

Michael S. Roth

*Beyond the
University*

Why Liberal
Education
Matters

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MICHAEL S. ROTH

Yale

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For my teachers and my students

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Acknowledgments



IN MY FIRST year as a college student, I often said I couldn't understand why somebody would study something just to teach it to somebody else. By the time I finished my undergraduate degree, I found that I enjoyed reading and research so much that I had a hard time imagining a future without further studies. My priority was to continue my education. I was very fortunate to have attended an extraordinarily intense yet open small university, Wesleyan, and then to go on to graduate work at Princeton. Both schools encouraged invigorating cultures of inquiry, and my teachers were very willing to let me follow my interests. I continued to wonder whether I should be studying philosophy, history, or psychology (I turned down a job in a psychiatric hospital to attend a Ph.D. program in history). My teachers basically said to stop worrying about what to call my field and to go to the classes that interested me while pursuing my research projects. I needed, they stressed, to continue my education. Eventually concluding that I was “focused” on how people make sense of the past, I decided to complete a Ph.D. in history. But my first book was on psychoanalysis (based on my senior thesis at Wesleyan) and my dissertation was on the history of philosophy. I was eventually a history and humanities professor before running a research program (and doing some curatorial work) at the Getty Research Institute for the History of Art. I went on to be president of California College of the Arts before returning to Wesleyan as president. It was good not to have to make up my mind. It still is.

I had remarkably gifted teachers at Wesleyan and Princeton—teachers who provided guidance and inspiration, mixed with more than a little discipline and critique. I loved my teachers, but I didn't know that I would love teaching. Then, when given the opportunity to run discussion seminars at graduate school, I emerged giddy with excitement. “I can't believe they pay us for this,” I would exclaim—to the chagrin of my fellow T.A.s, who pointed out how little they in fact paid us. I discovered that working with students on topics I cared about was going to be one of the joys of my life.

And what wonderful students I've had at Scripps College, Claremont Graduate University, California College of the Arts, and now back at Wesleyan! And in the last year I've had the dizzying and ultimately fulfilling experience of teaching online. My Coursera class is very different from the courses at the small institutions at which I've worked, but the energy of learning and the self-transformation that the students report have been stimulating and gratifying.

As a teacher, whether in the classroom or online, I devote much time to quoting texts. I want my classes to discover the joys of paying attention to the language, structure, and layered meanings in the books we read together. In this book, too, I provide more than the usual amount of quotations. I am hopeful that readers will get a feel for the compelling voices in the rich and varied American tradition of liberal education and that some will turn back to this tradition for further study (and pleasure).

I dedicate this book to my teachers and my students. They have allowed me to continue my education through more than three decades.



In the last few years, I have had several opportunities to try out some of the ideas expressed in this book with different audiences. I am grateful to the institutions at which I've lectured on liberal education and to the publications in which I've explored some of these ideas (*Chronicle for Higher Education*).

Education, Huffington Post, Inside Higher Ed, Los Angeles Times, New York Times, Wall Street Journal, Washington Post). My trustee, faculty, and administrative colleagues at Wesleyan have heard me out on the issues discussed in this book, and they have responded—often quite vigorously. I am grateful for their patience, insights, and dedication.

The staff of the President's Office at Wesleyan has been enormously helpful to me throughout the time I've worked on this volume. Joan Adams, Marianne Calnen, Heather Brooke, and Lisa LaPlante have given me the time and space to write. Andy Tanaka has helped me oversee every sector of university operations so that I can also have the opportunity to turn to research and writing. These are great gifts.

The talented editor Ileene Smith and I first discussed this project when she was working with Yale University Press, and I am very grateful to her for her insights. Ileene introduced me to Georges Borchardt, who is now my agent. Georges's serene, intelligent responsiveness has helped keep the book on track. Steve Wasserman, who first gave me assignments (and advice) many years ago when he was at the *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, has seen the book through as an editor at Yale. I am grateful for his constructive input.

For many years now, Charles Salas has read my work with the intention of making it clearer, more accessible, and less prone to error. This has taken much time and effort. Although we agree there is more to be done, I want to express my deep thanks.

I've written this book sitting side by side with Kari Weil, my wife and colleague. While writing her own book (and essays, lectures, and student evaluations), she has suffered through my attempts to say something about psychoanalysis, history, photography, crafts, film, philosophy, and now education. Her critical acumen is exceeded only by her sweet, empathic energies, and I have been the lucky recipient of both. Without her, I'd never have gotten beyond the university.

Introduction



WHEN I BEGAN my freshman year at Wesleyan University almost forty years ago, I had only the vague notion of what a liberal education was. My father (like his father before him) was a furrier, and my mother sang with a big band before she decided to start a family. Giving their children access to college education was part of their American dream, even if campuses sometimes seemed to them like foreign countries. Now I serve as president of the same institution at which they first dropped me out and where I stumbled into courses like Intro to Philosophy and Abnormal Psychology. Much has changed in higher education since my student days. At highly selective schools, many undergraduates now behave like consumers, arriving on campuses with specific demands and detailed plans for the next eight semesters. Many are intent on building résumés by choosing to double-major and accumulating credentials to match what they imagine to be an employer's expectations. Parents check that the facilities of the institution meet their standards of comfort and sophistication and want to be reassured that their student will develop specific skills that will justify the extraordinary financial investment that many private colleges and universities require. At large public institutions, declining state support has led to massive overcrowding, faculty who are underpaid and often part-time, and a creeping culture of pessimism about the quality of undergraduate learning. Students often enter the university system without the preparation to complete college-level classes, and professors are caught between maintaining standards and meeting the needs of undergraduates whose reading and math skills are woefully inadequate. A vast number of students drop out within the first two years, and those who persevere often have trouble completing their degrees because of the limited number of open seats in required classes.

Given this context, a broad education that sets the foundation for a lifetime of learning can seem impossibly idealistic. These days the words “college education” are more likely to be linked to the words “excessive debt” than “liberal learning.” Parents want their children's education to be immediately useful, and with a dramatically shrinking job market, undergrads themselves are often eager to follow a straight and narrow path that they imagine will land them that coveted first job. Broad liberal arts education, with a significant opportunity to explore oneself and the world, is increasingly seen as a luxury for the entitled, one that is scarcely affordable in a hypercompetitive world.

