Humanism, the Library, and the Quality of Life

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The term "humanities" perhaps appears today most often juxtaposed against the sciences and social sciences, creating a popular impression that somehow the sciences and social sciences have managed to secede from the community of polite learning, leaving behind them the effete and ineffectual, the remnants and tag-ends, the confused and beleaguered dregs of liberal education. This notion penetrates even into academe itself where people ought presumably to know better, but where nonetheless scientists are sometimes thought to have grown sleek and fat from more readily accessible outside funds. They are sometimes jocularly

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referred to as the "fly-boys of the academic services" because they can cop the best scholarships, inhabit the best campus buildings, and establish the cushiest oligarchies, while the poor, foot-weary, mud-slogging, and inglorious infantrymen in the humanities pursue their own harmless, considerably less expensive, and relatively less valuable services to the institution and to the larger community beyond.

Tempting though this whimsical concept may sometimes seem, and although it doubtless does contain a grain of truth, it is obviously simplistic. Humanism has a much greater and more splendid relevance and a vastly more important message. It always has had, and it always will have. Humanism, in its earlier and purer sense, embraced all aspects of scholarly investigation as they relate to man himself. "Man is the measure of all things", Protagoras observed in the fifth century B. C., "of those that are, that they are; of those that are not, that they are not".

There were in those halcyon days no discrete and separable disciplines that we would today call sciences or social sciences; they together with the belles-lettres and the gentler arts were comprised within the spectrum of learning thought proper for man to study. The educated man, the true humanist, was equally learned in all things; he was a polymath who could bring to bear upon whatever human problem he chose to explore the total profundity of existing scholarship in a proper balance of its facets.

Varro it was, the great Roman scholar, who shortly before the time of Christ, first separated and identified the several liberal arts which in medieval times became the trivium and quadrivium of an educational system that served even into the present century. Grammar, logic, and rhetoric were the trivium; geometry, arithmetic, astronomy, and music were the quadrivium. And the Renaissance Man, the "man for all seasons", still knew and could work with equal ease in all of them.

Specialization thus is a very recent, a 20th century creation; it is both cause and result of modern life, and it is at once its
blessing and its bane. Without it obviously the magnificent technical achievements that make our lives more tolerable than those of our forefathers could never have come about. With it, on the other hand, we have come also to know the pervasive exhaust fumes of the internal combustion engine, the contrails of jet aircraft that scar the beauty of the skies, the strip mines that gash our hills and valleys, and the earshattering sounds of heavy construction equipment, dehumanizing all.

This very recent advent of specialization has indeed precipitated incipient schisms between the several new branches of learning. Specialization fell so suddenly upon us that society dropped behind in its ability properly to assimilate it; indeed it lags still in its attempts to build adequate communication mechanisms to assure a free flow of information, knowledge, and wisdom among its several parts. Almost before society realized what had happened, it had produced and put to work in society an unfortunately large number of what might be called "mere specialists", people who were not truly learned in a balanced sense, but who had rather accumulated a profundity of information within a limited subject range. I believe we may fairly attribute many of the ills of our present technology-oriented culture to these "mere specialists", to men who were educated to see only the technical side of the problem before them and who therefore sought only technical solutions.

Certainly the wisest of the wise, in today's complex society as ever in the past, are not such men of limited vision. The greatest of today's humanists possess also enviable understanding of the social and physical sciences. So also do the best of today's scientists have great sensitivity to the humane needs, the psychic needs, the soul needs, the social needs of the society they serve. Who can say whether J. Robert Oppenheimer, Albert Schweitzer, or Buckminster Fuller are scientists or humanists. What of Arthur Holley Compton, Sir Kenneth Clark, Marshall McLuhan. They continue to be Renaissance Men in the best tradition, and I believe that our future is secure as long as such men as these are influential in the determination of its course. All disciplines after all, when exhaustively explored,
merge somewhere at the top one into another. There is good reason for the highest academic degree in all fields to be called the Doctor of Philosophy, the theory being that one must indeed become a philosopher to be maximally learned in anything.

I would therefore beware of the "mere specialist". The mere artist, the mere dramatist, the mere musician has nothing to say to us that is worth hearing; the mere architect, the mere biochemist, the mere physicist can do little for us that we need to have done. The true humanists among them, however, those who can articulate their efforts properly into the broad panorama of human needs and endeavors, and relate them intelligently to those around them, can continue to move us to undreamed of horizons in all fields.

