

June 3, 1964

Mr. Howard Nemerov  
5425 39th Street, N.W.  
Washington, D. C. 20015

Dear Howard,

As the College approaches the preliminaries of fund raising for new buildings, the demand for a brochure stating the case for Bennington rises in pitch and volume. Several persons have tried their hands at a statement but no one has got to the essence of Bennington's educational process and quality. Bill Fels suggested that we ask you and one or two others to try your hand at it and offer an honorarium of \$300. That is herewith offered.

The statement need not be longer than two or three thousand words; a supplement on building plans and related financial needs would be prepared here. If in the distance this place looks good to you, can you say what it is that makes it worthy of support?

Harry, Rickie and I are making do with tennisstand-ins until you get here, and hope that Middlebury connection will not take you out of town for any sweep of time.

Yours sincerely,

Thomas P. Brockway  
Acting President

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Dear Tom,

These are my first thoughts. Forgive the carbon, but as they took the form of a letter to Bill I think I ought to send the first copy to him. And as I don't know for sure that he is on the campus I think I ought to send a copy to you as well. That leaves me with no copy, but it will be fair enough for me not to think about it during the next couple of weeks, until I have a chance to hear your thoughts about what I've already thought.

I started my remarks as though they were going to be the desired brochure, which they obviously aren't. I was nearly finished when I got floored with the Reed College production you sent -- could that be the Reed College in Portland where I was only six weeks ago, where I talked with my niece, who is a freshman there and finding it dull? That is certainly a classic example of the standard literature of this type, and it pays the lip service of one platitude after another to ideals that could be agreed upon together by Matthew Arnold and Cassius Clay: it serves as showing us, hopefully, what way not to go. Though I recognize that my own document is equally far from the target, it may be useful as stimulating reactions, even violent ones, in other minds.

When I get home, we can confer on the question whether I possibly could ever draft the brochure you offered the money for; the present reflexions are as free as they may possibly be valueless.

Best,  
Howard

RLI



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Dear Bill,

Thanks, though a rather timorous thanks, for the invitation to write something ~~about~~ on the subject of Bennington. Trying to say what a place is about could never be easy, and it doesn't get easier just because one's been about the place for fifteen years and more. I shall probably get it all wrong, and it's even possible that you and my colleagues will rise up and fire me for having grievously misrepresented the purposes of liberal education (that result wouldn't be altogether uncharacteristic, either). All the same, I'll say what I can.

What has constantly amazed me about Bennington College is its preposterously high morale. With a presumption not less than that of dreaming Joseph, its people believe that to be at Bennington College is somehow to be at the center of the universe; clearly a most eccentric belief, and one that cannot be ~~amused~~ justified by any appeal to 'objective' criteria for the measurement of importance: witness our small enrolment, want of money, the shabby austerity of a physical plant that manages to combine primitivism with decay if not with decadence -- even our architectural splendors, from the depressed gentility of Jennings to the Commons Building which resembles a prototypical Howard Johnsons abandoned far from a main highway, are sort of funny. Yet this high morale, which not only exists but is the most immediately striking characteristic of the place, must live on something; what? On the spirit, I suppose, and on the realm of the ideal, which is also and equally the realm of the silly.

That idea, I think, is my theme. But before doing it in detail I should mention a related amazement, at the degree in which, without really trying to, we have somehow imposed on colleges and universities all through the country the acceptance of our belief that what we do matters a great deal. In the course of my two years' leave I have visited several dozen campuses here and there, and have been pleased, as well as ~~amused~~ amused, to see that our little ~~outfit~~ outfit has not only been heard about, but is also regarded with an odd combination of respect and suspicion, as though other faculties thought they might learn something from us, but that the something might be upsetting to learn. "You're kind of progressive up there, ain't you," said the Chairman of an English Department. "If that means making progress," I replied, "well, no." And the President of a college, touring me about his campus, said cosily, "We're not all that different from Bennington, are we now?" "Of course not," I said warmly, "though come to think of it we don't have either a chapel or a gym." Don't worry, I'm not going to bog down in anecdote; but I mean that it is quite usual for people at other places, both students and faculty members, to measure their own institution a little nervously against Bennington, while by reason of our conceit or our complacency or, hopefully, something better, we never make the reverse relation.

