

# LIBERAL EDUCATION IN A FREE SOCIETY- LUXURY OR NECESSITY

By Mary Ashby Cheek

Liberal Education has its roots in ancient Greece where one of the chief functions of education was the making of character and where education provided for the freedom and growth of the individual. Wisdom, courage, moderation, a love of beauty and grace, and a devotion to the welfare of the state were some of the ingredients of the Greek ethic. Other early roots were in the Hebrew-Christian ethic with its emphasis first on righteousness and justice, and later on love and human brotherhood.

The seven liberal arts of the Medieval University of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, outgrowths of the teaching in monastic schools, consisted of the famous *Trivium*—grammar as an introduction to literature; logic, leading to metaphysics; rhetoric, including some study of history and law—and the *Quadrivium*—arithmetic; music, including later the history and theory of music; geometry, including in time some geography and engineering; and astronomy which led to the study of physics.

Liberal Education, therefore, does not belong to any nation or culture, and the liberal arts college or university may be found today in Europe, Asia, Africa, Australia, and in the Americas. Kobe College inherits this rich tradition.

The term liberal education is associated usually with higher education though much of its original curriculum and a number of its modern creative concepts, such as the project method and concern for the total development of the individual student originated in the lower schools. This does not imply that there is anything juvenile about the curriculum or the concepts of modern liberal education but rather that they are universal in their application and deal with questions of intellectual growth at any age and at any educational level.

This liberal tradition in education is a dynamic one, changing, growing, and adapting itself to new circumstances. To be sure, its flame has flickered low at times when its thinking and method have become routine. Periodically enemies or skeptics have thrown water on the ashes, only to see them burst again into full flame.

But let us talk in specific terms. What is liberal education? How do you define it? It is easy to be abstruse in talking or writing about liberal education. I suggest, therefore, a simple and perhaps obvious definition that liberal education is that type of education which liberates the minds and spirits of men and women, boys and girls, and, incidentally, of teachers as well as students. In fact, if those who teach are not enthusiastic adherents of the liberal arts, their students will not acquire through their guidance the secret of the liberated mind.

The doubter may remark that liberal education was undoubtedly salutary for the ancient Greeks and for those living through the Middle Ages and Renaissance in Europe, when the pace of life was slow, when the educated classes were smaller than today and when the accumulation of knowledge was far less overpowering. Even the pre-war world could find time for it, but, they ask, is liberal education suited to this world of startling change, and to these mechanized, dynamic, terrifying, exciting times in which we live, in which speed, efficiency and the spectre of atomic war seem to be the compelling realities? Also, is it practical in this highly competitive modern world where men and women must acquire competence in a specialized field of knowledge? To be frank, is not liberal education a luxury in the mid-twentieth century?

Let us try to answer these points.

As a matter of fact, one may argue effectively and, I believe, conclusively, that liberal education is the most practical of all types of education in our contemporary twentieth century society. In this machine age, the needs of society change rapidly. New inventions and discoveries alter life and the mechanics of our living so quickly that a student may prepare himself to be an accountant, an

engineer, a businessman or woman and find within ten years that a new invention, a new source of power or new materials render his specialized training obsolete. The young person loses his or her position. He is prepared for nothing else. If, however, that young man or woman has had an excellent liberal education in addition to specialized training, he is resourceful, flexible and self-reliant enough to be able to turn quickly and with relative ease to another field of interest. Moreover, in selecting their students, advanced graduate and professional schools of medicine, law, engineering and the research institute are giving preference increasingly to those students with a liberal or general educational background because of the greater flexibility of their thinking, their breadth of view, their idealism and their "at homeness" in the world which this type of education has tended to develop in them, thereby enabling them to be finer citizens and more useful physicians, lawyers, engineers, and research men.

One should add here that the liberal college is fully aware of the demands of an age of specialization. Almost universally, liberal arts colleges require a concentration of work in the major field of interest during the last two years. The liberal colleges recognize also the concern which both men and women students have for preparing themselves adequately for vocational or professional life. The majority of liberal colleges today offer some vocational courses in education and in other fields as well, in addition to providing individual counselling for a year or more before graduation by trained vocational advisers. Many students take excellent posts immediately after they receive the bachelor's degree. A liberal education, however, while mindful of vocational needs, is primarily concerned with educating superior, responsible persons possessing broad sympathies and a wide background of knowledge, which provide the incentives for a happy and useful life and a strong foundation as well for the future professional man or woman. Many students expect to attend graduate school for specialized training following the completion of their college education.

To those who may question the importance of a liberal education for young women who expect to be married within a short time, one may recall the old saying that he who educates a man educates an individual, while he who educates a woman educates a family. I would maintain, therefore, that liberal education for a young woman looking forward to early marriage is quite as important as for her husband.

May we look briefly at the liberal arts curriculum then and comment upon why we believe that the nature of our society is such that a liberal education is no longer (if it ever was) a luxury for the few but a necessity for the many, if man is to understand and control the power which he himself has unleashed and is to build for himself and his children a just, happy and cooperative society.

