

**TO WHAT END
EDUCATION? -
VOCATION OR VIRTUE?**

PETER A. BENOLIEL

**Chairman of the Board
Quaker Chemical Corporation**

**Delivered at Bloomsburg University
Bloomsburg, Pennsylvania, September 28, 1995**

It was Jonathan Swift who observed, "Tis an old maxim in the schools that flattery is the food of fools." Naturally, I was most flattered to have been asked by President Kozloff to be the inaugural speaker at your New President's Forum Program. And given my bent and interest in education, it's perhaps just as natural that I stand before you as a fool. So, though a fool, I am not so foolish as to claim special expertise or insight.

I have chosen the subject of education for several obvious reasons:

1. It's a hot topic and always has been!
2. Virtually everyone has a view on the matter.
3. Presumably, some of you have more than a passing interest in the subject, else you wouldn't be here.

My chosen title poses the question, "To What End Education - Vocation or Virtue?" Both, I reply, most emphatically!

A definition of terms seems to be called for though I can offer no utter preciseness. When I speak of vocation, I make reference to a multiplicity of activities that enable employment and legitimate sources of income, but a definition of vocation doesn't stop there. The word vocation has as its root the Latin verb "vocare", to call; hence, a calling. The word implies more than a job

or a succession of jobs. As Edwin J. Delattre, then President of St. John's College, so succinctly pointed out in an essay entitled "Real Career Education Comes from the Liberal Arts", there is a ". . . difference between a vocation and an occupation, between having a calling and having a job . . . The former characterized as aspiring . . . to a life of fulfillment partly through one's work." So, when I speak of vocation I mean more than activities that merely enable ready employment and a source of income.

Virtue is a more difficult and, in my usage, a much more imprecise term. If we look in the dictionary we see among several definitions "Moral excellence, uprightness, goodness." Of course, this only begs the question. What is "moral excellence" or "uprightness" or "goodness?" I am using virtue in a broader, Aristotelian sense to encompass the notion of a way of life, a way of behaving that enables a human being to be fulfilled across the spectrum of human needs - self, familial, work, communal, philanthropic, and spiritual.

Now that I have definitions posited, however imprecisely, I come to my thesis which is a rather straightforward one. We have in this country a rather confused notion of what we mean when we use the term "education" and its expected outcomes. I would venture that the vast majority of people look to education as a means to prepare people for work, and there the expectation ends, hence, a "vocation", or even more to the point, a job, as its end. There are some of us

who would quarrel with that outcome and strongly assert that it is merely a part of what should be a much greater whole. Indeed, if one looks up the word "educate" in the dictionary, the first meaning generally given relates to a process of "nourishing" or "rearing", followed by the notion of "schooling" or "training." So, you see, right from the start I am a strong proponent that education properly encompasses more than vocational training and should be a process that prepares us for life in its fullest, and this can only come about through helping an individual develop his or her greatest potential as a human being.

Put another way, education should nourish intellectual and spiritual development. It should teach us how to learn and, thus, provide the intellectual tools and a broader context for training activities. Finally, and most importantly, education is a lifetime pursuit which has the potential of enabling us to transform experience to enlightened wisdom. Put as directly as I can, a first-rate education, which encompasses family upbringing and is ongoing, prepares us to live lives that are productive, satisfying, and fulfilling.

For the most part I do not think that our secondary schools or institutions of higher learning are providing quality educational experiences for our students. Naturally, there are exceptions.

There is an irony in all of this. Not so long ago a national poll was taken

that indicated that approximately 80% of the people felt there were severe problems with our educational system. Interestingly, some 80% of the same respondents felt that there was no problem with their particular schools! Something doesn't add up!

A further irony resides in the fact that while we do not have a shared vision as to the quality of our schools, notwithstanding a general dissatisfaction, we do have a shared vision regarding the very essence of our nation. I don't have to tell you that it resides in our Declaration of Independence which posits the justification of any government to be the guarantor of "certain inalienable rights" - "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." Later, I will come back to this as our touchstone as a possible basis of shared aspirations for our educational systems.

