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Address to the Lions Club of Dallas

Donald A. Cowan
University of Dallas

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Address of Donald A. Cowan to the Lions Club of Dallas
Adolphus Hotel, January 11, 1963

My father was a Lion. I was pretty young and so was the Fort Worth Lions Club when he became Tailtwister and then President. When the seven of us kids saw him and mother off for the inauguration dinner, we thought they looked splendid; it was the first time we had seen him in a tux. We rejoiced in every honor any Lion won, and particularly, of course, we basked in the glory of Julien Hyer. I pay tribute to him now, not so much for his past glory and present eminence as for his many acts of friendship and courtesy he has paid my father and, since his death, my mother; I am grateful and count him a Lion among men.

My father was a printer. I grew up with a stick in my hand and ink under my nails. The print shop was my first college. It may be that I learned more in the print shop than I have ever learned since. I learned layout and design. I learned accounting and cost analysis. I learned selling, how to engineer a business form and, therefore, how to understand another man's business. There, in those dark days of the early 30's, I learned how to meet a payroll. It is a sobering bit of knowledge; I think we would all feel more secure about our country's future if every professor in our universities, at some time in his career, had had the great privilege of the small entrepreneur in scraping together money so that men who worked for him could feed their families.

But I do not want to sentimentalize the school of hard knocks. However fond we may be of the 30's, I think none of us

would relive those depression years. And if we fear too soft a life for our children, we can reflect on the fact that, willy nilly, life has a way of matriculating every man into the same tough school of experience we attended, from which, God willing, he will graduate cum laude.

It is of the more formal schooling I would speak to you, and in particular, of the pattern of higher education and how it is changing today. That pattern is changing for many reasons, in a seemingly accidental way in many respects and often giving the appearance of randomness. But there is a general direction to the changes throughout the educational world, something more than a drift or a new style which our Minerva might wear like a new hair-do. These changes are responses to alterations in our society, reflecting its needs and aspirations, much of which I think you will find heartening in a way you would not have found such a survey a decade ago.

Our age was a technical one. I use the past tense because all of us, particularly those of us in education, are guardians of a world which belongs already to our heirs. We have not completed the technical age; we have not yet faced the major crisis of automation; we have not yet solved our problem of a future energy supply; any of us could point to a dozen problems on which we could speak with urgency and some alarm. But in our reflective moments we know that our economic system can digest automation, as it already has, in part, and can sponsor the research and development which will solve our problems of energy, transportation, water supply, and other physical requirements.

In short, we are confident that our technical society can satisfy our technical demands, and it is in this sense of adequacy that I say, with rockets zooming about my head, we are passing into a post-technical age.

In our technical age we saw the great technical schools arise. Engineering was the prototype for education, and in its mold schools of business, of journalism, of music and other specialties took form. I suspect these schools were necessary and it is, perhaps, because they have done their jobs well that, as undergraduate schools, they are disappearing. I do not mean that such schools as M.I.T. or Cal Tech will close their doors; far from it. But they and the other better engineering schools have long since altered their curricula so that they are oriented toward the fundamental sciences -- particularly mathematics and physics -- and are now moving increasingly toward the liberal arts. Some universities have actually closed the undergraduate school of engineering, requiring a liberal arts degree with a major in a science prior to entry into graduate work in engineering, and this is the pattern that is likely to become general. Business schools have shifted into graduate work and many prefer that the undergraduate program avoid concentration in business courses. The liberal arts have come back into their own. I submit to you that this reassertion of the importance of the liberal arts is a major change in American education. Why it has come about and what its effects are should be worth discussing.

First of all, we in America can afford to give our children a liberal education. Despite the pinch that you and I feel in

our personal budgets, we live in an affluent society. Admittedly it takes sacrifice but we can send our children to college -- and that was not true for all of us at college age. I went back to college as a sophomore at the age of 30, and I know many of you could not go back at all. But our children can go to college, and the children of the people who work for us can go to college. Society can spare these young men and women from its working force because automation has released them. Indeed, our economic system is a good deal healthier because these young men are removed from productivity. Even the youngsters of ordinary ability can have -- must have -- this education. The society which they will enter is a complex one. It is a technical society, but a rapidly changing one, one in which techniques learned in school would be out of date before they could be practiced. They must, therefore, learn fundamentals and acquire flexible minds. This is the function of the liberal arts. Surprisingly, in our day, in the post-technical age, it turns out that literature, languages, history, and philosophy, along with mathematics, physics, and the other sciences, are eminently practical.

