

THE BULLETIN OF
SOUTHWESTERN
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CONTINUING EDUCATION

by

LAURENCE F. KINNEY

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Southwestern at Memphis initiated its informal, non-credit program of liberal education for adults in 1945. The wide variety of types of discussion groups, of which Great Books has proved to be the most popular, encouraged a steady increase of interest and enrollment. During the past year 1,940 registrants took part in ninety-two groups organized by Southwestern's Adult Education Center, of which sixteen groups were established in fifteen communities outside of Memphis. Moreover the Southwestern program, so greatly stimulated and broadened by the substantial financial support and encouragement of the Fund for Adult Education, is sufficiently distinctive for it to have won wide attention as a pioneering venture. Emphasizing the liberal arts as the foundation for its adult program, Southwestern has consistently stressed those studies that will waken the sympathies, stir the imaginations, and broaden the perspectives of all who participate. Alone among institutions of higher learning, Southwestern has appointed a Dean of Alumni, whose principal function it is to encourage its own alumni and those of other institutions to continue their liberal education throughout their lifetime. Southwestern is thus in the forefront of those colleges that have given marked impetus to the growth of interest in continuing education for mature persons.

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Continuing Education

BY LAURENCE F. KINNEY

This is a do-it-yourself theme, for the only true education is self-education. Others can help; the learning must be our own. But there are many hindrances to this way of knowing.

There is abroad the notion that it is not necessary to think—that someone else will do it for us. This begins to operate very early in life. Parents turn their children over to the school system, where teachers are supposed to know what parents either never knew or have forgotten. The pupil suspects that if the learning were important, parents would know. Soon he discovers that in school it is not necessary to think: he must do some home work and pass some courses, in which he chiefly reflects the opinions of his teachers or authors. When he is older, he no longer needs even to read books or to pass courses. Somehow if thinking needs to be done someone else will do it.

Arnold Toynbee and Henry Luce draw very different pictures of our contemporary western world. Toynbee sees many signs of decay in our civilization—the presence of elements which combined to destroy some thirty earlier societies. The only possible renewal he envisages is that we may take intelligent action in time to meet the issues before us and set our civilization on the road to further advancement.¹ Henry Luce sees our western society standing on the brink of the greatest productive period in history. Through the application of applied science at the advanced level of automation, we are about to supply adequately the physical needs of men. Moreover, the team-work required for this achievement throws men into such co-operative endeavors that they thus learn the business of living together.²

¹Arnold Toynbee, *Civilization on Trial*

²Henry R. Luce, "A Speculation About A.D. 1980," *Fortune*, 1955.

The perplexing thing about these contrasting views is that both may be partly right. We certainly seem to be on the verge of phenomenal productive achievements. It seems over-simple, however, to believe that these accomplishments or the associations of men required to reach them will solve all or even the most important problems of our times. Unless we can extend intelligent action on a broader basis, the sickness of our society is likely to grow.

The do-it-yourself task which is most needed today is reflective thinking coupled with action based on that reflection. No one else can do this for us. The education required for a society to be free is not an end in itself. It is important just to know. But knowing is also important for action. As Thucydides said in the lines he placed in the mouth of Pericles: "We Athenians are most resolute in action because we are most reflective beforehand."

I. THE NEED FOR LIBERAL EDUCATION GROUNDED IN BASIC HUMAN TENDENCIES

We are faced with the need to keep active a process of reflective thinking because of man's tendency to fall out of harmony with his environment. I do not say, "fail to adjust to environment," for disharmonies can result, in part, from failures of men to adjust the environment as well as failure to adapt themselves. These disharmonies tend to take place in four areas of experience. Man tends to fall out of harmony with human beings, with nature, with the social structure which he creates, and with his own thought processes. These disharmonies rob him of his freedom. Let us consider them in order.

1. *Sub-Personal Relations*

Disharmony with human beings is expressed in man's aloneness which occurs even in the midst of teeming people. His relation to those around him tends to be exclusively utilitarian or superficial, leaving a haunting sense of dissatisfaction. In his isolation, he seeks to establish relationships on false bases, such as domination or submission, thereby increasing the estrangement. The relationship to persons as persons rests on mutual appreciation, a quality which is often missing. It is difficult for human understanding to grow in such infertile soil.

2. *Misuse of Nature*

Even man's physical environment has become an object of conquest rather than a home. He tries to bend nature as well as men to his will, rather than identifying himself with and participating in the common life and reality around him. And when nature is understood as one's total environment, we may reject the assumption that all reality exists merely for our use, and ask what our proper loyalties to *total reality* are.