Beyond the University argues that the demand that we replace broad contextual education meant to lead to lifelong learning with targeted vocational undergraduate instruction is a critical mistake, one that neglects a deep American tradition of humanistic education that has been integral to our success as a nation and that has enriched the lives of generations of students by enhancing their capacities for shaping themselves and reinventing the world they will inhabit. Since the founding of this country, ideas of education have been closely tied to individual freedom and hope for the future—to thinking for oneself and contributing to society by unleashing one's creative potential. Building on this tradition, in the twentieth century the American pragmatists developed ideas of experience and inquiry that serve personal and civic life without being narrowly utilitarian. Access to a broad, self-critical, and pragmatic education has been and remains essential for a culture that prizes innovation and an economy that depends on it. It also remains essential for a society that aspires to being democratic.

Of course, liberal education is not just an American idea. The roots of the concept extend back

the ancient world, and they grew into enduring institutions in the Middle Ages. In Western tradition going back to the Greeks, a “liberal” education was to be liberating, requiring freedom to study and aiming at freedom through understanding. The medieval emphasis on the seven liberal arts (grammar, logic, rhetoric, arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy) pictured all of them within a framework set either by philosophy/theology or by rhetoric/oratory. Although today in education we tend to emphasize the legacies of the philosophic ideas of inquiry (think Socratic method), for centuries education had been conceptualized as the deepening appreciation of great cultural achievements. This was a rhetorical tradition into which one was initiated so as to learn the virtues associated with the canon of monumental works—not a philosophical commitment to discover truths. Several recent commentators on liberal education have emphasized how the philosophical and rhetorical traditions have uneasily coexisted in an American context, especially with respect to the humanities.¹ The philosophical thread is skeptical, focused on inquiry and critical thinking. The rhetorical thread is reverential, focused on bringing new members into the common culture. The threads have been woven together in a variety of ways, giving rise to educational patterns that serve the “whole person”—to use a phrase popular in contemporary Chinese discussions of liberal learning.² At least since the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, these patterns have been significantly reconfigured in the West, not least because of the challenges that the sciences posed to either a theologically or a classically oriented education. Inquiry and critique replaced religion and knowledge of ancient languages as hallmarks of the modern research university that spread from Germany to America in the late nineteenth century. This paradigm of the research university has shaped higher education practices until our own day, though the reverential, rhetorical tradition persists, especially in core curricula at the undergraduate level.

Liberal education, as I use the term throughout this book, refers to the combination of the philosophical and rhetorical traditions of how one learns as a whole person. In contemporary higher education, the philosophical tradition has resulted in an emphasis on inquiry and critical thinking—learning to develop as an autonomous person by shedding illusions and acquiring knowledge through research. But a spirit of critique is only one aspect of a well-rounded education, and its overemphasis can lead to sterility rather than creativity.³ Modern universities that foster liberal education also depend on the rhetorical tradition, which has come to frame how students learn to appreciate or participate in traditions of compelling cultural interest. This framework helps students understand their connections with others and with canonical works in religion, art, literature, science, and music (to name just some strands of cultural interest). Liberal education intertwines the philosophical and rhetorical so that we learn how to learn, so that we continue both inquiry and cultural participation throughout our lives because learning has become part of who we are.

This book looks back through American history at thinkers whose ideas on education can still inspire us today. Although the focus is American, the ideas developed here have been important to discussions of education throughout the world—from democratic and anticolonial movements to recent efforts to capture creativity and entrepreneurship. We begin with Thomas Jefferson, who saw education as the key preparation for citizens and as an important weapon in fighting the abuses of wealth and privilege. “Preach,” he wrote, “a crusade against ignorance; establish and improve the laws for educating the common people.”⁴ The health of a republic, he argued, depends on the education of its citizens. In founding the University of Virginia, he emphasized the freedom that students and faculty would exercise there. Unlike Harvard and its many imitators, he said, Virginia would not prescribe a course of study to direct graduates to “the particular vocations to which they are

destined.”⁵ Jefferson had a broader view of educational purpose for the individual and society, a view that has continued to inform our approach to the college years despite calls for more vocational, tailored training.

Jefferson knew that as members of an educated citizenry we are better able to recognize and overcome our distance from—our strangeness to—one another. We learn to recognize that people and ideas that at first seem foreign may indeed have much to teach us. William James would later describe this “overcoming blindness” and remembering to look for the “whole inward significance” of another's situation as crucial dimensions of an education that takes us beyond the borders of our own comfort zones. A liberal education, Ralph Waldo Emerson said, should deepen our ability to “animate” dimensions of the world around us (aspects of nature, culture, enterprise) and not just criticize them. Emerson wrote that colleges “serve us, when they aim not to drill, but to create; when they gather from far every ray of various genius to their hospitable halls, and, by the concentrated fires, set the hearts of their youth on flame.”⁶ Liberal education teaches us to open ourselves to the world's “various genius” and to ignite our own and perhaps someone else's imagination. Jane Addams emphasized the challenges and the opportunities for using one's education to deepen one's empathy, to expand the sympathetic imagination. At its best, education develops the capacities for seeing possibilities and for relishing the world across borders we might otherwise not have dared to cross. Education must lead us beyond these borders if it is to be more than training for a role that has already been allocated to us by the powers that be. By expanding our horizons, liberal learning gives us context for hope, and it requires some confidence in the future. As Dewey put it, to discover “what one is fitted to do, and to secure an opportunity to do it, is the key to happiness.”⁷ Rather than starting out with a predetermined outcome for what students must do, liberal education helps them make those discoveries and secure those opportunities.

The commitment to liberal learning that Jefferson described has been attacked for its potential elitism and irrelevance for more than two hundred years. It has also been cherished by generations of students and teachers, and many of the best high school graduates still compete for the chance to pursue this education at highly selective institutions. In the last few years, commentators (who usually themselves have had a liberal education) have again questioned whether we should encourage so many people to have the opportunity to make this discovery. Economists have recently queried whether it is worth it for mail carriers, for example, to have spent time and money in learning about the world around themselves when they could have been saving for a house. Sociologists have wondered if by increasing access to college we are creating inappropriate expectations for a workforce that will not regularly be asked to tap into a capacity for independent judgment and critical thinking. Many complain about the cost of a liberal education, about its disconnect from the real world, about its elitism and its political correctness. Pundits write that we must make it more relevant while politicians growl about making it more efficient. The complaints of recent years are not that different from those that Jefferson faced when he described his plans for the University of Virginia, or the ones my parents heard when they decided that their children should go to college. Liberal education will always arouse such criticism in a land driven by economic ambition and anxiety, even more so today when hope for the future has come to seem so tenuous. If higher education is conceived only as a job placement program for positions with which we are already familiar, then liberal learning does not make much sense. But if higher education is to be an intellectual and experiential adventure and not a bureaucratic assignment of skill capacity, if it is to prize free inquiry rather than training for “the specific vocations to which [students] are destined,” then we must resist the call to limit access to it and to diminish its scope.

