



Toward a 21st Century Renaissance -- in My Day

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By **Robert Weisbuch**

I.

Given this chilly climate for administrators -- salary freeze, hiring freeze -- I turn for relief to that dusty ghost-town in my mind's geography, the one labeled Intellect. This turn has been further encouraged by the publication in recent months of an article on the influence, or lack thereof, of a book I wrote 20 years ago on the relations between American and British writers in the 19th century, titled *Atlantic Double-Cross*. This book tried to explain why the writers of each country hated each other's guts and how this animosity informs the great literary works of the period. In it, I argued for a new subdiscipline of comparative literature that would take up the Anglo-American relationship. The book pretty much flopped, in my view, and so I was delighted to read even a measured discussion of the book's effect on my discipline — delighted, that is, until I arrived at a paragraph beginning, "In Weisbuch's day. ..."

At first I was tempted to call the gifted, clearly youthful Columbia professor who wrote this sentence to say, "listen, it may be late afternoon; it may even be early evening. But it is still my day."

More to the point, the phrase made me realize that I am pretty old, and that made me think — I guess I am supposed to speak like a codger now and say instead, "that got me to thinking..." — about the changes in academe in my lifetime. I thought about the move of psychology, for instance, away from the humanities through the social sciences over to the sciences, a journey by which Freud was moved from being a point of reference to a butt for ridicule.

I considered the tendency for economics to forego fundamental questions for refining an accepted model. I note as well a decline in the influence of the humanities, from whence most university presidents arose in the 1930's, say, and an ascendancy of the sciences, and in particular genetic science, from which field an increasing number of our institutional leaders now emerge.

But going through these admittedly contentious thoughts, I saw something more substantial, which was that my thinking was taking place via the disciplines — and to that I added the realization that my poor book of so long ago had stated itself as an attempt to create a subdiscipline. I have just recently reread Douglas Bennett's very perceptive quick history of the liberal arts in the 20th century where he notes that the organization of colleges by these disciplines that we now take so for granted in fact was a fast and dramatic occurrence between about 1890 and 1910. Today, it seems, we really care more about them than we do about the whole self or whatever the liberal arts ideal is.

So I got angry at the disciplines, and there is reason for that. It gets difficult to understand, especially at the graduate level, why a doctorate in literature and a doctorate in physics exist on the same campus when it seems they might as well be pursued on different planets. During a year when I served as graduate dean at the University of Michigan, I attended a physics lecture and was seated next to the chair of the comparative literature program. As the scientist went on, my neighbor whispered to me incredulously, "This guy thinks the world is real." That takes C.P. Snow's two-worlds problem to a new and desperate place.

Or again, I invited the scientist from NYU who had successfully submitted an article of post-structuralist nonsense to a journal of literary theory and had his hoax accepted to speak at Michigan, with a panel of three scientists and three humanists responding. As the large crowd left the room, the conversations were remarkable. The scientists in the audience to a person found the critique of the pretension of literary theory wholly persuasive. The humanists to a person felt that their colleagues had successfully parried the attack, no question about it, reminding the physical and life scientists that their language could be pretty thick to an

outsider too and that the very history of science could be seen as the overturning of accepted truths to be revealed as unintended hoaxes.

And so, enraged at the disciplines, I tried to imagine what it would be like to have a university, a world, a mind that did not rely on the disciplines — and failed.

And my next move is to say, perhaps this is fine. If general education is tantamount to a mild benevolence toward humanity, involvement in a discipline is like falling passionately in love with a particular person. We need both. It is okay to be captured by an ecstatic interest. But we also know the danger of early love. In the words of Gordon McRae or somebody, "I say that falling in love is wonderful." And indeed it is arguable at least that we do not induct students into a love of the life of the mind by abstractions but by finding the single discipline that fixes their fascination.

Even so, we want that fascination to be versatile, to be capable, that is, of moving from one arena of thought to another, or at least to understanding why someone else would care passionately about something else. Every summer, I spend a week on an island off Lake Winnepesaukee. This is very odd for me, as my relation to nature is such that a friend once asked if I had suffered a traumatic experience in a forest or a park. I prefer my nature in iambic pentameters, and this family island, without electricity or plumbing, I have dubbed The Island Without Toilets. Still, it is restful, and each year we campers read and discuss a book or essay. One year it was Bill McKibben's book, *The Age of Missing Information*. In this tome, McKibben contrasts a day spent hiking to a modest mountaintop to a day spent watching a full 24 hours of each channel of a cable television system in Virginia. (The fact that there were only 90 channels in 1992 tells us that we are losing more information all the time.) The book is somewhat eco-snobby, but McKibben's main contrast is really not between the natural world and its vastly inferior electronic similitude or replacement but between deep knowledge and sound bites.