3. *Withdrawal from Public Affairs*

Man fails to articulate even with the social institutions which he has founded. Ancient Greek citizens studied and practiced the arts of freedom. These studies thereby acquired their name of "liberal arts," as practices in which free men engaged. The participation of the Athenian citizen in the public affairs of his city lifted him out of routines of self-interest to broader concerns and activities. Modern democratic states are larger, and most public tasks are delegated to civil officials or are left to a few active citizens. Meanwhile, absorption in private affairs is a further deterrent to the practice of the liberating arts. The educational and moral values which spring from the assumption of public responsibilities suffer from this neglect in contemporary society.

4. *The Present State of Learning*

A basic disharmony which especially characterizes our time results from our present state of knowledge. This seems to be a period of great enlightenment but, paradoxically, the liberation which might result from learning in our scientific age is blocked by the very process which brought about our scientific achievements. Here we seem to be faced with the crux of the problem of the intellectual life in the Western world. This calls for deeper soundings.

The development in the size of states, with the accompanying tendency to delegate public functions to a few people, has its counterpart in the field of knowledge. The expanding body of knowledge and the specialized techniques for learning undermine the confidence of all except a few experts in their capacity to understand. It is assumed that because knowledge is so complex, and precise thinking so technically demanding, therefore the experts must do our thinking for us. The minds of men are thus submitted to the authority of other men. The question forces itself upon us: when men surrender the liberating experience of participating vitally in public affairs and when they delegate to experts their chief rational functions, can they continue to be free men?

a) *Obsession with a Useful Method*

It becomes necessary to examine how this surrender or suspension of thought occurred. It seems ironic that anything so useful as the scientific method should also do us a disservice. Yet it must be considered frankly, if we are to release again the impulse to reflect. James B. Conant, in his Terry Lectures of 1947,³ pleads for a wider diffusion of non-scientific knowledge—a field more neglected in our time and to our greater peril.

It seems strange that men ever supposed that scientific inquiry, which is carried on by technical experts in specific fields of study, constitutes the whole or even the chief part of learning. There are

³James B. Conant, "On Understanding Science," chapter I, *Yale Press*, 1947.

some areas of human experience which scientific method is not well fitted to deal with, and among these are some of our most important experiences. Scientific method is unfitted, for example, to consider purposiveness. Therefore, when it deals with the human being, it can abstract only the mechanical and non-purposive aspects of man for consideration. But after the scientist has done his work, that most human aspect of man's nature by which he formulates goals and devises means to achieve them, remains to be explored. Professor A. N. Whitehead ironically called attention to the interesting contradiction involved in the preparation of scholarly papers for the purpose of proving that there is no purpose.⁴

The success of scientific method is not in question. Its achievements stagger the imagination. Deliverance from superstitions and fears of natural forces which were presumed to act whimsically, by the recognition of orderliness in nature, would be contribution enough. Many mysteries of the heavenly bodies and of the earth have also been penetrated. Man feels more at home in his universe, and more masterly. By use of scientific method he has established a measure of predictability and control of nature. Along with engineering techniques, man has achieved phenomenal results in production of food and consumer goods, in instantaneous communication and rapid transportation, in harnessing and transforming power, in providing leisure, in control of sanitation and the treatment of disease, and in creating conditions which enable men to live in close associations by which their cooperative efforts can increase a variety of achievements. No reasonable man could ask for a return to a pre-scientific outlook.

But while science is succeeding, what happens to the human spirit? Much certainly that is favorable, but is there something else? Dr. Dwight Harrison Murray of Napa, California, and recent president of the American Medical Association, recognizes "the rapid, bewildering scientific advances of recent decades (which) have brought remarkable progress in medicine," but at the same time, "have tended to make medical care somewhat cold, brisk, and impersonal."⁵

It is this deficiency of an outlook based wholly on scientific thought which disturbs Albert Schweitzer. It treats man, he says, not as "a being who is in the world and lives his life in it, but one who is stationed near it, and contemplates it from the outside, [and] because it approaches the problem of the relation of man to the universe from some arbitrarily chosen standpoint . . . it lacks unity and consistency, and shows itself more or less restless, artificial, eccentric, and fragmentary."⁶

