

THE MIND'S DISCIPLINE

by Merrimon Cuninggim

The dedication of a library is an act of faith.

This has been true, it seems, at any time and in every society. To plan, to build, and finally to dedicate a library, or any major expansion of its resources and services, are affirmative acts based on premises that are unprovable but widely accepted by the responsible agents of those acts. Man believes something, or believes in—that is, trusts—something, and what he does as a result of what he believes or believes in, is an act of faith. Calling it by such a term is not meant to hallow it, to throw some special aura around it; rather, it is simply to be as factually descriptive as possible.

Like any other act of faith, the dedication of a library is a conscious joining of the past with the future. The person of faith is affirming that the past is worth listening to and that the future is worth preparing for. Gathering books and other deposits of the experience of the human race, making them available for study by competent scholars and eventually for the enlightenment of mankind, and surrounding the whole process with an air of seriousness—the provision of convenient facilities, the protection of valuable items, even the institution of rules of acceptable deportment—these functions add up to a faith-full endeavor which our society expects librarians and others to discharge faithfully.

But we don't live at any time and in just any society. We live today, and thus in the midst of all the slings and arrows of an outrageous age. The long, withdrawing, melancholy roar of the retreating sea of faith is all around us. In today's distraught world the dedication of a library may well seem to thoughtful and sensitive people to be not an act of faith but an act of temerity. Books are for the birds, libraries are anachronistic institutions, technology is the wave of the future, and what are we doing here?

It may not be amiss, then, to try to find some special justification for what we are up to. All sorts of summary words and expressions could be used, of course, but one that has occurred to me

is, I suggest, peculiarly accurate. It is this: A library, especially a university library, is for the mind's discipline.

To use such a term is to run headlong against the temper of our times. "Mind" is a term that evokes at least mild suspicion, and "discipline" is downright unpopular. It may be prudent, therefore, to define our terms a bit more precisely, so that no unnecessary umbrage will be taken and yet so that the full nature of their being contradictory to the temper of our times may be disclosed.

To say that a library has something to do with the mind is not to disparage other aspects of man's equipment. To the extent to which man's mind can be separated from his body or spirit, or whatnot, especially his whatnot, to that extent a library can be said to focus its aim more to the improvement of his mind than to the exercise of any others of his parts. If a society, or some segment of it, gets to the point of feeling that improving the mind is less important than other efforts, or somewhat precious, or too difficult, or even subversive, then we academic types would deplore such attitudes, but that's the way it is. But a library, especially again a university library, has no choice. It must go right on giving its attention to the mind.

Discipline, too, needs some elucidation. A library, at least the library of an institution of higher education, is not primarily for the mind's enjoyment. It must hastily be added that neither is the library chiefly for the mind's inflammation. Either enjoyment or inflammation may be subsidiary outcomes of one's conscientious use of a university library. You can have a good time; you can get turned on. But the primary purpose of such an institution is for the mind's discipline, so as to put enjoyment, inflammation, and any other outcome, even boredom or stagnation, into proper perspective.

Now it is part of the folklore to which all of us, I dare say, subscribe that our parents practiced too much discipline on us and that our children have too little, though of course through no fault of our own. In other words, too much and too little discipline are all around us at the same time, and we tend to approve of as much as we have got, so much and no more. We give our loyalty quite readily to any agency that entertains us, that can make us feel happier or more secure; and on occasion we can even give some grudging respect to other agencies that excite us or provoke us or make us rebel at the ways of the world. Pity the poor library, then, for its chief function is none of these, though any of them on occasion may be its derivative product. The central reason for the

library's existence is to serve its two basic articles of faith, that the past is worth listening to and that the future is worth preparing for, and to serve them by means of its distinctive emphasis on the discipline of the mind.

All this suggests that a library may easily be out of step with the preferred ways of behavior of the human population it seeks to serve. A great debate is going on among us as to whether our social scene, or even the limited campus scene as part of it, should follow democratic or authoritarian modes of thought and action. But it comes upon us as a shock to realize that a library is committed to neither. It stands in opposition to both. This may be one of the hardest things for us who love libraries to recognize.

A library is not a democratic place—at least not in the way in which we often misuse that worthy term. That is, it is not a place where one book is as good as another, one idea is as sound as another, one student is as productive as another. Some books are used more than others. Moreover, merit is much more than, may not be at all, a matter of comparative use. Library merit is not measured by number of books held, or by people in attendance, or by size of budget—though all three things, especially the latter, help, of course. If democracy is the egalitarian, dead-level principle of one-man, one-vote—which is a pretty inadequate definition of democracy—that principle cannot support the building or administration of a library of quality.

