

The Aims of Education: Wake Eager from Dreams to Share Your Gifts, Enter the Conversation, Know the Other, and Transform Communities

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“If then a practical end must be assigned to a university course, I say that it is that of training good members of society.”—John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University*

I am finishing my 8th week as Provost at Southern Vermont College, and I am as thrilled to be in front of you all today as I was when President Gross first offered me the position back in April. Even then I knew this was a special college. At SVC, we believe in the inherent worth—and seek to fulfill the potential—of every single student. Here, we espouse the ideals of John Dewey, whose words describing education as life itself are imprinted on the bench you come upon from the parking lot just before you enter the mansion. Like Dewey, we at SVC view the classroom as a laboratory, making learning experiential for all our learners and relevant to the public outside of our campus. As someone who grew up in the Merrimack Valley, in Lawrence and Methuen, Massachusetts, as the first one in my family to go to college, as someone who had no clue about the aims of education when I went to my Academic Convocation at Merrimack College in 1970, and as someone who has worked his entire academic life trying to advance the importance of higher education, I am deeply honored to be before you today, in western New England, specifically, southern Vermont. As I was in June when President Gross asked me to deliver this address, I am a little bit nervous about the talk; at the same time, I am very much looking forward to presenting my ideas about the aims of education. I haven't taken this talk very seriously, because it follows a tradition that has its origins in the University of Chicago—one of the world's most prestigious academies—where an Aims of Education address was first delivered in 1962. Related to this special kind of address, for those of you who don't know, in 1929, the great philosopher Alfred Lord Whitehead wrote an essay entitled “The Aims of Education.” Interestingly, in that piece, he offered two sentences in praise of students, and I would like to give them, as gifts, to all the students: “You . . . are the hope and resource of your country in the coming generation. All [the] great things that [your] generation is destined to do have to be done [by] some like you.”

We Wake Eager from Dreams to Share Our Gifts

The first part of my talk is based on a powerful section from an award-winning poem by Frances Driscoll. Here are her beautiful lines:

We wake eager from dreams

filled with blue things and designs for hats.

At breakfast, we make a song, chanting our litany

of so much collected blue. (“Island”)

I believe with all my heart that the aim of education is to enable our teachers to help their students wake eager from dreams so that they may become part of the educative process. This process of higher education is really an entrée into an ongoing human conversation to which all of us here are invited to contribute. Those of us wearing regalia

today believe that, as students, your active participation in such a conversation will make it possible for all of you to wear regalia at your Commencement. We also believe that this conversation which extends from the SVC courses you take will lead inexorably to a happier, healthier, more inclusive world. For me, as Provost, the chief aim of an SVC education involves this process: After working together with peers and professors, you students will return to your residences after every class or internship or clinical filled or field experience with the voices of those people with whom you worked and thus wake eager from your sleep-induced dreams to return enthusiastically to those conversations each and every day you are here.

But this is not everyone's aim of education.

I was able to hear Stanley Fish speak at the Annual Meeting of the Association of American Colleges and Universities in January 2004. Fish, a literary critic, became Dean of Arts and Sciences at the University of Illinois (Chicago)—a position he has now vacated. Fish has published widely, usually upholding the ideals of our nation's colleges and universities in his writing. He authored a column for *The Chronicle of Higher Education* in which some of what he said in January 2004 was originally published.

Repeated in *The New York Times* in May 2004, Fish's aims for educators were these:

that educators should do their job (and only their job) well;

that educators should not attempt to do the jobs of others for which they are not qualified; and

that educators should not let others do their job.

Here's a provocative citation from Fish:

You can reasonably set out to put your students in possession of a set of materials and equip them with a set of skills (interpretive, computational, laboratory, archival), and even perhaps (although this one is really iffy) install in them the same love of the subject that inspires your pedagogical efforts. You won't always succeed in accomplishing these things—even with the best of intentions and lesson plans there will always be inattentive or distracted students, frequently absent students, unprepared students, and on-another-planet students—but at least you will have a fighting chance given the fact that you've got them locked in a room with you for a few hours every week for four months.

You have little chance, however (and that's entirely a matter of serendipity), of determining what they will make of what you have offered them once the room is unlocked for the last time and they escape first into the space of someone else's obsession and then into the space of the wide world.

