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“The Liberal Arts and Class Warfare,”

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Gustavus Adolphus College

When I was asked to give this talk last fall, it seemed so safely in the distance that I accepted. Also, I felt then that I had something to say arising from the particular circumstances of the Religion department, and from a desire to clarify, even defend, the role of my department in the college’s curriculum. Times have changed, although that’s still part of what I’d like to talk about with you today.

A quick, partial catalog of the changes: the faculty has been asked by President Bergman to explore potential innovations in our curriculum, to find ways to make the academic program a source of greater revenue. The shared governance consultations begun last year are considering mechanisms for dismantling academic departments and programs in the event of major changes to the curriculum or, potentially, financial exigency. We are engaged in another round of institutional strategic planning. The special Voluntary Early Retirement offer has been accepted by key members of this community, with consequences for our identity and institutional memory. There are other factors, such as the obscure calculus of “return on education” that may guide decisions on which parts of the academic program are deemed viable and necessary. All this against a background of doom-saying and handwringing in media outlets that report on the future of liberal education.

One of my colleagues told me last week she was looking forward to my talk because she anticipated lots of laughter. Of all the challenges I faced, that’s been the hardest. It’s tough to find laughs in this material, so I’ve aimed to be provocative instead. I also gesture at some reasons for optimism, so stay with me.

Here’s where I’m heading: what are the liberal arts, and what are they *for*? Why do I associate liberal arts education with “class warfare”? And where do I see Gustavus, specifically as a church-related institution, in the changing landscape of higher education -- whose future may or may not include the liberal arts?

The first question is easy, at least for a medievalist. The *artes liberales* are the disciplines of freedom, the skills that humans need to live **together** in community and to live **in and toward** their destiny as fully human. A principle theorist of this vision was Hugh of St Victor, twelfth-century pedagogue and exegete. According to Hugh, the universe is ordered by the good intentions of its creator. Humans deviated from those intentions (in the mythic story of Adam and Eve) though the misuse of an essential gift: freedom. Ever since, the creator has articulated a scheme for the restoration of humanity, shaping freedom to its right and dignified purpose. All

meaningful human endeavor, according to Hugh, can be directed to this purpose. From the seven arts (grammar, rhetoric, logic, music, geometry, astronomy, and philosophy), Hugh elaborated a whole system of human learning. No dichotomy between head and hand, for him: if we are to be restored to our whole humanity, then no skill, no practice is excluded. The life of the mind *is* a life of embodiment, since God gave us our bodies as well as our minds. Both are corrupted by sinful self-seeking, but the remedies are at hand: everything from weaving to theology, theatre to economics, medicine to rhetoric has a place in Hugh's restorative tree of knowledge.

This all-embracing scheme has a parallel in Judaism: the Talmud teaches that the Torah contains 613 positive commandments and negative prohibitions (Tractate Makkot 23b). That number corresponds to the number of bones, sinews, and muscles in the human body, added to the 365 days of the year. The Torah is a gracious gift, designed to shape human choice, not regulate freedom out of existence. As with Hugh's scheme, no area of life is too trivial to be turned to good purpose.

Much later, a unitive or holistic impulse also motivated Martin Luther, and undergirds his concept of "vocation" or calling. We are called to higher purposes than specific jobs or professions, but we can realize those purposes within jobs or professions.¹ No one is, or can be, freer than anyone else: we are all burdened by incapacity (also known as sin) but we are all liberated by the same redemptive power of grace.

So what are the liberal arts for? Well, according to these three accounts, they are for something more than the creation of a cultured elite -- icily regular, splendidly null.² But some recent studies of liberal arts colleges bemoan the incursion of vocational programs into colleges that were purely arts-and-sciences focused. In what's described as a "worrisome scenario," so-called "second-tier" liberal arts colleges [may] "become more like small comprehensive colleges...as they continue to add vocational programs." This transformation, according to authors, is driven by "vocationally oriented students" more concerned with being well off financially than with "such common liberal arts goals as developing a meaningful philosophy of life." The negative view of vocational training has sometimes echoed here: some believe Gustavus would be a better (more "liberal arts-y"?) place without Nursing, Education, Accounting. We would rise in rankings, maybe, or our diplomas would be worth more, unshackled from the shameless commerce division. For a variety of reasons, I strongly disagree.

¹ Martin Luther, "A Treatise on Baptism," XVIII, "For in baptism we all make one and the same vow, viz., to slay sin and to become holy through the work and grace of God, to Whom we yield and offer ourselves, as clay to the potter; and in this no one is better than another. But for a life in accordance with baptism, i.e., for slaying sin, there can be no one method and no special estate in life."

