

Aims of Education XII 2004-05  
Past and Present  
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Foreword by President James L. Doti

First presented in 1993, the annual Aims of Education Address has become a cherished Chapman University tradition. The idea behind this speech is to spotlight the quest for knowledge and the search for truth through the perspectives of faculty members representing our wide range of disciplines. It is my pleasure each year to select a faculty member to deliver this address to new students and parents at Fall Orientation.

This year I invited Dr. Matthew Schneider, associate professor of English and comparative literature, to present the address. A favorite professor among students and highly admired by his fellow faculty members, Dr. Schneider is an expert in 19<sup>th</sup>-century British Literature, Romantic poetry and literary theory. In this compelling address he reaffirms the vital importance of the liberal arts in providing students with a firm foundation for an understanding of the history, culture, triumphs, failures and dreams of humankind through the ages.

As we commemorate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Chapman University's historic relocation from Los Angeles to Orange County, it seems appropriate that we look at both "Past and Present," as Dr. Schneider's theme portends. In the lives of individuals, as well as those of institutions and nations, we do well never to forget our past, for we learn from its great lessons every day. As Dr. Schneider suggests, the liberal arts are not merely "learning for learning's sake" – they are vital studies that we share as we ready our students to participate as productive, ethical and inquiring members of a global society.

-James L. Doti

Past and Present

Students and friends, I'm honored to be speaking to you today at the very outset of one of the most important stages of your lives: your university education. Neither you nor I can predict exactly what the next few years here at Chapman have in store for you. One thing I can say, though, is that whatever happens to you between today and what seems now to be that impossibly distant day on which you graduate (but which will arrive much sooner than you think), your time here will always stand out in your memory with a vividness and wealth of detail that even the passage of decades won't diminish. It's been nearly a quarter of a century since I graduated from college; and though I can't remember what I had for breakfast three days ago, I can recall, on a week-by-week and sometimes even a day-by-day basis such things as what classes I took as a sophomore, what books I read as a junior, even who I had lunch with on a certain spring semester day of my senior year.

I've titled this morning's talk "Past and Present" because this next stage of life on which you're all embarking presents us with an opportunity to consider where you've been, and how where you've been has brought you to where you are.

Thinking about the relationship between the past and the present also gives me a way of specifying what I see as the special character of the liberal arts university.

Ask five professors what the phrase “liberal arts” means, and you’re likely to get five very different answers. For me, though, the core distinction between liberal arts education and its alternative, pre-professional education, lies in their opposite attitudes toward the role that knowledge of the past should play in an educational scheme. By its very nature, pre-professional education is forward-looking: its goal is to give people a defined body of knowledge and set of skills necessary for success in certain professions, like the performing arts, engineering and the various branches of design. The technical complexity of these endeavors, combined with the need to build into pre-professional training a great deal of time for students to practice using the skills they’ve been taught, leaves little leisure for intellectual excursions into aspects of these fields that aren’t immediately applicable to the sorts of tasks students will be asked to do once their educations are over. However interesting it might be to an engineering student to figure out how the Colossus of Rhodes, one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, was built, a developing engineer’s time is probably better spent working to make airplane wings stringer and lighter or office buildings more energy-efficient. The achievements of the past find a place in the pre-professional education only to the extent that they directly help students achieve something in the present, in the here and now.

By contrast, liberal arts education is under no such pressure to connect the past with the present, and is therefore free to study the past merely for the sheer delight of doing so. To my mind, this is both the greatest strength and greatest weakness of liberal arts education: the freedom it grants students to follow wherever their interests lead them has to be balanced against the fact that one learns in the course of a liberal arts education is not always directly applicable to the sorts of professions our graduates will pursue. Critics of the liberal arts point out that reading ancient philosophy, or studying the literature and culture of traditions far distant from our own, or getting a smattering scientific knowledge from a couple courses in biology or physics makes students jacks of all trades and masters of none. It’s well and good, proponents of pre-professional education say, to plow through the six dialogues of Plato- but to what use are you going to put all that reading in your life after college?

There’s validity in this criticism: liberal arts education does lack the focus and strictly defined vocational relevance of pre-professional education. To make the case in favor of the liberal arts, then, we need to go back farther and ask ourselves what the purpose of a college education is. If the purpose of going to college is primarily vocational preparation then the liberal arts really don’t have a leg to stand on. But if vocational preparation is just part of the purpose of a college education, and stands alongside another purpose that’s at once more vague and more lofty than job training, then the liberal arts – with the freedom they grant students to follow wherever curiosity leads – do have the validity. And what is that vague and lofty goal? Well, nothing less than the transformation of your being. As Chapman’s mission statement says, we want the education we provide here to take you from where you are now and make you into acquiring, ethical and productive global citizens. That’s a vague goal because both the process and outcome of that

transformation are going to be different for everyone. This is one of the reasons why we say that a Chapman education is “personalized.” And it’s a lofty or ambitious goal because the transformation of your being is a lot to accomplish in only four years or less. After all, that’s only about 1/16<sup>th</sup> of an average American’s life span. It’s a lot to do, but we’re going to give it our best shot.

