Chapter 2. What is college really about?

It's not like high school...
What is a liberal education?
What's so great about a life of learning?

What's in this chapter for you?

- Some interesting essays on living well.

1. "The Pleasures of Learning," from *The Immortal Profession,* Copyright 1976 by Gilbert Highet. Reprinted from the September 1976 *Reader's Digest.*
2. "How to Make People Smaller Than They Are," by Norman Cousins, first published in *Saturday Review* in 1978.
3. "Knowledge and Wisdom" by Bertrand Russell, from *Portraits from Memory.* Copyright 1951, 1952, 1953, 1956.

- By choosing a four year college after high school, you have in some sense entered a new world, one which your parents and grandparents may not know first hand. The readings and exercises in this chapter are designed to introduce you to some of the basic ideals of liberal education, the kind of education that the university at its best enables you to acquire, no matter what you major in.
- The following three essays were written at different times, by different men, for different audiences, but they share a common purpose--to reflect on the nature and benefits of learning, or more particularly, of becoming one of the truly educated. They are included here for your consideration. You are at the beginning of a new kind of an adventure in learning, one that can sustain you for a lifetime of discovery and pure pleasure. However, you are not likely to put yourself firmly on the road to becoming truly well-educated unless you have some idea of where that path leads. To become truly educated is to seek knowledge everywhere and to realize that only you have the keys to your own learning--thus to your own success--in college and throughout your life.

Study Suggestion

1) Read through all of the following essays, just for fun, and to get the general drift of things. Then go back and reread each essay. Look up any troubling words. Read the difficult sections several times. Make a note of anything you just can't understand. Write a paragraph about each essay in your journal, in your own words.* In each just tell the author's main point as clearly and concisely as you can. Also note any questions the essay raises for you; any points you find questionable or controversial. 2) When you have finished studying the essays, reflect on them, and write your own summaries, make a list in your journal of 5 characteristics of an educated person.

*For more on keeping a journal, see Chapter 3.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT: ESSAYS ON LEARNING AND WISDOM

"The Pleasures of Learning"

As most schools are set up today, learning is compulsory. It is an Ought: even worse, a Must, enforced by regular hours and rigid discipline. And the young sneer at the Oughts and resist the Musts with all their energy. The feeling often lasts through a lifetime. For too many of us, learning appears to be a surrender of our own will to external direction, a sort of enslavement.

This is a mistake. Learning is a natural pleasure, inborn and instinctive, one of the essential pleasures of the human race. Watch a small child, at an age too young to have had any mental habits implanted by training. Some delightful films made by the late Dr. Arnold Gesell of Yale University show little creatures who can barely talk investigating problems with all the zeal and excitement of explorers, making discoveries with the passion and absorption of dedicated scientists. At the end of each successful investigation, there comes over each tiny face an expression of pure heart-felt pleasure.

When Archimedes discovered the principle of specific gravity by observing his own displacement of water in a bathtub, he leaped out with delight, shouting, "Heruека, heureka!" ("I have found it, I have found it!") The instinct which prompted his outburst, and the rapture of its gratification, are possessed by all children.

But if the pleasure of learning is universal, why are there so many dull, incurious people in the world? It is because they were made dull, by bad teaching, by isolation, by surrender to routine; sometimes, too, by the pressure of hard work and poverty; or by the toxin of riches, with all their ephemeral and trivial delights. With luck, resolution and guidance, however, the human mind can survive not only poverty but even wealth.

This pleasure is not confined to learning from textbooks, which are too often tedious. But it does include learning from books. Sometimes, when I stand in a big library like the Library of Congress, or Butler Library at Columbia, and gaze round me at the millions of books, I feel a sober, earnest delight hard to convey except by a metaphor. These are not lumps of lifeless paper, but *minds* alive on the shelves. From each of them goes out its own voice, as inaudible as the streams of sound conveyed by electric waves beyond the range of our hearing; and just as the touch of a button on our stereo will fill the room with music, so by opening one of these volumes, one can call into range a voice far distant in time and space, and hear it speaking, mind to mind, heart to heart.