Lest I appear too pretentious in my concerns, allow me to put things in historical perspective. In anything I say I am reflecting an angst which has been with the human race for at least six thousand years of recorded history. I remember many years ago coming across a quotation that I can only paraphrase in the familiar adage, "I just don't know what is to become of the younger generation." I cannot vouch for historical accuracy, but the quotation was attributed to an unnamed Egyptian around 3000 B.C.! Of course, we are much more familiar with the educational concerns of Fourth Century B.C. Greeks, especially Plato in his training of philosopher kings

in *The Republic*.

Over time, schooling began to take on a more formal structure, culminating in the founding of the university system during Medieval times. We would do well to look at what was the basic framework of education in that period. I speak of the Trivium which encompassed grammar, rhetoric and logic, and the Quadrivium made up of arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music. As we move forward into the Renaissance, there was much spoken and written debate upon the means to effect a proper education. Figures such as Lorenzo Valla, Leonardo Bruni, Phillip Melanchthon, and Erasmus discussed the means and purposes of education with particular emphasis on the Trivium - combined with the *Ars Historica* as the necessary preparation for active participation in the life of the community, the latter in contrast to the Medieval emphasis on preparation for the church.

I won't further belabor this historical recitation other than to suggest from the very beginnings of our nation we have had a continuing debate as to the means, ends, and quality of our educational system. Early in this century such towering figures as John Dewey and Horace Mann influenced and induced major reforms in our secondary school systems. As our universities became more specialized, such figures as Alec Meiklejohn, Robert Hutchins, Stringfellow Barr, Scott Buchanan, and Mortimer Adler have been earnest and effective proponents of the liberal arts as the core of higher

educational endeavors.

In the last several decades we have had no end of reports that speak of the decline in the quality of our educational system, along with agendas for improvement. Indeed, the passage of Goals 2000: Educate America Act in 1994 with strong by-partisan support suggests that a national consensus to address the situation has emerged. But has it?

In 1994 the Committee for Economic Development (CED) issued a report entitled, *Putting Learning First: Governing and Managing the School for Higher Achievement*. In its opening paragraph, it cites "Only 7 percent of U.S. seventeen year olds can handle complex math problems involving algebra, and only 20 percent can write at an adequate level."

Approximately 25% of our high school students go on to higher education. Of these, a goodly percentage of them need remedial English in order to pursue their studies. What we have, then, are institutions of higher learning doing what the secondary schools should have accomplished. Think of the lost time and progress during a prime learning period of a student's life, age 14 to 18! Remember, the 80% problem in our schools and the concomitant 80% of each particular school being satisfactory - singular evidence of our low level of expectations.

We need only to look around to see that we may be in trouble. As reported on July 5 of this year, the American

Federation of Teachers concluded a study of three European educational testing systems. They found that students in France, Germany and Scotland reached higher levels of achievement and do so at an earlier age than American students. We also have read of similar comparisons with schools in the Eastern Hemisphere, particularly Japan where students have significantly higher levels of achievement in language skills, mathematics and scientific principles.

Thomas Jefferson, in 1799, wrote that doing mathematical computations was a "delicious luxury." This is clearly no longer the case. Without a sufficiently sound foundation in mathematics and science, American children will not be prepared for higher education and the training they will need in a technological and knowledge-intensive economy. In turn, the U.S. workforce will not be competitive in the global marketplace.

As we look at a recent profile of college graduates (1988 - 1989), slightly over one million Bachelors Degrees were conferred by all institutions of higher education. Sixty-five percent (65%) of these degrees were in very specific vocational fields. The remaining thirty-five percent (35%) encompassed such disciplines as liberal/general studies, life sciences, mathematics, philosophy and religion, physical sciences and technologies, psychology, and social sciences. As you all well know, mere statistics do not much inform us of the quality of the four years that are represented by these degrees. One thing

that we can induce from these statistics, however, is that, at best, a third of our students are getting something that may more broadly prepare them for a vocation and life. In making such a statement, I do not wish to imply that the remaining two-thirds of our students are all ill-prepared. Rather, I induce that for the most part they have been afforded a rather narrow educational (read training) experience that might make them obsolete in a few years and, most likely, will have narrowed their options, expectations, and outlook. Quite honestly, this is conjecture on my part and cannot purport to represent the reality when it comes down to specific individuals and specific institutions, nevertheless it is strongly suggestive and corroborated by experience.

