

TAFT

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“On What Living is For: The Mission of a School in Challenging Times”

(In this address to parents, I wanted to speak about our nation's educational history, and how the pursuit of the great question at the heart of a liberal education can and must sustain schools especially in times of challenge and change.)

Today I want to continue exploring an idea that I spoke to the faculty about six weeks ago: that is, the idea that rests in the heart of a school and how important it is, especially in moments of institutional challenge. The theme came to me in an odd way, on a rainy day and when I read two books.

Late this summer, I was standing miserably in the rain, ankle deep in mud, looking at a pay loader pick through the debris where our dining hall once stood. It was not a good day. The water was dripping down my back. Summer school students were eating under a tent. We had just knocked down the space where half the school ate its meals. Our business manager kept telling me that we were making good progress, but when you are staring into a pile of bricks and twisted steel on the edge of a big muddy hole, it is hard to be cheerful. We had just broken ground on a massive project, the disruption to campus life was going to be serious, Wall Street was beginning to totter, and I had one of those private moments of doubt when you find yourself wondering if this time you finally really have dreamed too big.

Not that this is unprecedented for a headmaster. Horace Taft, who moved his school here in 1893, must have had a similar moment, almost exactly a century ago. There was not a lot here: a large and tired Civil War-era inn, some lovely elm trees, and a brief apron of lawn. Surrounding the school was farmland—apple trees, cow fields, woods. He must have been nervous when he stood on this site with architect Bertram Goodhue, and watched the steam shovel take its first bite. He wrote his friend and fellow headmaster Sherman Thacher on September 8, 1911: “My debt is over \$118,000.” The difference between what he saw around him that day and what he envisioned for the future was stark.

But neither he nor I faced what a group of educators some 350 years ago did, and in their story is an inspiration for Taft.

I am talking of the colonists who founded the nation's first university. This is a story I came to know in Samuel Eliot Morison's definitive historical work, *The Founding of Harvard College*. It, and a book I was to read later, told me not only that great schools must be audacious but also that they must be animated by the pursuit of the single question that is at the heart of a liberal education: “What is living for?” If that question is at the center of your school, you can build something that will endure forever.

Harvard, Morison writes, “was established at a place which had been a wilderness eight years before, in a colony whose history was less than ten years old, and by a community of less than ten thousand people. The impulse and support came from no church, or individual in the Old World, but from an isolated people hemmed in between the forest and the ocean, who had barely secured the necessities of existence. No similar achievement can be found in the history of modern civilization.”

With the colonies of Massachusetts barely settled, colonists began thinking of schools almost immediately, a simple fact that is astonishing given the hardships they faced. By the early 1630s, we can find references to schoolmaster salaries in various communities—this when stumps still marred the fields and many homes were of wattle and mud.

And, in late October 1636, the Massachusetts General Court met for four days, and on the afternoon of the final day, they committed the funds—equal to almost 50 percent of the general levy—to fund a college. A year later the decision was made to settle the college in Newtown, henceforth to be known as Cambridge—a reference to the great university in England, and a sign that they were not thinking small here.

Perhaps we should not be surprised at the commitment to education, for when you scratch at the history, you find lots of evidence that these colonists realized that the future would require educated citizens, and they were really worried about what learning would be lost when the English-educated generation on these shores died.

In 1642, the General Court declared that “whereas many parents are neglectful in training their children in learning,” town selectmen had to see to it that citizens could “read and understand the principles of religion and the capital laws of the country... and learning must not be buried in the graves of our forefathers.” The 1643 publication, “New England’s First Fruits,” a publicity tract about New England, recounts the early days of colonial education. It reads:

After God had carried us safe to New England, and wee had builded our houses, provided necessaries for our liveli-hood, rear’d convenient places for God’s worship, and setled the Civill Government: One of the next things we longed for, and looked after was to advance Learning and perpetuate it to Posterity; dreading to leave an illiterate Ministry to the churches, when our present Ministers shall lie in the dust.

This is a wonderful sentence: we see the priorities—shelter, food, worship, governance, and education—and I am not sure anyone ever described schooling better: “to advance learning and perpetuate it to posterity.”

And this, Morison argues, really is where higher learning in this country begins. In July or August of 1638, the doors of the first college opened, in a large house on a dirt lane, in what we know as Cambridge. The “campus,” if you will, was on Cowyard Row, an acre and an eighth of bovine mooing and ripe odors. If Horace Taft started his school on humble grounds, it was luxurious compared to what the founding educational fathers had known; and my whining about the dining hall project seemed a bit—well, whiney. When John Harvard, a 31-year-old minister, died a year later, leaving one half his estate to establish the college and library, the great university was born.

There is something wonderfully innocent, optimistic, and brash in this story—something quintessentially American, about starting a college a few miles from the dark woods and among the gassy cows, and renaming the town “Cambridge” to boot. (Not that it was an easy start: Morison recounts how the first president was fired, having beaten his students and a servant, run up large debts, skimmed a goodly portion of Harvard’s bequest, fled the authorities by pushing the arresting constable off a boat, sailed to Virginia, where he led a church, received a doctorate at the University of Padua, married three times, and was jailed in Southwark, England, where he died in debtors’ prison, ironically just a stone’s throw from the very home where John Harvard was born!)

But there is no doubt about whether the college would succeed or whether it was important. We read in “First Fruits” these early sentiments: “Insomuch that we are confident, if the early blossoms may be cherished and warmed with the influence of the friends of Learning, and lovers of this pious worke, they will by the help of God, come to happy maturity in a short time.”

Listen to the humility and confidence in the sentence. The bellowing of heifers interrupting Greek declamations, Indians and militia still battling in the woods and swamps, hunger and cold at every winter door—none of this mattered. The colonists seemed to be saying: We are very sure about what a proper education is, and it will happen here and now.