Beyond the University consists of four chapters: The first describes the deep commitment to liberal learning in the United States from the time of its founding. Jefferson argued for the necessity of broad education in our young Republic, and African American writers David Walker and Frederick Douglass showed the hypocrisy of limiting that education to white men. In the middle of the nineteenth century Emerson insisted on the development of a capacity for “aversive thinking” in the service of freedom. At the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, the American research university comes of age, and chapter 2 discusses pragmatism's extensions of the Emersonian vision in this context. The main figures discussed in the chapter are W. E. B. Du Bois, Jane Addams, and William James. Du Bois rejected Booker T. Washington's accommodationist vocationalism in favor of the critical capacity of liberal learning. His criticism of Washington reinforces the association of education and freedom, especially for those who have been oppressed. Chapter 3 breaks the chronological flow to discuss controversies over liberal education, from Benjamin Franklin's satire of Harvard's pretentiousness to contemporary concerns over whether college education “is really worth it.” The notion of a liberal education has long been contested in the United States, and most often the issue has been how to balance practical demands with humanistic inquiry. Calls on Harvard College to better prepare farmers were made a century before Theodore Roosevelt asked universities to instill homely virtues such as kindness, thoroughness, and thrift rather than mere intellectual skills. These complaints are echoed today by social scientists like Charles Murray and Richard Vedder, who have challenged the economic rationale for higher education. The likes of Murray and Vedder want higher education to produce the equivalent of better farmers today. In chapter 3 we see that ambivalence about liberal learning (if not outright hostility to it) has always been intertwined with our commitments to education. In the fourth and final chapter I return to pragmatism and its commitment to lifelong learning through ongoing inquiry. John Dewey and Richard Rorty took up the cause of liberal learning precisely because it fit so well with the pragmatic ethos that linked inquiry, innovation, and self-discovery. Rejecting a view of education as narrow training, pragmatists embraced a capacious practicality that would be energized by a broad, flexible education.

The claim of this book is that broadly based, self-critical and yet pragmatic education matters today more than ever, and that it matters far beyond the borders of any university campus. The demands for useful educational results have gotten louder, and threats to liberal education are indeed profound (from government regulators, from the business sector, from within the university). In an age of seismic technological change and instantaneous information dissemination, it is more crucial than ever that we not abandon the humanistic frameworks of education in favor of narrow, technical forms of teaching intended to give quick, utilitarian results. Those results are no substitute for the practice of inquiry, critique, and experience that enhances students' ability to appreciate and understand the world around them—and to innovatively respond to it. A reflexive, pragmatic liberal education is our best hope of preparing students to shape change and not just be victims of it.

Change, some of it potentially disruptive, has come to American higher education in a very visible way in recent years. Technology promises to expand the reach of compelling teachers while significantly reducing costs. In the last couple of years, massive open online classes (MOOCs) have been prominent in debates concerning the future of higher education. Those who want to see universities become much more narrowly utilitarian embrace the classes as quick paths to the certification of marketable skills. Similarly, those who fear the further commercialization of universities see the technology of MOOCs as contributing to growing alienation and depersonalization.

in higher education. Although at first skeptical, I have come to believe that we can use this platform to advance liberal education. It can also be used for forms of training. No particular technology in itself enables or threatens liberal learning, but those who want to expand its range must experiment with new technologies. That's why I decided to offer a rather traditional humanities class, *The Modern and the Postmodern*, as a MOOC with Coursera and recruited professors from six different departments to join me in offering online versions of their undergraduate classes.

If *The Modern and the Postmodern* was an unlikely candidate for a MOOC, I was an equally unlikely candidate to teach one. As a university president, I don't have as much time to devote to teaching as I would like, and taking on this additional assignment, with all its unknown variables, seemed to many in my administration overly ambitious. Actually, some told me it was crazy. In addition, I was no fan of the massive online classes I'd checked out. It seemed clear to me that whatever learning happened online via lectures, quizzes, and peer-graded essays was very different from what I'd experienced in residential colleges and universities.

I was intrigued, though, by the prospect of sharing my class with a large, international group of people who wanted to study. This was really going beyond the university's campus, and I wondered doing so would change the way I thought about teaching and learning. I certainly wasn't looking for ways to replace the campus experience, but I was open to expanding the framework within which I think about it. How *would* students learn via recorded lectures, and how would *I* know what they were learning if they were grading each other? Would there really be a “massive” number of students who wanted to take a humanities class focused on literature, history, and philosophy? Would I be able to teach effectively without the instant feedback I receive from students when I am talking with them in a classroom? And how would teaching in the online format affect the way I teach on campus and the way Wesleyan will educate the coming generations of students?

I was surprised that almost thirty thousand people enrolled in the class, but I also found the number intimidating. I was used to facing a room full of eager faces, and we usually came to enjoy one another's company as we studied together. Thirty thousand strangers I couldn't even see just scared me. My “lectures” in the campus classroom are almost totally improvised—I talk about a number of quotations from the assigned reading and respond to questions. And I say dumb things all too often, but in the classroom we always find ways to move on. In an online class, however, some silly jokes I make about Freud could go viral and become my epitaph.

On our first day, the website for *The Modern and the Postmodern* was eerily quiet. Finally, our technical support person discovered that we had neglected to click something akin to a “Go Live” button. We did that while I was driving my daughter home from high school. When I checked the site after dinner I was astonished at the level of activity. Study groups were forming based on language and geography. There were Spanish and Portuguese groups, study units forming in Bulgaria and Russia and Boston and India. “Anyone in Maine?” someone plaintively inquired. (Turns out there are quite a few Courserians there.)

Geographical diversity was just the start. Some members of the class decided to begin a discussion board for older students, and many retired teachers joined in. Three couples were following the class together—all six had Ph.D. degrees—and decided to write me with questions about my definitions of the modern. Students holding down full-time jobs wrestled with Rousseau and Marx but wished the two would just “get to the point,” while a graduate student in the Netherlands provided fabulous lists of secondary sources for those who wanted more reading. There were students who were in high school and dreaming of college, older folks who wanted to discuss poetry when they came home from work, and people from all over the world who just had a deep desire to continue to learn.