And you have no chance at all (short of discipleship that is itself suspect and dangerous) of determining what their behavior and values will be in those aspects of their lives that are not, in the strict sense of the word, academic. You might just make them into good researchers. *You can't make them into good people, and you shouldn't try.* (my emphasis)

Unless he is being playfully ironic, which is possible, I think Fish has it wrong, because I think these are the aims of education:

that educators should assist students in waking eager from dreams

to return to the conversations of their classes, clinicals, internships, and field experiences—as we do at SVC;

that educators should encourage their students to share their social and cognitive gifts in those classes, clinicals, internships, and field experiences—as we do at SVC;

that in those classes, clinicals, internships, and field experiences educators should model for students how to have respect for the other—as we do at SVC; and

that in those classes, clinicals, internships, and field experiences educators should prepare students for transformative action—as we do at SVC.

What I want to emphasize is that educators can nurture Newman’s “good members of society” through their teaching and the courses they develop—as we do at SVC—thereby preparing a generation of people who can help to mend a broken, post-9/11 world.

In my opinion, such development can occur only if colleges and universities hold mature conversations,¹ informed and robust dialogues, which will lead to an abundance of ideas, strategies, and solutions for repairing our globe. At SVC, as symbolized by what you brought here today and by what you were given today, we believe in the abundance of talents, or gifts, that resides in our student body; we will all enjoy the fruits of that abundance—here and in the communities we will all enter outside of this mansion’s majestic walls—refusing to acquiesce to the illusion that a scarcity of ideas, vision, ideals, and character is the inevitable condition of human existence.

Engaging Faculty and Students for a Part in Humankind’s Ongoing Conversation

These mature conversations that educators orchestrate in their classrooms will be the preparation their students will need to engage in the public debates about the important questions of the day. How do we prepare students and faculty to hold these mature conversations? I have already spent hours with the SVC faculty asking them to think about the following eight questions—questions that, when addressed with students, I think will be crucial to initiating these conversations at SVC and in the wider field of higher education:

1. How do I create a culture of belonging in my classroom, clinical, internship, and field experience?
2. How do I try to be a role model in my classroom, clinical, internship, and field experience?
3. How do I inspire accomplishment in my classroom, clinical, internship, and field experience?
4. How do I build excitement in my classroom, clinical, internship, and field experience?
5. How do I promote curiosity and creativity in my classroom, clinical, internship, and field experience?
6. How do I promote adventure and risk taking in my classroom, clinical, internship, and field experience?
7. How do I prepare those in my classroom, clinical, internship, and field experience for leadership?
8. How do I prepare those in my classroom, clinical, internship, and field experience for taking responsible actions?²

Attempting to answer these eight questions (and others like them) will certainly help the faculty to prepare students of character who may enter, with confidence and conviction, the various discourse communities to which they will be invited in their lifetimes.

Now, to be fair to Fish, I will say that he may have a point in asking educators to do best what they have been prepared to do: teach, research, create, produce, and disseminate. Sometimes, when educators allow their political ideologies and social programs to take precedence in their classrooms, they risk losing their hold on teaching the content for which they are credentialed and risk dismissing the educational needs of their students. Fish may also be following a tradition in offering his own perspective to the so-called culture of suspicion to which nineteenth century thinkers such as Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche contributed. In such a culture, the idea of character formation cannot thrive and will not be accepted. (As much as I loved Manny Ramirez when he played for the Red Sox, is his example of looking out for himself and the bottom line aligned with a character-building perspective? As Manny's recent escapade illustrates, at SVC and in the higher education field, we have many challenges to meet in preparing informed, active, and caring citizens who will contribute helpfully to our global community. Let's hope Manny matriculates here when he's done playing baseball!)

Now, if we look carefully, Fish's critique of character-building efforts by educators becomes less biting when one recognizes that his own reader-response criticism is based upon a theory—social constructionism—which has as its ideological origin the transformation of society and advances collaborative learning (i.e., dialogue among peers leading to understanding) as its pedagogical practice. In some ways, Fish wants it both ways. Fish asks faculty to nurture the intellectual life, in a community of knowledgeable peers, ultimately, teasing tender minds into thought—what he attempted to do at UIC after his tenure on the faculty at Duke. So, Fish surely must recognize that passionate engagement is the hallmark of the college or university. It is this passionate engagement which leads teachers and students through conversation toward community and the quest for truth and, ultimately, away from that narrow perspective which curtails conversation and debate.

