The Second Coming of the Humanities

A Three-Act Drama of Tragedy or Triumph

The history of the humanities is a story of polarities: action/complacency; stability/inconsistency; unity/diversity. Within the past decade alone, the humanities have managed to touch upon each of the contradictory poles.

Act I—From Hope to Disappointment

In the early sixties, an aura of depersonalization enveloped American society. Technological "progress," which had promised to better the lot of man, had proven instead to be counterproductive. The machinery of life had become more sophisticated. Yet sophisticated machinery had somehow intensified human deprivation, unemployment, ignorance, misery, and hatred.

Concerned teachers, students, and laymen rose up in a spontaneous and unified movement for more humanistic studies in the nation's schools. Together they fashioned a rapid influx of "humanities" programs and courses into school curricula. In its early course, the movement exhibited firmness of purpose and direction. The movement was one of action, stability, and unity.

As has happened often in the history of the humanities, however, the movement soon lost sight of its original purposes. From a half-way house for a society degraded by technological "progress," the movement became an open marketplace in which teachers proudly displayed isolated and individualistic "courses" they had created. In effect, the movement had become little more than an accumulation of exercises in academic disciplines for teachers and students. In less than a decade, the Humanities Movement of the sixties had reached a stage of complacency, inconsistency, and diversity.

Act II—A Second Chance

Despite the relative failure of the Humanities Movement of the sixties to fulfill its purposes, social crises, which have been heightened by technological depersonalization, continue to swing public sentiment toward humanistic study in the schools. During these early years of the seventies, therefore, the humanities have a "second chance" to achieve those objectives proponents claim they can deliver, such as: (a) to develop an understanding of man; (b) to help students recognize the range of life's
alternatives; (c) to develop a moral and ethical system of priorities for social and individual action in times of stress.

Hopefully, in this, its second chance, humanities education will succeed. Current pressures for teacher accountability, performance contracting, and improved curricula strongly suggest that the public is willing to accept nothing less than success.

**Act III—At the Crossroads**

In order to achieve the objectives of humanities education, much more will be required than humanities “courses.” Such a goal will necessitate a restructuring of school curricula and school organization, specific training for teachers of humanities education, and a unified effort on the part of colleges/universities, elementary and secondary schools, state departments of education, and humanities organizations and teachers toward the establishment of common goals and model curricula.

Changes are beginning to occur in the character of humanities education. These changes, however, must be intensified, particularly in the following areas:

1. **Interdisciplinary Study.** There are strong currents against a traditionally rigid stance that the field of humanistic study is restricted to such disciplines as literature, philosophy, history, languages, music, and art. When the natural and social sciences were in their infancies, the humanities stood as man’s only access to an understanding of himself, of his purpose in life, and of his relation to other members of society.

   The natural and social sciences have come of age, however, and in many ways have demonstrated greater maturity and growth than the humanities. Scientists have come to realize that the consequences of science and technology must be a major concern of all men. Social scientists have always considered the betterment of man as the central focus of their study.

   Many humanities teachers have begun to incorporate the sciences into their programs. Unfortunately, many others fear that any tampering with the historical division of the humanities from the sciences will destroy man’s only weapon in the fight against many of the social crises created by the sciences.

   Social crises, however, have developed and flourished despite the artificial separation of the humanities from the sciences. The initiation of interdisciplinary study of the traditional humanities, natural sciences, and social sciences might well be the first step in acknowledging the fact that man’s good is more important than a petty warfare among scholars seeking disciplinary independence.

   Interdisciplinary study may well bring with it some bruised egos. Those who feel “bruised” may find some message in the words of Washington Irving, who commented that there is some relief to be found on a stagecoach by shifting one’s position from time to time to be bruised in a new place.

2. **Merger of Similar Movements.** The Humanities Movement, the Affective Education Movement, the Peace Education Movement, and the Alternative Schools Movement all are concerned with the improvement of American schools by reestablishing man rather than the machine as the first priority of society. An unfortunate truth of American education, however, has been the fact that diffusion, duplication, and a passion for individuality have dissipated efforts toward common goals.

   Parker, in lamenting the split of humanistic study into organizations such as the American Philological Association, MLA, NCTE, CEA, and many more, believes that the results far too often include indifference to common problems, a spirit of competition rather than cooperation, a further fragmentation of knowledge, and a prestige-seeking

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2 Indicated by teachers who attended the summer institute, “Designing Humanities Education for the ’70’s,” sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities, conducted by the Department of Education, Wittenberg University, August 13-26, 1972.
interference with the search for a liberal education. 3

Recent conferences of each of the movements have built into their programs a recognition of one another. Intensification of efforts to unify are necessary, however, in order to prevent a further split of humanistic study into more organizations than it presently is able to justify or support.

3. Specific Training Programs for Teachers of Humanities Education. To date, 12 colleges/universities are offering programs of training structured primarily for those individuals who intend to teach humanities courses or programs in secondary schools. Of the 12, nine are concerned with the training of future humanities teachers through interdisciplinary study and relevant education courses. Three universities provide programs devoted to a study of the humanities as a scholarly pursuit, with a secondary interest in the training of humanities teachers. 4

Approximately 15 states include divisions of the humanities within their departments of education. Two states have established certification standards for humanities teachers. 5

The National Association for Humanities Education just this year proposed guidelines for the preparation of humanities teachers. 6 The National Endowment for the Humanities has shown more of a desire than in previous years to fund research and institutes concerned with the teaching of the humanities. This action has balanced somewhat an earlier overcommitment to pure research of the humanities as disciplines.

Although all of these advances in the training of humanities teachers are encouraging, the commitment must be stronger and more far-reaching. As was cited earlier, the objectives of humanities education can be achieved only when colleges/universities, elementary and secondary schools, state departments of education, and humanities organizations and teachers view humanities education as a mutual responsibility.

Epilogue

There is a call today for comprehensive humanities programs, interdisciplinary study, and shared responsibility. While the call is not well-articulated or universal, its intent is discernible. It is a call for an approach to teaching and learning which focuses not so much upon specific and traditional disciplinary content as upon the notion of humaneness, and for humanistic education as distinguished from mechanistic and impersonal modes of dealing with man and his place in the universe. The approach would be upon man, the survival issues, and values, both moral and aesthetic. 7 Clearly it would involve any and all of the academic disciplines, as well as any and all of the educational institutions and organizations serving society.

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5 Ibid.

