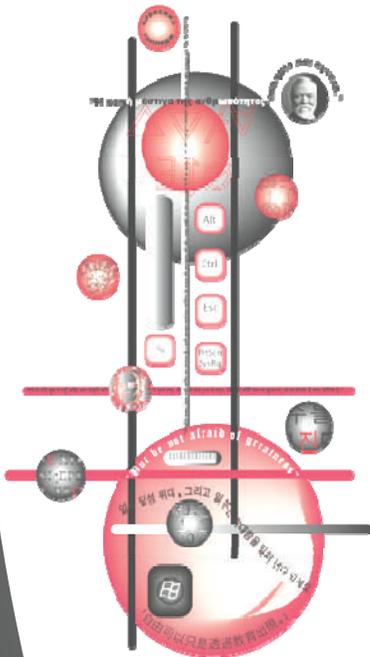




EDUCATION FOR LIFE

Keynote Address at the York
College Fall Convocation 2010



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Thank you President Keizs and Provost Griffith for this extraordinary honor of inviting me to be first Convocation Professor. It is a special privilege to address the whole community and to inaugurate a tradition of annual Convocation talks. I extend my welcome to the faculty, in particular to the new faculty members and the new students for whom this is an introduction to the College community as a whole, to our superb staff, and to our administrators, all of whom support our *raison d'être*: the pursuit of knowledge and the “leading forth,” the education, of our students.

When I first came to York College, Richard Nixon was President of the United States, John Lindsay was Mayor of New York, and Dumont Kenney was President of the College. I was not sure that I would stay, so I chose the exportable pension fund. I have decided to stay. Now, at the start of my 41st season, I want to share with you some thoughts about what good education means.

My undergraduate and graduate education at the University of Chicago made me sensitive to the values that inform this talk, each of which paradoxically embraces what is customarily thought of as dichotomous, even oxymoronic: elite education for a democratic community; perpetuation of tradition for new learning; teaching as character change so that students can become themselves; acquisition of common arts for the sake of specialized research; life as education and education as life. If we do not acquire common arts, when we use them in specialized tasks, we cannot recognize them for what they are, which we must do to use them to the utmost. If we do not recognize that ideas need to be tested and enriched in experience and dialogue, education is abstract and unrelated to life. When errors, defects and impediments are re-

moved, the learner becomes his “true self”.

I think of “education for life” as grounding abstract thought in concrete action. This removes the opposition between fixed tradition and revolutionary change, since tradition is maintained by renewal and the new emerges from the existing. Similarly, the rigid opposition between individual and society is replaced by the idea of a community that fosters the actions and growth of its members. The life of such a community is education. Intellectual excellence had traditionally been thought of as limited to a few, perhaps only sages and saints. Now higher education not only affords opportunities to know things that are useful, it aims at cultivating the humanity of a concrete person. To the moral lessons with which we were catechized in our formative years, higher education adds understanding – and with *that* – the possibility of change and improvement. All education is activity for the sake of truth and all utility is for the sake of humanity.

Intellectual excellence had traditionally been thought of as limited to a few, perhaps only sages and saints. Now higher education not only affords opportunities to know things that are useful, let alone merely to satisfy one’s curiosity, but aims at cultivating the humanity of a concrete person becoming the best one can be respecting knowledge as inclusive of all the facets of human life and experience. Moreover, this sort of education regards values as objects of inquiry that, as in the sciences, require endless, self-corrective experience and communication. To the moral lessons with which we were catechized in our formative years, higher education adds understanding – and with *that* – the possibility of change and improvement. All education is activity for the sake of truth and all utility is for the sake of humanity.

With these at stake, need we

ask why students and faculty ought not to plagiarize or to miss classes? But even if our work was less important than it is, even in its most quotidian moments of checking attendance and submitting grades, we must regard it as a calling. I recall being on an 86th Street cross-town bus with a driver reminding his passengers of the cultural institutions available when we reached 5th Avenue and then again, after crossing the park, when we reached Central Park West. He did so in a manner of such exquisite respect for us and the culture of the city that many of the passengers burst out in applause while two or three shouted “hallelujah!”

In my first years at York, most of my teaching was a two-semester course based on courses taught by Richard McKeon at The University of Chicago, Ideas and Methods I and II, which read various authors in the Natural Sciences, on motion, space, time, and cause, in the Social Sciences, on freedom, power, and history, in the Humanities on imitation, imagination, and expression, and on revolutions in all three fields. When you have more than a few minutes, I’ll tell you about it.

