

CIVIC EDUCATION, LIBERAL EDUCATION, AND THE DEMAND FOR MEANING

Alexander S. Duff

I feel like I've been hearing this claim, that "partisanship and division are worse now than they ever have been," for my entire adult life, that is, people think each year is worse than the last. And an increasingly common therapy proposed for such partisanship is better civic education: more information about how to vote, about American history, and governing institutions.

But the trouble, I've detected, is that the same partisanship that seems to grip our political life *also* means that we mean different things by civic education! We seem to agree that something called "civic education" is the medicine we need but we *still* disagree about what it includes! One man's civic education is another's narrow-minded ideology—or so the accusation goes.

In my remarks this evening I want to show you why the education in higher civics here at the School of Civic Leadership is not just more ideology.

~

Now I don't want to say much of anything about ideology being passed off as education in other corners of the academy—plenty of that has already been said, and I don't want to engage in any polemics this evening.

But I think it is necessary to admit that, separate from any zealous ideologies that you can find in the academy, there is a widespread underlying condition of what has been called confusion and boredom — I will say *moral indifference and disarray* — at the heart of much higher education, not just in the humanities but also in the more powerful and impressive precincts of the universities, in the sciences and so-called STEM disciplines.

They have developed many very powerful answers to the question of HOW to do something... but our answers regarding WHY to do things—including why to study—are more tepid or feeble. It behooves us to reflect a moment on the relationship of technological or STEM education to that offered here in our School.

~

Allow me this premise: the heart will demand meaning—the young will look for it anywhere they can find it. Most of us, most of the time assume it. Students, if they're really being students, demand it. And if it is not being supplied, it will be sought. If it cannot be found, it will be invented.

Education, higher education, institutional education such as we're providing, needs to be structured around the *expected quest for meaning*, and the conjoined *promise* and *need* that meaning be found to be true. That is: when you really get into it, we don't *just* want meaning to entertain, to enliven, to adorn, to distract, to numb, to suffocate our longings: we also want those longings to be satisfied

by real goods, by things that are *truly* meaningful. Meaning ceases really to be meaningful inasmuch it shows itself to be false.

The cutting, paring work of education—Socrates compares it to a butcher *cutting at the joints*—should entail the pruning away, the trimming, of false meaning and leaving – that is *allowing itself to be shown* – what is truly available for guiding and fulfilling our lives.

The widespread adoption of a model of knowledge which consigns meaning to the category of illusion, or to the *merely* subjective (whereas “objective” knowledge deals with facts, “subjective” concern with values is ... more subjective): this makes all meaning suspect. STEM, so-called, tells us that the most important things are the *facts* we can know, that we can quantify, that we can therefore engineer.

But the human being in full will continue to assume, and then in some cases to demand to understand, meaning.

~

So here is where our interest in civics comes in—the *primary* source of meaning is found in our common life, our communal and social life together. The “supreme” association, (as Aristotle called it) is political. And if the only “knowledge” we admit is knowledge of non-values, is knowledge of facts, then we will find ourselves *disarmed* and *confused* by the *fact* that our political community, with *its* convictions, *imposes* itself on us while we’re not paying attention, from birth til death, from dawn til dusk.

One form of this is when only one set of political opinions makes it into a classroom, as a kind of approved or acceptable orientation to the world—and this just fills up the atmosphere, like a suffocating cloud. And doesn’t this work because of the demand for meaning? Performative outrage, emotive displays of self-righteous: we should see and admit that these accomplish a crucial function in that they offer a source of meaning; they tell a meaningful story about the world: tales of justice and injustice, heroes, villains, etc.! These tales involve a promise that sacrifice will be worth it: they supply a topography of meaning.

The study of civics is a correction to this TREND in higher education NOT because it supplies an alternative “ideology” by which to satisfy the demand for meaning. The study of civics corrects this trend because it takes seriously the convictions and the sources of those convictions which shape and enliven our common life and—here is the key distinctive—puts those to the test. Not the test of “critical reason,” so called, or a withering, caustic skepticism that undermines all affective attachments to goodness as such, but the test of truth: which of our convictions holds up? Which can I really live by? How ought I really to live? What can I serve? And how can I serve it BEST? The goal of this education is not the *elimination* of all attachments and convictions, but the *illumination* and then the *scrutiny of*—sometimes gentle, sometimes rather harsh—of those things we cling to most dearly *in order to be guided by what is truly good*.

This is, in a word, tougher than it sounds. It’s good that it has something of a noble ring to it, because subjecting your deepest convictions to genuine and thoughtful scrutiny is painful work. I can only illuminate it by analogy: athletes who train and struggle together, subjecting themselves to repeated

stress and pain over months and years know *something* of the comradeship they feel for their teammates.

But they also know something of how this distinguishes their gang, their TEAM from everyone else. Those of you who embark together on this Odyssey of self-scrutiny, subjecting your realest convictions to the genuine test of truth—doing this together in the years to come will make you, as the poet said, “the happy few.” But I promise that it also will separate you from some of the people you hold most dear—at least for a time: from your friends, from your family. You are embarking on a voyage who’s return prospects are... challenging to discern from the outset. But you should take some comfort, some pleasure, even some pride, that you are doing this with others, others with whom new bonds will be forged.

~

Students who demand meaningfulness from their education ask for what is rightfully theirs. But after issuing the demand, the duty returns on the student to seek it with the requisite courage, steadfastness, fortitude, intrepidity, and resoluteness which scrutinizing one’s deepest convictions requires. This exam will take four years: welcome.