"Great Books as a Remedy for Education"

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Thank you for inviting me to speak this morning. I currently hold the position of senior scholar at the Benson Center for the Study of Western Civilization at the University of Colorado Boulder. I am not speaking on behalf of the program, but I believe that my remarks are consistent with the goals and aspirations of the Center. Regarding my comments, I am not sure if they are a welcome distraction from the events of the past week, or if they are relevant to what we are currently experiencing, or both. More on that later.

The title of my remarks includes the word remedy. To speak of a remedy suggests that something is wrong. As most of you know, there has been a dramatic decline in our educational system. Our children have been subjected to indoctrination and deprived of an education that lays the foundation for becoming self-sufficient and in a broader scope becoming good citizens and taking on the duties and responsibilities in our democratic republic. A good education preserves our liberties and increases our opportunities to live a good life. Before I continue, I must acknowledge that there are exceptions found in good home-schooling efforts; some schools, programs, and colleges around the country that adhere to sound principles of education; and of course, classroom teachers, professors, and some administrators who fight against the educational behemoth. We offer them recognition, praise, and support.

My title suggests that a remedy for an educational system that is diminishing students instead of enriching them is Great Books. I say a remedy, not the remedy, because there is not a single remedy to the problems we are facing.

What are Great Books? We have all read good books. A work of fiction can entertain us, a work of history can inform us, and a work of nonfiction can teach us. But there are some books that stand apart from others. Most of these books were written centuries ago, which suggests that their content speaks to readers from different eras and cultures than the ones in which they were written. Some refer to them as timeless or universal. The idea of Great Books as an education program dates to the 1940's when two University of Chicago educators began discussion groups.[1]

Great Books are not of one sort. They can come from philosophy, literature, history, or from the fields of science and math. I have had the pleasure and sometimes the agony of reading and teaching many Great Books. Next year I will be approaching thirty years since I moved from the back of the room to the front, or from having someone teaching me to my teaching others. One of the best ways to talk about the Great Books is to share some of my best experiences with them.

We begin with a name that some of you may already know, Socrates. He was a Greek who lived in Athens many centuries ago, and some centuries before Christ. He did not write any books, but Plato, one his students, wrote down his conversations, better known as dialogues with his fellow citizens. We have about forty dialogues, ranging from a dozen pages to the two longest which are about 300 pages. Socrates was famous for asking "what is" questions. What is justice, what is courage, what is virtue are among his questions. Some of the dialogues arrived at answers to the questions, others did not. The word philosophy comes from the Greek, from the time of Socrates. It means love of wisdom. When we love something or someone, we pursue it. Philosophy can also be understood as the search for wisdom. We'll return to Socrates in a moment, but let's first ask, how does one become wise?

One way is through experience that comes from a long life as we see in a wise grandparent or elder who has lived and observed other people and events. Another way is through inquiry, asking questions. The wisdom that Socrates possessed was a result of his long life, but also because he inquired into the nature of things. What I mean by that is he wanted to get at the root or at the starkest meaning. This is important because once we know what justice is, for example, we can apply it objectively or if we can define virtue, we can use it as a guide to judge behavior.

In addition to age, experience, and inquiry, there's another source of Socrates' wisdom. We learn about it from the dialogue that recounts his trial and defense when he was accused of various crimes in Athens. He tells the story of his friend who asked a priestess if there was anyone wiser than Socrates. She says no and Socrates, upon hearing this, sets out to find someone wiser. He discovers that his wisdom is found in the admission to himself that he does not know anything, nor does he think that he knows anything.[2] This propels him into the philosophic life, or the life of inquiry aimed at seeking knowledge and wisdom. To complete the

thought, if someone thinks he knows it all, is he going to pursue wisdom or seek knowledge? No, he is not.

Socrates pursued his inquiries and asked questions, always in public, and while he developed quite a following, especially the young who listened to the exchanges, others perceived him as a threat. He was put on trial in an Athenian court and sentenced to death at the age of 70. His death is a reminder that seeking truth can be dangerous.

Great Books are also found among literature. There is a wide range that includes Greek tragedies and comedies, Shakespeare's plays, novels, and many other examples. Regardless of the writer - male or female - of the time period - old or recent- or of the culture - Greek, European, or American - the story simultaneously captures our imagination and expands it. Whether we watch the performance on a stage or read the book, we learn by stepping out of our own world and daily life and into another.

Other rich works include the Greek playwright Sophocles whose play *Antigone* raises questions about law, justice, the family, political leaders and their citizens. The young Antigone is forbidden from burying her brother because he fought against the city in a civil war. She must decide whether she abides by the law of the city or honors her family and tradition that requires a proper burial. She chooses the latter, buries her brother, and is sentenced to death. It is only after she takes her own life that the ruler realizes his error in judgment.

Equally challenging are Shakespeare's plays that probe human nature in political, familial, and civic settings. Take for example the relentless pursuit of power by Lady Macbeth who pushes her husband Macbeth to kill Duncan the King.