But it is also true that a library is not an authoritarian place. If no book is thought to be challenging simply because it's there, no book is allowed to lord it over the rest simply because it is somehow prestigious. In human terms: if merely doing his own little thing is no fit defense for a reputable scholar, no more may his defense lie in some self-assumed, or circumstantial, or arbitrarily assigned authority.

A well-ordered library is neither a pseudo-democracy nor an autocracy, but is a meritocracy. All serious books and all serious students, and maybe even some frivolous ones of both kinds, are welcome, but none of them rules the roost. Ruling is indeed the wrong word, for no book and no person, not even the librarian, can reign over the library. Battered by too much or too little democracy, too little or too much authority, we might wish it were one way or the other; but a library is a place and a community where merit is or should be the determining factor in ordering precedence. To be sure, merit among books or among people is not always clear, not always agreed upon. It has to be hammered

out under continuing competition, but sooner or later it does get established. The university library, more than the classroom, the dean's office or the dormitory, is the arena in which merit is most likely to be established and maintained.

Mention of other parts of a university's campus gives us a chance to broaden the lens of our observation. Has it occurred to you that, all the time we've been thinking about the library, we've actually been talking about the university as a whole? More than any other one spot or service of the institution, the library can be said to be the microcosm of the university. The central purpose of the university as a whole, not just of the library as one of its parts, is for the discipline of the mind. The identification of higher education's purposes, goals, and proper functions is one of the games that we academic folks like to play. We can spin them out to a score or more, or squeeze them in to two or three, as the occasion suits us. But when all is said and done, the mind's discipline would probably be in everyone's list, and near or at the top of most. Oversimplification, or impreciseness of definition, or omission of other important goals and functions is bound to displease some of us. Those who believe that the university has a social responsibility to discharge might fear that the phrase, the mind's discipline, does not give sufficient emphasis to this important role. For their comfort I hasten to say that, as an activist, I do not mean to ignore this third important function alongside the time-honored duo of teaching and research. Those others who believe that teaching and research should take precedence over all else will presumably have no trouble with the phrase. The summary of the matter is that among academic people, and with the necessary qualifying footnotes that we would all want to add, large agreement is likely for the proposition that the university is a place for the mind's discipline.

But today's university, many of us feel, has taken on too much the coloration of its society. Not the greatness of its society, but its weakness—on the one hand, its special privileges, its pride of place, its self-protectiveness; on the other hand, its prejudices, its sense of insecurity, its fears. As a consequence, discipline of the mind gets compromised, weakened, sometimes lost in the shuffle. Does the public still have a large esteem for the university? Yes-s-s, perhaps—though there are plenty of signs to the contrary. Does the public *want* to hold the university in esteem? Yes! Feelings of awe, vestigial regard, a desire to be associated with, even when being critical of, the university are still widespread among us. Is there

something perverse or contradictory here? No, I think not. A strange mark of the esteem in which the public wants to hold the university is found in that same public's growing disaffection with the university. This disaffection, often remarked, has many explanations, but whatever its derivative causes, it springs from the central though often unconscious conviction that the university has come to be more the mirror than the leader of its society.

Let us pursue this point briefly. The disillusionment of a large part of the American public with today's university is not, I submit, with what the university should be as often as it is a disappointment with the university's not living up to what it should be, to its own essential nature and purposes. To be sure, criticism and pressure abound when a university behaves as it should—for example, when it protects academic freedom—but more fundamental disaffection sets in, I believe, when a university behaves as it shouldn't. Extremist groups all the way from the Black Panthers to the John Birch Society may rant and rave when the university is true to its central task, but the broad sweep of the general public, limited perhaps in understanding but essentially fair-minded and respectful, is more put off by lack of performance than by impurity of purpose.

To be a little more specific: People are disturbed not because the university is concerned with the discipline of the mind but because the university is often disloyal in practice to that primary concern. Discipline of the mind means teaching: A university gets into trouble with its constituency not because it professes a desire to provide gifted teaching in its classrooms but because it doesn't provide it. Discipline of the mind means research: Whether the university should sponsor research is not the issue; whether that research is competent and socially responsible often is. And speaking of social responsibility, once we have eliminated the radicals of left and right who want the university either to man the barricades or retreat to the storm cellars, the great majority of the rest of us hope that the university's exercise in the social setting will be consistent with its own inner character, no more and no less.

In all this talk about agencies and functions, libraries and teaching, research and social responsibility, let us not forget that the university is, first of all, a human community, a community of seniors and juniors, of teachers and students, with the administration and the trustees in important supportive roles. What is the current, nation-wide hullabaloo all about? I don't mean, What is

the ruckus about at Harvard or San Francisco State, or Columbia, or Texas, or any other one institution? There are all kinds of answers, and all kinds of people are giving answers. I mean, What are the common threads? Narrowed down, there are still many answers. Let me suggest one: I have the uneasy feeling that much complaint centers not on the fact that the university properly proclaims its concern for human development, primarily for intellectual development, but relatedly for the development of something we sometimes call the whole person. The complaint, rather, is that the university has failed to give persuasive evidence that this *is* its concern, that this is an important part of its total endeavor.

Take the students, for example: Omit, if you will, the firebrands, the small percentage who are the darlings of the media because they like to occupy, demand, and burn, baby, burn. Consider, rather, the radical discontent of a large proportion of the current student generation, a discontent that seldom proceeds to the point of disruption and general misbehavior and is one of the great constructive developments of our day. The radical discontent of the younger generation is not directed at the mission of the university, I submit, but at the evidence they feel they see that the university is not serving its mission. The rebellion of most of the students is not at the fact that authority is in the hands of adults, but at the timidity or high-handedness with which that authority is often exercised. Student protest is not at their own junior status as citizens in the academic community so much as it is at their not being taken seriously even as junior citizens. In other words, the college generation joins hands with their age group in other walks of life who are in revolt not against ideals but against hypocrisy, not against the American dream but against what they take to be the American reality, the cynicism in the implementation of that dream. If the university ever decides to be the university, with the discipline of the mind as its central purpose, and with other functions flowing from it in appropriate elaboration, then the younger generation and the citizenry as a whole can be expected to rally to the side of any institution whose practice credibly reflects its profession.

Furthermore, it needs to be realized, I think, that a university, like a library, may not perform its proper function in either a pseudo-democratic or an authoritarian way. In its functioning as a human community, a university is not properly egalitarian, even though in some spheres of its life peers abound. Correspondingly, a university is not properly hierarchical, even though in other

spheres of its life authority is specifically designated. Like a library, a university must be a meritocracy, with all members of the campus community participating in the various aspects of that life to the extent that their varying experience and expertise qualify them to do. The campus must be a collaborative community, not a pseudo-democratic one; it must be authoritative, not authoritarian.

What does this mean, then, for students in their occasionally overambitious push for power? It means, to my mind, that in some areas students ought to have power, either to share it or, in perhaps a few areas, to exercise it alone. It means that in other areas they ought *not* to have exclusive authority. We probably wouldn't agree on what these areas would be—and I won't endanger your possible sympathy for my central proposition by trying to persuade you of my specifics. My central proposition that a university is a meritocracy means that, in key areas of the institution's activity, students should be neither omitted nor placed in charge. (A good way to displease everybody!) Their participation should be characterized neither by tokenism nor by dominance. They, like all other component groups of the university, are engaged in the process that we have called the discipline of the mind, and this process can be effective only when it is neither pseudo-democratic nor authoritarian but is based, instead, on various degrees and kinds of eligibility—on academic qualifications: knowledge, capacity for search, truthfulness, experience, maturity, ability to communicate, sensitivity to applicability of knowledge to problems of society, etc. The discipline of the mind, let me repeat, is an effective process only when it is collaborative, not pseudo-democratic, when it is authoritative, not authoritarian, when it is based on merit.

My propositions, then, are quite simple: A great library, and a great university of which it is a part, exist for the primary purpose of the mind's discipline. This means that some books are better than others, that some ideas are sounder than others, that some people are more experienced than others in making such tricky judgments, but that all have their proper place. It is a place not to be easily or arbitrarily allocated, but one arrived at by much trial and thus undoubtedly some error, by ebb and flow of opinion, by give and take in personal relationships, and finally, by the recognition that the differences among books and men are more often ones of degree than of kind. If there is any soundness in these imprecise propositions that I have offered, then let me, as an out-

sider, be so presumptuous as to close with three bits of gratuitous advice.

First, apologize to no one, not even to the most hidebound dinosaur in or outside the university, for the university's emphasis on rationality and its uses. Pursue with patience and even temper the leadings of rationality in science, in civic betterment, and in everything in between. A true university is not a propaganda factory, and its library, not its office of public relations, is its appropriate epitome.

Second, apologize to no one, especially not the most adolescent disrupter, whatever that person's age, whether in faculty or student body, for the university's same emphasis on rationality, this time as the rule of campus relationships. Eschew the luxury of emotion as the guide to academic conduct, whether displayed in swashbuckling or sycophancy. Better than a faculty meeting or a student forum, a library is a fit symbol for the university's essential nature.

Third, proclaim the mind's discipline as the guiding aim of the library and of the university as a whole. Proclaim it, and to the extent to which human frailty allows, provide it.