

Dr. Elizabeth Coleman

Remarks at Inaugural
As Ninth President of Bennington College

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I accept and greet this charge of assuming the presidency of Bennington College with something resembling the alacrity, and high expectation with which, to butcher Shakespeare, the young bridegroom leaps to his death. Those of you unfamiliar with the wondrous meanings of Elizabethan English are most cordially invited to come to Bennington College to discover them.

This is a time when the debate over liberal education is again heating up; this is a place, this college, as daring, as exhilarating as any I have known; and this is a responsibility, that of leading such an institution, which is as great and worthy a challenge as I can imagine.

So, this inaugural is a very special moment for me and it is with great pleasure that I welcome you, and it is with equal gratitude that I thank you for joining me. What I would like to share with you today is some of my sense of the joy, of the magnitude of desire, of the celebration of the human spirit that the work we call education touches; something of what it means to teach, of what it can be like to be a student; something of the values to which the classroom is dedicated; something of what is envisioned in the very idea of a college.

I apologize in advance for ignoring such mighty themes as the explosion of knowledge, the shrinking of the planet, the dominance of technology, the subjection of women, the rise of yuppies, the demise of civilization, but there is a reason. In the din of the going ideological agendas for education, whether Marxism, feminism, fundamentalism, or Bennett-ism, the revolutionary agenda of education itself goes unheard. In our emphasis on the practical social purposes education is presumed to serve — the notion that education equips us to fit better into a given world — we can and do lose sight of the power of education to enable us to be a transforming presence in the world. Being able to write a good business letter or to know the differences between hardware and software may be side effects of education; they are not its purpose. In our efforts to heap values on education from without we can and do overlook what it means to see it from within — what, for example, it means to enter a community where the resources being systematically mined, aggressively developed, are located *within* human beings, and hence what it means to enter a community where acquiring more for oneself means that there very likely will be more and not less for one's fellows. We have, in short, become very accustomed to defending liberal arts education in terms of where it will get you. I would like to dwell, for these precious moments at least, on what's happening while you are there.

At the center of education is the fact of human intelligence, curiosity, imag-

ination. Equally central is the capacity to speak, the desire to be heard, and, most remarkable, hardest won, the willingness to listen. Then there is the complexity, fullness, wonder of the world. Curiosity is not all that drives us, nor are wonders the whole story about the world, but they do constitute a portion, and a sizable one, of the human condition and it is the enviable place of education to exploit the dynamic between human curiosity and the fascination of the world for all it is worth.

If you would see most clearly the magnitude of that dynamic in our lives, watch its beginnings when we participate in it by touch, feel, smell, most of all by taste. The baby would swallow the entire world if only it would fit. If you doubt the intensity of human curiosity, look again at the fixed gaze of that infant with eyes that seem large enough to fill a room and bright enough to light it. If you would gauge the content and character of insights to be achieved, the lessons to be learned, imagine what is involved in the discovery that when things, or people, disappear from sight, they are not necessarily gone forever, although they might be. Or the determination and concentration, the sheer genius it takes to grasp the difference between those things that are alive and those that are not, the difference between those things that move by themselves and those that must be pushed.

Often these discoveries are accomplished one on one — the child and the world, but not always. Remember when you were energetically pulling a cord across the floor, at the other end of which is a favored object, when suddenly that object seems intent on staying right next to the leg of a table. Regardless of how hard you pull and, even more startling, how loudly you scream, it refuses to budge. If anything it clings even closer to its new-found friend until someone, usually a larger person than yourself, with almost no effort and in utter silence, pulls back ever so slightly in the other direction (of all things) and places what you are pulling in a different relationship to the leg of that table. Miraculously, all is right with the world. If the person who intervenes invites you to watch closely, if he overcomes your great impatience, particularly after this unconscionable delay, and with patience infinite somehow persuades you to get into this mess again, incredibly, in order to try your hand at making things right, and if she kneels down instead of bending over and works with you eye to eye in this great enterprise, he or she is a teacher — more precisely, an extraordinary teacher. At the moment you stop screaming and tugging and start looking, listening, then imitating, finally understanding so that you will no

longer need outside intervention, you are a student. If the space this occurs in is set up in such a way to encourage such events, it is a classroom. And if the subject — here no less than intimations of cause and effect — is of such magnitude that huge as our teachers may seem at the outset they fade into the background as the fascination of what is being revealed takes over, then we are confronting an unadulterated instance of education.