He illustrates deep knowledge by an Adirondack farmer's conversation concerning each and all the species of apple. There is so much to know, it turns out, about apples; indeed, there is so much to know about everything. As I wrote a few years ago, "Life may appear a deserted street. But we open one manhole cover to find a complex world of piano-tuning, another to discover a world of baseball, still others to discover intricate worlds of gemology and wine, physical laws and lyric poetry, of logic and even of television." And I asked, "Do our schools and colleges and universities reliably thrill their charges with this sense of plenitude?"

They do not. And while I cannot even imagine a world without the disciplines — which are really the academic organization of each of these microcosms of wonder -- I can imagine them contributing to an overall world flaming with interest. Falling in love is great and irreplaceable, but how about reimagining the campus as Big Love, Mormon polygamy for all sexes, or at least as a commune, where each of us is mated to a discipline but lives in close proximity with family-like others on a daily basis.

That is, I believe, what we are, however awkwardly, attempting by having the disciplines inhabiting the same campus. However much general education has been swamped by disciplinary insistence, a remnant remains. Even academics tend to tell other people where they went to college, not so much in what they majored. We probably already possess the right mechanism for a 21st century renaissance. It just needs some adjustments.

I want to suggest two such adjustments. One is in the relation of the arts and sciences to the world; and another readjusts the arts and sciences in relation to themselves and to professional education.

II.

When I was at the University of Michigan several years ago, something shocking took place. The sciences faculty, en masse, threatened to leave the college of liberal arts. "How could the sciences leave the arts and sciences any more than Jerry could leave Ben and Jerry's?" I asked someone who had been present at these secession meetings. "The same way another Jerry could leave Dean Lewis and Jerry Martin," he replied. Somehow to Michigan's credit, the rebellion was quelled, but to me it is suggestive of the weakness of the liberal arts ideal at many of our institutions.

There are many signs of its frailty, beginning with the frequent statistic that more students at four-year colleges now major in leisure studies than in mathematics and the sciences. It is difficult to find a middle or high school where anyone speaks of the liberal arts, and much as I have been worrying about the disciplines, aside from scattered efforts they seem to have been missing in action from much of the last forty years of discussion of school reform. In speaking about the arts and sciences in relation to the world, I want to suggest, though, that the lording of the disciplines over general education and the absence of the excitement of the disciplines in the schools have everything to do with each other.

This near paradox can be illustrated best if I stay within my own neighborhood of the humanities for this aspect of the argument. Last month, filled with nostalgia, I agreed to serve on a panel for the National Humanities Association, which advocates to Congress for funding for these impoverished disciplines. My job was to provide one version of the speech for the public efficacy of English and history, religion and philosophy and so on. I decided to fulfill this assignment rapidly and then to ask why, if we believed in the public efficacy of the humanities, we utterly ignored it in our mentoring of graduate students in these disciplines.

My argument for the humanities is exactly the same as my argument for the arts and sciences generally. As a young person, I never expected a major battle of my lifetime to be the renewal of dogmatic fundamentalism in opposition to free thinking. I find myself again and again referring to an episode of the television program "The West Wing" that aired shortly after 9-11. The president's youthful assistant is speaking to a group of visiting school children and he says, "Do you really want to know how to fight terrorists? Do you know what they are really afraid of? Believe in more than one idea."

This is not always as simple as the Taliban versus Shakespeare. There are subtle discouragements within our own society to the freedom to doubt and the freedom to change one's mind. And there are elements within each of us that tend toward dogmatism and against the embracing of difference and a will to tolerate complexity. The campus, ideally, is a battleground for this freedom.

Against the many who would tyrannize over thought, we need to fight actively for our kind of education, which is far deeper than the usual political loyalties and divisions. God and George Washington are counting on us. And so are all those kids in East LA scarred by violence and poverty. In a nation of inequality and a world of sorrows, damn us if we neglect to advocate effectively for the only education that lifts up people.

Having said that, I asked why, paraphrasing Emerson, we do not turn our rituals and our rhetoric into reality. Over the last 40 years, the professoriate in the humanities has been a mostly silent witness to an atrocity, a huge waste of human resources. According to Maresi Nerad in the "[Ten Years After](#)" study, in a class of 20 English Ph.D.'s at whatever prestigious institution, three or four will end up with tenure-track positions at selective colleges or research universities. And yet this degree program, and all others in the humanities, pretend that all 20 are preparing for such a life. It's a Ponzi scheme.

When I led the Woodrow Wilson Foundation, we began a [Humanities at Work](#) program, one aspect of which was to give little \$2,000 scholarships to doctoral students who had found summer work beyond the academy. A cultural anthropologist at Texas worked at a school for delinquent girls who had been abused as children. She employed dance, folktales, autobiographical writings and a whole range of activities related to her expertise to improve these girls' self-images. A history student at U.Va. created a freedom summer school for fifth graders in Mississippi, teaching them African American history. Meanwhile, we secured thirty positions at corporations and non-profits for doctoral graduates.

Our point was not to become an employment agency but to suggest that every sector of society, from government to K-12 to business, could benefit hugely by the transferable talents of people who think with complexity, write and speak with clarity, and teach with verve and expertise. We wanted such graduates to comprehend the full range of their own possibilities. Should they then decide to enter academia, at least they would perceive this as a free choice. And in the meantime, the liberal arts would populate every social sector as never before. I do not mean it ironically when I look to the liberal arts takeover of the world.

For that to take place at any level of education, I think, we need to marry intellectual hedonism to the responsibility of the intellectual. If we want our professoriate and our students to apply their learning -- and I do -- if we want them not simply to critique society but to constitute it, we must first acknowledge the simple joy of learning as a prime realistic moment. My dear friend Steve Kunkel is a leading investigator at Michigan

of the AIDS virus. He is a fine fellow and I am certain that he would wish to reduce human suffering. But when I call Steve at 7 in the morning at his lab, because I know he will be there already, he is there less out of a humanitarian zeal than because he is crazy about science, the rattiest of lab rats. Just so, when I unpack a poem's meaning, I experience a compulsive enjoyment. This is half of the truth, and it leads someone like Stanley Fish to scorn the other half by writing a book with the title [Save the World on Your Own Time.](#)

I think we can devote some school time to saving the world without prescribing or proscribing the terms of its salvation. Louis Menand, surely no philistine, argues that we need to get over our fear of learning that may brush shoulders with the practical and more generously empower our students. Granted, and granted enthusiastically, academic enclosure, the distancing of a quiet mind from the harsh noise of immediacy, is a great joy, even a necessity in the growth of an individual. But when it becomes the end rather than the instrument, we approach social disaster. We must travel back and forth between the academic grove and the city of social urgencies.

This is to say, and beyond the humanities, that a certain precious isolation — is it a fear? — has kept the fruit of the disciplines within the academy, away even from our near neighbors in the schools. The absence of the disciplines from the public life and the bloating of the disciplines to squeeze out the liberal arts ideal in the colleges are part and parcel of the same phenomenon. It is not that the world rejected the liberal arts but that the liberal arts rejected the world.

In a brilliant article, Douglas Bennett provides a brief history of 20th century college in which he notes an increasingly exclusionary notion of the arts and sciences. And this seems to me part and parcel of the same dubious ethic that so distrusts the messiness of the social world. As I read that we arts and science adepts kept purifying ourselves — education is too messy, throw it out, along with the study of law, along with business, along with anything material (again, “That guy thinks the world is real”) -- I am reminded of Walt Whitman's critique of Matthew Arnold, whom he termed “one of the dudes of Western literature.” To Arnold, Whitman says, “the dirt is so dirty. But everything comes out of the dirt, everything; everything comes out of the people, the people as you find them and leave them: not university people, not F.F.V. people: people, just people.”

The liberal arts became pure and they became puerile. Having greatly expanded the old curriculum by addition and subdivision, they spent the rest of the century apologizing by limiting themselves. They expelled fascinating areas of human endeavor that then came to constitute professional education, and professional education proceeded to eat the libbies' lunch.

Who or what can teach us to do what Menand urges, empower not only our students but our academic disciplines? The answer, plain as can be, is the sciences. Is it any wonder, given the exclusionary bent of the liberal arts, that scientists, whose subject and whose instruments of investigation are often frankly material, might consider secession, especially when social influence, which is also to say funding, was getting thrown away along with whole areas of crucial consequence?