I believe that the days of the mere specialist are waning. At least I am persuaded that colleges and universities are producing fewer of them today than they were two decades ago. Doing so is requiring in some cases that students remain longer at their education than they once did, but that does not particularly trouble me, because for every added year that today's students are spending in school, medical science is adding a year to their life expectancy. Thus their likely period of productive labor is not being diminished; it is rather being sustained at its present length while being made more productive.

Mission-oriented research, as contradistinct from discipline-oriented research, has also done much in the last two decades to mitigate the ills of overspecialization. It has both required and facilitated multidisciplinary team approaches to problems, thereby encouraging crosspollenization with resulting innovation as well as greater humaneness in its outworkings by encouraging increased communication among previously discrete disciplines, modifying them all for the better. When two people talk together, neither is ever again quite the same. A similar phenomenon occurs when one scholarly discipline talks with another; both change.

Doubtless continued development on almost all fronts therefore will require vastly increased use of multidisciplinary teams. Whether solutions are being sought to inner-city pr-
blems, ecological and environmental problems, problems of cultural development and engineering, the full range of man's creative urges and needs must in balance be considered. To free the untapped reserves of human energy and creativity will require vastly improved human interaction, because it is unlikely that we will be able ever again to educate individuals on a broad enough front to enable them to attack such problems alone.

Yet the idea intrigues, (does it not?) that a way may yet be found to educate generalists without specialization but with sufficient general understanding to be able to coordinate the work of specialists in the interests of complex multi-dimensional causes. Or perhaps the idea only intrigues me personally because I am a librarian, and librarianship is perhaps the one discipline today that attempts only to develop general knowledge, without specialization, among its practitioners. Librarians after all were the great scholars remembered from the classical world. Of the most famous Alexandrian scholars, Zenodotus, Eratosthenes, Callimachus, Aristophanes of Byzantium, and Aristarchus, all were librarians save Callimachus, and even Callimachus' scholarly reputation rests largely upon his compilation of a catalog of all of the works in the Alexandrian library. Perhaps therefore it is the Walter Mitty in me that encourages me to ponder the possibility that librarians as humanists may once again inherit the earth.

As a librarian I find it instructive and encouraging to ponder the sources of humanism—the well-springs of the humanistic tradition. Doubtless they can most properly be construed to be humanity itself. Man interprets his environment as he himself experiences it. "Homo sum," begins the oft-cited statement of Terence; "I am a man, and nothing pertinent to man is alien to me." As man's observations and interpretations of his experiences take place moreover, it has been his nature to communicate them to other men, and much of the joy in humanistic endeavor is derived from the communication itself—whether it be viewing a beautiful painting, reading a fine poem, describing the adventure of discovery in a laboratory,
or simply sharing in an invigorating conversation.

The antiquity of the humanistic message is a venerable one, extending in most traditions to the very beginnings of life itself—in some indeed even earlier. The Talmud teaches that there were records before the creation of the world. Collections of books, according to the Vedas, preexisted even the Creator, and the Koran supposes that books co-existed from eternity with the uncreated God.

The Judeo-Christian tradition, of course, identifies “the word” with the Creator himself. “In principio erat verbum,” reads the opening passage of the Gospel according to St. John; in the beginning was the word. Presumably the word preexisted all other phenomena in order to perpetuate those phenomena.

Communication is the key element in the eleventh chapter of Genesis where it is recorded that Almighty God looked down upon the people as they strove to construct their ziggurat at Babel and said, “Behold . . . they have all one language . . . . and now nothing will be restrained from them.” Was the ancient Hebrew mythmaker who recorded this incident suggesting that all things are possible where communication is perfect? We cannot know, but the interpretation titillates.

It is from such venerable concerns as these that colleges and universities draw one of their major responsibilities and wherein as a librarian I find my mission—that of the preservation, organization, and dissemination of “the word”, the records of man’s achievements, his imaginings, and his observations. Indeed, in what was perhaps one of his less universal pronouncements, Thomas Carlyle once stated baldly that “The true University of these days is a Collection of Books.” Most would doubtless allow a more complex structure to the university than this very restrictive one, but few would deny withal that to amass a collection of books—to husband “the word,” if you will—is a legitimate and substantial humanistic responsibility of a university.

