

The Place of the Liberal Arts in the Residential College

Address by CHARLES M. REED, William S. Lee Professor of History at Queens University of Charlotte, in Charlotte, North Carolina. Delivered at "A Symposium on the Educational Contributions of the Residential Liberal Arts College to Today's Students" to the students, faculty, and trustees of Catawba College, Salisbury, North Carolina, on March 31, 2003.

Thank you very much, President Knott, for your invitation to join the panel of speakers today. Some of you are old enough to have seen on TV one of the elaborate ceremonies surrounding the British monarchy. Oh, do they know how to do it up right — a coronation, a funeral, a wedding — all of them glittering spectacles with horse-drawn carriages, footmen in bright livery, music that makes you want to stand at attention in front of the TV throughout the entire ceremony. We Americans love it even more than the British, who after all have to pay for it. Our response: Gosh, tradition is a wonderful thing — all those hallowed, ageless customs. It therefore comes as a surprise to learn that most of those ancient-looking ceremonies were invented within the last century and a half. Interesting idea, that we can invent tradition.

What about another tradition, the tradition of the Liberal Arts? What does that term call to mind? A constant in the midst of change? Surely old? Maybe too old? Maybe a dinosaur, hopelessly out of sync with our fast-changing world? Today, in the first half of the program, we on the panel will approach the liberal arts in a historical context, and for a very good reason: the liberal arts you know are even newer than the ceremonies surrounding the British monarchy. I mean that what we call a Liberal Arts education today is worlds away from the liberal arts prior to the Civil War. Our goal today isn't just a trip down memory lane; rather we want to see if there are elements of older models worth retrieving. I've been asked to begin all the way back, with the ancient Greco-

Roman model of the liberal arts. Permit me, please, to dwell more on the "spirit" of the earliest liberal arts than on the "letter."

So how did the ancient model differ from the present one at Catawba? In a word, the ancients focused on making people good; Catawba and other colleges, on conveying "solid knowledge" and sharpening young minds to get more of it. To put it another way, the goal of the ancient model was almost exclusively ethical or normative: the ancients aimed at fostering "virtue." The present goal is the reverse -- almost exclusively factual, in fact "value-free"-free, that is, from ethical evaluation.

To make people good, the ancients focused on three crucial notions — the quality of a person's life as a whole, the overall caliber or fineness of a person, and the sort of rationality they deemed vital for thinking about how to live a fulfilling life and be an excellent person. To take each in turn: Ancients of every philosophical stripe agreed that the goal of a life was "human flourishing" -- inexact, to be sure, but as substantive with respect a person's overall ethical and political well-being as is the notion of "health" to his or her physical well-being. Second, everyone agreed on the principal traits of an excellent person: they were the habitual disposition to act with courage, self-control, and a sense of personal fairness; one who acted thus the Romans call "virtuous." Third, they also agreed on the single most vital good habit of mind, which they called "practical thinking."

That word "practical" doesn't mean applied thinking, rather thinking well about how to act or what to do -- today, next week, next year, or over a lifetime. Practical rationality contrasted vividly with two other sorts of thinking the ancients deemed far less

vital: the first of these was thinking for the sake of knowing absolutely, which they called "theoretical thinking." Examples of theoretical thinking today would include all our so-called sciences. The third sort of thinking was "thinking for the sake of making," called "productive thinking." Examples of productive thinking would be architecture or civil engineering, the subjects emphasized at our land-grant universities. The surgeon and repairperson also qualify as productive thinkers, in that they remake, so-to-speak, hearts or hernias, and defective TVs or computers.

Now back to the three central notions — to an overall life well-lived, the overall fineness of a human being, and practical reason. These remain important in everyday thinking today. We commonly speak of lives "wasted," or of people as "cowards" (without courage) or "gluttons" (without physical self-control); and we acknowledge the existence of "fools" (those deficient in practical reasoning).

But note that present day academe, splintered by specialities that employ theoretical and productive reason, can't accommodate our three central notions. To a professor in one of our disciplines, these notions seem absurdly broad. No one gets a Ph.D. in "virtue" or "whole-life excellence." Even in Philosophy, doctoral theses are far too truncated to accommodate those whoppingly-big notions. So do people no longer feel the need to think about how to live their entire lives or be virtuous? Not if shelf-length at Borders or Barnes and Noble is any indication. Because the pop psychology and pop management gurus are getting rich off tackling these very topics. In the ancient world the very brightest and most studious people addressed themselves to the questions, "How ought I to think practically about being really good at being a human being and

about living the most fulfilling life possible? Today anyone with questions of such scope must turn to Stephen Covey, Tony Robbins, or the authors of best sellers such as I'm OK, You're Ok, or of Finding the True You Within.

