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# the human dimension of the college

by Howard R. Swearer  
opening convocation address  
September 25, 1970

**F**or all of us this convocation marks the beginning of a new academic year — an occasion to look ahead. For me it is the beginning of a new life. I use the term "life" instead of "career" advisedly. Carleton, as I have observed during the last two months and have felt in innumerable conversations with students, faculty, staff and alumni, is the kind of community to which one naturally gives of himself intellectually and emotionally well beyond the limits of most professional callings. It deserves no less; and the personal rewards from entering openly and fully into this community of scholarship and living are bountiful. Pain there is also, I am sure, but in a Benthamite calculus for

most it seems far outweighed by the pleasure.

There is an understandable but regrettable tendency for most discussions of higher education today to ascend into vapid generalizations about the nature of the educational "system" or its likely condition in the year 2000 or to wallow in testy re-criminations or hand-wringing. There is no lack of diagnoses of our ills or visions of our purpose and future. We academicians are a verbal lot; and since colleges and universities have become both a center of public attention and a political issue, our analyses are amply supplemented by journalists, politicians, or others simply with access to a dictaphone. Regretfully,

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**A task for entire  
community**

many of the educational pathologists fail to examine our culture in the wider cultural setting. Too many prescriptions for our ills have the whiff of patent medicine, to say nothing of grapeshot.

**I**t is not my intention to belittle our problems, our needs and our shortcomings. The litany is long and well-known. I need not repeat them here. Nor is this the time to attempt a comprehensive analysis of our condition. After two months I am still digesting information and impressions. In the Carleton argot there is still much "booking" to be done. More important, the process of analysis and goal setting is one in which all members of the community should participate; I suspect it is a continuous, never-ending process. The new College Council and its policy committees will be important arenas in which the community wrestles with questions of policy and program. A symposium is being planned for mid-January devoted to liberal education at Carleton from the perspective of faculty, students, staff and trustees. During the fall term there will be, I trust, a variety of other public occasions in which one aspect or another of Carleton's liberal education will be examined. The dean of students, Miss Phillips, and the director of counseling services, Mr. Johnson, are, in addition, planning a series of lectures and seminars over the year dealing with personal effectiveness.

As we alter or reaffirm our educational programs and living arrangements, we shall necessarily proceed step by step, dealing with one or several issues at a time. I must confess to considerable skepticism about wholistic plans which spring fully designed from the brow of educational consultants. The internal logic may be impeccable and the symmetry aesthetically pleasing, but somehow or other the affairs of men can never seem to be molded to their grandiloquent configurations.

At the same time, random decisions do not add up to a program and can be disastrous. We must search for those philosophical concepts and guiding principles which will inform our more specific policies. This search will be both deductive and inductive. On the one hand, we must dream and stretch our aspirations; on the other, we must assess where we now stand and build on our firmest foundations. Many of the building blocks are already here; others are being edged into place. To cite a few: room for independent study in the curriculum and off-campus experience; our growing connections with other educational institutions and with the larger community around us; increasing cooperation among disciplines; the new system of governance; college-supported faculty research on new courses; the increasing numbers of black and other minority students; efforts under way to improve and enrich dormitory life and to bridge the

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**What is truly  
"relevant"?**

gap between the academic and the social realms. Most promising is the existence of a highly professional faculty and staff whose loyalty to this institution and devotion to teaching are manifest. We are fortunate. Many colleges and universities cannot boast of a linkage between academic professionalism and institutional loyalty. We are twice blessed with a student body of immense ability and creativity, whose healthy impatience with the gap between aspirations and reality has by and large been used constructively and whose passion has been tempered by a devotion to reason. You have been, I believe the record has shown, "due process radicals," to use Kingman Brewster's felicitous phrase.