But, far beyond books, learning means keeping the mind open and active to receive all kinds of experience. One of the best-informed men I ever knew was a cowboy who rarely read a newspaper and never a book, but who had ridden many thousands of miles through one of the western states. He knew his state as thoroughly as a surgeon knows the human body. He loved it, and understood it. Not a mountain, not a canyon which had not much to tell him; not a change in the weather that he could not interpret. And so among the pleasures of learning, we should include travel: travel with an open mind, an alert eye and a wish to understand other peoples, other places, rather than looking in them for a mirror image of oneself. If I were a young man today, I should resolve to see -- no, to learn -- all of the 50 states before I was 35.

Learning also means learning to practice, or at least to appreciate, an art. Every new art you learn appears like a new window on the universe; it is like acquiring a new sense. Because I was born and brought up in Glasgow, Scotland, a hideous 19th-century industrial city, I did not understand the slightest thing about architecture until I was in my 20s. Since then, I have learned a little about the art, and it has been a constant delight. In my mind I have a permanent album containing bright pictures of the Blue Mosque in Istanbul, the little church of St. John Nepomuk in Munich, the exquisite acropolis of Lindos standing high above the shining Rhodian sea.

Crafts, too are well worth exploring. A friend of mine took up book-binding because his doctor ordered him to do something that would give him relaxation and activity without tension. It was a difficult challenge at first, but he gradually learned to square off the paper and the boards, sew the pages, fasten on the backstrip, and maintain precision and neatness throughout.

Within a few years, this initially rather dull hobby had led him into fresh fields of enjoyment. He began to collect fine books from the past five centuries; he developed an interest in printing; eventually, he started a private press and had the joy of producing his own elegant books. Many other crafts there are, and

most of them contain one essential pleasure: the pleasure of making something that will last.

As for reading books, this contains two different delights. One is the pleasure of apprehending the unexpected, such as when one meets a new author who has a new vision of the world. The other pleasure is of deepening one's knowledge of a special field. One might enjoy reading about the Civil War, and then be drawn to a particularly moving part of it – the underground railway, say, which carried escaping slaves northward to freedom. One would then be impelled to visit the chief way stations along the route, reconstructing the lives of those resolute organizers and thankful fugitives.

Tradition says that Ptolemy, the great astronomer of the Greek and Roman world, worked peacefully in his observatory under the clear skies of northern Egypt for 40 years. Many and great were his explorations of the starry universe. For instance, he described astronomical refraction in a way that was not improved for over 1000 years. Ptolemy wrote just one poem, but it expressed his whole life:

Mortal I know I am, short-lived; and yet,
whenever I watch the multitude of swirling stars,
then I no longer tread this earth,
but rise to feast with God,
and enjoy the food of the immortals.

Learning extends our lives (as Ptolemy said) into new dimensions. It is cumulative. Instead of diminishing in time, like health and strength, its returns go on increasing, provided....

Provided that you aim, throughout your life, as you continue learning, to integrate your thought, to make it harmonious. If you happen to be an engineer and also enjoy singing in a glee club, connect these two activities. They unite in you; they are not in conflict. Both choral singing and engineering are examples of the architectonic ability of man: of his power to make a large plan and to convey it clearly to others. Both are esthetics and depend much on symmetry. Think about them not as though they were dissociated, but as though each were one aspect of a single unity. You will do them better, and be happier.

This is hard advice to give to young students. They are explosive, exploratory and insurrectionary. Instead of integrating their lives, they would rather seek outward, and even try to move in opposite directions simultaneously.

Much unhappiness has been suffered by those people who have never recognized that it is as necessary to make themselves into whole and harmonious personalities as to keep themselves clean, healthy and financially solvent. Wholeness of the mind and spirit is not a quality conferred by nature, or by God. It is like health, virtue and knowledge. Man has the capacity to attain it; but to achieve it depends on his own efforts. It needs a long deliberate effort of the mind and the emotions, and even the body.

During our earthy life, the body gradually dies; even the emotions become duller. But the mind in most of us continues to live, and even grows more lively and active, enjoys itself more, works and plays with more expansion and delight.

Many people have played themselves to death, or eaten and drunk themselves to death. Nobody has ever thought himself to death. The chief danger confronting us is not age. It is laziness, sloth, routine, stupidity -- forcing their way in like wind through the shutters, seeping into the cellar like swamp water. Many who avoid learning, or abandon it, find that life is drained dry. They spend 30 years in a club chair looking glumly out at the sand and the ocean; on a porch swing waiting for somebody to drive down the road. But that is not how to live.