Of the 65% population that receives degrees in specific vocational pursuits, some two-hundred and fifty thousand (250,000) (or about 40%) received Degrees in Business and Management. I strongly suggest that undergraduate years could be better spent in pursuing liberal studies including in-depth exposure to arts and letters and rigorous instruction in the physical, life, and social sciences.

Let me try to make some connections with the workplace today. There is hardly a day we don't pick up the newspapers to find that major corporations are laying off thousands of blue and white collar workers. Why? - to be competitive in a global economy. The cost of doing business must be reduced, and the only way this is done is by changing the processes within a business. What is driving this

phenomenon? Automation. Computers and related information technologies have enabled the acceleration and multiplicity of the processes of production, financial transactions, and information sharing. In turn, this translates into losses of millions of jobs. Computer technology has brought about major discontinuities in our economy and society that only can be compared to the Industrial Revolution of 240 years ago.

In a recent statement published by the Committee for Economic Development entitled, *American Workers and Economic Change*, the changing dimensions of skills needed in the new workplace are enumerated. I quote extensively:

1. From Hands-On to Hands-Off

Skills in the emerging economy are increasingly peripheral to hands-on work. As technology subsumes the repetitive aspects of work, human labor becomes peripheral to the actual fabrication of goods and the delivery of services.

2. From Particular to General

As the context for using skill shifts from repetitive applications to varied uses, skills requirements are shifting from the job-specific to more general competencies.

3. From Concrete to Abstract

Increasingly, jobs require that workers spend more time sitting in front of computer screens wrestling with

abstractions or interacting with colleagues, suppliers or customers. . . . As physical tasks become mental tasks and thinking becomes procedural, communication and higher-order conceptual skills become more important for making the abstract more concrete.

4. From Solitary to Interactive

In the new economy, jobs are more social. Hierarchies are in decline, and informal networks are more important. Continuous processes and shared information are replacing sequential work processes. . . .

5. From Repetition to Handling Exceptions

Because the reach of technology is subsuming repetitive work functions, human capital is used more and more to handle exceptions to routine production and service delivery. This is the reason our white-collar and technical elites have always been required to have reserve skills. . . . The critical difference in the new economy is that our elites and our non-supervisory workers need a reservoir of skills that are deeper and broader than used to be required on the job.

6. From Specialization to Convergence

Jobs and their skill requirements are becoming more alike. Skill convergence is driven from the top down and the bottom up. . . . The more flexible and powerful technologies free up non-supervisory labor for more general

responsibilities."

What is this telling us? Quite simply, for people to obtain and hold jobs in the new workplace, they must have a wider array of skills, the ability to learn in a rapidly changing technological and work environment, the ability to deal with the abstract and to conceptualize, the ability to undertake complex problem-solving, and the ability to interact effectively in a non-hierarchical structure. Narrow vocational training is hardly suited to prepare such a work force. Will our average high-school graduate cut the mustard? Given the outcomes we read about, particularly in comparison with similar age groups in other countries with whom we compete, it would hardly seem so. The comparative low rates of literacy, borderline comprehension skills, and the weak computational skills, which characterize today's high school graduate, suggest their employability to be marginal, at best, and, indeed, in the larger sense, puts our country's economic well being at risk. And we haven't even touched upon the larger issues of human potential and development which is what a good education should be all about.

The challenge to our secondary schooling system is obvious, and I am hardly the first one to address it. There are many initiatives underway. I need look no further than my own locale and School Superintendent David Hornbeck's "Children Achieving" initiatives in the Philadelphia Public School System. The real question is whether we as a nation in

our various communities and school districts, truly recognize the problems and have the political and economic will to address them.

