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# 26th Commencement Address

E. Alverna Burdick  
*Connecticut College*

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COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS

Dean E. Alverna Burdick

February 14, 1944

WHOM KNOWLEDGE PURSUES

A few years ago there appeared in Quarterly a poem, two lines of which I remember. The poem was in no sense great poetry, if poetry at all, and the lines are remembered only because of the confusion they portray.

You follow me  
And I'll give chase.

Someone is invited to follow someone who in turn pursues we know not what nor whom--the poem never reveals. I sometimes think this is a rather apt picture of what happens to many of us, not only to students. We come in pursuit of knowledge, find ourselves giving chase to a number of other things, and knowledge turns out to be pursuing us.

We are forced, or think we are forced, to consider problems outside the scope of the English source theme and the history assignment. Other interests, persons and issues quite outside the particular courses confront us, and command if not demand so much time that the main pursuit is but an unpleasant task. Teachers become task masters, ever there to try to bring us back to what we originally intended to be in college for. As each other interest crowds into the picture, college work seems to deal with less real issues. Real life is concerned with living people, and books may seem not to be so concerned.

1. In instances of individual or family crisis, such as personal illness or the last leave of a brother who is going overseas, it is these happenings and attendant problems which are real living issues.

2. When a community is in a crisis, as was this community during and after the hurricane, the problems of heat, light, water, food and actual physical safety were the real problems. (The first thing President Blunt did, however, was to post a sign at 6:30 the next morning, "Classes will be held as usual.") When a nation

3. is in a crisis, current national problems seem more real than verb forms.

It is small wonder then that in times like these, with the world, the nation, every community, every family and individual directly affected by war, (many individuals experiencing the dislocations more directly than some of us will ever realize,) small wonder that formal education is questioned. Small wonder perhaps that school knowledge pursues us and seems to compete at odds while we give chase to solutions of these other more real problems.

We would be foolish indeed not to heed the knowledge which comes to us from sources outside our courses. We should not shut our minds to the knowledge of the attitudes of our Congressmen, <sup>and our writers</sup> as they give evidence of these attitudes in their utterances and their stands on vital issues. We should know the attitudes of the young men at the war fronts, the attitudes of those who are returning. We hear that they are disappointed and disillusioned by what they find back home. I heard of a boy who ~~was~~ back from the front who said, "Even my family doesn't know there's a war. While they professed to wish to know what I had been through, they stopped my story to switch on the radio for a favorite program." We can say, "It doesn't do that boy any good again to live through tests to which his body and spirit have been put. It would be kinder to make him gay." It was no kindness to show this boy gayety. We whose only suffering to date has been worry must face the very real problem of understanding these men who have studied war, who know war. This man does not want us to be sorry for him. He needs intelligent grasp of what he calls real life--ultimate realities--the things which really matter, the things which are big enough to make a man glad he could share in preserving them. It takes wisdom to share in any measure the basic realities this boy has faced. And we shall be more than inadequate if we do not put our best minds to the task.

↗ It is the fashion to find fault with something outside ourselves when we find ourselves inadequate to the situations we meet, and by the same token to look for easy-aids-to-adequacy by studying those things directly bearing on a problem we are facing. I wonder what you graduates will think, after you leave, about the courses you have taken in college. Will you who are chemists and obtain jobs which require

knowledge of techniques you do not possess, think your college inadequate in that a course in that technique was not offered to you? If you marry and cannot cook, should we not have required a course which would have prepared you for this very real job? If you marry and your husband returns from the war with changed attitudes, should college not have offered you a course in the rehabilitation of service men to domestic tranquility? If you should have to meet sorrow, ~~and all of us do sooner or later~~, should college not have offered you a course which would have given you a sound philosophy of life, a course which would have fortified you for these realities of life?

And if you who are still undergraduates were to look at your own problems of living here and now, and view your program of studies, what relationship is there between those problems and these studies?

What courses would help us to meet <sup>Life?</sup> Much thought through the ages has been put upon the problem of which branches of study contribute most to the quality of man's living. I happen to think that some subjects have more to contribute ~~to the quality of one's living~~ than some other subjects. It seems to be a human trait to think more highly of oneself than one ought to think and to recommend those fields of study most highly which have produced such worthy results. But I am not going to launch my craft into the waters of this controversy.

Some psychiatrists have told us that the real hazards in living are grouped around three areas, that when a person bogs down it is usually in one or more of the following areas: the area of love, the area of work, the area of social relations. And more broadminded individuals include a fourth area: the area of man's relationship to the universe, to God. This is very clarifying <sup>isn't surely</sup> and seems to include the most important areas, except perhaps the Area of Man's relationship to Animals--Wild and Domesticated.

