

THE PRESENT MOMENT OF THE UNIVERSITY OF DALLAS

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October 2003

All of us know, I think, that the University of Dallas stands at a point of change in its history. Not far from its fiftieth anniversary, it faces the selection of a new president. We need to acknowledge what our present leader, Msgr. Milam Joseph, has accomplished in the few brief years he has been with us. He has energized the school, giving it a forward-looking momentum, changed the appearance and functioning of the campus, invigorated the academic programs, introduced a new liberal arts college of business, brought about a vitally functioning Institute of Religious and Pastoral Studies and hence stronger relations with the diocese, staffed his administration with people who understand the purpose of the school, and forwarded the mission of the University to be an important force in American education. And he suffused this campus with an atmosphere of optimism and passion, which will bear their fruit far into the future.

The change we face at this point, however, is more than just that of a new university president, serious as that situation is. We stand at the juncture that some of us have seen coming for a couple of decades. September 11 two years ago was a startlingly clear if painful demonstration of the destructive potentiality of technology in the hands of private individuals, awakening us to the dangers facing a world in which age-old rancors can be acted upon on such large scale. We know now that we face the crisis of the West for which the University of Dallas has been preparing its students. Donald Cowan, this University's third president and in large part the author of its liberal arts curriculum, was keenly conscious of the fragility of civilized codes of thought and behavior that guarantee our freedom and happiness; he was aware that Western institutions which are the legacy of an essentially Christian society would reach a crisis period in the near future and would have to be redefined and reinvigorated through our educational systems. He was certain, however, that a mere repetition of ways of thinking from the past would be insufficient, just as would a technical curriculum or a structureless one based simply on the idea of the "new," no matter how faddish. What the coming epoch would require, he knew, would be imagination, conviction, faith, a deep moral sense, and an ability to reshape things—qualities that a true liberal education enables a person to do. He was confident that the kind of education students receive at UD would fit them for the task of rebuilding society. In a paragraph written near the end of his life, he emphasized the importance of the right kind of education:

The current generation of young people will virtually have to reinvent society. Most present institutions of civilization will dissolve in the communal imagination of this generation and will have to be reconstituted in a new form. What must be prevented, however, is the loss of humanity. If people can obtain through technology most of the things they desire, then we as educators must be very much concerned to make them desire the good. We need to be instilling in them the large, controlling virtues of human understanding, instructing their imaginations and hearts as well as their ingenuity and skill. It is in fact our primary responsibility to think seriously about the common humanity of the students in our care. The nobility implicit in these fragile human beings who will remake society needs to be uncovered and nurtured. [Educators] occupy the crucial post of this task, facing outward toward a dying hierarchical regime and inward toward a communal world whose citizens are already in possession of an implicit equality, the ground for a full flowering of democracy.

This moment of which he speaks is the moment toward which our university has been pointed from its beginning: its time of destiny, its crisis, the time when the education our university offers will be most needed by our nation. But a crisis can go either way. The Greek word from which “crisis” comes means a separating out, a putting apart of things that before had been mixed together, a moment in which one must choose. And there’s no doubt that America could choose the dark side of this forking path. Private education everywhere is facing a difficult ordeal at this crucial juncture in our nation’s history. The economic situation has radically changed; there will be no easy way for the University of Dallas to make its way financially. Potential donors continue to give their support to well-established institutions of learning whose curricula have all but disintegrated. High-school students do not know and have not been told—by parents, teachers, or counselors—that they need a liberal education.