Early humanists appear to have recognized clearly their duty to acquire and preserve records comprehensively, as there
were great libraries in the ancient world. Assurbanapal had a library of 20,000 cuneiform tablets; the library at Alexandria contained more than 700,000 papyrus scrolls; and there were great libraries in Pergamum, China, Greece, and Rome. Through the early Middle Ages Arab scholars, and in the Renaissance western scholars, strove to bring together in libraries as extensive a record as possible of the acts of mankind and the thoughts of its sages.

This same responsibility to collect exhaustively remains the primary function of research librarians today. In 1857 the librarian of Harvard, perhaps unwittingly, rephrased for modern librarianship the original comprehensive Terentian definition of humanism. "I think it would be well," he wrote in his annual report that year, "if it were generally known that there was never anything printed of which we would not be grateful for one copy."

To fulfill this charge that is imposed upon it in the interests of society by the humanistic tradition, modern librarianship engages in a well-nigh incredible range of seemingly frenetic activity. Some of the great adventures of book collecting in the interest of scholarship are well known—the discovery of the Boswell Papers at Malahide Castle by the Irish Sea, for example, and their subsequent removal to Yale; the bibliothecal swashbuckling of Henry Huntington and William L. Clements, to name only two of the great millionaire collectors whose legacies to scholarship have been of such great importance; and the 102 packing cases of Chinese rare books which were spirited out of Peiping in 1948 and stored for two decades in the safekeeping of the Library of Congress before being deposited permanently in the National Central Library in Taipei.

It is easy to believe that all of this is in the past, however, that the adventure of library work has been diminished in recent years to a humdrum, workaday level, but such is not the case. It continues with ever-renewed vigor. The libraries that have participated in the Farmington Plan have had as part of their responsibility the acquisition of one copy of every scrap of paper printed—whether book, journal, newspaper, pamphlet, or broad-
side—in all parts of the world. Many of you may have had
opportunity to share in this high adventure of acquiring rese-
arch materials under the most difficult circumstances—in coun-
tries where we have been denied admittance, or where no
organized booktrade exists, or where there is no record of
publications, or where only a barter economy obtains, or where
bureaucratic obstructionism is a way of life, or where there is
no recognition of the function of books in social, cultural,
educational, technical, or economic development. To develop a
free flow of books from such countries and under such circum-
stances is a librarian’s challenge of the highest order requiring
the greatest kind of ingenuity from all who are involved in it.

Acquiring books moreover is not enough. Upon receipt
each must be scrutinized by a catalog librarian, analyzed for
subject content, and entered properly both into the library’s
complex card catalogs and into the National Union Catalog for
prompt identification and retrieval by the scholar at his time of
need. This organizing activity is of paramount importance
and is the hallmark of a librarian’s responsibility. The Yale
University Library alone owns 6 million books, enough to fill
150 linear miles of bookshelves. Imagine if you can the enor-
mous entropic thrust, the vast unavailable energy, locked up in
6 million books just placed in a pile. It is the work of catalog
librarians and their assistants so to array books as to make
that body of intrinsic power readily available to those who
would use it to enhance the quality of life.

Any effort to appraise in monetary terms the value of the
capital asset represented by a large research library would have
to take into account not only the actual expenditure made for
its books, but also their appreciated value—and it is always a
good library’s aspiration to acquire more books that appreciate
in worth than that depreciate in worth—plus the contributed
value of this cataloging and processing for use. Calculated in
such a way, a crude estimate of the dollar value of this vast
asset in the heart of say, the Ohio State University campus
might approximate fully $60 million.

Yet the value of a book collection to a society is of two
kinds. It has, of course, a dollar value when counted among its chattel, but this value is perhaps of lesser importance than its humanistic or research value, which is totally incalculable in dollars, but which is the true measure of its worth to the humanistic endeavor. For who, after all, can place a market value on a fine poem or on a complete record of scientific experimentation; who can properly appraise the availability to a scholar of an obscure but meaningful pamphlet which will aid in the comprehension of new human insights? Interestingly, this second kind of value that resides in a research library seems always to grow from the first. An institution, in other words, invests marketable assets in its library in order to develop what becomes essentially an unconvertable asset. Yet a great library is a necessary quality in the scholarly climate of a humanistic institution. If the university does not provide a great library, scholars will simply go away, because the university is failing to fulfill this basic responsibility of humanism.

