

First Year Seminar
An Address to Students and Faculty
1991

THE SECOND COMING

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity

Surely some revelation is at hand;
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out
When a vast image out of Spiritus Mundi
Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.
The darkness drops again; but now I know
That twenty centuries of stony sleep
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

W.B. Yeats (1921)

Now that... is a poem. Read it a few times.

Socrates says he was driven by the gods to speak out. While I cannot claim this degree of inspiration, my commitment to you and to the enterprise of education compels me to speak out a little about First Year Seminar.

In 399 BCE Socrates, then a 70 year old man, was accused of impiety and corrupting the city's youth. When it came to a vote about what to do with this old troublemaker the citizen's council asked Socrates to propose his own punishment. He suggested a punishment fitting the crime. He said he should be housed in the town hall for the remainder of his life so that he could continue to engage people in serious conversation about the nature of their lives.

Instead they sentenced him to death. Privately and in truth, they did not really want to execute him and quietly offered him a deal that would allow him to

escape. But Socrates would have none of that. As Popeye says, "I am what I am," and Socrates wasn't about to save his own butt by playing loose with the truth. So he drank the hemlock.

During the trial, Socrates defended himself and his life's work. He made a few remarks worth thinking about.

Some one of you then might put in and ask perhaps, "Well, Socrates, what is your business? Where did these calumnies come from? For all this talk about you, and such a reputation, has not arisen, I presume, when you were working at nothing more unusual than others do; it must be you were doing something different from most people. Then tell us what it is, that we may not be rash and careless about you." That seems to be quite fair, if anyone says it, and I will try to show you what this is which has got me this name and this prejudice. Listen, then. And perhaps some of you will think I am jesting, but be sure I will tell you the whole truth: a sort of wisdom has got me this name, gentlemen, and nothing else. Wisdom! What wisdom? Perhaps the only wisdom that man can have. For the fact is, I really am wise in this wisdom...

Socrates then goes on to recount the story of how his friend Chairephon went to Delphi to ask the oracle if anyone was wiser than Socrates. The priestess answered that indeed no one was wiser. Socrates was baffled by this bold claim and set out to test it. So he went around the country seeking out those with reputations for wisdom: statesmen, poets, dramatists and craftsmen. In each case he put questions to them. And in each case he discovered that they were not wise and would try to show them that they were not. He observed, in fact, an interesting mathematical ratio. For every increment of increase in reputation there appeared to be a commensurate increase in ignorance. Needless to say Socrates annoyed many people in this way because in general, people do not like to be challenged about their own wisdom. Socrates would walk away from each man thinking that indeed the god at Delphi was right, he was wiser than all. But then comes the punch line: "The fact is that neither of us knows anything beautiful and good, but he thinks he does know when he doesn't, and I don't know and don't think I do: so I am wiser than he is by only this trifle, that what I do not know I don't think I do."

This notion of wisdom is captured by Ambrose Bierce's definition of education found in his imaginative work, "The Devil's Dictionary" published about the turn of the century. "Education, n. That which discloses to the wise and disguises from the foolish their lack of understanding."

The rigidity of our assumptions about the way things "must be" often keeps us from knowledge about the way things are. Flexibility of the intellect (we might call it imagination) is the key to education. Mark Twain once said that,

"Education consists mainly in what we have unlearned." We must learn how to question even our most basic assumptions about our experience if we are to rid ourselves of ignorance and begin to make sense of the conundrum of our lives. Ignorance may be bliss as the saying go, but it is also a dangerous phenomenon.

In 1987 I taught an introductory ethics course at California State University, Long Beach. I gave out sheets of paper on which students could tell me anything they wanted. One student wrote that he apologized in advance for not talking in class. His jaw was wired shut and would stay that way for at least six weeks. He had gone into a 7-11 store and when he came out was surrounded by a group of young men who battered him. No one tried to stop them. The student's name was Nezam Emtiaz. He was Iranian.

In 1988 I drove north from California for an all-day interview here at Pacific for the teaching post in philosophy and religion. While I was driving I was thinking about the test lecture I was supposed to deliver the next day. My mind kept going back to my students in Long Beach, the kind of hectic lives they led, their expectations for the future, the enormous gratitude they would express for the least bit of kindness in a very cruel and impersonal educational machine. I thought too of Nezam. I was just going across the California/Oregon border. A pickup truck passed me. There were rifles in the rear window and in the middle of that same window was a large sticker that read: "Have you mugged an Iranian today?" A chill ran down my spine...

On Friday of last week I was driving along I-84. I noticed some roadside graffiti. The message read, "So many niggers, so few bullets." We're not talking about Selma, Alabama, 1961. This is Portland Oregon, 1991!

