is so sharp that if courage is feeble, those ten years are likely to blot from our view many earlier years of wealth and progress, our

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tremendous resources, our magnificent location, our unparalleled opportunities, and all the blessings which have been showered upon us. Because of an overly deep concern regarding economic factors, such as unemployment, there has been a tremendous drive against liberal education. We have been urged to put our principal emphasis upon defensive measures, and to train our youth for jobs as the most essential step.

There has been a marked manifestation of fear that unless we abandon liberal traditions in education and turn our energies into so-called practical lines, revolution is just around the corner. Nearly one hundred and fifty years ago, Edmund Burke said, "Nothing is so rash as fear; and the counsels of pusillanimity very rarely put off, whilst they are always sure to aggravate, the evils from which they would fly . . . ." Never has there been a clearer and more transparent manifestation of the validity of Burke's dictum than in the results of scurrying away from a time-tested liberal tradition in education, as though it were responsible for our troubles. The problems of youth have always been serious, and they have been accentuated by the depression, but the over-emphasis which speaks of "a lost generation" and of "the tragedy of youth" comes from counsels of fear. Every defensive move proves rash and makes the situation worse.

Fortunately, as long as there is freedom, education need not take its color from its environment. Indeed, if it reflects its environment, it fails to achieve and exercise its highest function. In point of fact, education exists not to reflect, but to alter, its environment. It exists to redress the balance of the mind and to bring into focus those riches of the human spirit which the certified public accountant cannot enter upon a commercial balance sheet. It is another proof that the soul should stamp itself upon the environment.

During the last hundred years there has been a beautiful illustration of this fact, almost upon a laboratory scale, in Denmark. Having first lost Sweden and then Norway, it was later deprived by Bismarck of Schleswig and Holstein. Its people, if any in the world, might legitimately have complained that they did not have "lebensraum." They were forced to win a breathing space from the sea by dikes; from dune and heath by grasses and forestation. Yet from the meagerest of natural resources they have built an effective economy. Indeed, they have done something infinitely
more. They have turned from a tradition of warfare into paths of peace, and they have made that transition, not because they had a surfeit of wealth, not because they exercised the authority of a great power, not because they held a position of leadership in science or technology, not because their techniques were superior. They have achieved their present relatively happy status because they quit crying for the moon and embraced the good earth. They have ceased pitying themselves and have accepted the beauty and the joy of life as of more value than its loss and pain.

They did this under the inspiration of an idealist; Bishop Grundtvig denounced the hot pursuit of an "assured livelihood," or, as we would call it today, "economic security." Any refusal by a people to accept the hazards of life and to take the bitter with the sweet seemed to him to demonstrate that they had lost their energy and independence and love of learning. Therefore, he sought to give them neither agricultural education, though there was imperative need to improve their farming, nor technical education, though it was essential to improve their manufactures; instead he proposed "for each individual the development and enlightenment which bring their own reward."

Let us accept those words as an adequate definition of a liberal education. They show it to be an experience valid within itself, wholly self-justified. They make clear the fact that it is not mere preparation for the professions, or even (an absurd phrase!) "for life." Whatever their nationalistic tendencies, Grundtvig and his disciples demonstrated with complete finality how ridiculous is the fiction that a liberal education is confined within the boundaries of an established and immutable pattern of studies. They answered forever the mistaken assertion that liberal learning is the esoteric possession of the intellectual elite, for they showed that the peasantry profited richly and permanently from its disciplines. The fruits of those disciplines were intellectual perspective, warmth of emotional response, and power of critical thought.

Those words, "the development and enlightenment which bring their own reward," just about a century old, were sneered at by the self-styled realists. Men were crying for bread and this mad bishop would give them nothing substantial, only words. It was asserted in Denmark then, as it is asserted in America now, that man cannot eat beauty, that he cannot subsist upon poetry and literature and music. Grundtvig's response was the inevitable
response of the liberal educator everywhere, always, "Man shall not live by bread alone," and he will live more happily, more effectively, more richly with fewer economic goods, if he have treasures of the mind and spirit. He saw, what must always lie at the root of liberal education, that wisdom is more essential than skill. He insisted upon the fact familiar to all liberal educators, that the wise man may acquire skill, while there is no evidence that the skillful man will become wise.

If skill alone could solve our problems, we would be well off. The gifts which science and technology have given to mankind have vastly increased our power. The slaves of the lamp, the slaves of the machine do the bidding of the humblest. They have enormously increased capacities for achievement, but they have equally increased capacities for destruction. Skill without wisdom, skill without self-discipline, skill without ethics only make the descent to hell, always easy, just so much swifter and more catastrophic.

The world is not suffering primarily from shortages of food or clothing or resources; if that were so, the major energies of mankind would not now be turned into non-productive armaments. The most conspicuous fact in the world today is not that the economic system is out of balance, that there are men who are ill-fed, ill-housed, and ill-clothed; all that is trivial beside the fact that the moral system is so frightfully out of balance that a man without ethical perception can put a great spiritual leader into a concentration camp; that greed for power can devastate the architectural richness of Spain, reduce millions of its people to penury, and provide a tremendous opportunity for the spread of disease; that lust for power can reduce the most ancient civilization extant in the world to ashes,—as in China. The world is suffering, in short, from bad faith, from deliberate refusal to be bound by ethical concepts and a denial of the obligation to exercise self-discipline.

Even so, there can be no clearer illustration of the futility of force when it comes into competition with the human spirit than the migration of the Chinese colleges and universities westward, away from Japanese domination. It may be possible to conquer the land, it may be possible to seize resources, it may be possible to control cities with their trade and commerce, but courage is beyond capture and the human spirit may remain free even though the body is in bondage.
In this free nation, in the strongest strategic position in the world—in a military sense not only, but in an economic sense as well—we should blush at our doubts and fears. We should repent our lamentations because part of the cream has been skimmed from the richest milk in the world, because part of the profit has disappeared from the most effective industrial system in the world. We should recognize that the way out of the financial and economic chaos is not through technical skills alone, but even more through a spiritual and intellectual regeneration.

This University is manifestation enough that economic troubles are not overwhelming. When it was founded a century ago, not one of those devoted men, making profound sacrifices for its establishment, could in his wildest dreams have imagined a scene of such beauty as that which surrounds us, such comfort as that which has become commonplace, such resources in library and laboratory as now we take for granted. It was established for precisely the same purposes that Bishop Grundtvig was pleading at the same moment in Denmark; he wanted his schools to perform for the intellectual and emotional life of the students what the church did for the spiritual life of the people. This University, small as it then was, poverty stricken as it now appears to have been, was dedicated to that specific purpose. Indeed, it was guided by the church and had a spiritual aim as definite and as clearly perceived as its intellectual objective.

If at a critical moment in the history of our times, after an expansion in resources and opportunities which has been closely paralleled in other institutions in the United States; if under such circumstances we betray those courageous, those single-minded men of a hundred years ago by abandoning the liberal ideal because, forsooth, after the fat years we have lean years, then, indeed, courage is dead. Then, indeed, the words of the prophet shall have been fulfilled, “Where there is no vision, the people perish.” Rather let this institution and others which have grown with it continue to develop their scientific techniques and improve their skills, remembering always, however, that those are secondary achievements,—that the central facts in life are the enfranchisement of the mind, the refinement of emotional response, and the release of spiritual energies. To those ends, whether in prosperity or in adversity, may Duke University ever be dedicated.