What do we mean by a liberal education? Is it a mere tag that we hide behind, implying a kind of general learning? Is it a sampling of the humanities and the arts? a collection of readings on radically opposing positions? If we speak accurately, we mean by a liberal education the kind of learning that is the supreme creation of the West, the glory that has led to the American founding, the specific sort of *paideia* that has made possible the incarnation of democratic ideals. As a recent book has pointed out, Rémi Brague’s *Eccentric Culture*, the European culture (which we inherited) is distinguished by its Christian respect for the secular order. It discerned two realms, the temporal and the spiritual, implicit in the scriptural “Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s”; and in working out the intricate relationship between the two, allowing the temporal its own freedom, its own pursuit of the good, Europe developed a unique culture. It developed the liberal arts, which are Europe’s chief contribution to learning. These disciplines, the intellectual arts that produce free people, derive from the study of Rome and Greece—in tension with the study of Rome and Jerusalem. It was on the basis of this culture that the American founding occurred; and American ideals are still inescapably bound to European culture, still requiring the buttressing of the liberal arts. Now that most educational institutions have put aside this traditional curriculum, the serious question to be asked is whether democracy can be sustained by a mere overt teaching of the necessary virtues. Can churches and homes

take over the task? can elementary and secondary schools, simply by emphasizing the words *freedom* and *justice*, expect the qualities that underlie these concepts to be very deeply embedded in a person's soul? It seems, rather, that this kind of paideia is the very mark of institutions of higher learning.

The remarkable thing about what we call a liberal education, in which, as Cardinal Newman insisted, knowledge is pursued as its own end, is the transformation it effects. A liberal education does not teach students right answers; instead, it leads them into a region of their own souls in which they can *find* right answers in new and unfamiliar situations. It endows them with a power enabling them to know the true order of being. What we are saying is that truth cannot be taught directly: it needs a vehicle, a carrier. The best carrier of the truths that a classical Christian society has considered desirable is a body of great works in philosophy, politics, literature, mathematics, and science. This is the sacred wisdom of the West, which can be passed on only by great labor. But its fruits are wisdom and equanimity. Liberal education forms the character of persons, freeing them to seek truth and justice in radically new situations. The University of Dallas has taken as its task the always necessary task of reanimating this tradition, not following the past slavishly but reformulating and reimagining, bringing to life again the great works of the past and relating them to the present.

Liberal education is floundering in most universities throughout the nation. Actually, it has not really been taught for some fifty years. It has been confused with general education, presented as a fine ornament for an elite, or given as a kind of sop for those who cannot make up their minds about a major. It has been presented as content for cultural literacy—facts, information, skills. But for some time now it has not been taught as the experience of greatness that leads a person into new territory, the formation of magnanimity, of large-souledness, which alone can promote and sustain a free way of life. It has been viewed as a decoration upon life, not as the inner core of life itself.

But at this particular moment in our nation's history, the way is open for the noble life. We are no longer a country emerging from agrarianism to industrialism; we may have reached a period in which there will be no startlingly new innovations; we may be asked instead to build a culture that is worthy of a virtuous and noble people. Specialists in financial matters are telling us that the passing of the labor market from America to Asia will radically change the face of American life. Wage earners in developing countries will work for pay that no American company can ignore. There will be fewer and fewer jobs in production for Americans; the economic basis of our society is changing. With the *production* of technology no longer our chief concern, our emphasis has already turned to shaping the *use* of technology toward desired ends. That "brave new world" is already dawning in which all people will have as their chief task thinking and learning. This is the role the University of Dallas was called to play: to affect American education such that the supreme joy of learning, the wise use of leisure, the high task of pursuing truth may be made available to everyone. This kind of education has been carried on by numerous institutions founded by UD students following in the path of their alma mater; here in Dallas, the Teachers Academy of the Dallas Institute has taught the classics to high school teachers for twenty years; in New Hampshire a jewel of a small school, Thomas More College,

has been teaching the liberal arts with a superb curriculum since its founding in 1980. Numerous preparatory schools have been founded by UD's graduates. One senses that an awareness of the modern educational loss is beginning, on a widespread level, to be felt across the nation. Hundreds of small schools nationwide have modeled their curricula on a book that Dr. Os Guinness and I edited a few years back called *Invitation to the Classics*—in which UD professors and their students, now themselves professors, along with faculty members from other universities, do just that: invite readers into the classics

This is the beginning of a great shift in American consciousness; this is the time the University of Dallas will be needed. Our epoch needs to be led by a great burgeoning of originality in reclaiming the great ideas and images from the past, not by any sort of dogged literalism.

