

Aims of Education VIII 1999

The Idea of a University in the 21st Century

By Paul Frizler, Ph.D. Professor of English and Comparative Literature

Preface: The annual Aims of Education address is a Chapman University academic tradition begun in 1993 and delivered during new student orientation week. I invited Dr. Paul Frizler, professor of English and Comparative Literature, to share his unique perspective on education with incoming students, their parents and partners on August 25, 1999 in Chapman Auditorium. I think you will enjoy Dr. Frizler's thoughts on how Chapman University mirrors the 19th century ideal of what a university should be, particularly as the clock ticks toward the dawn of a new century. I invite you to share your thoughts with Dr. Frizler or with me.

- James L. Doti, President of Chapman University

I would like to welcome you to the last Chapman University orientation of the 1900s. You will notice I didn't say of the 20th century, because technically, as I am sure some of you know, the 21st century doesn't really begin until the year 2001. (After all, the first century began with 1 and went to 100, so it's logical that subsequent centuries began with a 1, 101, 1001; therefore, the millennium will begin in 2001). But since tradition, commerce, and emotion all indicate that the big celebrations will occur this December 31st, I am not going to clamor for cancellation of the imminent festivities. (I suspect, though, that a month after the New Year's parties, a massive campaign will begin, trumpeting the 'real' millennium celebrations the following year. And, for the second year in a row, we will be confronted with escalating New Year's prices for hotel rooms, restaurants and nightclubs.)

But less than one minute into my speech, I have already digressed from my topic, which is: "The Idea of a University in the 21st Century." And I guess whether it will begin next year or the year after doesn't much matter. (I personally prefer to think of it as starting the year after, because that at least gives Rupert Murdoch one more year to decide what to do, in the 21st century, with the studio name 'Twentieth Century Fox,' not to mention what will happen to Twentieth Century Insurance Co.) Once again I digress.

Whenever the new century/millennium begins, it will, no doubt occur during your time here at Chapman University. So it will probably surprise you to know that the inspiration of my speech comes from a work written not in the last decade, not even in the 20th century, but in the 19th century. This work, a notable Victorian study of education by John Henry, Cardinal Newman, (the man for whom all the Newman clubs on college campuses are named) is titled *The Idea of a University*. This book is composed of a series of essays that I first read as a graduate English major studying Victorian Literature. Cardinal Newman's main purpose in this book was to argue that religion or theology should be part of a university curriculum, and even be taught at secular universities.

As the essays developed, however, Newman expanded his lectures to present many views on different facets of university education. And I was surprised, since I am not Catholic, that I agreed with virtually all of them.

In preparing for this speech, I re-read *The Idea of a University* and found that over the years I had developed an even more positive response to Newman's ideas. Therefore, I decided to summarize in my speech today some of his views, views which were conceived more than 140 years ago, in an era before computers, before typewriters – electric or manual – in fact, before fountain pens, much less ball-point or felt-tip pens. (I'm not sure if Newman was still writing with a quill pen. Some of you are too young to remember quill pens; they were basically a pen made out of a feather probably plucked from some unsuspecting bird.)

Newman's Idea of a University

But back to Newman's book. *The Idea of a University* is constructed as a series of nine discourses delivered to the Catholics of Dublin University. The first lectures began in 1852 and were turned into a completed definitive draft in 1889, 110 years ago. Although Newman's main purpose was to argue that theology was a vital part of a university curriculum, he also argued – surprisingly, since this was the post-Darwinian era in which science and religion were consistently at odds – that all of the sciences should be available for study. In fact, as he developed his idea of a university, he expressed the view that no knowledge or discipline be omitted, no matter how unpopular, peripheral or controversial the subject might be.

But before continuing, I must clarify Newman's title, *The Idea of a University*. Newman was not using the word "idea" as we might use it today to refer to a concept. He didn't mean the notion of a university, but rather we might call the university ideal. Newman was referring to Plato's concept of the "idea." Plato (not to be confused with Mickey Mouse's dog, Pluto) was an ancient Greek philosopher, who believed that every thing on earth was an imperfect shadow of a perfect form, which he called an "idea." He used "idea" in a Platonic (easy for him since he was Plato) sense. So for Cardinal Newman, the idea of a university was the flawless incarnation of a university that exists in a pure form as a perfect idea in the spiritual plane, which all existing universities on earth were striving to approximate.

The ideal university, Newman argued, offers a strong liberal education, of the sort found in most American universities. Ironically, today a broad liberal education is rarely province of most universities in Europe. American schools like Chapman University are more in tune with Newman's views on a liberal education than Oxford or Cambridge or even Dublin University, where Newman gave his lectures.

While discussing general education in Discourse 5, which he called "Knowledge for Its Own End," Newman brilliantly demonstrates the value of learning, which has no practical or utilitarian purpose except to expand the mind, enlarge the spirit, and give pleasure in the joy of knowledge for its own sake.