But we, alas, get bigger ourselves and leave the age when the whole of life is the process of transforming the unknown to the known, the unfamiliar to the familiar, to enter that time when education is supposed to occur at certain periods of the day and is supposed to be very different from what happens at other times of the day. Distinctions develop between play and school and it becomes easier, much easier for us to lose touch with the wonder of it all. More focused, more pointed, education remains, nonetheless, potentially explosive, however deeply buried, however much layered-over by our daunting awkwardness when it comes to institutionalizing this process. One reason for that continued power is that books enter the picture and our growing capacity to read them.

Here it demands less an act of our imagination, places less stress on our memory, to reconnect with what it meant to take that next step in education, to enter the realm of words on a page — that magical world where experience is no longer confined to what you encounter directly. Sitting curled in a chair you are transported to the Galapagos — taste the slight bitterness of the beetles that Darwin puts on his tongue during the voyage of the Beagle — your deepest wells of repugnance somehow momentarily overcome. Although you are young you will become old, although happy you will brush against the very limits of human suffering, although very much a daughter you will be every inch a father, when Lear enters carrying a dead Cordelia in his arms to tell us, “She’ll come no more, never, never, never, never, never.” Relaxed, complacent as you may be in the easy embrace of this republic, you will be jarred awake by your encounter with the politics of terror if you are brave enough to read Miguel Asturias. Enthralling as the world may be in its immediacy, exciting as are the passions of human relations at close quarters, there is something awesome as the limits of time, space and even the self disappear and we enter the life of the mind, of the imagination, to encounter what selves other than ours have thought, seen, felt, heard and made. So it is to read.

The expansion of worlds that books proffer is only one side of the equation. On the other are the resources that are engaged if we are to mine their wealth.

It is easy to confuse the stillness of our curled-up reader with passivity; nothing could be further from the mark. Those who sit back waiting for the words to leap out and hit them may be doing something, but it is not reading. Whether Aristotle's *De Anima*, or Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, Newton's *Principia* or Anne Tyler's *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant*, if we would know them, we must actively, energetically enter their world, share their assumptions, breathe their life. The demands are enormous, on a par with the rewards, and it takes education at its best to meet them. In addition to teaching at its most thoughtful, our utmost seriousness and dedication as students, the existence of other students now assumes a critical role. Nothing can quite replace the impact of other voices seeing what we somehow missed despite endless re-reading, hearing a music that we are deaf to despite all our efforts. Our rush to judgment slows down, the great temptations of premature closure are resisted as the pleasures of seeing the full unfolding of a text take over.

Reading is of course only one of several fundamental arts properly associated with a formal education. There remains arithmetic, remembering, writing. I need hardly belabor the values of writing; we hear about them daily, from every direction. It is devoutly to be wished, and unlikely to be granted, that as much was made of the overweening importance and difficulty of having something to say as is made of technical concerns. Writing can refine, extend, even shape our thought and imagination; it cannot substitute for them.

Memory, unlike writing, is scarcely mentioned. This undoubtedly is related to its association with varieties of pedagogy that are currently considered relatively mindless. Even were the assumptions about memorizing and the absence of mind beyond question, which is doubtful, our nonchalance about the educational importance of memory is perilous. You can exclaim about the necessity of knowing the past all you want, but what if people have left undeveloped the ability to recall what is not directly in front of them. You can bemoan the demise of reason, but what if we cannot remember precisely what was said, and by whom, at the outset of the argument. A terrible, even terrifying, consequence is to decide that such things don't matter — not an uncommon reaction to ignorance. Forgetting is no academic matter, as every writer of totalitarian nightmares understands perfectly. There is no more intimate relation than that between conscience and the capacity to remember, to remember accurately and to insist on the necessity of doing so.

