On the character of Generation X

DIANA SCHAUB

BEFORE I say anything either in praise or blame of today's young people, it might be well to remember what Montesquieu says in his *Spirit of the Laws*: "It is not young people who degenerate; they are ruined only when grown men have already been corrupted." The young may indeed be degenerate, but if they are, it is their elders who ought to answer for it. Since the generation of students in college now was raised by the Baby Boom generation, moral soundness was perhaps not to be expected. We have recently had an all too revealing look at the respective degeneracy and corruption of these two generations in the persons of Monica Lewinsky and Bill Clinton. But before we start bashing the Boomers, and lamenting the ruination they have wrought, we should note that Montesquieu's maxim would

---

This essay was originally presented at a conference titled "Morality and Public Life: Is America in Moral Decline?" sponsored by the LeFrak Forum and the Symposium on Science, Reason, and Modern Democracy held at Michigan State University, 24 April 1999.

lessen the blame attaching to the Boomers as well, since it is the World War II generation that bears responsibility for them. Somehow, the kernels at least of that self-absorption and moral heedlessness were already present—yes, even in the generation that is being called "the greatest generation." (Perhaps it shouldn't have been so surprising to see the decorated war veteran Bob Dole recommending against impeachment and then becoming the pitchman for Viagra.) Virtue cannot be passed intact from one generation to the next, because it never fully exists in any generation. The regression that Montesquieu implies would take us all the way back to the Founders, and cast doubt on the potency of even their pristine virtue.

Montesquieu's point seems to be that those regimes that depend for their existence on the inculcation and transmission of virtue through the generations are doomed to decline. If the political life of the nation tracks closely the moral life of its citizens, then that nation is in trouble. Thomas Jefferson, in the very midst of the American Revolution, declared, "From the conclusion of this war, we shall be going down hill." The beginning, it seems, is the beginning of the end. And the adjective that most frequently modifies "virtue" is "lost."

A fine-tuned machine?

Not every regime, however, need be so hostage to the shortfall of virtue. In monarchies, for instance, Montesquieu says that "politics accomplishes great things with as little virtue as it can, just as in the finest machines art employs as few motions, forces, and wheels as possible." As a result, "In well-regulated monarchies everyone will be almost a good citizen, and one will rarely find someone who is a good man." In such a mechanized political system, which keeps its equilibrium by means of its perpetual motion, one need not fret over moral decline. Instead, one just admits to living on a lower plane, and blithely joins Montesquieu in declaring that "not all moral vices are political vices." Or as our politicians say, "It's time to move on." In a regime of this type, the education of the young is neither so crucial nor so laborious.

In many respects, our own system seems to be an egalitarian version of Montesquieu's "well-regulated monarchy" where "each person works for the common good, believing he works

for his individual interests." Given the absence of hereditary privileges, it was necessary for the American Founders to craft what Madison, in the *Federalist Papers*, called "inventions of prudence" to supply the place of the accidents of history. Through a judicious parceling out of power, "the private interest of every individual may be a sentinel over the public right." Not surprisingly, the U.S. Constitution contains no provision for governmental involvement in civic or moral education; properly modeled institutions will unobtrusively model individuals to fit. Contrast the Constitution's silence on this score with the words of William Penn's Preface to the Pennsylvania Frame of Government (written in 1682):

> That, therefore, which makes a good constitution, must keep it, viz: men of wisdom and virtue, qualities, that because they descend not with worldly inheritances, must be carefully propagated by a virtuous education of youth; for which after ages will owe more to the care and prudence of founders, and the successive magistracy, than to their parents, for their private patrimonies.

Despite the structuralist thrust of the American founding, a concern for republican character formation was not altogether jettisoned. Some of the state constitutions, particularly that of Massachusetts (1780), paid attention to the inculcation of virtue, providing for "the support and maintenance of public Protestant teachers of piety, religion, and morality" and authorizing the legislature to "enjoin upon all the subjects an attendance upon the instructions of the public teachers aforesaid." Likewise, the Northwest Ordinance (1787) declared: "Religion, morality, and knowledge, being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged." Among the founders, Franklin, Jefferson, and Washington were notable for their attempts to revive the ancient idea of public schooling, complete with the ancient stress on patriotism, citizenship, and military self-sufficiency, but without the classical republican hostility to commerce and technological advance. Education was understood to be key to both economic and political independence. Indeed, one might say that the whole question of civic and moral education took on added complexity, as the aim of education shifted from reverential to liberationist. For the first time in history, a republic welcomed, perhaps even

required, the release of the individual from tutelary powers, and in particular from religious authority.