Probably all this that I have said, with what follows, ought not to be spoken out loud at all. Its impertinency would be no obstacle if it is true, as I believe it is, but a quality of morale perhaps depends for its maintenance upon remaining implicit and not much spoken of. So I shall say these things, but if you decided it would be better not to give these remarks any publicity I'd quite understand and even agree.



Now I shall try to say what I think this high morale of ours is about, and what qualities in our way of doing things are responsible for its continuing presence. (High morale, incidentally, doesn't mean that faculty, students, administration, and other employees of the College don't bitch about everything almost all the time; they do, and their so doing reflects not only a dedicated interest in the place, but also a charming ~~unwavering~~ faith in the possibility of improvement).

It seems to me that the spirit of Bennington College has a great deal to do with our amateurism and dilettantism. As there are probably no dirtier words in the vocabulary of American education than amateur and dilettante, I am particularly pleased to introduce them, accepting the perfectly real disadvantage of their derived meaning for the sake of their primary meaning, which has to do with love and delight, what the poet Hopkins hits off so exactly when he writes of "the fine delight that fathers thought."

What I have to say of amateurism and dilettantism will apply chiefly, though not exclusively, to literature and the ~~xxxx~~ other arts, in part because that is where my experience is, but also because other disciplines may have other ideals, even at Bennington. But the importance of art and artistry in the Bennington curriculum may be diagnostic for the character of the entire school.

Members of the faculty in literature and the arts are, a good many of them, professionals in the trades they practice. But they tend largely to be amateur teachers, in the following senses. They fell into teaching by accident, to support themselves, and stayed because they liked it. Generally, they did not prepare themselves for a teaching career by graduate work or courses of education, and ~~perhaps~~ a number of them didn't finish college. Their relation with the teaching of an art is dominantly practical, and though it doesn't by any means exclude theory it tends to neglect views of the subject as historical. Hence their teaching is likely to be inductive a good deal more than deductive, they do not ~~great~~ knowledge as a system or as a possession, but as instrumental to handling existing situations; Lord Acton's advice to the historian, "study problems not periods", would be felt by most of them to describe what they would naturally be doing anyhow.

The educational policy of the College strongly supports this kind of teaching, largely in implicit and negative ways, by reposing a near absolute confidence in the teacher's ability to decide by himself, though with regard for the needs of his division, what he wants ~~to~~ do and how he ought to do it. To give a course not because you know its subject but because you want to know its subject, is an acceptable motive; and in some way, though we don't speak of it much, the teacher's education is primary at Bennington and the student's a helpful afterthought. Another way of putting that: if you want to learn something ~~thoroughly~~ thoroughly, teach it; ideally, in an ideal college, the students would do all the teaching; but that is not practicable, it seems, for it would presuppose an enormously learned faculty to attend their lectures. And as for ~~dilettantism~~ dilettantism, T H Huxley defended the position nicely when he said that four or five hours in the reading room would make you the second most learned man in the world on any given subject.

AND HIGHLY PAID

The College also implicitly recognizes its amateur and dilettante teachers in several other ways, by having no academic rank or hierarchy, by not regarding the Ph.D. as a requirement for teaching at Bennington, and by allowing that excellence in teaching might consist simply in teaching very well, and not in publication (in the Literature Division, a rather publishing lot anyhow, the old motto has been revised to read, more stoically, Publish and Perish).



In part as a result of this amateur and dilettante character among the Faculty, there appears to have grown up at Bennington a recognizable, distinct, and even somewhat traditional style of teaching, with something consistently identifiable among its many individual variations. This isn't easy to describe, either, but when Miranda says "O brave new world...." Prospero remarks in a friendly way "'Tis new to thee." The skepticism of the practitioner, in homeopathic amounts, tempers the enthusiasm of the beginner, and this style of teaching might be summed up in what Robert Frost said (and it was all he said) about his own "teaching methods": "I used to joke with the kids."