After about a month, we organized a Google Hangout (a visual conference call) in which several students (chosen by lottery) could participate in a free-flowing discussion about the reading and lectures. We recorded the hour-long session and made it available to everyone else in the class. Our hangout included people in Calcutta, São Paulo, southwest France and ... Rhode Island. The first question from India was about the nineteenth-century French poet Charles Baudelaire. We'd talked about his notion of the *flâneur*, the happy wanderer in the modern city. The Indian student wanted to know how I'd connect this notion to Baudelaire's interest in how our senses can be activated by powerful works of art. The student from Brazil said the week's readings, by Ralph Waldo Emerson and Ludwig Wittgenstein, were "mind blowing," and she asked how their ideas of memory related to those of the other authors we'd read.

This hour-long intense discussion wasn't a "massive" conversation; it was a colloquy mediated by technology. Thousands of other students would watch the hangout, and many of them would resume these conversations in different forms—from face-to-face meetings in cafes to virtual encounters in online chat rooms. They were eager for intellectual stimulation and cultural participation; they had a strong desire to learn how to learn—to experience great works of literature and philosophy in ways that would promote further inquiry. They had, in sum, an appetite for liberal learning that extended far beyond the college years and the campus boundaries.

Many have written about the extraordinarily high attrition rates in MOOCs. At Wesleyan we expect (almost) all of our students to complete their coursework on time, while most MOOCs have attrition rates of more than 90 percent. But saying someone "failed to complete" a free, open online class is like saying someone "failed to complete" the *New Yorker* in the week she received it. Most don't sign up for the class or the magazine for purposes of "completion." Half of those who enroll often don't even actively begin the class, while others will learn with the course rather than seek to finish it for purposes of a grade and certificate (although some do want that). There are many access points for increasing one's understanding of the world and its history. Students use MOOCs differently than students use the classroom, and we should pay attention to that rather than think the online world fails to replicate a "really real" classroom. When I teach my course on campus next year, I want to give my undergraduates the benefits of what I've learned from the online version. This will be more than just using recorded lectures as homework. It will be integrating perspectives on things great thinkers have said—and things I've said—from an amazing range of people from across the globe.

On the Discussion Forum for The Modern and the Postmodern there were any number of threads. Some commented on the teaching (happily, they were enthusiastic about the lectures), others on the grading (more than a few complaints about the peer evaluations), and still others offered complementary materials to add to our study—from songs to scholarly articles to cartoons. One student wrote about how much he enjoyed the class because it was a respite from taking care of his disabled parent. This sparked a conversation with several others who were in similar situations. Others talked of missing the excitement of being at a university, while still more talked about never having had that opportunity. At Wesleyan we embrace the label "Diversity University," but we are highly selective and admit a small percentage of the very qualified people who apply. My MOOC impressions upon me aspects of difference and inclusion I don't often encounter on my campus.

One of the threads of our discussion board asked why those in the class felt the need to keep studying. A student from Singapore wrote about our class "igniting the fire for learning," while a Swiss graduate student enrolled with his "mum" so that they would be able to discuss the material together. She'd dropped out, but he said that he finds the camaraderie online a reminder of why he went to a university in the first place. Somehow, the graduate seminars he takes in Zurich don't live up

to his expectations. A student in South India related that decades after having completed formal schooling, “learning makes me feel alive.” And a student who didn't say where she's from simply wrote: “Baudelaire has captured me. I love the living and the feeling and the participating in life's beauty and ugliness. I have taken to carrying *Paris Spleen* around town with me as I walk and bike.”

Turns out the “massive” part of these open courses was the least interesting thing about them. Most students didn't feel like a mass. It's the differences among them, and how they bridged those differences through social networks, that energized their MOOC experience and mine. Of course, like books and lectures, films and recordings, MOOCs can also be used for much more utilitarian ends, but I found in teaching one nothing necessarily antithetical to the goals of liberal education. On the contrary, the technology of MOOCs revealed that there was a wide international interest in learning for its own sake, an interest in broadening one's cultural experience and in connecting with other people who share one's passionate curiosity. My “good-enough books” class aims to combine the intertwined traditions of inquiry and cultural participation. I am trying to help my students develop their critical thinking skills while also inviting them to revere great achievements in philosophy, history, and literature. At least I want them to understand why these texts have inspired reverence as well as research. My aim, then, is to contribute to their liberal education—and this is just as true online as it is in person. Liberal learning mattered to my online students in some of the same ways it matters to my students on campus: it helps them in the process of self-discovery while bringing them into a more thoughtful conversation with the world around them.

Beyond the University is not focused on online learning or how to bend the cost curve in higher education. These are worthy subjects that have stimulated much discussion. This book steps back from current debates concerning technology and cost to argue that the calls for a more efficient, practical college education are likely to lead to the opposite: men and women who are trained for yesterday's problems and yesterday's jobs, men and women who have not reflected on their own lives in ways that allow them to tap into their capacities for innovation and for making meaning out of their experiences. Throughout American history calls for practicality have really been calls for conformity—for conventional thinking. If we heed them now it will only impoverish our economic, cultural, and personal lives.

The mission of universities focused on liberal learning should be, in Rorty's words, “to incite doubt and stimulate imagination, thereby challenging the prevailing consensus.”⁸ Through doubt and imagination, and hard work, students “realize they can reshape themselves” and their society. Liberal education matters because by challenging the prevailing consensus it promises to be relevant to our professional, personal, and political lives. The experimentation and open-ended inquiry of a broad, pragmatic education helps us think for ourselves, take responsibility for what we do and believe, and be more aware of our desires and aspirations. This book will show that liberal education has long mattered to Americans because it increases our capacity to understand the world, contribute to it, and to reshape ourselves far beyond our years at a university.

From Taking in the World to Transforming the Self

■

WE AMERICANS HAVE strong yet ambivalent feelings about education. We believe in its necessity, but we aren't sure how to measure its success. We know it's important for our economy and culture, but we don't trust what it does to our kids. We are as committed to learning as we are to freedom, but we are made nervous that too much learning, like too much freedom, can be a form of corruption. Every week the newspapers, magazines, and blogs are filled with stories that display the dysfunction of our K-12 educational system; we read about good schools striving to produce high scores rather than well-rounded students and about poor schools being punished for their failure to be located in affluent neighborhoods rather than helped to cope with their perilous positions in an ecology of poverty.

The discourses concerning higher education are just as conflicted, though the issues are somewhat different. Those students who manage to finish a four-year degree (even if it takes five or six years) are usually very satisfied with their college experience. Whether they go to a large public university or a small residential college, many of these students will look back with appreciation on their own intellectual and social growth during this period of their lives. Of course, there will be questions about the costs of those years. Was the investment as thoughtful as it should have been? Did the college years “pay off” enough in the long run? The numbers most frequently cited underscore that a college diploma will usually result in a significant wage premium for most people. But each family is left to wonder whether its own investment in a college education was a wise one, and as a nation we still wrestle with the question of what such an education is really for.

