

The Disappearance of Liberal Education

❧ THE countries of the West are committed to universal, free, compulsory education. The United States first made this commitment and has extended it further than any other. In this country 92.5% of the children who are fourteen years old and 71.3% of those between fourteen and seventeen are in school. It will not be suggested that they are receiving the education that the democratic ideal requires. The West has not accepted the proposition that the democratic ideal demands liberal education for all. In the United States, at least, the prevailing opinion seems to be that the demands of that ideal are met by universal schooling, rather than by universal liberal education. What goes on in school is regarded as of relatively minor importance. The object appears to be to keep the child off the labor market and to detain him in comparatively sanitary surroundings until we are ready to have him go to work.

The results of universal, free, compulsory education in America can be acceptable only on the theory that the object of the schools is something other than education, that it is, for example, to keep the young from cluttering up homes and factories during a difficult period of their lives, or that it is to bring them together for social or recreational purposes.

These last purposes, those which are social and recreational, the American educational system, on a very low level, achieves. It throws young people together. Since this does not take any greater effort than is required to pass compulsory school laws and build buildings, the accomplishment of this purpose would not at first blush seem to be a matter for boasting. Yet we often hear of it as something we should be proud of, and even as something that should suggest to us the main line of a sound educational policy. We often hear that bringing young people together, having them work and play together, and having them organize themselves "democratically" are the great contributions to democracy that the educational system can make. This is an expansion of the doctrine that was popular in my youth about the moral benefits conferred on everybody through intercollegiate athletics, which was, in turn, an adaptation of the remark dubiously imputed to the Duke of Wellington about the relationship between the battle of Waterloo and the playing fields of Eton.

No one can deny the value of getting together, of learning to get along with others, of coming to appreciate the methods of organization and the duties of membership in an organization any more than one can deny the importance of physical health and sportsmanship. It seems on the face of it a trifle absurd, however, to go to the trouble of training and engaging teachers, of erecting laboratories and libraries, and of laying out a program of instruction and learning if, in effect, the curriculum is extra and the extra-curriculum is the heart of the matter.

It seems doubtful whether the purposes of the educational system can be found in the pursuit of objects that the Boy Scouts, the Y.M.C.A., and the local country club, to say nothing of the family and the church, purport to be pursuing. The unique function of the educational system would appear to have something to do with the mind. No other agency in the community sets itself up, or is set up, to train the mind. To the extent to which the educational system is diverted to other objects, to that extent the mind of the community is neglected.

This is not to say that the educational system should not contribute to the physical, social, and moral development of those committed to its charge. But the method of its contribution, apart from the facilities for extra-curriculum activities that it provides, is through the mind. The educational system seeks to establish the rational foundations for good physical, moral, and social behavior. These rational foundations are the result of liberal education.

Education is supposed to have something to do with intelligence. It was because of this connection that it was always assumed that if the people were to have political power they would have to have education. They would have to have it if they were to use their power intelligently. This was the basis of the Western commitment to universal, free, compulsory education. I have suggested that the kind of education that will develop the requisite intelligence for democratic citizenship is liberal education, education through great books and the liberal arts, a kind of education that has all but disappeared from the schools, colleges, and universities of the United States.

Why did this education disappear? It was the education of the Founding Fathers. It held sway until fifty years ago. Now it is almost gone. I attribute this phenomenon to two factors, internal decay and external confusion.

By the end of the first quarter of this century great books and the liberal arts had been destroyed by their teachers. The books had become the private domain of scholars. The word "classics" came to be limited to those works which were written in Greek and Latin. Whitehead refers to Wordsworth's remark about men of science who "murder to dissect" and properly observes: "In the past, classical scholars have been veritable assassins compared to them." The classical books, it was thought, could be studied only in the original languages, and a student might attend courses in Plato and Lucretius for years without discovering that they had any ideas. His professors were unlikely to be interested in ideas. They were interested in philological details. The liberal arts in their hands degenerated into meaningless drill.

Their reply to criticism and revolt was to demand, forgetting that interest is essential in education, that their courses be required. By the end of the first quarter of this century the great Greek and Latin writers were studied only to meet requirements for entrance to or graduation from college. Behind these tariff walls the professors who had many of the great writers and much of the liberal arts in their charge contentedly sat, oblivious of the fact that they were depriving the rising generation of an important part of their cultural heritage and the training needed to understand it, and oblivious also of the fact that they were depriving themselves of the reason for their existence.

Philosophy, history, and literature, and the disciplines that broke away from philosophy—political science, sociology, and psychology—suffered from another kind of decay, which resulted from a confusion that I shall refer to later, a confusion about the nature and scope of the scientific method. This confusion widened the break between those disciplines that split off from philosophy; it led professors of these disciplines up many blind alleys; and it produced profound

changes in philosophical study. The same influences cut the heart out of the study of history and literature.

