

The Place of Music and Liberal Arts in Our Life

A Final Lecture over Certain Connections in Human Thought and a Charge to My Students at HSU

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I. A Charge to the Liberal Arts Student: Music and Meaning

. . .only your art is pure contraption.
(from W. H. Auden's "The Composer")

Dr. Samuel Johnson once observed that "the prospect of one's eminent demise wonderfully clarifies the mind's focus." Indeed, I find this to be true. If you will bear with me, I would dearly wish to share some thoughts with you as a kind of last lecture. In law, such statements carry much evidential weight and are not considered mere hearsay. I hope you will grant me the same consideration. First I would speak to you of music and ideas in themselves and of Henderson specifics later. Please indulge me and bear with an incorrigible old professor.

Music, in my not so humble opinion, is possibly the most profound means of expression of feeling and values available to humankind, yet it is the most abstract of the Arts. It is through this process of abstraction that I believe one finds the key to the universality of music. A poem of necessity is born in a given language and, upon translation, becomes most problematic in matters of meaning and interpretation. A painting or sculpture, perhaps, is less so, but still focuses upon the immediate subject, a specific image which may reduce the power of universal comprehension. Of course, these problems can be largely overcome through study, experience, and an open-minded interest in cultures of other times and places. Consider the problem most modern English speakers have with Shakespeare. The evolution of language and idioms, pronunciation, and commonly held cultural values make it very difficult to truly follow the original intent of the Bard to the point where one can bask in the universality of the human condition so powerfully displayed by this greatest of playwright/poets.

There is a basic truth in this. All good and well-made art is certainly universal in its ultimate expression, but this lofty eyrie of the universal is arrived at through the local, the culturally subjective. From the perspective of other cultures and eras it oft becomes, indeed, "as through a glass, darkly!" Music, certainly music of a purely instrumental origin (for now let us exclude the complex problem of words and music as in opera and song), also has certain cultural barriers that often are difficult to surmount. But in terms of tone, rhythm, timbre, and texture—that is, the fundamental elements from which all music is made—there needs be no re-interpretation. In its inherent abstraction, it may be apprehended for better or worse in a pristine immediacy. Listen to a Bach fugue, blues from the American delta, a Medieval plainsong, or a Japanese composition for the koto. The list is endless; but no matter how far from your experience, you can have a meaningful musical listening experience, limited at first perhaps, but of substance

nonetheless! However, try this with a poem in ancient Greek or an Icelandic Edda, or whatever. One is faced with a wall of linguistic incomprehension. Pure music, the absolute play of notes, on the other hand, offers an open door to any who are willing to enter.

The validity of any given opinion concerning new music, of course, is predicated upon how experienced the listener may be and how much prior knowledge of the technical elements one has and so forth; but still, even a novice must bravely initiate the process. The educated mind will freely acknowledge its initial ignorance and should hold final judgment in abeyance until a later time. It is interesting to note that such works that make an effortless and immediate appeal often will not maintain those qualities over repeated performances. Works which are less immediately appealing often grow in interest along with the maturing of the listener through a lifetime of experiences. Indeed, normative value judgments are ever in a state of flux and reassessment in most individuals and that is proper. It is interesting to note that growth and development are found in healthy organisms; that which becomes static and rigid is symptomatic of regression, decay, and finally death. When one ceases to grow, one has begun to die. The mind, however, may overcome this gloomy inevitability of the physical body by the exercise of curiosity and new knowledge. Here we may stay young at heart to the end of our days, in some people even to their dying day!

Why harp upon this point? Many people live without intellectually challenging themselves. Most are content with simple amusement and immediately accessible interest. How many films with shootouts and car crashes does one need? More people probably read comic books than the novels of William Faulkner. But the quality of a work of art is not a democratic decision determined by a majority. Indeed, most seem to use music only as background sonic wallpaper and do not focus upon the play of notes. Most commercially viable enterprises are shaped for the largest possible audience at the lowest possible production costs and are willing to compromise and adjust anything for the sake of popularity and economic success. The quality of aesthetic values, again, is not a matter for simple democratic numbers.