The great questions that scholars had asked for centuries in Oxford and Cambridge were now asked on the new shores.

Now what was this education? What were they learning?

Author and former Dean of the Yale Law School Anthony Kronman in his 2007 work entitled *Education's End* answers this question. He describes those early days and the years that followed: "In their [professors'] mind, a college was above all a place for the training of character, for the nurturing of those intellectual and moral habits that together form the basis for living the best life that one can."

He writes, "...education rested on the premise that the ends of human living are not merely a fit subject of instruction but *the one subject before all others*" (emphasis mine). The Harvard or Amherst or Georgetown professor in our early history knew that the central task was a shaping of the soul: the aim of education in their institutions was to prepare graduates for a successful, honorable, and good life.

I need not point out that what they sought in the mid-17th century will sound very familiar to you today. The colonists believed keenly—as we do—that they had an obligation to the future: recall the line about advancing learning and *perpetuating it to posterity*. And they believed that the learning was a general one, as much about the spirit as it was the mind: recall how they dreaded leaving an illiterate ministry to the churches. It was an education about the development of the habits of mind, the practices of the heart, and the inclinations of the spirit that result in a good life.

Now, I have read the history quite carefully, in the General Court papers, in letters from early masters, in published materials; and despite the inauspicious start, there is not one shred of doubt about what this education meant or why it mattered. That the schooling took place in an abandoned cow field did not matter. A great idea animated all they did, and to that idea they brought, and from that idea they took, great authority.

My hope is that we at Taft have the same confidence.

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An education rooted in this pursuit is a very sound one, and I would argue this is what we try to do here with your sons and daughters—and who would argue with this goal? But here is the rub: Kronman goes on in his book to argue that today institutions of higher learning have ceased to pursue the very question that defined their work in the first centuries of our national history: to wit, "What is living for?"

While that question shaped all that happened in colleges in the first two hundred years of our history, by the late 19th century, he notes, universities began to redefine themselves as research institutions and left that question to the secular humanities, where it was pursued with admirable if lonely rigor. Beginning in the 1960s, however, he argues, the question was no longer considered relevant and largely vanished from the world of higher education.

Kronman sees universities having lost their way, where the question of life's meaning "[has] ceased to be a recognized and valued subject even in the humanities.... It has been expelled from our universities under pressure for the research ideal and the demands of political correctness." His argument is a provocative one, to be sure, and not everyone will agree with him; but I do think he is right on the history. Were they here today, the founding educational founders would surely ask, "Where, then, are we asking what life is for?"

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Taken together, Morison's and Kronman's books tell me two vital truths: first, that a school that will endure must have at its center the question "What is living for?" and its attendant questions: "What constitutes a good life? What values will I live by? What obligations do I have toward my community?"; and second, if colleges have dropped this banner, it has fallen upon our shoulders to carry it.

There is no doubt in my mind that when Horace Taft founded this school with his simple and compelling vision, he was reaching back to our educational founding fathers, those who helped the children of colonists explore life's purpose. Here we *consciously* see ourselves as having received from those colonists a bequest: to prepare the mind,

heart, and soul of your children, that they might lead good, productive, and honorable lives. In a way, Taft teachers see themselves as the direct descendents of these colonists, and they carry the same faith and passion. We want your children to ponder life's ends every day. At Taft, our answer to the question, "What is living for?" is this:

First, it is the pursuit of learning. This is a school where I hope that your sons and daughters are intellectually challenged and inspired to be lifelong learners. For this reason, the curriculum is incredibly deep and broad—at how many high schools can you take "Forensic Science," study multivariable calculus, read Shakespeare's tragedies, master Mandarin, and write a thesis on Roosevelt's economic policies? Living is for learning.

Second, it is the lesson of service: the humble but fervent belief that we should serve others. We are always seeking ways to emphatically link our mission of the education of the whole student with our motto, "Not to be served but to serve." Today, more Taft students are active in service than at any point in our history. Living is for service.

Third, it is the personal and moral development of your children. We try to seize *every* opportunity to engage in the conversation of what it means to lead a good life and to be a good citizen. Living is for honor, respect, and kindness.

When you see your school's work in these terms, you find yourself feeling a bit what the early instructors at Harvard must have felt: feet in the mud, head in the heavens.

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A great school is lodged in history, like a gem in stone, and there are moments of enormous pressure and fracture, as there were in 1638 when those men huddled in a field and decided to start a college. I believe we are at such a moment today. As in the past, it will make us shine and give our work a crystalline clarity and the sharpest of edges.

We have seen these moments in the past. One thinks of Taft when its young men marched off to the War to End All Wars, or the fervor and fear on that cold December day of infamy, or the social upheaval of the late 1960s, and the chill of September 11, 2001. We might note the date carved into the stone over the Lincoln Lobby archway indicating the completion of the CPT building: 1929. Taft has always stood unshakable because at our very foundation, poured into our footings, is the quest to help your child develop her life purpose.

We have entered a period of singular complexity, a time when the landscape has altered and the terrain is quaking, when the economic climate baffles the predictions of the most sophisticated prophets, when the foreign policy topography has left us feeling for our way, when we worry about the world we are bequeathing to our children.

Now is precisely the time when we remind ourselves that we cannot do better than to help our children lead good lives. Now is the time when we should feel most confident of what education for young people must be.

So I carry optimism and faith like pebbles in my pocket, because I think what we are doing is larger than any challenge. We carry a purpose that is so compelling that obstacles crumble to dust and faith in our mission blazes like a torch. This school will endure, and its importance grows by the day. I like to think that we are reaching back to a cow field hundreds of years ago, seizing the dreams that lit that day and handing them, every day and with a quiet urgency, to your children.



For other remarks by the Headmaster, please visit TaftSchool.org