

Shimer College 2009 Commencement Keynote Address

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The choice of the Commencement speaker is a slippery business: it may be a movie star, a politician, a captain of industry, a retired general, an international figure from the UN, or a Nobel laureate. At the University of Chicago, with which Shimer College has a close relationship, there is strong tradition that the commencement address is always given by a member of the faculty who talks about some issue from his own field of specialization which has some significance for the graduating seniors. Since I'm on the faculty at the University of Chicago and I approve of that tradition, I thought I'd follow it this afternoon here at Shimer. And since I mainly teach in the undergraduate college and my primary field of interest is early history, you might even say, the creation of the Liberal Arts, I thought I would talk about that, not only because it interests me, but also because graduating seniors from Shimer College who have received an extraordinary Liberal Arts education these past several years, it has to be of deep interest to you and your concern about the future.

So let me begin with a story from the distant past, an historical story with which you, as Shimer students, have some acquaintance. It begins in the seventh century B.C. in mainland Greece and the surrounding regions colonized by the Greeks – to the east on the islands of the Aegean and the shore of Asia Minor and to the West in southern Italy and Sicily. Traditionally my story starts with a man named Thales, of whom we know almost nothing, although among other things he is credited with accurately predicting an eclipse of the sun. He was apparently the first of a number of extraordinary individuals at the time from the regions to the east and west of mainland Greece, some of whom began to develop geometry, others of whom were interested in all sorts of natural phenomena. All of these men with their diverse interests more or less rejected the traditional religious beliefs of the Greeks in the Gods; they focused their attention instead on the world of nature and they searched for the permanent causes of those common phenomena we all can observe: the rise and fall of the sun each day, the 28 day cycle of the phases of the moon, the peculiarity of the wandering stars we call planets, and the cycle of the seasons. They not only observed these phenomena, but also wished to understand them as natural phenomena, so they framed theories that explained them. They were interested in what the Greeks called “nature”, “*phusis*,” those things that happen by themselves without the intervention of Gods or humans. If they were not exactly scientists, they were proto-scientists, and because they were totally focused on discovering the permanent causes of the permanent features of the world, they were generally not very interested in the human things because, as they observed, the human things, their communities, their customs, their laws, their beliefs about the gods, were all extremely variable from place to place and from time to time. The human things have no stability or permanence and therefore could not really be known. This is act one in my story: the creation by the pre-Socratic thinkers of science, the effort to identify, describe, and ultimately understand the natural, unchanging order of the world.

Act two begins a bit later in the early years of the fifth century B.C. with a man named Protagoras, the first Sophist. A Sophist, as the term implies, was simply a wise man who taught his wisdom to others for a fee, often a very substantial one. In effect, the Sophists were the first

professors, men who claimed to know something of importance to humans about the human world. They accepted the skepticism of the pre-Socratics about the existence of the Gods, but they were fascinated with exactly those aspects of the world that the pre-Socratic physicists had turned away from, those highly variable beliefs, customs, and laws that shaped the lives of individuals and their communities. The Sophists saw that the diversities of the many human communities were not gifts of the gods, but were merely shared beliefs or opinions that had developed over time and been shaped by various legislators, poets, rulers, and priests of one sort or another. They also saw that in each community the laws and beliefs that shaped it tended to favor the community's rulers. In democracies which were ruled by a broad assembly of all citizens, the poor, who were more numerous than the wealthy, tended to tax the wealthy heavily. And in cities with a restricted assembly limited to the land-owning, wealthy classes, it was the poor who were at a disadvantage. But the key to political power, the Sophists saw, was not stupidly to try to seize power through armed force – that merely created a permanent violent struggle between the factions that composed the community. Instead, the key was to frame convincing arguments for laws that were accepted even by those disadvantaged by them. And the key to framing such convincing arguments was the art of Rhetoric, the capacity to take either side of any disagreement and make a convincing argument in its favor. That is what the Sophists claimed to teach, and that was the beginning of formal education in the West.

Prior to the Sophists, the education of the young was a rather modest affair; there were schools and teachers that taught the young to read by reading Homer and the poets. But at late adolescence the young men of the city, especially those from wealthy families who didn't need to go to work, simply learned from participating in the active political life of the community. When the Sophists emerged as serious teachers of the young men, there developed, a certain ambiguous tension between the elders of the city and the Sophists. The elders spoke the "*Pios*" language of the traditional values and customs of the city, and the Sophists were skeptical intellectuals who spoke the rational, technical language of a nontraditional discipline. This was the "culture war" of the 5th century B.C. in Greece, especially in Athens. This was also the intellectual and political context of the Socratic career, act three in my story.