Roughly two-thousand years ago, Quintilian recognized the importance of three disciplines—grammar, or the study of texts; rhetoric, or the production of texts; and logic, or the critical thinking ability to discern and to formulate a rational qualitative or quantitative argument—as he tried to assemble good men to carry on the ideals of Roman culture in his *Institutes of Oratory*. Today, in colleges and universities, we may return to these ideas and Quintilian's trivium, even as we acknowledge new literacies brought about by technological advances, new genre studies that prepare young women as well as young men for the public discourses that await them, debates about the environment, stem cell research, human reproductive health, and so forth. General education, core curriculums, at colleges and universities attempt these "greater expectations"³ by preparing students for living in and contributing to a world in which individuality—human dignity, individual rights, personal choice—is more and more interconnected with global systems of commerce and telecommunications. At colleges and universities like SVC, the curriculum can initiate this process by using reading, oral and written communication, critical and analytical reasoning, and reflection to explore the interaction among individuals and the various communities within which personal identity is cultivated. And they might advance these skills in multicontextual teaching and learning communities, both inside and outside the classroom.⁴ Educators have always accepted a responsibility to manifest hope and love in their teaching. These virtues, embodied by the

professor and passed on to be embraced by the student in collaborative, multicontextual, transformative educative spaces, will help to heal our broken world.

The Engaged Classroom within the “Rooted” Campus

As President of the National Urban Alliance, Eric Cooper points out that, currently, in America, we practice a *pedagogy of despair*, particularly for persons of color and for lots of other persons, too. A useful bumper sticker for the kind of approach that brings about such despair is offered by Lisa Delpit who has explained that, “When one ‘we’ gets to determine standards of learning for all ‘wes,’ then some ‘wes’ are in trouble!” Such a debilitating stance is very much like the oppressive banking approach to education that Paulo Freire described and denounced almost forty years ago: its process involves “P”rofessors, with a capital P, depositing information into “s”tudents, with a lower case s, and then withdrawing from the students the dividends of their deposits via exams and papers. Fortunately, Cooper also advocates a *pedagogy of hope*, a problem-posing pedagogy in which learners become teachers and teachers become learners—face to face in educative communities of which the classroom is but one to which everyone contributes and in which everyone participates. By practicing such a pedagogy people “develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation” (Freire).

Surely, it will take transformative thinking to show us all how to use our abundant talents, or gifts, to confront the racial, social, political, ideological, and cognitive challenges of our post-9/11 world. ***Right now, I would like to give you all “a chance to acknowledge and act upon the abundance each of [you] possesses” (Palmer). Please put your gift into the SVC back pack you were given and exchange your back pack with the person to your right or left, in front of you or in back of you.***

After this gesture, it should now be abundantly apparent to all of you that the rooted college, like SVC, is a community in which those in it see how much everyone has to offer to it. In such a rooted environment, educators will neither be isolated nor sullen nor downtrodden, seeking sustenance elsewhere—at professional meetings, away from their campuses, away from the persons they should be bringing inside their disciplinary circles and teaching their particular habits of mind. The current practice for encouraging faculty to revitalize themselves is to send them away to professional meetings or to provide them sabbatical leaves of absence. And these are fine and necessary benefits to provide the faculty. But a complementary course of action might be to offer faculty strategies to fashion a sustaining community through transdisciplinary programming that aims at extending to all the academy’s constituencies an opportunity to be contemplative and then to take action that will effect positive societal change. I think we all know that when we allow ourselves to be brought down by a *scarcity* of resources, the end result will be *isolation*. If we can be pumped up by the *abundance* that results from the sharing of resources, our gifts, then the happier result is *hope*. The rooted academy is *that* place where people share—through dialogue, conversation, and engagement—what gifts they have and where they are willing to receive these gifts, adding to what they already possess cognitively and socially, constructing a hopeful future.

Kafka’s “Metamorphosis” and the Academy as Change Agent

As I bring this address to a close, I would like to do so by talking a little about Franz Kafka’s short story, “The Metamorphosis.” If nothing else, the story’s title fits the

topic of this address because I have been talking about a stance that brings about change. I have spoken about changing the way people in the academy relate to one another, about changing the way they then are able to think about the communities they join and depart, and, ultimately, about the way in which they bring about positive change for those communities as well as for themselves. In “The Metamorphosis,” we find out that the protagonist, Gregor Samsa, “awoke one morning from uneasy dreams [to find] himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect.” Gregor certainly undergoes an enormous change here, but what if we were to examine that change, not as a nightmare, but as an opportunity, like that in Frances Driscoll’s poem which I cited at the beginning of this address: What if we were to consider Gregor’s metamorphosis as his taking a vulnerable risk to bring about change to his family’s situation, coaxing them into becoming a community able to withstand the forces that are driving them apart and, as in his own case, mad.