Scholars' appetites for books, of course, are notoriously insatiable, expandible always to the endless boundaries of man's intellectual curiosity, and no library can do more than meet some of them. Witness, for example, the great work that librarians have done during the past two millenia in preserving the important documents of the classical world. Each bibliothecal generation for two thousand years has received from its predecessor the great tragedies, the fine poems, the important chronicles, and the stimulating discourse, of the Greek and Roman writers; has preserved them to the best of its ability through the ravages of flood, pillage, fire, and infestation; and has handed them on to its professional progeny. Their success, it would seem, has been little short of miraculous. Yet even these are not the artifacts that evoke greatest excitement among today's classical scholars. Rather they wax much more enthusiastic over the middens disinterred from the ancient refuse pits of North Africa, of Oxrhhynnchus and Fayûm, which have been fortuitously covered over and preserved for twenty centuries by the shifting sands of the Sahara. Here they find written oddments of household life, an old soldier's discharge paper fol-
ollowing the Peloponnesian War, a manumission document freeing a Nubian slave, a grocery or a laundry list, and they are greatly agitated by them. What can a librarian learn from observation of this scholarly phenomenon? He can learn the absurd yet inexorable apothegm that the trash in his wastebasket today is the research material of tomorrow.

Even the most acquisitive librarian can save little of the material in his wastebasket, but he must strive constantly to acquire comprehensively in areas of current or anticipated humanistic or scholarly concern. In doing so he is after all fulfilling one of the high callings of the humanistic enterprise, for his is the stewardship of the sources of humanism.

How exceedingly rare are great statement of conviction made by librarians. How seldom do I hear librarians indicate clearly that they are aware of their importance to society. Let me tell you of one such statement I heard a number of years ago. This statement was made on that memorable night when much of the world watched breathlessly as Neil Armstrong stepped cautiously from the ladder of his lunar landing craft onto the face of the moon. People everywhere heard him say, "A small step for man, but a great step for mankind." Only few people, however, heard the freshman librarian, who watched this event with us in our family room, when she responded, "But just think; it would never have been possible if it hadn't been for librarians." That, my friends, is a very profound and thought-provoking statement, which is at the heart of everything I am trying to say. Credo! This, I believe! I am both chagrined and gratified that this remark came not from the hoary head of some sage and ancient prophet among us, but from a youngster in her first year out of library school. Perhaps there will yet be library giants in the earth in the twentieth century.

Neil Armstrong could never have got to the moon, if it were not for librarians. Polio could never have been eradicated if it had not been for librarians. Agricultural productivity could never have been increased sufficiently to feed today's multitudes, had it not been for librarians. Our understanding of the past
would be a confused jumble of mythology and tradition, if it were not for librarians. Our services indeed are absolutely indispensable to successful accomplishment in virtually every field of endeavor, yet we librarians too seldom sense this essential nature of the services we purvey. Society, we sometimes think, does not take us seriously enough. Well, society my friends will only take us seriously as we take ourselves.

We must be more aware than we are, I feel, of the great importance of our service to society not primarily to enhance our sense of pride and prestige and status, but rather so that we can understand fully and with humility the enormous burden of responsibility that accompanies our charge from society.

If society is to survive, we must in the 21st century as ever in the past find human answers to our problems, answers that meet the full range of man’s needs, rather than only specifics within that range of needs. Man’s drives for beauty, for truth, for love, for morality, for dignity, for God, for joy, are as pervasive and unrelenting as his drives for air, for food, and for comfort. Man cannot live by bread alone. Thus the true humanist today, regardless of the specific discipline he calls his own, is one who will take care that he is always sympathetic to, always sensitive to, always patient and tolerant toward the entire range of man’s nature, his motivations, his needs, his strengths, and especially his frailties. The overemphasis in the past four-score years upon “mere specialization” has not driven us far off of a humane course. Libraries, which are in the final analysis, simply the aggregate memory of man, possess both the knowledge and wisdom necessary for our return. As people dedicated to their maximal development and effectiveness, we can all take pleasure and justified pride in being part of an industry that has so essential a role in determining the quality of modern life.