A civic education

In his *Politics*, Aristotle says that "the most important task of the legislator is education." To a certain extent, our elected officials seem to agree. No politician gives a speech today without calling for improvements in education. However, most of this concern seems to be a new, purely economic variant of the national anxiety that first arose during the Sputnik era. Education is viewed as an instrument of global economic competition. If our second-graders can't out-add the Japanese what will become of us? The nation here is synonymous with GNP. Educational institutions themselves often put a gentler, more cooperative face on the global marketplace; their mission statements speak of preparing students to live and work "in a diverse and changing world." The difference between the more nationalistic and the more cosmopolitan formulations is not very material however. Both treat education as essentially vocational, and in their emphasis on the economic both abstract from citizenship. The politicians are worried about the comparative test scores of American youngsters, but they view those youngsters as future workers, not future citizens. Back in the 1950s, at least, the call for educational betterment was tied to larger and nobler national purposes. The space race that led to an emphasis on math and science education was envisioned as part of the contest between democratic freedom and totalitarian communism. The usually thankless task of teaching algebra to adolescents might be redeemed if one believed it was integral to the fate of liberty.

In the midst of our contemporary debates about the crisis in public schooling, we seem to have forgotten the most essential point—a point on which ancient and modern political philosophers are in complete agreement: namely that, as Montesquieu says, "the laws of education should be relative to the principles of the government." Aristotle puts it this way: "Children ... must necessarily be educated looking to the regime, at least if it makes any difference with a view to the city's being excellent that ... its children ... are excellent. But it necessarily makes a difference: ... from the children come

those who are partners in the regime." We need to reconsider education in the context of citizenship. What would it mean to educate with a view to the perpetuation of our institutions?

I don't mean to say that the economic perspective is illegitimate. I do mean to say it is insufficient. It is true that American education has always had a very practical, occupational orientation. Accordingly, in the report Jefferson wrote for the University of Virginia, he listed as the first object of primary education "to give to every citizen the information he needs for the transaction of his own business." But his list did not stop there; it concluded with higher objects:

> To understand his duties to his neighbors and country, and to discharge with competence the functions confided to him by either; To know his rights; to exercise with order and justice those he retains; to choose with discretion the fiduciary of those he delegates; and to notice their conduct with diligence, with candor, and judgment.

In the past, there were organizations that were wonderfully adept at combining economic and political aims, weaving together in Jeffersonian fashion a teaching about rights, interests, and duties. I spoke with my dad recently about his youthful involvement in Future Farmers of America (FFA) and 4-H. My hunch had been that these were not narrowly vocational programs—and that was amply confirmed by what he told me. The purpose of FFA was "to provide training in farmer-citizenship." That meant that participants not only received hands-on instruction in animal husbandry, farm implements, and crop science, but that they learned "how to conduct and take part in a public meeting, to speak in public, ... and to assume civic responsibility." They actually had contests in running a meeting according to Robert's Rules of Order. (Having recently served on a number of college committees, I can say that my colleagues and I could have benefited from such training.) Extemporaneous debate was also much practiced.

The 4-H program was similarly civic-minded. To the best of my dad's recollection, the pledge went as follows: "I pledge my head to clearer thinking, my heart to greater loyalty, my hands to larger service, and my health to better living for my community, my country, and my world." My father's FFA and 4-H experience was not rendered irrelevant when he left the

farm behind. It no longer seems accidental to me that this future farmer went on to teach high-school mathematics in the Sputnik era, and then entered the new field of computers, becoming a successful corporate executive and civic leader.

A pre-professional education

Whereas the old-style vocational training was public-spirited and liberal, today's so-called "liberal education" is often narrowly pre-professional. One can find on most college campuses today a pre-law society, an extracurricular organization that might be thought roughly analogous to the Future Farmers of America. The pre-law society helps students prepare for the LSATs and then assists them in applying to schools on the basis of their scores. There is little or no sustained consideration of the role of lawyers and judges in a constitutional order—and certainly no aspiration to educate lawyer-citizens.

I wonder whether today's students would participate in a group called Future Lawyers of America. In my experience, many students headed to law school do not intend to practice law. Or so they are very ready to say. Aware of the disrepute attaching to the profession, they are quick to assure you that they just want the degree, in the belief that it opens up other, as yet undetermined, possibilities. They are pre-law non-lawyers. I suspect also that they would be uncomfortable with the declarative force of the older terminology. They would not want to label themselves as future anything. They are not going to be a determinate thing when they grow up. They speak of careers, but not callings. They view law or medicine or journalism as offering interesting opportunities for purely individual satisfaction and advancement. They do not view the law as a profession or a discipline. To be a Future Lawyer of America would suggest that one was part of a larger whole and had a role, both professional and political, to play within that whole. Signing up for the pre-law society does not entail any such expectations.