This resurgence of the liberal arts is a great boon to conservatives. The technical age was conducive to a planned economy. Theory was dominant. The social sciences flourished. And, indeed, we learned and will continue to learn greatly from them. But no longer do we renounce the past. In the post-technical age, values and traditions are important, history has meaning, and that which the past found good is conserved.

It falls largely to the university to be the conserver of the past. The gradual dissipation of the community and finally the family itself as a storehouse of lore, folk tales, and values has proceeded for some centuries now, hastened in recent years by our communication systems. The wisdom that passed from father to son has been interrupted. It cannot be replaced by any static system of instruction. We cannot implant attitudes or demand reactions according to past ideas, even our own. The values of the past must be recreated in a context pertinent to our time. That is the function of the university. Let me say, parenthetically, that while my official position is that we need both state and private institutions of higher education, and I believe it within limits, I cannot imagine a university fulfilling its essential role in our society outside a religious context. No student of history or anthropology would attempt to understand any culture of the past without considering the role religion played in every aspect of that culture. No person concerned about the health and vitality of our culture today would attempt to extract from it the religion which gives meaning to its values. It is bad education to attempt it. It can no more be done than science can be taught without mathematics. We cripple our young men when we deny them an essential part of their education. Now let me say that religion is never actually left out of any education. It is there in the literature, in history, -- throughout the whole structure. But when it cannot be admitted openly, something unhealthy exists in our midst. The frank acceptance of religion as pertinent to our education is essential for the conscientious seeker of truth.

It has been a remarkable privilege to be in near the beginning of a new university with the potential for greatness which the University of Dallas has. Because it was started with an intention of excellence, there was no built-in mediocrity. It was started in the post-technical age; its curriculum has been governed by the concept of education I have been describing. Because we have this concept of education we give less free choice than do most schools. The freedom of choice comes in the selection of a major discipline, a choice which need not be made until well into the second year of college work. In the beginning we see to it that the student becomes involved in philosophy, requiring two years of it. The failure to insist on an adequate involvement in philosophy during the past forty years has been a major failure of our educational pattern. We have allowed our students to be perpetually naive. It is as if they must continually reinvent the bicycle -- or perhaps the wheel itself. We see to it, too, that literature becomes an important part of their lives. In two years of literature every student reads some sixty great books. We have discovered we cannot teach grammar to grown ups -- not by teaching grammar, at least. We can teach grammar and we can teach writing and rhetoric by bringing to the student the presence of great literature -- the great epics, The Iliad, Odyssey, Aeneid, Song of Roland, Beowulf, the Divine Comedy, Paradise Lost -- the great tragedies of Sophocles, Shakespeare, and a few moderns -- the great novels. And in the hand-to-hand struggle with great literature (each student writes a theme a week about the literature) in the uncovering of a great creative

mind, each student discovers his own resources and the well springs of his own individuality. So I could describe to you the experience a student has in foreign language, which reveals another culture and thereby throws light on his own. And in our history courses, the civilization which man has constructed in the West takes on a patterned form.

I cannot yet say to you that everyone in our university has an adequate experience in science. Everyone is exposed, but my own commitment to physics with some understanding of its importance in the structure of our world -- an importance that goes far beyond the economic and physical aspects of our age into the whole matrix of metaphysical beliefs -- keeps me dissatisfied with what we do as yet. I know that if we are to develop a whole school with an adequate knowledge of physics in the sense I intend, we must repair elementary and secondary education. That repair job is going on and I can foresee the day when the wisdom as well as the competence which science yields can be in the possession of every college graduate. It is so for many now, and I can say to you that the liberal arts are the proper colleagues of the sciences. We are able to take a boy further along the road of advanced physics than can most schools, and I attribute that, in part, to the flexibility of mind and the nurturing of the imagination which literature, history, philosophy and our other requirements provide.

I will not attempt to describe to you our entire program. I suspect you can sense my excitement about it. The University of Dallas has grown amazingly in its six years. Buildings have

sprung up on its thousand acres west of town. Dallas has been generous in supporting us; I trust it is because we are doing something Dallas needs and because we are doing it well. We are doing something we like to do and believe in doing. We shall ask Dallas for more support. Perhaps I should have talked to you today about the intricacies of university financing. It is actually a privilege to ask for money for a university. But today I wanted to tell you a little about American education, how it is changing in ways I find most encouraging, and how we at the University of Dallas are taking our part in the revitalization of western culture and in the strengthening of the American civilization as we know it.