

Self-Education

President's Associates Dinner Remarks

November 17, 2000

I HAVE RECENTLY been thinking a great deal about Harvard, and about universities. And I thought I would simply share with you some ideas reaching as far back as the seventeenth century, and then forward to this very academic year.

I have a simple theme. I want to suggest that, insofar as education and teaching are concerned, matters have improved considerably over the past three hundred and more years. I will also say something about our current undergraduates and what it is like to teach them, since I tried doing precisely that earlier this year.

For many decades after the founding of Harvard College, the faculty consisted almost entirely of students who had very recently graduated (people we would now call graduate-student teaching fellows), with the sole exception of the president, who was often the lone adult in the professorial ranks. The undergraduates, meanwhile, were not always completely charming. In fact, they seemed at times so intractable that when Increase Mather, minister of the largest church in Boston, was invited to be president of Harvard, he replied, a little indelicately: "What? Should I

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[give up] preaching to 1500 souls . . . [in order] to expound to 40 or 50 children, few of them capable of [any] edification” whatsoever? So Mr. Mather, along with several others who were approached, decided that there were much greener pastures to be found elsewhere, as compared to whatever grass and clover were then growing in Harvard Yard.

Early in the eighteenth century, a young Boston newspaper reporter named Benjamin Franklin found great pleasure in regularly excoriating Harvard, whose students he regarded as ignorant and arrogant, as well as lazy and languid. Fashionable dress seems to have been one of their most intense preoccupations – a charge that appears to be at least partly borne out by the fact that, in 1754, Harvard College felt compelled to pass a new ordinance declaring that “every candidate for his degree [must] appear in black, or dark blue, or grey clothes, and that no one wear any silk nightgowns.”

We know at least as much about student discipline in those earlier eras as we do about anything academic. It does seem to have been the case, however, that plane geometry was about as far as most Harvard eighteenth- and even early nineteenth-century students progressed in mathematics. We know this because, toward the end of senior year, Harvard undergraduates engaged in an annual, solemn nighttime ritual in the Yard, presumably chanting and gesticulating as they went. At the conclusion of this festival rite, they buried, ceremoniously, a copy of Euclid’s *Elements*, bidding it *adios* forever.

We also know, from the diary and letters of a bright Princeton undergraduate of the same era, that his class succeeded in covering only about a dozen pages of his chemistry textbook after an entire year of study. And having gone to Princeton partly because of his strong interest in history, he found that there was absolutely no instruction in that subject during the whole of his first two terms – and not much in sight as he looked further down the road.

Given the fact that Harvard, Princeton, and some other col-

leges clearly graduated some intelligent, literate, well-informed, and capable leaders during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, we might well wonder how that could possibly have happened.

There are several reasons, but one in particular was important. Many of the gaps and other deficiencies of the cramped, prescribed curriculum, and often deadly teaching methods, did not cause nearly as much intellectual damage as we might imagine, because recent research on this subject has shown that student-organized debating societies, essay societies, literary and other publications, and similar activities created many of the most valuable and powerful learning experiences for undergraduates.

In fact, at Princeton, the two major debating societies had, in their own buildings, quite large libraries consisting of recent and contemporary books in philosophy, literature, history, religion, and other subjects: many of the books, in other words, that the college library was not itself acquiring.

So the students essentially created their own informal and lively curriculum, their own reading habits, and their own methods of teaching and learning – methods that were based mainly on discussion, argument, questioning, criticizing, and debating. Henry Adams, who graduated from Harvard in 1858, was absolutely withering about the College's formal curriculum and instruction. But looking back, half a century later, he wrote about his election in his senior year as Class Orator for Commencement. After his speech, one elderly gentleman commented on Adams' "perfect self-possession":

Self-possession indeed! [wrote Adams.] If Harvard College gave nothing else, it gave calm. For four years each student had been obliged to [present himself] daily before dozens of young men who knew each other to the last fibre. One had done little but read papers to Societies, or act comedy in the Hasty Pudding, not to speak of all sorts of regular exercises, and no audience in future life

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would ever be so intimately and terribly intelligent as these. . . . Self-possession was the strongest part of Harvard College, which certainly taught men to stand alone. . . . Whether this was, or was not, education, Henry Adams never knew. He was [however] ready to stand up before any audience in America or Europe, with nerves rather steadier for the excitement, but whether he should ever have anything to say, remained to be proved.¹

How Harvard managed to transform itself from the ossified methods of the 1850s or the 1750s into a different kind of college for serious and stimulating learning is an intriguing tale, but one that is much too long and complicated to relate on this occasion. But part of the answer was that Harvard found ways, in effect, to institutionalize in its formal curriculum and pedagogy many of the lively and energetic forms of learning that the students themselves were already practicing.

The prescribed course system, which allowed for very little student choice, was completely changed by President Eliot's creation of the "free elective system," which meant that the College soon needed a different kind of faculty, with much deeper knowledge across a much wider range of subjects. The "recitation system" of instruction (where students essentially memorized material and then "recited" what they knew in class) was gradually displaced by discussion groups designed to be, as President Eliot said, "Socratic" in nature.

Then, late in the nineteenth century, the teaching of science was also totally revamped. In 1886, the departments of chemistry, physics, botany, and zoology established experimental courses for entering freshmen. These departments, President Eliot wrote, "will be studying the difficult problem" of how "to teach a science of observation by experimental methods to young persons whose mental training has been received almost exclusively through book-study of languages and mathematics."

So in subject after subject, the student was placed in the posi-

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tion of being a much more active, inquiring, exploring agent: a co-participant in experimentation, or in library research for a seminar paper, or in any number of other activities.

By 1932, President Lowell was in a position to write about the nature of teaching and learning at Harvard in a way that would have been unthinkable a century earlier:

Teachers can impart facts – not, perhaps, better than an earnest student can get them from books – they can explain, present points of view, and, if the pupil is not too reluctant, they can stimulate and inspire; but unless the student desires, or is provoked, to learn, he will profit little. He must be made to educate himself, working out things by his own effort. . . . To absorb and give back the information and ideas of the teacher may win good [grades] in many courses, but for training and fortifying the mind it is less valuable than power acquired by voluntary exertion in pursuit of an object. In short, the essence of all institutions of higher learning should be self-education under guidance.²

So, in the space of about sixty or seventy years, Harvard College adopted and articulated a new vision for undergraduate education – a massive change that we now take more or less for granted. This is not to say, however, that everything worked as planned. In fact, President Lowell also wrote, more than once, about the fact that everyone

who has taught a freshman course in a subject requiring the use of books dealing with large questions is aware of the fact that freshmen can read paragraphs, or a few pages covering a definite point, but that they can rarely read a book; that is, they have not the habit of sustained thinking needed to grasp and hold a continuous line of thought and take in its full meaning.³

In short, we had our vision and our defined standards, but there was still a very great deal to do in terms of actually achieving the goals that we had set for ourselves.

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Well, how are we managing today? As you might expect, matters are (and always will be) rather less than perfect. But the situation is encouraging and exciting. To find out whether our current freshmen could read more than a paragraph in a sustained and intellectually coherent way – or write more than a paragraph – I decided to teach a mini-course to a dozen entering freshmen this past September, during the week *before* freshman orientation. We met for two hours every morning and two hours every afternoon for a week, with three papers due between Tuesday and Thursday. This was an intellectual version of Outward Bound and similar programs that we offer freshmen during that same week. Our seminar subject was lyric poetry – all sorts of poems from different periods, but a good deal of difficult twentieth-century verse.

I want to say a few words about how the students in our seminar coped with one very short poem, but before that, let me give you some sense of what these students were like, in their own words. In answer to a question concerning the kind of poetry that interested them, and whether they read any poetry in any languages other than English, I received answers such as:

I read poetry in French – mostly Racine, Hugo, and Apollinaire. I speak some Italian and made one enjoyable abortive attempt to read Dante's Inferno in the original. This summer I have had a lot of fun reading (slowly) The Canterbury Tales in the original, so in some sense I might be able to add Middle English to my list [of languages].

Then in response to a question concerning how they spent their last three summers, I received: “Double Session Football Camp”; “Youth Fellowship to Israel”; “Playing tennis and playing piano”; “Computer graphics programming”; “Five-Star Basketball Camp”; “Community Service Program on St. John's Island, South Carolina,” and so on.

I found myself, therefore, with a dozen public-spirited, athletic, poetry-readers, and the first poem that we discussed – a

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beguiling little bit of off-hand conversation – provoked quite strong reactions in the seminar.