And finally, for any of you who doubt the glories and omnipresence of

mathematics, just imagine a universe without the lines: “how do I love thee? Let me count the ways.”

The expansion, the refinement of those capacities that empower us to experience an enlivened and informed relation to the world, is in short, the essential work of education, whether pre-nursery or post-doctoral. It does not only take place in school, nor is what happens in school limited to education. Its centrality shifts as other agendas increase in importance — the socialization of the pre-college years, the training emphases of the post-college years.

Poised between the two — the time of growing up, the time of being grown — is the college experience, second to none in its challenge, complexity, and vision. It comes at a time when personal autonomy assumes new dimensions, much less now a matter of possessions, much more a condition of the self. Choices are increasingly internalized, less and less coming from external sources, whether those be parents, teachers, peers, or whether they be hourly school bells driving your feet, SAT’s driving your mind. It is a time you are invited to make your education your own, a time when you imprint it, no less than it imprints you. The growing maturity, even more to the point, the expanding freedom, transforms the dynamic between teacher, student and subject.

Teaching is never more unequivocally the art of engaging students in the pursuit of truth, the quest for excellence than in college, but such majestic purposes are accomplished at this stage by working very closely in the vineyards where faculty have chosen to cultivate those things most intently themselves. In so doing teaching facilitates the extraordinary process by which students discover an abiding interest of their own — a vocation, a craft, a question, a discipline, a profession — and what it means to pursue it. Here one learns that depth of focus and intensity of concentration are necessary to do anything at all, that breadth of vision is necessary to do anything well. Somehow the range of one’s curiosity must be reconciled with the necessity for immersion, the excitement of creative discovery with the rigors of technical mastery.

However self-absorbed, however lonely this process becomes at any given moment, there is the continual fact and reminder of the existence of others — of this taking place in a context, a community, where the give is essential to the take. The most basic facts of the classroom affirm the possibility and the value of collaborative activity, its accomplishments remind us again and again of its power. Whether as teacher or student, there simply is nothing quite like the thinking we do when preparing for a class, because of the urgency, tension and

expectation that the presence of minds other than our own, equally committed to the inquiry at hand, provides.

The struggle to achieve the power and the pleasure of a genuine autonomy — the emerging capacity to shape one's world as well as to be shaped by it — is then, one hopes, born out of a profound recognition of, and respect for, the autonomy of other people and other things.

Just so one hopes that the very conditions for a successful formal education — its dynamic center, its dependence on inquiry, wonder, uncertainty, the capacity to see things freshly — ensures that the successful completion of one's formal education will not be confused with the ending of one's education itself. The only thing that should make leaving college bearable is the hope against hope that you are taking the best part of it with you.

References to hope bring us to the great question of the relation between this take on education, or, as some would see it, this hallucination about education, and what actually happens. Undoubtedly the distance is often very wide. I suspect the divide is even greater between such a view of education and the way education is often talked about. It is worth a moment to speculate as to why. There are, I think, three reasons worth mention.

First, there are the mechanical rather than dynamic models that dominate our thinking about education. Information is confused with knowledge. Reading, writing and mathematics are reduced to mere technical facilities. Teaching, even in its more elaborated and nuanced forms, is essentially seen as a process of filling students' heads, which are apparently empty, with stuff that teachers apparently have in great, even over-abundance.

The ways in which we manage, more accurately package, education are confused with its substance. Questions that might search out the limits of human freedom or try to fathom the nature of gravity pale in the face of questions about the choice of a major. Picking one's way through a Chinese menu of distribution requirements is presumed to provide breadth, a grasp of the interconnections of ideas, as if taking two from column A and three from column B would do it, as if taking three from column A and two from column B would place us in great jeopardy.

Even the accents of reform are at times a parody of seriousness. Of course *what* we read, think about, do in college matters, it matters enormously, but to list a handful of great books as if that were a response to this issue is not helpful. It is not a large step between that sort of response and the notion that lists

in themselves have something to do with what it means to be educated.