> Come, you spirits
> That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,
> And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full
> Of direst cruelty. Make thick my blood.
> Stop up th' access and passage to remorse,
> That no compunctious visitings of nature
> Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between
> Th' effect and it.[3]

I'll refrain from listing a few modern political figures, males and females, who embody Lady Macbeth and her sentiments. Use your imagination.

There are so many other great works. St. Augustine who in his *Confessions* recounts his journey from a dissolute life to one that embraces Christianity. Mary Shelley whose Dr. Frankenstein fashions a monster that is intended to represent among other things his mastery

over nature but instead becomes the agent that destroys everything that the Dr. holds dear. W.E.B. du Bois whose chapters in *The Souls of Black Folk* recount the efforts of a formerly enslaved race to emerge and become part of a wider community. It is no accident that I choose these three. On the one hand, we can think of them as imparting to us universal truths about faith, nature, and humanity; on the other hand, we can see the particular struggles that are recounted in each. For those who keep a tally, the authors include a white man from North Africa who lived in the 4th century, a 19th century white European woman, and an American who in 1895 was the first black man to earn a Ph. D. at Harvard. I do not keep tallies of the categories that now pervade our daily life. Instead, I look at the words on the page and ask whether they contribute to a dialogue that teaches and challenges the reader.

Many reject the notion of identifying and recognizing a set of Great Books that have value beyond those that are simply good. The critics assail the fact that many were written by DWM's - dead, white males - and regard this as sufficient criticism to dismiss and undermine any effort to have a recognized corpus of books that teach and challenge the reader. Another criticism is that they perpetuate eras that were marked by slavery or white supremacy or other ills and are thus deemed part of the problem. If they would read but a few pages, they would realize that many of these authors are challenging the very same practices or ways that they criticize. In other words, those who condemn past practices should see these works as written by those who were at the forefront of questioning or criticizing the very same things. Whether the list of Great Books is comprehensive or missing other great works is beside the point. What matters is having writings that serve as a point of beginning to open the mind. We hold opinions, but how do we test those opinions and transition from opinion to knowledge to truth? These works and others free the mind. The alternative is living in a closed world, as though one lived in a cave. That image is from Plato's *Republic* and is representative of a world that is closed, where one merely goes through motions that are dictated by others and have no independent thought or do not conceive of the possibility of seeking truth.

Reading Great Books can be a lifelong private pursuit; though the classroom may be in the distant past, we never have to stop learning. In an educational setting the Great Books have been the mainstay of liberal arts colleges and the foundation of a liberal arts education. Let me define liberal education. In contrast to a manual education where one learns skills, a liberal

education is intended to free the mind. Understood in the broadest meaning, it encompasses four things: 1) education to be human beings, 2) education to make the most of our human powers, 3) education for our responsibilities as members of a democratic society, and 4) education for freedom.[4] The common element of these four points is that we are talking about individual human beings who can thrive in a true liberal society, in a democratic republic. This is in sharp contrast to a totalitarian regime in which the private and the individual is diminished or denied, and uniformity prevails. The mind is closed in such a regime rather than opened and enriched. Oftentimes a liberal education takes place at a seminar table where students and teachers discuss readings and engage the author through questions and challenges.

This is a remedy that I propose and support for our educational system that is in such a bad way. I have already given examples of select readings and authors who can take us out of a closed or circumscribed world and broaden our understanding. There is another feature of a liberal education that benefits both the students and the broader community.

This falls under the general question, what is the value of a liberal education? It is twofold. First, as already presented the content of the readings expands our experiences through discussion and thought. It makes our world view much more expansive. Second, we form habits that will serve us well throughout our private, public, and professional lives. One of my teachers spoke of the three R's that a liberal education ought to achieve: respect, rationality, and reverence.[5] We have the freedom to express our opinions in a republic, and oftentimes we tolerate those with whom we disagree though we are currently experiencing the very disturbing phenomenon of a "cancel culture" when one does not fall in line with the prevailing pronouncement of the day. Returning to how liberal education cultivates respect, a discussion of readings that have complex issues brings to forefront differing opinions. If we cultivate the habit of listening to others who have different opinions and interpretations and make an effort to understand them while also sharing our own opinions and interpretations, the civil exchange fosters a respect for others with whom we agree and disagree. The exercise of understanding another's prejudices or differing opinions moves from discussion of books and ideas at the seminar table or classroom to our daily lives where we try to understand people's views that may disagree with our own. By taking those with whom we disagree seriously, there is a greater likelihood that they may readily engage and re-examine the positions they hold.

The second R is Rationality. Recall that I said that Great Books include works in math and science. Studying the foundations of mathematics like Euclidian geometry or working through scientific theories develop the ability to solve problems. It also sets up a contrast between objectivity and subjectivity. Studying works that have competing forms of government or defining who should be citizens in these governments cultivates a sense of compromise. These exercises are forms of problem solving and based on a rational approach. Rationality also informs principles. Judging the actions of characters in a novel and questioning what guides their decisions leads to asking whether they are acting from a principled basis. Discerning principles can inform the development of one's own set of principles. We have the blessing of living in a society where there is a free exchange of ideas—though we are currently in a battle to preserve it—but we must discern and defend principles that are worthy of our freedom and that will sustain it.

