Having a Degree and Being Educated

by Dr. Edmund D. Pellegrino

Dr. Edmund D. Pellegrino, former President at Catholic University and now Director of the Center for Clinical Bioethics at Georgetown University, delivered this commencement address to graduating students at Wilkes College in Pennsylvania. He draws a clear distinction between the process of earning a degree and being an educated person. As he so bluntly phrases it, a degree "is only a certificate of exposure, not a guarantee of infection."

Study Questions: (1) Pellegrino makes a specific point about modern, technological society and the type of education (and views of it) that are encouraged. Why is he concerned? What are the dangers of being educated within the context he describes? (2) Why are Americans so fascinated with experts? Can you give some examples of the experts Pellegrino describes as crowding "the TV screens, the radio waves . . . ?" (3) How does Pellegrino distinguish between an "educated" and a "trained" mind? (4) Which among the questions Pellegrino poses about an educated mind can you answer "yes" to as far as your own education is concerned? (5) What kinds of freedoms does Pellegrino identify that help us "lead truly human lives?" Why are they connected and interdependent? Can you give any examples of this connection and interdependence? (6) What suggestions does Pellegrino give in this essay (hat will help you avoid the pitfalls of "delusion?"
Few humans live completely free of illusions. Reality is sometimes just too harsh to bear without them. But, comforting as they can be, some illusions are too dangerous to be harbored for very long. Eventually they must meet the test of reality—or we slip into psychosis.

I want to examine a prevalent illusion with you today—one to which you are most susceptible at this moment, namely, that *having* a degree is the same as being educated. It is a bit gauche, I admit, to ask embarrassing questions at a time of celebration. But your personal happiness and the world you create depend on how well your illusion is brought into focus. And this emboldens me to intrude briefly on the satisfaction you justly feel with your academic accomplishment.

The degree you receive today is only a certificate of exposure, not a guarantee of infection. Some may have caught the virus of education, others only a mild case, and still others may be totally immune. To which category do you belong? Should you care? How can you tell?

The illusion of an education has always plagued the honest person. It is particularly seductive in a technological society like ours. We intermingle education with training and liberal with professional studies so intimately that they are hard to disentangle. We reward specific skills in politics, sports, business, and academia. We exalt those who can *do* something—those who are experts.

It becomes easy to forget that free and civilized societies are not built on information alone. Primitive and despotic societies have their experts too! Computers and animals can be trained to store and retrieve information, to perform us. What they can never do is direct the wise

The potential tyranny of experts, other men's opinions or values but frames its own, a mind that can resist the...
the subtle despotism of even a great teacher's ideas.

Second, can you ask critical questions, no matter what subject is before you—those questions that expose a line of argument, evaluate the claims being made upon you, the evidence adduced, the logic employed? Can you sift fact from opinion, the plausible from the proven, the rhetorical from the logical? Can you use skepticism as a constructive tool and not as a refuge for intellectual sloth? Do you apply the same critical rigor to your own thoughts and actions? Or, are you merely rearranging your prejudices when you think you are thinking?

Third, do you really understand what you are reading, what people are saying, what words they are using? Is your own language clear, concrete, and concise? Are you acquainted with the literature of your own language—with its structure and nuance?

Fourth, are your actions your own—based in an understanding and commitment to values you can defend? Can you discern the value conflicts underlying personal and public choices and distinguish what is a compromise in principle and what is not? Is your approach to moral judgments reasoned or emotional? When all the facts are in, when the facts are doubtful and action must be taken, can you choose wisely, prudently, and reasonably?

Fifth, can you form your own reasoned judgments about works of art—whether a novel, sonata, sculpture, or painting? Or are you enslaved by the critic, the book reviewer, and the "opinion markers" vacillating with their fads and pretentiousness? Artists try to evoke experiences in us, to transform us as humans. Is your imagination free enough to respond sensitively, or are you among the multitude of those who demand the explicitness of violence, pornography, dialogue—that is the sure sign of a dead imagination and an impoverished creativity?

Sixth, are your political opinions of the same order as your school and athletic loyalties—rooting for your side and ignoring the issues and ideas your side propounds? Free societies need independent voters who look at issues and not labels, who will be loyal to their ideals, not just to parties and factions.

Do you make your insight as an expert the measure of social need? There is no illusion more fatal to good government!

If you can answer yes to some of these indicators, then you have imbibed the essence of a liberal education, one which assures that your actions are under the direction of your thought, that you are your own person, no matter what courses you took and what degree you receive today. You will also have achieved what Wilkes College itself hoped for you:

Education is thought of as not just imparting the knowledge of a professional discipline, but also as demonstrating a certain way of life—a way of life which is humane and thoughtful, yet also critical and above all rational.

If your answers are mostly negative (and I hope they are not), then you are in danger of harboring an illusion—one which is dangerous to you and to society. The paradox is that the expert too has need of an educated mind. Professional and technical people make value decisions daily. To protect those whose values they affect, to counter the distorted pride of mere information, to use their capabilities for humane ends, experts too must reflect critically on what they do. The liberal arts, precisely because they are not specialties, are the indispensable accoutrements of any mind that claims to be human.

There are two kinds of freedom without which we cannot lead truly human lives. One kind is political and it is guaranteed by the Bill of Rights. The other is intellectual and spiritual and is guaranteed by an education that liberates the mind. Political freedom assures that we can express our opinions freely; a liberal education that the opinions we express are free. Each depends so much on the other that to threaten one is to threaten the other.

This is why I vex you with such a serious topic on this very happy occasion. The matter is too important for indifference or comfortable illusions. My hope is that by nettling you a bit I can prevent what is now a harmless illusion from becoming a delusion—a firm, fixed belief, impervious either to experience or reason.

May I remind you in closing that the men who made our nation, who endowed it with the practical wisdom that distinguishes its history, were men without formal degrees. One of the best among them, Abraham Lincoln, went so far as to say: "No policy that does not rest upon philosophical public opinion can be permanently maintained." Philosophical public opinion is not his work of information or expertise but of an educated mind, one which matches the aim of Wilkes to impart a way of life that is "... humane and thoughtful, yet also critical and above all rational."

T. S. Eliot, in his poem, "Dry Salvages," said: "We have had the experience of an education—I hope you have not missed the meaning." You have had the experience of an education—I hope you have not missed the meaning.

You will forget my name and my topic—that is the fate of all commencement addresses. I hope you will not forget Eliot, Lincoln, or Wilkes.
Education as Conversation

by Piers Lewis

Piers Lewis is a professor of literature at Metropolitan State University. Lewis wrote this essay in 1983, and he constructs an interesting case for a variety of conversations that students might join as part of their education.

Study Questions: (1) Why does Lewis find the quote from Benjamin Franklin's essay compelling and linked to how Metro State has viewed higher education at the level nationally. (2) What are your responses to some of the questions he poses about our "vaunted civilization" compared to the "virtuous simplicity of that ancient way of life"? (3) Why does the author pose this question: "But do we need to be quite so much what we are?" How does this question relate to Lewis' conclusion that we must work out a "compromise between the needs of the private self and those of the social, communal, institutional life in which we are immersed . . . ?" (4) What is the type of education that the author describes as the goal of Metro State? In particular, how does Franklin's description of the Indians as having "an abundance of leisure for improvement by conversation" strike the author as important for a Metro State education? (5) What are some of the "key conversations" alive in our culture and in higher education at this time? What sorts of conversations will you need to know about and join in discussing with others? How will you know about these key conversations and how will you prepare to join them?
"Savages we call them, because their manners differ from ours, which we think the perfection of civility; they think the same of theirs.

Perhaps, if we could examine the manners of different nations with impartiality, we should find no people so rude, as to be without any rules of politeness; nor any so polite, as not to have some remains of rudeness.

The Indian men, when young, are hunters and warriors; when old, counselors; for all their government is by the counsel or advice of the sages; there is no force, there are no prisons, no officers to compel obedience, or inflict punishment. Hence they generally study oratory, the best speaker having the most influence. The Indian women till the ground, dress the food, nurse and bring up the children, and preserve and hand down to posterity the memory of public transactions. These employments of men and women are accounted natural and honorable. Having few artificial wants, they have abundance of leisure for improvement by conversation. Our laborious manner of life, compared with theirs, they esteem slavish and base; and the learning, on which we value ourselves, they regard as frivolous and useless. An instance of this occurred at the treaty of Lancaster, in Pennsylvania, anno 1744, between the government of Virginia and the Six Nations. After the principal business was settled, the commissioners from Virginia acquainted the Indians by a speech, that there was at Williamsburg a college, with a fund for educating Indian youth; and that, if the chiefs of the Six Nations would send down half a dozen of their sons to that college, the government would take care that they should be well provided for, and instructed in all the learning of the white people. It is one of the Indian rules of politeness not to answer a public proposition the same day that it is made; they think it would be treating it as a light matter, and that they show it respect by taking time to consider it, as of a matter important. They therefore deferred their answer till the day following; when their speaker began, by expressing their deep sense of the kindness of the Virginia government, in making them that offer; “for we know,” says he, “that you highly esteem the kind of learning taught in those colleges, and that the maintenance of our young men, while with you, would be very expensive to you. We are convinced, therefore, that you mean to do us good by your proposal; and we thank you heartily. But you, who are wise, must know that different nations have different conceptions of things; and you will therefore not take it amiss, if our ideas of this kind of education happen not to be the same with yours. We have had some experience of it; several of our young people were formerly brought up at the colleges of the northern provinces; they were instructed in all your sciences; but, when they came back to us, they were bad runners, ignorant of every means of living in the woods, unable to bear either cold or hunger, knew neither how to build a cabin, take a deer, nor kill an enemy, spoke our language imperfectly, were therefore neither fit for hunters, warriors, nor counselors; they were totally good for nothing. We are however not the less obliged by your kind offer, though we decline accepting it; and, to show our grateful sense of it, if the gentlemen of Virginia will send us a dozen of their sons, we will take great care of their education, instruct them in all we know, and make men of them.”

Benjamin Franklin

Benjamin Franklin wrote that. It's part of an essay entitled, "Remarks on the Politeness of the Savages of North America," written by him when he was in France after our Revolution.

My purpose is not to draw you into a discussion of manners or politeness, though much can be learned from a comparative discussion of the manners and customs of different cultures. Nor do I want you to get the idea, which maybe you've already got anyway, that learning to talk intelligently about books and ideas is merely a "polite" accomplishment, something one trots out at cocktail parties to show how smart one is . . .

No, Franklin caught my attention by the way he makes fun of the education provided by the colleges of his day, while suggesting that the Native Americans had something a whole lot better. In other words, something about Franklin's position here rings a bell, as they say, for all us at Metro State: our view of what passes for education in the schools and colleges of this country is similar to Franklin's.

No doubt you found the Native Americans' polite speech of rejection amusing. You were supposed to. But don't worry, this isn't a trap. I just want to show you something I think is important in this speech that you may not
have noticed. And I want to connect it to liberal education here at Metro State.

The first time we hear or read this splendid retort, the thing that's most likely to catch our attention is its clarity and simplicity as it states the obvious facts with perfect accuracy. Obviously, the type of education available in the colonial colleges, which were designed primarily to train ministers, would be completely irrelevant to a culture of hunters and warriors. Of course those poor young Native American men who were the beneficiaries of that education were "good for nothing" when they got back to their tribes. And so we enjoy this joke at the expense of the colonial colleges—we Americans, who are so proud of our practicality and contemptuous of "book learning."

But take another look at this selection from Franklin's essay and ask yourself a simple question: where did this polite, courteous, ironic speech come from? Hunters and warriors are not necessarily good speakers or writers. One does not learn to say what is on one's mind accurately, neatly and eloquently if the only things one knows are hunting, fighting and enduring the hardships of life in the woods. Nor is that sort of life necessarily the best preparation for being a part of a community and active in its public affairs.

Franklin was a practical man, but he was well aware of the fact that an exclusively practical education is no education at all. And if we listen to Franklin again, we will see that those practical skills made so much of in the Native Americans' speech were by no means the most important things in the social and cultural life of the tribes: "The Indian men, when young are hunters and warriors; when old, counselors; for all their government is by the counsel or advice of the sages; there are no prisons, no officers to compel obedience, or inflict punishment. Hence, they generally study oratory, the best counselor or advice of the sages; there are no prisons, no officers to compel obedience or inflict punishment. Hence, they generally study oratory, the best speaker having the most influence. The Indian women till the ground, dress the food, nurse and bring up the children, and preserve and hand down to posterity the memory of public transactions. These employments of men and women are accounted natural and honorable. Having few artificial wants, they have abundance of leisure for improvement by conversation. Our laborious manner of life slavish and base; are you so sure they were wrong? Take a look at the quiet desperation of the nine-to-five routine so many must endure (if they should be so lucky) and think again. Would you say that the employments of men and women in our society are considered equally natural and honorable? How much time do you spend satisfying merely artificial wants? How much time do you spend sitting in front of the tube, instead of in conversation with other members of your family or friends? Would you say that you had abundance of leisure for conversation? Have you any idea what Franklin means by the phrase "improvement by conversation?"

Here is the point I want to make: it is extraordinarily difficult, especially in our society, to get people to think of education as anything but an economic problem, a process, or a problem. The reasons are not simple—Franklin himself, ironically, is part of the picture—and not unrelated to the conditions that make for prisons, punishment and police. We use the methods of double-entry bookkeeping for all transactions; there is nothing, seemingly, for which there isn't a "bottom line," even love perhaps. This is no exaggeration. I know many families, and so do you, in which love must be "earned" and money is constantly intruding on—or being used to manipulate—feelings of love or affection. Do we not see here a profound corruption of family life? Or has such corruption become our way of life? How do you get people to stop confusing apples and oranges, as the saying goes? And is this not, in part, an educational as well as a moral problem? Yet neither our schools nor our churches seem capable of teaching us how to keep separate those things that ought to be kept separated.

It is not possible to return to that possibly mythical condition of complete communal simplicity that Franklin is describing. We are, for better or worse, what we are. But do we need to be quite so much what we are? Mere individuals, we have forgotten that we are fundamentally social animals. Considering the private, individual self as sovereign, we shrug off our responsibilities to others and the community. We think of education as a private benefit—"my" education—of no concern to anyone else (or theirs to me) despite the fact that public monies pay for most of it as a matter of public policy. It is symptomatic of our condition that we have forgotten the use of words like "base" or "honorable," words that imply comparative social evaluations. We have allowed ourselves to become social atoms. Individuals. That, at any rate, is how we think about ourselves and how we talk; since no
society of mere individuals can function or cohere as a community, our actual behavior must of necessity be something else.

The original inhabitants of this continent—and pre-urban, pre-industrial peoples generally, perhaps—had no need for specialized educational institutions. The whole tribe participated in the education of the young, who were thereby totally socialized, totally acculturated. Education, socialization and acculturation were the same thing. There are no individuals in a tribal culture, not in our sense of a person who retains the right and the capacity to live his or her own private life independent of what the group thinks or wants. That right of the private individual to live apart from or even in defiance of social or cultural "norms" is, paradoxically, a precious achievement of our culture, and nothing I say here should be interpreted as an argument for a return to some form of cultural totalitarianism.

People commonly talk in our society about educating the "whole person" but without any comprehension of what that might mean or whether it would be desirable if it were possible. The education of the whole person was what growing up in a tribal culture was all about. For better or worse, we do not live in a tribal culture. There is a private self that has a right to be let alone and safe from the meddling of priests, parsons, educators, social workers and the police. Educating the whole person is what totalitarian states try to do, fortunately with but indifferent success.

Somehow or other, we must try to work out a reasonable compromise between the needs of the private self and those of the social, communal institutional life in which we are immersed from the cradle to the grave. It is no accident, education being such a central process in any society, that the problem of reaching such a compromise is the same in our educational institutions and in the society at large.

Though we are not so pretentious or misguided here at Metro State as to claim to educate the whole person, we do believe that people are not merely economic individuals mindlessly pursuing economic advantages across a social landscape populated only by other individuals, similarly engaged. There is such a thing as a whole education—a whole lot more than the mere acquisition of job-related knowledge and skills. At Metro State, you are expected to acquire, or show that you have acquired, a whole rather than merely a partial education—substantial learning, in other words, in matters relevant to the complex social and cultural roles you necessarily play as a citizen of this city, state, nation and world. There is, in case you have forgotten, a big world out there in all senses, and like it or not, it will intrude on your private affairs.

The purpose of the different categories of competence described in the Perspectives book, which you presumably have seen by now, is to suggest in a very general way the relevant components of a whole education. We particularly wish to draw your attention to the communication, community and humanities, and math and natural science, and culture, science and tradition categories. If you can say or write what's on your mind with the directness, style and wit of the Native Americans, you are a competent speaker and writer. Competence in the community category entails, among other things, knowledge of the social sciences that have developed over the last hundred years or so that help you understand and become effective citizens in increasingly large, complex, turbulent societies—the systematic study of government, politics, economics, geography, social behavior and attitudes. One cannot be an informed citizen in our kind of world without knowing something about these sciences, and the scientific and philosophical traditions that made them possible.

There remains the somewhat puzzling and elusive matter of "cultural" competence (Ed. note: the "cultural" competence area was changed to "humanities" in 1996. They are ostensibly the same). It turns out that important aspects of our social experience remain unsaid after the social sciences have had their say. It is not possible to do justice to this elusive but necessary idea in a short space. But consider Franklin's remark about the Native Americans having abundance of leisure for improvement by conversation. There's something intuitively satisfying about that idea, something intuitively right as a description of the "culture" of human societies. The term "culture", with its agriculture connotations, implies a process of cultivation and improvement (in agriculture, we improve on nature). A cultivated person is one whose nature has been improved by being subjected to some disciplined process of improvement—education—but not, or not only, because of the efforts of others; you have to do it to yourself. No one can do "it" to you if you won't meet them at least halfway. For these processes of improvement, of cultivation, cannot simply be willed or forced into being; they have a way of happening or not happening regardless of the conscious efforts of parents and "educators." Education is not a science. It is a social process, and much more like a conversation than a discipline. Hence the importance of the word "leisure." The Native Americans, Franklin says, had abundance of leisure for improvement by conversation because they had few artificial wants; a condition approached only by the "leisured" i.e. wealthy classes of Franklin's day. Now this commodity, leisure, is much more widely if still unequally distributed. You all have leisure time for
education (though almost certainly not as much as you would like). You wouldn't be here otherwise. And what are you going to talk about? Something, let us hope, besides shop talk, gossip, sports and sex, important as these may be in our lives. The question is, what are you going to do, what are you going to talk about in your "conversation" at Metro State, to improve your W/NJs?

Let us see if we can "unpack" that term "conversation" a little. At any time, in any society, certain key conversations are running more or less continuously just beneath the surface of social life. From time to time they burst out into the public domain—break into print or otherwise work their way into whatever media are available—and become public-controversies. The public debate about abortion, for example, is undoubtedly connected to deep and long standing uncertainties about the nature of the individual self. We have already glanced at other manifestations of what we may call, for the sake of convenience, the problem of individualism. No one knows what the outcome will be of the conversations on this question that are now going on at every level of modern life. And not just in this country. It is safe to say, however, that this "conversation" touches virtually every public policy question on our current agenda, from tax reform to pornography to education to public health.

Interpretation is another subject that is beginning to loom large in our cultural conversations. You know something big is in the wind when religious and political conservatives on the right agree that the Bible and the Constitution should be allowed to speak for themselves, without mediation or interpretation. Meanwhile, an international community of critics, scholars and philosophers is tying itself up in knots trying to decide if there is anything, any fact or text, that "speaks for itself without interpretation, but seems by and large to agree that there is no such thing as a fact or text standing alone without the support of some "interpretive community."

The meaning of intelligence is another subject that is very much on a lot of minds these days. We have this word, intelligence, and a whole battery of tests that claim to measure "it", but no one knows what it is. Some of the people who do well in these tests have banded together in clubs of various degrees of exclusivity as if they thought a number of them have something in common. Is skill and speed in the solving of problems a true measure of intelligence? Now the computer folks are saying that they can, someday, produce something called "artificial intelligence." something so close to the real thing that if you were on one telephone line and a computer was on the other, you wouldn't be able to tell if you were talking to a person or a machine. Is there something fishy about this claim? Some people think that no machine could ever be intelligent because no machine has or could ever have a soul. Does that sort of reasoning strike you as fishy, too? A good many of our friends, the ocean going mammals, seem to have brains as large as ours and many people are convinced that they must be, in their way, as intelligent as we are. Must we consider them to have souls, then? If not, why not? And if they have souls, are they too divided ineluctably into the saved and the damned...? How do you like that reasoning?

Individualism, interpretation, intelligence—it is surely of no significance whatsoever that each of these subject or problems begins with the letter "I" which is also the personal pronoun. Or is it? Anyway, most of the subjects of current concern lead back in one way or another to one or more of these basic "conversations." (No doubt there are others—different people will make different lists.) Where they'll end no one knows; probably they'll never end, never be resolved, but the intellectual energy and heat they generate along the way is certain to have major repercussions for everyone.

And now you should notice something else about conversations that's relevant to you, here and now: most conversations have a history, certainly all the important ones. You would not expect to walk into a room in someone's house and join immediately in a conversation that had been going on there, without first finding out who had been saying what to whom and, maybe, how long they'd been going at it. Nor can you expect to join in a conversation out in the public domain without first informing yourself about the issues and the arguments and the participants—its history, in short.

Finally, you need to know about some of the important conversations that have been shaping the culture of the Western world for decades, centuries and in some cases millennia. The humanities comprise the intellectual disciplines that have been developed in the West over the last two or three hundred years, that helps us understand how our social and cultural experience has been, and is still being, shaped by the past. For the sake of convenience, and because it seems somehow "natural," the cultural domain has been categorized according to the different kinds of conversations that have been going on for long time in it and have in a sense become institutionalized: music, literature, philosophy, history, religion, the visual and theatrical arts. Our second purpose is to help you to learn how to conduct yourself in some of these conversations yourself. And why, you wonder, should I want to do that? Because not to do so, to remain on the sidelines, is
to abandon your inheritance to specialists, professionals, academics; because, whether you know it or not, these conversations are about you; because, after all, the original inhabitants of this continent were right and social life isn't worth a damn without abundance of leisure for improvement by conversation.