

"Midway this way of life we're bound upon  
I woke to find myself in a dark wood,  
Where the right road was wholly lost and gone."

*Dante The Divine Comedy*

"We must always follow somebody looking for  
truth, and we must always run away from  
anyone who finds it."

*Andre Gide*

## **Uncommon Sense:**

### **Liberal Education, Learning Communities and the Transformative Quest**

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Defining the elusive quality of a Liberal Education has challenged educators since the modern university began its slow rise to prominence nearly 800 years ago. Where once mastery of a particular bodies of knowledge and the possession of certain moral and intellectual traits were the recognized hallmarks of a liberally educated person, modern educational systems now offer only statistical variations of what might be called the Mass Educated Being.

For all practical purposes, the MEB is basically defined as one who has collected a specified number of units across a Whitman's Sampler of introductory classes ranging from sociology to statistics, along with a specialized major where, presumably, s/he would have acquired the real tools necessary for a successful life and career. What is happily avoided in such a scenario, of course, is any discussion of what a liberal education actually consists of or what the liberally educated student has or should have become in his or her four or more years at college. To paraphrase Descartes, *I count therefore I am!*

Recognizing that modern universities must serve a variety of socially useful purposes including preparing students for careers and advancing the cutting edge of knowledge through basic research--purposes which at the moment need no advocates-- I want to address, however, the institution's most ancient and basic purpose which in far too many cases is reflected all-too-often in name only. Rooted in the Greek *holon* or whole, or its Latin translation *universum*, the university was originally organized as a society of teachers and students where the whole, or the meaning of the whole could be studied.

Certainly, we are long past believing either that there is a single nameable whole to be grasped, or that anyone can seriously claim to achieve the necessary breadth of knowledge to do so in one or more lifetimes, or even that there is a specific methodology for doing so. Yet in fact Western societies have maintained the university as the principle institution devoted to teaching and learning on the highest level, entrusting, and even requiring, in most cases, that its leaders in virtually every field of endeavor gain its mark of approval. Whatever its limitations, society evidently agrees there is no better place than the university for the educating process to take place. Perhaps the question to pose at this point is: what is it that we believe goes on in a university to warrant this trust?

Does society merely want the assurance that our graduated artists and architects will be able to draw, our accountants count, our engineers build and our doctors heal? For these skills, and most others, high-level trade or professional schools might--and often do--suffice. Obviously there is some more basic quality or transformation of mind we deem vital, especially in our experts and leaders, but more and more inherently in a democracy, in our people themselves. Granted that the meaning of the whole may never be entirely understood, the foundation stone of modern thought is that through the gradual application of human reason, important connections and relationships within that whole can be known and brought to benefit humankind. Indeed, the

entire premise of democratic government rests on the assumption that self-governing individuals can grasp the complex dimensions of the vital issues of their times in order to make essential judgments as citizens.

The role of higher education in this process appears to be two-fold. To act responsibly, individuals must first be capable of making accurate judgments about the islands of purported truth constantly being discovered, claimed and mapped by others in the vast, oceanic unknown surrounding them. Critical thinking skills and a highly developed "crap detector" coupled with breadth of knowledge and exposure to the wide variety and elasticity of the human experience are essential ingredients here. Educated in such a fashion, a citizen, presumably, is less likely to be swept-up in the passions of the moment and more likely to substitute reason for prejudice in making essential judgments.

A second level of educational achievement rests on the attainment of that harder-to-define attribute of mind which we call wisdom. Building on that solid base of knowledge and mastery of critical reasoning skills, wisdom also implies a high degree of self knowledge coupled with a greatly enhanced ability to evaluate complex issues and determine courses of action based on the application of the deepest perceptions and highest ideals of the individual or group involved.

Important as these achievements are, there is yet an even more basic transformative task for liberal education to perform, one which is certainly the hardest of all both to articulate and achieve in the academy as it is presently structured. Like all of us, students are invariably shaped by the increasing fragmentation characteristic of our world on virtually every level. It is hardly a new idea that the anguished, often frantic search for belonging, meaning and belief in our powerfully individualistic and rapidly changing society contributes to many of its most destructive excesses.

Conditioned to the separateness of existence, prey to the reflexive divisions of psyche and self, mind/body, good/evil, us/them/, male/female, human and animal, and myriad consequent sub-distinctions, including the specialization and fragmentation of knowledge, our students come to us at a time of fundamental challenge to most of these rigid lines. A new universum of knowledge is emerging in which the rule appears to be wholeness and integration, interconnection and relatedness, rather than separation. It is here, in the service of healing the divisive and limiting breaches within and between ourselves, as well as between the human and natural worlds that the contribution of a contemporary liberal education is potentially the greatest. For this to happen, however, a substantial re-thinking of both the methods and goals of the educational process itself may be required. Whether a fragmented system of education can in any effective way produce integrated beings is perhaps the most significant question confronting practitioners of liberal education today.

In order to discuss what an alternative *holistic* model of education might look like, it is useful to define the term itself. More than 25 years ago, the late Arthur Koestler proposed the word "holon," combining the Greek word for "whole" with the suffix which suggests a particle or part.<sup>i</sup> A holon, as Koestler defined it, thus has the two seemingly contradictory properties of being both a whole and a part of larger wholes. A holon exists as a self-contained functional unit, independent and self-regulating within its environment; yet it simultaneously exists as a subordinated part of larger holons which themselves exist as part of a larger holarchy or hierarchy of self-regulating holons. Theorists such as Ken Wilbur have since applied the concept to an enormous range of phenomena from biological organisms, to mental processes to the organization of knowledge."<sup>iii</sup>

To make sense of this conception within an education setting, one might think of the university *holon* itself. Within it, individual students take individual courses in individual departments which are themselves parts of individual schools or divisions within the campus structure. Autonomous, self-regulating holons (students, courses, departments, divisions, campuses) clearly exist at each level within the larger system. Yet each unit simultaneously exists in supra-ordination to its own parts, and as a dependent part in sub-ordination to controls on higher level--that is, each holon is at all times both independent and relational. Finally, it is essential to recognize that each holon in this system exists, as well, as an information-carrying or cognitive representative of numerous other systems (students as parts of families, social and cultural groups, departments as representatives of disciplines and sub-disciplines and made-up of individual faculty members, universities as

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<sup>i</sup> Arthur Koestler. The Ghost in the Machine, 1967; Janus: A Summing Up, 1979.

<sup>ii</sup> Ken Wilbur, A Brief History of Everything, 1996.

parts of larger public or private political, economic and social structures, etc.) As Koestler expresses it, "No man is an island; he is a holon."

Looked at closely, the dominant educational model as practiced from public schools to colleges and universities, rests on several basic assumptions. First among these is that exposure to introductory level, discipline-based courses followed by a graduated exposure to a specific discipline, will produce the liberally educated individual who is capable of making the critical and decisive judgments required of an educated citizen and a future societal leader in this day and age. While this is a model which has grown up under the guidance of the modern university, whose rules and boundaries it reflects, I suggest that it is based on the confusion of the powerful research tools of the disciplines, of which faculty are justifiably proud and to which they are deeply attached, with those best designed to bring about the personal and intellectual transformation which is actually at the heart of a liberal education.

In addition, the model most often rests on the beguilingly efficient and seemingly cost-effective method of a one-pointed system of information transmission which may actually work directly against the desired personal transformation discussed above by reinforcing both individual fragmentation and the habit of intellectual passivity while further confusing the act of absorbing information with the essence of education.

Finally, the model's deepest and most rarely-challenged message is that specialized learning is somehow "higher" and of greater value than more "generalized" education, which for most students is perceived as something to get through as quickly as possible. The act of integrating and relating disparate bits of knowledge--making sense of it-- for the most part, is left entirely to the individual student, busy as s/he is competing for grades, collecting units and preparing for the job market. It is a task analogous to expecting each assembly-line worker to collect and assemble enough individual parts to create a functioning automobile, while simultaneously installing spark plugs as the line speeds by.

It is hardly surprising that from somewhat different perspectives, major national reviews of higher education in America beginning in the 1980's all concluded that undergraduate education was suffering from a serious malaise brought on by just such factors as over-specialization and professionalization. David Kennedy, then President of Stanford University, publically called for serious reconsideration of the relative place of research and teaching on his own prestigious campus, admitting that undergraduates at what have been considered the "best" universities were being cheated of an essential part of their education because of an increasing imbalance in favor of research. Despite strong criticism of the existing model, however, neither Kennedy's report nor other critical studies went very far in specifying either the viable alternatives available or the underlying educational or philosophical rationale necessary to support a liberal education outside of the framework that has traditionally existed. While suggesting that the answers may lie in smaller classes and closer contact between faculty and students, most critics stopped short of confronting two of the most basic issues of all: whether discipline-based, highly specialized education may itself be a barrier to the stated goals of a truly liberal education; and whether the almost universally-practiced methods of transmitting knowledge are adequate to the task at hand.

It is here, I would suggest, that the theory and practice of Learning Communities--as they have been evolving at campuses across the nation--can best contribute to educational reform efforts. Let me draw on two sources to illustrate the point: one, the educational implications of Koestler's concept of the holon; and the other, nearly thirty years of Learning Community experience in the Hutchins School of Liberal Studies at Sonoma State University.

Koestler's "nested" conception offers a radically different educational vision largely because it shifts the focus to the hierarchical multiplicity of relationships implicit at each holarchic level and point-of-intersection of knowledge. The process of education is conceived of less as a narrowing, two-dimensional ladder than as an expanding three dimensional web where the learner's growing mastery of an area of knowledge depends on his/her ability to integrate, connect and define both the area's own patterns and relationships as well as its reciprocal and relational meaning relative to the larger patterns of which it is a part. Significantly, the model re-conceives of the student as the active patternmaker at the center of the web, making and applying connections, rather than as the mountaineer scaling the peak of one specific body of knowledge.

The holarchic model recognizes that students at every educational level are involved in what my colleague, Nelson Kellogg, has called the "co-creation of wisdom," a necessarily collective and interactive process which requires profound engagement with questions, ideas and problems, as well as effective personal and intellectual interaction with others engaged in similar processes.

Most importantly, the holarchic model suggests that just as the transformative vision of Earth from space has changed forever our perspectives on our home planet, an "aerial" view of knowledge, looking across, beyond and through the disciplines to discover and explore the fundamental questions and deepest connections underlying them, may similarly alter our vision of education.

It is within this framework that the experiment carried out in the Hutchins School can best be understood.

Despite its choice of name, the Hutchins School is, in fact, more a spiritual than a direct descendant of the undergraduate college created by Robert Hutchins and Mortimer Adler at the established and well-endowed University of Chicago in the 1930's. Created by a small group of interdisciplinary-minded faculty at a young, rural and highly innovative branch of the California State University in northern California, the Hutchins School first opened its doors to a freshman class of 100 in the fall of 1969. Of the four founding faculty drawn from existing departments, only two survived the turmoil of the School's first year.

As was the case in numerous other experimental programs at the time, bitter differences rapidly surfaced over the program's philosophy and structure. In the Hutchins case, the "structuralists" won, establishing the principle that at the bare minimum, college classes--even experimental ones--required reading lists, regular meeting times and recourse to traditional academic requirements and standards. One has to recall the extremely radical anti-establishment feeling pervading much of higher education (as well as most other aspects of national life) in the late 1960's and early 1970's to appreciate the utter sincerity and passion of those on both sides of such arguments. Any number of well-meaning experimental programs at universities and colleges across the nation foundered on just such disputes.

In outlining the principle features of the Hutchins School, two in particular seem significant for this discussion: the process of curriculum-building and the undergraduate seminar. In contrast to the top-down evolution of courses and programs in every academic discipline, in which undergraduate education is conceived of as a series of graduated introductions to specialized fields, the Hutchins program evolved, as it were, from below. No specialized graduate-level liberal studies curriculum existed to drive undergraduate preparation. The surviving faculty, joined over the next two years by eleven new recruits hired directly into the Hutchins School, were in the enviable position of being charged with creating a meaningful undergraduate education from the ground up, and in the process with rethinking virtually all standard educational beliefs and formulas.

As in similar innovative programs, the evolution of the curriculum in large part reflected the growth and evolving interests of the faculty members themselves as they expanded outward from their original areas of specialization to address the issues central to interdisciplinary, liberal education. Initially sharing a common commitment to little more than the ideal of interdisciplinarity and the belief in education as a community process, the faculty eventually self-organized into teams, or what in those more radical days we called "cadres," to work out the large thematic units that gradually allowed us to overcome the gravitational force of our own academic disciplines as well as the temptation to fall back upon an established canon of 'great books' at the core of the curriculum. Keeping the larger focus on questions and issues we took to be essential for educated individuals to ask and encounter in the modern age, we gradually developed a sequence of integrated courses: "The Human Enigma," "In Search of Self," "Exploring the Unknown," and "Challenge and Response in the Modern World" as the program's fundamental building blocks--though with constantly evolving content and changing faculty.

At the risk of imposing the artificial harmony of theory on what was experienced most often as an organic, evolutionary and at times highly contentious human process, I would propose, however, that the evolution of both the structure and content of the Hutchins Learning Community can be best understood as the emergence of a new and more comprehensive holistic form of learning. Using Koestler's formula once again, the act of stepping back from the sharp edge of discipline-based structures of knowledge in order to permit the emergence of less differentiated but more highly integrated holarchic forms--a paradoxical "regression" in order

to progress-- effectively opened the way for the evolution of new and more comprehensive ways of organizing learning and teaching.

Beyond the nature of the curriculum, the most distinctive feature of the Hutchins School itself has been its undergraduate seminar. Typically consisting of 12 to 14 students and a faculty member, the seminar has been the crucible in which the variety of ingredients available in the Hutchins Learning Community have been mixed. Unlike research-oriented seminars familiar to many who have attended graduate school, or presentation seminars common in the sciences in which experts share their specialized work, or highly directive seminars in which the more-or-less Socratic instructor asks and the students answer the relevant questions which move the discussion from predetermined point to point, the Hutchins seminar involves students from freshmen to seniors in a highly interactive process in which both instructors and students conduct a joint exploration of the topics and materials at hand.

While in almost all cases an individual faculty member or a faculty cadre will have planned the course, selected the readings and designed the basic topics and issues of study, the open-ended nature of the Hutchins seminar mandates active student participation in shaping the interior structure of the course. As one senior described her learning experience, " we were given basic requirements and encouraged to fly. There is something elemental about being behind the wheel of your own education; it is liberating, empowering and inspiring." Within the seminar, the issues raised by students are explored as seriously as those raised by the instructor, and in the process all participants are challenged to question their own personal and intellectual assumptions on every level. The seminar's very nature as a deliberately collective and non-competitive exploration of truth provides a relatively safe testing-ground in which students are encouraged to try out ideas and risk asking their own questions rather than continually relying on or responding to those of others. Refining their thoughts and judgments while confronting respectfully those of both other seminar members and accepted authorities, students gain an enormously empowering sense of their own intellectual power and responsibility. In the process they encounter a stimulating and evolving mixture of the best of classical and current thought, all of which is to be discussed, analyzed, written about and employed in the context of many of the major issues and problems facing both the students and the contemporary world.

What is unique is less the specific curricular material, much if not all of which is used in a variety of combinations in other higher educational institutions, than the way in which it is used within the seminar itself. As a form of a learning community, the seminar's goal is decidedly not to showcase the brilliance and knowledge of either individual faculty or individual students. Instead, moving toward the more elemental meaning of the term "community of scholars," its aim is to involve all participants in a common process of active inquiry and shared insight leading to intellectual growth and personal transformation. Coming from a traditionally competitive educational background, a student spoke of her dawning realization that "being a 'good' seminar participant required more than preparing my own analysis of the text," adding that, "a 'good' seminar is one where each person is both participant and facilitator. The responsibility of the seminar is shared and becomes a truly rich experience."

Faculty and students become co-learners in a process which vastly revises the traditional relationship between the two, requiring an often ego-threatening abandonment by the faculty member of the protective barriers provided by his or her professional expertise and status. The seminar format itself removes the physical support of podium and rectum. Wide-ranging and often unpredictable discussions render obsolete carefully crafted notes and a planned "coverage" schedule of material. Excursions outside the faculty member's syllabus or even original areas of specialization demand a constant process of reading, thinking and exploring, akin to, but more advanced than that being undergone by the students themselves. This does not mean, however, that the instructor's hard-earned expertise is useless or abandoned, only that it is used in a very different fashion and for significantly different goals. One newer faculty member likens the facilitator's role in a Hutchins seminar to that of an artist whose trained "viewfinder" and carefully refined sensibilities are most powerfully employed in enabling others see reality in new ways and aiding them in "framing the gems" of their own visions more effectively.

Essential to any faculty member's transformation from purveyor of specialized knowledge to facilitator of interdisciplinary learning is his or her active participation in faculty cadres where courses and themes are

formulated and through which the process of continuing interdisciplinary faculty education occurs. Ideally providing faculty members with a learning community of their own in which pedagogical strategies, knowledge and insight are shared, the cadre serves likewise as a primary vehicle for the creation of new and unique course syntheses.

For the student, the format poses a series of immediate challenges. Since virtually all of his or her previous education occurred within the context of individual competition (for grades, attention, standardized test scores, etc.) effectively depicted by Paolo Friere's "banking" model of knowledge accumulation, the collective model of the seminar initiates a serious process of unlearning deeply entrenched behavioral patterns and assumptions. Reflecting back at the end of her Hutchins experience, one student admitted frankly that "I did not enter the program to become educated. I entered it to become an educator." Yet the seminar experience of being part of a team of "twelve to fourteen students and one professor working together to solve a problem..." raising and attempting to answer "some of the truly puzzling questions of our time..." gradually led to her recognition "that my education has now just begun."

Functioning in the seminar likewise requires a combination of both active and interactive learning skills which often are neither taught nor tolerated in the traditional classroom. Though critical thought and rigorous analysis of texts and ideas are required, it is equally essential that the seminar become what one proponent calls "a hospitable environment" in which "every attempt at truth, no matter how off the mark, is a contribution to the larger search for corporate and consensual truth."<sup>iii</sup> This does not imply absence of conflict and disagreement, only that these exciting and inevitable differences in individual perception and levels of understanding be treated as part of a larger process of personal and intellectual community-building. Assessing the workings of the seminar process itself, one student described the task as one of developing, "a vocabulary to give voice to the intricate processes which constitute the keystone of meaningful dialogue." Her recognition that the seminar's goal is to increase understanding rather than win a game of intellectual hand-to-hand combat is of critical importance in defining the meaning of both a true reaming community and a *holistic* liberal education today.

Underlying this model of learning is indeed an alternative epistemology, one in which, as Parker J. Palmer has written, "the relational nature of reality" supercedes a previously-held vision of separation, fragmentation, individualism and simple objectivism. Here we move to "juxtapose analysis with synthesis, integration, and the creative act."<sup>iv</sup> For this to occur effectively in the classroom, a radical shift in emphasis is essential. What may be appropriate training for specialized research in the disciplines should be recognized as counterproductive in creating the conditions for liberal reaming, particularly when we are faced with questions which fall outside the boundaries of any single field or collection of disciplines.

We are increasingly being confronted with the fact that the important issues regarding human life, our coexistence with nature and the planet, the proper allocation of natural, social and human resources, and our judgments about the uses of our immensely powerful technological tools cannot and should not be left to specialists alone. While we necessarily concern ourselves with the seemingly mundane requirements and activities of our individual lives, we are now inevitably faced with the larger consequences and broader relational web of those actions.

In many ways the seminar models for students an alternative method of dealing with the complex issues which face all of us. A learning community which supports the individual in exploring both his or her own ignorance and knowledge enhances not only external but internal learning. The variety of perspectives, observations and experiences readily available on any topic provide a healthy antidote to the typical isolation of traditional learning experiences, contributing to a deep understanding of alternative ways of seeing reality. The fact that the "right road" alluded to in Dante's classic lines has always been "wholly lost and gone," can serve symbolically as a starting-point for the collective search which has always been central to a liberal education.

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<sup>iii</sup> Parker J. Palmer, "Community, Conflict, and Ways of Knowing: Ways to Deepen Our Educational Agenda," Change (September/October, 1989), p. 25.

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid., p. 24.

Gide's warning that our greatest enemy may be the persistent human tendency to accept answers--our own or those of others--and to stop asking questions is the paradoxical meat and drink of the seminar process.

If the real value of the liberal education process is that through it students will learn how to live successfully in the vast middle ground between attachment to absolute truths and surrender to powerlessness and personal despair, and to make accurate, creative and wise judgments about the important issues confronting them as individuals who are also part of a social community, then a serious reconsideration of current educational structures is essential. Just as the eternal questions of good, evil, beauty, truth, love, justice and meaning cannot be answered on a scantron sheet, so the academy cannot pretend to confront them adequately without providing an interactive, relational and assessable structure in which students and teachers can search for their own answers together.

Wholeness will not be found either in isolation or absolutes, but by individuals who have confronted and challenged their own definitions and limitations, using all the tools universities have to offer, and who have also developed their own identities within true learning communities.