What we know of Socrates, we know almost exclusively from the Dialogues of Plato. We have no way of knowing whether it is an accurate picture of the historical Socrates, because Socrates himself wrote nothing and the reports of his contemporaries rarely display the profundity of the Platonic Socrates. So, our Socrates is the one so brilliantly portrayed by Plato. He has been traditionally understood to be an enemy of the Sophists, but in the Dialogues, though he questions their views, he is also intrigued with them. In his conversations with his fellow Athenians he often seems to share the Sophists' skepticism about the traditional values and beliefs of the city. Cicero says that "Socrates brought philosophy down from the heavens, into the cities of men, into private houses, and compelled her to ask questions about life and morality and things good and evil." So, according to Cicero, Socrates as a philosopher, was interested in the discovery of the same kind of fundamental, permanent principles of things that the pre-Socratics were, but instead of looking for them in the heavens or in nature, he looked for them in the cities and houses of men, exactly the realm that the Sophists were interested in where the Sophists found only variable opinions that could be studied, manipulated and shaped by a clever and technically perfected rhetoric, Socrates found various serious but differing opinions about

justice, virtue, and education. Further, despite their inadequacy in the face of Socrates' cross-examinations, these opinions always pointed beyond themselves towards what seemed to be true knowledge of these strange permanent entities he called "forms." He never seems to have gotten a full and adequate account of these strange entities, but in searching for them he transformed the "*Sophia*", the Wisdom, of the Sophists into "*Philosophia*", the love of and search for Wisdom, recasting the idea of education for all of posterity.

Socrates thus integrated the "*Pios*", traditional wisdom of the city fathers with the skeptical, probing insights and techniques of the Sophists in order to look for the permanent truths of the fundamental human phenomena – our capacity to reason, our desire for the truth of things, the need for genuine human excellence, the virtues of moderation, courage, wisdom, and justice. In sum, the Platonic Socrates, our Socrates, incorporated in a single human life the image of a liberal education, an education which is comprehensive, including everything from the extended cosmos as a whole to the complex inner life of the individual human soul, and education which recognizes that there is some validity in the demands of each of the competing parties that always try to shape the education for the young. The scientists are right to insist that the young must study and understand the natural world in which we live. The Sophists are right to argue that the young need the arts and tools of persuasion, they need to learn to read well, to talk and write with power and elegance if they are to make their way in the world and to be effective in their communities. And the fathers, the elders, are right to insist that the young, if they are not to regress to the condition of mere barbarians, must come to see, to appreciate, to respect, and finally to incorporate in their very character the ideals, the traditions, and the procedures of their community. And Socrates packages, so to speak, all of this in his probing questioning of all these groups. His image is utterly enchanting, but how can we, lesser mortals, convert this image into a realistic, structured, formal education that will liberate the young from their profound ignorance?

If Socrates and Plato together constitute the third act of my story, act four belongs to Aristotle, perhaps the most powerfully organized mind in the whole of our tradition. Aristotle transformed the competing parties, of the pre-Socratic scientists, the traditional city fathers, and the skeptical Sophists who Socrates incorporated in his philosophical career, into a distinct but related intellectual disciplines. The scattered, interesting but often inaccurate insights of the pre-Socratics became the basis for the articulation of the major Theoretical sciences of Physics, Metaphysics, and Mathematics and all their various sub-disciplines. The arts and technical skills employed by the Sophists became Aristotle's universal arts of Logic, Rhetoric, Dialectic, and Poetry. And the serious, practical, but often inchoate, concerns of the fathers became the practical disciplines of Ethics and Politics. The theoretical sciences make it possible to discover and organize into a number of distinct disciplines, each with its own subject matter, methods, and principles the truth about all the diverse features of the natural world. The universal arts the Sophists, tentatively explored, make it possible for us, using logic, to construct rational argument, using Rhetoric to make seriously persuasive arguments where logic is not possible or appropriate, using dialectic to examine and critique opinions to form better opinions, and using the fine arts to make beautiful and profound representations of our deepest experiences of ourselves and the world.