Just one look at any one of these areas, and even the most naive can see that no curriculum can in a short period or in a life-time offer all that one individual could and probably will need in preparation for living his life. And even if we

should be able to assemble in a master catalogue all of the subjects which should be covered in "Preparation for Living", what student could know which to select, and what adviser, no matter how inspired, could prescribe the wisest selection?

This brings me to the dismal conclusion that no subject nor set of subjects can prepare a student for all of the exigencies of Life. Does this mean that the courses which you have taken are useless in helping you meet reality? That education of a given kind does affect the quality of man's living has many times been proved. The particular quality achieved may be fortunate or unfortunate. An unfortunate achievement is shown perhaps most clearly in Germany from 1933 to the present. In February 1938 a brief statement of the purpose of education was given by the Reich Minister of Science, Education and Culture: "The function of all Education is to create a good Nazi." This aim has been realized to a degree we had thought impossible. <sup>Yes</sup> A declared purpose has enormous importance.

On each check issued by Connecticut College is the statement: "The aim of all Education is the Development of Character." A strange place for this statement to appear <sup>since checks are issued to so few of us albeit regularly, and</sup> <sup>^</sup> To my knowledge it does not appear elsewhere in literature of the college. <sup>4/1</sup> No educational institution is unaware of its obligation to give rich opportunity to its students for the development of <sup>their</sup> potentialities in character. We do not offer a course in "Your Character - How to Become Moral." The laboratory is here. It pursues you, perhaps, while you give chase to other matters.

In my darker moments I sometimes think that it is only through suffering and hardship that one gains in moral strength. But one sees too many individuals and nations become embittered and lose moral gains to think that suffering is the surest or the only way. And we come back to education, "the greatest instrument of persuasion, with faith in man's reasonableness and confidence in man's intellectual and moral freedom." President Morley says that the function of a liberal education is to stimulate intellectual curiosity, to stimulate critical acumen, the ability to evaluate the experiences ~~of the things~~ of life, and to strengthen moral character. It is the essence of the liberal tradition that it claims to deal with reality, that it has to do with man's real problems, his experiences, his

aspirations and his destiny. It attacks even the problem of War and Peace. It claims to free men of ignorance and prejudice. If it frees men, <sup>How</sup> why is it on trial for failure to solve the problems of War and Peace? It is estimated that behind the liberal thinker are 3000 years, if that, and that behind warring man are 1,000,000 years of a proneness to get what he wants by violence. The kind of society which will emerge after this war will depend upon the kind of ideas that are uppermost in the minds of people who are now <sup>win</sup> pursuing or being pursued by knowledge. "As a man thinketh, so is he." As a nation thinks, so will it be.

What have some of our colleges been thinking recently? We have seen examples of throwbacks to previous eras. Not so long ago we seemed to be cultivating our minds as preparation for leisure-time living. Now we are cultivating the mind for prosecution of the war. Society has dictated much of our educational policy, and that kind of education has fed back into society much that is deplorable into what was already deplorable. The war has caused us to re-evaluate and to look to our laurels, especially in the liberal arts colleges. Soon, before it is too late, we must reinstate education to a higher place as an influence upon society, or lose for an indefinite period the gains made in earlier times.

If we cannot ask for specific courses to meet all of our real problems, is there a question we can ask of any course, a question we can ask of ourselves in each course? We can ask what does this course tend to make me into? Such a question implies that we seek something rather than <sup>that we</sup> be pursued. It implies that there may be some change in us and that we are willing to accept a change. We are often likely to take courses merely in order to be informed. Perhaps we should choose them in the expectation that they may show us something which is greater than ourselves, and that we may be changed by that which is greater than ourselves. Vast is the difference between "being wise to" and being wise. Great is the gap between recognizing a truth and embracing that truth. I was once trying to teach a <sup>Christmas</sup> story play to a group of second grade youngsters. Santa Claus <sup>figured prominently</sup> ~~was one of the characters;~~ and one boy refused to play, saying, "I'm onto this Santa Claus stuff." Wise to the

Santa Claus myth and therefore sure that all mysteries are myths, <sup>and</sup> but entirely lacking in any comprehension that there could be deep meanings, *in ideas not readily understood.*

"Being wise to things" is a step. <sup>Critical</sup> Analysis is the first step in all knowledge ~~which~~ <sup>which</sup> goes beyond mere information. Without analysis ideas are nebulous and indistinct. With analysis they can become distinct and ordered. To be sure, analysis may be painful and may seem at times to unsettle the very foundations of what we have previously thought solid. It has always been dangerous to analyze. Socrates was a menace to the state because he insisted upon following every idea back to its source. He was forced to drink the hemlock because he persisted in this searching analysis. Analysis may indeed be superficial and thus fail of all worth, in plumbing that which is real. But in one way or another we must all take ideas to pieces, especially those ideas we call our own, before we can consider them valid. This educational process of analyzing must be practiced and practiced. Many subjects should be of direct value in giving us this practice, although there is no better field than one's own ideas and the prejudices we all seem so early to have acquired.