The liberal arts curriculum is customarily organized into three or four more or less formal divisions, the humanities, the natural sciences and mathematics, the arts and the social studies.

The teaching in the natural sciences and mathematics in the liberal arts college is designed to provide not only elementary and advanced instruction for students in these fields but also to acquaint all students with some knowledge of the basic facts, methods, limitations and concepts of the natural sciences or mathematics, some understanding of which is a necessity for every educated person in this scientific age. Ideally, the teaching of natural sciences and mathematics in the liberal college should be of such a nature that students will become aware in the classroom and in the laboratory of what is meant by the scientific method, the relation of cause and effect and the importance of exact and logical thinking in any field of study. Likewise, frequent reference on the part of the instructor to the history and development of science and its impact on political, economic and cultural life will make the study of the sciences come alive and clarify for the student the vital relationship of the subject matter of science to that of the social studies and its impact on the fields of the arts and humanities as well.

A great civilization has always expressed itself through the fine arts: music, drawing, painting, sculpture, poetry, the dance, as well as through innumerable applied arts such as design and architecture, and in Japan we might add flower arrangement. The striking examples of Emperor Hirohito's recent poetry reading contest for which some thirteen thousand persons submitted poems, and the paintings of a Churchill or an Eisenhower and of their numerous artistic progeny, serve to illustrate the growing public recognition given to the importance of the arts as a recreating force.

The medieval and pre-medieval *Quadrivium* called for the study of music, while the life of the Greeks was a constant search for beauty, expressed in art, architecture, the dance, and in fact in almost every avenue of life. Though the modern liberal arts college seemed reluctant for a long time to give the arts a recognized place in the curriculum, today their importance is being fully recognized in higher education as in elementary education, not only for those who have especial talent but for all students.

Educators today consider that the creative, disciplined emotional expression made possible by participation in one of the arts is a delight and a release to the individual participant from current tensions as well as an important part of the education of the well-rounded person. Likewise, work in the history of art deepens one's understanding and appreciation of beauty, and leads to a clearer appraisal of the part played by the arts in the life and history of our own and earlier times.

Increasingly liberal education recognizes that all intelligent mature persons in this constantly shrinking world, and particularly those who will be leaders of thought in a modern democratic state, must be cognizant of and seek to understand current public questions. They must assume responsibility as individual citizens for contributing to better government and the improvement of the conditions of life in their local communities, in the nation, and eventually in the world at large. It is not strange, therefore, that the social studies, sociology, political science, economics, history and

allied subjects, have assumed an increasingly important place in the liberal arts curriculum. These studies should make students aware of current political, economic and social questions and the long background out of which they have arisen, and enable them to acquire the habit of objective analysis of such problems. With good teaching the students should see the bearing of one of these closely related fields to another, as well as their relevance to other fields of knowledge. A modern technique for enabling the student in the social studies to supplement theory with data from real life is to provide a well-planned field-work experience, providing opportunities for observation and even participation in the work of government offices or in industry, business, and social institutions.

The liberal college should never seek, of course, to indoctrinate students or to do their thinking for them, but it should seek to encourage students to do their own thinking and to inspire them to become active and responsible citizens of their local communities and of their nations, fully aware that alert public opinion is the life-blood and protection of democratic government and of a free society. Professor Zimmermann of Oxford University has said that there is no effective international citizen who has not already been a conscientious citizen of his community and nation, and by implication one might add that in the twentieth century an informed conscientious citizen of his community and nation will become almost inevitably a believer in the necessity for effective international organization and cooperation among the nations.

Traditionally, the humanities have been considered the heart or core of the liberal arts curriculum, providing an opportunity for the study of our great cultural inheritance from the civilizations of the past as well as of those of the present—their languages, literatures, history, philosophy and religions—which reveal men's most treasured thoughts and his most significant and inspiring ideas and ideals. The study of this great pageant of human thought and events reveals both the individuality of other peoples, past and present, and also the essential links in our common human heritage.

This human story, in its infinite variety, enriches the mind and enlightens the understanding, as memory serves the individual person. Without a primary understanding of our collective memory, we are disinherited and impoverished human beings. Moreover, we are apt to develop a distorted view of the problems and accomplishments of our own times and even to take ourselves too seriously, lacking, under such circumstances, perspective and a proper sense of proportion.

The study of foreign languages, ancient and modern, provides not only invaluable practical tools but it doubles and triples our understanding of other peoples whose thought we approach at first rather than second hand. In addition, the liberal college agrees with Toynbee that we do learn lessons from the study of history, which clarify our understanding of our own present and that of other peoples, and increase the likelihood, therefore, that we may contribute toward the building of that cooperative world which is still in its infancy.

In this connection it should be noted that the *area studies* which are being introduced into liberal arts offerings in the West, are helping to transform a former over-emphasis on western civilization into a genuine world outlook. Colleges and universities in the Orient have long thought in terms of both oriental and occidental culture.