Never has the need been more urgent to define our purposes more clearly and to shape our programs thereby. Colleges and universities are caught up in society's race for social, political and economic change. In fact, some would charge — mistakenly, I think — that we are or should be the fulcrum of change. We could not, even if we wished, avoid redefining our relationships to the society which both nurtures and chastises us. And, unless we want others to do it for us, we had better get on with it. There is the danger in this regard that our response might be an indiscriminate rush to "relevance" which would crowd out sound educational practices and liberal education without contributing much to the amelioration

of society's troubles. There is also some poignancy to the criticism that we are quicker to plan for others than we are for ourselves. I find some politicians' mots more difficult to absorb because of worry about our own beams.

**T**he private liberal arts college has a special obligation to define its purposes. At a time when there are some eight million college students and predictions call for an increase from 50% to 70% in the number of high school graduates who will continue on for more education in the next decade or so, what place is there for the private undergraduate college of limited enrollment? We are in danger of slipping into a position of competing with the large publicly supported universities and, to make it worse, on their own terms. As the revolution of "inclusion" proceeds and we approach near universalization of higher education, as financial needs of higher education in this country continue to increase, there will be growing questioning about our "relevance." Already in the consideration of schemes for public support of private colleges there are signals that the public interest, which is and should be the rationale for governmental support, may be narrowly interpreted by some to mean that the private colleges as a condition to receive taxpayers' funds should simply replicate their public brothers.

**Need to define  
purposes**

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**Not competitors  
but teammates**

**T**he burden rests on us to show that we are not competitors of the large state universities but vital teammates in a differentiated, therefore better, higher educational system. As we define ourselves more clearly and loudly, I am confident the necessary support will be forthcoming. The dynamics of the academic market place during the last two decades have operated to promote a growing homogenization of higher education as documented in a recent study of the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education. There will and should be increasing concern by students, parents and the citizenry at large over this trend. Homogenization and sterilization are twins not only in the milk bottle.

Let me stress that I am not criticizing the public universities. They are performing a magnificent service to this country. As many of them enter into a new period of open admissions, they will face enormous challenges. Who can but applaud the rapid and all too long delayed extension of citizenship to which higher education is the key? Carleton, I am proud to say, is also taking part in this revolution of inclusion and we shall continue to do so to the best of our ability, though we cannot join in the open admissions policy without literally joining the public system. I am not prejudging the issue whether or not Carleton should grow, but it is clear we could not in-

clude thousands of additional students without undermining our essential nature.

Furthermore, we owe it to our prospective students to explain more clearly what their experience here is likely to be. Many students would not be satisfied by, or benefit from, a Carleton education. There is a natural reluctance for an educational institution to define its objectives clearly for fear it will cut itself off from the "best" students. The opposite may be more true, certainly, if by "best" is meant those most likely to benefit from the educational experience Carleton has to offer.

Carleton is not infrequently referred to in the press, along with a score or so other private colleges, as an elite school, a bittersweet characterization during an age of growing egalitarianism. There is widespread agreement among us that we do not wish to be elitist in terms of race, creed or class. We are, however, normally willing to accept the designation with no little pride as it refers to the intelligence of our students and high academic standards. But, increasingly we are aware that high standards and highly intelligent students are not ends in themselves. Among other questions which come to mind — what special educational experience can we provide? For what are we preparing our graduates? How well does our education articulate with that of the sec-

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**True measure of  
our worth**

ondary schools from which come our students at one end and with post-graduate and professional education and other experience at the other end? How well do we reconcile action and direct experience, social and artistic, with theoretical studies? Intelligent, well-prepared students and high academic standards cannot in themselves be a measure of our worth but rather the basic materials with which we have to work in designing exciting educational programs.

Another characteristic of Carleton cherished by most is its size. For most of us this was a big reason why we came here. But, again, size by itself is not a sufficient standard by which to judge ourselves. The value of our size is what we do with it. It should enable us to provide an education different from larger public institutions, better suited to the kinds of students we attract. It should facilitate educational experimentation and the collective discussion of educational philosophies which may set standards and lead the way for others. But only collective *will* and *wisdom* will make our size a positive educational asset.

**The human  
dimension**

A consideration of size leads me to revert to the theme on which I began — a view of Carleton as a way of life, rather than merely a profession for the minority of us or an educational automat for the majority of you. The human dimension of the institution merits our close attention both because it is intrinsically important and

because, I suspect, it may be a strategic starting point for thinking through our essential nature and purposes.