Now let me give you a quick tour of what I termed "the letter" of the liberal arts in Greco-Roman higher education as it existed for seven hundred years. The best-known breakdown is the division into the three liberal arts of language — grammar, rhetoric, and logic -- and the four liberal arts of number -- arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music (music as a mathematical art). We can straightaway eliminate the latter four as components of ancient higher education. At the elementary level most students got a bit of arithmetic and music. Anything you and I would recognize as "physical science" never stood a chance. The breakdown of the liberal arts of language into grammar, logic, and rhetoric is also misleading, if we look at the way pedagogy was actually organized. All of higher education was instead divided into three entirely separate sorts of schools, in different locations, each of them staffed by different specialists.

First there was what we still would recognize as "grammar" at the elementary level. But at the higher level specialists called "grammarians" also taught epic poetry, drama, and a bit of history. You read uncritically, to absorb admirable traits of character, recognize bad traits, and discover examples of good or bad practical reasoning in action. These books, I mean, were meant to teach you how to behave. The goal was to cherish old truths, not to discover new ones. The second sort of teaching, always in another school, was philosophy. Romans who could afford it went to Athens and later to Alexandria in Egypt for their philosophy. There were many sects — Platonists, Aristotle's

heirs the Peripatetics, Stoics, Epicureans, and still others -- but they all stressed above all the pre-eminent role of practical reason in deliberating about the nature of the best life and the overall excellence of a person. They even agreed on the same three good habits of character as constituting "virtue"; they differed on smaller issues. Third, and by far the most important, were the rhetoricians, again in separate schools. When people today think of rhetoric, they think mainly of ornamental language or of deceit or fallacy; "Her speech was just so much rhetoric," we say, or, "Hey, skip the rhetoric and get to the point." But for the ancients, beginning in the democratic assemblies of ancient Greece, rhetoric was instead a spoken exercise in practical reason to persuade one's fellow citizens to act in the way the speaker deemed appropriate. "Logic" was by no means confined to philosophy. Ancient teachers of rhetoric, too, demanded rigorous arguments; they insisted as well that that the speaker present himself as one with excellent habits of character.

So much of the "letter" of ancient educational practice. I want to end by contrasting ancient assumptions with our own. Imagine that the greatest teacher of Roman rhetoric, Quintilian, living in the first century A.D., had been transported miraculously to Salisbury . After a month at Catawba he's chatting with a professor here.

Prof.: How's it going, Q.?

Q.: A polite answer or a true one?

Prof.: Hey, tell it like it is.

Q.: Tell it as it is, you mean. Every Roman schoolboy learns from a grammarian that "like" governs only nouns and pronouns. Shakespeare, my great solace for the past miserable month, didn't write a play entitled Like You Like It. You Americans are the only western country rich enough and mobile enough to have a prose problem.

Prof.: Listen, Q., may I be frank? Many of my colleagues find you so picky as to be downright uncollegial.

Q.: You mean they regard me as such because we civilly agree to disagree on issues we both regard as vital? Instruction in my school consisted of teachers and students debating such issues in a public forum, on a daily basis; rhetorical education at its best took the form of incessant verbal combat. I had expected to find more resilience in your halls of learning.

Prof.: Let's get back to your true answer to my question about how it's going. Q.: May I risk being uncollegial?

Professor: Sure. Shoot.

Q.: I hate it here. It's not just that I'm barely able to turn on lights and turn off the television. It's that I find your myths so uncongenial.

Professor: Our myths??? Whoa. You people were the ones big on myths, not us.

Q.: Really. One of your esteemed professors told me the other day that we ancients differ from you in a single, fundamental respect. He said we chose "virtue" as our beacon, whereas you chose "liberty" and "equality."

Prof.: He's absolutely right. So says our Declaration of Independence. But why do you call them myths?

Q. Because you're in thrall to them in entirely unreflective ways, so that at every turn I find them honored only in the breach.

Prof.: Meaning . . .???

Q.: So you're "free," are you, not enslaved? We prized virtue and practical reason because we thought them the surest foundations of actual "freedom." Your real lodestones -- what you truly cherish -- aren't freedom and equality but your pleasures and creature comforts. We ancients on the other hand realized that the desire for these is unlimited, so that their temporary fulfillment would simply lead to another round of desires. My contemporaries would have been terrified by the prospect that your advertising media would multiply such desires a thousand-fold. And without ends other than your vulgar hedonism, such rapaciously consumption-minded humans would be anything but free; on the contrary, they would be reduced to the ethical equivalent of slavery. Your college, professor, and all the others are dedicated to the proposition that books educate the young. In our day they did, but now it's that wretched, glowing screen, located in virtually every room of every home, that actually shapes the codes of meaning and modes of behavior for the young. Books could barely compete even if your best young read the best; but, since they read the most recent rather than the best, together with those execrable works called "textbooks," books are utterly out of the running.

Prof.: Q., my friend, you're just an elitist snob, calling us "vulgar."