Almost from the day York College opened, the faculty were engaged in re-thinking the general education curriculum. I came in the 3rd year and remain to this day a newcomer for Professors Robert Parmet and Sam Hux, who were here from the start. President Kenney, who had been President of Queensborough Community College, used a Ford Foundation grant to gather a panel of distinguished scholars. Their task was to plan an elite education for students from underserved communities. The panel included Rosemary Park Anastos, President of Barnard College, Richard Davis Anderson, Boyd Professor of Mathematics, Louisiana State University, William Ayers Arrowsmith, Professor of Classics at the University of

Texas, John Hope Franklin, Professor of American History and Chairman of the History Department at the University of Chicago, Laurence McKinley Gould, Professor Emeritus of Carleton College and Professor of Geology at the University of Arizona, Isidor Isaac Rabi, University Professor Emeritus of Physics at Columbia University and Nobel prize-winner in physics, Mark Van Doren, Professor Emeritus of English at Columbia University, Richard Peter McKeon, Distinguished Service Professor of Greek and Philosophy at the University of Chicago. York Professor Samuel J. Hartenberg was the panel's recording secretary.

McKeon played a special role in the creation of York College. He directed President Kenney's and Professor Hartenberg's dissertations. I was working on mine. The York College reincarnation of his Ideas and Methods course was part of a large set of Gen Ed requirements, most of which were interdisciplinary and based on the University of Chicago curriculum. Its purpose was philosophical in the sense of raising questions about how different views of the same subject can be fruitfully related to each other and how conceptions of the organization of the sciences can be distinguished and related.

However, the form this curriculum took did not suit the spirit of the times. The anti-war protests and the civil-rights movement led many students in this country to think that their studies were not *relevant* to their lives. After it was decided that York College would be built in Jamaica, Queens, President Kenney left the College. An acting-president told us that we needed to change the Gen Ed curriculum and that, although he did not know what the new curriculum would be, he did claim to know that "the *trivium* and the *quadrivium* ain't where it's at." He

was referring to what in the Middle Ages came to be called "the seven liberal arts". I raised my hand and said that, although I agreed that the curriculum needed to be changed and that I did not know what it should be, I was confident that, if it were any good, it would *be* the *trivium* and the *quadrivium*. In my defense, I want to say that the *trivium* is the arts of grammar, rhetoric, and logic, i. e. of interpretation, invention, and inference, and the *quadrivium* includes mathematics and astronomy, perennial activities and subjects: it is hard to imagine what education would be without them. But my remark was a slap in the face of a newly appointed, acting-president trying to make an impression on his faculty at a convocation. Which raises the question of how one ought to disagree with and also correct people.

In those days, I used to enjoy being the one who, in a committee or Senate meeting, would rescue the group, not to mention truth and goodness, from some obnoxious or aggressive person, by my own brand of verbal aggression. May I remind you that our word "polemic" is from the Greek *πολεμικός*, meaning "of or for war"? That was before I came to think about aggression and its destructive and constructive uses in the study of psychoanalysis and before I recognized in Socrates an extraordinary teacher who practiced the idea that the good is the aim of all things, all actions, and notably of the actions of a teacher. When a person is in error, of thought or behavior, pointing this out with derision, the way a purposely humiliating army-sergeant might do, may perhaps be instructive to others, but it mostly hurts and angers the target.

In the classroom, the guiding principle should be to help the student to do better; the question should be, especially when we

wish to criticize – and often we are angry when that wish is strong – "What is the purpose of my actions?" "How will they help the student?" This is *not* student-centeredness if that term means sacrificing learning to good feelings; it is simply good, effective human relations, an example, if not of nation-building, at least of community building. And the means are not always sweet.

Socrates shows us, in his exchange with Thrasymachus, how an obstreperous, arrogant, threatening person can be helped to listen and open his mind to others' ideas without losing one's temper or gratifying one's aggressive impulses, and yet Thrasymachus finds the lesson to be pretty rough and is at first moved to say that Socrates is unfair. There is nothing like experience to hold up a mirror to ourselves. Our students too will recognize our good will if we truly teach for their sake rather than to show them up or to show ourselves off. And they will recognize our fraudulence if we do not make demands on them and the emptiness of their own endeavors when they choose processing over education and make their way without the strenuous effort and character change required by real learning.

