

The Unexpected

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We learn humanity from humanity.

NO one is born civilized. We learn our humanity from humanity. Surrounded by decent, kindly people, a child slowly learns to subdue the savagery of his impulses. He learns to play and to work with his fellows, even to be considerate of them. He picks up a sense of what is good and what is to be cherished. In his head and heart an image forms of what life is and can be. And over the years he grows into a truly human person.

But alas! Many babies are born into the midst of all that is cheap and tawdry. The people they depend upon are coarse and gross, or even twisted and malign.

And even we luckier ones, we too live out our lives mostly in the mild company of mediocrity.

Yet every baby is capable of growing to some touch of greatness in his soul. Nor is this much a matter of the quality of his brain. Bright, or not-so-bright, a

human being can grope his way toward a satisfying fineness in the values he holds dear. Even a meager brain can support some cultivated joy in what is lovely—in things, in people, and in human relationships. It is not the intelligent alone whose character can shine forth in faith and truth and simple goodness. Those haunting potentialities that make man truly human are not the sole gift of high intellect. In these terms no man need settle for a low star to steer by.

Only—and this I think is the humanities idea—something from beyond must be brought into a life that is to rise. We can learn to be ordinary—no small thing!—from the ordinary people around us. But only the extraordinary can help us to go higher.

And the extraordinary is in short supply. With reasonable fortune a young person may be close to a few adults who can lift him—a parent or relative of rare quality, a great teacher or two, a friend in his church or neighborhood. But even for those who are this fortunate it is still

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too little. We simply cannot learn enough from those who happen to be nearby.

A Way of Approach

Ultimately, to learn humanity at its higher levels, we must all lean heavily upon *vicarious* contacts, still *learning from people*, but reaching out to them—to the fine and the great in all times and places—through whatever media will bring us closest. To establish this contact is the function of the humanities.

Interpreted thus, the humanities are not a body of subject matter. They are, rather, a way of approach, a set of purposes. Some subject fields, notably literature and music and the arts, have obvious and direct opportunities to serve the purposes. For poems and songs, sculpture and paintings, and the novel and biography and drama have the capacity to move people enormously. Yet mere technical instruction in these fields may have little to do with the humanities ideal. Conversely, in our times, the physical and social sciences and the burgeoning behavioral sciences such as psychology and anthropology may be taught so as to have tremendous humanizing values. And guided experience, through school activities or through service in the community, may for some be most significant of all.

For the humanities are never solely of the intellect, even though they will stretch the intellect to its furthest reaches; always they have to do also with emotions and feelings and ideals, with commitments to goals and cherished values. To "appreciate" a poem is never simply to know what it means, though that is involved; there is always some overtone of moving with the poet in the depth of one's being.

The power to reach the emotions is not

peculiar to a few subjects. Science may look more plainly intellectual, while music plays more clearly to the feelings. Yet it is in the sciences that many a youngster, left cold by art, will make his real response to beauty, form his lifelong commitment to truth, or even dedicate himself to serving mankind. If new fire enters a young spirit, what does it matter whether it comes from the lifework of Socrates, Michelangelo, or Beethoven—or from Madame Curie, Lincoln, or Churchill?

What this all adds up to is that we have a tremendous pool of new curricular resources to use for humanities purposes. To see the contrast, put yourself in the shoes of an educator in the centuries before our own. He had almost nothing to use but a handful of classics. Books were scarce, few students had ever seen a great work of art or heard a symphony. The natural sciences were rudimentary. Except for history—and that not well developed—the social sciences were virtually untouched. The behavioral sciences were still to be conceived. A meager curriculum it seems. Yet it could produce a Thomas Jefferson with such breadth of mind that at the height of violent crisis, he could lean back and see the whole thing as one phenomenon of the universal: "When, in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people. . . ."

Now we no longer need to depend on literature alone. Even if we did, what a new wealth of resources we should have! The literature of the world lies open before us—all the great heritage of minds and spirits that transcend our own—in the original or in excellent translation. It includes an unprecedented wealth of nonfiction of every conceivable sort, rooted in science, in social thought, and in a steady reexamination of morality.

New, too, is an unequalled resource of materials written directly to children and youth.

The excellent reproduction of art has become so inexpensive that its treasures can be brought to the schoolroom. The splendors of music find their way to us even more easily. Motion pictures and television open out still other resources. If we cannot get from the humanities a greater harvest than they have ever yielded before, it is not that we lack tools for their cultivation. One has a tantalizing sense that a great renaissance should be so easy!

Beyond an Elite

Yet it will not be easy. For we must face up to a task our forefathers never tried. In the spirit of their times they never thought to go beyond an elite. In the spirit of ours we must do our work with all. We must because our experience with democracy and universal education has given us at least some dawning intuition of what the common man can rise to. Yet we also know more than ever before about the great ranges of abilities and interests, and about the impact of social class and every aspect of background. To reach all with the humanities we shall have to make bold use of a tremendous diversity of means.

We have not tried that very much. All too often we act as if the only way to humanities goals is through a few dozen time-hallowed works. If great masses of our children do not hear the message of Shakespeare, we surrender altogether—often on the specious argument that we must not “lower the standards”—and just let them sit there in their alienation. Or we divert them into a curriculum of the ordinary and the “practical.” Now it is time to see that the authentic carriers

of the humanities are not few, but very numerous; not coming to us only in a few esoteric forms, but rather in immense variety, attuned to children and youth of every shape of ability and interest and background.