Finally, the third R is reverence. We must revere the founding documents of this nation, beginning with the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. Reverence develops as one studies the words, ideas, and themes of these documents and others that informed the building of America. Young citizens and old must know the rights and principles that were articulated at the founding of this nation and the government designed to secure them. The stance of reverence is the firm foundation upon which we can stand to defend them.

Liberal education, both the content and the habits, begins in the private sphere of the student and is carried into the public sphere of the citizen as one reaches adulthood. Such an education not only enriches our lives, but it contributes to the means to perpetuate our free society where such studies are allowed. No such thing exists in a totalitarian regime - and sadly in many institutions of so-called higher learning - because free minds are a threat to the uniformity and indoctrination that must exist for it to maintain its power over the people or its student-body. Liberal education exposes the totalitarian posture for what it is. It is an assault on the individual, on our communities, on our government, and on our country.

I half-jokingly asked if my talk is a distraction from last week's election or a contribution to how to think about it. I argue that it is both. Any mention of Socrates can transport us beyond the Boulder confines and take us to the streets of Athens where we can imagine ourselves listening to a dialogue about virtue. As far as a contribution to understanding what is at stake in our current day politics, I point to a work that is easily catalogued among great

works and one that benefits Americans young and old. Abraham Lincoln gave his House Divided speech on June 16, 1858 in Springfield, Illinois to an audience of 1,000 attendees at the Republican State Convention. I quote the opening lines:

> If we could first know where we are, and whither we are tending, we could then better judge what to do, and how to do it.
>
> We are now far into the fifth year, since a policy was initiated, with the avowed object, and confident promise, of putting an end to slavery agitation.
>
> Under the operation of that policy, that agitation has not only, not ceased, but has constantly augmented.
>
> In my opinion, it will not cease, until a crisis shall have been reached, and passed.
>
> "A house divided against itself cannot stand."
>
> I believe this government cannot endure, permanently half slave and half free.
>
> I do not expect the Union to be dissolved -- I do not expect the house to fall -- but I do expect it will cease to be divided.
>
> It will become all one thing or all the other.[6]

This speech is an entrée to considering the state of our own country. To realize the parallels that exist between Lincoln's time and ours, we need only remove the words slave and free and rewrite the phrase to read: "I believe this government cannot endure, permanently embracing the principles of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution and rejecting them". A seminar studying Lincoln's speech and other writings, much like the one that I am teaching this semester at Boulder, brings into sharp focus how a nation that is built on core principles and ideas must have them taught and held up for examination. A good measure for determining their value and worth are readings from the Great Books. Discerning and judging universal truths, much like what is offered in the Declaration, and securing the rights articulated in that document in a government, as the Constitution was originally designed to do, is work that is supported by a good liberal education that draws upon the core of Great Books.

While I praise these writings and hold them dear, make no mistake that they paint only a picture of the greatest of human possibilities, they also include the most depraved human behaviors. The actions of the worst tyrants in history are chronicled in works that also show how

free people are reduced to servitude. In addition to opening our minds and teaching us good habits to practice with our fellow human beings, these works remind us that the good guys don't always win. They teach us that freedom must be defended and they teach us how to defend it. With respect to our topic today, education, recognize that we are in a war. We are fighting to preserve America, the institutions, and principles that changed the course of our history centuries ago, and we are fighting for our future. The battle must be fought on many fronts, but my focus today is on liberal education and how it can be among the remedies that contribute to re-establishing a sound educational system, which can translate into support for our American institutions.

I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge that today is Veteran's Day. Men and women who serve in the armed forces and who sacrifice to perpetuate our freedoms offer us another way to think about the topic that I have discussed this morning. I may not hold a weapon in my classroom, but the words that I read and speak can be likened to weapons. They can serve to defeat that which aims to destroy freedom (Karl Marx's *Communist Manifesto* is a good example) or they can elevate and inspire us to understand and defend that which contributes to a good life where freedom of thought and inquiry are possible. To that aim we work, whether it be in a classroom or around a table with family, friends, or colleagues or in a group such as yours that has a common political mission that is dedicated to defending the principles of this country.

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[1] Center for the Study of Great Ideas, http://thegreatideas.org/index.html.
[2] Plato, *The Apology of Socrates*, 21d.
[3] Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, Act 1, Scene 5. https://shakespeare.folger.edu/shakespeares-works/macbeth/.
[4] *An Introduction to the Great Books and to a Liberal Education*. The Great Ideas Program #1, Encyclopedia Britannica (January 1, 1959).
[5] Eva Brann, "Civic Education," Lecture at St. Catherine's College, St. Paul, MN (1982).
[6] Lincoln, House Divided Speech, http://www.abrahamlincolnonline.org/lincoln/speeches/house.htm.