² Alfred Tennyson, "Maud: A Monodrama," (1855): "Faultily faultless, icily regular, splendidly null, Dead perfection, no more..." II.I

In one of my previous lives, before I became an academic, I worked in central New York. The town I lived in was home to a “second-tier” liberal arts college. How do I know this? A professor from the school lived in the same building, and he, his wife, and I spend many weekends drinking astonishingly large amounts of Utica Club beer. He contended that the chief purpose of the institution that employed him was to turn out graduates who knew how to say “Nice jacket!” as the key to their future success. Given a choice between the worrisome scenario posed by students, especially first generation students, feeling financial pressure, and maintaining a non- (or even anti-) vocational curriculum for status reasons, I’m inclined to opt for the first.

Happily, this is choice isn’t necessary for us. Our Carnegie Classification, “arts and sciences plus professions,” acknowledges our historical commitment to vocational education, grounded both in the Lutheran sense of the word and in the immigrant heritage of this institution.³ If anything, I think that Gustavus should become more, rather than less, vocational – in the Lutheran sense of the word -- for the purpose of waging class warfare.

In response to the advertised title of this talk, one of my colleagues asked me “What do you know about class warfare?” Fair question. I’m a medievalist, and aside from a couple of scenes in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, dialectical materialism isn’t often on my radar screen. But I’m a working-class, first generation woman in the academy. I received a fine liberal arts education at a highly selective college. I also washed dishes in my dormitory’s kitchen and was told to write thank-you notes to the people who funded my scholarship. Room was made for me and others like me, but the institutional culture was not, shall we say, welcoming. Our place in the class structure was clear. This situation persists even here: ask a student unable to register because they can’t pay their fees.

Second-tier schools are saddled with, or exploit, a particular irony about liberal education. Michael Dellucchi has argued that colleges whose curricula now churn out graduates of “professional” programs nevertheless seek to retain the “myth of [liberal arts] uniqueness” in their mission statements and promotional material.⁴ So while some liberal arts colleges are “selling out” to student “preoccupation with the ... job market,” they apparently also benefit from *selling* the cachet of specialness or elitism (“Nice jacket!”). This paradoxical situation is driven, supposedly, by students who want to walk into jobs the week after graduation, with some

³ In its discussion of its classification system, the Carnegie [“A high concentration of majors in the arts and sciences is not the same as a liberal arts education, and we do not view any particular location on this continuum as the special province of liberal education. Examples of high-quality liberal education exist across the spectrum.”] http://carnegieclassifications.iu.edu/descriptions/ugrad_program.php

⁴ Michael Dellucchi, “Liberal Arts’ Colleges and the Myth of Uniqueness,” *The Journal of Higher Education*, 68:4 (Jul.-Aug., 1997), 414-426.

vener of refinement, and a social network that will guarantee their mobility and employability. Oh, those nefarious, mercenary, and shallow eighteen year olds.

Again, happily, this description doesn't fit many or even most of the Gustavus students whom I've encountered. Yes, they are concerned about jobs; they are concerned about the cost of education and the burden of debt. These concerns coexist with other deeply held convictions: they want to make a difference in the world. So maybe the pressure to transform the ideals of liberal education came from other sources. If, as Marx said, the ruling ideas of each age have ever been the ideas of its ruling class, what is the ruling class of this age, and what are its ideas?

I submit that the ruling ideas of our age, derived from "the material mode of production peculiar to that age" (Marx again) are those associated with globalization; the global movement of capital and goods made as frictionless as possible by the dominance of supra-national entities and multinational corporations. That movement occurs with regard neither to health and wellbeing of the people who produce the goods nor the people who consume them. Indeed, much of what is produced for and consumed in the developed world is unnecessary, even inimical, to the health and wellbeing of the world. In exchange for imported consumer goods, the developed world (North America especially) exports a tremendous amount of junk: junk food, junk entertainment, the trashy sweepings of ruling ideas bent on devaluing on particularity and distinction. Not to mention the trash itself: so much that we export it to other countries, exchanging our trash for their raw materials, health and freedom.

