

The Arts and Humanities as Basics
Talk to the Retired Teachers, Woldale School

Much of what follows was prepared originally as a plea for the arts and humanities before the Council of Academic Deans at Central Washington University. The occasion was a hearing given over to long-range planning. The threat was the rise of technical and vocational training at the University, a rise some of us fear could be at the expense of the arts and humanities. It's intriguing that -- with a few changes -- that statement, prepared for a roomful of deans and vice-presidents and the like, may have some things to say to a roomful of real, live fresh-from-the-trenches teachers, from the primary grades up through secondary, at least some of whom are worried that the swing to a conservative interest in basic skills and vocationalism could threaten the arts and humanities in grade and high school. What follows is still a plea for the arts and humanities, a plea and a modest suggestion of one way to keep the arts and humanities in the education of our elementary and secondary children.

At any level people who are teaching the arts and humanities are stewards of the traditional knowledge of our culture. A steward is "One called to exercise responsible care over possessions entrusted to him." That brief definition speaks volumes: A steward is "one called." We are called to exercise not just care, but **responsible** care. And the possessions, by definition valuable, are **entrusted** to us. People who teach the arts and humanities have been called to a very special responsibility, a very precious trust.

It is not unusual to talk about how our teachers are entrusted with the care of our most priceless resource -- our children. What I am suggesting is that not just the students are precious: so too is the subject matter.

And the possessions entrusted to the teachers' stewardship are not only precious; they are fragile. As old as they are, as taken for granted as they might be, as easy as it may be to do platitudinous lip-service to them -- the arts and humanities remain enormously fragile. Their lessons and values can be lost, even irretrievably so, in a twinkling, through the best-intentioned acts of neglect. Think of the immensity and suddenness of the cultural loss in modern China under Chairman Mao. These cultural possessions are easily lost, and once lost, very difficult to regain, in part because once they are lost, too few people know enough even to recognize that anything is missing. That is one of the most scary things about all this: By the time the values of the arts and humanities have begun to be lost, people aren't even able to miss them.

One of the things at issue here is freedom. Freedom is essential. An essential function of education in a democratic society is the preparation of its citizens for freedom. Our newspapers and evening news give us too many examples of the social price we pay for people who are not able to handle the freedom they are guaranteed and the personal power that that freedom gives them. Freedom, the capacity for enlightened choice, flows out of knowledge, and essential to that knowledge is a sense of context, a sense of what has gone into getting us where we are, what mistakes have been made,

what great thoughts thought, what great works of art created. And it is never too early for youngsters to begin acquiring their sense of cultural context. That, it seems to me, is what makes the arts and humanities so important in the education of our children, early and late.

The current emphasis on basic academic skills is intended to improve our future students' mastery of those basic skills, clearly a laudable and noble intention. But some of us fear an unexpected twist: The increased emphasis on academic basics in the schools could mean less time spent on the so-called "fringe" areas represented by the arts and humanities. Those future students might well end up no better prepared and perhaps even a bit worse prepared in terms of the arts, of reflective thought, of an eye and ear for art and literature. They can be expected to be better prepared in their grasp of language, their own and that of other cultures, but they could easily end up being less well prepared in their sense of the values rendered in that language. They may have even less of a sense of their cultural context; they may be even less ready for the freedom guaranteed them as American men and women.

But how do we keep the arts and humanities in the elementary and secondary curriculum, with the constant pressure to add more and more and emphasize this and that in ways that consume immense amounts of time and energy?

One important step, I believe, is to disengage ourselves from the tentacles of the industrial-educational complex. That complex consists, on one hand, of the publishers and manufacturers of educational materials, and, on the other hand, it consists of the research universities, the agencies, the think-tanks that sustain themselves through ceaseless activity -- endless and repetitive studies that must be done with all of the hoke and trappings of the behavioral scientist's vision of the scientific process. These studies, often immensely expensive, must be done and redone and published and republished. Consider, for instance, the amount of money and time spent studying the traffic habits of white rats in educational psychology labs across the land! And now, after all those years, what difference has it really made?

One good reason for disengaging ourselves from this industrial-educational complex is that it has an overwhelming selfish interest in change: Just as our car manufacturers used to do before the Japanese and Germans taught them better, our publishers and materials manufacturers rely on planned obsolescence to keep up sales. And in a similar way, the little researchers in their little labs also must find something constantly new to natter over and study, else the promotions don't come and the grant money dries up. Transience is all!

Please understand that I am not denying either the possibility nor the value of progress. I believe in scholarship and research; I believe in the virtues and values of intellectual work. Heck, I even believe in human perfectibility, much to the bemusement of my more cynical colleagues. I simply would insist that not all data are necessarily knowledge, that not all knowledge is wisdom, and that certain kinds of change produce loss rather than gain.

The problem with mere change is that it can become so easily mindless. Last week I read a short study of how we ought to select the words we put on our students' spelling lists. It wasn't really wrong; it was simply mindless. Its author struggled hard to demonstrate that some students have more trouble spelling some longer words than they have spelling some short ones, the implication being that therefore we should not put longer words on the spelling lists. The unexamined assumption seems to be that we should only try to teach youngsters words that are easy for all of them to spell. Untangling the layers of mindlessness involved there would take too much time. My point here is simply that this fellow got caught in that academic version of planned obsolescence that leads to a sort of lunatic quest for change. The high-interest advocates have had their day, and the high-frequency types, too. And now he was going to try something different. And probably next month his claim will engender an equally mindless counterclaim.

I think it is very important for us to stand back from the manufacturer's interest in new and changing (and increasingly expensive) stuff and from this cockamamie research that keeps us and our materials spinning around, like those little round dolls that you can punch over but never down.