A second and in some ways much more formidable factor is the elevation in the last 100 years of the expert and expertise to the status of being *the* model — virtually unexamined and certainly undisputed — of intellectual seriousness and competence. We are so totally imbued with this way of seeing that it is difficult to appreciate that it was not always so. One consequence of this valuation of the expert is to undermine the authority and power of those arts fundamental to the uses of intelligence itself, such as reading, seeing, listening. A recognition of *their* authority extends the access and range of individuals as such, while the whole impetus of the model of expertise is to emphasize the limits of our range. Whatever the impact of this attitude for good or ill on civilization generally, it has had a profound and highly problematic impact on education, particularly on what is called higher education.

Finally, the most intriguing reason is the loss of feeling in this country for the importance of some of the fundamentals of education, as if we were anesthetized on this subject. One does not have to go to Socrates' Athens to see great passions aroused by matters we think of as merely academic. It was not so long ago that reading and writing could cost you your life in this country if you happened to be a slave. Obviously people, white and black, acknowledged the extraordinary power of the written word. And today all we need are ears to be aware of the desperate importance that books — the writing and the reading of them — currently have for people in other countries. But for us to feel that urgency requires a leap of imagination; were it not for the capacity of writers from other countries to engage our imagination, their passion about the exercise of their craft would probably remain a distant and vaguely enigmatic phenomenon.

This deadened and deadening ambience is consistent with, and reinforced by, current ideological fashions among a significant proportion of the intellectual and academic community — an insistence on our incapacity to get outside our own skins whether it be a matter of their color, their sex or their material circumstances. Together they produce a chilling skepticism or worse, an oblivion, with regard to the potential power and range of our imagination, or for that matter of our humanity. But fashions are not eternal, and the history of this republic suggests that it can and does periodically awaken.

Moreover, despite our astonishing capacity to trivialize, distort, even pervert, the work of education, certain ineluctable facts remain. They are the ones with

which we began — human curiosity, intelligence, imagination, desire, the fascination of the world. They have a way of asserting and reasserting themselves. While they may only be smoldering in most settings, in some they are ablaze.

Which brings us at long last to our destination — Bennington College, that institution which Howard Nemerov, who spent many years teaching in it, likened to a dreaming Joseph. It will come as no surprise that I consider this college a very special institution, so I will not ask you to take my word for that. I will, however, ask you to listen to the words of some others.

First, those of a member of the Board of Trustees, formerly its chairman.

The men and women who founded Bennington College in 1932 endowed it with a few dollars, some usable buildings, a beautiful landscape and, most important of all, a boundless hope for intelligence and talent. Believing that the best education would embrace both the didactic and the creative a faculty was assembled of *working* artists, scientists, social scientists and writers eager to teach, in the words of one, what kept them awake at night. Ever since, a Bennington teacher, undefended by syllabus, has invited a student to participate seriously in the teacher's own working life. That invitation is the essence of a Bennington education. Neither the student nor the teacher can take anything for granted. Learning is never perfunctory, no matter how agile the student's intelligence; teaching is never routine, no matter how familiar the material. Indeed, if the usual purpose of education is to make the strange familiar, at Bennington it is as well to make the familiar strange.

As a result, Bennington students learn to abandon the presumed dualism of intellect and emotion, of vocational and cultural interest. They learn to express themselves in the rich and varied language of physics, choreography, history, sculpture, biochemistry, musical composition, poetry, philosophy and economics. They learn to work hard and to do well, at first because the faculty expects no less of them, but very soon because they learn to expect no less of themselves. They learn to prevail in the face of frustration, to try again in the face of failure.

Next the words of a faculty member, himself a poet and translator, as well as a teacher, whose career at Bennington College has spanned almost its entire history.

