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“The Liberal Arts as a Vocation”

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Recipient of the 2009 Sidney Hook Memorial Award

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Thank you Don Wyatt, and thank you my friends and Phi Beta Kappa colleagues. I am honored, overwhelmed, humbled, joyous, and, I should add, somewhat embarrassed to receive this award, the Sidney Hook Memorial Award. Max Weber, the polymathic sociologist, gave a talk in 1920 titled *Wissenschaft als Beruf*, or “Scholarship as a Vocation.” In it, Weber calls academic life “a mad hazard,” and he poses a question which he thinks is the test of what it takes, the right stuff, to endure as a scholar amidst those mad hazards: “Do you in all conscience believe that you can stand seeing mediocrity after mediocrity, year after year, climb beyond you, without becoming embittered and without coming to grief?” Well, in receiving this award, I’m worried that I’ve become that guy who embitters others more deserving. For one thing, most others would know better than to start off a keynote address with a joke from the Weimar-era. In all seriousness, I can understand and accept this tremendous award only if I can construe my presence and purpose here as representing small college liberal arts professors all across this country, a dedicated legion that teaches and toils, year after year, without much recognition, except perhaps as local heroes. Presciently Weber heralded their coming, latter-day individuals who remain devoted to their workaday calling as scholar-teachers, without regard to reward, reputation, let alone redemption. I sing the praises of my liberal arts colleagues, and I know—dire rumors to the contrary notwithstanding—that something magnificently important abides and endures, nay flourishes, in those small classrooms and small institutions, albeit in personal relations and in the kind of intimate communities that Weber in his talk describes as operating in *pianissimo* rather than in a publicly *fortissimo* register.

In recent years I’ve become, though, an outwardly loud proponent of that distinctively American institution, the small residential liberal arts college, down-to-earth little utopias think I; but I’m also not an ostrich with my head in the sand. I’ve seen the data: the number of liberal arts colleges has declined by 35% in the last 20 years. I’ve heard the grim reports: the Golden Age of liberal arts education is over, we’ve been told. I suppose I could deliver on this occasion either a damn-the-torpedoes pep talk or an ominous, angry, or resigned, jeremiad. Weber in his talk says, however, that the prophet and the demagogue do not belong on the academic platform, and I think it well to heed that advice of his tonight.

Instead, I stand here of mixed mind, my mood upbeat yet also a bit elegiac about the state of liberal arts education. Many of the things I’ve treasured in academe are indeed changing and changing fast. I suppose it’s an old story of generationalism, but the change also seems to be picking up pace in our epoch; we’re experiencing speed-up, at a rate that is difficult to comprehend as we live through it. I find myself caught in the flux, both hopeful and yet wary about the new educational world that seems to be unfolding so precipitously in front of us. My graduate school mentor, the Weber scholar Reinhard Bendix, insisted time and again that the ongoing course of history usually reveals an admixture of

practices traditional and modern, rather than a clear break and stark graduation from one period to the next. Weber in his major works was an intellectual broker in charting the seemingly inexorable path in modernity from *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft*, from small-scale, tightly knit communities to large, impersonal forms of society; but Bendix insisted, as something of a corrective, that aspects of *Gemeinschaft* are seldom completely eradicated, even as the forces of *Gesellschaft* seem to take over. Tonight, I'd like to talk about one or two of the aforementioned treasures of mine, not in order to cling desperately to the past or to forestall, or expedite, the looming future—but to narrate the kind of small, daily, unassuming acts of care that become the basis, I think, for more visible public goods, even though they often defy the terms of economic rationality; little gestures, behind-the-scenes routines, unsung virtues that I think are at the heart of the liberal arts way of life, which, if properly remembered and passed on, may be able to strike and negotiate some balance, some continuity, between preservation and innovation.