Yet I suspect students would be happier if they could escape the endless "pre"-ing and prepping and make their way back to a more grounded future. I suspect they would be happier if they could get out of these inchoate societies composed of selves and instead belong to an America with a shape

and a content. What the economization and globalization of education means for students is atomization. They are isolated beings, readying themselves to compete with every other person on the planet. No wonder they start interviewing for jobs and lining up employment internships the moment they arrive on campus. By the time we graduate them, their résumés are longer than mine. But they have only the vaguest sense of how a liberal education will assist them in their future, other than providing time and materiel for résumé padding. They spend their college years preparing their applications, rather than preparing themselves by application. Many of them are already PR specialists.

Those less anxiety-ridden look upon college as their last chance at the sandlot. One young man told me that college was really just four years in which to play around until he was old enough to enter the business world. He seemed to expect maturity to arrive automatically when he exchanged his baseball cap for a suit and tie. (Or perhaps he believed that maturity would not be required even then.) Incidentally, if one is looking for symptoms of moral decline, the omnipresent baseball cap is as good as any. I don't know when the cap craze began, but it strikes me as aggressively juvenile, especially when caps are worn in the classroom. The only thing that somewhat reconciles me is that it does seem to be an attempt on the part of young men to claim some article of clothing for themselves as males. While young women will occasionally sport a baseball cap, it remains basically male gear. Since the poor fellows can't figure out what manhood should mean, they settle for the irritating bad boy instead. So entrenched now is the practice that even nice boys don't know that indoor cap wearing is a breach of etiquette. Apparently, neither parents nor teachers bother to inform them, or so I gather from the astonished looks I get when I upbraid them for "dissing" me. Still there is something reassuring in this atavistic male longing to wear a hat. In the past, most male vocations had a hat proper to them, a hat tailored to the task and indicative of the kind and degree of authority the wearer exercised. That whole wondrous array has been leveled. Yet, if democratic equality and boyishness must reign, I suppose it is only fitting that the triumphant headgear be that of the quintessential American game.

Whether students view college as a résumé builder or a holding pattern, they all believe that their real education will be in the world. Just as Montesquieu said: "In monarchies the principal education is not in the public institutions where children are instructed; in a way, education begins when one enters the world." Since today's kids are precocious enough to know already many of the lessons of that fashionable world, they heavily discount the lessons of their schoolmasters. They are either not serious as students, or they are serious in an illiberal way.

Why go to college?

I recently tried out a little thought experiment on my students, in an attempt to elicit their real thoughts on learning, work, and leisure. I asked these 60 students to imagine that each was the recipient of 100 million dollars. What would they do—and particularly would they remain in college? If so, would their studies change at all, in direction or intensity? I was initially heartened when all but a couple of students said they would stay in college. I thought maybe this indicated that they didn't, after all, subscribe to the instrumental view of education. Freed, in imagination at least, from economic necessity, they could now see that they valued learning for its own sake. Guess again.

The seniors said they would stay because there were only two months to go, so they might as well finish what they had started. The most one can say for this is that it is a work ethic, of sorts. Asked to imagine themselves freshmen, nearly all said they would still stay—to socialize. Without the annoyance of classes, college could be even more fun than it is already, with its great housing, great parties, and a whole army of people devising entertainments and cleaning up after you. What must the hard-working janitorial staff think of these privileged campers as they wipe up the weekend vomitus and repair the destruction to the buildings and grounds? The level of vandalism, assault, and general mayhem that routinely occurs on college campuses is appalling. In such a setting, students are insulated from the ordinary consequences of such behavior. In place of the old *in loco parentis* model, we have the maxim "let's keep the police out of this if we can."

On a more upbeat note, those who were first-generation college students said they would stay because of what their graduation would mean to their families. The students themselves, however, didn't seem to share fully in the conviction of education's importance, but they did manifest genuine filial piety. When I asked whether any of them would remain perpetual students, that possibility occasioned puzzled looks. As to what they would do after the party ended, avoiding boredom seemed to concern them. Work and travel were their main choices to stave off boredom. Since many of them expressed an intention to work in some capacity despite their windfall, they felt they would still need the certification of a college degree. Well over half, however, admitted that they would be less assiduous students. There were a few who felt strongly that it was important to work hard in order to prove one's capacity to be self-supporting. They intended to hide their fortune from their children, in order to school them in self-reliance as well. None was prepared to decline the gift, however.