Professor Whitehead, who, it will be remembered, was a mathematical physicist as well as a philosopher, made the following tribute and indictment of scientific methodology, especially in its quantitative *versus* a qualitative approach:

⁴A. N. Whitehead, *The Function of Reason*, Macmillan, 1929

⁵*Newsweek*, June 25, 1956, p. 88

⁶Albert Schweitzer, *Out of My Life and Thought*, p. 56 (Mentor)

"Bodies are perceived as with qualities which in reality do not belong to them, qualities which in fact are purely the offspring of the mind. Thus nature gets credit which should in truth be reserved for ourselves; the rose for its scent; the nightingale for his song; and the sun for his radiance. The poets are entirely mistaken. They should address their lyrics to themselves, and should turn them into odes of self-congratulation on the excellency of the human mind. Nature is a dull affair, soundless, scentless, colourless; merely the hurrying of material, endlessly, meaninglessly.

"However you disguise it, this is the practical outcome of the characteristic scientific philosophy which closed the seventeenth century. "In the first place, we must note its astounding efficiency as a system of concepts for the organisation of scientific research. In this respect, it is fully worthy of the genius of the century which produced it. It has held its own as the guiding principle of scientific studies ever since. It is still reigning. Every university in the world organises itself in accordance with it. No alternative system of organising the pursuit of scientific truth has been suggested. It is not only reigning, but it is without a rival.

*"And yet—it is quite unbelievable. This conception of the universe is surely framed in terms of high abstractions, and the paradox only arises because we have mistaken our abstractions for concrete realities."*⁷

It is clear that Professor Whitehead did not wish to halt scientific studies. He objected to the assumption that the scientific account should be taken as a full and adequate report of nature. The standardized concepts of science are only valid within narrow limits. This is where the philosopher enters—to evaluate the findings of the separate sciences, and to bring them into some proper unity. And it is at this point also that any intelligent human being enters, and needs to exercise his own judgment. An explanation of nature and experience which treats sights and sounds as nothing but quantities and motions, which leaves purpose out of account, which cannot consider feeling, obligation, beauty, or any values whatsoever, may serve men in important ways, but it cannot take the place of other views of nature and experience which must supplement it. Ordinary men, who have the throb of life in them, demand more adequate explanations of their experiences.

Schweitzer makes a sharp contrast between elemental thought at its simplest level and scientific knowledge.⁸

"The unlearned man who, contemplating a tree covered with blossoms, is stirred by the mystery of the will-to-live which rules in all around him, is wiser and really knows more than the scientist who studies a thousand forms of the same will-to-live under the microscope or in physical and chemical processes, but yet, in spite of all his knowledge of the way in which its phenomena run their courses, remains unaffected by the mystery of the fact that all that is, is will-to-live, but is satisfied with the mere superficial impression of his own ability to describe accurately a tiny fragment of the phenomena attendant on life."

⁷A. N. Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World*, p. 56 (Mentor)

⁸Albert Schweitzer, *Philosophy of Civilization*, Vol. II, *Civilization & Ethics*, p. 252; A. & C. Black, Ltd., 1923

b) *More General Types of Knowledge*

It was in the same mood that Albert Einstein addressed the students at California Institute of Technology in 1938:

"Just consider a quite uncivilized Indian, whether his experience is less rich and happy than that of the average civilized man. I hardly think so. There lies a deep meaning in the fact that the children of all civilized countries are so fond of playing 'Indians.'

"Why does this magnificent applied science, which saves work and makes life easier, bring us so little happiness? The simple answer runs—because we have not yet learned to make a sensible use of it. . . .

"It is not enough that you should understand about applied science in order that your work may increase man's blessings. Concern for man himself and his fate must always form the chief interest of all technical endeavors . . . Never forget this in the midst of your diagrams and equations."

It is into this larger world that the scientist walks when he leaves his balances, his microscope, or his test tubes, at the end of his work day. At home with his family, affection is either present or lacking; responsibility is assumed or shirked; there are common interests, or each is a sort of stranger to the other. These determine the quality of home life and citizenship.

