

## THINGS THAT FIRE CAN'T BURN

Excerpts from Talk to Meeting of Headmasters of Friends Schools  
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Some say the world will end in fire,  
Some say in ice.  
From what I've tasted of desire  
I hold with those who favor fire.  
But if it had to perish twice,  
I think I know enough of hate  
To say that for destruction ice  
Is also great  
And would suffice.

--Frost.

Forgive me for being late to your dinner, but a funny thing happened on the way to the Friends Academy: The main building of our College burned down. College is not a place but a process, we have been saying, but we did not intend to be taken so seriously, so soon. As Lady Astor said when the iceberg hit the Titanic, "I asked for ice water but this is ridiculous."

Fire is said to be good for the soul; through heat comes light. Let me try to reflect a few thoughts that came to me in those hours while a beautiful old building was burning -- thoughts that go beyond the obvious lesson that we must learn to travel lightly and not to lay up our treasures upon earth. As we picked up the pieces and started to work again, moving into simpler buildings and with a warmer sympathy for each other, we felt some connection with the people of Vietnam who have been doing this every day -- some new understanding of War and Peace, Gone With The Wind, and Faulkner's South. The miles between Old Westbury and Harlem or Newark or Baltimore seem less. What is the relation between a college and a city? Are they both supposed to be communities of learning? When ancient Athens was captured and burned, the people of Athens took to the sea and said their city was on ships.

Where is our college? What does the burned shell of a college building say about the thing called a college? Was the college burned down, and would it be there again if the building were just put back together? Would a church still be a church if the building was intact but the idea of God was gone? What is the idea of a college without which a college's buildings are nothing but a hollow shell?

We are in search of that idea, a search as old as Socrates. Indeed the search itself, which Socrates called dialectic, may be the very idea we are seeking. Since that search is inevitably a personal one, let me use the first person in this fireman's report on things fire can't burn.

With the death this season of two leading friends and teachers in my life, Scott Buchanan and Martin Luther King, and in the light of a fire that destroyed most of my tangible connections with them, even the set of great books Buchanan led me to, and the diary of the various occasions when I marched behind King in the last decade, I have a feeling of being out in front; that is to say, lonely. And I feel stretched out on a dialectic that leaves me feeling both more conservative and more radical.

Any big fire conveys a certain new respect for the laws of nature and of nature's God. And the loss of friends and teachers always teaches one how much there is to lose. But fifteen months of college-making, including a continuous encounter with college students who are my colleagues, have left me more conservative in other ways.

There was another important death a few weeks ago in our family of friends: A young man at a great university committed suicide. I do not pretend to be able to unravel the thread of this tragedy; it involves the irresponsibility of people to each other, the impersonality of the multiversity, and the threat to rationality in hard drugs, but one other disturbing point was made. A friend of this sensitive and promising young man says that a few days before he died he indicated how heavy he felt the burden of his generation of having to think through everything entirely from scratch -- of having, on a clean slate to deal with all the great questions of sex, politics and religion, of how to live a life, as if for the first time in history. In some sense everyone does this, but in the full sense it is an appalling burden. Why should anyone expect to carry it?

In the ashes of my office, where the Encyclopedia Britannica's set of great books had been, there was one remnant of a volume, a charred page listing great ideas: "Matter, Medicine, Nature, Poetry, Relation, Religion, Revolution, Soul, Time, Truth, Virtue, War, Will, Wisdom, World." Those are not new ideas or questions; a lot of important things have been said about them over the last twenty or thirty recorded centuries; many of these things are contained in the books. Fire burned my set, but the books are still around, because millions of people throughout history have been helped by them -- educated by them -- and have cherished them. My student colleagues have urged me to call them very good books instead of great books, and I have been learning to call Shakespeare a very good writer and Oedipus a very good play. The Bible is indeed a very good book. But tonight I want to hold my ground: The great books of our tradition -- and of all the great traditions we can reach and understand -- constitute a great conversation. Hopefully this generation will have important things to add to that conversation, but it will do so best if it takes good account of the common world-wide, age-old conversation it is continuing.

For some time I have been pointing to what seems to me a world-wide common generation, the first in the history of mankind -- a generation that mourned Kennedy, hates the Vietnam war, is bored by all bureaucracies including the nation-state, and has begun to dance freely. The problems that concern young Americans or Africans or Asians --

integration, urbanization, development, automation, autonomy -- are world-wide problems: Yevtushenko is writing poetry about them. But Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy, Plato and Sophocles, were writing about them, too. The burden of understanding oneself and the world can be shared not only with nearby friends but with faraway teachers. As Stringfellow Barr says: "The warm body principle can be carried too far -- some of my best friends and teachers have been dead for two thousand years." In assembling a faculty, in living a life, it helps to know we have this headstart.