"Experience" properly understood

The travel bug had already bitten a number of my students. They made the case that travel was a form of education, and that this experiential learning did not have the drawbacks of book learning. Clearly, one was pleasant, the other painful. I would grant that this mania for travel—which today's elders share with the younger generation—is a manifestation of a natural desire to know and to broaden one's encounters with the world. But I believe it is also indicative of a dearth of imagination. Lacking internal resources to avoid boredom, one must seek external stimuli: new sights to strike the eye, new sounds, new smells and tastes. Moreover, these new experiences need not be the catalyst for either reflection or action. They can just be promiscuously enjoyed.

My students seem to regard travel as the 3-D version of television, where both spectator and spectacle are in motion. In this perfectly kinetic cinema, learning occurs by osmosis. Thomas Hobbes, that democratic reductionist, said "prudence is but experience." My students implicitly agree. They follow Hobbes in almost wholly attributing wisdom to experience and

in making experience itself an intellectually passive event. Put yourself in a new setting and let that setting wash over you. Our academic institutions eagerly join in and give credit for subjecting yourself to new settings in the form of internships and living abroad. Even worse, they often spout a postmodern doctrine of the incommunicability of experience—popularly expressed in such sayings as "guess you had to be there," "it's a black thing," and "men just don't get it"—thereby denying a common humanity and the possibility of reasoned discourse. On this model, experience isolates, confines, excludes, and silences.

For a more adequate understanding of the meaning of experience (and its embodiment in literature) we might turn to Henry James. In his essay "The Art of Fiction," James responds to the cliché that a novelist must "write from experience." All well and good, but what is experience? According to James:

> It is an immense sensibility, a kind of huge spider-web of the finest silken threads suspended in the chamber of consciousness, and catching every air-borne particle in its tissue. It is the very atmosphere of the mind; and when the mind is imaginative ... it takes to itself the faintest hints of life, it converts the very pulses of the air into revelations.

James tells of an English novelist who

> was much commended for the impression she had managed to give in one of her tales of the nature and way of life of the French Protestant youth. She had been asked where she learned so much about this recondite being, she had been congratulated on her peculiar opportunities. These opportunities consisted in her having once, in Paris, as she ascended a staircase, passed an open door where, in the household of a *pasteur*, some of the young Protestants were seated at table round a finished meal.... The power to guess the unseen from the seen, to trace the implication of things, to judge the whole piece by the pattern, the condition of feeling life in general so completely that you are well on your way to knowing any particular corner of it—this cluster of gifts may almost be said to constitute experience.

So yes, James says, write from experience, but "try to be one of the people on whom nothing is lost!" I fear that many of my students could trek the surface of the whole globe and

come back without an experience worthy of the name. And I suspect that a lifetime of this culture-surfing will prove as unsatisfying as channel-surfing or net-surfing. Of course, none of us has a web as finely and densely spun as Henry James, that master of spidery consciousness, but we will never become better spinners so long as the dominant view of experience is such a debased one. Universities should be places where the capaciousness of the human mind is always in view and where that capaciousness is not regarded as a function of what James called the "accident of residence." After all, cosmic and cosmopolitan range is as evident in the homebodies (Socrates, Jane Austen, Emily Dickinson) as in the travelers (Xenophon, Herman Melville, Walt Whitman).

Thinking about leisure

My little hypothetical about the lottery jackpot confirmed what Alexis de Tocqueville said of Americans long ago: We are a nation "restless in the midst of abundance." We are without a conception of leisure. The Greek word for leisure was *schole,* from which we get the words school and scholar. That etymological connection has been lost, however. Faced with the prospect of a life of leisure most of my students could only imagine two possibilities: "vegging out"—a locution that graphically encapsulates a less-than-human alternative—and "keeping busy" through a combination of work and travel. (Tocqueville had already taken note of this particular formula for busyness: "If at the end of a year of unremitting labor [the American] finds he has a few days' vacation, his eager curiosity whirls him over the vast extent of the United States, and he will travel fifteen hundred miles in a few days to shake off his happiness").