One place where this shows up, I believe, is in the reading and spelling materials. The reading texts seem to get to be more and more like the comic books that we are hoping to get the students beyond. The readers come to look more and more like comic books, the spellers more and more like coloring books. The manufacturers carefully ignore that embarrassing research that suggests that all that expensive color is probably more important to the selection committee than to the students and that illustrations, unless they are extremely thoughtfully done, can be distracting to a devastating degree.

One thing that we have surely learned about how we learn our language is that we all do learn it to a remarkably similar degree. And we manage this on the basis of hearing a very idiosyncratic, partial and biased sampling of the language. Our samples can be remarkably varied, even inadequate and misleading, and still we all pretty much learn the same language, and with remarkable ease. Most of the learning is done before we ever enter school. I believe this single fact has much to tell us about our reading and writing and spelling programs. One implication might be that, all other things being equal and assuming a good and concerned teacher, youngsters are going to learn to read and write and spell -- whatever this week's research study says and whatever the latest trendy trend is among the hucksters of educational materials and reform. And that fact gives us some breathing room. We could, for instance, have the kids read the stuff that seems to us to be important for them to read. We could have them write about the things that seem to us to be important for them to write. And, for that matter, they could learn to spell the words that we want them to learn to spell -- not because they are necessarily high interest words, nor because they are high frequency words, nor because they have the right number of syllables, or do or don't rhyme with *orange*. No we can teach them these words simply because we think people ought to be familiar with such words.

For instance, *symphony* is a nice word. To be sure, it has three syllables, which makes it, I suppose, a bit long, and it comes in quite low on the *Thorndike-Lorge Teacher's Word Book of 30,000 Words*, and it doesn't appear at all in *The New Iowa Spelling Scale*. But still *symphony* is a nice word for spelling: It refers to an important part of our cultural heritage. It has some nice metaphoric extended meanings. It provides a way into some historical observations. We can point out that it has a lot -- or at least a prefix -- in common with words like *sympathy* and even *symptom*. It's interesting and useful to know that that prefix means "Together" in all those words. Kids like to take things apart. Why not words? And *symphony* is related to *telephone* and *phonograph* and *stereophonic*, all of which contain the Greek base *phone*, meaning "Sound.". And here we are all of a sudden talking about the Greeks. So spelling gets us off into music and history and culture and philosophy and science and geography and lord knows what all, which, I would submit, is the way the arts and humanities are supposed to work for us.

During reading class, why must we settle for the committee-produced pap that fills so many pages of so many planned readers? That stuff is produced more by the art departments and marketing departments and the accountants and people who spend their lives writing stuff like that spelling study than it is by real writers and teachers. Instead of spending dreary hours comparing one reading series with another, series that tend very quickly to blur, like any porridge, into an undifferentiated mass, why not have our selection committees looking for reading material that talks about the things we think our kids should have in their minds and do it in a way that we can expect youngsters to handle, with a bit of help from their adults. I still can remember, indeed still have in my bookcase, *The Boy's King Arthur*, Sidney Lanier's version of Malory's tales of the Round Table. Someone bought it for me when I was in the second or third grade. It was and is a wonderful book. It contains maybe eight or ten marvelous and thoughtful illustrations by N.C. Wyeth, Andrew Wyeth's father. I can still remember sitting in my aunt's front yard, under a tree that bore boxes of peaches that remained always hard and green, reading that book, or more accurately, puzzling over it. What lines: "And when they came to the sword that the hand held, King Arthur took it up" or "Then that knight descended from his horse lightly like a valiant man, and put his shield afore him, and drew his sword, and so they came eagerly unto battle, and either gave other many great strokes, tracing and traversing, raising and foining, and hurtling together with their swords, as it were wild boars." Oh my! What boots it that to this day I do not know what *foining* means, or that it wasn't till many years later that I learned the meaning of *traversing*? So what if *afore* is an odd word that occurs, for all I know, only here and in Snuffy Smith? What if the phrase "either gave other many great strokes" is a bit quaint and would not be a good choice when your are taking your SAT's? So what?! Those lines ring. They come out of one little nook of our cultural heritage. They tie us back with the Middle Ages. They make the imagination spin. They begin to give us a sense of the all-important web of similarities and differences that tie us to those people of that long-lost time. They provide a context for cowboy shows and kung fu movies and CBS special reports on our Middle Eastern foreign policy. They can provide one little piece of that grand cultural context that can make our values and our freedom work.

Is it really necessary that youngsters be required to read instead the products of that industrial-educational complex that have usually had leached from them all traces of the rich cultural heritage they are meant to perpetuate? Our students will get all they need of that sort of spiritless pap soon enough, when they grow up and spend their days and nights watching "All My Children" and "Dallas." Surely selection committees can find reading materials with more grit: lovely retellings of the Greek and Roman myths, anecdotes and tales from history, simple biographies of our artists and musicians, tales of those men and women who have done the best that we have been able to do so far.

So the suggestion that I'm making here is disgustingly simple, even simple-minded: Some of us fear that the arts and humanities may get lost in the current preoccupation with basic language and mathematics, a very reasonable fear, it seems to me. So let's use the arts and humanities as the stuff of those basic language studies. Let the youngsters read and write and, odd to say, spell about those things that seem important to us in that artistic and humanistic heritage.

On one hand, you can see this suggestion as a call to guerilla warfare. On the other hand, you can see it as something noble sounding, like "convergent education," in which rather than compartmentalizing and parceling things out, we blend the things that are important to us into the things that are required of us. In his book *On Literacy: The Politics of the Word from Homer to the Age of Rock* Robert Pattison makes an eloquent case for the argument that teaching the husks of literacy, the mere forms of reading and writing, without the spirit, without what I'm calling here the humane values of that literacy, can lead only to exasperated teachers and stupefied students. "And when they came to the sword that the hand held, King Arthur took it up."