In seeking general understanding, for which all have responsibility, although the limiting techniques of scientific method will not suffice, the same spirit of regard for facts, disciplined reflection, and willingness to learn from those with whom we differ, need to guide our inquiries. Some people have gone so far as to say that such a spirit of inquiry is what is meant by the scientific method. But the scientist's approach is far more specific and standardized; he seeks and achieves a more precise type of answer to his questions, and consequently his work is more limited. In an article on general education, Earl McGrath, referring to "scientific analysis of the data of life" as an emphasis on specialization, said:

"This methodology, apt in gaining an understanding of some aspects of life, has been applied with diminishing return to materials as refractory to its techniques as literature, the fine arts, and religion."⁹

Scientific method is highly successful with the quantitative and the mechanical. Here it is unexcelled. But if our interests end here, we are guilty of the sole preoccupations with which Americans are generally charged, that is, with materials, the assembly line, and a sensate culture.

II. THE RECOVERY OF THOUGHT AND RENEWAL OF THE COMMON LIFE

In the Adult Education movement in Memphis and in America, we are seeking to advance community dedication to elemental and comprehensive thinking.

⁹Earl McGrath, *Editorial, The Journal of General Education*, Vol. 1, No. 1, (Oct. 1946).

1. *Elemental Thought*

Two distinctive ways in which elemental thought supplements scientific analysis are in the apprehension of persons as such and in the grasp of wholes.

In addition to a subject-object relationship, by which we know things, there is the equally real relationship which Martin Buber calls the "I-Thou" relation.¹⁰ He applies the term to the relations of man and God and of man and man. Here one is not dealing with a "thing among things, an It." Among persons, there is operative a value system; and a relationship obtains which is sometimes called "value resistance." One does not address himself to an object as he does to a person, for the object has no power to resist. But a person can resist another's will. There is a need therefore in human relations to persuade, to interpret, in order to gain cooperative relationship. If one ignores the rights of the other, or forces compliance rather than gaining consent, he has treated a subject as if he were an object and has violated the inter-personal relationship. Knowledge of this relation does not lie in test tubes, but in homes, friendships, human affairs, and at the shrines where men worship.

Elemental thought also grasps wholes and finds their "brooding presence" in their parts. No living organism is merely identifiable with the assemblage of its parts. Such a whole eludes the analyses of separate sciences, but cannot escape the inner eye of the poet, the artist or the philosopher.

2. *A Comprehensive View*

This informal and elemental understanding must supplement a description of how a thing works. A comprehensive view does not accept an either-or approach. It places elemental and scientific knowledge together in a total perspective. Such completely human activities cannot be delegated, but must be performed by ourselves.

3. *Knowledge for What?*

Nor is the perspective which is given in comprehensive understanding the end of the matter. Neither discovery nor contemplation is man's ultimate purpose. His knowledge is achieved for the sake of intelligent and appreciative attitudes and action. Understanding is good, but it is also the basis for appreciation and for action.

4. *Basic Loyalties*

Man's religious orientation is the final determinant of his sense of values. And it is in this light that we recognize the major fault of education which seeks to be purposeless or to evade value-judgment issues.

The Christian faith produces the unique relationships which redirect men and set up value systems within them which struggle against debasement of human relations, the misuse of nature, and escape from social responsibilities.

¹⁰Martin Buber, *The Eclipse of God*, Harper and Brothers, 1952.

5. *The Opportunity Lies in Communities*

I think I am striking the keynote of the contemporary Adult Education movement in suggesting that the educational activities in communities provide promising and practical means for achieving such perspectives. For such insights are likely to be achieved through three avenues:

- a) *By group study-discussion programs, in which the participant's best and most disciplined thoughts are exchanged in a democratic setting.*

This is an opportunity to meet people on human terms. In contrast to a utilitarian relationship, here is an association for mutual aid in learning. And we learn from one another only as we develop respect for those who differ with us.

- b) *By the stimulation of individuals to further study and reflection.*

Such private deliberation must inform group discussion for the greatest benefit. Group discussion which rests only on the spontaneous response of the moment becomes thin.

- c) *By participation in serious community activities.*

This also provides a laboratory test of ideas, and demands further investigation for intelligent action.

What will such experiences tend to do for us? They make it possible for every activity of life to be more significant, so that life's meaning will not be perpetually postponed. Rather, each life-event can take on meaning as our human-human relations deepen, as we face the world of nature not to exploit it but to identify with it, as we are better able to use our institutions intelligently, and as our rational processes are broadened to provide perspective.

This will lead to learning from the ancients and from our contemporaries; but the learning will not belong to either; it will be our own. It will not belong in a book; it will not be embalmed somewhere in a library; but it will leap into life for us so that we will not simply appreciate the song of a bird or the walk in a garden that a Wordsworth engaged in; this knowledge and sense of things will be at our own disposal to inform and enrich our human experience.