W.E.B. DuBois, in one of his many fine essays on education in *The Souls of Black Folk*, illustrates well the original link between scholarship and leisure. Listen to his description of Atlanta University, one of a number of black liberal arts colleges founded in the wake of the Civil War:

> The hundred hills of Atlanta are not all crowned with factories. On one, toward the west, the setting sun throws three buildings in bold relief against the sky. The beauty of the group lies in its simple unity:—a broad lawn of green rising from the red street

> with mingled roses and peaches; north and south, two plain and stately halls; boldly graceful, sparingly decorated, and with one low spire. It is a restful group,—one never looks for more; it is all here, all intelligible. There I live, and there I hear from day to day the low hum of restful life. In winter's twilight, when the red sun glows, I can see the dark figures pass between the halls to the music of the night-bell. In the morning, when the sun is golden, the clang of the day-bell brings the hurry and laughter of three hundred young hearts from hall and street, and from the busy city below,—children all dark and heavy-haired,—to join their clear young voices in the music of the morning sacrifice. In a half-dozen class-rooms they gather then,—here to follow the love-song of Dido, here to listen to the tale of Troy divine; there to wander among the stars, there to wander among men and nations,—and elsewhere other well-worn ways of knowing this queer world. Nothing new, no time-saving devices,—simply old time-glorified methods of delving for Truth, and searching out the hidden beauties of life, and learning the good of living. The riddle of existence is the college curriculum that was laid before the Pharaohs, that was taught in the groves by Plato, that formed the *trivium* and *quadrivium*, and is today laid before the freedmen's sons by Atlanta University. And this course of study will not change; its methods will grow more deft and effectual, its content richer by toil of scholar and sight of seer; but the true college will ever have one goal,—not to earn meat, but to know the end and aim of that life which meat nourishes.

One wishes a few college presidents would pay heed, and rethink their blind worship of "the bottom line," their embrace of the corporate model, their obsession with new buildings and new programs, their competitive quest for funding and rankings.

Now perhaps this forgetfulness about the goal of higher education is of no concern; after all, if "the business of America is business," then getting and spending are the right things to do. But we might want to remember Aristotle's warning about the political consequences of mistaken priorities. Aristotle says, "War must be for the sake of peace, occupation for the sake of leisure." In his discussion of leisure in book VII of the *Politics*, Aristotle severely faults the Spartan regime for its crude emphasis on utility and its militarism. He concludes that:

> Most cities of this sort preserve themselves when at war, but once having acquired [imperial] rule they come to ruin; they lose

> their edge, like iron, when they remain at peace. The reason is that the legislator has not educated them to be capable of being at leisure.

While Americans are in no danger of glorifying war (indeed, we are more likely to fail to see the need for war as a means to peace), we do, I believe, share the Spartan perplexity about leisure. What Aristotle says about the effects of peace on a martial people may be equally true of the effects of prosperity on a laboring people. Once the work ethic erodes, we are doomed, for we know nothing else. The American generations that confronted war and depression acquitted themselves admirably, but their virtue was, like Sparta's, somewhat forced. It may sound odd, but it is the post-Cold War generations that face the toughest test. They must demonstrate whether the nation can keep its edge without necessity as a whetstone. Is it only the fight for freedom that makes us free, while the enjoyment of freedom debases us? My students have in effect won the lottery by being born in America in the late twentieth century. Are they being educated in a way to make them full possessors and guardians of that inheritance?

Sluttish women, brutish men

We made a big detour from a liberal understanding of leisure once before. Suburban middle-class American women in the 1950s and 1960s found themselves blessed with hard-working husbands, timesaving technology, and comparatively minimal child-care responsibilities (a result of small families and public schooling), yet by all accounts, they felt empty and incomplete. In *The Feminine Mystique*, Betty Friedan called this "the problem that has no name," a problem that "cannot be understood in terms of the age-old material problems of man: poverty, sickness, hunger, cold." Friedan was right that the malaise these privileged women were experiencing was a result of "a slow death of mind and spirit." But she was wrong in saying that the problem had no name—its name was boredom. Feminism was born of boredom, not oppression. And what was the solution to this quandary? Feminists clamored to become wage-slaves; they resolutely fled the challenge of leisure.

Perhaps it is unfair to fault feminists for having no higher conception of value than what DuBois called the "Gospel of Pay." Like other Americans, these women had formed the habit "of interpreting the world in dollars." Their assertiveness aped the already misguided American male assertiveness. Feminists would have been better advised to hold out for the superior worth and satisfactions of the domestic realm or perhaps to encourage women to be the vanguard for nobler aspirations. Women could have pursued liberal studies, politics, art, civic culture, and philanthropy. What they needed was an education to make them capable of leisure; what they got instead was a doubling of their duties. Today's overburdened women are beginning to realize that obligatory participation in the work force is not the route to self-realization (or family cohesion or societal happiness). Feminism should have been either intransigently conservative or truly radical. Instead, it was conformist to the core.