Of course, millions of students don't even start four-year programs, and most of those who begin at two-year community colleges never earn a degree. Many students acquire more debt than they can afford, along with frustration and a sense that the system failed them. They wonder whether they should have expected to get a college education in the first place. They wonder why education matters especially if it wasn't effective job training.

The questions raised about education in America today are not new, but they do have an urgency about them, an urgency born of the particular economic and social conditions of our time. After decades of self-confident military and economic supremacy, American official culture seems gripped by a sense of impending doom, or at least by a feeling that our children will likely have fewer opportunities than we have had. As has happened periodically throughout our history, American optimism is once again being tested.

Education depends fundamentally on our ability to generate optimism and find reasonable (defensible) ways to sustain it. When our faith in the future is shaken, whether it be by technological change we don't understand, economic competition that undermines job security, or cultural forms that challenge our sense of identity, we often criticize education as having failed to prepare us for our current predicaments. And so it has been since the Puritans first set up schools in the New World.

We start our consideration of liberal education not with the Puritans, though, but with the founding of the United States. As our democratic experiment was being launched at the end of the eighteenth century, so were debates about the importance of education. The key figure here is Thomas Jefferson, author of the Declaration of Independence and third president of the United States. Jefferson himself

had an insatiable appetite for learning, and he was convinced that only by educating its citizenry could the new Republic steer a course between the hazardous rocks of governmental tyranny and popular anarchy. Jefferson was a man of the Enlightenment, and for him this meant faith that the accumulation of knowledge would improve public and private life. He was committed to a view of the United States that vested power and authority in the people (at least the free white men), and he was acutely aware that the health of the new polity was dependent on those with authority being educated in how to use it. Thus the education of the people should be the responsibility of a government elected by the people. This would create a virtuous circle of learning and a citizenry thoughtful enough to protect itself from governmental overreaching.

In the eighteenth century, there was little to support the idea that education was a governmental function. European traditions gave the church or the family the responsibility for education, and the nature of instruction much depended on the denomination with which one was affiliated. Generally speaking, the Protestant emphasis on reading the Bible for oneself demanded basic literacy, and this had had a profound impact on expanding the capacity to read to the popular classes. The New England colonies extended this movement into the political sphere by using tax dollars to pay for schooling. In addition to enabling one to read the Bible, schooling was seen in political terms because an educated populace would be able to make judgments about those who wielded authority over them. Literacy was the key to acquiring information, and the ability to thoughtfully consider that information was a basic requirement of membership in the community.

The emphasis on education was not confined to the colonies in the Northeast. Although they disagreed about many important political issues, John Adams and Jefferson saw eye to eye on the necessity of education as a foundation for maintaining freedom. "Wherever a general knowledge and sensibility have prevailed among the people," Adams wrote, "arbitrary government and every kind of oppression have lessened and disappeared in proportion." Americans could be proud, he thought, of their commitment to learning: "A native of America who cannot read and write is as rare a sight as the appearance of a Jacobite or a Roman Catholic, that is, as rare as a comet or an earthquake."² Jefferson was similarly committed to the idea that knowledge was freedom and that literacy was the basic foundation of knowledge. Like Adams, he believed that the government could do most to protect freedom by promoting an educated citizenry.

There was, however, considerable resistance to the idea that education should be a governmental project. Insofar as one thought that education and religion should go hand in hand but also that public authorities should not promote any specific religious belief, then one would not want secular state officials interfering with schools. Education was a *moral* process, many believed, and it should not be divorced from ecclesiastic powers. Then there were those who were skeptical about the government's ability to promote education in the name of freedom and independence. Would not a government have every incentive to use publicly supported schools to indoctrinate citizens into slavish obedience?

For Jefferson and Adams, the best protection against indoctrination was more education. Only an informed citizenry would be able to see through the ruses used by governmental authorities, and exposure to the competition of ideas would allow citizens to judge who could best represent their interests. Adams, we might say, hedged his bets in this regard. Though he invested mightily in the importance of the people being able to critically evaluate information, he also supported a structure of government that would force regular compromise among competing groups, or order. "Orders of men, watching and balancing each other, are the only security; power must be opposed to power, and interest to interest.... Religion, superstition, oaths, education, laws, all give way before passions, interest and power, which can be resisted only by passions, interest and power."³ Adams

believed in education in the long run, but he wanted to be certain that checks and balances and layers of representation would prevent any particular regime from going too far too fast.

Jefferson had a more idealistic notion of an educated citizenry as the guardian of freedom. The major goal of his education proposals was “to enable every man to judge for himself what will secure or endanger his freedom.”⁴ The political and moral core of education was cultivating the capacity for independent judgment so as to be free from external coercion. “Man, Jefferson, believed, is most free when he is most nearly or completely self-sufficient, hence his education must be concerned with developing such inner resourcefulness.”⁵ All citizens should develop this capacity, and some of them would go beyond it to develop lives in which they pursued ideas for their own sake.

Jefferson's concepts of education fell into two main spheres: popular instruction of the citizenry and higher education. He introduced legislation in Virginia in 1779 to address the first issue, *On the More General Diffusion of Knowledge*, and he founded a university decades later to embody his ideas concerning the second. The legislation never passed, but its principles reverberated in American discussions of education for generations. The University of Virginia at Charlottesville was launched with the strong imprint of its founder, and it continues to thrive today.

Jefferson's *On the More General Diffusion of Knowledge* proposed that citizens should learn the basic skills for preserving their freedom, for conducting their affairs, and for continuing to learn. Literacy and numeracy were key. It was the government's responsibility to see to this education because only if the people had such instruction could they be counted on to govern themselves. “If we think them [the people] not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion by education.”⁶ This was why Jefferson argued that taxpayers should foot the bill, rather than count on churches or rich benefactors to see to the people's education. Adams, who disagreed with his “frienemy” on many political questions, was of one mind with him when it came to the public's responsibility for education: “The whole people must take upon themselves the education of the whole people, and must be willing to bear the expenses of it. There should not be a district of one mile square, without a school in it, nor founded by a charitable individual, but maintained at the public expense of the people themselves.”⁷