**L**ast May, I am told, there welled up at Carleton a feeling of goodwill, a spirit of highly intense personal cooperation that warmed the heart of even the most hard-nosed cynic. This widely shared sense of community was in response to a specific set of circumstances, a perceived external challenge. No such sense of exhilaration and companionship can be sustained over a long period of time. One cannot operate for long with a continuous town meeting. The level of energy required soon leaves one exhausted. But this period may loom as a goal of community life, personally experienced by many of you, toward which we should strive, not in response to external stimuli but through our own internal processes and motivation. Having glimpsed a more vigorous sense of community, we should seek to approximate it by other, less artificial, means before the vision and sensations fade with time.

President Nason, in his final report summing up his years at Carleton, notes that over the last decade the sense of college-wide community has dissipated before those attributes of the new student culture stressing individualism, an atomistic concept of social relations, and a penchant for association primarily in tightly knit friendship groups of limited size.

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**Trust, patience  
and goodwill still  
useful values**

Those traditional symbols of the college community, which also served as its cement, have lapsed: required chapel, weekly convocations, dormitory councils, extensive student government, and freshman hazing (I hope absence of hazing extends to *all* freshmen!). There appears to be at Carleton and elsewhere an affiliation gap between loyalty to a limited group of close friends on the one hand and to such high ideals as peace and equality or to "movements" (usually short-lived) on the other. The reasons for this affiliation gap are not difficult to locate and they are understandable, especially for the minority students in our midst. But, I am frank to say, I find it disturbing both for Carleton and society.

**T**o the extent that allegiance is highly limited, much of its root cause seems to derive from a lack of authority and trust. With the rapid pace of technological and social change and with the increased sensitivity in this age of instant communications to the yawning space between our society's aspirations and practices, traditional forms of authority have been eroded. Some measure of trust has been withdrawn from institutions, nationally and on the campuses as well. New forms and patterns of authority need to be fashioned. Nowhere is this task more pressing than in higher education; Carleton has an opportunity to lead the way. Our size is immensely in our favor and the new governance structure is in place. But,

other ingredients will be necessary as well — above all, such old-fashioned values as trust, patience and goodwill. Few of us think it wise or possible to turn the clock back to compulsory chapel or weekly convocations; we might, however, think about the need for new community-wide enterprises and occasions which help to knit us together.

Reacting to student charges of paternalism, the faculty — wisely, I think — has by and large stopped taking attendance, popping surprise quizzes, and other procedures which tended to cast doubt on students' sense of responsibility and ability to handle independence. But there is the danger that a number of students may now be cut off from needed faculty support. Our student-faculty ratio is highly favorable, luxuriously so by the standards of most colleges and universities. But just as in the case of our size and academic standards, this ratio is not an end in itself. New forms of faculty-student relationships must be forged.

Finally, it would seem evident that we must be more discriminating in our judgments about what may be legitimate values, processes and institutions. Clearly, a number of our national and college attitudes and practices have not served us as they should have; but in rejecting them one should be wary of spreading the acid of skepticism too broadly. In the "age of anxiety," all too often the shouter of slogans is king, at least in terms of newspaper coverage. Such basic hu-

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**Knowing and doing  
are simply  
insufficient**

man values as regard for the rights of others, self-discipline, and personal honesty and courage can be eroded away, only to our long-run regret.

Franklin Murphy, a former chancellor of the University of California, Los Angeles, much in the vein of the philosophy of Miguel de Unamuno, once characterized the philosophical leitmotiv of this generation as: *sentio, ergo sum* (I feel, therefore I am), in contrast to Descartes' summation of the attitude of the 17th and 18th centuries, *cogito, ergo sum* (I think, therefore I am) and the mood of the 19th century, *facio, ergo sum* (I do, therefore I am). This is a useful, if oversimplified, classification and helps to explain some of the misunderstanding between the younger generation imbued with *sentio* and the older generations raised in the traditions of *cogito* and *facio*.