Now, you might ask why a liberal arts education is particularly well suited to achieving this educational goal. I’ve given this matter a lot of thought because, as an English professor, I’m right in the very heart of the liberal arts: you could say, in fact, that the contemporary university English curriculum is a direct descendant of grammar and rhetoric, two of the seven traditional liberal arts. And what’s true of the liberal arts in general – that they consider the past more than pre-professional education does – is especially true for me: my teaching and scholarship focus on late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century British Literature – that is, works written in a different country at least 150 years ago. If the liberal arts in general aren’t particularly relevant to the contemporary world, what possible relevance could plays, poems and novels written by people who have been dead for a century and a half have for us, living today on the west coast of North America in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century?

This is a good question, one that those of us who direct our students’ attention toward the past ought to ask ourselves before we assign a 900-page novel by Tolstoy or Dickens. To answer it I’m going to need to expand a bit on how I think my field – English language and literature – stands as an indispensable component of a liberal arts education. I’ll start with a definition of literature. Literature is the oldest continuous chronicle of humanity’s attempts to make sense of itself and the world. Before there was painting, before there was sculpture, even before there were movies, there were old stories – stories that at first were passed down orally from generation to generation, and then, later, written down; stories in which people preserved their memories of significant events, important characters and breakthrough experiences in comprehending what it means to be human. Over the millennia, millions of people have contributed to this chronicle, each from his or her unique point of view. But all were motivated to undertake the difficult process of translating their perceptions, thoughts and feelings into words by the same desire: to understand and be understood by others.

As I said, millions have contributed to this chronicle, but some contributions are better than others. A select few of these contributors – for reasons that must remain mysterious, as genius can’t easily be accounted for – manage to cut closest to the timeless truths of the universe and the human condition, and so their works have the power that others lack to capture our minds and hearts long after the personal and social circumstances in which they were written have been erased by time’s ceaseless march forward. I can’t come up with a simple formula to explain why Shakespeare, Jane Austen and Emily Dickinson – to name just three of my favorites – emerged from the backgrounds of their words to write the masterpieces they did, but I can tell you why I think their works continue to have the power to delight and fascinate us. I believe that despite the vast range of differences in values and perceptions that can be found in the records of societies past and present, there’s a set of core human experiences with which people at all times and in all places have had to deal. There may be more, but I’ll just give you five of these core

experiences: love, sorrow, courage, death and sacrifice. Everyone who attempts to make a serious contribution to literature touches on one or more of these aspects of life. But it all falls to certain figures to mediate on these universal experiences more compellingly and truthfully than others, and so to leave behind books and plays and poems that enrich our appreciation of what it means to be human. These are the works that survive, despite the difficulties which their having been produced in times different from ours sometimes impose on us in understanding them.

To leave literature out of any educational scheme, then, is to cut yourself off from a rich source of wisdom about life. But there's another reason why literature should play a central role in liberal arts education, one that relates more directly to that goal of transforming being that I mentioned earlier. The word education derives from the Latin verb *educare*, which means "to lead out of" or to "lead away from." This fits nicely with my notion of liberal arts education as transformation; since you could think of transformation as a process in which you're found in one place and then led, by your educators, to another. Though it may not be immediately apparent, all of you are at a crucial crossroads in your personal development. You are at the point where almost all of your physical maturation is complete, and so now it's time for your mind to catch up with your body. You are hovering on the brink of intellectual adulthood, and, like all high places from which you will have to make a leap, it's both an exhilarating and scary place at which to find yourself. I hereby give you fair warning: my faculty colleagues and I are going to push you over the edge. But fear not: we're not going to leave you to find your own way out of the canyon that divides intellectual adolescence from intellectual adulthood. We've all made the leap, and lived to tell about it, and, in fact, we know that covering the land on the other side of the canyon is a journey that will continue for the rest of our lives. We also know that the books we've cherished have served as faithful friends and companions through our own transitions and transformations, and we're going to introduce those books to you with the hope that they'll help you make the jump as they have helped us.

I know I'm not saying anything particularly original in likening books to friends. You've heard this before, from your teachers and school librarians. But I don't mean that books are friends merely because they can give us a bit of fun or help us occupy some otherwise idle hours. Books can be indispensable companions as we face challenges growing up because, as the 17<sup>th</sup> century English poet John Milton wrote, books "preserve as in a vial the purest efficacy and extraction of that living intellect that bred them." Long after their authors have – in the words of William Shakespeare – "shuffled off this mortal coil," books live on as the distillation of the deepest and best thoughts of a human being who went to the trouble of pondering long and hard on the complexities, the joys and the sorrows that everyone, to varying degrees, experiences. Words that have the power to speak to us across centuries carry with them tremendous powers of consolation, which they seem to have acquired from the vast stretches of time through which they've traveled to reach us. Consoling words like these are always welcome, but never more so than when the dependent mode of childhood must once and for all give way to the independent mode of adulthood. Peering across the gap that divides these two ways of life, we can begin to tremble and shake, because we suddenly become

aware that lurking beneath the face we show to the world is a vast inner life; we perceive wells of thought and feeling so deep that they appear unfathomable, even to a drastically expanded self-awareness. The gap widens into a yawning abyss, and a new kind of fear grips us – the fear that these depths exist only in us, can never be fathomed, and certainly never understood by someone else.

If read with sensitivity and a willing, open spirit, the literature of the past can help break the gloom of the deep loneliness that seems to descend upon us just when we need it least – as we're steeling ourselves to step over into adulthood. The books that have come down to us from the past are records of an intense self-consciousness struggling to illuminate, through words and phrases, the shadowlands of individual experience. These records show us that even when we descend to the deepest levels of our mental life, we're not alone. Someone else has not only embarked on that dangerous journey, but has survived its perils and returned to give us the good news that something about those depths can be grasped and communicated. Even more important, the books of the past that have the power to speak to us in this way give us an additional assurance, one that we might not notice without reminding ourselves of just exactly how old a given book is. The older the book from which we can draw feelings of deep friendship, the more we're assured that despite the differences of time, customs and culture, some facets of human nature don't change. The fact that we can cherish books from the past with something approaching the love we have for our flesh-and-blood friends in the present shows us that, notwithstanding the barriers that people raise in order to differentiate themselves from others – and what's a more impermeable barrier than time? – At the deepest level, where it counts the most, we share a common human experience, and we can talk to and understand each other. The same heart beats in us all.

This, finally, is where I think the liberal arts education beats a pre-professional course of study hands down. Liberal learning broadens our frame of reference, and, in so doing, shows us that we humans – at all times, and in all places – have a great deal more in common than at a first glance we might suspect. Free to search in both the distant past and the present for what is true, beautiful and good, a liberal arts education breaks down the tyranny of the here and now, and lets us see something of the scope and majesty of human achievement. Instead of just imparting a body of knowledge or a set of skills that apply to only one dimension of our lives, liberal arts education changes the whole self, fostering in us habits and dispositions that enable us to perceive more about ourselves and the world around us. Liberal learning makes us both more inward and more understanding of others – whether they lived and died thousands of years ago or they're sitting next to you right now. And, best of all, because it honors the best of what the past has to offer by connecting the past to the present within our own minds, a liberal arts education equips us with a saving hope: the hope that our own contributions to the ongoing project of human self-understanding – be they modest or grand – will not necessarily be swept away by time's cruel forgetfulness. If we lead our lives as liberally educated people should – with curiosity, diligence and a passion for what's right – we won't be forgotten. We will inspire future generations as past generations have inspired us.

With all this talk about yawning abysses and leaping off cliffs, you're probably wishing – as I sometimes do – that adulthood were something you could at any time, voluntarily opt out of: “No, no, I've had enough of this – I'm going back to the playground!” But fear not; we're not going to leave you stumbling around in the dark to find your own way. We're here to help when the road gets rough or steep. And we have some old friends that we'd like you to meet. I'm looking eagerly forward to seeing you around campus, hopefully accompanied by some of those friends. Until then, Godspeed to you all, and welcome to what will most likely turn out to be the most exciting and unforgettable stage of your life.

About the Speaker

Matthew Schneider, Ph.D.

Matthew Schneider, Ph.D., is an associate professor of English and comparative literature at Chapman University, and former chairman of the English department. Dr. Schneider earned his M.A. in English at the University of Chicago and his Ph.D. at UCLA. He is the author of *Original Ambivalence: Autobiography and Violence in Thomas De Quincey* (Peter Lang, 1995), and his scholarly articles include publications on Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, John Keats and literary theory. His many honors include Chapman University's Award for Faculty Excellence and Chapman's Valerie Scudder Award for Excellence in Teaching and Scholarship.