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GOOD QUESTIONS DESERVE GOOD ANSWERS

It's a wonderful thing to have as a major orientation event a speech on "The Aims of Education," and it's a wonderful thing, as a faculty member, to be faced with the challenge of giving such a speech. It says a good deal about the College at the University of Chicago that there should be such an event. I want to reflect for a minute on what this event means and implies before getting on with it. And I want this reflection on what it means that there should be such an event to be the beginning of your education in the College. Your college education begins "now."

Your first "lesson"—and perhaps the most important single one of all—is precisely to perform such reflection as we are about to do—to approach your experience, in life as well as in college, in a reflective way, a way that asks not merely "What's the next thing on the program?" but "What does it mean that this thing is on the program?" You want to be constantly asking questions—not in a spirit of carping and truculence but in a spirit of openness and inquiry. But let's stop here for a minute. We haven't even asked any questions but we have already come to a crucial distinction, a distinction about ways of asking questions, about what I have called the "spirit" in which we are going to ask questions.

But now let's be reflective. What have we learned already? We have learned that one can barely begin the process of reflection without making distinctions, that distinctions save us from saying things we don't want to say—in this case, that questions of all kinds are productive—and clarify what we do want to say by leading on to further inquiry. How exactly do we distinguish between a carping question and a genuine one? Why does this matter? Can we be sure of this distinction?

I think, as my title indicates, that it's important, to try to answer questions as well as to ask them—though I could imagine some interesting debate on this. By a "carping" question, we tend to mean a question that seems purposely to avoid the central issue and fasten on something peripheral, a question that seems motivated or designed to derail the ongoing conversation or discussion, not to move it forward. How do we know when this is going on? Here we have to rely on our basic shared experience of social life, our general sense of the meaning and intelligibility of the actions of other persons. We have complex ways of assessing

the intentions and tones of others. These assessment practices, of course, can and should themselves be examined. Can we be wrong in an assessment of the tone of a question? Surely. What may look like carping or truculence may be genuine inquiry. The questioner may be clumsy or uninformed. But there will normally be evidence that we can adduce on these matters, and we will generally be able to come to a consensus. All of this, of course, can and should be further examined.

But let us return to our (let us say) noncarping questions about the event in which we are now participating. What does it mean for a college to speak of the aims of education? It has to mean, first and foremost, that the institution in question, our college, believes that education has aims. It always helps in trying to understand what it means to believe something to ask what it would mean not to believe it or to believe something else. One might, for instance, believe that education did not have an aim, that it was merely a pleasurable or a valuable activity that was an end in itself. One might feel that it was a resource that was simply to be made available, without any particular “aim.” To speak of education as having aims means to think of it as a process that means to do something to those on whom the process works. To speak of education in this way is to emphasize the purposiveness of the process, rather than its randomness or its beauty. Be warned, therefore. This college means to do something to you, it means to make you into (or help you to become) creatures of a certain kind.

At least as important, however, as the idea of purposefulness in the title of this event is the idea of multiplicity—not the aim but the aims of education. This teleological process—education—is seen as having multiple aims. The “aim of education” lecture would, presumably, be a very different thing from the “aims of education” lecture.

So what are these aims? I have already touched on one of them—to make you productively questioning and reflective persons. This is a candidate for the aim of education but, happily, that is not the subject of this lecture (though I will return to this particular aim). One might say that the multiple aims of education in this college are embodied in the design of our curriculum. Our aims, I am happy to say, are not deduced *post hoc* from the curriculum but have actually gone into structuring it. You will spend, roughly speaking, your first two years in the College in the General Education program and the second two in your concentration. This large structure should reveal our aims. Through our General Education program we provide you with basic skills—skills in textual, numerical, and conceptual analysis; skill in acquiring and employing a foreign language; skill in thinking about social and scientific issues; skill in appreciating the arts. We also mean, in General Education, to provide you with a certain amount of knowledge—knowledge of the basic sciences, knowledge of calculus, knowledge of the history, achievements, and characteristic modes of a particular civilization. We conceive of our General Education program as aiming to give you some of the tools and insights, some of the particular pieces of knowledge and some of the kinds of knowledge that we think that every educated person in our world should have.