Goals 2000 notwithstanding, we as a nation seem to eschew standards when it comes to one of our most important undertakings - education. I would submit that if we are to be competitive we must insist on certain minimum standards of achievement in:

1. Literacy and reading comprehension in English.
2. Oral and written expression in English.
3. Some proficiency in a second language.
4. Computational and mathematical skills.
5. Understanding of scientific methods and principles in both the life and physical sciences.

While more difficult to measure and probably not susceptible to national standards, we should insist that no one graduate from high school without a grounding in our spiritual and historical heritage. Focus, naturally, should be on our national and Western heritage, posited, however superficially, within a broader global context. To what do I refer when I speak of our heritage? Specifically, literature, myth and religion, history, rudiments of government

(in my day called Civics), art and music. We owe this to all our youth whether they have higher educational ambitions or not. It is only in this way that we not only prepare them for employment in the new workplace but, hopefully, enable them to know how to learn and provide the basis of greater self-awareness and self-development as they mature. It is only in this way we as a nation can hope to have a viable economy and responsible government. I am speaking about preparing our children for work, citizenship, and life.

Joshua R. Chamberlain, the hero of Little Round Top in the Battle of Gettysburg, on reflecting some years later upon the Civil War and its after effects noted: ". . . the expressed interest and . . . purpose of our fathers in establishing the government of one great people and the inborn right of every human being to make the best of himself [makes it] the duty of all to help do this."

Is this not a worthy ideal for our secondary educational institutions?

I might add parenthetically that Chamberlain was an educator of high attainment having served as president of Bowdoin College after having been Governor of his native state of Maine following the War Between the States.

Permit me to now move on to consideration of higher education. I would submit that the majority of our college graduates:

1. Have inadequate oral and writing

skills.

2. Have less than adequate computational and mathematical skills.
3. Have less than adequate understanding of basic scientific principles.
4. Are barely aware of our national and world history.
5. Are marginally informed of our Western artistic, scientific, philosophical, and spiritual heritage.
6. Are unaware of other cultures and their contributions to mankind.

In making the above charges, I am not suggesting that all students are ignorant of all of the above. Rather, for the most part they are, and, at best, unevenly and inadequately aware of how little they know. Yet, we celebrate the fact that our society offers higher education to a greater number of students than in any other country in the world. As previously pointed out, some two-thirds of these students are getting degrees in particular vocational fields, more akin to training. As important as that may be, are we rendering educational justice? Are we adequately preparing students to cope in a rapidly changing technological and global environment? Should we not provide the context for vocational training? And what about our obligation to nourish the minds, the hearts, and the spirits of our

young people?

I now come back to our touchstone. Amidst the bewildering and oftentimes unseemly antagonisms of special and narrow interests, I rather suspect that all of us as U.S. citizens share Thomas Jefferson's vision of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

Let's talk about our educational system in relation to these three notions.

Life

Should not our educational offerings open doors to the breadth and depth of human knowledge, expand horizons, develop intellectual faculties, challenge individual opinions, and nourish spirits? Isn't this what education should be really addressing - preparing us to live life to the fullest?

Liberty

How little we seem to understand the notion of liberty as expressed in the Declaration of Independence. Liberty means the freedom to live a life, but a life intertwined with others with concomitant responsibilities and obligations. It is important to keep in mind that both the signers of the Declaration of Independence and the framers of the Constitutions (in many cases, the same individuals) understood this very well. That is why our founding fathers addressed so seriously the question of how liberty was to be

encompassed and enlivened within a national structure, hence, the difficult job of framing the Constitution and having it adopted. One only has to read the *Federalist Papers* of Jay, Madison and Hamilton to better understand the issues, those of states' rights, the protection of the minority versus the majority, issues that were alive then and are alive still today.

Many of our founding fathers were, for the most part, educated, along the lines I cited above. At the very least they were skilled in the trivium (grammar, rhetoric, logic) and had every expectation that citizens of the United States of America would be so as well. How else would they be able to sustain, in Lincoln's words, ". . .government of the people, by the people, for the people .."?