What then is Beauty? And who can really define the idea of Beauty clearly and with precision? Do you want to be called to task and challenged in your current thinking and values, or do you wish to be comfortably entertained and merely have what you are simply reaffirmed? Who among you have ever willingly reached out to contemporary music, art, and poetry? Do you willingly embrace the art and science that form the intellectual underpinning of human civilization? Have you found and contemplated those common elements that seem to reoccur over and over again in the history of all cultures? In our myths and stories, we find a mirror. In that image of ourselves is possibly our best hope to know Truth, our best chance to embrace Beauty. These are things not only of the mind, but are universals of the soul. They are not meant to be explained and dissected so much as experienced. Socrates was right; it is in a recognition and admission of our own ignorance that the first tentative step to wisdom is to be made. So put aside where you have been and let's look ahead!

II. The Struggle for Truth: Absolute or Relative; Local or Universal?

The origins of western science (and even music) and thereby much of the modern world can be easily traced, as in so much else, to the ancient Greeks. Pythagoras and many others were the

first to make a systematic study of both the mathematics of sound and its effects (and affects) on the human psyche. Curiously, the researches of these Greeks were at once rational and mystical. The Pythagorean saw that the world might be understood through mathematical analysis and perhaps even the underlying design of the very cosmos might be seen in underlying mathematical structures. This is not really different from modern physics, is it? From the "harmony of the celestial spheres" of these ancients to Einstein's search for a "Unified Field Theory" that would explain reality from the microverse of quantum structure and the atom to the behavior of megagalaxies and the "big bang," both assume the fundamental effectiveness of mathematical analysis in understanding.

What, then, is Truth? This is the problem of epistemology in philosophical systems; one should have some idea of how you know that you know! Is simple sensory observation of an external event enough to claim to know the Truth? There is usually a deeper reality beyond the surface observation, a reality that can only be apprehended through careful thought and reflection, a consideration of the observed facts in light of rational understood principles. It is not enough merely to claim to know as anyone for whatever purpose may do so and who is to gainsay the claims of another? This, of course, is the problem of presenting claims of most religious insights which are of an entirely subjective origin. This is not intended to disparage anybody's particular religious faith, but there, in a nutshell, is the problem -- whose faith? Which shall be exalted over another? In art, there is also a similar problem of value judgments (*mutatis mutandis*). What is "correct art?" What is "good music?" This poem is better than that one! How so? You can see the problem. Is art then, like religion, merely a matter of one's opinion? Is that opinion simply the general synthesis of one's cultural experiences and background; that is, one's conditioning? If this is so, what then is the truth about beauty?

To further muddy these epistemological waters, consider this "thought experiment" and think about what is the truth of things:

Imagine a train leaving a station (A) and moving at 100 m.p.h. to the next station (C). Aboard the engine is the engineer (B), who is blowing his train whistle. Now, the steam whistle is the event which is being observed (heard) by three persons at the same point in time: Mr. A, back at the first station; Mr. B, who is pulling the whistle cord on the train; and Mr. C, who is waiting up ahead at the next station. Let us give each of the three persons a two-way radio which, of course, will communicate at the speed of light as radio waves do. Since the two stations are only a couple of miles apart, the transmission of radio waves is so nearly instantaneous as not to matter. What do you suppose the three honest fellows report to one another about the sound of the whistle?

Mr. A: "Hello B, check your whistle. It is defective as it is falling in pitch!"

Mr. B: "The whistle is fine and steady! Get your ears examined!"

Mr. C: "Are you both pulling my leg? The damn thing is rising in pitch! I know what I heard! Rising, I say!"

Well, who is telling the Truth? Whose is the correct interpretation of the event?

Curiously, it is all of them, all at once, who are correct in happy mutual contradiction. This would at first look seem to be a call for the acceptance of a relativistic truth, one that depends solely upon a subjective point of view, but is it really? As stated above, there is a deeper and more universal truth, one which depends upon rational interpretation and scientific knowledge. Some, in their ignorance, might throw up their hands and shout, "Black Magic!" Others, if they know about the behavior of moving systems and wave production, would recognize the Doppler effect at work and not be troubled at all by our poor confused trainmen. This, by the way, is also an excellent demonstration of the deeper truth of relativistic effects in observational results, a truth most central to modern physics. The Truth is out there! But truth has two manifestations. There is the fluid truth of relativism, ever varied and malleable, such as we found above in the subjective points of view our several trainmen experienced. And there is the deeper truth, indeed, an absolute truth, that both contains and reconciles the seeming contradictions of the locally relativistic view. This larger view does not rely upon simple sensory experience alone, but employs the light of the mind, the wash of reason, to expose the greater but simpler underlying truth.