No learner has ever run short of subjects to explore. The pleasures of learning are indeed pleasures. In fact, the word should be changed. The true name is happiness. You can live longest and best and most rewardingly by attaining and preserving the happiness of learning.

GILBERT HIGHET

Gilbert Highet (1906-1978) was born in Scotland but spent most of his life in this country. He was a classical scholar, poet, critic, author, and for many years professor of Latin language and literature at Columbia University. At one time he was chief literary critic for *Harper's*. Highet's fourteen books include *The Powers of Poetry (1960); Explorations (1971); and The Immortal Profession: The Joys of Teaching and Learning (1976).*

HOW TO MAKE PEOPLE SMALLER THAN THEY ARE

By Norman Cousins. Reprinted by permission of the author from *Saturday Review* (December 1978). Copyright 1978 by *Saturday Review.*

One of the biggest problems confronting American education today is the increasing vocationalization of our colleges and universities.

Throughout the country, schools are under pressure to become job-training centers and employment agencies. The pressure comes mainly from two sources. One is the growing determination of many citizens to reduce taxes --understandable and even commendable in itself, but irrational and irresponsible when connected to the reduction or dismantling of vital public services. The second source of pressure comes from parents and students who tend to scorn courses of study that do not teach people how to become attractive to employers in a rapidly tightening job market.

It is absurd to believe that the development of skills does not also require the systematic development of the human mind. Education is being measured more by the size of the benefits the individual can extract from society than by the extent to which the individual can come into possession of his or her full powers. The results is that the life-giving juices are in danger of being drained out of education.

Emphasis on "practicalities" is being characterized by the subordination of words to numbers. History is seen not as an essential experience to be transmitted to new generations, but as abstractions that carry dank odors. Art is regarded as something that calls for indulgence or patronage and that has no place among the practical realities. Political science is viewed more as a specialized subject for people who want to go into politics than as an opportunity for citizens to develop a knowledgeable relationship with the systems by which human societies are governed. Finally, literature and philosophy are assigned the role of add-ons -- intellectual adornments that have noting to do with "genuine" education.

Instead of trying to shrink the liberal arts, the American people ought to be putting pressure on colleges and universities to increase the ratio of the humanities to the sciences. Most serious studies of medical-school curricula in recent years have called attention to the stark gaps in the liberal education of medical students. The experts agree that the schools shouldn't leave it up to students to close those gaps.

We must not make it appear, however, that nothing is being done. In the past decade, the National Endowment for the Humanities has been a prime mover in infusing the liberal arts into medical education and other specialized schools. During this past year alone, NEH has given 108 grants to medical schools and research organizations in the areas of ethics and human values. Some medical schools like the one at Pennsylvania State University, have led the way in both the number and the depth of courses offered in the humanities. Penn State has been especially innovative in weaving literature and philosophy into the full medical course of study. It is ironical that the pressure against the humanities should be manifesting itself at precisely the time when so many medical schools are at long last moving in the direction.

The irony of the emphasis being placed on careers is that nothing is more valuable for anyone who has had a professional or vocational education than to be able to deal with abstractions or complexities, or to feel comfortable with subtleties of thought or language, or to think sequentially. The doctor who knows only disease is at a disadvantage alongside the doctor who knows at least as much about people as he does about pathological organisms. The lawyer who argues in court from a narrow legal base is no match for the lawyer who can connect legal precedents to historical experience and who employs wide-ranging intellectual resources. The business executive whose competence in general management is bolstered by an artistic ability to deal with people is of prime value to his company. For the technologist, the engineering of consent can be just as important as the engineering of moving parts. In all these respects, the liberal arts have much to offer. Just in terms of career preparation, therefore, a student is shortchanging himself by shortcutting the humanities.

But even if it could be demonstrated that the humanities contribute nothing directly to a job, they would still be an essential part of the educational equipment of any person who wants to come to terms with life. The humanities would be expendable only if human beings didn't have to make decisions that affect their lives and the lives of others; if the human past never existed or had nothing to tell us about the present; if thought processes were irrelevant to the achievement of purpose; if creativity was beyond the human mind and had nothing to do with the joy of living; if human relationships were random aspects of life; if human beings never had to cope with panic or pain, or if they never had to anticipate the connection between cause and effect; if all the mysteries of mind and nature were fully plumbed; and if no special demands arose from the accident of being born a human being instead of hen or a hog.