At Bennington the approach has been Faustian rather than fus-tian: the Doctors have renounced the complacencies of Witten-berg and succumbed to the ravishments of "magic"; the auto-didact has transcended the Academy. Time and again, the classroom has served as threshing floor for works in progress, poems or books in the making, possibilities in search of a rationale. Poems, treatises, dances, paintings, avocations, have run their courses, over the years, as mice and mythological champions run their mazes, and returned to the studio or the scholar's study bearing the collective imprimatur of student and teacher. Whole works, such as Fromm's *Forgotten Lan-guage*, Stanley Edgar Hyman's *Iago*, Kenneth Burke's medita-tions on rhetoric and motives in Biblical discourse, Wallace Fowlie's "reading" of the French moderns, Francis Fergusson's *The Idea of a Theater*, William Troy's essays on Virginia Wolff and Thomas Mann, were once untried additions to the syllabus of an educational venture. Given that long leash, teachers were constantly impelled to exceed rather than recycle themselves, and students, for a four-year interval, raised their sights like a pole-vaulter's crossbar, to measure their tolerance, and overleap it. Both took away glimpses of self-excess which turned into works of imagination or credentials for a personal identity.

He concludes:

I am what I have taught, teaching as I please because the out-come is incalculable and I think of myself as a work in prog-ress.

Finally the words of a student now attending Bennington College.

I am currently a Junior at the college and loving every minute of it. I am attempting to complete a double major in Social Science and Visual Art. It is quite an undertaking. . . My interest in art is diverse, ranging from painting, printmaking, to ceramics. In the graphics field I work predominantly in lithography and monotype. I find them to be extremely spontaneous and flexible media. . . Ceramics is my other love. . . Recently I have been working in Raku, an ancient Japanese method of glazing and firing ceramic ware. If you are not familiar with it, it produces brilliant colors and metallic flashes which give character to even the simplest bowl or jar. It is quite unpredictable and I spent the better part of last term attempting to control it. I also worked with earthenware doing some functional pieces which I very much enjoy. . .

My work in Social Science at Bennington is quite a phenomenon, insofar as I came to the college as an intended art major. The more I became interested in Social Science, the more I realized its appeal and depth. My particular infatuation is with Philosophy. It is inexhaustible, difficult and at times frustrating, though nonetheless compelling. My other interest lies in the field of anthropology. I am fascinated by culture, and the tie that culture has with every type of human development. . . I find myself continually perplexed with the problem of past and future: the implications and influence of history in a social and political context, and the relationship of this to culture and what we commonly call "progress."

Bennington is very active and susceptible to passions. . . all of which adds to the flavor of the college. . . There is great interaction between student and teacher both in and out of the classroom. For me this is immensely important. For the most part I find that I push myself as I struggle to grow artistically and intellectually: but for every two pushes I give myself, my professors give me a third. In my mind, it is this balance

which makes Bennington work for me. We're always testing limits here, and limits are always testing us. . . I believe in Bennington, and it's nice to know that Bennington believes in me. It is part of my soul and always will be.

So, if you would know Bennington College it's easy. All you have to do is to imagine a place which has Trustees, faculty and students who see with such vision, care with such passion, think with such intelligence, and speak with such eloquence. You might also imagine an institution where values intrinsic to the work of education emerge with a rare clarity, an even rarer intensity.

My extraordinary good fortune is to know first-hand what it is like being associated with this institution. No mystery here. It is a great joy, an even greater honor. But, that still leaves the question of what it means to be its president — to somehow know what it takes, and to have what it takes, to help sustain its creative energy, its exuberance, its great courage. There's the rub. Knowing that whatever I had done before would not answer that question, I asked a number of people whom I thought might know much more than I. I heard more times than I care to remember, the story of the three envelopes, and at times, much thoughtful counsel. (No one, I might add, warned me about sixteen-inch blizzards in early, very early, October.) But the advice I encountered in these past months that I suspect I will think of most often in the months and years, and years, ahead I found in an entirely different context, while reading a biography of Winston Churchill, which I hasten to assure the faculty was not being read for purposes of finding some useful models. It is the response of a Victorian mother to her daughter's anxiety about what she should do on her wedding night. Her mother's advice: "Lie still and think about England." Truly advice for all seasons.