Even if we stick to traditional forms, our new teaching devices can open them out to many more students. We have many ways of building easy gradients to the lofty heights. For instance, the boy who gets little from reading *Macbeth* may tune in to it fairly well if he first hears one of the great recordings, or has his imagery stimulated by a motion picture.

But—and this is more fundamental—we must not limit ourselves to the traditional means. We need to hunt for the *moral equivalents* of the great, traditional vehicles.

For instance, week after week on television “The Defenders” presents a powerful plea for our institutions at their best, for freedom and justice and mercy. Does it not have a high element of moral equivalence to, say, the *Areopagitica*, for those who cannot read that lofty work—or even for those who can?

Or, if that is still too far up for some of the urchins who dawdle through our classes, how about “Bonanza”? Yes, I know, it contains violence. But, looked at thoughtfully, it is also a study of maturity and immaturity, of weakness and strength, of the tragedies that spring from twists in human character. It just might “work” as a starting point for some youngster who can’t see why the endless analysis of Hamlet’s waverings so fascinates his teacher.

Closer to the school’s usual offerings, every librarian knows books for a wide range of tastes. Owen Wister’s exciting Western, *The Virginian*, is not generally classed among the hundred great books,

but it is a classic study of a fellow who matures into a man. The adult model that emerges would not be bad for many a youngster to grow by, for a while. Or take *And Now Miguel*, the simple and beautiful story of a teen-age farm boy trying to join up with the menfolks. His struggle is a universal of adolescent life. Maybe there are more suitable versions of it for boys from the pavements, but boys and girls need *something* as they work to find themselves.

If even these easy stories are too hard for some—and I suppose they are—where do we look next? I am sure the media are there, waiting for us to use. We can find them if only we can shake off the stereotypes of “greatness” and start thinking of *validity*—validity for a given youngster as he now is.

Outside literature, there are media that make their demands less upon abstract intelligence. We ought to be grateful that one need not be academically smart to fall in love with music. Its resources are infinite, and it is not only the great symphony that has power to lead a person toward beauty and sensitivity and universal truth. Art, too, goes where verbal ability need not follow. Generations of Americans have taken their bearings on Abraham Lincoln, because they had sensitive photographs of that great man.

But one can also go completely outside the “cultural”—even to so lowly a subject as consumer education. You start talking about how to buy a bicycle or a dress and all at once the class can be pondering what’s worth working for in the first place. Suddenly, one day, you find yourself in a thoughtful analysis of the place of recreation in life, and how to develop a rich and balanced program. And that may lead to a realistic appraisal of what is possible in the poor part of

town; then your “apathetic” adolescents blaze out in righteous indignation on behalf of the underdog. Thus a philosophy of life can be got at in toughly realistic ways, with youngsters who are on poor terms with abstraction.

In Touch with Mankind

The truth is, it is dangerous to stereotype the humanities as a set body of subject matter. When we do, we often fall into mere technical instruction in that subject matter, teaching it for its own sake. We turn the almost-sacred field of literature into an arid waste of analysis and criticism, forgetting what the stuff was written for in the first place. We require everyone to read certain standard pieces, forgetting what good adult reading proves—that there is no one thing in all the world’s literature everybody has to like. We fall into serio-comic dogmas about no one’s really being educated until he can think in at least two languages. And, altogether, we get into a precious posture that no real writer would have anything to do with.

The humanities have work to do, real work, in a real world, with real people—all of them.

They have the power to help a young person find out what he wants to live for, to hammer out a set of values for himself, to work through to purposes that give him a personal meaning. They can help him identify with what is best in this old world of ours, and commit himself.

The humanities can lead a person toward taste and a sense of beauty, toward cherishing the beautiful in at least some of its varied forms. They can help him build resources for a rich inner life, toward inner dignity coupled with recreative fun.

They can help a young person get to know himself, with all his faults and virtues, to dig down into the less conscious wellsprings of his behavior. Getting acquainted with his emotions and his impulses can generate a new acceptance of the whole affective side of his nature and make it available to him as a source of strength. He can win through to a solid self-respect, and he will be free to love and be loved.

The humanities can do this by putting him in touch with all mankind in its whole sweep through history, helping him to identify with the human condition, with all that implies of bliss and sorrow, of success and failure. They can help him get in perspective. With their help he can develop a tough inner fiber to carry him through times of trouble.

They can help him to see things in the large, to hunt for the general answer in the confusion of specifics.

Capacity for Growth

The list could go on, but already the words disappoint me, as they probably do you. It is hard to catch the magic of the humanities in simple sentences. We get highflown, when we mean we just want to help youngsters understand and accept themselves and the people around them, get a better vision of what's possible for themselves and their society, build resources for a life with purpose and true pleasure, and quit settling for mediocrity.

Yet maybe it is not altogether bad to give voice to some very high purposes—if we really mean them. For we are not going to get anywhere till we genuinely see that just such things are perfectly, practically possible. The potential for all of them is there, in our children. That is how human beings are. More of them

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showed it, for a while, in Athens, when the conditions were right. More of them showed it again in the bustling days of the Renaissance and in Elizabethan England. They showed it marvelously when they came to these free shores and moved out on the frontiers and built this nation. It was never any accident, any more than it is an accident that with better nutrition each generation of our babies grows an inch taller.

An inch per generation in all the other dimensions of human goodness would not be a bad goal. Our babies are born with plenty of capacity for the growth. Our job is to see that the conditions are right for growing that unexpected inch.

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