But education can never intelligibly be just education in general. To be an educated person must mean to have some sense of what it means to know something in detail, not only in general, to have some sense and experience of applying specific tools to specific problems, not merely developing a full set of tools. Our curriculum means to break down various invidious, unproductive distinctions—between knowledge and skills, for instance, between knowing techniques and knowing “stuff.” Skills are pointless without material for them to work on, and knowledge is inert without the ability to grasp its structure and make use of it. Your degree from the College of the University of Chicago is intended to be both a preprofessional degree—a degree that will allow you, if you so desire, to proceed onto advanced and specialized study in your field—and a degree that will allow you to live intelligently and enjoyably in the world of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Let me pick up now on the word in my last sentence that—if you were awake and listening—you probably found most surprising, that is, my mention of enjoyment. Aristotle thought that learning was itself a pleasurable experience, and I am inclined to agree with him on this, but what I want to speak about now is not the pleasurableness of education itself but the pleasure that education enables. With regard to literature, the arts, inter-personal relations, even the natural world, many people hold the view that an analytical approach somehow prohibits or inhibits enjoyment. I think that this is a deep misunderstanding. One of the things that education can do is to free us from what Descartes or Bacon or many writers would describe as false but familiar notions or attitudes. We could learn to think about the “analysis ruins pleasure” attitude historically, learning where and when in the West (and elsewhere) it came to be dominant. To stick to the West, we could come to recognize the place in Romanticism of the notion that “We murder to dissect.” We could recognize why Wordsworth and many of his contemporaries would have wanted to say things like this and we could recognize why we should not take this single memorable line as expressing even Wordsworth’s complete position on the matter. He and the other Romantics were (as they saw it) correcting an imbalance, responding to particular circumstances. There is no inherent reason why enjoyment cannot be increased through technical knowledge and analysis. Think how much more you enjoy watching a sport or a performance the more technical and historical knowledge relevant to the sport or performance you have. Analytical and historical knowledge gives you more to enjoy and helps you to understand why you enjoy what you do. In the early stages of mastering a set of analytical tools they can be a distraction, but when they are mastered they become part of your “normal” range of perception. Knowing that lightning consists of electricity does not make the phenomenon less impressive, just as knowing that a work of art is in a particular tradition, form, or genre does not make the work any less beautiful or moving. Far from it. To increase, in both depth and breadth, your responsive capacities is one of the aims of the education into which, with this lecture, you have entered.

Since I am discussing false though familiar notions that I think you might have and that our College aims to free you from, I want to flag one more of these syndromes. Where the first might be called “the Anti- Dissection Reflex,” this one might be called “the Absolutist See-Saw.” This syndrome especially afflicts the study of the humanities and social sciences. It occurs in two stages. The first stage is the demand for the Answer. What is the true meaning of Hamlet? What exactly, without any ambiguity, is a social contract? Did Plato truly think The Republic was an ideal? When it emerges that the Answer to such questions is not exactly forthcoming, and that your professor does not think that there is an Answer, then the second stage sets in. This is the move from the demand for the Answer to the belief that there is No Answer. This in turn leads to the second part of the second stage, which is the belief that “all answers are the same,” that it is all, as the phrase goes, “a matter of opinion,” and that one opinion is as good as another. I have mine, you have yours, and that’s the way it is. Everyone is entitled to his or her own.

Now it is certainly true legally that everyone is entitled to her or his opinion. No one can be legally prosecuted for having one, whatever it may be. But in the intellectual realm, “entitlement” is a different matter. From the fact that there are no absolute answers to many interpretive and conceptual questions, it does not follow that there are no better or worse answers, that all opinions are of equal weight. There are standards of plausibility; there are standards of coherence; there are canons of evidence. A belief can be more or less plausible, better or worse founded. The ability to sort out views within the realm of better or worse is definitely one of our aims of education, as is the ability to provide evidence for views. The fact that there is no absolute right answer, moreover, does not mean that there are no wrong ones. There are facts of the matter to which any plausible view will be responsive. It will be clear what facts any plausible view is basing itself on, even if one does not accept the view. Interpretation is not a science—and I’m not sure science is a science in the sense that some of you may think—but interpretation is also not a guessing game or a matter merely of whims or “bright ideas.” Competing serious interpretations will share a wide range of agreement about the relevant data before they start to diverge about the proportions and meaning of the data. Ultimately, certain issues may be undecidable, but there is a long and important road to travel before we get to “ultimately.” One should not and need not assume a position of helplessness and hopelessness, of amiable shoulder-shrugging or disagreeable dogmatism in the face of interpretive disagreement. There are things to say about differences of opinion, ways of moving either to a consensus or to clear recognition of exactly what the differences are and why they exist. To help you maneuver between “Thought is free” and “Here I stand” is one of our College’s major aims.

