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CHARACTER EDUCATION FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY: POSSIBILITIES OF A  
HUMANISTIC CURRICULUM

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CHARACTER EDUCATION FOR THE TWENTY-  
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BY THELMA B. THOMPSON

President's Address Delivered at the Fifty-Fourth  
Anniversary Convention of the CLA in Columbia, South  
Carolina, April 19, 1991

At this point in American history, few persons can question the supremacy of American technology and scientific might; yet, at this same juncture, most thinking persons are seriously concerned about the continued deterioration in American ethical life. Traditional standards of authority in the schools, the churches, the communities, and the homes that once influenced the characters of our young have eroded, leaving behind total indifference to the old influences and resulting in increased dishonesty in business and government, arrogance in the professions, stubborn problems such as drug addition, and a general insensitivity to the ideals and values that have led to earlier American successes.

The College Language Association, in this its fifty-fourth

year of existence, is keenly aware that something needs to be done because our own sense of well-being is indexed in some complicated manner to what transpires in the global arena. For example, whether or not educators in Virginia get a budget increase next year might very well depend upon the number of rebuilding contracts that Kuwait awards to Virginia contractors, or to how the oysters run in the Chesapeake Bay.

Beyond the somewhat mundane concern of financial well-being, however, are deeper concerns about the direction of future education and the leading roles that educators must play. In this modern age, some have lost sight of the original and popular purpose of education—to teach wisdom and virtue to the young and to ensure respect for culture and compassion for humanity. This old-fashioned ideal has given way to a view of the purpose of education that upsets the balance between the research function and the teaching function. The aggressive quest for “new knowledge” or “truth” sometimes ignores the fact that “old knowledge” may be truth as well. The emphasis is often to displace the old rather than to be guided by it, or to build upon it. The notion that esoteric research has no monetary value—that the promotion of the humanities, especially arts and letters, is not “cost-effective”—is a popular one in some academic administrative circles. Dr. John A. Howard points to an important change that has taken place in the academic circle in recent years with respect to values and traditions. He writes:

What had been thought to be wise and good in the moral realm had to be just as readily open to academic challenge as was the existing level of knowledge in any field of Science. In this atmosphere where the open mind was the supreme attribute, it was not appropriate to commit one's self to an affirmative cause. Such a commitment was anti-scholarly, anti-intellectual.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> John A. Howard, “The Challenge to Leadership: To Spread Hope,” in *Values and Virtues*, ed. Willard Pearson (Valley Forge: Valley Forge Military Academy, 1985), p. 18. Hereafter cited in the text.

It is in this theory that I find an explanation for the loss that we feel, for example, in encountering intellectual attitudes of some black literary superstars. Although blacks are the major subjects of their work, the objects of their publishers' marketing strategies, the reasons for their literary longevity, the theoretical roots of their rhymes, and their "people" when they are polled, many of these stars cannot commit themselves to speak at a CLA Convention or to visit our financially and politically threatened historically black institutions if "the price is not right." College Language Association Convention Program chairs try in vain to get even a response from some, and one chair was recently told, "I cannot commit myself so early for the 1992 CLA." The unspoken reason is that a better offer may come along. CLA professors have taught these writers, have taught our young students to admire, respect, and criticize their works, have kept them in print, but clearly that is the only purpose professors serve—a one-way supportive role. This is the general attitude to which W. E. B. Du Bois responds when he wrote in his *Autobiography* the following:

Perhaps the most extraordinary characteristic of current America is the attempt to reduce life to buying and selling. Life is not love unless it is sex and bought and sold. Life is not knowledge, save knowledge of technique of science for destruction. Life is not beauty except beauty for sale. Life is not art unless its price is high and it is sold for profit. . . . The greatest power in the land is not thought or ethics, but wealth. . . . Those responsible for the misuse of wealth escape responsibility, and even the owners of capital do not know for what it is being used and how.<sup>2</sup>

My urgent contention is that maybe teachers at all levels of education need to give some thought to character education—to values and ideals that have sustained our ancestors and us through the most difficult of times, and these are difficult times, politically, economically, socially, morally,

<sup>2</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Autobiography of W. E. B. Du Bois: A Soliloquy on Viewing My Life from the Last Decade of Its First Century* (New York: International, 1988), pp. 18-19.

and generally.

The end of the Cold War, the unification of Germany, success in the Persian Gulf, forgiving of foreign debts much initiated by proud Americans are outstanding national achievements in and by themselves, but for faculty and students, for CLA members, our struggles remain unchanged. Indeed, most of us are reaching into ourselves for the reserves of moral strength to take us through these times of four to five language classes each, pay cuts, budget decreases, classes of forty and more, excessive committee meetings, academic advising, various and sundry university services, community service, and family obligations. Yet, we are here today—most of us here at our own expense. The question is why? We are here because, as a late CLA member and friend, Darwin Turner, told me, “I go everywhere, but I come to CLA; I come home to CLA!”

The CLA is currently the closest realization to the coalition of historically black colleges that Du Bois envisioned, falling short in the scope, but proving, nonetheless, that we can work together for good. The underlying reason is that we are committed. We have a cause. We have moral reasons to be here. We believe in something common. We have broken the myths, by our very presence here today. We have shattered years of negative beliefs and are enjoying the magical mountaintop of academic exploration. Our characters were built. We were told the “right” things and if not, we questioned the lies. One professor told me that “literature was a man’s world,” another that a “monkey in a cage no matter how hard he tried, could never be like the man outside.” (*The Washington Post* and the *Hilltop* helped us send him back to Australia, I think.) It is character education that has made us persevere in the face of adversity, that is saving us now and that will save our students. According to John Howard, “character education . . . is the process of training the young to understand, embrace and abide by those informal codes of conduct which make liberty possible” (22). He believes:

America can raise itself from the dismal swamp of self-delusion and self-indulgence into which it has fallen. Our civilization has bounteously fed the body and starved the soul, so that the spirit of a nation is a pitiful and puny thing. We have ministered to the animal in man, but we have grossly neglected the divine spark that makes him more than animal. We should not be surprised then if the standards of civilized conduct are scorned, and the institutions of society are floundering in internal confusion and external hostility. (16-17)

John Ruskin (1819-1900) says, "To make children capable of honesty is the beginning of education."<sup>3</sup> Herbert Spencer (1820-1903) believed that education has for its object the formation of character,<sup>4</sup> and John Milton (1608-1674) sums it up best by declaring in his essay "On Education," his belief: "I call therefore a complete and generous education that which fits a man to perform justly, skillfully and magnanimously all the offices both private and public of peace and war."<sup>5</sup>

The United States Government is beginning slowly to realize, like Willy Loman, that some dreams are just that—hollow dreams. Here we stand on the threshold of the twenty-first century, commanding the powerful and awful secrets of modern technology, and yet some in our society are uneducated, miseducated; some are underfed, and thousands homeless. Here we claim that we understand the human mind, some of its illnesses and strengths, but our nation reaps little benefit from this new knowledge. Here we are as a nation, "perfect" in war but "confused" in peace. It is partially the diminished role of humanity in the minds of our leaders that binds us. We are trained to handle situations and crises from a distance, not to address simple human needs at close range. The enthusiasm of new leaders is often cancelled by their subsequent poor deci-

<sup>3</sup> John Ruskin, *Time and Tide* (London: George Allen, 1923), letter, viii.

<sup>4</sup> Herbert Spencer, *Social Statics, or the Conditions Essential to Human Happiness* (New York: Kelley, 1969), pt. 1, ch. 2, par. 4.

<sup>5</sup> J. Max Patrick, ed., *The Prose of John Milton* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1968), p. 232.

sions. Often, their decisions are outgrowths of their moral bases, and as a result human history becomes more and more a race between education and catastrophe.<sup>6</sup>

President Bush, the education President, quickly lit his "One Thousand Points of Light," and the National Service Legislation of 1989 recognizes the fact that "only people can help people." (Try telling your problems to the computerized telephone at your bank!) For American educators, these discoveries of the education President are old verities. We have been "Points of Light and Heat" for decades. We have held the torch, the candle, the naked electric bulb for generations. What about us who have warmed the country's heart with our concerns and our choirs, our poetry readings, art exhibits, science projects, and successful models most conceived in the nation's colleges and universities and birthed to the nation's credit?

But enough has always been enough and must be now. True to our commitment, we can neither stop now nor turn back. As enlightened visionaries, we must continue the tradition of giving of ourselves, of excellence in scholarship in the broad sense of discovery of knowledge, integration of knowledge, application of knowledge, and presentation of knowledge. Scholarship must continue to exhibit itself whether we are administrators, researchers, teachers, or any hybrid that our system so often creates.

This current situation—an apparent lack of recognition or appreciation—leaves us no choice other than to resort to magic, to self-affirmation, and to consolation. The magic of higher education today is that innumerable opportunities exist through the curriculum to tap into the nobler impulses of students. If we do not, who will? For example, public speaking classes might begin with analyses of great and inspiring speeches by our giants and masters of *nommo*, the word. Teach them what the scholar of African

<sup>6</sup> Herbert George Wells, *The Outline of History, Being a Plain History of Mankind* (New York: MacMillan, 1921), ch. 15.

culture, Janheinz Jahn, says:

All magic is word magic, incantations and exorcism, blessings and curses. Through *nommo*, the word, man establishes his mastery over things. . . . For the word holds the course of things in train and changes and transforms them. And since the word has this power every word is an effective word, every word is binding. And the muntu (man) is responsible for his word.<sup>7</sup>

Language mastery is a valid means of empowerment.

Educators need to grasp every opportunity to educate for character. I posit that this character education is transferable and when applied to other areas of education creates a solid base for perseverance, honor, and excellence. For example, literary and dramatic works to be studied in English and foreign language classes should pose unlimited opportunities to touch the aspirations and intellects of students. Lorraine Hansberry's uneducated character, Mamma, teaches her college-educated daughter in the classic play, *A Raisin in the Sun*. She instructs the insensitive Beneatha, and thus all readers, about appropriate thought and actions. She insists:

There is always something left to love. And if you ain't learned that you ain't learned nothing.

Have you cried for that boy today? I don't mean for yourself and for the family 'cause we lost the money. I mean for him; what he been through and what it done to him. Child, when do you think is the time to love somebody the most; when they done good and made things easy for everybody? That ain't the time at all. It is when he's at his lowest and can't believe in hisself 'cause the world done whipped him so.

When you starts measuring somebody—measure him right, child. Measure him right. Make sure you done taken into account what hills and valleys he come through before he got to wherever he is.<sup>8</sup>

How did this unschooled character know the essence of love? Is Hansberry demonstrating the lost habit of charac-

<sup>7</sup> Janheinz Jahn, *Muntu: An Outline of the New African Culture* (New York: Grove, 1961), pp. 132-33.

<sup>8</sup> Lorraine Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun*, in *Contemporary Black Drama*, ed. Clinton Oliver and Stephanie Sills (New York: Scribner, 1971), p. 116.



ter education as it once took place in the homes? Are we our brothers' keepers, anyway? Professors in the humanities ought not to be concerned with the accurate or the "right" answers, but rather must remain concerned with the ageless, "right" questions. Our students need to think about them. We in turn need some of these students to repeat those same questions and to raise others to their classes twenty years from now—and so we build a continuum of humanistic thought and strong character.

Is this approach of teaching ethics to students a part of our university's philosophy? Are we concerned with discussing ethical principles in our disciplines? Does this mean that those of us who do have such agendas are competing for students' interests? Maybe we are, but in this respect so, too, are the music industry, the insurance companies, and other service sectors of society.

To return to my starting point, however, there is still more that our curriculum can accomplish. Emerson said, "There is not history, only biography." Yes, to study a life is to study history. For example, the following statement written by W. E. B. Du Bois in his *Autobiography* is worthy of contemplation by students of economics, gerontology, and sociology. He writes:

Without a word of warning, I found myself at the age of 76 without employment and with less than \$5,000 of savings. . . . Not only was a great plan of scientific work killed at birth, but my own life was thrown into confusion. . . . A word from the poet Sara Teasdale expressed my mood:

When I can look life in the eyes,  
Grown calm and very coldly wise  
Life will have given me the Truth  
And taken in exchange—My youth.

Du Bois continues:

My youth? I laughed grimly. It was not my youth that I was losing; it was my old age; and old age was worthless in the United States.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Du Bois, pp. 323-24.

Our worldviews as well as our perception of our roles in this world are unquestionably influenced and formed by what we read, see, and discuss (Howard 24). Sometimes, we may have to help students learn what to feel. As our families get smaller and our schools get larger, many of our students have less of an opportunity to learn, to practice and enjoy socialization and intergenerational activities and have a greater possibility of misdirection.

Our university students need to learn about service, for any definition of a successful life should include a component on service. I had a recent experience that left me much hope. The students at my university requested more “cultural activities” on the campus, despite over sixty such activities this school year. A part of the answer should be a challenge to the students. Yes, they were told that in financially difficult times, funds are limited and that we cannot spend \$40,000 to bring an operatic star for one concert, but we should have told them, also, that their culture is within them, that they must find it and positive ways to express it. In the “good old days” we did not buy our culture from promoters. We students organized glee clubs, drama groups, round tables, dancing groups, teas, debating societies, photography displays, and so forth. We spoke and sang our culture and on other occasions listened as our mentors and administrators told us our past and suggested our futures. Youth must be challenged. They are capable of far more than is obvious. In the journals of the then nineteen-year-old college student Ralph Waldo Emerson, one finds the projection of this young man’s private visions that gave a framework to his life. At that tender age, Emerson wrote:

It conveys the most agreeable idea of Power to see a solitary individual, by the native force of intellect setting at work numerous and mighty engines in the midst of intelligent society, working in many ways upon the passions and interests of many men and inducing them to do what but yesterday appeared contrary to their views and profits . . . so that each solely bent on

doing his own part, is yet subservient to a harmonious whole.<sup>10</sup>

James Weldon Johnson, shortly before the untimely end of his life, returned to a professorship at Fisk University. He reduces the motivation of many educators to this simple confession:

There are thrills also in the contemplative life; and in it there are also fields on which causes may be won. I am almost amused at the eagerness with which I go to meet my classes. The pleasure of talking to them about the things that I have learned and the things that I have thought out for myself is supreme. And there is no less pleasure in drawing from them the things that they have learned and the things that they have thought out for themselves.<sup>11</sup>

Young people are capable of thought, but we must expect of them that thought which truly prepares them for real life and reflects strength of character.

William G. Doty supports this notion in his essay "Pedagogical and Epistemological Moralities." He points to the humanities as the place from which to attack "restrictive" institutionalization such as "oppositional thinking" and urges engagement in honest dialogue, not trivializing the importance of divergent thinking. He uses as his model the new "intellectual space," feminist realignment and its impact on the curriculum, demonstrating the moral constraints of knowledge. Parker J. Palmer also supports this thinking. He writes:

Feminist thought is not primarily about equal pay for equal work. . . . It is primarily about another way of seeing and therefore another way of being in the world. It is about an alternative epistemology.<sup>12</sup>

The dialogue must continue among scholars. The humani-

<sup>10</sup> William H. Gilman, et al., eds., *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson 1819-1834* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1960), p. 1822.

<sup>11</sup> James Weldon Johnson, *Along This Way: The Autobiography of James Weldon Johnson* (New York: Penguin, 1990), p. 409.

<sup>12</sup> Parker J. Palmer, *To Know As We Are Known: A Spirituality of Education* (San Francisco: Harper, 1983), p. 24.

ties curriculum, the sacred “cloak,” is being divided. In fact, it is a tale of a tug. Edward H. Rosenberry agrees that “humanistic studies should focus on what Matthew Arnold called ‘the best that has been thought and said.’” Rosenberry continues:

The question between us is whether the best is the sole province of the Western classics or an ongoing venturesome process, in which each age and each segment of the population that feels an identity expresses its own character and aspirations. . . . Excellence in Education must be the product, in part, of its content; nothing can come of nothing.<sup>13</sup>

I support Rosenberry’s theory that content is vital, but as important as content today is the need to teach students to read. No list of literary, culturally, politically correct readings means anything if it is not read or if it is not understood. One student in an oral report once told me, “Herman Melville was the man who wrote the movie *Moby Dick*.” Such is one of the dangers facing us today. Given the burden of volume and advancements in technology, we have to create new magic and reinfuse the word, *Nommo*. The “Word” is good and “will dwell among them” (students). Business majors should read Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*; law students, *The Merchant of Venice*; music students, Baldwin’s “Sonny’s Blues.” Reading the “required” texts is life-long reading, no matter how long the life.

The ethical charge to us, to universities, and to colleges is to help to reshape the vision of our students, to anticipate the freedoms that will define their lives and work and to prepare them to select and reject accordingly. As Doty says:

We sell ourselves short when we ignore the moral dimensions of knowing, when we convey the notion that ideas and artworks somehow float free of their socio-historical contexts, and when we veil our passion for knowing (or practice intellectual pathos). . . . We need to convey a disciplined athletics that reunites ethically the *psyche* and the *logos* and that recognizes the re-

<sup>13</sup> Edward H. Rosenberry, “The Embattled Humanities: Another View,” *The Key Reporter*, 54, No. 3 (1989), 1+.

sponsibility of the teacher scholar carried on behalf of the intellectual and pedagogical communities.<sup>14</sup>

Through character education, or education for living, youth as well as ourselves can find causes for optimism, even today.

Members of the College Language Association, we will be among the world's last optimists. Our fifty-four-year history is laden with proof of our stamina, our will and ability to survive and even flourish in difficult times. I ask that we, this year, renew ourselves and our talents. The students, this organization, and the world need us, our efforts, and our values.

*Norfolk State University  
Norfolk, Virginia*

<sup>14</sup> William G. Doty, "Pedagogical and Epistemological Moralities." *Humanities in the South*, Spring 1990, p. 8.