

A Message from the Dead – Languages, that is

Faculty colloquium talk, 1977

This is called a colloquium, which means a "talking together," and I hope that this session becomes just that, because many of you will not agree with some of my statements, and this could lead to a healthy discussion.

Modern education has tended to look upon Latin and Greek as "dead" languages -- in every sense of that term. Therefore, they have no direct relation to "life" in 1977. They are dead, so let's bury them and get on with the study of relevant material like the social sciences and the pure sciences; "these" are the elements of modern life. Oh, if a person wants to play around with an esoteric subject just for the heck of it, and he has time left over from his more serious learning, it is all right for him to devote that time to picking up a smattering of this useless knowledge, but he would really gain more by spending that time developing his body in some physical exercise.

But wait just a minute. This is a LIBERAL ARTS college. If that term means anything except a miniature university, it must go back to the meaning of "liberal," which is roughly the equivalent of the old-fashioned word "gentleman" -- a cultured human being.

Actually, the whole concept of the proper education for people between the ages of eighteen and twenty-two is different in a university and in a liberal arts school. The university is the ideal place for the high school graduate who knows exactly what he wants to do and who has picked up the poise and self-discipline necessary to pursue his goals without getting emotionally confused by the life on a university campus. But how many 18-year-olds have reached this point of maturity? As a graduate assistant when I was young (yes, I once was), I worked with freshmen for seven years in two different universities, and I found that most freshmen suffer great cultural shock in their transfer from the security of the home environment to the impersonality of the university campus. Up to this time they have been treated as adolescents; now suddenly they are expected to react like adults.

The liberal arts college is based on the theory that this is the proper time to help a young person "find" himself. Let him sample "all" the areas of knowledge and identify his interests in order to become very sure of what he wants to do with his life. This is the time for him to develop himself as a "person," working out standards of conduct and the ability to understand other people and the most effective ways of working with them. Hopefully, he will develop the qualities of tolerance and courtesy, and a sensitivity to the beauties of art, music, and literature, as well as a respect for the wonders of science. He needs "time" to mature and to "put away childish things." He will choose some area in college which he will probe in some depth, but he will not isolate himself in this field -- yet. Only after he has found himself can he narrow his interests to a specialized field and still lead a rich and rewarding life as a human being.

Granted that taking an 18-year-old kid and in four years turning him out as a polished gentleman is an impossible dream. After all, at the end of this time he is still only twenty-two, and much of his inner growth is still ahead of him. But at least a liberal education tries to lay a solid foundation on which he can build a full life in every respect in the future.

If this is the function of a liberal arts college, I maintain that the Humanities are the heart of the institution. Certainly other areas are essential, for a heart without a body is rather pointless. But without the Humanities, a person becomes a form of trained robot. The

Humanities strive to give him wisdom rather than knowledge, and too much knowledge without wisdom is very dangerous.

I once went around asking Monmouth College faculty members what the word "Humanities" meant to them. I was amazed to find that most of the people teaching in a liberal arts college do not have the vaguest idea. Several people said, "The Humanities are everything that is not a social science or a pure science." In other words, a garbage can where you can throw all the leftovers! No way. The Humanities are those courses which have as their basic aim the development of the person's inner being. They deal with truths instead of facts. They help the person perceive and enjoy the tremendous beauty in this life of ours, which sometimes gets obscured by the ugliness we cannot avoid. Literature, music, art, religion, philosophy -- these are the things that make life a vital experience; these are the areas in which man learns to interpret not what life "is" but what it "means". They develop in him that invaluable quality of understanding. And the greater contact he has with the Humanities, the richer and fuller his life will be -- whatever he becomes professionally.

And now at long last, let's focus our discussion on the area of language, and its role in this kind of education.

It has been said that a man who knows only his own language understands that language no better than a person who knows only his own religion understands that religion. Americans are the only people I know who are so bigoted that they feel no need for any other language but their own. Naturally, everything worth reading either was written in English or has been translated into English. Foreign languages have been slashed from the curricula of schools as luxuries until the inevitable result has come -- young people don't know even their own language, and communication is very difficult for them.

The best thing is to know as many languages as possible, but certainly an "educated" person must know at least one other language besides his own. Not everything worthwhile can be found in English, and translations are poor substitutes for the original. How on earth do you translate puns (a basic form of world comedy), or poetry? Take your favorite poem or song and try to fit it into other words that say it just as effectively. And English does not always have a phrase that is exactly equivalent to a phrase in another language. Admitting this, we often just appropriate a phrase from another language and incorporate it into our own -- like *esprit de corps*, *ad hoc*, *in memoriam*, and hundreds of others.

OK, suppose you admit that it might be of "some" value to study a foreign language -- but why a DEAD language? After all, some 2,800 living languages are just waiting around to be learned.