One hopeful sign among my students is the ambivalence of many of them, men and women alike, about the current sexual dispensation. They regret the loss of the rituals of courtship, although they feel a little guilty about that regret, since they have been told that courtesy and modesty are sexist (and sexually repressive) impositions. Wendy Shalit, the young woman whose recent book, *A Return to Modesty*, has garnered so much attention, is rapidly gaining a hearing. After I recommended the book to a couple of my students, I soon got reports that young women were spontaneously reading chapters aloud to one another in the dorm rooms and circulating copies from hand to hand, like samizdat. If the reinstitution of female virtue requires female solidarity—what Shalit calls "the cartel of virtue"—the first steps in that direction are being taken in those earnest discussions.

Sadly, the young women will receive no support from their elders. The official policy of college counseling centers and student-life bureaucrats is that it is impermissible to advise young women on the steps they might take to avoid date rape and other forms of sexual predation. Apparently, to tell a young woman that going out half-naked for a night of heavy drinking in the local bars is risky behavior is a form of "blaming the victim." I have spoken with a number of the upper-

classmen who serve as resident advisors in the dorms and they feel they are being prevented from offering real guidance to their young charges. They have workshops in how to respond to these incidents but not in how to prevent them (other than offering martial arts classes, of course). In the grip of the dogma of sexual equality, colleges are essentially conspiring in the debasement of students. The women become sluttish, and the men brutish. But something in many of these young women resists, not always in the most effective ways; they punish themselves via eating disorders, they seek escape in alcohol, or they convert to radical feminism and make a fetish of their victimization. If those who talk about "empowering" women mean it, the Shalit book would be mandatory reading for every new female college student.

Sexual politics

I have one female student of hardier temperament (whom I'll call Polly) who might be capable of sparking a revolution for republican sexual morality single-handedly. In a recent class, preparatory to teaching Machiavelli's *Mandragola,* I told the story of the rape of Lucretia. If you remember your Roman history, Lucretia was cornered by Sextus, the son of the Tarquin king, and given the option of acceding to sexual relations with him, with the promise that no one would know of her humiliation, or refusing such relations, in which case he would not violate her, but he would kill her and one of her slaves, justifying her death with the claim that he had found the two in bed together and had acted to vindicate the wronged husband. Not much of a choice: Lucretia can sacrifice the integrity of her body and will, but maintain her reputation for marital fidelity; or she can protect her chastity at the cost both of her life and her reputation.

Before I revealed to the class the conclusion of the legendary story, we spent some time discussing what was at stake. Polly finally interrupted the discussion with an impatient and imploring, "What did Lucretia do?" I told them that Lucretia acceded to the rapist, but she did not keep her humiliation hidden. Upon her husband's return, she told him what had happened. Of course, it was her word against that of the prince. So, as the proof of the veracity of her accusation, she

plunged a dagger into her breast. By her suicide she offered irrefutable evidence that she had been grievously dishonored. Her husband and other male kin took up the bloody dagger and led a successful revolution against the Tarquin dynasty, thereby founding the Roman Republic. With her eyes on fire, Polly blurted out, "That is the best story I have ever heard."

While many of her fellow classmates were either uncomprehending or uncomfortable, she seemed immediately to understand and admire Lucretia's act. She saw how women who insist on respect can shame men into manliness. She grasped the political consequences of this vindication of a woman's honor as well. She saw that valorous Roman patriotism was undergirded by the spirited modesty of Roman matrons. (Purely as an aside, I would contend that the current occupant of the Oval Office is another Sextus Tarquinius. Our nation's unwillingness to punish him is more evidence of the failure of contemporary feminism.) One young woman like Polly could reestablish sexual modesty and political liberty if not through her heroic death, then maybe by the kind of family she establishes. I hope she will have 10 kids and 100 grandkids.

On a less dramatic note, another hopeful sign is the number of top-notch young people, especially women, considering careers in elementary and secondary teaching. Even just seven years ago when I started teaching, all of the young women would have had their sights set on law school or corporate employment. That was what smart, ambitious women with a humanities degree were supposed to want. However, just in the last two years, all of my best female students (and a couple of top-notch young men as well) have decided on teaching instead, sometimes to the dismay of their parents. Clearly, this may just be an anomaly, but I pray it is a trend.

The feminist depreciation of women's domestic role led to depreciation also of women's traditional career choices, teaching and nursing. But perhaps those traditional careers were also natural careers for women—remember the Socratic metaphor of teaching as "midwifery." Despite the surprised or disappointed looks they encounter, these future teachers refuse to be apologetic. They believe that teaching youngsters is a task that will summon all of their ingenuity, intelligence, and insight into human character. Teaching is, as W.E.B. DuBois

said, "the contact of living souls." Especially since these young people have availed themselves of the new routes by which to avoid the usual processing of the "education" departments, I can't help but hope that my own chances of reaching students may be better 10 to 15 years from now.