In its best manifestations *sentio* is a useful corrective to the excesses and blinders of *knowing* and *doing*. Much of the current awareness of racial injustice, environmental destruction, and "man's inhumanity to man," to use Churchill's words, we owe to the growth of *sentio*. Students feel strongly about the plight of ghetto dwellers, corruption in government and injustice. I fear *sentio* was not as important an element in the "liberal" tradition which molded most of us in the previous three decades. The point is not that knowing and doing are bad; they are simply insufficient. At the level of the individual, *sentio* has led students to seek new dimensions in their education which includes the

senses. This includes greater attention to the creative arts as well as experiential education — learning through direct experience. Traditionally, under the triple influence of our stern Puritan forefathers, who founded our early colleges along the Eastern Seaboard, the highly rationalistic Germanic educational tradition and the practical instincts of the farmers and toolmakers which infused the public universities, the place of feeling was given short shrift in the curriculum of most colleges. In many colleges and universities today the creative arts are still regarded with suspicion, as somehow unacademic, more suitable for extracurricular fun and games.

**I**t should not be surprising if the new surge toward feeling also has its excesses. For some, the "deed" is sufficient unto itself; their motto is "experience should not be sickled over with the pale cast of thought." Spontaneity is sometimes confused with sincerity. Good form, really "good form," is sometimes regarded suspiciously as both the result and cause of hypocrisy. Thirst for experience through the senses can lead to faddism, cultism and dangerous drug experimentation. Many have noted the wave of anti-intellectualism.

For some of the older generation, colleges today appear obsessed with Dionysian rites. While this is clearly a caricature, there may well be need to redress the balance with *facio* and *cogito*. More to the point, we need to harness *sentio* to create a better, more humane community here at Carleton.

**Spontaneity some-  
times confused  
with sincerity**

**Let us create  
a more humane  
community**

There is a great potential here which we have only begun to tap. Involved with our own senses, we all too often cut ourselves off from the feelings and emotions of others, save perhaps a small handful of friends. Are we really concerned enough about our fellow man in an intensely personal way to take the time and the responsibility to lend him a helping hand? Are we willing and able to interfere in another's life to the extent of assisting, perhaps forcing, him or her to make the grade at Carleton or to work out satisfactorily a personal or social problem?

Finally, it may be that we are experiencing a truncated version of *sentio*, thereby shortchanging ourselves. I refer specifically to joy and humor. Mike Gartner, a 1960 graduate of Carleton, has written in a recent issue of the *Saturday Review* about the grimness he encountered on the campus last spring. I grant you the messages incessantly bombarding us from the mass media are not conducive to happiness. However, I offer you an observation from Reinhold Niebuhr which provides some useful perspective:

*All of us ought to be ready to laugh at ourselves because all of us are a little tunny in our foibles, conceits and pretensions. What is funny about us is precisely that we take ourselves too seriously. We are rather insignificant little bundles of energy and vitality in a vast organization of life. But we pretend that we are the very*

*center of this organization. This pretension is ludicrous; and its absurdity increases with our lack of awareness of it.*

**I**n conclusion, I hope you will indulge me in a few words about the presidency of this very human institution. One wag has said that what colleges need as presidents today are not Clark Kerrs but Clark Kents. I assure you, your president is *not* superhuman. Henry M. Wriston, former president of Lawrence and Brown, has written—only partially with tongue in cheek—the following inhuman description of his experience:

*The president . . . is expected to be an educator, to have been at some time a scholar, to have judgment about finance, to know something of construction, maintenance and labor policy, to speak virtually continuously in words that charm and never offend, to take bold positions with which no one will disagree, to consult everyone and follow all proffered advice, and do everything through committees but with great speed and without error.*

While Clark Kent might be able to fill this job description, I would tell you in all honesty that Howard Swearer cannot. As you will quickly perceive, your president has his bountiful share of human frailties. As one human being to another, I would like to say that I look forward to working with every one of you to make this as humane a community as is humanly possible.