This Is Just to Say

*I have eaten
the plums
that were in
the icebox*

*and which
you were probably
saving
for breakfast*

*Forgive me
they were delicious
so sweet
and so cold⁴*

Some students read the poem as a subtle but devastating exposé of human evasiveness and selfishness. The speaker is seen as trying to pass off his actions as a perfectly natural and understandable midnight raid on the icebox, with only a brief conventional apology to the other person – perhaps his wife. The speaker (according to this reading) doesn't seem to care that the plums were probably chosen to be shared at breakfast. He seems entirely insensitive, except that he's alert enough to realize he should at least admit to having done something that perhaps he should not have done.

Other students disagreed: the poem is not a profound moral drama. Rather, the poet is trying to record and present ordinary behavior that occurs every day between people who know each other very well and understand each other. There were the plums. The speaker was suddenly attracted to them. He disposed of them, and then he wrote a note to explain what happened. It shows the strength of the relationship and the easy trust between these two

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people, rather than exposing any great selfishness that threatens to divide them.

There were other readings and other views, and we talked for at least an hour, trying to see what we could make of these elusive lines that at first sight seemed so transparent. We did agree that this was a very carefully crafted poem and that it would be possible to trace the ways in which the lines are organized: the number of syllables in each word and line, the subtle patterning, the careful placement of key words and phrases – in short, the thoughtfully composed, subliminal order.

But what, after all, did we think the poem is “about”? We decided that something important *did* happen here: a form of transgression (eating the plums) followed by an appeal for forgiveness, with the two words “Forgive me” placed strategically and conspicuously as the first line of the last stanza.

At the same time, we concluded that the poem did not seem to be an exposé of deep selfishness on the speaker’s part. There is a sense in which this is a minor, modest transgression, well within the range of our ordinary, imperfect, everyday lives. In fact, as readers, we are almost invited to participate in eating the plums: the last three lines of the poem seem almost to celebrate – certainly to appreciate – the deliciousness and sweetness of the fruit. The objects of this world evoke desire. In that sense, they may be hazardous. On the other hand, we cannot very well do without them, and the poem seems to suggest that we are not wrong to respond to their beauty and to experience their bounty.

We sensed, in other words, a delicate balance in this situation. The daily ritual of a relationship – the expectation that things will be shared, and the important symbolic act of “breaking fast” together – has been momentarily disrupted. And yet, there is also an instantaneous act to repair the damage, with a note that is itself a gentle confession. We sense that forgiveness will be forthcoming, because the transgression is seen and felt to be understandable, even natural.

We even raised the possibility that there is here a very distant

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echo of Genesis, the Garden, and the Fall: forbidden fruit, indulgence, dislocation, and the need to find a way to reconcile. But if so, this is a *pianissimo* version, and these rather innocent plums are not at all tragic in their implications.

Further discussion led us to think about the poem as a metaphor for the very nature of human relationships – the way in which human communities must function if they are to remain healthy: every day there are innocent or less innocent temptations, potential falls and necessary repairs. The students talked about *their* experience of learning to live together as a new community – soon to be part of a much larger university community in which they themselves would be constantly sending and receiving signals or messages that would have to be patiently read and interpreted, and that might possibly begin with a line such as, “This is just to say.”

In effect, therefore, the poem, and our seminar, became one way of thinking about Harvard as a human place, as well as an academic place. And our few lines of verse seemed to reassure all of us that it was natural – in fact, inevitable – to stumble, and equally possible and natural to recover or restore equilibrium. Indeed, this process was central to the experience of learning, of growing, and of building relationships that would ultimately be more durable because they had been so fully tested.

There have been many wonderful moments during these past ten years at Harvard. And this week of teaching – of watching young people reach more deeply to understand words, implications, and meanings – was as important an experience as any I have had. I can now (should there have been any doubt) wholeheartedly testify that matters really *have* improved over these last three hundred years: our freshmen can, rather remarkably, read *many* paragraphs, entire volumes, and a great deal of difficult poetry with sustained intensity and comprehension. For this, and for so much more, Harvard is deeply and gratefully in the debt of friends such as you who have come together on this occasion, because it is your continuous engagement, interest, and generos-

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ity that make it possible, year after year, for us to bring such extraordinary students to this extraordinary College and University.

- 1 Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams: An Autobiography* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1918), 69.
- 2 A. Lawrence Lowell, *Report of the President to the Board of Overseers, 1931–32*, 7.
- 3 A. Lawrence Lowell, *Report of the President to the Board of Overseers, 1923–24*, 7.
- 4 William Carlos Williams, “This Is Just to Say,” *Collected Poems, 1909–1939, Volume 1* (New York: New Directions Publishing, 1986), 1: 372.