Although the protestors of the 1970s often had a too narrow view of relevance, they were right that all learning ought to be in the service of humanity, especially if we consider that the pursuit of truth includes the pursuit of who we truly are, not taking our common humanity to be merely the lowest common denominator of human needs, important as they are. Before the Roman idea of *humanitas* became the plural *humanities*, as a result of the Renaissance emphasis on subject matter, all human knowledge was regarded as part of the humanities, the study of the achievements of humanity. It is a great service to help a person rec-

ognize in himself the presence of something shared with Alfarabi, Shakespeare, Jane Austen, Newton, Marie Curie, and Martin Luther King, Jr., much as a child yearns to be like a great athlete, dancer, or musician that he has seen. We continue the tradition at York of thinking how to do that.

I encourage you to engage in the process by which the Gen Ed curriculum is developed, so that we can get the best education our collected experience can produce. In my view — and I remain unhesitant to share my views, though now less truculently, I hope, than when I was much younger — the new Gen Ed requirements proposed by the Task Force would provide a more integrated education for our students that would show them the whole range of human achievements and help them to integrate these into their understanding of their own humanity. They would in the same way help the faculty to

understand what they mean when they advocate for a life of reason and make us a more cooperative, unified faculty. I think it is time to return to the interdisciplinary model to reinforce the value of the whole person, the well-educated human being who can have useful thoughts about problems that involve science and the diversity of peoples, values, philosophies, and religions.

We want our students to be prepared — prepared to specialize in a major and a profession, but prepared in a much wider sense for life itself. When his brother, Epimetheus, whose name means “hindsight,” failed to prepare human beings, as Zeus had ordered him to do, the job was given to Prometheus, whose name means “foresight.” Prometheus got himself in terrible trouble, however, by stealing fire from Zeus and giving it to us along with the arts of politics. Fire symbolizes the use of

nature for human purposes, but it also symbolizes nature as energy that we aspire to understand, including political energy. The arts of politics refer to things that only some people do, since many refuse even to vote. But we and our students must recognize that we are all political since we must live together and cooperate with each other. We get the politics and leaders that we deserve when our only concern is ourselves: politics as self-consuming energy, a terrible fire.

Thank you who listened for doing so. On the other hand, those whose minds wandered may thank me for giving you time to relax and to think of things more congenial to you. Finally this: please do not hesitate to invite me back, in the next 20 years or so. As the great Sugar Ray Robinson said, “the legs are shot, but the punch is still good.”

Welcome to York College.

Howard Ruttenberg was born in Chicago, Illinois, and did both undergraduate and graduate work at The University of Chicago. He completed his dissertation in the Department of Philosophy, with Richard McKeon as dissertation advisor, for the Committee on the Study of Ideas and Analysis of Methods.

After teaching for one year at California State College, San Bernardino, he joined the York College faculty in 1969 while still working on his doctorate, which he completed in 1975. Over the years at York he has taught Introduction to Philosophy, Ancient Philosophy, Modern Philosophy, Philosophy of Love and Friendship, and Existentialism. He also has taught Freedom of Speech, Medieval Philosophy, and led seminars and independent studies on Plato, Aristotle, Spinoza, and Richard McKeon, among other subjects.

In 1977 Professor Ruttenberg began studying at the Center for Modern Psychoanalytic Studies (CMPS) in Manhattan, where he learned to use emotional communication in the classroom, as was displayed in 2007 with dramatic teaching vignettes, “How to talk with people who do not want to talk to you.” His work at the Center included service as book review editor of the journal *Modern Psychoanalysis* and it gave rise to published essays on the analogy between justice and mental health in Plato’s *Republic* and on the philosophic presuppositions and methods of modern psychoanalysis.

Beyond that, he was chosen by Zahava McKeon, Richard’s widow and executor, and a group of other McKeon students, to write the introduction to *Richard McKeon, Freedom and History and Other Essays* (1990), an extensive analysis of a collection of essays on history, human rights, responsibility, and the dialogue among philosophers of different convictions and methods of thought.

Dr. Ruttenberg has served York in several roles over the years, including as department Chair for 16 years, as a member of the College Senate, including being Vice Chair, as Chair of the Council of Chairs, and as a member of the College Curriculum Committee and the Charter Revision Committee, and Chair of the Committee to Implement the Mission of the College. His current service includes membership on the General Education Reform Task Force.

Howard is married to Linda R. Bernstein, who earned her Ph.D. in Medieval English from Columbia University, and they have two children, Raphael Isaac and Ariel Jennie, both of whom are now studying at Brooklyn Law School.

