

Bellarmino Commencement Address - 2007 - by Wendell Berry

In all the history of teaching and learning, our own time may be the oddest. We seem to be obsessed with education. Newspapers spend an enormous flow of ink on articles, editorials, and letters about education. Presidents of public universities appear on the op-ed pages, prophesying the death of American civilization as the inevitable result of fiscal caution. Our governmental hallways are hardly passable because of university lobbyists kneeling and pleading for public dollars. One might conclude that we are panic-stricken at the thought of any educational inadequacy measurable in unappropriated funds.

And yet by all this fuss we are promoting a debased commodity paid for by the people, sanctioned by the government, for the benefit of the corporations. For the most part, its purpose is now defined by the great and the would-be-great “research universities.” These gigantic institutions, increasingly formed upon the “industrial model,” no longer make even the pretense of preparing their students for responsible membership in a family, a community, or a polity. They have repudiated their old obligation to pass on to students at least something of their cultural inheritance. The ideal graduate no longer is to have a mind well-equipped to serve others, or to judge competently the purposes for which it may be used.

Now, according to those institutions of the “cutting edge,” the purpose of education is unabashedly utilitarian. Their interest is almost exclusively centered in the technical courses called, with typical ostentation of corporate jargon, STEM: science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. The American civilization so ardently promoted by these institutions is to be a civilization entirely determined by technology, and not encumbered by any thought of what is good or worthy or neighborly or humane.

The course of study called STEM is in reality only a sort of job training for upward (and lateral) mobility. It is also a subsidy granted to the corporations, which in a system of free enterprise might reasonably be expected to do their own job training. And in the great universities even this higher job training is obstructed by the hustle and anxiety of “research,” often involving yet another corporate raid on the public domain.

I do not mean to say that it is impossible to get something like an education in even the most ambitious university. After all, if you have a library, classrooms, laboratories, and an assemblage of doctors diversely learned, you have the makings of an actual school. And in such a place a young person might still pursue a respectable course of study. But that possibility seems less and less probable.

Actual education seems now to be far more probable in the smaller schools, and I think you graduates are fortunate to have been students at Bellarmine. A school the size of this one still can function as a community of teachers and students, with responsible community life as its unifying aim. But you must not forget that the purposes and standards of the world into which

you are graduating have not been set by institutions such as this one, but rather by the proponents of STEM, who would like you to have a well-paying job as an unconscious expert with Jesus Christ Munitions Incorporated, or Cleanstream Water Polluters, or the Henry Thoreau Noise Factory, or the John Muir Forest Reduction Corporation, or the Promised Land Mountain Removal Service.

You are not going to discover that the STEM project recognizes the standards of ecological and community health, or that it proposes the real national security of coherent local economies or sustainable methods of land use. You will be told instead that you and your community are now ruled by a global corporate empire, to which all the earth is a “third world,” against which you have no power of resistance or self-determination, and within which you have no vocational choice except a technical and servile job which will give you a small share of the plunder.

You will be told also – ignoring our permanent dependence on food, clothing, and shelter – that you live in a “knowledge-based economy,” which in fact is deeply prejudiced against all knowledge that does not produce the quickest possible return on investment. Even as the ecologists (who manifestly are excluded from STEM) have greatly enlarged our knowledge of ecosystems, their complexity and fragility and their need for care, our knowledge of our own species has been radically simplified. STEM’s definition of humanity includes no suggestion of reverence or neighborliness or stewardship. Instead, people are encouraged to think of themselves as individuals, self-interested and greedy by nature, violent by economic predestination, and members of nothing except their careers. The lives of these “autonomous” individuals will be “successful” insofar as they subserve the purposes of the corporate-political powers, who will regard them merely as consumers, votes, and units of “human capital.”

At commencement exercises it is customary to invite a speaker to exhort the graduates not to think of the end of their formal education as the end of their education, but rather to continue to learn and to grow in consciousness as they go forth to the duties and trials of responsible citizenship. As the designated speaker of this ceremony, I am serious about this duty. I do hereby exhort the graduates to continue to learn and to grow in consciousness as responsible citizens. And I do so knowing that no exhortation could be more subversive in the world as defined by the proponents of STEM.

To urge you toward responsible citizenship is to say that I do not accept either the technological determinism or the conventional greed or the thoughtless individualism of that world. Nor do I accept the global corporate empire and its economic totalitarianism as an irresistible force. I am here to say that if you love your family, your neighbors, your community, and your place, you are going to have to resist. Or I should say instead that you are going to have to join the many others, all over our country and the world, who already are resisting – those who believe, in spite of the obstacles and the odds, that a reasonable measure of self-determination, for persons and communities, is both desirable and necessary. Of the possibility of effective resistance there is a large, ever-growing catalogue of proofs: of projects undertaken by local people, without official permission or instruction, that work to reduce the toxicity, the violence, and the

self-destructiveness of our present civilization. The resistance I am recommending will involve you endlessly in out-of-school learning, the curriculum of which will be defined by questions such as these:

What more than you have so far learned will you need to know in order to live at home? (I don't mean "home" as a house for sale.) If you decide, or if you are required by circumstances, to live all your life in one place, what will you need to know about it and about yourself? At present our economy and society are founded on the assumption that energy will always be unlimited and cheap; but what will you have to learn to live in a world in which energy is limited and expensive? What will you have to know – and know how to do – when your community can no longer be supplied by cheap transportation? Will you be satisfied to live in a world owned or controlled by a few great corporations? If not, would you consider the alternative: self-employment in a small local enterprise owned by you, offering honest goods or services to your neighbors and responsible stewardship to your community?

Even to ask such questions, let alone answer them, you will have to refuse certain assumptions that the proponents of STEM and the predestinarians of the global economy wish you to take for granted.

You will have to avoid thinking of yourselves as employable minds equipped with a few digits useful for pushing buttons. You will have to recover for yourselves the old understanding that you are whole beings inextricably and mysteriously compounded of minds and bodies.

You will have to understand that the logic of success is radically different from the logic of vocation. The logic of what our society means by "success" supposedly leads you ever upward to any higher-paying job that can be done sitting down. The logic of vocation holds that there is an indispensable justice, to yourself and to others, in doing well the work that you are "called" or prepared by your talents to do.

And so you must refuse to accept the common delusion that a career is an adequate context for a life. The logic of success insinuates that self-enlargement is your only responsibility, and that any job, any career will be satisfying if you succeed in it. But I can tell you, on the authority of much evidence, that a lot of people highly successful by that logic are painfully dissatisfied. I can tell you further that you cannot live in a career, and that satisfaction can come only from your life. To give satisfaction, your life will have to be lived in a family, a neighborhood, a community, an ecosystem, a watershed, a place, meeting your responsibilities to all those things to which you belong.

I am sure that you are going to come face to face with the questions and issues I have mentioned, and I am sure that I don't know how you will answer. People who speak at commencements speak in hope, but also in ignorance. However you may answer, I join the rest of your elders in worrying about you and in wishing you well.

(http://www.bellarmino.edu/studentaffairs/graduation/berry_address/)