A short story by our greatest American writer, William Faulkner, "Race at Morning," throws a poignant light on the real motive for education. It is the story of one day's events in which a twelve-year-old boy goes with his adopted sponsor, whom he calls Mister Ernest, to hunt a big white-tailed deer. In the process of the story we realize that the boy's parents have deserted him and that Ernest has taken him in, taught him farming and the hunt. The boy is idealistically caught up in Mister Ernest's way of life, the life of nature, in the fields and the big woods. On this particular day, after long hours tracking the deer with the dogs and shooting without results, the deer shows himself—in a position where he could easily be targeted:

And then we seen him again [the boy says]. It was the last time—a thicket, with the sun coming through a hole onto it like a searchlight. He crashed jest once; then he was standing there broadside to us, not twenty yards away, big as a statue and red as gold in the sun, and the sun sparking on the tips of his horns—they was twelve of them—so that he looked like he had twelve lighted candles branched around his head, standing there looking at us while Mister Ernest raised the gun and aimed at his neck, and the gun went, "Click. Snick-cluck. Click. Snick-cluck. Click. Snick-cluck" three times, and Mister Ernest still holding the gun aimed while the buck turned and give one long bound, the white underside of his tail like a blaze of fire, too, until the thicket and the shadows put it out; and Mister Ernest laid the gun slow and gentle back across the saddle in front of him, saying quiet and peaceful, and not much louder than jest breathing, "God dawg. God dawg." ...

"Don't worry," I said, "I ain't going to tell them you forgot to load your gun. For that matter, they don't need to know we ever seed him."

"Much oblige," Mister Ernest said.

In that one frozen moment of contemplation, when the boy recognizes that the older man does not really want to kill the deer, but to realize it, he comes to see that maybe that was the point of the hunt: the deer has to outrun the dogs all day just to know that he can do it; the man has to keep up the pace and shoot at the deer all along just to reassure himself that he is capable of it. But neither wants the high, spiritual moment of contemplation to end. The boy explains this in his own view as follows:

What we had all three spent this morning doing was no play-acting jest for fun, but was serious, and all three of us was still what we was—that old buck that had to run ... because running was what he done the best and was proudest at; and Eagle and the dogs that chased him ... because that was the thing they done the best and was proudest at; and me and Mister Ernest and Dan, that run him ... because now we could go back and work hard for eleven months making a crop ... all three of us going back home now, peaceful and separate, until next year, next time. (*The Big Woods* 188)

Later, after the experience is over, and the boy makes a reference to putting in the crop, remarking that after that it won't be long before November and the next hunt.

"You ain't going to put in the crop next year," Mister Ernest said. "You're going to school."

So at first I didn't even believe I had heard him. "What?" I said. "Me? Go to school?"

"Yes," Mister Ernest said. "You must make something out of yourself."

"I am," I said. "I'm doing it now. I'm going to be a hunter and farmer like you."

"No," Mister Ernest said. "That ain't enough any more. Time was when all a man had to do was just farm eleven and a half months, and hunt the other half. But not now. Now just to belong to the farming business and the hunting business ain't enough. You got to belong to the business of mankind."

"Mankind?" I said.

"Yes," Mister Ernest said. "So you're going to school. Because you got to know why. You can belong to the farming and hunting business and you can learn the difference between what's right and what's wrong, and do right. And that used to be enough—just to do right. But not now. You got to know why it's right and why it's wrong, and be able to tell the folks that never had no chance to learn it; teach them how to do what's right, not just because they know it's right, but because they know now why it's right because you just showed them, told them, taught them why. So you're going to school."

And in this simple dialogue, Faulkner has hit upon this change that has come upon us in this long history of mankind, on our way to the New Jerusalem. Most people used to need to be taught *how*; but now they need to be taught *why*. The four centuries of modernity just now ended have focused on the how of things: and now that we have so much power, we need to focus again on the why: on the moral and spiritual reasons for doing what we do. Knowing these ultimate reasons for things is no longer the mere province of the elite. Democracy is based on the belief that all people can make judgments, all can know the why of things. In fact, democracy stands or falls on a sufficient number of citizens knowing the ethical and spiritual reasons for things. This is what Alexis de Tocqueville emphasized in his book *Democracy in America*, after his famous

visit to this country in the nineteenth century. American democracy does not come naturally to people, he insisted. It must be taught. And so our very way of life—the business of mankind, as Faulkner puts it—depends on a liberal education—if not for all (as it should be) then at least for a sufficient number to instruct others in the reasons for things.