Let's bring it closer to home. Last year a student at Pacific University was threatened with death simply because she did not share the heterosexual orientation of the majority and had the audacity to actually live that truth openly. I felt a deep sense of anger and sorrow when I read the recent editorial in the Index about unreported and unpunished rape on this campus. I would like to suggest that there is a connection between these incidents and the yearlong enterprise you are about to embark on which we have named "Culture and Civilization."

History, according to H.G. Wells, is more and more a race between education and catastrophe. The incidents from my own experience are just a few micro-cosmic signs of the catastrophe he believed only education could prevent. We are dealing with the real thing in the Persian Gulf. When the news of the war broke, I don't know about you, but it was very difficult for me and many of my colleagues to go on with the Winter III program as though nothing had happened. Many of us still feel a kind of surrealism in the air. I keep waiting to wake up from what feels like a very bad dream.

But if Wells is right, then, in a very deep sense, here in this room is exactly where we should be. These seats and your desks are a kind of front line. We must carry on, for I too believe that education, properly understood is our only hope. For years our foreign policy has been designed and carried out by the "wise men" that Socrates found so dangerously ignorant 2400 years ago.

We are embedded in a nexus of relationships the vast significance of which we rarely get glimpses of. Most of us feel uneasy, to say the least, about our ignorance of the issues underlying the Persian Gulf war. We have learned a great deal about the techniques of war but very little about its significance. We now know what a "sortie" is (or a "sorty" as they say on tv) and how a "patriot" can shoot down a "scud" and how a 1,000 bomb isn't really a bomb at all but actually a harmless "ordinance". And it turns out that sometimes these "ordinances" become "incontinent" and dump their load (if you pardon the expression) on the heads of civilians. But it doesn't really matter because the whole thing takes place in what they call a "theater" and as everyone knows whatever horrors we see at the theater are only make-believe.

Yes, we are getting an education alright. But what kind of education is it? Well, it is a kind of what I call a "polytechnic education." An education concerning certain material facts. An education about the techniques and artifacts of war. And all of this is a rather paltry substitute for the real thing, a kind of insulting distraction from the deeper human issues that are at stake. W.E.B. Du Bois wrote in 1903 that, "The function of the university is not simply to teach bread-winning, or to furnish teachers for the public schools, or to be a center of polite society; it is, above all, to be the organ of that fine adjustment between real life and the growing knowledge of life, an adjustment which forms the secret of civilization."

I have heard it said that if all you have is a hammer you tend to treat the world as if it were a nail. If we have to have problems in life then we want problems we can solve and solve now. Hammers become instruments for the quick resolution of ambiguity in life. There are military hammers. There are also technological hammers, economic hammers, and ideological hammers.

And the default modus operandi seems to be that if we have trouble solving the deep, messy, intransigent human problems that create gulf crises in the first place, then we can at least show incredibly nifty videos taken from the nosecones of cruise missiles slamming into buildings to relieve what the Allied force generals assume is the burning question in all our minds -- namely, how do you solve the technical problem of blowing up, or rather, "neutralizing" a civilization.

An exclusively polytechnic education does not dispel the sort of pathetic ignorance that led to the Persian Gulf war and our wholesale swallowing of the incessant rhetoric that keeps it going. An exclusively polytechnic education does not dispel the ignorance that led to the wires in my student's jaw, or the slogan along I- 84, or the death threat to the Pacific Student. An exclusively poly-technic education, as Jean Giradoux said in 1933, "makes us more stupid than the brutes."

A thousand voices call to us on every hand, but our ears are stopped with wisdom."

Yes, something has gone wrong.... And most of us have at least a vague sense that this is so. Rescuing true education in the full liberal arts notion of the term is urgent, relevant and essential. I believe there is nothing less at stake than the survival of the human species on this planet.

There is a language of the head and a language of the heart. And we would do well to learn the grammar of both. A 16th century thinker put it thus, "We only labor to stuff the memory, and leave the conscience and the understanding unfurnished and void." The time is now to change all that. Conscience and understanding are at the core of it. "Superfluous branches we lop away, that bearing boughs may live," says Shakespeare in Richard II, and that assumes we have hearts and minds that are ready for some serious pruning.

Think of it this way. Butcher, baker, candlestick maker; PT, OT, Pre-Opt or Psych; you are still a member of the human race... And if you have any spark of life within you and have not yet been crushed by the FACTS FACTS FACTS in the Gradgrind school of Charles Dickens, then I beg you to turn off that insidious steady stream of refined cultural sugar called TV (if you have not done so already) and cultivate your intellect and conscience. I beg you not to wait to be given an education but to take one, now. Take us to where you are, don't let us simply lead you to where we are.

Let's face some facts.

