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Another Brick in the Wall?

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ANOTHER BRICK IN THE WALL?*

My text for today comes from "Pink Floyd," and it reads as follows:

We don't need no education.
We don't need no thought control.
No dark sarcasms in the classroom.
Teacher leave those kids alone.
Hey, teacher, leave those kids alone.
All in all you're just another brick in the wall.
All in all you're just another brick in the wall.

These words come from a rock song, "Another Brick in the Wall," which was popular a little over a year ago. They are, I think, disturbing words. Of course it is refreshing to hear a rock song that has lyrics of sufficient substance to be disturbed about. Lyrics from other contemporary songs like--"my baby takes the morning train, he works from 9 to 5 and then, he takes another home again"--hardly provide food for thought. By contrast, the words of "Another Brick in the Wall" struck me as expressing a serious opinion about the state of contemporary education, an opinion that if not particularly congenial to me as an educator, was at least thought-provoking. To put it more personally, as I rode to school, listening to my car radio, on my way to meet my class, to teach, I was not exactly cheered to hear the voice on the radio angrily shouting at me, "Hey, teacher, leave those kids alone."

In the short space allowed me here, I want to share some of my thoughts with you in response to "Another Brick in the Wall." Time will not permit me to qualify my remarks, to explore other important dimensions of the issue, or to acknowledge contrary viewpoints as much as I would like to. Please do not judge me harshly for what I have had to leave out. Alas, I do not have time to ponder the exact meaning of "brick" and "wall," least of all the meaning intended by

*Honors Day Convocation address by Michael B. Young on May 6, 1981.

the songwriter. I do not have time to acknowledge adequately that "bricks" and "walls" are surely in some sense good and necessary, as I imagine some in this audience would like to insist. I cannot even explore the question someone like George Carlin would ask--if the purpose of education is not to produce bricks, then why do we require teachers and students at commencement to wear hats called "MORTAR boards"?

Instead, I will do just two things. First I will describe what I take to be the fundamental purpose of higher education which is precisely the opposite of what this song suggests. And secondly I will consider how such an education can or cannot equip a student to fit into the "wall" of gainful employment he or she will face upon graduation.

First, then, to describe the fundamental purpose of higher education, I take that purpose to be mind expanding, not mind enslaving. It should, as its name suggests, be truly liberalizing. Among the ancient Romans, only freemen enjoyed the privilege of studying the "liberal arts"--hence the name "liberal" from the Latin "liber" for freedom or liberty. As one encyclopedia points out, these freemen didn't have to work for a living--hence the problem I will be speaking about at the end of my talk today. Here, however, my point is that the purpose of liberal education has been from the start to free the minds of students, free them from the confines of their family, community, nation, even their time and place in history. It should bring them into confrontation with a myriad of alien cultural practices and values so that they can gain perspective on their own practices and values. This sort of education is concerned to free students from their ethnocentrism, to break down walls, not construct them. Perhaps the public schools at the primary and secondary level are vulnerable to the charge that they are too concerned with "producing bricks for the wall," but education at the college level, especially at a private liberal arts university, should not be vulnerable to such criticism. Our goal should be to

produce people who can be productive workers and active citizens, but who will not work or vote without thinking, people who are familiar with a broad range of alternatives, who appreciate the complexity of issues, who are equipped with the analytical skills to make an informed choice and a moral conscience that will guide them to the right choice. In response to the we-don't-need-no-education people, I would answer that it is ignorance, not education of the highest sort, that makes people susceptible to "thought control."

If the we-don't-need-no-education people came to my classes (or others at Wesleyan), I don't think they would find the sort of indoctrination they expect. In my history of England survey they would find a rascally political activist like John Wilkes in the late eighteenth century and the impudent social satirist Oscar Wilde at the end of the nineteenth century who were at least worthy precursors of the current generation of punk rockers. I do not read and discuss with my class Victorian views of women just so my students can memorize and feed back to me dead, irrelevant Victorian history. Indeed, Victorian views of women are not nearly so dead or irrelevant as I wish they would be. But on this as all matters, my goal as teacher is not indoctrination but understanding. We do not examine the contest between free enterprise and socialism, the views of Adam Smith and of the Fabian socialists, so that my students will be indoctrinated with the simplistic belief that either one of these is entirely right and the other entirely wrong. We do not study the life and writings of George Orwell in order to run happily into the arms of Big Brother. Most of all I wish the we-don't-need-no-education people could take the 300-level Humanities course which I teach along with six other faculty members. Near the beginning of the first semester of that course, we consider the suggestion from Socrates that "the unexamined life is not worth living." Nor do we leave unexamined Socrates' own brick-like submission to his execution at the hands of the state. During the year we return often to this

theme--that the unexamined life is not worth living--most dramatically when we examine the life of Nora in Ibsen's A Doll's House and of Ivan Ilych in The Death of Ivan Ilych by Tolstoy.