The too tolerant society

The decent souls among Generation X are, I believe, more impressive, morally, than my own Baby Boom generation. But at every turn, their best instincts are thwarted by the hegemony of the Boomers. This is especially the case when it comes to developing the capacity for moral and political judgment.

Today's students have been drilled in relativism, of both the cultural and individual varieties. They have also been drilled in toleration, as a universal desideratum. To keep these two contemporary dogmas marching along in sync, students perform a very odd and, I think, very dangerous stutter step, resulting in many of them concluding that they are obliged to respect all manner of horrendous practices: slavery, human sacrifice, cannibalism, genocide, you name it. Their relativism tells them that there is no principled ground on which to say that such acts are wrong. Meanwhile, the only principle that does exist for them—though on what basis it would be hard to say—mandates equal respect for all beliefs and practices. Often, they seem so oblivious of human suffering, so unaware of human evil, and so ignorant of history that they don't really know what they are permitting when they yoke together this absolute tolerance with a relativist perspective. This is niceness gone seriously awry. (One is reminded of the etymology of the word "nice" which goes back to the Latin root *nescius*, meaning "ignorant.") Those who actually have some reservations about genocide and slavery don't know how to justify expressing those reservations. They know they mustn't impose their views on anyone else, and yet, it does seem to them that the victims are at least as deserving of respect as the executioners.

It might help them to know that, in its original formulation, liberal toleration always contained a qualification: No tolerance for the intolerant. Old-fashioned liberal tolerance

was demanding, in that it required enlightenment, of others, as well as oneself. The newfangled toleration, by demanding openness to the point of mindlessness (or spiritlessness), offering no resistance to the spread of fanaticism and extremism, risks becoming a vehicle of illiberalism. From being part of the arsenal of enlightenment, tolerance has become a form of know-nothingism. One gets moral credit for recusing oneself from the whole business of judging, discerning, and discriminating. It is moral to be amoral. One does not need to develop a capacity for moral and political judgment, since we ought not to be judging one another, either individually or collectively. Think how long it has been since the word "discriminating" was used with a positive connotation, as in "he was a man of discriminating judgment." For us, all discrimination has become "invidious." All judgment has become an imposition. One of the worst things one can say about someone today is that he is "judgmental." (At the same time, there is something of a popular backlash against this laxity, visible in the popularity of Judge Judy, Dr. Laura, and other shoot-from-the-hip types.)

In the classroom, the prevailing notion of toleration and "respect" is at odds with the intellectual enterprise. One of the categories on Loyola's standard course-evaluation form reads: "showed genuine respect for students." I have had students mark me as deficient on grounds that I required them to explain and justify their statements. They arrive believing that a challenging question directed at their stated view indicates disrespect. Since "everybody's entitled to his opinion," and no one is entitled to judge or discriminate among opinions, class discussion ought simply to be a matter of each person stating his view and leaving it at that. They have no conception of dialogue as a logical process, a joint endeavor subject to the arbitrament of reason, a working-through-speech-towards-the-truth. It comes as news to them that being taken seriously as an interlocutor—being listened to, questioned, and argued with—might be a form of "genuine respect." I have found that I must be much more explicit about my pedagogical methods than my teachers ever were.

Of course, students have heard the liberal-arts boilerplate about "learning to think critically." The problem is that for

many of them critical thinking seems to mean the cursory dismissal of others' arguments by espying in them that dread quality of "partisanship." If you can show that someone else is trying to persuade others, and mustering arguments to that end, you can then dismiss their arguments, because, after all, they only brought them forward with the illegitimate aim of persuading others. Attempts at persuasion are an imposition. Having so handily discounted any view they disagree with, they believe their own view stands firm, unassisted by any arguments on its behalf. In denouncing the partisanship of others, they are oblivious to their own. The charge of partisanship is used to fend off the challenge set by an opposing opinion. With students, this seems to be just a reflex of their complacency. Among our partisan politicians, the charge of partisanship is deployed much more self-consciously, and much more culpably. Both intellectual and political discourse are enfeebled by this refusal to start where one ought to start: with a consideration of the rightness or wrongness of the argument.