"The engineering of consumers has become the economy's principle growth sector. As production costs decrease in rich nations, there is an increasing concentration of both capital and labor in the vast enterprise equipping man for disciplined consumption."⁵ So Ivan Illich asserted, thirty years ago. Schooling, he insisted, is complicit in this process – the disciplines of freedom converted into the disciplines of consumption. He argued for a de-schooling of society, since the educational system amounts to little more than the rigidly controlled administration of credentials. Social and financial advancement are assured by acquiring a "learning pedigree," not the ability to actually do something with what we've learned. ("Nice jacket!").⁶

One might argue that a "pure" liberal arts education is the best way to resist the drift toward professionalism (and commercialism). Illich disagrees, claiming schools do not encourage "the open-ended, exploratory use of acquired skills" that he calls "liberal education." Why? Because even those institutions support "schooling for schooling's sake: an enforced stay in the company of teachers, which pays off in the doubtful privilege of more such company."⁷

⁵ Ivan Illich, *Deschooling Society*, 66.

⁶ Now, of course, we are pressed to certify ("assess") our students' knowledge relentlessly, which would seem to respond to Illich's critique, except that the root of the current educational system is compulsion.

⁷ Illich, 24.

Under these conditions, he further argues, “*registered* students submit to *certified* teachers in order to obtain *certificates* of their own; both are frustrated ...”⁸

Academics often critique these conditions, of course, but inevitably are implicated in them as well. Illich notes that our privileges include “time, mobility, access to peers and information, and a certain impunity,” but, he notes, this freedom is accorded “to those ... already... deeply initiated into the consumer society and into the need for some kind of obligatory ... schooling.” To the degree that liberal arts colleges sell “the life of the mind” as the furniture of elite privilege, desirable in inverse relation to practical concerns, they perpetrate a kind of fraud. What they are selling isn’t liberation: Illich calls it “a dull, protracted, destructive, and expensive initiation” into a myth of equal access to our increasingly unequal society.⁹

As I said earlier, I would rather see Gustavus become more rather than less vocational. Not more commercial, although from 1887 until 1923 the college had a school of commerce. Not more professional, even if from its inception, the college had a “normal school,” devoted to teacher training. I believe we can use our vocation, our calling, as scholar-teachers to unmask the false consciousness perpetrated by a liberal education that is neither, and to alter its course. In large part this work is already being done here, has always been done here. I submit that’s because of the Lutheran concept of vocation that honors the potential for all work to be both creative and redemptive. Whether we subscribe to any religious conviction or not, we should appreciate the radical notion of freedom, articulated by Luther, that underwrites this egalitarian possibility. In effect, if all people can be “priests,” then all people can be teachers, and learners. The maintenance of educational systems devoted chiefly to credentialing is inimical to freedom and authentic development. By teaching the need to be taught, converting knowledge to a commodity, schools dishonor the wisdom to be gained by experience and encounter with the world at large. Thus, Illich contends, schools alienate students (in the Marxist sense) from “the work of creativity... People lose their incentive to grow in independence, ...they close themselves off to the surprises which life offers when it is not predetermined by institutional definition...”¹⁰ If we think he’s wrong, we should ask ourselves whether we have ever complained about students’ lack of initiative, of commitment to serious intellectual work, of curiosity and creativity. Might this be because our shared undertaking is in conflict with itself, the result of promoting idealism but having to sell credentials instead?

Now I sound like I’m contradicting myself: isn’t idealism best found in the uncommercial liberal arts setting? No – or not, at least, as such institutions are constituted in our society today, distorted by market pressure into shills for class privilege. I think idealism can be better

⁸ Illich, 103; emphasis mine.

⁹ Illich, 54-5.

¹⁰ Illich, 67-68.

grounded in the vision of the liberal arts I described earlier, which sees in all work the potential for creation and redemption. This is an egalitarian vision. In the best of my experience at Gustavus, it has been a feature of our common life. It just needs to be resuscitated a bit.

We can devote our energy and endeavors to that vision again, but I believe it will be risky and difficult, though potentially exhilarating. Illich's "de-schooling" called for replacing the educational system with a web, connecting learners of any age to peers and mentors, via experience and shared study, with ready access to information, enabling them to learn what they want, when they want. I'm suggesting something a bit more modest. What if we made our credentialing process (the generation of graduate-school ready majors, prepared according to disciplinary standards) *secondary* to a broad collaboration across the institution, extending into the community and region? The goal would be to address pressing issues of our time with special attention to how they play out in the immediate environment. In so doing, we'd be mounting a principled resistance to blind allegiance to an unlimited, unsustainable growth economy. We'd be resisting the deliberate rootlessness of global capital, exploiting a disconnected, disenfranchised labor force, while ignoring damage to ecosystems and human ecology left in its wake. We could say instead, "*Here* we stand; we can do no other."