Classical Latin and Greek are dead only in the sense that they are no longer spoken in their original form -- although modern Greek is 95% based on classical Greek. But these classical languages have gone through a marvelous transformation with the passing of time. They have permeated the languages of Western civilization. Spanish, French, Portuguese, and Italian are little more than corruptions of Latin. In fact, I have been told that Italian is basically Latin in the ablative case -- the form most frequently met in Classical Latin. And more than two thirds of the words in the English language are derived from Latin or Greek. Also, a great many of our abbreviations are Latin: we use i.e. (*id est*) instead of t.i. for "that is"; e.g. (*exempli gratia*) instead of f.e. for "for example"; op.cit. (*opus citatum*) instead of wo. ref. for "work already referred to"; and lb. (*libra*), not pd. means "pound." Also, scientific terminology is almost entirely Latin or Greek, so that it will mean the same thing worldwide. These are just a few of the very practical reasons that a study of these languages is beneficial.

Someone once challenged me with the question of why a student would not increase his English vocabulary better by studying more English courses instead of Latin and Greek. The answer to that is simple. When you learn one Latin or Greek word, you learn the "base" for sometimes hundreds of English words. For instance, the Greek words *phobia* and *mania* mean a morbid fear of or a mad craving for something. Look at how many English words contain these base words. And the Latin base *duc-* or *duct-* means "to lead". Just consider the number of English words that use this in their makeup -- everything from "reduction", "induction", and "aqueduct", to "education" itself.

The department also has one other service course which feel is essential to understanding a great many areas of knowledge -- classical mythology. How anyone can understand much of the world's music, art, or literature, without a basic knowledge of classical mythology is beyond me. Over sixty operas are based on the love story of Aeneas and Dido, and at least twenty-seven on the Orpheus and Eurydice story. In art, almost all classical art has a mythological theme, naturally. But this material was also used extensively by the Renaissance painters and sculptors, and has continued to be used into modern times, where such artists as Picasso and Michael Ayrton have used the Minotaur a great deal symbolically. And in literature, not only are Shakespeare and Milton and Tennyson loaded with mythological references, but also Eugene O'Neill's "Mourning Becomes Electra" and T. S. Eliot's "The Cocktail Party" and "The Family Reunion" and Tennessee Williams' "Orpheus Descending." George Bernard Shaw's "Pygmalion," which was later turned into the stage play "My Fair Lady," is nothing more than a classical myth in modern costume. And this list could go on for hours.

Scientific terminology uses this source extensively also. Twelve of the chemical elements are named from mythological personalities; in geology Neptunian rock and Pluton illustrate classical deities used to identify certain kinds of rock formations; in biology the Atlas vertebra supports the skull, and the Achilles tendon is in the area of the heel; in astronomy, every known constellation in the Northern hemisphere draws its name from classical mythology, and all the planets in our solar system except the earth are named from Greek and Roman gods; in psychology two personality problems are known as the Oedipus complex and Narcissism. And these names were not just snatched at random from the air because somebody liked their sound; each one has a scientific reason for its use, based on a mythological story.

If you just sit down to read a current periodical, you will more than likely run into a reference to classical mythology. From *Time* magazine I recall such headlines as "Sisyphus in Washington" and "Angela Davis calls Soledad brother George Jackson a black Prometheus." How does a reader have any idea what these headlines mean if he does not know his classical mythology?

And it is surprising how many modern cartoons are based on mythology. *Playboy*, of course, goes all out with cartoons using those oversexed characters, the mythological satyrs and centaurs. But serious political cartoons in reputable newspapers also reflect this material. Hercules' task of cleaning out the Augean stables is used to point out the vast work of cleaning out corruption from government or pollution from our environment. Neptune rises from the sea to protest oil spills and the dumping of toxic waste in our waters. Cuba is pictured as America's Trojan horse. I have a complete lecture on mythology in modern cartoons if you would like to see it sometime.

Trademarks and brand names with mythological implications are innumerable. Atlas and Ajax, for instance, are used frequently for strength; and I have a list of seventy-eight products that have used Hercules in their name.

In fact, the use of classical mythology in modern life is so pervasive that I am convinced that every college student should be “required” to have some knowledge of it, whatever his field of concentration might be.

O.K. Every single course mentioned in this discussion is available at Monmouth College. Taken together they form what is known as the Department of Classics. Since each one has such a valuable contribution to make to a student's development, I wish you would tell me why so few students take advantage of them, and so few advisers recommend them. I think that I know one reason: we really never miss what we have never had. And I suspect that many students (and advisers) simply don't know what these courses can offer, or their contact in the past has been so meagre that the student never really found out what they were all about. This is sad because, if they never have this contact, they will go through life without one of the most enriching and far-reaching experiences that education can offer them.