So, as Faulkner rightly intuits, we have to belong to the business of mankind; the question *why* should elicit our most fundamental study: we are moving away from the epoch in which the descriptive *how* of skills and techniques could accomplish marvels; but we may have thrown out too many things on the way; and people may continue too long to consider materialism and the how process to be efficacious. But this generation of young now in college needs to know why; it needs the fundamental study that will enable them, as Jacques Maritain, the French philosopher has said, to unlock their own intuitive power, to engage what my husband called “the inner tutor.” They need to have what has long been called a liberal education. This is the unique product of Western civilization, present nowhere on the globe but in this heritage of Graeco-Roman Judaeo-Christian wisdom encapsulated in the great books. It was to reanimate this wisdom that the university of Dallas was founded, offering *ex corde ecclesia*, from the heart of the Church the supreme freedom, as our motto has it “to students of all faiths”—the freedom to instruct their minds and hearts and to be a free people.

So we have to remember that our university is not just for Catholics. It is offered to the world from the heart of the Church. It is for the world. At its very inauguration its motto was “a Catholic university for students of all faiths.” Further, our university is not just for an elite; it is for all who find that they want what we have traditionally called a liberal education, by which we mean an education that takes as its mission the discovery of what Faulkner has called “the old verities.” The West has accumulated a series of great texts that are guides in this search; one person cannot undertake the task successfully by himself; and so this heritage must be passed down to each new generation.

Christopher Dawson, the medieval historian, wrote about the Leviathan of American secular education, of a monstrous size with which we cannot hope to compete. But, as he pointed out, Leviathan has a small brain. We can hope to match him there and perhaps even overpower him. That is the hope for the University of Dallas. Its mission is not simply to protect the faith of young Catholics. Its mission is to engender a revolution in American education, and we can already see some of those results in new institutions of learning that have been founded by UD graduates. But this university still has an important role itself to play for the new epoch that we face. It must become known; it must be recognized and supported as an important educational resource for the nation. This is our task; for just at this point there is the opportunity for American ideals to reach the whole world. This is the “auspicious moment.” If we allow those ideals that we transmit to be solely economic, omitting the precious moral and intellectual verities we have inherited, we shall have slighted the task we have been given.

UD is different from other institutions of higher learning, distinguished from non-Catholic schools by its loyalty to the great tradition bequeathed to Western civilization by Rome, as it carried Athens and Jerusalem into the territory that became Europe. It is different from most

other Catholic universities in that its sense of that tradition permeates all its studies. At UD each discipline is seen to exist in a sacred universe subject to the power that created it, redeemed by the power who entered history, its growth toward final fulfillment governed by the power indwelling within the human person. From all their disciplines, not just from theology and philosophy, UD students learn about the ongoing nature of truth, its perennial availability to the questing mind.

But what is most distinctive about UD education is that it doesn't teach the texts so much as, according to Don Cowan, the metatexts—what lies behind the texts, that realm of value to which, when we are introduced to it, we have permanent access. What we all need to remind ourselves of, then, is that the University of Dallas has a unique approach to liberal education; it presents it not as a bookish endeavor but as an experience pointing to a living tradition, one that modifies and changes as it goes along but that keeps the precious inheritance of the past.

And yet, as we know, our school has still not been “discovered.” It stands on the verge of that recognition that will enable it to fulfill its mission. And so somehow we have to get through this crisis and focus on the task ahead. There is a hunger for solid education in our time.

What we can say in summation is that: UD is producing better educated students than ever; its curriculum and faculty are stronger; its campus is beautiful. It stands ready to discharge its mission. It needs our support. It needs our love; it needs our prayers.