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**Sustainability: the Ultimate Liberal Art**

Ironic as it may now seem, the liberal arts of grammar, rhetoric, and logic were regarded by the ancient Greeks as practical and useful skills - so useful, in fact, that they were seen as the indispensable preparation for citizenship, for participation in a free society. And it was in Greece, the same Greece, that science was "invented." How doubly ironic, then, that in our science-driven age, we have so little place for the wisdom of Greece.

It is not that we reject useful knowledge. We worship it, but we have redefined it to exclude those very elements that the Greeks judged of such significance. It is time that we reconsider our approach - for the benefit, and perhaps even survival, of our modern world.

Our scholarly forebears of the Middle Ages enlarged, rather than ignored, the judgment of Greece, adding to the liberal arts the quadrivium of arithmetic, astronomy, geometry, and music, thus providing the essential educational preparation for the new age of discovery that marked the Renaissance. Even those most practical of people, the pioneers of the industrial and social revolutions of the 19th century, were careful not to reject, but to redefine, the essential content of the liberal arts - expanding them to embrace the new insights of the emerging natural and social sciences.

It is our generation that has seen the liberal arts confined largely to the liberal-arts colleges, both the smaller, traditional, independent undergraduate institutions and the colleges of liberal arts and sciences within universities. Outside those communities, the liberal arts have languished, not because they have been tested and found wanting - the evidence of centuries refutes that proposition - but because they have been nudged aside, elbowed out by more "practical" training and more "relevant" instruction.

So our new leaders - engineers and architects, physicians and social workers, lawmakers and urban planners, business executives and economic policy makers - graduate untouched by the hard-won collective historical experience, social perspectives, moral considerations, and humane reflections of our fellow human beings through the ages. Unencumbered by such reflections, they are likely to confront each new emerging issue as something novel: a challenge now encountered by society for the first time.

Perhaps we need to learn from our forebears of the Renaissance and Industrial Revolution and reformulate the liberal arts in ways that will nurture the development of freethinking men and women for the current age. The concept of sustainability could provide a new foundation for the liberal arts and sciences.

By "sustainability" I mean the effort to frame social and economic policy so as to preserve with minimum disturbance earth's bounty - its resources, inhabitants, and environments - for the benefit of both present and future generations. The old Native American proverb captures perfectly the spirit of this sustainability:

We do not inherit the earth from our ancestors; we borrow it from our children.

What might such a foundation entail? Certainly some significant exposure to the appropriate sciences: geology, natural resources, ecology, and climatology. Certainly, too, some understanding of social interactionsociology, economics, and history. And also, surely, some extensive familiarity with the great issues and themes of human inquiry, self-reflection, and moral consideration that have guided human conduct and reflected human creativity - with the arts and the humanities, in other words. And to anchor everything in the present, some review of the practical arts of technical discovery and invention, especially in relation to the broad issues now confronting us.

"That's not much different from the traditional grab bag of the liberal arts," the cynics might respond. But, in fact, it would be different in the new focus, added coherence, and stark immediacy that it would provide. Sustainability, after all, is the ultimate liberal art (and science).

Mastery of such a sweeping range of topics is, to be sure, the work of a lifetime and more, but exposure to the issues and methodological approaches involved is not. It is, in fact, no more extensive in its reach or burdensome in its demands than the "old" liberal arts. How it should be framed, what it should contain, how it should be taught, and how it should be supplemented will be the questions that the governing faculty of each college and university should consider and decide for itself. There can and should be no single prescriptive approach. Experiment and variety will have much to teach us.

But we should agree on one matter: The broad range of questions that sustainability raises have no single set of answers. We have yet to develop solutions. The topic is full of approximations, assumptions, projections, extrapolations, and ambiguities. Moreover, we should avoid simple stances because, to a greater degree than most other subjects, sustainability is open to indoctrination and partisan scholarship. Although it may be possible, it is difficult to be a partisan advocate in, say, chemistry or classics. It is probably less difficult in climate change or energy policy.

And beyond the complexities of sustainability as such, there lies the larger question of sustainability for what purpose. For sustainability will be best understood within the larger framework of values, meaning, and purpose - just as "solutions" are best considered within the context of the global society. That is why the wisdom that the traditional liberal arts provide is such a vital part of any such new curriculum.

Such a new approach to liberal arts, science, and sustainability will demand much of its students; it will demand even more of faculty members. But it will have one distinct potential benefit: If it is taught as an exercise in exploration and discovery, it may form the basis for a new kind of global map - a policy blueprint - that would allow us to set a common course for all the people of our rare, beautiful, and benevolent planet.

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