It is your responsibility, then, to build both at once a flexible, varied, and tolerant point of view, open to change and even contradiction, and the deeper bedrock of an absolute sensibility that can only be founded on the rational principles of Logic, Scientific Methodology, Mathematics, and Patience. Patience will allow you to discover the deeper explanation that will melt away the contradictions initially perceived in any foray into the endless mysteries of intellectual exploration. The Liberal mind will seek – indeed, will expect to find -- connections and insights between all things. Ultimately, everything is connected.

III. Some Thoughts On Our School And What May Be Done To Improve Our State

We live ever in intellectual peril. Look at Kansas today, where the legislature would outlaw basic scientific truths by legal fiat! Darwin today; who is next? Einstein? What of Astronomy? Is old Galileo once again to be tried for heresy for reporting his direct observations of the universe? Does biblical scripture support the solar/galactic models of modern science? In for a penny, in for a pound it seems to me. If the teaching of modern biology is to be legally abolished in the schools, why not ban any other ideas that gainsay biblical notions of the heavens and earth? We are not instilling in our students the rational, factually supported philosophical armor that makes for an intellect that will withstand the constant assault by the enemies of free inquiry and free expression!

One of the paradoxes we face in Arkansas education is that if we really do our job with intellectually gifted students and arm them with the knowledge, skills, and values that will serve them professionally, we thereby condemn those young graduates to exile! They usually must leave our state for economic and cultural opportunities, only coming home for Christmas to see the grandfolks and then back to Dallas, Boston, or wherever. This is a sad state of affairs; the better the University does its job, the more likely this sad scenario. A paradox! The solution is possible but not easy; no "quick cure" or "buzz-word" solution is forthcoming. Spare me another "task force" or another "retreat." Lord knows we have already "retreated" before the barbarians almost to intellectual capitulation! No! We, who are trusted with the academic keys to the future, must begin to work on a parallel set of responsibilities. The intellectual development of those

individual students who truly have the capacity and motivation to achieve is one path; the other, a largely neglected responsibility of the University, is to build a rich cultural base in our state which can nourish the artistic/scientific life. These bright minds must be able to put down roots here, and it should not be in stony barren ground! What specifically? My love is music, but what do I see? Every school in the state has a marching corps band program, but where are the orchestras? After all, 99.99% of the greatest instrumental musical creations in western civilization are predicated upon orchestral resources. Much choral and keyboard music of the first rank needs orchestral support, as well. Nothing is wrong with concert winds, but they are only a very small portion of the true art of Music. And I see little reason for all the time spent on rifles and flags (music?) with no large ensemble concert music until spring! No, we have sold out our heritage and the reach for the highest values because we can get support for matters Athletic, not matters Aesthetic. Do we really want to reflect the artistic values of the typical school board? What kind of music education is it that is intended only for a few years in one's youth? Is there music in your life after Band? Who can get work professionally in a marching band after school is over? Music should be an enhancement of our citizens' lifestyles for their entire life! However, many could keep active in music, and even earn some money while at it, throughout their lives with a string instrument in local symphonies, church performances, and amateur chamber music groups, all of which have a huge literature base composed by the finest composers. We should offer music education for the entire life and not musical exploitation for just the school years!

HSU should have a chamber orchestra program offering professional artistic preparation. Such a program could earn for us a national reputation as a place to learn and perform the great literature. We could and should concertize in our region, offering the best music and the best examples to our citizens both old and young. Mozart in Malvern, Barber in Bearden! Let others limit themselves to marching and pep bands as PR lackeys to athletics. We should return music to its rightful place as the most profound means of human expression. The University has a philosophic obligation to be an agency for cultural growth. Let us become the school with a brain as well as a heart! The alternative is continued mediocrity and being labeled as a cultural backwater with few economic/cultural opportunities. There is clearly a strong correlation between the cultural life of a region and the per capita income of its citizens! We spend millions on sports facilities in which, basically, one finds two small groups of people (generally recruited from out-of-state, to boot) disputing the location of a "bag of air," an activity which, in perspective, would be silly if not for the tragic waste of taxes and energy. Where are the art galleries, museums, concert halls, chamber music groups, the dance, theater? Does history bear my position out? Consider this question for example: How many of you have ever heard the name of Beethoven and honor his huge contribution to Western Civilization? Can you name the most powerful and famous Austrian personage who lived as a contemporary of Beethoven? Who was the greatest, most gifted Austrian athlete at that time in History? Who was the most important and influential politician? Think on that. Indeed, what and who does survive and count for the ages? I fear that our leadership is aesthetically blind to the real issues and lacks the necessary cultural insights to inspire the courage to confront the status quo, to truly lead Henderson State University *ad astra*. Our best hope is with you, the student. It is you who will have to hold the administration and board's collective feet to the fire! Grouse enough and maybe, just maybe, real change may begin. Sadly, don't hold your breath as this will take inspired, courageous cultural leadership; not just the bricks and mortar exterior but also the heart