This style in teaching goes with a couple of other things. For one, teaching and learning are recognized as constituting an ~~erotic~~ erotic relation, and therefore regarded as pleasurable. This is not very easily acknowledged in some institutions, and I shall say no more of it because there's no use trying to explain it to people who don't already understand it; and in fact you will do best to suppress the whole paragraph, or reporters and their photographers will be prowling the bushes for weeks.

For another thing, education at Bennington has somewhat the character of a game, in which the highest seriousness is consistent with a certain attitude of play. This game, like any other, is capable of inducing rage, anguish, apathy, and despair in the participants, but, to put it as fancily as possible, its level is not quite existential but a parody of the existential, somewhat tentative and testing: in a word, artful. (Probably the common tribal malfunction at Bennington, and this goes for teachers as well as students, is hysteria, and not one of the darker forms of drama).

And one thing more. It seems as though we regard education not solely or even primarily as 'a preparation for life' but, far rather, as a part of life. Probably our emphasis on the arts is significant here as indicating a view of the purpose of life as present and not exclusively (and eternally!) future, as self-contained rather than directed ~~to~~ exclusively to distant objectives, as pleasure more than use; in the same sense, we stress the act of making, in relation to art, more than the condition of possessing, whether the possession is knowledge or technique.

That needs elucidating, and I have to refer to my own experience. When I offer a course in Verse Writing, I can complacently point out to the students at the beginning of the year my nearly perfect record; I have taught this course many times, and never produced a poet (the one exception had to go and study with Robert Lowell for a couple of years). The students will not be put off by this sad confession in the least; it is part of the serious play, in which their intensity and enthusiasm are taken quite seriously without regard for the fact that the intensity and enthusiasm are temporary conditions. The teacher takes the teaching of Verse Writing to be justified all the same, not only because the occasional lucky hit of a schoolgirl will sometimes have more depth and charm than a good many acknowledged masterpieces, but also because the object is less to produce professionals -- poets aren't professionals anyhow -- than it is to make the student aware of that about the nature of art and imagination which cannot be understood by only looking at the finished art object, but which can somewhat be understood from within the process of working with the materials, in this instance language and idea.



Possibly the generalizing out of that last would provide a clue to what Bennington is about. Though we do now and then graduate students who later make a distinguished career in music, painting, literature, and so on, that is incidental, and these students would be rare exceptions under any mode of education. The essential in our teaching, I think, is the development of inwardness with respect to whatever subject is studied; this is perhaps most apparent in the arts, but it doesn't apply exclusively there. Ideally, what we develop in the student is neither knowledge nor technique but an attitude that seems compounded of humility and confidence; this comes from being at the center of something, and the sense of being at the center of something comes from trying to do that something, trying to know it rather than know about it; the attitude also has a touch of gaiety, or anyhow does not confuse seriousness with a church-going expression.

I don't mean to ~~make~~ overstress this essential attitude at the expense of knowledge and technique, though probably I have, just to try and make clear something that is not at all easy to make clear in words. Knowledge and technique have a great deal to do with the matter, but then, knowledge and technique are easily discussed by everyone, so that the other, the inwardness, which is not easily discussed, sometimes gets overlooked entirely. But a nice balance of all these factors was achieved by a great virtuoso, Horowitz I think, in reply to someone who was surprised at his small hands and stubby fingers: "What makes you think I play the piano with my fingers?"

The picture I have drawn, whether accurately or not, does not make Bennington College look much like other colleges, any more than the language I have employed looks like the language of a brochure. But then, the language of a brochure is conventionally somewhat overflown, and the phrases used of the ideals of higher education in our country need a major overhaul and a long rest before they will ever again be serviceable. If brochures were written to be read by people who respected truthfulness, we might be even bolder, much bolder, and say that our educational ideal is a combination charm school and confidence game, defending this position first by remarking blandly that there's nothing really ~~wrong~~ about charm, especially in a world not particularly ~~lacking~~ well-provided <sup>with</sup> that quality, second by an essay -- Kenneth Burke would write it, I think -- making a detailed application of the metaphor of the confidence game to all sorts of human activities. Now I think of it, Melville has already done it in his novel *The Confidence Man*; but according to my recollection higher education may ~~have~~ be the one important human activity he left out of the account.