In the story, Gregor changes from being a beaten down person to caterpillar-like insect to nonexistent (he dies); Gregor’s family members—figuratively, in a cocoon for a long time—change from being isolated individuals (his asthmatic mother, his overweight and aging father, his frail and frivolous seventeen-year-old sister with few prospects) to a community that is able to stand up to the society of bloodsuckers, thereby getting their sustenance from one another.

“The Metamorphosis” ends this way:

Then they all three [Gregor’s father, mother, and sister] left the apartment, which was more than they had done for months, and went by tram into the open country outside the town. The tram, in which they were the only passengers, was filled with warm sunshine. Leaning comfortably back in their seats they canvassed their prospects for the future, and it appeared on closer inspection that these were not bad at all, for the jobs they had got, which so far they had never really discussed with each other, were all three admirable and likely to lead to better things later on. . . . it struck both Mr. and Mrs. Samsa, almost at the same moment, as they became aware of their daughter’s increasing vivacity, that in spite of all the sorrow of recent times, which had made her cheeks pale, she had bloomed into a pretty girl with a good figure. . . . And it was like a confirmation of their new dreams and excellent intentions that at the end of their journey their daughter sprang to her feet and stretched her young body.

The change here is unmistakable. We have witnessed the metamorphosis: from caterpillar-like Gregor—suffocating, alone, unloved in the city—to his butterfly-like sister, Grete—breathing in the air and the sunshine, adored, and loved in the country. Gregor’s family has become a community, now with opportunities for sharing in the abundance of their surroundings. All the change may be viewed as a result of Gregor’s risky leadership, the kind of leadership faculty and students will exhibit in the educative process I have been discussing. In fact, the metamorphosis here is reminiscent of Plato’s *Phaedrus*. In *Phaedrus*, Plato has Socrates lead Phaedrus away from the city to the country to change the location of the mature conversation in which they will engage. Like Gregor’s mother, father, and sister, like Socrates and Phaedrus, professors and teachers, need to learn how to love one another so as to effect a dialogue, a mature conversation, which will lead to positive change.

The bottom line is that, at SVC and in all higher education institutions, we educators want to bring our students inside our circles, our sacred spaces for teaching and learning, nudging them to complete projects we have started and may not be around to see through to fruition. To drive home this final point, I will cite Thomas M. Landy, founder and director of Collegium at Fairfield University and a member of the faculty at the College of the Holy Cross. Landy has pointed out that “the function of [rooted] intellectual life [is] to be leaven in the world, both to help transform creation and to be transformed by it.” A rooted academy can certainly ensure what the great social thinker and teacher Jonathan Kozol wishes for all of us, as teachers and learners, what I think SVC does better than any other college in America:

Resist the deadwood of predictability. Embrace the unexpected. . . . Celebrate silliness. Dig deep into the world of whim. Sprinkle your . . . lives, no matter how difficult many of those lives may be, [at times,] with hundreds of brightly colored seeds of jubilation. Enjoy the wild flowers!

Notes

¹ Tracy Shier has offered the idea that rooted colleges and universities must act by developing courses and programs in which these mature conversations can take place as a way to ensure positive change in the future.

² These questions are based on those in the work of Dr. Russell J. Quigley, Quigley Institute for Student Aspirations, Portland, ME, and Executive Director of the Global Institute for Student Aspirations, Endicott College.

³ Released in September 2002, the AAC & U’s report, entitled *Greater Expectations: a New Vision for Learning as a Nation Goes to College*, “calls for a dramatic reorganization of undergraduate education to ensure that all college aspirants receive not just access to college, but an education of lasting value. The panel offers new visions that will promote the kind of learning students need to meet emerging challenges in the workplace, in a diverse democracy, and in an interconnected world.”

⁴ Roberto A. Ibarra, Senior Consultant at the Southwest Wing of Ibis Consulting Group, Special Assistant to the Provost, and Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of New Mexico, is writing about how to reframe the context of higher education. Ibarra’s current research focuses on developing models for changing academic and corporate cultures. His *Beyond Affirmative Action* is based on an ethnographic

research project funded by the Ford Foundation to study Latino graduate students, faculty, administrators and non-academics across the country. That study uncovered a new approach to diversity (an active, collaborative-learning, *multi-contextual* model) that is becoming recognized as a new paradigm for educational change.

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