Access (remember, though, just for free white males) to instruction regardless of wealth was a key component of this Jeffersonian plan. All citizens deserve a decent education. Girls would be included in elementary instruction, though he did not focus on their particular studies. But access was just the starting point. At each level, he planned to determine the most talented 10 percent of the boys, who would then be given the opportunity to continue their work at a higher level. Again, it was crucial that the state pay for those who could not afford to pay for themselves. Jefferson thought that the health of the Republic would depend on its ability to renew itself by finding talent of the first rank, and he was trying to create a system that would find gifted young men who might otherwise be overlooked because they didn't come from the right families. “The best geniuses will be raked from the rubbish annually,” and the state would be able to benefit from “those talents which nature has sown so liberally among the poor as the rich but which perish without use, if not sought for and cultivated.”⁸

Raking the rubbish for talent who would then be cultivated at the public expense would prevent the creation of permanent elites based on wealth who would try to turn the government's powers to their own private advantage. Jefferson believed strongly that given the variability in human capacities and energy, there would always be elites. His notion of equality was an equality of access or opportunity, not an equality in which everybody wins. But he also believed strongly that without a serious effort to find and cultivate new talent, the nation's elites would harden into what he called an “unnatural

aristocracy,” increasingly corrupt and inept. His plan for the “diffusion of knowledge” aimed to create a basic level of knowledgeable citizens while providing the most talented among them with the ability to become tomorrow’s elite—a “natural aristocracy,” as he called it.

In Jefferson’s system, those talented youngsters culled from the ranks of students in the early years of study would eventually need a strong university at which they could complete their formal education. His legislative agenda for primary education was defeated in the 1790s, however, mostly because the state representatives thought it too expensive. Jefferson continued to believe that universal primary education supported with public funds was crucial, but he could see that the antipathy around him made his plans politically unpalatable. So, in his later years Jefferson focused his attention on creating a new sort of university, one that embodied his particular conception of liberal learning. Jefferson had played a role at the College of William and Mary, striving to modernize the school in the wake of the American Revolution and the European Enlightenment. But he discovered how difficult university reform could be, and so he decided it would be more advantageous to start from scratch, founding a new university so that “every branch of science, useful at this day, may be taught in its highest degree.” He was struggling to separate the new institution both from the influence of religious groups and from the traditions of rote traditional learning that he thought had infected Old World and New England universities. In a report of 1818, he listed the key objectives for university education: “To form statesmen, legislators and judges; to expound on principles of government; to harmonize agriculture and commerce; develop reasoning facilities of our youth; And, generally to form them to habits of reflection and correct action, rendering them examples of virtue to others, and of happiness within themselves.”⁹ It was clear that Jefferson wanted his university to produce the leaders, the natural aristocrats, of the new nation. But what did he have in mind in saying that the school would teach branches of science “useful at this day”? And how would one determine “the highest degree”?

These were questions Jefferson had long considered. Shortly after independence, he had supported an effort to launch a national university, a project that even the hero George Washington could not bring to fruition. The first president had hoped that a nonsectarian university drawing on all of the states would inspire national unity. A flagship educational institution could achieve an international preeminence that would be hugely advantageous for the new nation. Benjamin Rush had laid out a plan for a Federal University in 1788, with the goal of “acquiring those branches of knowledge which increase the conveniences of life, lessen human misery, improve our country, promote population, exalt the human understanding, and establish domestic, social, and political happiness.”¹⁰ When Washington became president, he championed this idea: “A primary object of such a National Institution should be, the education of our Youth in the science of *Government*. In a republic, what species of knowledge can be equally important? And what duty, more pressing on its Legislature, than to patronize a plan for communicating it to those, who are to be the future guardians of the liberties of the Country?”¹¹ But Congress was not willing to ask citizens to support a university with tax dollars, and the desire for a secular institution that would foster national unity ran into opposition on the grounds of regionalism and religion. Those concerned that federal authorities would increasingly lose it over the states were never eager to see a preeminent central university. Those who thought that education without religion would lead to corruption could not countenance an institution of high learning that did not explicitly rest upon the core principles of Christianity.¹²

Jefferson was one who supported Washington’s project for a national university, and he even had the idea of importing the faculty for it from the University of Geneva. But seeing the opposition to the national plan, he would eventually focus his efforts in his own state of Virginia. In the summer of

1818 he, together with James Madison, James Monroe (then president), and a small group of other notables met in the Blue Ridge Mountains, commissioned by the state legislature to discuss the vision for publicly supported higher education. Jefferson was seventy-five years old at the time, and he took two days to travel the thirty miles from his home to the tavern in the Blue Ridge. He arrived on horseback accompanied by Madison, two aged founders of the country now trying to secure its future by establishing a public institution of higher education. Jefferson's report early on acknowledged that some felt that a university education provided merely "useless acquirements," that this was the type of enterprise best "left to private individual effort." But he and the other commissioners at the tavern in Rockfish Gap were convinced that cultural independence and civic health required the public support of advanced work in an array of fields that were creating new knowledge. Such support would pay dividends to all because of the effective leadership that graduates would bring the state. Virginians, Jefferson noted, should not be sending their sons to Kentucky for their education, where a public institution had recently been created. Nor should the talented youth head for Europe, where they were more likely to be corrupted than educated. There should be a place of learning, an "academical village" close to home where they could fully develop their abilities. After Jefferson's skillful negotiations and imaginative presentations on the state's demography, it was determined that the university's location would be Charlottesville, just down the hill from his home at Monticello. This way he could keep an eye on things.¹³

Mr. Jefferson's university, as it came to be called, would be an engine of inquiry where the habits of study and reflection, research and conversation would lead to the betterment of students and teachers alike. "Education generates habits of application, of order, and the love of virtue; and controls, by the force of habit, any innate obliquities in our moral organization."¹⁴ The experience of students, as Madison knew well, doesn't at all points stimulate the habits of moral organization that the author of the Declaration of Independence had in mind. The raucous celebrations of college men, their "inebriated insubordination," were problems in the early nineteenth century as they are in the early twenty-first. But don't we still hope that our students acquire a love of virtue, even as they discover through hard work and sociability just what "love" and "virtue" might mean?

For Jefferson, the pursuit of happiness required an active mind, and engagement in the practice of open-ended research was a good in itself while often leading to positive outcomes in the world.¹⁶ He compared the improvements brought by learning to the improvements a farmer introduced in his orchard through grafting: "Education, in like manner, engrafts a new man on the native stock, and improves what in his nature was vicious and perverse into qualities of virtue and social worth."¹⁷

Jefferson's university would be nondenominational. The author of the Declaration had also penned the *Notes on the State of Virginia*, a forceful articulation of the need to separate religious and political life. Religious faith was a personal matter, he argued, not based on knowledge or supported by research. One could certainly allow for private worship, but there was no point in bringing on campus what he thought of as the idle speculations of theologians. When confronted with critics who said he was a godless corrupter of youth, he would offer Protestant churches the right to set up academies on the periphery of the school. They declined.