So more strongly than ever I want to challenge -- I hope our college will challenge -- the coming generation to learn and perhaps even to love the tradition that they will try to change. It seems to me that they need to be challenged to move from where they are at, as they put it, to some of the other places they ought to go. For a generation that is steeped in the modern iconoclasm, that knows the powerful existentialist literature of the twentieth century, the contrasting world views of ancient Greece, of Christianity, of the Renaissance, and, now coming into view, of the East, can be liberating. For the great books are no weight of centuries chaining readers down to old dogmas. They argue with each other and with us. They are an example of the dialectic which a college needs to practice, which a person needs to live by. Together they take the truth as a question, and show that by this search men can be free. That is an old definition, but the best one I know, for the liberal education that is the original idea of a college. As Scott Buchanan once wrote about the ideas of the world that the books convey, "they are hypotheses, and for all their heroic dimensions, and their high and mighty poses, they are only possibilities, which with boldness, laughter and ingenuity on our part can be put aside and replaced."

Now let me report my new radicalism. It has little to do with the radical rhetoric or personal styles of the new left or the hippies and hidden hippies, though they serve to remind us what one reader of the great books has written. "A proper school," says Eva Brann, a tutor at St. John's College, "harbors within itself such depths of true dissent and such abysses of true radicality, that an unobtrusive cloak of ordinary behavior is essential to its internal and external survival."

The scandal that makes me seek radical action -- an educational revolution -- goes to the heart of American public rhetoric and constitutional reality. We The People are ordained to rule; the guardians of our republic are all the people. This requires nothing less than universal liberal education, and there is nothing we are further from. We have one of the most pervasive elite systems ever devised. From the first grades there is a powerful selection system that in a thousand ways at home and in school, tells over half our children that they are not destined for college. They learn fast that they are what in Long Island schools are called "the grease." Then something also happens to the nearly half of our young people who go to college, something that may be almost as serious: They drop out and never graduate. Of 100 eighteen-year old Americans about 20 will get a bachelor's degree, 5 will get a master's degree and eight-tenths of one person will get a Ph.D. or equivalent advanced degree. Yet the focus of higher education is on the production of that eight-tenths

of a person, the advanced scholar. The power, priorities and rewards go primarily to the graduate departments and schools reproducing the Ph.D.

What about the other 99 out of 100 Americans? The least we must admit is that they are being ill-served by our present system. But I would put it more drastically: The republic is being crippled, our hope of government by consent and dissent is withering, because the great majority of Americans are made to feel intellectually incompetent and impotent, because the guardians of our republic do not become liberal artists.

...I have outlined some of the first steps in the search which we are taking at Old Westbury in our first program opening this September. But we have no reason to be satisfied. We ourselves, in selecting an outstanding and diverse student body, turned down four out of every five applicants, doing no telling what damage to those students, most of whom we would have been delighted to have at Old Westbury. We have not yet begun to do our part to turn upside down the order of higher education -- to give first priority to the liberal education of all Americans, not just of the most outstanding or most promising ones.

And even if our plans all work -- the small common seminars on contrasting views of the world, the reading of great books and other important works, the workshops focussed on urban problems, the independent study and student-initiated programs, the terms of living and working in difficult assignments in communities across cultural frontiers at home or abroad -- will the result be the liberal education Americans need? At a time when we need to be far more intellectual than we think we have the courage or capacity to be, are we doing or proposing even half of what is required?

A fellow college-planner was walking recently in the Gardens of Diocletian in Yugoslavia, and he says he suddenly heard the voices of educational innovators, except they had Roman accents and they were arguing about the educational crisis in those days when the Roman Empire was falling. "If we establish better student-teacher relations, if we give more relevance to the courses, if we make the classes smaller, if we let students get some experience out in the world, if they take responsibility for their own learning, then the tide can be turned." But there was no "then" for Rome.

I do not really feel so gloomy. On most days I believe we are on the eve of a world-wide renaissance, in which Americans will point the way by which in the age of automation men can become effective amateurs, that is to say liberal artists, who have the confidence and capacity to put their hands and minds to many things, including above all their own self-government, both personally and politically. But for this we will need the best idea of the world we can get, we will need to stretch our imagination to worlds we can't get passports to. We will need colleges that have more than the shell of liberal education. And for colleges engaged in such a search we will indeed need boldness, laughter and ingenuity.