and mind of our school must evolve. If you look at the few institutions in Arkansas which truly enjoy a high reputation and attract national attention, one must wonder how they function without a football program! Art and science: is that all they offer? (My sarcasm here begins to drip, I fear.) What kind of example do the sports programs offer? Win at any price? Physically gifted knaves and thieves are coddled and allowed license. What does this say about our lack of values? We pay coaches far more than liberal arts and science professors and hire P.E. graduate assistants beyond that to actually meet their classes! This is another way of hiding the true costs of ball programs by using academic monies to pay these non-academic persons. Now, lest you think I am opposed to football and marching bands, let me set you straight. We could have a non-scholarship program, or at least one that requires minimal financial support, which has people trying out as on-campus walk-ons, people who would play for the love of the game and School Spirit. Such a program could be a great asset to the campus life, morale, and just plain fun! Here, emotion and love of the school would serve as the motivating power. What we have is a hugely over-expensive program that robs the University of far too much money. You are forced to pay an exorbitant fee for each credit hour for athletics. Where are our real values at HSU? Thank the good Lord we spend all this money on a winning program! (Oops, I'm dripping again.) Should the millions we have spent on athletics over the thirty years I have been here instead have been applied to a University Orchestra program, I am absolutely certain that HSU would today enjoy a national reputation as a center for cultural excellence with, I truly believe, a growing enrollment of students who seek out a place where they may be part of a process of the first rank!

Thanks for your patience; I hope my rant was of some interest to you. I am proud of many of the improvements in our campus and the tentative steps we have made toward becoming a college of high standards; but unless President Dunn and our board members start really listening to the faculty, nothing will truly change. I think our top people are listening to the wrong persons. Total consensus is not possible, nor even desirable; but if your faculty cannot make a contribution, what have we become? Find the courage to dare to reach. Stop looking about at other schools for models. We, if you really mean all the high sounding verbiage about excellence, etc., should be a leader. I fear we still confuse form with content. Just saying it doesn't make it so!

Again, I thank you for the privilege of passing on what I feel to be the essence of what I have learned over some thirty-five years of teaching. To do so has certainly helped my feelings! I offer my best wishes to you, my students (to whom I have always been far more fond than you ever thought) and to my friends and colleagues who have made my thirty years at HSU a good way to spend a life! Thanks again so very much and, remember, do not cut this or any other administration any slack! Think for yourselves and demand a challenge. Otherwise, what the heck are you doing studying the Arts in a University? Oh, and by the way, tell whomever it was that came up with the notion: "We don't need no stinkin' badges!" This is a campus, not a company plant! Well, I love you anyway. Keep up the ferment and, "...do not go gentle into that good night."

Biographical Sketch

William Underwood was born in Mississippi in 1940, attended schools in, Mississippi,

Tennessee, Florida and Colorado. He served in the U.S. Navy and later, attended the University of Memphis for a B.M. and an M.A. in Music Theory and Composition studying composition under Johannes Smit. After two years of directing band and choir at Southside High school in Memphis he was offered a teaching fellowship at the University of North Texas where he studied composition under William P. Latham. He was finishing his D.M.A. dissertation (second symphony) when he was offered a theory/composition position at Henderson in 1970 where he has happily remained for the past thirty years. He and his dear wife, Carol have built a dream home out past Caddo Valley where they are happily dwelling with their five dogs and one nervous cat. Dr. Underwood, due to illness, has just retired from his teaching responsibilities and felt a need to make a final charge (he has been asked to give the faculty charge at graduation on more than one occasion at H.S.U.) to his students and colleagues.

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