Perpetuation

Let me return to the question with which I began: What would it mean to educate with a view to the perpetuation of our political institutions? For an answer, one can't do better than offer Lincoln, for this was the theme of his life's work—a theme he first raised in the Lyceum Address of 1838. Lincoln believed that any threat to America would come from within, and that it would stem from a failure of self-understanding. "If destruction be our lot," Lincoln said, "we must ourselves be its author and finisher. As a nation of freemen, we must live through all time, or die by suicide." Lincoln already saw signs of the impending suicide of self-government in the "increasing disregard for law." The worst effect of this mobocratic spirit was to corrode the attachment of the people to their government. This is a diagnosis that sounds eerily familiar. In the wake of events such as the Oklahoma City bombing and the Littleton school massacre, every American knows about violence and terror in the heartland. But our most astute political observers have long known that danger lurked in the heartland—not just in the actions of the lunatic

fringe but, more significantly, in the alienation of political affection experienced by ordinary men and women. In order to refasten the people's attachment to their government (and perhaps refashion it as well), Lincoln called upon his countrymen to "Let [reverence for the laws] become the *political religion* of the nation."

Jefferson, who had likewise worried about democratic degeneracy, offered a very different, antireverential solution. What Jefferson recommended was a kind of permanent revolution—manifest, for example, in his suggestion that all laws, including the Constitution itself, have a life-span of 20 years, thus forcing each generation to assume the galvanizing task of founding. According to him, "The dead have no rights. They are nothing.... Each generation is as independent of the one preceding, as that was of all which had gone before."

While Jefferson seems to side wholly with transformation, Lincoln seems to side wholly with tradition. The opening remarks of the Lyceum Address are a panegyric on the founding generation. Theirs was the struggle; we are but epigones whose sole remaining task is the transmission of their blessed legacy. However, once the psalmodizing is over, the task of transmission begins to look more difficult. It turns out that "the political edifice of liberty and equal rights" erected by our forefathers has never really been a freestanding structure; "it had," Lincoln says, "many props to support it." Here is how he explains it:

> I mean the powerful influence which the interesting scenes of the revolution had upon the *passions* of the people as distinguished from their judgment. By this influence, the jealousy, envy, avarice, incident to our nature, and so common to a state of peace, prosperity, and conscious strength, were, for the time, in a great measure smothered and rendered inactive; while the deep rooted principles of *hate*, and the powerful motive of *revenge*, instead of being turned against each other, were directed exclusively against the British nation. And thus, from the force of circumstances, the basest principles of our nature, were either made to lie dormant, or to become the active agents in the advancement of the noblest of causes.... But this state of feeling *must fade, is fading, has faded*, with the circumstances that produced it.... [The scenes of the revolution] *were* the pillars of the temple of liberty; and now, that they have crumbled away, that temple must fall, unless we ... supply their places with other

> pillars, hewn from the solid quarry of sober reason. Passion has helped us; but can do so no more. It will in future be our enemy. Reason, cold, calculating, unimpassioned reason, must furnish all the materials for our future support and defence.

According to Lincoln, assertions of independence can allow passion a helpful role, but those same passions are harmful to the development of the habit of independence. Because self-government, both in the individual and in the collective, depends upon the sovereignty of reason, the "capability of a people to govern themselves" is still an undemonstrated proposition. The temple of liberty, though aided in its construction by a scaffolding of passion, must be built from the rock of reason.

Tradition and transformation

America today finds itself in precisely this circumstance of faded patriotism: It cannot summon up the scenes of the Revolution, the scenes of the Civil War, the scenes of World War II and the subsequent Cold War. Its unruly passions will not be fortuitously ordered in the manner of previous generations. The old pillars have rotted, done in by time, with assistance from the termites of materialism, feminism, multiculturalism, and postmodernism. New pillars must be designed. But how?

There is no one responsible for a greater transformation of our moral and political life than Abraham Lincoln; at the same time, there is no one more intransigent in his devotion to the founding principles, the founding documents, and indeed every jot and tittle of the law of the land. That is a paradox worth pondering. To me, it suggests something quite interesting: the possibility of transformation proceeding out of the tradition itself, and precisely because of utter fidelity to it. In seeking to carry out his task of perpetuation, Lincoln saw that the founding, like all beginnings, had been unable to maintain its full momentum and direction. The only conceivable way to restore its force was to draw once again more deeply than ever from the original source. In other words, the endurance of the republic depends on a kind of repetition of its emergence, hence Lincoln's call for new pillars of liberty in the Lyceum Address, and ultimately his call for "a new birth of freedom" in the Gettysburg Address.

My modest suggestion is that the young be schooled in the principles of the Declaration and Constitution and encouraged to undertake an intensive dialogue, both philosophic and political, with the dead. The dead may not have rights, but they may have been right. If we begin by asking whether they were right or not, our answer to that question might inform our stance toward the present and guide us toward renewed public engagement. It will enable us to do what Václav Havel calls "embracing what one is given to do in one's time and place."