But analysis is not enough. When we have taken the first step and taken an idea to pieces, the second step is to put those pieces, or some of them, together in some kind of synthesis. It is not enough that we should tell ourselves this is false, this is true. The demolition squad can tear down a condemned building; the trowel of the builder is needed to make a building which will not be condemned.

It is this intellectual process of synthesis that is needed in trying to understand the significance of the suffering and hardship of the young man back from the South Pacific. Synthesis is where wisdom begins. It is not enough to be wise to the attitudes of these boys who return from war. It will take more than an analysis of why they are embittered and why they are critical of us civilians for us to have wisdom in understanding them. <sup>for we and they together must rebuild our society</sup> We wish desperately to meet these problems which are real living issues, and yet it is this second step of putting things together constructively that is so hard for us to take. "You can lead a student to college, but you can't make him think." Analysis but reveals that there

is a real problem, but one must not be easy until that problem is attacked constructively. That students are aware of this need for synthesis is shown frequently in the question periods following lectures. Sooner or later a student will ask, "What can we as students do?" The answer is sometimes discouraging. It is usually learn more and learn better those things which are really true in the situation. The synthesis is first an intellectual synthesis. We wish to run before we know how to walk. We tend to jump to conclusions and wish to reshape things before we know what thorough analysis would reveal needed to be done. We wish to reform before we have made the intellectual synthesis showing the true direction our action ought to take. And often in this discouragement a paralysis overcomes us, and we seek refuge in a kind of false modesty exemplified in the statement we hear so often, "What I do cannot affect anything anyway." And then we go about acting as though there is nothing for us to do but lead little lives, since we are so insignificant. We (again let knowledge pursue us, and) rationalize our lethargy, by saying that what we do is so insignificant. Are we insignificant, or are we individuals with human dignity and worth? We are both. In order to look at any vital problem realistically we must examine this paradox. We think of ourselves as insignificant (pieces of matter) on the one hand, and on the other hand, we think very highly of ourselves. It is true that man is unimportant, and equally true that he is important.

Each/

All of us at some time or other has had the experience of being deeply convinced that we are as nothing and at other times we have recognized something <sup>greater</sup> than ourselves and that we are somehow important in relation to that bigger thing. The gap between "being wise to" and being wise is tremendous. We become wise as we learn to see things <sup>which are more significant</sup> ~~bigger~~ than ourselves and use our poor and fragmentary <sup>apprehend</sup> parts to ~~grasp~~ those things which are greater than our <sup>little</sup> ~~simplest~~ selves. <sup>(Lack comes comprehension and)</sup> It is here that synthesis ~~building something of worth~~ begins.

One first easy step to this kind of pursuit of wisdom is within the experience of each one of us. Perhaps our first conception of purposes larger than our own ~~needs,~~ <sup>needs,</sup> ~~has~~ come to us by thinking of the needs of some other particular person who



The needs of / particular persons, and trust in / particular persons, represent one first easy step and must not be construed as anything more than one beginning toward wisdom. It is one window through which many begin to see that as individuals they are unimportant in comparison to but important in relation to certain truths outside themselves. Beginnings are but beginnings. "Being wise to" is but a very small beginning. Analysis must be followed by synthesis.

Synthesis is not a thing of sudden making. I think it begins for any ~~person~~ <sup>individual</sup> whenever ~~that person~~ <sup>he</sup> reaches out beyond the satisfactions of self (even that intellectual satisfaction of analysis) to the risk of faith in another person, <sup>Contemporary or past</sup> faith in an idea, faith in a unifying principle. This is the path of those who have pursued wisdom, those who have pursued wisdom with more success than we ever shall. And there is no limit, no end to this path except insofar as we ourselves are limited. Francis Bacon puts this limitlessness thus: "A little philosophy inclineth man's mind to atheism; but depth of philosophy bringeth man's minds about to religion. For while the mind of man looketh upon second causes scattered, it may sometimes rest in them and go no further; but when it beholdeth the chain of them, confederate and linked together, it must needs fly to Providence and Deity." <sup>And later:</sup> "Atheism depriveth human nature of the means to exalt itself above human frailty." Thus Bacon returns us to our paradox: man is weak; man can be exalted above this frailty.

We take many courses which are concerned with, and rightly so, second causes. No one can fit these courses into a "confederation of links" for us. Each person's education is different from that of any other person--different in material and in shape. The individual himself must make the synthesis. No one can ensure that <sup>the</sup> formal education an individual receives will be wise, but with that education one can by oneself learn to pursue wisdom. We may be pursued by knowledge, and neither analysis nor synthesis will result. Wisdom requires that we do the pursuing.