I'd like to focus on two increasingly old-fashioned forms of residential liberal arts community, namely what it means to play—to perform music—with others in a band; and also what it means to go to a library building and physically check out a book. Weber once wrote a study in the sociology of music, but he never talked about playing in a band—so I will. I grew up in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, to parents who stayed on their family farms until their late twenties, and who didn't attend college, largely because of those farm commitments and the war; neither parent played a musical instrument (spoiler alert: aging white guy is about to amble down memory lane). While I was growing up, Coe College was a place that exerted a salutary educational influence throughout the city, and that influence extended to me, as beneficiary: Coe College gave my pals and me coming-of-age access to its athletic, music, and library facilities. It so happened that my family's next-door-neighbor was a professor of music at Coe College, who emigrated in her youth from Czechoslovakia. She, Alma Turechek, would occasionally invite me into her home for late-afternoon chats (she was very encouraging and proud of my early scholastic achievements). Typically, as dusk settled in, as the sun's light grew dimmer, we would continue talking. During that twilight period, she would leave the lights off in the house as we spoke—she explained that there was a particular Czech word for that transitional situation, *soumrak*, and during *soumrak* folks simply talked or sat quietly as the sun's light slowly receded, and they would wait a while before turning on the lights. It was a special moment, meditative and subtle, and one simply paid attention to the changing light, and to the kind of conversation it prompted. So we talked. Those discussions were vital to my upbringing. I'm pretty sure Alma didn't consider *soumrak*, the time she spent with me, as something she would put on her CV. I doubt she ever received merit pay increases, let alone awards, for it. She's long dead now. But I remember.

Starting in the 3rd grade, I took music lessons on the alto sax, so-called private lessons, one-on-one with a teacher, lessons that were offered in the public schools. Starting in the 4th grade we also participated in concert band, again a regular mid-1960s public school offering, and I can assure you that there were lots of squeaks and squawks along the way. But we had full instrumentation in our little grade school concert band—imagine, enough middle-class parents and their proxies coaxing and encouraging their kids to play trombone, trumpet, tuba, baritone, French horn, clarinet, flute, drums, and various saxophones—and to stick with those music lessons, years on end, well before anyone achieved anything close to the proficiency to produce anything quite beautiful. Starting in junior high, we added jazz band to the mix, bands that were black and white, male and female, jock and nerd. Starting in high school, we added marching band and orchestra. Our high school concert and jazz bands participated in music programs and contests sponsored by Coe College, Drake University, the University of Northern Iowa, the University of Iowa, and Iowa State. It was all part of a robust and vertically integrated K-16 musical system. I also played summer concerts in the Cedar Rapids Municipal Band, funded by the city. In college, where some of my friends and I found jazz instruction wanting, we founded the Amherst College jazz band, and we eventually got John Coltrane's former teacher, Roland Wiggins, to teach a music theory course at the college. In grad school, I taught private sax lessons for money on the side. At Pomona College, as a professor but not affiliated with the music department, I've played in the concert band and in a student saxophone quartet. That early musical instruction I received, and the public school, parental, and community support sustaining it has afforded me subsequent opportunities I never would have otherwise experienced. My high school band put out a record. We won a state championship and played on a twin bill with Woody Herman's Thundering Herd big band. Somehow those Midwestern public school music teachers invited famous musicians to play at our high school and to give clinics just for us, and they came—as a high school kid, I met Maynard Ferguson, Dizzy Gillespie, Art Pepper, Clark Terry, Rich Matheson, Lyle Mays, and others. The garage rock-jazz band I was in eventually produced professional musicians who are now Emmy-award winning performers and composers at Julliard, the University of Michigan, on Broadway, and in Hollywood. About ten years ago, the principal clarinetist of the LA Philharmonic started auditing my political theory classes at Pomona College and we became friends—and music provided a common background for our relationship. For instance, I would talk about the Orphic tradition in Homer, Plato, Virgil, Christine de Pizan and Dante, and he would tell me about the orphic venues in which he had played throughout the world. Imagine having the principal clarinetist of a major city orchestra come to your home to play a concert just for your young kids to encourage them in their musical stirrings, echoic of *soumrak* sessions from my youth. My colleague at Pomona College, the world-renown composer and

pianist Karl Kohn, wrote a sax quartet for my student group and dedicated it to me. Music has charmed my existence. Mind you, I've managed to fake all of these people out—I'm not very good at the sax—and especially for that reason I'm grateful for the institutional opportunities for music performance that have come my way. Even at a lesser level of ability, I know as an insider the joys and wonders of creative performance. What a privilege it is to sit as the top note on a five-part moving sax chord, two altos, two tenors, and a baritone, and to continue with a chord progression, now intermeshing with five part chords from the trombone and trumpet sections, respectively—all with a full rhythm section leading the way. To be enveloped with that lush music, surrounded by true, full-frequency sound waves, all of the human ingenuity and human capital, all presupposed by countless hours of practice and discipline and passion and parental and neighborly and institutional support and coordination, and faith in the future—all in tune, all hitting the beat, all hitting the groove, communicating, improvising, is that not a glimpse of what people call heaven? Or, closer to earth, what Immanuel Kant called, in music, the unity of the real and the ideal? Methinks musical education—and the performative and creative arts more generally—are absolutely integral—not merely ornamental—to the liberal arts way of life. Weber in "Scholarship as a Vocation" asks how ideas occur to us. I know how they occur to me (when they do occur): It is a creative process that I first learned via music. Music provides not just the ambient emotional background to my thinking process but also, call it the deep constitutional apparatus for generating my best ideas, those times when both hemispheres of the brain seem to firing synapses back and forth. Neuroscientists today confirm that musicality enlarges brain activity. Thomas Jefferson fiddled with his violin while writing the Declaration of Independence, and Albert Einstein, another violin player, claimed that his brainpower came from playing Mozart and Bach. For me, today, when I write, I think, implicitly, intuitively, in the background, in terms of musical composition, its underlying logic, structure, and conventions—with preludes, melody, harmony, chord progressions, phrasing, rhythm, dynamics, recurrent motifs, counterpoint, modulation, improv, hooks and codas, and ending on a big bang or a fadeout. Music, of course, isn't the only way to structure the deep logic of writing. I think my late friend and colleague, the novelist David Foster Wallace—who once told me that he had no musical ability whatsoever—fashioned much of his writing on another early formative activity from his Midwestern background, namely tennis. I don't mean to suggest in any way that my writing should be compared to his, his was pure and manic genius, but I will proffer or invite a contrast between our different compositional modalities, musical versus athletic. In many of his works David addressed the subject of tennis explicitly, but I also think tennis was the underlying form of much of his writing—the written page as an arena for sparring with one's reader, a process of volleying back and forth, with the writer as server, who tries to outmatch the reader as opponent, with sentences that count as angles and set-ups and spins and shots. The common hook is that we both viewed writing as an activity with others, anything but solitary and solipsistic, wherein the reader is to be imagined as a full participant, not just a spectator, to the printed proceedings; and the writer is never simply a soloist. The excitement of reading a David Foster Wallace piece is that he seemed to expect you, the reader, to match wits with him, to volley shots back; and thus his writing exuded respect and care for the reader as not just interlocutor but as co-equally sentient and worthy partner. But the tennis model of writing and reading is a competitive model, oppositional even when playful; whereas I just happen not to think that way about my own fumbling attempts at writing, which I envision necessarily as an ensemble production, not a match. True, in music it isn't all harmony; there can be risk and dissonance and discord, but the group remains intact and brings different voices together to achieve group coordination: It don't mean a thing if it ain't got that swing. I do worry about the decline of a common sense of writing as an experience, an engagement with others, rather than as a mere tool or technology, a conveyance for information and knowledge exchange. I do own an iPod filled with music, and I'm thankful for the ease of listening to a huge variety of such digitally produced and consumable music. But oh how I wish everyone would have a chance to be enveloped by live, unrecorded chords, to sit in the middle of a band and play alongside others, to be a creative performer, not just a spectator and consumer of music. I confess that when I read a lot of the dreadful prose that many scholars write these days, I think to myself, Have you no sense of your reading audience as anything but captive? Have you never performed live on stage? Man, have you never played jazz, funk, the blues, or Bach? Do you realize that your prose has no rhythm? I hate to think that our graduate schools are producing a whole generation of scholars with tin ears. I say, PhD programs, in the humanities, social sciences and the sciences, should be requiring not just foreign language facility and quantitative methods but musical facility as well, and we'd be better off as a nation. I'm not being flip. We need to return to the centrality of the arts in our entire educational system, and our leaders, practitioners, and exemplars of the liberal arts need to make that case very assertively and very pleasingly. It's a joyful case to make. But an older generation has to do it, because it takes a number of years of instruction and practice and discipline before the younger generation has the skills to reap the benefits.

Anyway, at eighteen I left Cedar Rapids to attend Amherst College, a geographical displacement that was also something of a culture shock for me. Those east coast preppies threw me for a loop, but that's another story. I felt immediately comfortable, however, in the library, which felt very much like the Coe College library back home. The Amherst College library was and is called the Frost Library, named after the poet Robert Frost, who was a professor of English at the college for a number of years, before my time. Both the Coe College and Amherst libraries of my day

were still very low-tech; no computers, for instance. And bar scanners were yet to be invented, so you checked out a book from the library by signing a card in the back of the book, a card that stayed with that particular book upon its return to the library. So every book on the shelves in the Frost library contained its own log of everyone who had personally handled that particular copy, with a ready inventory of the handwritten signatures of its users over the years. Imagine the thrill of coming upon a book with Robert Frost's signature in the back. Or Robert Fagles'. Or Henry Steele Commager's. Or your professor in a particular class. Or a classmate. Or to come upon a book whose last reader was 100 years prior—and then to find something of value in it, anew, as if you've excavated a rare Grecian urn. Those signed check-out cards made you feel as if you were part of an extended community of readers, holding that history right in your very hands, looking with your eyes at the very same pages that had been scrutinized through another set of once-living eyes. It wasn't that the text became mysteriously sacralized in the process, but it made demonstrable the fact that a book is an intergenerational artifact, that authors can speak to us, as it were, beyond the grave and that their hidebound words can galvanize a kind of protracted readership, a community defined over time. While the advent of bar scanners has certainly made checking out books more convenient, I think something has been lost in the shuffle. We're living on the cusp of a new era of cultural production, having shifted in the classical world from orality to writing and then to the printed word starting in the 15th century, and now into the multimedial digital era. Printed newspapers are going by the wayside, publishing houses are going belly up, and the future of the printed page, and the book, is not an auspicious one. My late Claremont colleague Peter Drucker predicted in 1997 that in thirty more years residential college education would be rendered, by the same digitizing forces, obsolete, books and buildings both becoming relics. Mind you, I have many colleagues today who are mightily enthusiastic about downloading all sorts of reading matter through iPhones and Kimbles, along with e-books and i-books and online, on-demand, googlable access to every damn book ever written throughout recorded human history, popping right up there on your laptop screen. Don't be a stick in the mud, don't be a Luddite, they say. We're in a new Gutenberg revolution, and it's all good, even the texting and twittering. But then I think back to my undergraduate experience in the Frost library. I just don't think digitized books are apt to initiate quite the same pleasures, the thrills, the undercover bonds, the mysteries that those card catalogued, hand-signed books formerly prompted. Sure, maybe in the future, when you download a particular book, you can access a list of every other worldwide reader who has also downloaded that book, or you'll read in real-time along with other readers and gain new opportunities for interactive and shared reading experiences. Is it likely, however, that those virtual communities, now tracked by Amazon.com, will become memorable and profound, accumulating depth and meaning over time? I wonder. Can the digital ever be tangible? At night, you're not going to tuck your Kimble lovingly under your pillow after you read an amazing downloadable book on it, are you? Dante at the end of the *Paradiso* tries to impart to his reader a poetic notion that a great Book of Love holds the entire universe together: can Dante digitized truly convey that sublime vision? I think you need to be holding a copy of the *Paradiso* in your hands while you try to appreciate, to grasp his view that the pages in front of you are the very scattered leaves of that universal book of which he writes. Okay, maybe that's too quaint. I've read Robert Darnton's amazing essay on Rousseau's readers, who relished the 18th century book's gold-inscribed leather bound covers, who fussed over the book's expensive sheep skin pages or delicate rag paper and its hand-designed fonts and fancy printed letters. I'm aware that books can be fetishized, and that dwelling on a particular historical iteration of the book is to decontextualize a form of cultural production, abstracting it out of its changing economic conditions and power dynamics, and so on blah blah blah. Still, I desperately wish my own 21st century students could experience that thrill of discovering Robert Frost's signature tucked away, among others, in just another book on the shelves in their little college library and to see the names of a handful of others who have likely shared that thrill over that particular book. A book, to be sure, doesn't raise the dead. Reading isn't an exercise in morbidity. Reading doesn't need to conjure up an absent subject. But it does help us understand our participation in a grander human comedy, and a tangible book makes that extended mystery, that protracted history, a little more palpable, something you hold in your hand.

Well, those Frost Library books, and the general liberal arts environs at Amherst College, inspired me to try my own hand at book writing. My senior thesis turned out to be over 400 pages long—on Max Weber. I went overboard. But I wasn't unusual. My friends were all avidly writing long theses, or conducting elaborate lab experiments, while playing or singing or dancing in music or theater groups, while competing in intramural or intercollegiate athletics, while cultivating friendships and engaging in spirited conversation. The liberal arts were alive and robust and meaningful. Mine isn't a romantic or revisionist memory. I'm again extremely fortunate to find myself at a residential liberal arts institution, Pomona College, with colleagues who are devoted in the very core of their being to teaching and research; with administrators who deeply care about the liberal arts; with trustees who are true-blue believers in and sponsors of that form of education; and with students who read and pursue their studies with passion and rigor and good cheer. And the alums look back on their undergraduate days with tremendous fondness. The spirit and practice of the liberal arts are alive—and attractive. We can admit only a fraction of the students who want to attend Pomona College. And we can hire only a fraction of the PhDs who want to teach there. And yet we operate against the backdrop of a national mythology that purports as a commonplace that a liberal arts education is somehow woefully misbegotten, economically foolish,

unaccountable and deserving of its impending demise. What poppycock. My friends, we need to get the word out, that a liberal arts way of life is probably the best, one of the best, of all possible worlds, the highest or the most rewarding of pursuits, the incubator of great joys and profound memories, that a liberal arts education helps cultivate human meaning and helps craft human soulfulness, producing the kinds of people you want to be around for the rest of your life, liberally educated engineers, broadly read mechanics, thoughtful and inspired businesspersons, curious and interesting neighbors. We need to dispel the popular falsehood that reading books and sharing ideas and pursuing truths and contemplating beauty and making music are ultimately exercises in futility, wastefulness, and uselessness. We need to get the word out that the liberal arts is a way of life, not just a curriculum, and that the benefits and utility of the liberal arts are to be measured over the span of a lifetime, not simply in test scores or starting salaries upon graduation. Don't expect, don't place the responsibility for raising the national GNP or for saving the whales or for saving the planet on America's network of small liberal arts colleges. Instead, we need to tell others and to remind ourselves that the ultimate reason for getting a good job in the first place or for saving the planet is to be able to pursue, to live, to enjoy the ongoing enrichments of a liberal arts way of life.

The main point of Weber's "Scholarship as a Vocation" talk was to assert that the integrity of modern scholarship requires steadfast devotion to increasingly specialized research and that such devotion still resembles something like bygone religious faithfulness, even though modern academic research was, for Weber, a religiously disenchanted and disbelieving enterprise. For Weber, the modern scholar, even though he or she no longer believes that scholarship leads to redemption, ought to regard his or her activity nonetheless as, as it were, a missionary calling, not just a job. But realize: Weber in the talk boasts of the superiority of the German research university, which produces quasi-aristocratic specialists, over the American teaching college, which produces middlebrow democratic generalists. I quote: "The American boy learns unspeakably less than the German boy...The young American has no respect for anything or anybody, for tradition or for public office—unless it is for the personal achievement of individual men. This is what the Americans call 'democracy.'...The American's conception of the teacher who faces him is: he sells me his knowledge and his methods for my father's money, just as the greengrocer sells my mother cabbage. And that is all. To be sure, if the [American] teacher happens to be a football coach, then, in this field, he is a leader. But if he is not [a sport's coach], he is simply a teacher and nothing more." Perhaps in 1920 Weber didn't have much inside acquaintance with the American-style residential liberal arts college. Today, every day, I encounter students and colleagues who do not regard their own scholarly, teaching, and learning activity as fundamentally a function of economics, as a mere job or a way to get a job. But Weber's cartoonish critique should be a worry. I think we need to adopt Weber's notion of a calling and apply it as well to broad-based liberal arts education, and not just specialized research. We need thus to elevate and to exalt and to proclaim widely, impelled onward by the courage of our convictions, that for those of us in the know, the liberal arts way of life, a well-crafted, well-rounded, well-wrought life with others, is indeed a vocation, not just a curriculum, not just a career, certainly not just a job. At the end of his most famous book, Weber warns of a coming iron cage of modernity that will trap us into a cultural order about which it might well be said: "Specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart; this nullity imagines that it has attained a level of civilization never before achieved." I see the task of liberal arts education as withstanding that grim future, namely by cultivating an educational ethos that seeks indeed to bring *spirit* and *heart* to our lives. My friends, thank you for listening to me on this occasion, and please trust that I will do my best to live up to the tremendous honor that you have bestowed so generously upon me. Thank you.