What would be taught at Jefferson's university? Ancient and modern languages; pure and applied mathematics; physics, botany, zoology, anatomy, and medicine; government and law; ideology, grammar, ethics, rhetorics, literature, and the fine arts. Although religion was excluded from the curriculum, it seemed little else was. Yet Jefferson consistently spoke of *useful* knowledge, or the "circle of the useful sciences."

In what ways did he think all these areas of study useful? Jefferson was a man of the Enlightenment and for him this meant faith that the accumulation of knowledge would improve public and private life. Thus, his conception of “useful knowledge” was capacious and open-ended—and he reflected this even in his design for the campus in Charlottesville. To be sure, Jefferson's curriculum placed much less emphasis on the learning of Greek and Latin texts than many schools of the time, in favor of what he thought of as more active or modern fields. And he had a clear preference for history over literature because he found the former more conducive to moral and political instruction. Jefferson was committed to the modern: students should learn useful (not “dead”!) languages and engage in disciplines that had active research agendas. But the “sage of Monticello” was no narrow utilitarian. He himself delighted in reading classic texts in their original languages and wrote that “I feel a much greater interest in knowing what has passed two or three thousand years ago, than what is now passing. I read nothing, therefore, but of the heroes of Troy, of the wars of Lacadaemon and Athens, of Pompey and Ceasar ... I slumber without fear, and review in my dreams the visions of antiquity.”¹⁸ Visions of the past, when tested by facts and thoughtful conversation, would develop into genuine knowledge that could be put to use in the world.

Jefferson was convinced that history, literature, and philosophy, though taught at the university, could also be studied readily enough outside of the classroom. On campus he emphasized the sciences, which along with mathematics accounted for about half of the curriculum.¹⁹ He did this not because he believed that graduates would become scientists themselves but because the habits of mind and methods of inquiry characteristic of the modern sciences lend themselves to lifelong learning that would serve one well—whether one went on to manage a farm or pursue a professional career.²⁰ It is here we see the dynamic and open-ended nature of Jefferson's understanding of education and “usefulness.” His approach to knowledge and experimentation kept open the possibility that any form of inquiry might prove useful.²¹ This value could not be determined in advance, but, in the Enlightenment fashion, would be determined by what individuals made of their learning as they built on its practice (its “habits of application, of order, and the love of virtue”) once outside the confines of the campus. The independent and free inquiry cultivated at the university would enable independent and free thinkers, citizens capable of thinking for themselves and taking responsibility for their actions in the contexts of their communities and the new Republic. That inquiry might be in grammar or zoology, anatomy or ideology—it didn't matter to Jefferson. The free pursuit of knowledge would prove useful because it helped to form free citizens beyond the university.

This leads us to one of the most important formal innovations in Mr. Jefferson's university, the freedom of students to choose their own course of study: “I am not fully informed of the practices at Harvard, but there is one from which we shall certainly vary, although it has been copied, I believe, by nearly every college and academy in the United States. That is, the holding the students all to one prescribed course of reading, and disallowing exclusive application to those branches only which are to qualify them for the particular vocations to which they are destined. We shall on the contrary, allow them uncontrolled choice in the lectures they shall choose to attend, and require elemental qualifications only, and sufficient age.”²² For Jefferson it made little sense to promise a free, open-ended education to students if they were already “destined” to pursue particular vocations, if they were forced to follow the previous generation's dictates on how they were to live their lives. Education allowed for the experience of freedom as one began to discover one's capacities, and one began to discover these capacities as they were brought into use through education. The author of the Declaration of Independence wanted students to make these discoveries for themselves, not to be told

what to study because their futures had already been decided by their families, teachers, churches, government. If the university was to be a place where one discovered and cultivated one's independence, then it made no sense to solidify it as an institution that would cement the pathway determined by the previous generation. Jefferson's university was to be a place that practiced freedom and he hoped this would give its faculty and students a greater ability to act in accord with the freedom as republican citizens and private individuals.

Of course, it is important to remember that Jefferson's university aspired to being a place of freedom while also excluding most of the population from ever attending such a place. The University of Virginia was to be only for the most talented citizens. Those who had succeeded in the earlier levels of schooling might have an opportunity to choose their course of study, but the majority of people (women, slaves, native peoples) would never have that opportunity and were excluded from the start. Jefferson's hypocrisy regarding race and gender is legendary; his insight into structures of oppression didn't disturb his own personal tyrannies. If our unconventional third president understood that education was inexorably linked to the possibility of freedom, his conventional racism and sexism led him to think that neither women, Africans, nor native peoples should enjoy that possibility. They were not to be citizens, so they were not to be educated.

But this is already to overstate things, for there are vast differences and inconsistencies in Jefferson's views on these excluded groups. With regard to women, he admitted that “a plan of female education has never been a subject of systematic contemplation with me,”²³ yet in his 1779 plan for schooling in Virginia, girls were included through the elementary grades. Some of his contemporaries, agreeing on the importance of an educated citizenry, realized that mothers would be responsible for a good part of that instruction—and thus women, too, should have a quality education. Noah Webster and Benjamin Rush, for example, wrote on the importance of women becoming competent partners in the home and thoughtful mentors to their children in republican independence.²⁴ In 1819 Emma Willard argued powerfully, if unsuccessfully, for state-supported seminaries for women to be trained as professional teachers.

As a widower with three young daughters, Jefferson emphasized the importance of the girls achieving competence in domestic matters, including the ability to launch their own children in the process of learning. He urged them on in their study of foreign languages, music, science. In many respects, the education recommended for girls was similar to that for boys, but that similarity stopped well before the university.²⁵ There the goal was to produce leaders, and Jefferson's regard for girls and women—his understanding of equality—did not extend that far.

In regard to Native Americans, Jefferson's views were complex, not to say contradictory. He got to know many Indians as a youth, and in his travels he made sustained efforts to understand their languages and political systems. In 1785 he wrote that “I am safe in affirming that the proofs of genius given by the Indians place them on a level with whites,” and he often spoke of how the political organizations of specific tribes evinced an attachment to liberty that should be emulated by the former colonists.²⁶ His scholarship on native peoples was consistently respectful; he used them often as examples to combat racist degenerate theorists popular in Europe. He spoke of a day when a living in North America would, through intermarriage, become one “continental family.” But as many historians have pointed out, Jefferson the politician was a ruthless adversary to Native Americans. American Indians who got in the way of white expansion would be destroyed without mercy. And as the sage of Monticello said himself: “If we are constrained to lift the hatchet against any tribe, we will never lay it down until that tribe is exterminated.”²⁷ Jefferson included the study of American Indian

tribes in the curriculum of his new university, but he did not think there would be Indians studying there.