Finally, there would be good reason to eliminate the humanities if a free society were not absolutely dependent on a functioning citizenry. If the main purpose of a university is job training, then the underlying philosophy of our government has little meaning. The debates that went into the making of American society concerned not just institutions or governing principles but the capacity of humans to sustain those institutions. Whatever the disagreements were over other issues at the American Constitutional Convention, the fundamental question sensed by everyone, a question that lay over the entire assembly, was whether the people themselves would understand

what it meant to hold the ultimate power of society, and whether they had enough of a sense of history and destiny to know where they had been and where they ought to be going.

Jefferson was prouder of having been the founder of the University of Virginia than of having been President of the United States. He knew that the educated and developed mind was the best assurance that a political system could be made to work -- a system based on the informed consent of the governed. If this idea fails, then all the saved tax dollars in the world will not be enough to prevent the nation from turning on itself.

NORMAN COUSINS

Norman Cousins, longtime editor of *Saturday Review,* was born in Union Hill, New Jersey, in 1915. He attended Columbia University before becoming editor of *Current History* in 1935. Cousins edited *Saturday Review* almost without interruption from 1942 to 1978. He has many honorary degrees and has received several awards for his essays and books. Among his latest books are *The Improbable Triumvirate (1972, The Celebration of Life (1974), and The Quest for Immorality (1974).*

KNOWLEDGE AND WISDOM

Most people would agree that, although our age far surpasses all previous ages in knowledge, there has been no correlative increase in wisdom. But agreement ceases as soon as we attempt to define "wisdom" and consider means of promoting it. I want to ask first what wisdom is, and then what can be done to teach it.

There are, I think, several factors that contribute to wisdom. Of these I should put first a sense of proportion: the capacity to take account of all the important factors in a problem and to attach to each its due weight. This has become more difficult than it used to be owing to the extent and complexity of the specialized knowledge required of various kinds of technicians. Suppose, for example, that you are engaged in research in scientific medicine. The work is difficult and is likely to absorb the whole of your intellectual energy. You have not time to consider the effect which your discoveries or inventions may have outside the field of medicine. You succeed (let us say), as modern medicine has succeeded, in enormously lowering the infant death-rate, not only in Europe and America, but also in Asia and Africa. This has the entirely unintended result of making the food supply inadequate and lowering the standard of life in the most populous parts of the word. To take an even more spectacular example, which is in everybody's mind at the present time: You study the composition of the atom from a disinterested desire for knowledge, and incidentally place in the hands of powerful lunatics the means of destroying the human race. In such ways the pursuit of knowledge may become harmful unless it is combined with wisdom; and wisdom in the sense of comprehensive vision is not necessarily present in specialists in the pursuit of knowledge.

Comprehensiveness alone, however, is not enough to constitute wisdom. There must be, also a certain awareness of the ends of human life. This may be illustrated by the study of history. Many eminent historians have done more harm than good because they viewed facts through the distorting medium of their own passions. Hegel had a philosophy of history which did not suffer from any lack of comprehensiveness, since it started from the earliest times and continued into an indefinite future. But the chief lesson of history which he sought to inculcate was that from the year A.D. 400 down to his own time Germany had been the most important nation and the standard-bearer of progress in the world. Perhaps one could stretch the comprehensiveness that constitutes wisdom to include not only intellect but also feeling. It is by no means uncommon to find men whose knowledge is wide but whose feelings are narrow. Such men lack what I am calling wisdom.