I certainly can attest to this joy. My own specialties are in literature and film studies, and I have spent a great deal of my life mastering expertise in these disciplines. But along the way, at different periods in my life, I have received a great deal of pleasure by becoming intensely consumed with learning everything I could about such disparate fields such as geology, history, politics, relativity theory, nutrition, theater, art history, baseball and even rock and roll. And I am not alone in my quest for knowledge beyond my special interests.

Many professors at Chapman have diverse interests. One example is the president of the university, Jim Doti. When he was a professor of economics in the Argyros School of Business and Economics, he created the nationally acclaimed Orange County Economic Forecast. But he demonstrates his commitment to the liberal arts by voraciously reading great books, including classic novels by such Victorians as Anthony Trollope and modern novels by such masters as V.S. Naipal. Dr. Doti is also a genuine movie aficionado, and some of our most interesting conversations have focused on movies, both old, such as Frank Capra's 1946 "It's a Wonderful Life" and new, such as Roberto Benigni's 1998 "Life is Beautiful."

Knowledge in Relation to a Professional Skill

But Newman did not believe solely in a pure liberal education. His theories also ran counter to many of the educational theorists of his day by supporting professional education, provided that it is accompanied by a liberal education. For example, he recognized the value of teaching medicine and law, stating that professors of law should be valued as much as professors of literature. These days, the same argument should hold, although the disciplines would probably be reversed in terms of the necessity for appreciation.

So, studying for a profession is a valuable thing for those students who already know or will soon learn what it is that they want to be when they grow up. But, even if one doesn't, one shouldn't be too anxious. I agree with the Cardinal when he says that the value of university training is to learn how to learn; to be humble and aware of how little one knows; and to develop the skills and knowledge to learn where and how to find everything one might ever need to know. It would be fascinating to imagine what Newman would think of the ability on our time to locate vast stores of information on the Internet.

I think Newman would agree that great careers can be forged from the most unlikely majors. I can recount numerous stories of students who have ended up with stunning jobs that superficially seemed unrelated to their majors. Take Katherine McMillan, who came to Chapman as an English major in the early '80s. She was planning to get a Ph.D. and become a college professor, but along the way she got a job working for Microsoft. After working as Bill Gates' assistant, she was put in charge of the creation of all software for their car racing computer games. Rumor has it that she will have enough money to retire, if she chooses, by the age of 40.

Or take the case of a philosophy major I know who became a successful screenwriter. Or the art major who later became the CEO of a design company. The important basis for ultimate success is, as Newman asserts, the training of the intellect, the mastering of basic skills, and developing the ability to do critical thinking.

Learning from One's Peers

Along with this emphasis on learning everything and anything, the most startling view in Newman's book is his belief that a great deal of important learning happens, not in the classroom, not from one's professors, but from one's peers. In fact, Newman says a great deal of important learning occurs during discussions in residence halls, then called dormitories. In fact, learning can occur everywhere and

anywhere. Students will interact with other students from varying geographical areas, different cultures, religions, and races. Take advantage of this experience and broaden your worldview. Keep your mind open, not only at study sessions, but at parties, at lunches, while viewing plays, lectures, concerts, at sports events, and even in discussions with administrators.

I know that I've learned a lot from movies that have helped me make sense of the world. For example, when the twin sister in Santa Ana last year went on trial for attempted murder of her identical sibling, friends of mine seemed shocked. Not I. I had seen enough old movies to know that when there were identical twins, one always was evil.

And, movies since the '70s have taught me that if you are attacked by a group in a martial arts free-for-all, even if you are heavily outnumbered, your enemies will wait patiently to attack you, dancing around in a ludicrous manner until you have knocked each one out, one by one. Also, I've learned that when you turn your lights out to go to bed, everything in your bedroom will be clearly visible, just slightly bluish. And many detectives can solve cases only after they have been suspended from duty and had their badges taken away. Oh, and of course, if, for some reason you start singing and dancing around the street, a mysterious unseen orchestra will immediately begin to accompany you, and everyone you meet will immediately know all the words to the song and the exact steps of your dance. If you're a soldier at war, you're liable to survive any battles unless you are naïve enough to show someone a picture of your sweetheart back home.

These are just a few things I've learned from watching movies. So please keep your mind open. Learning, as Cardinal Newman recognized a few decades before the invention of the cinema, is everywhere.

The Idea of Chapman University

I believe that Chapman University comes very close to the Platonic idea, or at least the Newman idea, of a university; for one, it has an ideal mission in terms of treating students as responsible individuals within a global society, and not as numbers in an educational facility. When I first began teaching at Chapman in 1969, even before most of you incoming students were born, Chapman was a charming school with many positive qualities, such as a close-knit community, widely shared values, and an ethical foundation. But in many ways the college fell short of my notion of a Platonic ideal.

Over the years Chapman continued to move in a general direction upward, continually improving. Time prohibits me from even listing all of the positive changes that have occurred. From its beautiful new buildings to the higher standards and expectations of students, Chapman has become a top-notch regional university. You are fortunate enough to be attending this university at this time.

In the course of all these rapid changes, Chapman retains many of the wonderful qualities that were its strength years ago. Back then, the campus looked pretty funky, with its few deteriorating buildings covered in Pepto Bismol-pink, peeling paint and surrounded by a landscape that would have sent shivers down the spine of Martha Stewart. Yet in this new and beautiful environment, one still can

expect the same concern for individualized and personal education, and with the same warmth, ideals, and spirit.

Because of the individual attention given to students, many wonderful actions have enhanced students' lives and sometimes saved them from disaster. I could tell a dozen stories from my own experience to show you what Chapman means and what can be done in a place where there is close bonding between faculty and student, a closeness not possible in a school with numerous courses numbering 300 students.

I will just tell you one story. I once had a student from Texas in a composition class who was having major writing and reading problems. He could barely write a paragraph in an hour. In the first meeting with him, I learned that he had always struggled in grade school, and his parents had hired numerous tutors to assist him. As a result, he was able to pass through and ultimately come to what was then Chapman College. But, at Chapman, he did poorly in all his classes, and he was afraid he was not smart enough to be college material. I had a number of meetings with him, studied his papers, and decided he definitely was smart enough, but suffered from the learning disability known as dyslexia. I helped him get professional help. He persevered and passed the class, but just barely. Over the next four years, I would see him occasionally and ask him how he was doing, and he always responded tersely that he was doing fine.

A few years passed. One Sunday night I was out at dinner in a Newport Beach restaurant with some friends. I saw that same student come in with a group of people. He came to me and asked if he could introduce me to his family. I said sure and walked over to his table, where I met his fiancé, mom, dad, and brother. When he introduced me and said my name, his mother gasped and rose from her chair to hug me. Needless to say, I was startled. "You are the one who saved my son," she explained. "He just graduated from law school, is getting married this weekend, and it's all because you took the effort to figure out what was wrong and sent him to be treated for his disability."

Well, I thought, I probably was not responsible for his marriage. But wow! These are the moments that make one feel that being a professor can be more worthwhile than working in just another occupation. I can imagine a story like this might occur at a huge university, but it is far less likely than at a school like Chapman. And stories showing individual attention such as this one can occur here often.

Chapman is the Real World

Despite this positive portrait I have painted, Chapman is still the real world, and occasionally you will be displeased with things that occur during your stay here. Bad things may have already happened. Because of space limitations, you might not be able to enroll in the class you had your heart set on; a seminar, for example, on the migratory practices of the mocking bird. Or, you might be a strict vegetarian whose favorite movie is "Babe," arguably the "Citizen Kane" of talking-pig movies; and one day after your fourth viewing of the video, you return to your room in Braden, appalled to see your roommate eating a ham sandwich. Or you have just

learned that your instructor feels there is nothing excessive about assigning 14 novels in one semester, one of which is “War and Peace.”

Chapman is full of human beings, many of whom demonstrate human foibles and failings. I personally am pleased that there is little of the scary perfection of a “Stepford Wife” community here.

Nevertheless, by and large, you will be treated as a person who matters, and not as an inconvenience. Faculty may joke that their job would be a wonderful one if only they didn’t have to deal with students. But it is students that are their nourishment, their inspiration, and their *raison d’être*. (That’s the reason for being those of you who have yet to master French).

So, feel positive about the educational adventure you are about to experience at Chapman University. Make the most of your years here at this institution. I believe that if Cardinal Newman could return and visit this Orange campus, he would believe that at Chapman University, the Idea of a University has found an outstanding incarnation, quite high on the Platonic ladder of perfection.

About the Speaker

Dr. Paul Frizler is a professor of English and Comparative Literature in Chapman University’s Wilkinson College of Letters and Sciences. A film history expert, he also is a script consultant, film historian, director, writer and producer of films, stage shows, musicals and rock videos. Dr. Frizler, a Chapman professor since 1969, is well known for his critically acclaimed and highly successful rock and roll productions at Chapman, “The Story of Rock and Roll” in 1998, “The Latin Roots of Rock and Roll” in 1993 and “A Comical Look at Rock and Roll” in 1991. In 1996, Dr. Frizler spent part of the summer as a cast assistant to Jack Lemmon, Burgess Meredith and Kevin Pollack on the set of “Grumpier Old Men.”

About the Cover

The artist, Jason Milton ’00, uses portraits of Cardinal Newman and Plato, and a rendering of Beckman Hall to illustrate “The Idea of a University.”