So Aristotle's organization of the sciences became the basis for the development of any number of curricular or liberal studies. Over the next 2500 years every major community used this pattern to devise a course of studies that would be the completion, the final piece, in the serious education of the young, preparing them to take their place among the future leaders of the community. The Romans, with their profound concern for politics and governance put a heavy emphasis on rhetoric and the other arts. The middle ages, with their focus on Christian faith in all its complexity, had to integrate the biblical tradition into the classical curriculum, so exegesis, commentary, theology, and specific new Christian values such as faith, hope, and charity, became subject to analysis and commentary and were thus included in the liberal arts. With the rise of modern science in the 16th and 17th centuries, natural science in a distinctively new form had to be integrated into the curriculum along with a great deal more mathematics. With the emergence of the nation state every national community now has its own version of the appropriate education for their young, so the liberal arts take on a number of distinctive national flavors and are taught in institutions of higher learning called colleges and universities. Italy, England, France, Germany all develop patterns of education and institutional structures that emerge from the common medieval pattern, but now take a number of rather distinctive forms.

And this brings me to the fifth and last act of my story. The United States is one of the new nation-states, but as a large republic with an increasingly broad electorate, it too needs an appropriate liberal curriculum for its future citizens. At first this was handled in primary and secondary schooling with its heavy emphasis on American history and courses in Civics. But the creation of a large number of public, private and church related colleges and universities in the 19th and 20th centuries called for a more substantial and more adult liberal education. The standard solution that emerged was to select a number of courses in writing, literature, foreign language, history, and science that were dubbed liberal arts and to require all students to take a certain number of them in each category. We used to call this the Chinese Menu form of liberal arts – choose two from column A and three from column B. It still exists in many, perhaps most, American colleges and universities, but it has long been understood to be a ridiculous parody of an education in the liberal arts. So there have been many experiments for about a century now attempting to devise a more serious program in the liberal arts. A few of these experiments have been truly radical, none has succeeded in gaining general acceptance.

In the 1930's, during the great depression, a group of intellectually ambitious academics from the University of Chicago and St. John's College met one summer and tried to devise a more serious and effective liberal arts curriculum. The St. John's group held out for a program based on the great books; those from Chicago argued for a program based on a set of disciplines. They couldn't agree and so went their separate ways. The Chicago group under the leadership of Richard McKeon devised an extraordinary curriculum based on their three year sequence of courses in the Humanities, the Social Sciences, and the Natural Sciences, along with one year courses in mathematics, writing and foreign language, and concluded with a capstone integrating course in the organization of knowledge. In face these sequences of courses with their modern names – Humanities, Social Sciences, Natural Sciences, and Integration – were actually the original branches of knowledge blocked out by Aristotle. The Humanities are a modern version of Aristotle's Theoretical Sciences, but updated to include the many developments and discoveries in the sciences since Aristotle. The Humanities are a modern version of Aristotle's

universal arts now called imaginative literature, history, rhetoric and philosophy. The Social Sciences are Aristotle's sciences of the practical, now called economics, sociology, anthropology, and psychology. And the integration course on the organization of the various modes and forms of knowledge was Aristotle's awesome science of Metaphysics, the Science of the Sciences. The readings in every course were original sources, including replicating crucial scientific experiments; the courses were all very small and conducted by teachers who asked questions, like Socrates, rather than lecturing, and grades were awarded on the basis of a single six hour comprehensive exam given at the end of each year-long course and graded anonymously. The program was established at the University of Chicago in the late 1930's and in 1950 Shimer College also adopted this extraordinary curriculum. At Chicago the program was always very controversial and by the mid 1950's the University sadly began to chip away at its many unusual features so that today only vague bits and pieces of the original design remain. Shimer has done much better and the basic structure of the original program is still evident in the liberal arts curriculum you graduating seniors have completed.

So here we are today celebrating your successful completion of your undergraduate program of students. You have earned a B.A. More significantly, you have completed the most original, the most powerful, and the most comprehensive liberal arts curriculum in the world. You are now, liberally educated and prepared to take your place in the adult world. That world is more complicated, more difficult to navigate than the world your parents entered generations ago. But you are ready for it, though you may not yet realized it; for your non-specialized, non-vocational education has actually better prepared you than your less fortunate friends graduating from other larger, more conventional schools. An education is not measured quantitatively, it is measured by its quality, and though your school is small, it is nevertheless great. I am delighted at the end of my story to congratulate you on a job well done, and wish you a Bon Voyage on the exciting journey you are now well equipped to undertake.