Surely I do not explore with my class these two people painfully reassessing the values of their society in order to make that class more slavishly accept the values of their own society. Ivan Ilych is dying when he looks back over his entire life and realizes that he allowed himself to become absorbed with his job, with making money, with achieving status, with climbing the ladder of what his society considered success. Just before dying, Ivan observes, "It is as if I had been going downhill while I imagined I was going up. And that is really what it was. I was going up in public opinion, but to the same extent life was ebbing away from me. And now it is all done and there is only death." Requiring my class to ponder the fate of Nora Helmer and Ivan Ilych is hardly the best way to produce "bricks." And I am sure my colleagues could add many more examples of this sort from their own teaching.

It may seem odd to say so, but I hope that what I have said up to this point has bored you. If you feel this way about my whole speech, I'm in trouble. But I hope that we have such a basic, common commitment to the liberalizing goal of education that so far I have merely stated the obvious. This would seem to be the case in view of the fact that Wesleyan, unlike many other universities, never did abandon its general education requirements, and indeed reaffirmed those requirements precisely at a time when other universities were realizing what a mistake they had made. In my eleven years at Wesleyan, I have often seen my colleagues write and speak more eloquently than I in these few minutes on the value of a liberal education. The words of Professor Emily Dale stick particularly in my mind. Emily said that if parents send their children to Wesleyan to be provided with a lifeboat to carry them through life, then her job must be to punch holes in the bottom of that lifeboat. I do not naively assume that all my colleagues would

subscribe to this view of education, but I do believe that there is much greater consensus to this effect among us than among our students. Too often my advisees see liberal education as nothing more profound than choosing two from column A and three from column B. By and large, it seems to me, our students come to us with their own brick-in-the-wall mentality, and we do little to counteract this. Of course the situation has worsened as the economy has worsened, as more and more of our students enter the university intent upon a career in business, law, medicine, or some other field, suffering under the misconception that the raison d'être for the university is to prepare them for such careers. I look out at my classes now and wonder sometimes if I cannot read in the faces of many students the plea--please make me into a brick so I will fit better into the wall. I understand that the library staff are considering a freshman introduction to the library that could enable and encourage our students to make better use of the library in their four years here. I wish that we had a similar program, something like the faculty Home Visitation Program but on a larger scale, to enable and encourage our students to make better use of their whole education here.

In the preceding paragraph, if not earlier through the life of Ivan Ilych, I have raised the thorny question of how education relates to employment, how liberal values can or cannot survive, after graduation, in the workplace. This is the second and final topic of my talk today. Let me emphasize at the outset that I am neither blind nor unsympathetic to the vocational utility of a liberal education. I am constantly trying to impress upon my classes the analytical and communication skills they are practicing in the study of history; yesterday I performed a "skills inventory" exercise with a class of history majors; and tomorrow I will personally escort that class to the career education center. I objected on several grounds to the Liberal Arts Professional Model a few years ago, but I am supportive of much that it was trying to express,

and I am glad that we are continuing similar efforts today in a more palatable form. Having said all this, there still seems to me to be an unavoidable tension between the liberal view of education and the vocational view. If we focus on that tension, elucidate it, teach it, prepare our students for it, we will be doing them more good than if we ignore its existence. That is why the Bioethics course and the Business Ethics course impress me as two of the most important courses we have added to the curriculum in recent years.

Let me try to make this point in another way, by referring to a small brochure that has been widely distributed in this country. It is called: "HISTORY. But what do I do with it?" This brochure is intended to relieve the job anxiety of history majors. It explains how the skills, affinities, and knowledge of a history major can be put to use in a wide variety of occupations. In short, it tells people what they can do with a history major. I have given this brochure to people, I have used it in my counseling, and it is helpful. But frankly my heart has never fully been in it. How delighted I was, then, to read a copy of a speech given by the author of this brochure in which she reflected on its popularity and observed that if she had it to do all over again, she would re-title it "HISTORY. But what will I be with it?" And her new emphasis would be on the kind of person education can enable us to become rather than the kind of job it can enable us to land. The aims of liberal education and the vocational needs of our students are not mutually exclusive, and I, like the author of this brochure, take the vocational anxiety of today's students seriously. But neither we nor our students should lose sight of the fact that what we are is more important than what we do. If we reverse this priority, we will cheapen our own work, and we will indeed run the risk of producing little more than bricks for the wall. Still I hope it is clear that I am not entrenched at the extreme liberal pole of this old debate or the extreme vocational pole. Obviously I incline toward the former, but my main concern is with neither pole but rather

the area somewhere in between where vocational and liberal values confront one another, where what we are must come to terms with what we do.