Pursuit of Happiness

And now I come to the most difficult notion posed by Thomas Jefferson, namely, "the pursuit of happiness." What did he mean by that phrase? What did he have in mind? In truth, I don't think any of us can know with any certainty, but we have clues. First of all, Jefferson was a very learned man, deeply schooled and engaged in the liberal arts. He was versed in mathematics, indeed, familiar with the calculus of Isaac Newton, having read the *Principia*. He was interested in the natural sciences, particularly physics and biology, and was known to collect specimens of plant and animal life in his native Virginia. He was an architect and, indeed, designed his home, "Monticello"

and the plans for the University of Virginia. He was a proficient violinist and loved to hear and play music. He was deeply schooled in our Western philosophical heritage having read Plato and Aristotle in Ancient Greek, and Virgil, Cicero and Seneca in Latin.

He was our nation's Minister in Paris at the outbreak of the French Revolution and was an astute observer of government processes, whether despotic or democratic. He had a deep background in political philosophy and had read John Locke's *Concerning Civic Government*. Indeed, it was from Locke that he derived the phrase "Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness", although in Locke it read "life, liberty and property."

Now this was a monumental change on the part of Thomas Jefferson. The right to own property is something most of us hold near and dear to our hearts, is guaranteed under our Constitution, and a very concrete idea. But, the notion of the pursuit of happiness is amorphous at best and begs definition that, thus far, I have not provided in any meaningful semblance. Let me try. At the start of this talk some interminable minutes ago, I made reference to the Aristotelian notion of virtue. Actually, it was Socrates who first began to ask such revolutionary questions as "What is virtue?" and "What constitutes the good life?" It was his pupil, indeed, disciple, Plato who captures these questions and hints of answers in such compelling dialogues as *The Crito* and *The Apology*. And finally, it is Plato's pupil, Aristotle, who

essays more precise descriptions of happiness, the good life and, indeed, virtue.

Thomas Jefferson was well acquainted with Plato and Aristotle. Indeed, we can be certain that he had read the *Nicomachean Ethics* where Aristotle discusses at length what constitutes happiness for a man. Oversimplified, it goes something like this - a man achieves virtue and, in turn, happiness by developing and practicing good habits of conduct - not engaging in excesses or deficiencies but practicing the "Golden Mean" in his behavior, and by being a contributing member of society and recognized as such. A man's happiness is wrapped up in something beyond himself, a higher purpose than himself, namely, living as a contributing member of society and in harmony with that society. A man that is able to do so throughout his life, indeed achieves happiness. I would submit that it was this larger definition of happiness that Jefferson had in mind in crafting the words of the Declaration of Independence.

I have rambled quite a bit and, perhaps, you have lost the thrust of my remarks. Quite simply, I am advocating an education curricula which enables proficiency in certain skill sets, outcomes meeting national academic standards, and familiarity with our historical and cultural heritage.

We owe this as a minimum to each and every high school graduate in this country. It sounds like a tall order but

many schools have done it in the past and are doing it today. It is a question of societal expectations and will. We owe nothing less to our children if they are to be prepared for the work place, to be thoughtful citizens and to lead productive lives.

Higher education should, indeed, build upon the above foundation of knowledge and proficiencies, enriching and deepening. Vocational disciplines should not be confused with academic pursuits, but rather offered as stand-alone curricula leading to certificates or licenses for specific vocational undertakings.

In sum, then, I am advocating a broadly encompassing education both for our high school and college students. In doing so, I am positing the notion that it is the best preparation for:

- A vocation, keeping in mind the root of the word being "vocare", a calling, which hopefully leads to a satisfactory career.
- Responsible citizenship.
- A virtuous life, "the pursuit of happiness" wherein one's intellectual, communal, and spiritual development is optimized.

Taken together, vocation, citizenship and virtue encompass what is meaningful, satisfying and perhaps noble in life. Our system of education, both secondary and higher, should enable and

nourish the greatest within us.

Robert Goheen, former Ambassador to India and President of Princeton University, put it most eloquently when he stated that an education at its best has the power ". . . to nourish a mind . . . enliven and enlarge a man's conscious jurisdiction to draw out our potential for awareness for rational understanding. It seems to extend our capacities for beneficial service, for responsible action, wherever we happen to find our chosen work."

Vocation and Virtue!