In the final section of my talk, I would like to give an example of the advantages of paying close attention to an object in front of you and not assuming in advance that you know all about it. Since I am an English professor, the object to which I will turn your attention is a

poem, but I have no doubt that the educational lessons involved could be taught in many other ways.

The poem that I am going to talk about is one that is probably familiar to some of you. That is part of my reason for selecting it, since it is a poem that puts the familiar under extraordinary pressure. The poem in question is Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken." Another reason for my wanting to talk about this poem is that it seems that there is nothing to say about it. It seems completely straightforward. Now, I don't want to suggest that things never are what they seem—that couldn't be true—or that something that seems straightforward couldn't be so. What I do want to suggest is that we should be wary of taking apparent simplicity at face value. Frost's poem is partly about the ease with which we impose familiar patterns on our experience. Robert Frost was not a nice man. The poem is a very clever trap, and it rewards only the very wary reader.

As with the lecture tonight, let's start with the title, "The Road Not Taken." One would immediately think that this is going to be a poem about lost opportunities, about possibilities unrealized. One would think that it might be wistful or elegiac—"the road not taken" might have been wonderful, might have led me to. . . Who knows? The poem might be an exercise in compensatory fantasy or projective nostalgia. The poem is in fact a study of fantasy, but not of this kind. It is a poem about conceptualizing the very general shape of one's life, but it neither expresses nor is about nostalgia. It is about having made a decisive choice—or rather, it is a poem about believing that you have made a decisive choice. Its last three lines are famous:

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

These lines are spoken by a very self-satisfied and self-dramatizing speaker. Recall the pregnant pause after "and I": "I—/I." This speaker—who is not, as we shall see, the historical author and person, Robert Frost—has a strong sense of himself. He has a clear picture of his character and his life. He is a non-conformist, an adventurous spirit who took the "less traveled" road, and who sees a particular non-conformist choice as having "made all the difference." This speaker is very clear on both the nature of his choice and the momentousness of it— together of course with the fact of his choice. His picture of his life is apocalyptic. There was a single moment, a single decision, that "made all the difference."

This is a familiar way of seeing one's life. It provides a clear and well-defined pattern and it makes this pattern a product of a conscious and well-considered choice. The trouble with all this is that the poem contains another, much more detailed account of the "two roads" moment, and this account is quite different from the picture of a well-considered and rational decision. Most of the poem, in fact, is taken up with de scribing the moment in which the

speaker made what he presents as his choice of the “less traveled” road. “Two roads diverged” turns out not to be a telling but a re-telling. Here’s the first stanza:

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
 And sorry I could not travel both
 And be one traveler, long I stood
 And looked down one as far as I could
 To where it bent in the undergrowth.

(1-5)

Some things got lost in the re-telling: some details, “a yellow wood,” and the sense of hesitation (“long I stood”) and of hopeless mourning over the fundamental conditions of physical existence. More important, however, is the discrepancy between the opening and the later account of how the “decision” was made. After the speaker looked down one road as far as he could, one would think that, in the next stanza, Frost would present the speaker looking equally carefully down the other road. But this is not what we get. It is very important, in an analytical situation like this, not to assume that what you think must be there is there. You must attend only to what is there. After spending the whole opening stanza describing how far he looked down one road, the speaker begins the second stanza by telling us that he “Then took the other.”

This should be a shock. If we have been reading carefully and not adding to the data what must be there, we are surprised that the speaker “took the other” rather than examining it and comparing it with the first. The speaker “looked down one... Then took the other.” The moment of decision is presented here not as a rational choice based on careful comparison but as a lurch, a sudden and arbitrary commitment, a leap. This is a very different picture of the great choice. But Frost is not finished playing with us. The speaker did have reasons—he “took the other, as just as fair, / And having perhaps the better claim.” So there-telling was right; the effect of arbitrariness was mistaken. Although the poem is oddly weak on this point—“took the other, as just as fair” (was it so?); “having *perhaps* the better claim”—it looks as if the speaker can stick to his story. The reason why “the other” might have had a “better claim” was “Because it was grassy and wanted wear.” He took “the one less traveled by.” Unfortunately, however, the doubts expressed in the “as” and the “perhaps” turn out to be justified when Frost has the speaker add, somewhat reluctantly, on the matter of “wear”: “Though as for that, the passing there / Had worn them really about the same.”