Similar approaches have been implemented elsewhere. At the Morris campus of the U of M, for instance, the Center for Small Towns partners with communities across northwestern Minnesota. They're reeling from the debilitating effects of Big Ag – agriculture that works vast tracts of land with big machines, not people. Small towns are scrambling to stay alive, and Morris students from across disciplines partner with them on projects to help. Macalester promotes an urban version of this. Its president, Brian Rosenberg, has written incisively about opportunities presented by the increasingly permeable boundaries between academy and community. Mac's program in Community and Global Health engages students and faculty from departments as diverse as political science, mathematics, and biology in substantive work with area health organizations.

Last year, a couple of our colleagues circulated (narrowly) a proposal that the college develop "The Gustavus Center for the Future of the Midwest." The center would sponsor programs in Rural Public Health, Civic Engagement and Public Life, The Changing Face of the Midwest, and Agriculture, Environment, and Climate Change. The proposal envisions collaboration among disciplines as far-flung as Religion, Economics, Scandinavian Studies, Theatre/Dance... but wait: are they far-flung at all? Can't we all readily imagine how this might look?

The risk here is, of course, to departmental structures. Departments in disciplines already reduced to non-degree granting programs elsewhere (Religion, Classics, Modern Languages, Art History) – may think that maintaining disciplinary integrity, measured by our competence to

prepare students for graduate school, is our best insurance against elimination. Devoting effort to cross-disciplinary programs could seem suicidal. If we're not staffing or supporting our major adequately – measuring adequacy by the disciplinary credential – then what are we doing? And how can we ensure our contribution to the development of whole human persons?

I believe that the second question can be answered by new programs that take as their focus the wellbeing of the wider community. Our best insurance against both irrelevance and eradication could be investing ourselves more deeply into the life of this region. *This is already happening at Gustavus*; there's no shortage of examples – but they are largely isolated and/or self-motivated activities. Rarely are they programmatic initiatives that enjoy the support or recognition of a department, much less the college as a whole. A college-wide shift in this direction could fulfill the claim made by Edgar Carlson: "Society is rich in the measure in which it allows its members to develop their constructive possibilities. The individual is rich in the measure in which he invests his abilities and training in the interests of the common good. No institution contributes more generously to this creative endeavor than an institution of liberal education."

This new institutional structure would foster an investment in the common good made collectively, by staff, faculty and students. Rather than serving as brokers of credentials, we – all of us, not just faculty -- might broker access to one another's disciplinary skills and personal aptitudes, to our community of accountability, thereby reviving the notion of the public intellectual. As Roger Gottlieb, a scholar of religion and ecology has put it, "This is not about dumbing-down what we say or becoming hacks for some limited political agenda. It is about having the horizon of our intellectual work be the struggle to respond to the environmental crisis; ... It is about having the criterion of what is or is not a significant theoretical problem be set by efforts to heal the world, rather than by disciplinary tradition or academic fads. If we wish to preserve our scholarly objectivity, that is all to the good. But we cannot pretend to detachment, for ultimately who could be detached from the conditions that make his or her life possible?"¹¹

The roles of our individual disciplines, in a scheme like this, would look much more like the articulated network described by Hugh of St Victor: biology linked with ethics, poetry linked to political science, theatre infused with social justice. Oh, wait: we're already doing that! Again, *the pieces* are here, vastly increasing the likelihood that we can constitute a new whole from these parts without a massive, disorienting shift. This holistic vision is part of our institutional DNA, as is our connection to the community and region. We can begin to embody it in quite simple ways, too. Let's stop boasting about our students as "chemists who sing, Poli. Sci majors who dance." For the most part, our students' creative lives *are* their vocations – passions they

¹¹ Roger S. Gottlieb, "Religious Environmentalism: What it is, Where It's Heading and Why We Should be Going in the Same Direction," *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* [Online], 1:1 (April 2007).

sadly stuff in the box while they strive to be employable. Let's flip things around, and honor the poets, violinists and sculptors *who happen to be* highly effective nurses, teachers, and biologists.

Again, I don't want to minimize or ignore risks. But I would like to invite my faculty colleagues, in particular, to embrace *liberation* as the measure by which we produce and defend our work. If programmatic cuts are proposed, or departments are pressed to replace faculty lines with adjunct hires, we could ask, "How can we do the work of deep commitment to our place and time with contingent labor? How can we make a sustainable culture, an equitable economy, out of 'disposable' parts?" Or we can simply ask, "Does it liberate?" As our guiding question, it demands a thoughtful, authentic, and principled response. As a criterion, it raises the stakes for all of us. The Gustavus I have known is equal to the challenge.

Thanks for your time and attention, and for the many examples of commitment and courage that continue to inspire me.