In the liberal institution, which gives a significant place to religion in its educational offerings, and in the life of the institution as well, and I suspect that a clear majority of the liberal arts colleges and universities in the world are of Christian origin, there is a new emphasis being placed on philosophy and religion as integrating subjects in the whole curriculum. In the twenties and the thirties, in some British and American institutions the teaching in philosophy, ethics and religion had become limited in scope and ineffective in presentation. Educators noted with concern a lack of convictions and a firm sense of values in many of their students. Moreover, education had become highly fragmented as departments

within the college or university became more specialized and self-sufficient and inclined to look upon themselves as ends in themselves instead of as parts of a related whole. Students no longer possessed a common body of knowledge in which to root the essential loyalties.

Since the genius of the liberal arts college has been the education of men and women with free minds and firm convictions possessing loyalties to common ideals, faculties aroused themselves to a thorough-going study of their educational offerings. Departmental barriers were lowered and closely related subjects organized into divisions. A common body of general education was more effectively organized and required in many institutions for all freshmen and sophomores. Others have devised courses for seniors, in addition to the major examinations or thesis, which are designed to assist students in building bridges between their segments of knowledge. Among other ideas there has been fresh interest in the teaching of philosophy, religion and ethics, and in the influence which they might exert in helping to provide the needed amalgam for the whole curriculum.

This last plan of using religion and philosophy as integrating factors in the curriculum offers fine possibilities of further resolving the problem of the fragmentation of knowledge, but it can only be carried into effect successfully and made educationally sound if the chairs of philosophy and religion and the post of religious adviser on the campus are filled with persons of the finest scholarly training, who possess also extensive knowledge of other fields of learning and who are endowed with vision and understanding. A faculty which is sympathetic to this idea is also a *sine qua non*.

One cannot fully understand the potentialities of the liberal arts college without calling to mind also some important developments outside the curricular offerings which cannot be realized in every institution. I refer to the intimate contact and give and take between professor and student in and out of the classroom, the small class, and residential life where one learns to live and



work with a wide variety of one's fellows of differing backgrounds, including those of minority groups and students from other countries. Participation by students in the work of some college organizations provides opportunity for leadership, and student government at its best is an effective training school in democratic citizenship. In other words, just as the curriculum is concerned with broad related fields of knowledge with specialization in the last two years, so the total program of the residential liberal college program is concerned with the growth and development of the whole person—physically, intellectually, spiritually—who is being prepared to be a participant, not a spectator, in the life of his time.

If "inert ideas," unconnected with one another and with real life situations, which are so abhorred by the great philosopher Alfred North Whitehead, are to be thus avoided, this bold liberal arts concept, which is old but forever new and growing, calls for excellent teaching and planning by persons of high stature. The most crucial question before the liberal arts college in any country today is how we are to find, prepare and hold such persons in the teaching profession in view of the other green fields which also beckon them. The adequate financing of these colleges is one important question in this connection.

Finally, it should be said that all institutions of higher learning seek to acquaint their students with the content of certain fields of knowledge. The fundamental purpose of many of them is to give highly specialized instruction in one or more of them. This is necessary and desirable. In fact, Japan is fortunate in having variety in its higher educational picture, with large universities and smaller colleges, having both public and private support, organized as co-educational or separate colleges and with highly specialized or more liberal or general plan of study. Differing needs are being met and in each case the institution in question is apt to do a finer piece of work because of the existence of those of differing origin, educational organization and purpose. Consequently, each is under the necessity of making clear to its own constituency, to

the public and to the higher educational authorities not only its standards of excellence but also its *raison d'être* and its potential contribution to society.

The liberal college will always be under particular scrutiny in any land because of the nature of its offerings and the fact that its objectives are less readily formulated and understood. With this fact as a stimulus, its educational offerings, its methods, its results must be under constant review by its own faculty, administration and alumnae, the fundamental purpose remaining the same but the avenues for attaining this purpose changing to meet the needs of the times. There should be, therefore, both underlying stability in purpose and constant ferment in ideas. The liberal college should be experimental in outlook and constantly on the alert as a pace setter for the whole educational world. Kobe College, for instance, under the able leadership of President Namba and his associates, will continue, no doubt, to be a pace setter in the liberal higher education of women in Japan.

The uniqueness of the liberal arts college is in its far-reaching purposes and in the complexity of its problems in trying to attain these lofty goals. The liberal college as we have stated above is concerned with the development of personal character in its students as well as with their broad, exact, and specialized knowledge. It seeks to produce men and women with trained minds and the ability to think for themselves, whose thought is characterized by a sense of the relatedness of knowledge and the wholeness of life, by a sense of proportion, a high sense of values, and who possess an overpowering desire to serve their fellows and to support those forces that build the good society. Liberal education seeks to produce, therefore, men and women who are fitted to create and to maintain a democratic, and perhaps a more Christian society.

Is liberal education, then, a luxury or a necessity?