As Jefferson's published views on Native Americans have to be seen in relation to his policies concerning westward expansion of the new country, his views of Africans must be seen in the context of his personal and political connection to the institution of slavery. Jefferson was a slaveholder who also hated the institution because he thought it degraded everyone who came in contact with it: "There must doubtless be an unhappy influence on the manners of our people produced by the existence of slavery among us. The whole commerce between master and slave is a perpetual exercise of the most boisterous passions, the most unremitting despotism on the one part, and degrading submissions on the other. Our children see this, and learn to imitate it; for man is an imitative animal. This quality is the germ of all education in him."²⁸ Jefferson complained of "boisterous passions," yet fathered several children with his slaves, most famously with Sally Hemmings, the half sister of his wife. There is a sea of literature now trying to understand these contradictions (or condemn them), but here our interest is their relation to his views on education. In *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Jefferson called for an end to slavery while also presenting his views on the natural intellectual inferiority of blacks. Jefferson repeats some of the racist appraisals of Africans by white writers of his time. He recycles the standard calumnies about their work ethic and about the natural ugliness of their hair and skin. Perhaps most important, from his perspective, was his conclusion that blacks were capable of very little learning: "Comparing them by their faculties of memory, reason, and imagination, it appears to me, that in memory they are equal to the whites; in reason much inferior." As he famously added, although they might be gifted in music, "misery is often the parent of the most affecting touches in poetry.—Among the blacks is misery enough, God knows, but no poetry."²⁹

For Jefferson, Africans could not proceed in the journey of enlightenment, and so they could not become full citizens. In 1780, as governor of Virginia, he wrote that they should not continue to be made slaves, but neither could they live among the free (and educable) citizens of the United States. Jefferson was not thinking just about the limited future of blacks as he tried to imagine a postemancipation society; he was worried about the permanent prejudices of the ex-masters, and the ex-slaves' inability to forget the massive injustices done to them—"ten thousand recollections, by the blacks, of the injuries they have sustained."³⁰ How could black and white Americans ever learn, even truly engage in mutual education, given the horrible history in which they were entangled? "Indeed I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just: that his justice cannot sleep for ever: that considering numbers, nature and natural means only, a revolution of the wheel of fortune, an exchange of situation, is among possible events: that it may become probable by supernatural interference! The Almighty has no attribute which can take side with us in such a contest."³¹ The governor-slaveholder goes on to express hope that things are beginning to get better, that "the spirit of the master is abating, that of the slave rising from the dust" in ways that would avoid a violent reversal of oppressive roles.³² The author of the Declaration imagines, even strongly desires, that the black slaves will be free. But he cannot imagine them living side by side in equality with whites, and so he offers a scheme that would send the millions of blacks to a new colony: "For if a slave can have a country in the world, it must be any other in preference to that in which he is born to live and labour for another."³³

Here we seem to have come upon the limits of Jefferson's views of education, the point at which his creed that learning in the broadest sense sets you free runs aground on his prejudices that some people just can't learn how to learn. Jefferson could not imagine African poetry, could not abide the possibility of stirring narratives written by an ex-slave, but African Americans themselves would

extend the Jeffersonian faith in education as the path toward freedom. Here we will look at just two powerful examples. The first is David Walker's 1829 *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World*. Walker, whose father was a slave and mother a free black, grew up in North Carolina and eventually settled in Boston. He was a fervent evangelical, a shopkeeper, and active in the local Freemason organization. Walker wrote for abolitionist newspapers and was committed to inspiring blacks to seize the freedom that was rightfully theirs, rather than appeal to whites to grant it to them as a gift. Walker writes a call to arms for enslaved blacks, urging them toward an intellectual and spiritual independence that would empower them to overthrow the tyranny of their masters. Just a few years after Jefferson's death, Walker explicitly attacks both the founder's comments on the inferiority of blacks in *Notes on the State of Virginia* and the wrongs of slavery more generally. Walker doesn't want a slaveholder deciding that slavery is an evil; he wants the slaves themselves to articulate their judgment and then take the appropriate actions. "For my own part, I am glad Mr. Jefferson has advanced his positions for your sake; for you will either have to contradict or confirm him by your own actions, and not by what our friends have said or done for us; for those things are other men's labours, and do not satisfy the Americans, who are waiting for us to prove to them ourselves, that we are MEN, before they will be willing to admit the fact."³⁴ Walker asks, "How to prove that we are MEN?" And he answers in what had become the classic Enlightenment (not to say Jeffersonian) formulation. We will show that we are men by showing that we can learn. Education is the path to freedom:

I pray that the Lord may undeceive my ignorant brethren, and permit them to throw away pretensions, and seek after the substance of learning. I would crawl on my hands and knees through mud and mire, to the feet of a learned man, where I would sit and humbly supplicate him to instill into me, that which neither devils nor tyrants could remove, only with my life—for colored people to acquire learning in this country, makes tyrants quake and tremble on their sandy foundation.

The bare name of educating the coloured people, scares our cruel oppressors almost to death. But if they do not have enough to be frightened for yet, it will be, because they can always keep us ignorant, and because God approbates their cruelties, with which they have been for centuries murdering us. The whites shall have enough of the blacks, yet, as true as God sits on his throne in Heaven. (37)

Walker closes his *Appeal* by using the author of the Declaration to attack the author of *Notes on the State of Virginia*. Hear your own words, he calls: "Compare your own language ... extracted from your Declaration of Independence, with your cruelties and murders inflicted by your cruel and unmerciful fathers and yourselves on our fathers and on us" (80). To be sure, the religious rhetoric throughout the *Appeal* is not Jeffersonian, but the faith in education surely is. By "seeking after the substance of learning," from Walker's perspective, oppressed blacks will prove that they are human; they will realize (actualize) their own humanity. In so doing, they will "scare their cruel oppressors" and set themselves free.

Walker's *Appeal* certainly did frighten the white establishment. His powerful call for justice and insurrection was printed in three editions in 1829 and immediately created a backlash. The pamphlet circulated through black societies, churches, and businesses. It was said that Walker sewed copies into the used clothing he sold in his store. In the South, blacks were arrested, or far worse, if they were suspected of having copies of the text, and a bounty was put on the author's head. The state of Georgia was willing to grant \$10,000 to anybody who could hand him over alive, and \$1,000 to anyone who would murder him.³⁵ The pamphlet's message, linking education, freedom, and justice, continued

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