In general the professors of the humanities and the social sciences and history, fascinated by the marvels of experimental natural science, were overpowered by the idea that similar marvels could be produced in their own fields by the use of the same methods. They also seemed convinced that any results obtained in these fields by any other methods were not worth achieving. This automatically ruled out writers previously thought great who had had the misfortune to live before the method of empirical natural science had reached its present predominance and who had never thought of applying it to problems and subject matters outside the range of empirical natural science. The insights of these writers were at once out of date; for they could, in the nature of the case, represent little but prejudice or guesswork, which it would be the object of the scientific method to sweep out of the way of progress.

Since the aim of philosophers, historians, and critics of literature and art, to say nothing of social scientists, was to be as "scientific" as possible, they could not concern themselves much with ideas or with the "unscientific" tradition of the West. Nor could they admit the utility of the liberal arts, apart from those associated with mathematics.

Meanwhile the idea of education for all became firmly established in the United States. The school-leaving age steadily rose. An unprecedented flood of pupils and students overwhelmed the schools, colleges, and universities, a flood that has gone on growing, with minor fluctuations, to this day. Merely to house and staff the educational enterprise was an undertaking that would have put a strain on the wealth and intelligence of any country.

The triumphs of industrialization, which made this educational expansion possible, resulted from triumphs of tech-

nology, which rested on triumphs of science, which were promoted by specialization. Specialization, experimental science, technology, and industrialization were new. Great books and the liberal arts were identified in the public mind with dead languages, arid routines, and an archaic, pre-scientific past. The march of progress could be speeded by getting rid of them, the public thought, and using scientific method and specialization for the double purpose of promoting technological advance and curing the social maladjustments that industrialization brought with it. This program would have the incidental value of restoring interest to its place in education and of preparing the young to take part in the new, specialized, scientific, technological, industrial, democratic society that was emerging, to join in raising the standard of living and in solving the dreadful problems that the effort to raise it was creating.

The revolt against the classical dissectors and drillmasters was justified. So was the new interest in experimental science. The revolt against liberal education was not justified. Neither was the belief that the method of experimental science could replace the methods of history, philosophy, and the arts. As is common in educational discussion, the public had confused names and things. The dissectors and drillmasters had no more to do with liberal education than the ordinary college of liberal arts has to do with those arts today. And the fact that a method obtains sensational results in one field is no guarantee that it will obtain any results whatever in another.

Do science, technology, industrialization, and specialization render the Great Conversation irrelevant?

We have seen that industrialization makes liberal education more necessary than ever, and that the leisure it provides makes liberal education possible, for the first time, for everybody.

We have observed that the reorganization of the educational system would enable everybody to get a liberal education and to become a specialist as well.

I should like to add that specialization, instead of making the Great Conversation irrelevant, makes it more pertinent than ever. Specialization makes it harder to carry on any kind of conversation; but this calls for greater effort, not the abandonment of the attempt.

There can be little argument about the proposition that the task of the future is the creation of a community. Community seems to depend on communication. This requirement is not met by improvements in transportation or in mail, telegraph, telephone, or radio services. These technological advances are frightening, rather than reassuring, and disruptive, rather than unifying, in such a world as we have today. They are the means of bringing an enemy's bombs or propaganda into our homes.

The effectiveness of modern methods of communication in promoting a community depends on whether there is something intelligible and human to communicate. This, in turn, depends on a common language, a common stock of ideas, and common human standards. These the Great Conversation affords. Reading these books should make a man feel himself a member of the species and tradition that these books come from. He should recognize the ties that bind him to his fellow members of the species and tradition. He should be able to communicate, in a real sense, with other men.

Must the specialist be excluded from the community? If so, there can hardly be one; for increasingly in the West everybody is a specialist. The task is to have a community nevertheless, and to discover means of using specialties to promote it. This can be done through the Great Conversation. Through it the expert can discover the great common principles that underlie the specialties. Through it he can

bring ideas to bear upon his experience. In the light of the Great Conversation his special brand of knowledge loses its particularistic vices and becomes a means of penetrating the great books. The mathematical specialist, for example, can get further faster into the great mathematicians than a reader who is without his specialized training. With the help of great books, specialized knowledge can radiate out into a genuine interfiltration of common learning and common life.

Imagine the younger generation studying great books and learning the liberal arts. Imagine an adult population continuing to turn to the same sources of strength, inspiration, and communication. We could talk to one another then. We should be even better specialists than we are today because we could understand the history of our specialty and its relation to all the others. We would be better citizens and better men. We might turn out to be the nucleus of the world community.