

She had to be able to read a balance sheet, know what it meant and, hardest of all, know what to do about it. She had to possess the demonstrable ability to raise substantial funds. She had to love students and learning. She had to be deserving of respect from her colleagues and she had to be an eloquent advocate of this College and its ideas and values.

Among all the remarkable candidates considered, one kept emerging beyond the rest who met every ideal but one. *She* was a *he*. He also possessed other very important attributes. An active interest in the intellectual and creative life of his colleagues, supported by a strong, personal intellectual foundation; an understanding that passion and intelligent skepticism could and should co-habit the human spirit; an energetic and indefatigable fellow, more than aware of and equal to the enormous pressures, both financial and pedagogic, that liberal arts institutions would face in the next decade.

Michael Hooker, son, husband and father, rodeo rider, oil-field roughneck and Vista volunteer, Dean of Johns Hopkins, an esteemed, nationally respected leader on the issues of ethics and bio-technology, philosopher, teacher, and now to become president of Bennington College.

Members of the faculty, members of the Board of Trustees, the responsibility and the authority to invest the sound and spirited stewardship of this College in Michael Hooker are placed in your hands. Would you signify your readiness to do so by rising?

In the presence of your family, your fellow members of the academy, your faculty and administrative colleagues, students and their parents, alumni, friends, and on behalf of the Board of Trustees, I am proud to install you, Michael Hooker, as eighth president of Bennington College.

Michael Hooker

Mrs. Borden, Governor Snelling, former President Murphy, friends of Bennington College. I have a dear friend in Mr. Terkel's adopted town whom I consulted about what I should say here today. She advised that I be brief, philosophical and comforting.

I am almost always brief; I am, by training if not by nature, philosophical; and, I shall try to be comforting. That, I fear, is not an easy task because our current discomfort runs deep. It is a discomfort that is intellectual, psychological and spiritual. I want to spend a few minutes discussing that discomfort with you and then to say something about education and Bennington College.

One criticism sometimes jocularly levied against the present generation of students is they haven't read the minutes of the last meeting. That criticism, I think, applies also to social commentators who decry a certain loss of innocence in the modern era and who purport to search in vain for historical parallels to the present age. There are opposite parallels to be found, and one is in the century of my own academic specialty, the seventeenth.

Discussions in the salons of Paris at the beginning of the seventeenth century were often marked by a deep sense of intellectual despair regarding the significance of human life and the place of persons in the universe. To understand that despair, it is important to understand a few significant events of the previous hundred years. The sixteenth century is one that looks from our perspective to have been a period of great intellectual progress, but it did not appear so to the denizens of the time.

In 1543 Copernicus published his heliocentric astronomical theory that put our sun at the center of the universe. That publication had the effect, in a very short time, of overturning the system of explanation of Aristotle and Ptolemy that had lasted for almost 2,000 years. What looks to us to be a marvelous scientific advance did not seem so to learned people at the time. Copernicus was persuasive in convincing people that if this theory, his heliocentric theory, was not entirely correct (it still required numerous epicycles) the theory was at least preferable to the Ptolemaic theory that put the earth at the center of the universe. What was appealing about Ptolemy's theory was that it accorded well with the Christian doctrine of creation. When Ptolemy's theory was called into question, by implication, so was the Bible. And the Bible was more than just a guide for spiritual life; it was the expression of received knowledge regarding the nature of persons and the nature of the universe. Copernicus's theory was greatly aided by the invention of the telescope in 1609 and by Galileo's discovery of the satellites of Jupiter soon thereafter. Galileo's observation confirmed that not every heavenly body revolves around the earth; Jupiter's moons at least do not, and so that provided direct observational confirmation of the fundamental premise of Copernicus's theory.

Confidence in Catholicism, and by extension confidence in religion in general, was shaken most strongly by Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformation. Luther challenged the Catholic Church by rejecting a criterion of religious truth, that of papal infallibility, that had lasted over 1,000 years. Luther's challenge had an anarchic effect by replacing the pope's interpretation of religious truth by

the criterion of individual conscience. The Church had always maintained that matters of truth in religion are settled by appeal to the pope who, speaking *ex cathedra*, speaks infallibly and conveys the word of God. Luther, however, maintained that what is true in matters of religion is what the individual conscience compels one to believe after thorough and careful reading of the Scriptures. The intellectual effect of Luther's challenge was far more profound than its having simply challenged the authority of the pope and brought about a new interpretation of religious truth. More importantly, Luther raised the problem of establishing any acceptable criterion for the truth.

The Church had always held as a criterion of religious truth the pope's pronouncement. In providing an alternative criterion, that of the dictates of individual conscience, Luther implicitly raised the question, "How do we decide who is correct, Luther or the pope, regarding matters of religious truth?" If we ask the pope, he would say that the pope is correct in adjudicating religious disputes, and if you ask him on what authority he knows he is correct, he will tell you that he is correct because he says he is, and what he says in matters of religion goes. On the other hand, if you ask Luther why he thinks he is correct, he will tell you that after thoroughly and carefully reading the Scriptures, his conscience compels him to believe that he is. Obviously, there are two competing criteria for religious truth, and what is needed is some independent criterion of truth to settle the debate between Luther and the Church.

But suppose we had a good candidate for such a criterion to adjudicate this dispute. How could we be sure that our criterion was adequate? We would need some independent criterion to verify our chosen criterion for adjudicating competing criteria for religious truth. But clearly, such a criterion would itself stand in need of verification, and so on. What applies to questions of religious truth applies to any truths whatsoever. Any dispute between competing claims to truth will require some independent verifying principle which itself will stand in need of verification by an additional verifying principle, which itself will need justification by an additional verifying principle, which itself will need justification, and so on. The problem is amusing, but it is profound and tended, in the seventeenth century to shatter the confidence of philosophers that any truth can ever be known.

Less philosophical, but probably of equal emportance in undermining the intellectual stability of the century, was the shrinking of the European world through exploration and discovery. It was common for sailors to return home after months

at sea with stories of strange and mysterious cultures in far away lands. Discovery of societies with beliefs widely divergent from their own tended to disturb the confidence of Europeans that there was something natural and correct in their own cultural attitudes and beliefs. Questions came to be raised regarding the propriety and ultimate validity of European opinions, customs and laws.

By the middle of the sixteenth century circumstances were ripe for the rediscovery of the manuscripts of Sextus Empiricus, a third century A.D. skeptic who had produced a manual of ancient arguments in support of the claim that no one knows anything. Sextus distinguished two varieties of skepticism, academic and Pyrrhonian. Academic skepticism maintains that only one thing can be known with certainty—namely, that nothing else can be known. However, it holds that some opinions are more probable than others and that prudence consists of operating on the assumption of the truth of our more probable opinions. Pyrrhonian skepticism, which is much more severe, maintains that no opinions are more probable than other opinions, because their being so would require some criterion for assessing probability, and any criterion would itself require a criterion to warrant it, and so on. You know the rest.

For those of you who are titillated by this, let me recommend Montaigne's marvelous essay "Apology for Raymond Sebond." Montaigne's essay recounts many of the arguments of Sextus and adds a few of his own in support of the doctrine of skepticism. Skepticism became so well established that at the beginning of the seventeenth century it was common to entertain one's dinner guests by inviting a skeptic who would argue persuasively for some thesis during the first half of his talk until every guest was convinced, and then he would argue equally convincingly and persuasively for the denial of his thesis. Guests were left totally befuddled, amused, confused and entertained.

I offer this brief excursion through some portions of an earlier time to invite your reflection on the analogy with our own time. There are clear parallels in our day to Luther's challenge of the Church, to Copernicus's challenge of geocentrism, to the shock of exposure to alien culture, and to the revival of epistemological skepticism.

It requires more argumentation than I have time to give it here, but I maintain that in this century we have witnessed the secularization of religion and the significant decline of religion's capacity to provide a widely held metaphysical view of the nature of reality. Reflect, for example on the "death of God" debates in the

early sixties and how quaint those issues now seem to us. In the late sixties and early seventies, many aspects of religion in the lives of individuals were replaced by excursions into unthinking religious fundamentalism and superficial mysticism, phenomena that I maintain are emblematic of religion's decline.

Corresponding to the scientific revolution brought about by Copernicus and Galileo and the unsettling effect their theories had on confidence in science, in our own day we have the discovery of subatomic particles without end that has shattered our conviction, earlier confidently held, that the atom is the fundamental building block of matter and the ultimate constituent of the universe. The character and pace of discoveries in the other sciences as well have undermined our belief that any of our scientific theories is the final word on its field of concern. What is worse, we are coming to believe that no scientific theory will ever get us any closer than we ever were to understanding the ultimate nature of reality.

In the first place there is the phenomenon just mentioned—it seems that it is in the very character of science for one theory *always* to be succeeded by another that that more accurately or parsimoniously accounts for the body of data. Science seems to be an in-principle endless process of theory replacement. But even if there were some final theory in each of the sciences, the ultimate metaphysical questions would remain: Why are we here; Why does the universe exist; and, What does it all mean? In this respect our skepticism runs as deep as it did in the seventeenth century. We can count on neither science nor religion to give us the answers required for our psychological comfort.

To continue building the analogy, it is easy to find parallels to the cultural shock brought on by discoveries of cultures widely different from those of seventeenth-century Europe. In our own day the speed of travel and the instantaneous character of telecommunications have shrunk the world to a global community and have made cultural clashes inevitable. Unfortunately, whereas the effect of such clashes was psychological in the seventeenth century, they are all too often in the present world taking the form of military conflict. Also there is in the present day an additional element of radical cultural disparity, that between the standards of living in the West and in the rest of the world. One quarter of all humanity lives in absolute poverty where starvation is a daily commonplace, and another quarter of the world's population lives under conditions of hunger and exposure that make life short, nasty and brutish. Awareness of the almost comically absurd difference

between our material conditions of life and those of others, and awareness of our apparent impotency to do anything about the disparity, has an alienating effect on our own psyches.

Finally, to complete my analogy between the seventeenth century and our own, there is one more striking example of skepticism in our own day which should be noted. Less benign than the failure of science to answer our most profound questions about reality is the form of modern skepticism that says that there are no moral absolutes, no real rights and wrongs. This view, which is distressingly ubiquitous among contemporary students, is glibly expressed in the assertion that what's wrong to you may be right to me and that there is nothing to adjudicate the dispute between us. There are not ethical absolutes; all moral assessments are relative to personal belief and individual conviction. Often accompanying this pernicious ethical agnosticism is a loss of the spirit of endeavor and optimism that is required to keep our democracy and our economy viable and vital.

The genesis of today's ethical and spiritual anomie is difficult to locate. It is popular to cite the effects of disillusionment brought on by the Vietnam war, marked as it was by moral atrocities such as My Lai and the napalm bombing of villages. It is popular also to cite the revelations of Watergate, which tended to confirm a dark suspicion we hold regarding the motives and character of our political leaders. I myself am more inclined, however, to see Vietnam and Watergate as both an effect and a perpetuating cause. I remember vividly Jeb Magruder's response to one of Senator Ervin's queries when he replied that somewhere between Yale and Watergate he had lost his moral compass. I think Mr. Magruder was speaking for a large number of his generation. I am inclined to believe also that the collective loss of our moral compass finds its cause in the phenomena I have previously cited, in the failure of the promise of technology to cure our ills, and possibly also in the constant threat of nuclear annihilation which, by the way, had its seventeenth century parallel in the ever-present specter that the plague might return.

Well, so much for an analysis of our discomfort. I have left myself little time to follow the recommendation that I provide comfort. Since I have used it as an analogue to our own time, it is appropriate to ask what happened to the epistemological, religious, and cultural confusion and skepticism of the seventeenth century. What happened, of course, was the emergence of enlightened humanism in the eighteenth century. That age was marked by an

unparalleled sense of optimism, progress, hope and civic and political awareness. There is really no reason to believe that such an age cannot return. What is required is simply a commitment to bringing it about.

I am happy to say that in my ten and a half months at Bennington I have been enormously heartened to see within our community a strong awareness of the problems facing us and a deep commitment to addressing them. The challenge for us, and the challenge for education in general, is to revive humanism and to create in our own institutions a context in which human endeavor, responsibility and excellence are engendered and encouraged. We must cultivate in students and in ourselves the ability to think for ourselves and the self-confidence to be self-guided. I have been enormously pleased to find here an atmosphere where those values thrive.

Martha Hill, speaking of her own work, captured the spirit of Bennington when she said:

"Your goal is freedom, but freedom may only be achieved through discipline, not drill, not something imposed from without, but discipline imposed by yourself upon yourself.

"There is no competition. You are in competition with one person only, and that is the individual you know you can become.

"It is out of that handling of the material of the self that you are able to hold the stage [I would say, world] in the full maturity and power which that magical place demands."

I am deeply convinced that we cannot truly effectively, and surely not finally, correct the ills of society until we first perfect ourselves. The reconstruction of the collective human spirit must start with the individual and, among other things, with instilling in individuals a sense of the unbounded joy of having given all of oneself to a task. That sense of work done, or excellence achieved, for its own sake, is something that cannot be taught in institutions where the model of work's value is instrumental. The focus on pre-professional preparation that so thoroughly characterizes most of undergraduate education in this country almost guarantees that our students will see education not as intrinsically valuable but simply as means to an end. For many students such expectations for their education will be disappointed by a market that, for the present anyway, is incapable of absorbing the mass of highly educated graduates our schools are turning out.

Society would benefit far more from providing an education that confronts students with themselves, that encourages the cultivation of habits of choice-making and problem-solving, and that fosters a

sense of wonder at the world and exhilaration in the accomplishment of a tough task undertaken simply for the joy of doing it. That kind of education, I am delighted to report, I find to be the essence of this college, and I am profoundly gratified and humbled to have been charged with the duties of its presidency.

Before I close, please, if you will, indulge me in a very personal moment. We are, all of us, the total product of our parents and I simply want to acknowledge mine, by asking them to stand.

Thank you very much for being here; it means a great deal to me. It means a great deal to the faculty and to the students and to the College. Good day.