It is not only in public ways, but in private life equally, that wisdom is needed. It is needed in the choice of ends to be pursued and in emancipation from personal prejudice. Even an end which it would be noble to pursue if it were attainable may be pursued unwisely if it is inherently impossible of achievement. Many men in past ages devoted their lives to a search for the philosopher's stone and the elixir of life. No doubt, if they could have found them, they would have conferred great benefits upon mankind, but as it was their lives were wasted. To descent to less heroic matters, consider the case of two men. Mr. A and Mr. B, who hate each other and through mutual hatred,

bring each other to destruction. Suppose you go to Mr. A and say, "Why do you hate Mr. B?" He will no doubt give you an appalling list of Mr. B's vices, partly true, partly false. And now suppose you go to Mr. B. He will give you an exactly similar list of Mr. A's vices with an equal admixture of truth and falsehood. Suppose you now come back to Mr. A and say, "You will be surprised to learn that Mr. B says the same things about you as you say about him", and you go to Mr. B and make a similar speech. The first effect, no doubt, will be to increase their mutual hatred, since each will be so horrified by the other's injustice. But perhaps, if you have sufficient patience and sufficient persuasiveness, you may succeed in convincing each that the other has only the normal share of human wickedness, and that their enmity is harmful to both. If you can do this, you will have instilled some fragment of wisdom.

I think the essence of wisdom is emancipation, as far as possible, from the tyranny of the here and the now. We cannot help the egoism of our senses. Sight and sound and touch are bound up with our own bodies and cannot be made impersonal. Our emotions start similarly from ourselves. An infant feels hunger or discomfort, and is unaffected except by his own physical condition. Gradually with the years, his horizon widens, and in proportion as his thoughts and feelings become less personal and less concerned with his own physical states, he achieves growing wisdom. This is of course a matter of degree. No one can view the world with complete impartiality; and if anyone could, he would hardly be able to remain alive. but it is possible to make a continual approach towards impartiality, on the one hand, by knowing things somewhat remote in time or space, and on the other hand, by giving to such things their due weight in our feelings. It is this approach towards impartiality that constitutes growth in wisdom.

Can wisdom in this sense be taught? And, if it can, should the teaching of it be one of the aims of education? I should answer both these questions in the affirmative. We are told on Sundays that we should love our neighbor as ourselves. On the other six days of the week, we are exhorted to hate him. You may say that this is nonsense, since it not our neighbor whom we are exhorted to hate. But you will remember that the precept was exemplified by saying that the Samaritan was our neighbor. We no longer have any wish to hate Samaritans and so we are apt to miss the point of the parable. If you want to get its point, you should substitute Communist or anti-Communist, as the case may be, for Samaritan. It might be objected that it is right to hate those who do harm. I do not think so. If you hate them, it is only too likely that you will become equally harmful; and it is very unlikely that you will induce them to abandon their evil ways. Hatred of evil is itself a kind of bondage to evil. The way out is through understanding, not through hate. I am not advocating non-resistance. But I am saying that resistance, if it is to be effective in preventing the spread of evil, should be combined with the greatest degree of understanding and the smallest degree of force that is compatible with the survival of the good things that we wish to preserve.

It is commonly urged that a point of view such as I have been advocating is compatible with vigor in action. I do not think history bears out this view. Queen Elizabeth I in England and Henry IV in France lived in a world where almost everybody was fanatical, either on the Protestant or on the Catholic side. Both remained free from the errors of their time and both, by remaining free, were beneficent and certainly not ineffective. Abraham Lincoln conducted a great war without ever departing from what I have been calling wisdom.

I have said that in some degree wisdom can be taught. I think that this teaching should have a larger intellectual element than has been customary in what has been thought of as moral instruction. I think that the disastrous results of hatred and narrow-mindedness to those who feel them can be pointed out incidentally in the course of giving knowledge. I do not think that knowledge and morals ought to be too much separated. It is true that the kind of specialized knowledge which is required for various kinds of skill has very little to do with wisdom. But it should be supplemented in education by wider surveys calculated to put it in its place in the total of human activities. Even the best technicians should also be good citizens; and when I say "citizens", I mean citizens of the world and not of this or that sect or nation. With every increase of knowledge and skill, wisdom becomes more necessary, for every such increase augments our capacity of realizing our purposes, and therefore augments our capacity for evil, if our purposes are unwise. The world needs wisdom as it has never needed it before; and if knowledge continues to increase, the world will need wisdom in the future even more than it does now.

BERTRAND RUSSELL

Bertrand Russell (1872-1970), British philosopher, mathematician, and social reformer, was born in Trelleck, Wales, and educated at Trinity College, Cambridge. His influence on mathematics, logic, and social thought, through such writings as *Principia Mathematica* (1919-13) and *Marriage and Morals* (1929), has been profound. In 1950, he was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature.