

**THE HEART OF THE MATTER:**  
Hutchins, The First Forty Years

My thanks to Francisco for the excellent 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary program, and also for reading the moving and beautiful statement written by Warren's son for this event. Thanks to all of you for being here to share in celebrating this milestone. I'm honored to have been asked to speak this evening and would like to begin with a few comments about Warren before moving to tonight's topic.

I'm certain that we all realize that none of us would be here tonight without Warren's leadership, deep commitment to liberal education and the strength of character he exhibited in creating this unique "school within a school," holding it together during its formative years and continuing in later years to help guide its progress. We know from many examples that successful founders of institutions or movements share a number of characteristics: one is a deep, sometimes single-minded and often passionate commitment to their goals; a second is ability to excite and continue to motivate others about their cause; but the third is the rarest and hardest to achieve: the wisdom to allow others to step in and take over guiding the evolution of what has been built at the appropriate time. Warren, I believe, exhibited all three, and the leadership process he initiated, though never easy, was critical to the successful future development of the school.

It's been said of speakers in general, and after dinner speakers in particular, that while it doesn't matter when they start, the most important thing is that both the speaker and his or her audience manage to finish at the same time! That is my main goal this evening, and to make it possible, I'll work to keep my remarks brief and to the point.

Of course the next question, then, is what is the point? When asked several months ago to speak at this event, I had to come up with a title, and without knowing at all what I would say, I asked that very question. And, in a very Zen-like way, with all the ringing clarity and ambiguity of a Koan, the answer came to me: The Heart of the Matter. Of course that's the point! Isn't it always the point?

So, now a disclaimer: while I can't promise to take you there directly (because the blinding truth that lies at the Heart of the Matter might be too much to handle in one flash), I will do my best Moses imitation to guide us on a journey to the nearest overlook. I'm surprised that no one has commented on it so far today, but it does happen that, symbolically, the 40 years of Hutchins exactly parallels the number of years the Children of Israel wandered in the desert after leaving Egypt. Somewhere out there, I assure you, is the Promised Land. "I may not get there with you....."

On the theme of wandering, then, I'm reminded of a narrative I developed many years ago to give at the annual Hutchins Graduation Breakfast, explaining in mythic terms the creation story of the Hutchins School. I thought our graduating seniors

should be able to appreciate and understanding the deeper meaning of how the program came to be.

As the story goes, once there was a time of great darkness in Higher Education (and no, it had nothing to do with furloughs yet, or budget cuts, or even Green Music Centers). Students and teachers stumbled about on campuses all around the country searching for even the slightest flicker of the light of learning. At that time, a young scholar came to California bearing a small candle of liberal learning which he managed to keep burning all the way from the Midwest where it had first been ignited by the ideas and example of the famed President of the University of Chicago, Robert Maynard Hutchins. Not knowing exactly where to go to help enlighten the world, young Warren Olson first tried a place called CSU Chico, but evidently there wasn't enough kindling to use, or the wood was too wet to get a good flame going.

Then somehow he found or was guided to the brand new campus of Sonoma State College, discretely hidden in a hay field on a former seed-farm. Yet despite its unprepossessing exterior, or perhaps because of it, he found there a community of fellow searchers, lots of kindling and dry wood, and, of course, plenty of tobacco for his pipe. He looked around and declared that "here I will light the lamp of learning." And he did, and it was good—at least some of it. But more about that later!

We've got to get back to the Heart of the Matter, and here I must tell you that it is a case where truth is stranger than fiction or myth, so the best I can do is turn from myth to history and relate my truth or my experience—selectively, of course since I've been warned by Eric that no one wants to hear racy or scandalous stories from the old days.

The fact is that whatever metaphor you use to describe it, a journey, a jungle, a swamp, a desert, higher education in the last half century has been anything but an ivory tower. This is particularly true for those of us who chose to join Warren Olson in projecting (and at times protecting) the light of liberal education in the Hutchins School 40 years ago.

To provide the appropriate context for the experiment, let me first explain why I believe that it is particularly significant and revealing that Hutchins opened its doors in 1969, the same year that we landed on the Moon.

The country, at that time, was basically coming apart at the seams, over the Vietnam War, over race, over the enormous social and cultural changes of the 1960's, and over the assassinations and increasing violence of the decade culminating in the political turmoil of 1968-1969 and the election of Richard Nixon. It was a period when radical anti-establishment feeling pervaded every aspect of national life. This was especially true in higher education where the educational values of what UC President Clark Kerr, proudly called the Multiversity were under assault from students and faculty alike, dissatisfied with top-down, authoritarian administrations, university-government ties which made major educational institutions complicit in the maintenance of the 'warfare state' and oppression of

minorities at home and abroad, and with a depersonalizing type of education which seemed aimed at replicating both the established structures of power, and the unquestioning modes of thought which sustained them.

In my own experience, I had by then spent nearly seven years at Berkeley, listening to Mario Savio on the steps of Sproul Hall calling on students to throw their bodies on the gears of the machine and bring it to a halt, joining with 20,000 others in singing "We Shall Overcome" with Joan Baez, marching against police violence and the War, being tear gassed every semester from 1963-1970 while studying for my degree in American History. I had been a Teaching Assistant in enormous classes, watching a single "Sage on the Stage" lecturing to 700 or 800 undergraduates, who dutifully took notes and memorized facts for the tests and papers I would grade and he would never see. And this passed for education at what many thought the greatest university in the country.

But, just as the countervailing image of the whole earth rising above the moon's surface appeared to us for the first time that year, that image of wholeness and unity, that blue and white jewel eternally floating in the blackness of space, standing in stark contrast to the chaos, division, blindness and ignorance we were experiencing below, it turned out that small groups of faculty and students at universities and colleges across the country, people like Warren Olson, Jerry Tucker, Red Thomas, Ken Stocking and other colleagues at SSU, were busy developing radical countervailing educational models in order to reassert and reclaim the humane values of a liberal education based on that same wholeness and unity.

Exactly how it was to be done was unclear, and as the process unfolded here at Hutchins and elsewhere, it proved to be both amazingly contentious and remarkably creative. Warren liked good arguments, and God knows he got them! To begin with, all of the original faculty were in one way or another products of or shaped by the upheavals of the 1960's. Both faculty and students were products of a culture of dissent. That meant, in one way or another, suspicious of authority, whether that came in person or from books, and, in most cases, characterized by a willingness to experiment and test personal and intellectual boundaries. However, as we all were to learn, knowing what you are against is one thing; defining what you are for, it turns out, is far more difficult.

That first year, 1969-1970 almost destroyed the new Hutchins School. It ended with Warren and Jerry essentially firing their other two colleagues over fundamental philosophical and practical differences about teaching and learning. One of the four originators, a professor of physics, had developed a basically anarchist vision for the new school in which the students and faculty member essentially created the curriculum on a daily basis, without limits or structure. Another tempting vision at the time was to see the seminar, which all agreed on as a basic pedagogical structure, as a kind of personal therapy group. Warren would have none of it, and in a painful and ongoing process, drew the basic lines which defined Hutchins as an academically-oriented institution with a high degree of freedom, but with a clear,

learning-based structure. In fact, if he had not done so, it is probable that Hutchins would not have survived, as was the case with a great many similar experimental programs across the country.

That there was to be an academic structure and rigor, even in so experimental a program was explained clearly to me in my first interview with Warren. He, Jerry Tucker and I all wore jackets and ties—perhaps the only time I did so on campus for the next 30 years. Impressed by what I heard, I did my best, to present my own very real commitment to the ideal I believed we all shared of transforming higher education. That it was to be interdisciplinary and taught in seminar-sized classes appeared to be the perfect antidote to all I had found wrong with higher education elsewhere.

I do admit, however, to being a bit shocked at the sight of the campus on that Spring day in 1970, once I found it at the end of an empty two lane country road outside the small town of Cotati. It seemed to consist of little more than several grey concrete monoliths and a few temporary buildings growing out of a field of recently-mown hay. The Berkeley I left was swirling in turmoil because of the recent National Guard killings of eight students at Kent State University. Tear gas still lingered under the trees, sprayed by police to disperse the protest marchers. The huge campus was on strike. Sonoma State, in contrast, was bucolic and peaceful. No sign of activism, police, guardsmen, or for that matter, many students. It was, in fact, the freest college campus I could ever have imagined, as the one story from the old days I will allow myself to tell indicates.

Having arrived about an hour early for my interview, I decided I might as well walk around and look the place over. Hearing some live music, I wandered in that direction, only to discover that there was a lake in the back of the campus where some kind of festival was underway. As I got closer, to my great amazement, there appeared to be hundreds of nude young people, the student body or bodies, I supposed, swimming, sunning, warming in improvised saunas along the shore, and then diving back in. The sight certainly gave me a new appreciation of the possibilities of higher education, and definitely increased my interest in this particular job. I didn't yet know much about the Hutchins School, but perhaps if their offices were near the lake, I could be persuaded.

But back to The Heart of the Matter. When I did talk with Warren and Jerry later that day, what was intellectually exciting, however, was the fact that there was no fixed curriculum already in place, that the new faculty would have a hand in creating it from the ground up—an unheard of opportunity almost anywhere in higher education; that the faculty would be interdisciplinary by design and learn from each other, and that the teaching would take place in small seminars.

What wasn't explained, or possibly even understood yet (and perhaps wouldn't have made any difference to us anyway at that time) was that in order to support those small seminars, Hutchins faculty would end up teaching basically twice as

much as anyone else on the campus, as well as spending countless hours in cadre meetings, faculty meeting and retreats planning those new, interdisciplinary courses, arguing over each and every book and endlessly debating the nature of the School.

But the real work, it turned out, was learning, gradually, at times grudgingly, to listen to, hear and validate the very different ways of thinking of colleagues coming from a variety of backgrounds and perspectives. For the lesson we all had to learn was that for Hutchins to succeed, all of us would have to change, unlearn, rethink, or even abandon some strongly held preconceptions. And as I only understood much later, that was, in fact, a **mirror of the very process students** experienced in the Seminar itself.

The **Heart of the Matter** was not yet clear to any of us, but we all discovered that much of the baggage we carried from our sojourn in Egypt had to be discarded before we could ever hope to enter the promised land. Warren carried the torch, and through his connections with higher powers secured enough “manna” to keep us fed and watered (and eventually tenured.) And, eventually, even housed in our own buildings. But he, too, along with the eight of us hired in 1970, Richard and Lou in 1971, Susan and Jeannine in 1972 and Fred in 1973, who collectively might be called the “founding generation,” discovered that even with the best of intentions, and basic agreement about the fundamentals of Hutchins, enormous differences remained about the route to follow.

Should the program be Great Books-centered, as its namesake, Hutchins, implied? Robert Maynard Hutchins had come to believe, in his own terms, that “neither the frivolity of liberal arts colleges” with their wide-open systems of electives, “nor the single-minded materialism of vocational training” was what was needed in higher education. He advocated a “liberal education worthy of the name.” And for him that implied a strictly prescribed curriculum, based not on narrow faculty specialization, but on students pondering the broad philosophical questions and issues raised in the Great Books. This common curriculum, he believed, would give students the experience of being part of a cohesive, ongoing academic community.

To some degree both the idea of a CORE CURRICULUM AND A COHESIVE ACADEMIC COMMUNITY had inspired Warren’s original vision, but as it turned out, exclusive reliance on that traditional core of Western thought seemed outdated to many on the new faculty. What other models were there?

Should the core curriculum then be based on a broader **Western Civilizations, historical model**, essentially marching over time, as we would now say, from “The Greeks to the Geeks”?

Should it be **thematically organized** around perennially important philosophical topics such as JUSTICE, LOVE, BEAUTY and TRUTH?

Or should it be based on more pressing but less canonical issues relating to modern science, technology, public policy and emerging global issues?

Of immediate importance, and taking years to resolve, was the critical question of whether all sections of a given course should require the same books? Advocates of a common curriculum and those arguing for some room for variation fought heated battles on this front for years. What ultimately resulted in the so-called 60/40 rule was not at all easy to achieve.

Tremendous differences surfaced on these and other issues, at times dividing the faculty into hostile camps suspicious of each others' motives.

Underlying many of these debates, and at times breaking into the open, was disagreement about the degree to which **CONTENT** (the specific books and materials we read) or **LEARNING PROCESS** itself were the program's defining characteristics. Was it mastery of material, or the students' own learning process that was central to the creation of a "liberally-educated" being?

We proved capable of arguing vehemently about even more elevated subjects, as well, such as the proper shape of the seminar table or whether or not there should even be a table. Thus, I was pleased to learn that just last year, this pressing issue has surfaced again—indicating that the newest generation of faculty is at least as creative as the original. Just as the table ultimately turned out to be neither round nor rectangular, but curved with blunt edges, thus pleasing both sides, we managed to find a workable compromise.

It's worth noting that as part of our learning or unlearning process, some of us also had to overcome a strange disease to which only faculty members seem susceptible. Later diagnosed as **ANUPHOLSTERAPHOBIA**, it is best described as a syndrome characterized by an unreasonable fear of not covering all the material!

Ultimately most of these issues were largely settled by what might be called the **GREAT CURRICULAR COMPROMISE of 1976** (our version of the Missouri Compromise), a political arrangement which happily opened the way to further program evolution and growth.

The agreement basically divided up the four lower division core courses between the two groups holding differing viewpoints. The **Human Enigma and Challenge and Response in the Modern World** largely became the domain of those wanting more of a basic humanities and historical content focus.

In **Search of Self** and **Exploring the Unknown** thus evolved in more thematic directions with greater attention to process and more affective development.

While these may sound like simple and obvious solutions today, they were hard-fought and controversial decisions at the time. I should emphasize also that the

lines were not quite as rigidly drawn as I portray them, and faculty could and did teach together in multiple areas and in multiple modes.

Ultimately, however, what united Hutchins was far greater than our differences:

**The School's central feature was and is the Seminar**, which provides all of us, faculty and students alike, with a remarkable vehicle for learning. Discussion and listening skills are essential; everyone's contribution is valued; responsibility for deepening the level of discussion is shared; at its best, it is a powerful tool for both a collective exploration of questions that really matter and personal growth.

Hutchins as a **Community of Learners** proved to be a key component as well; students benefitted from being part of a shared and defined experience, distinct in its own fashion, even if hard to explain to others. Indeed, the success of the large and effective national Learning Community movement in the 1990's, led to a large degree by faculty at Evergreen College, both validated and recognized Hutchins pioneering work.

Central as well was the commitment **to interdisciplinarity**. There were, and probably still are, great debates over what that means: are we really interdisciplinary, or perhaps transdisciplinary or multi-disciplinary, or even nondisciplinary. In the emerging literature in the field, academics engaged in heated debate over such distinctions. But in practical terms, what I think it meant for us was that we gave license to ourselves and our students to **cross boundaries**, to ask meaningful questions and pursue answers and topics which required drawing on thoughts, ideas and research from multiple sources and fields of study.

Certainly, I think we all appreciated the bumper sticker proposed in the late 1970's: Interdisciplinary do it in any field!

We were also all strongly committed to building skills in **critical and synthetic thinking, as well as those in reading, writing and research**.

And we shared the strong belief, at that period, in the effectiveness and value of **Independent Study**; enabling students to have the opportunity of creating and carrying-out projects on their own.

What allowed us to believe that we were somehow on the right track, however, were the students in the program. Not only did they value and validate the Hutchins Experience, but the quality of work they did, the contributions they made to the School, the reputation they achieved on campus as they moved into other areas of study, and the creative directions they went in their lives—assured us that this elusive "Liberal Education" was happening. Over the years, as I talked with faculty all over the university, they reported how easy it was to recognize Hutchins Students in their classes: they were the ones who spoke up, asked questions, and wanted to talk about the material.

In fact, the very differences in philosophy and practice over which we in the faculty endlessly agonized, seemed only to benefit them as well. Perhaps there is something to learn about THE “HEART OF THE MATTER” from that. That the real learning occurs in the quality and nature of the encounter students have with each other, and with the variety of faculty and subject matter we provide, within the crucible of the Hutchins seminar and learning community itself. And speaking from personal experience, the process of dialogue is transformative for the faculty member as well. Each of us could speak at length about how much we have learned from and been changed by our students in that encounter.

We also had the advantage of a remarkably stable faculty which stayed together to build the program over nearly 20 years before giving way to what gradually evolved into a second and now a third generation of committed interdisciplinary educators.

But I digress and time is short if we're to get to that Promised Land.

There was also no shortage of **External problems** for us to face; and how we resolved them likewise became critical to Hutchins survival.

Whatever the final shape of our core curriculum and how carefully we defined it, it had to mesh with the evolving GE Requirements at SSU, particularly in areas like science and mathematics.

How well and whether our grading policy served our students as they moved through SSU or transferred colleges (another continuing question) had to be resolved and then debated again and again.

SSU was changing also by the early 1980's, and in conjunction with a tyrannical president, came a serious downturn in student enrollment and a concomitant loss of revenue. Programs were being cut and faculty laid off. Hutchins felt and was, in fact, vulnerable—as an alternative program in a less and less alternative age and campus.

Years later, the Dean told me that he had been directed by President Diamandopolous to close the program. Fortunately, he chose not to.

It had become clear by the late 1970's that the student body coming to Hutchins was changing. Most were no longer products of the dissenting generation of the 60's, but very reasonably wanted a good liberal education because it might lead to a potential career. It was then that the decision was wisely made to create what became Track II, the teacher credential track, which has since become a dominant feature the program. It did, indeed, help to save the School, and perhaps change it as well.

I was surprised to read the STAR article on the 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary which featured a fine front page picture of a seminar discussion with the description below reading,

“This year the Hutchins program will celebrate 40 years of preparing future teachers for the classroom.”

Well, yes, but....that’s not really the point!

To be fair, the article does go on to quote Tony Mountain and Wendy Ostroff to the effect that Hutchins provides an alternative learning environment which, in Wendy’s words, allows students to **“actually control and own their own education.”** **“I’m just a facilitator or a guide,”** she adds, **“helping them on their own journey which I think is the best way to learn.”**

We may be getting close to THE HEART OF THE MATTER with that. In fact, I think we’re nearing the bank of the Jordan. Too bad I can’t swim, but I can at least make out the wording on a big sign on the other side.

It seems to be a statement by someone named Einstein, followed by a series of questions. I think it’s another one of those damned Koans! It says,

**“Problems can’t be solved at the same level of awareness at which they were created.”**

and then it asks:

How do we help people shift their levels of awareness?  
What tools do we have to speak to those unlike ourselves?  
How can we help people learn to live with ambiguity?  
How can we integrate dialogue and action?

These sound suspiciously like the same questions we’ve been wrestling with for the last 40 years here in Hutchins. If that ‘s THE HEART OF THE MATTER, maybe we do know the answer. It lies in **DIALOGUE** itself: the powerful fusion reaction involving students, faculty and ideas which occurs daily in the crucible of our seminars. Tony mentioned it at noon as a key to active citizenship. Eric referred to it in speaking of the seminar as the heart of Hutchins.

So, perhaps we haven’t changed the entire world yet in our 40 year journey, but all of us have certainly been changed for the better by it.

But, I could be wrong, and the key to real wisdom may well still lie buried under boxes in Richard’s office.

Les Adler  
October 17, 2009