And by the same token, it is the sciences that can teach the humanities in particular how to reconnect. Indeed, a few moments ago, I was calling for the humanities equivalent of tech transfer; and that is half of my hope for a 21st century renaissance.

III.

By a renaissance in our time — in Weisbuch's day -- I do not mean the recovery of classical learning and its inclusion in a Christian worldview that marked the original. I want to invoke instead the extreme interdisciplinarity of that time when the arts and sciences came so spectacularly into, if not unity, vital relationship, and when learning and worldliness ceased their contradiction. Here is what I mean. I do not in fact live on the campus of Drew University, but in a town 15 miles away, Montclair, New Jersey. Aside from the filming of some scenes featuring AJ Soprano down the street at our high school, the neighborhood was all too quiet when we moved in, with neighbors at most stiffly waving to one another from a distance. Then Tom and Janet and their three moppets moved in, along with Tom's insane white limousine, the backyard hockey rink, the Halloween scare show, the whole circus. As Tom started offering the middle-school neighborhood kids “rock-star drop-offs” to school in his limo, everything changed. Some of our houses have large front porches, and neighbors began to congregate on summer evenings. Soon, whenever we lit the

barby a few families would turn up with their own dogs and steaks and ask if they could join in. There are about ten families now that assist each other in myriad ways, that laugh together and, when necessary, provide solace and support.

The university can become a porch society in relation to the disciplines. Indeed, for the last 40 years we have been experiencing a loosening of the boundaries, as the prefix “bio” gets attached to the other sciences; as environmental studies unites the life sciences, theology, the physical sciences, public policy, even literary criticism; as Henry Louis Gates, as historian, employs genetic research to revise and complicate the notion of racial heritage. And then there is the huge potential of democratizing knowledge and recombining it through the burst of modern technology, one of whose names, significantly, is the Web.

You cannot intend a zeitgeist but you can capitalize upon one, and this is one. A few simple administrative helps occur to me as examples. We can invite more non-academics to join with us in our thinking about the curriculum. We can require our doctoral students to take some time learning a discipline truly a ways from their own rather than requiring the weak cognate or two, and we can take just a few hours to give them a sense of the educational landscape of their country. We can start meeting not with our own kind all the time but across institutional genres, and we can especially cross the divide into public education not so much by teaching teachers how to teach but with the rich ongoing controversies and discoveries of the living disciplines.

Less grandly, within our own institutions, we can pay a bonus to the most distinguished faculty member in each department who will teach the introductory course and a bigger bonus to those who will teach across disciplines, with the size of the bonus depending upon the perceived distance between the disciplines. We can stop attempting to formulate distribution requirements or core curricula via committees of 200, which is frankly hopeless in terms of conveying the excitement of the liberal arts, and instead let groups of five or ten do their inspired thing, spreading successes. We can create any number of rituals that encourage a porch society. As one new faculty member told me at a Woodrow Wilson conference years ago, “My graduate education prepared me to know one thing, to be, say, the world’s greatest expert on roller coasters. But now in my teaching position, I have to run the whole damn amusement park and I know nothing about the other rides, much less health and safety issues, employment practices, you name it.”

We might name this zeitgeist the whole damn amusement park, but I would suggest a naming in the form of a personification: Barack Obama. When I am fundraising, I often chant something of a mantra, and I ask you to forgive its sloganeering. The new knowledge breaks barriers. The new learning takes it to the streets. The new century is global. And the new America is multi-everything. There you go and here he is. Our fresh new president is indeed international, multi-racial, multi-religious, multi-ethnic, a liberal-arts major and law school grad who became a community organizer and breaks barriers with an ease that seems supernal. He was not required; like the courses we choose freely, he was elected.

Barack Obama was born on an island, and at the start of this essay I mentioned the site of my summer challenge, the Island Without Toilets. Our disciplines are islands. Our campuses are islands. And islands are wonderful and in fact essential as retreats for recuperation. But in the pastoral poems of an earlier Renaissance, the over-busy poet rediscovers his soul in a leafy seclusion but then returns, renewed and renewing, to the city. It is time for us to leave our islands. We are equipped.

Robert Weisbuch is president of Drew University. This essay is adapted from a talk he gave at the 2009 annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association.