Q.: Our Greek work for "vulgar" is apeirokalia, meaning "without experience of the fine."

The media that shape your mores dwell not on fine character and noble lives, as did our grand old books, but on people aiming low and hence living low lives. In the words of your fellow-modern, Leo Strauss, we ancients thought it safer to understand the low in light of the high; you try to understand the high in light of the low; in doing so you necessarily neglect or distort the high.

Prof.: OK, granted, you folks had more "couth." But how many of you did? Only a few rich males, right?

Q.: Which brings us to your other cherished myth, that of "equality." I'm staggered by how you make a fetish of equality where it shouldn't exist and ignore it where it should. Why, for example, are you so obsessed with equality as to ignore the obvious differences in humans in character and the capacity for practical reason? Neither is taken into account in college admissions or faculty hires, unless the candidates are positively vicious or utter fools. Then, again, you ignore equality where it should count the most, in the distribution of goods and services. Our ancient surplus -- that amount of goods and services over and above what people needed to subsist upon -- that surplus generated by our agrarian economy was so small that its equal redistribution would barely have made a ripple on the pond of our society; yet your technology has generated this enormous surplus, a grossly disproportionate amount of which goes to a very few. And the disparity in wealth continues to grow, a threat to the health of any republic, as we knew well. Yet it rarely occurs to you to challenge such disparity in the name of your vaunted "equality." You censure us for thinking chattel slavery "natural," that is, not subject to alteration through

practical reason. (Why deliberate practically about things one can't change?) Yet you take this enormous inequality as equally "natural," as unalterable and hence not a fit subject for practical deliberation in the political realm.

Prof.: OK, Q., I'll civilly agree to disagree. Our values and lifestyles just differ from yours.

Q.: Terms such as "values" and "lifestyles" denote irrational preferences to be adopted or shed at a moment's notice. Our stress on character denoted instead ingrained, durable habits of courage, self-control, and fairness. Nor were they preferred irrationally.

Through practical reason we believed we could go from knowing less to knowing more about how to become fine persons and live flourishing lives. The need for the aforesaid traits of character and mind appear to me more viscerally necessary for you than for us. Your rate of ever-accelerating social and technological change increasingly dislodges people from the roles that older Americans took for granted. Don't you see that the transmission of culture from one generation to the next, which we could take for granted, has been disrupted on an unprecedented scale? Can you think of anything that will better help the young survive such dislocation than strong character and practical wisdom?

Prof.: Your regime imposed a regimen on the young. Our constitution forbids that. We count on family, church, and local community to shape character and good sense.

Q.: True. But have not family, church, and local community of late lost some of their power to shape character and practical reason? I acknowledge that higher education can only do so much? Yet a small residential college is small republic that could affect

character and practical reason, if you ceased ignoring these. A start would be to hire faculty, coaches, and administrators who are paragons of character and practical reason. Decades later graduates remember next to nothing about the courses they took, but they vividly recall those faculty whose nobility equaled or exceeded their competence. More generally, professor, if young men and women don't experience the satisfactions of participating actively as citizens in a strong collegiate community, how likely is it that they'll be disposed to participate as citizens in the larger, weaker communities they join as graduates?

Prof.: So how would you foster character and practical reason at Catawba, Q.? By reading those old, so-called "Great Books"?

Q.: You already read a smattering of the so-called Great Books, but for the wrong reason. The Great Books movement maintains that reading Homer or Plato is the best way to sharpen one's mind in order to recognize solid knowledge when you see it. We on the other hand read Homer and Plato to learn what traits of character to emulate and what qualified as good or bad examples of practical reason. Practical reason has virtually disappeared from your undergraduate education, at an enormous cost. I hear your students complaining about how seldom their learning relates to living their lives. A basic economics course, they tell me, doesn't tell them how to cope with a madly fluctuating economy; it tells them what professional economists do. Likewise with a basic chemistry or psychology course. This is the direct result of exalting theoretical knowledge — knowing for certain, solid knowledge — over practical deliberation, which is about how to live. We ancients believed that, for a human being, thinking about how to live is a

more basic and vital use of the intellect than the discovery of any fact in any discipline whatever. What would it take for faculty to change course and tackle problems of knowing as intellectually subordinate to the more fundamental problems of living? Your faculty are the proud bearers of degrees that confirm their prolonged initiation into private, solitary, silent seekers of some spec of solid knowledge. That's how they became "doctors"! I confess that the challenge overwhelms me. Perhaps you might begin by digging up their grandparents and re-educating them. I'm tired, professor, and I'm homesick. Why wasn't I plopped down in the America of 200 years ago, when things hadn't changed all that much, when John Adams could still remind his son John Quincy that "the end of all study is to make you a good man and useful citizen." I just want to go home.

Prof.: On the basis of that solid knowledge you deplore, Q., I can assure you that returning to your own time and place is scientifically impossible.

Q.: Then how did I get here, Professor?

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