So were the roads different or not? And what does it mean that this is now the question? What it means is that the picture of the “choice”—can we call it that now?—as arbitrary and not rationally motivated has become much more plausible. Or perhaps we simply can’t tell whether the roads were or were not the same. Maybe we can just shrug our shoulders and lapse into an easy skepticism—“who knows?” Frost, however, will not allow this. As I said, he was not a

nice man. The next stanza eliminates all ambiguity. The entire poem thus far has consisted of a single sentence—one of the many formal features that make the poem so much stranger than it pretends to be. The lines that begin the third stanza finally end the sentence. After the reluctant concession of “really about the same,” the speaker has to continue the true account:

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.

So there was no “less traveled” road that morning. They were equal. We immediately want to ask why the speaker, in his final account, falsifies his experience in the way he does. This is indeed the key question, the question that the poem wants us to ask, but Frost adds a few more lines to the initial narrative and fills out the third stanza before we get to the re-telling. He tells us what the speaker said to himself as he “chose,” necessarily arbitrarily, the one identical road over the other: “Oh, I kept the first for another day!” Yet even at the time, just as he knew that “the other” road (the one taken) did not in fact have “the better claim,” the speaker adds, “Yet knowing how way leads on to way, / I doubted if I should ever come back.” So where does this leave the exclamation (“Oh, I kept the first...!”)? How can he have said to himself that he was going to keep the first for another day if he knew something that led him to doubt the believability of such a claim?

The answer has got to be that the exclamation, the fantasy of preserving all options, was what one might call an enabling fiction. One has, after all, to tell oneself *something*, to give some account to oneself of why one is doing what one is doing—even if, at another level, one knows that what one is saying to oneself cannot possibly be true. We are creatures who need to believe, or half-believe, certain things about our actions. It is in this context of self-explanatory fiction-making that the re-telling of the narrative occurs. The re-telling is presented as a future activity, a very far distant future activity: “I shall be telling this with a sigh! Somewhere ages and ages hence.” Some time in this distant future the speaker will, he knows, present, probably as a regular matter, an entirely false account of his experience. He will make it seem much simpler, more apocalyptic, and more rationally governed than it was. Perhaps no single choice in life will make “all the difference”—even the choice to come to college at the University of Chicago. Maybe life is more normally a series of choices and consequences—“how way leads on to way”—rather than being completely determined by a single apocalyptic choice.

But what does it mean that the speaker knows—in the present of the poem—that he will, in the future, misrepresent his experience in this particular way? Here, I would say, we are genuinely in the realm of interpretation. Maybe he is saying something about the need for a “picture” of one’s life toward the end of it. Maybe he is saying something about the for self-aggrandizement. Perhaps Frost thinks that profound knowledge of our tendency toward self-deception could produce a life without self-deception. Or perhaps he believes that belief in the

possibility of being totally unself-deceived would be the greatest self-deception of all. Perhaps he believes that enabling fictions really are enabling—or something else.

Whatever one comes to believe about the final, bottom-line meaning of this poem, there are some things that one cannot believe about it. One cannot, for instance, believe that it is about the splendors—real though they might be—of non-conformity. One cannot believe that the roads were different. I hope that this analysis—much briefer (believe it or not) than it could have been—has served to show a number of things: the advantages of paying close attention even to something that at first seems straightforward; the pleasure to be gained by analysis (I assume that you like the actual poem better than the Hallmark card version of it); and the way in which a great deal of hard work can and need be done before one reaches the realm of undecidable interpretive difference. I hope too that this analysis has shown the value of asking genuine questions.

In the spirit of this final point, I would like to ask a final question, a question that cannot be kept out of an analysis done in the 1990s of a poem by Robert Frost. Does it matter that this poem was written by a white, male American (or a male, white American—take the adjectives in any order you like)? I think that this is a fair question if—and this, as always, is crucial—one does not think that one knows the answer in advance. I would say that with regard to the particular fantasies the poem is exploring—the fantasies of non-conformity and of being the god-like determiner of one's fate—the poem probably does have special relevance to Western persons, and perhaps most of all to middle-class white Western males. Perhaps the very image of seeing adventurousness in terms of moving onto untrodden ground is male or Western. Perhaps. On the other hand, the idea that persons need fictions to enable them to do things and to live with the fact of aging does not seem to me culturally limited or determined. Our need to tell stories—to ourselves as well as others—is not limited to any particular story.

I would hope that your education in the College of the University of Chicago will lead you to recognize a good answer as well as a good question.