

# Educating the Human Spirit

Walter Wangerin Jr.

My eldest son prepares to go to college now. And the colleges know that. Joseph has received so much mail from institutions of higher learning that, ton for tonnage, it could stall a mule.

I've studied these advertisements. I've analyzed what most schools consider their best hook to catch a student. And I've discovered here a hierarchy of courses: At the top is what students seem to want from education; at the bottom is what they must take to get what they want. What's at the top is vocational: jobs.

Math is important-because it will get a student a business degree; physics not for physics' sake, but to build a career in engineering. English leads to communications; communications to journalism or media (or business again).

Behold: Jobs justify the study! Biological sciences seem scarcely important in themselves (knowledge mastered solely to know), but rather as the track to professional degrees in, say, medicine. And, saith the canny student, "Can I make a history course count for a law degree? I want to be a lawyer."

"I want to *be*," says the student, "and so I go to college' "*Be*, he says. But *be* refers to a profession, not to an identity. It does not refer to intrinsic personhood, to character or virtue or wisdom. It refers to work: accounting, counseling, manufacturing. *Be* doesn't mean "*be*" at all; it means *do*. It refers to a function performed in society for which society pays rewards. One can *do* these things and still *be* a nincompoop, immoral, trivial, treacherous, a mule. It toucheth the mouth: to feed it in the future. It toucheth not the soul: to shape it for the future. And what is the value of feeding a mouth that serves a wretched soul? Out of such a mouth shall come-what? Blessing or cursing? Well, we don't know if we can't know who this student is or what his spirit may *become*.

There is another list of courses in the catalogues the colleges have sent my son. But these courses receive a plainer, more perfunctory, less breathless presentation. Perhaps recruiters consider them a duller hook for catching applicants. Perhaps few students truly hunger, truly thirst for them.

For these are the true courses of *be*. Boldly they consider questions of virtue, questions of human purpose and conduct, goodness as an absolute, beauty as a possibility, and ethic as a choice with spiritual and social consequence. These are the courses of *be*: They engage the student in dialogue with spirits past and present who make *being* their thesis, their passion, their genius and their inquiry.

These are the arts and the liberal arts: philosophy (wisdom for the love of wisdom), literature in any language, history as a study of humankind, theology, music, art, art history, the classics and the like. They do not promise jobs. Nor do they promise to produce wise or charitable or clear-sighted humans. But they do

require the student to study such humans and to consider the ideas that have shaped humanity. They do, therefore, provide the student with mentors, articulate guides in the business of living. They prepare a student seriously to ask the question *why* he would buy and sell (not merely "What price?" or "What do I gain?"). And they will surely teach the student a larger, lovelier, more sophisticated language than *I*, or *I want*.

Please, please understand: None of this is to blame the areas of education that train for vocations. Nor does it criticize the foresight of the student who has chosen a profession.

Rather, it disputes the single-minded attitude that college is valuable *only* if it promises an income at the end of it. When jobs alone can sanction students' education, when employment alone can persuade them to work to learn, then learning itself is demeaned among us. We've made it utilitarian and self-centered, a means to satisfy one's personal needs and desires, and (at its basest) one's material needs and desires.

But education is-and we can be-more generous and worthy.

In the days shortly before the Nazis executed him, the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote: "The only thing I am clear about at the moment is that education which breaks down in the face of danger is not education at all. Education must be able to face death and danger, even if it cannot 'conquer' them."

Consider the man and the context of his word. Consider the quality of this wise and faithful mentor-and realize that one can't face the danger one has neither named nor discussed in the course of one's education.

The American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, when World War II was a red roar on the eastern horizon, wrote: "The law of love is not obeyed simply by being known. Whenever it is obeyed at all, it is because life in its beauty and terror has been more fully revealed to us."

Consider the context again. It will recur for us. Consider the requirements placed upon the human spirit in such a context, and admit that the mind must be trained to support that spirit. Consider that "the law of love" may be devoutly expressed in church but that the full revelation of life is beautiful and terrible in the arts.

This is the revelation I wish for my son in college-before the world requires his soul of him. For when he cannot choose but choose, I hope (I pray to God and I plead with academia) that Joseph's scope and his standards shall be more merciful than mercenary.

**An Addendum**

Sept 5, 2001

I wrote this column in 1988 and find that it is in principle as timely today as it was 13 years ago.

On the other hand, the framing of my column was fixed in time. Joseph was the oldest of our four children and the first to enter college. He chose, as a matter of fact, to attend Valparaiso University--an institution to which I followed my son some three years later when I accepted an offer to occupy the Jochum Chair of the University.

Joseph himself is an artist now. He sculpts, draws, illustrates--and is just completing his first commissioned work: the busts of the Hongs, Edna and Howard, for the library of St. Olaf College. Which is to say: the education he received did accomplish the things I had yearned for years ago.....

Oh, and our youngest daughter, Talitha, took education farther than anyone else in our immediate family. This summer she completed her Ph.D. in (Ah, yes) mathematics.

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