How not to explore this point of confrontation is illustrated by a recent article explaining how historians have responded to the job crisis. The author of that article exhorts his readers to go job-hunting with a quotation about the inspirational example of Sir Thomas More. The quote is as follows: "Thomas More was chancellor of England while writing Utopia. The crucial lesson of More's life was that public service and scholarly reflection can go hand in hand." Let me read that last sentence again: "The crucial lesson of More's life was that public service and scholarly reflection can go hand in hand." Well, the actual fact is that More wrote Utopia long before becoming Lord Chancellor of England, and a significant part of that book is devoted to explaining why the humanist should not enter the service of a worldly prince. More important, though, is the fact omitted by this author that More's "public service" ended when he resigned in disgust at the policies of Henry VIII, and his "scholarly reflection" ended shortly thereafter when Henry had More's head chopped off. But I have not corrected this quotation simply in order to draw the opposite conclusion, that the world of learning and the world of working are separate and incompatible worlds. Rather, it seems to me, what More's life points out is the tension, the difficulty, of reconciling liberal values with the values of the work place, not the impossibility or undesirability of trying to make such a reconciliation.

An article from a magazine published by Harvard University provides me with a more positive example to conclude my talk.¹ The author, Louis Banks, is a former editor of Fortune magazine. He taught for three years at Harvard Business School and currently teaches at MIT's Sloan School of Management. Banks observes that older managers are increasingly confronted

¹ Louis Banks, "Here Come the Individualists," Harvard Magazine, 80 (Fall 1977), pp. 24-29.

with a new breed of employees whose behavior and expectations are confounding. Among the examples Banks gives are these:

An expansive chief executive invites a promising junior to join a “weekend retreat” to discuss the future of the company, and the junior politely refuses because he has made plans to be with his family. Could the retreat perhaps be scheduled for a Thursday or Friday? A recruiting vice-president from a large New York firm busts his budget to offer a fabulous starting salary to a Baker Scholar from the Harvard Business School, and loses out to a Chicago firm paying a lower salary but helping the young graduate's wife find a job in her field. A prestigious computer company consults its secret list of potential executive stars and offers a junior salesman a chance to leap to glory as district manager on the West Coast. After “talking it over with my wife,” he declines, opting to wait until their eldest child can finish up in the elementary school where she has so many friends.

After giving these examples, Banks goes on to observe, "Encountering this unorthodox behavior in bits and pieces, the average manager of my generation is disoriented at best, or, at worst, outraged by such apparent evidence of lack of interest, disaffection, or downright disloyalty to 'the company.'" But Banks himself does not interpret it this way. He does not equate this "new individualism," as he calls it, with mere selfishness or narcissism. He sees these bright, youthful executives as a new breed of individuals-with-a-choice, concerned for the quality of their overall lives. They are willing to work very hard indeed for their companies, but as one of them puts it, "How much loyalty can the corporation expect from me if they won't allow me to be loyal to my own beliefs?" There is no decline of the work ethic among these new individualists, but as another teacher at the Sloan School puts it, they are trying "to bring personal values into play with organizational values." Banks believes such people can be genuine assets to their employers, and he quotes the chairman of the board of DuPont Corporation, who said, "Finding the right fit between the goals of organizations, and the goals of people working in them will be one of management's main tasks."

If the chairman of the board of DuPont and teachers at Harvard Business School and MIT's Sloan School are to be trusted, then, one may not have to be a brick to fit into the wall in the future. Our most enlightened managers will liberalize the "wall" to accommodate people who wish to preserve their personal values, their families (if they have families), and their integrity. Another article in the same issue of Harvard Magazine suggests that the same is true of law school and the legal profession. Much depends, however, on how many truly liberally educated people our universities produce to go out and confront these "walls." Our hope rests, then, with you students, particularly those of you whom we have come to honor today. If you go forth to liberalize the world rather than succumb to it, to refashion the walls as much as yourselves, then you will have justified our highest hopes. If, instead, you leave Wesleyan for no higher purpose than to become bricks in the wall, then you will have justified the prophecy of Pink Floyd. And we teachers will be left to wonder whether the world would be any poorer if we had simply heeded Pink Floyd's warning, "Hey, teacher, leave those kids alone."