You are under a lot pressure and stress as a student. Most of you are taking five classes at a time, all of which put a burden on your mind to perform and divide your thinking into finer and finer discrete performance segments. In addition, most of you are working part-time or perhaps even full-time. Most of you have something we politely call a "student loan" which is likely to become quite large and will weigh on you for years after you have left college; a kind of mortgage without a house. Don't tell me you don't worry about these things. I know that you do.

And to make matters worse our most prevalent source of news about the world and our main source of entertainment is television which bombs the brain relentlessly with carefully designed 30- second sorties that blast little craters in the mind, leaving one dazed, restless and intellectually stunted. And all of this is the environment in which your parents and your teachers expect you to get "an education." Something is wrong with this picture.

No wonder many students think of class time as work time, but work in the pathetic modern sense as an activity one must simply put up with in order to buy things. You are being socialized to accept Work time in your lives as just a blur on the road to Miller time. An exaggeration?

Let's say I made you all a proposition. Let's say I have the authority to give you all A's in this class (or any class you choose for that matter) and you don't have to do any work or show up for any of the classes. Let's say I put that to you as a serious question. What would you do? Pretty good deal? It's like getting something for nothing. Only a fool would pass that up, right? God knows that the unforgivable sin in our times is to pass up a good deal...A wise shopper goes for the sales and a free A; well, there it is: I'll take two! But think about the implications of this little scenario for your life, for your understanding of the nature of work and the role of play in your life, for your sense of self in community.

In 1888 Vincent Van Gogh wrote a letter to his brother Theo saying that he felt as though he were on a kind of train through life. In the beginning he could see things quite plainly because the train moved slowly but as life went on the landscape would whiz by and he could make nothing out distinctly. I like to think of C&C as something different than just one more bit of the blurry landscape rushing by in our lives. I like to think of C&C as a safe and serious place where we can slow the damn train down and reflect earnestly and seriously on where we are and where we are going. You really do deserve more and our country desperately needs more. Enter C&C.

The College of Arts and Sciences here at Pacific is not a polytechnic school. And as happy as I am to work at an institution with such fine health professional schools, I must say that your undergraduate career is not simply the beginning phases of obtaining a license to practice PT, OT, Optometry or Psychology. This is not a history course, a philosophy course, an english course, or a political science course. It is not a course in sociology, psychology, art, or the natural sciences. We, your C&C faculty, have also been victims of the polytechnic system and are bound by our own "specializations." Just listen to the title of my Doctoral Dissertation: "Inductive Reasoning, Realism and the Religious Use of Language..." We too want to do more than sit back and analyze existence from the blinders of our respective disciplines.

Culture and Civilization at Pacific is an opportunity for all of us, faculty and students alike, to learn something about the deeply embedded cultural forces that shape our beliefs and values and therefore our activities. The biologists tell us that we have a genetic heritage. Well, we also have a cultural heritage and it permeates our very thoughts and concepts of self. To enter seriously into a conversation with these forces is to encounter ourselves as we really are: in the classroom, in the dorm, in our families and communities. If you remain open, engaged, "present," as I like to say, the rewards will be great.

A few days ago I was paid a visit by a former student of mine. She had had a rough go in life for the past couple of years. Raised in an abusive environment she never quite learned the rules of the game in relationships. Things did not work

out here so she took a year off. She went home. Her mother and stepfather were in the process of breaking up. Just when she needed them the most they were unavailable. The depression intensified. In a final desperate attempt to find the center of her life, to take control again she made some choices. While her parents sat night after night making themselves stupid in front of the TV, she went into her room and read. "And what did you read in your room," I asked. "I reread all of my books from C&C." She reread all of her books from C&C....What is this all about?

This student eventually moved out of the house to live with a more stable relative and got some help from a good family therapist. She's looking for work and is planning to go back to college next year. I am not suggesting that C&C was her salvation. What I am suggesting is that what we are doing is deep and worthy and may well come back to you at crucial times in the future.

I shall end, therefore, as I began this morning, with Socrates. He says to the good citizens of Athens that

the state is like a big thoroughbred horse, so big that he is a bit slow and heavy, and wants a gadfly to wake him up. I think the god put me on the state something like that, to wake you up and persuade you and reproach you every one, as I keep settling on you everywhere all day long. Such another will not easily be found by you gentlemen, and if you will be persuaded, you will spare me. You will be vexed, perhaps, like sleepers being awaked, and if you listen to Anytos and give me a tap, you can easily kill me; then you can go on sleeping for the rest of your lives, unless god sends you such another in his care for you." (436-7)

And the question I leave you to wrestle with this year in C&C is: What is it...to live one's life...asleep?

Marc Marengo
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