Educating Public Intellectuals

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I am deeply honored to accept the AGLSP Faculty Award for 2015 and am sincerely grateful to the selection committee, to our Association President, Deborah Finkel, and the other Association officers, as well as to the Program Committee and our hosts from Stanford University who have made this year's conference such an outstanding one.

In the spirit of the Conference theme, "Place Matters," I would like to invite you to reflect with me for a few minutes on the exceptional meaning and value of what is taking place here and now among us as we participate in the event of this Annual Conference. The underlying question is something like this: How are we to explain why and how Liberal Arts education in general, and, in particular, Liberal Studies programs for lifelong learners like the ones we represent, are so effective in forming minds and transforming hearts into fertile places where realities like "Meanings" and "Values" can take place in the lives of individuals and societies? How, in other words, does the mystery of liberal education take place in human experience?

Some might wonder at my abrupt introduction of the word "mystery" into a context which presumably is centered on an intellectual pursuit of knowledge and the rationally guided application of that knowledge to the circumstances of our lives. But to be so surprised is to be reminded of the most basic of all educational experiences: the piercing illumination that takes place in the mind when it perceives clearly, over and over again, that it does not know, and most particularly, when it recognizes that it does not know that which it had mistakenly thought it did know. Mystery is the experience of being reduced to silence, not just once

or occasionally, but over and over throughout the course of a lifetime and across the sweep of cultures, until we come to recognize that silence is the necessary beginning and end of all meaning and of all value. Education is necessarily mysterious because the human lives and deaths we all share, together with all that occurs within them, as well as the universe in which they take place, all begin and end in silence. Each is a story without beginning or end, and education is the process of learning to navigate through that kind of story. Education leads us out of ourselves by helping us learn to identify points of reference in life's journey to death.

So we see that the silence of Mystery is neither static nor stagnant; Mystery's silence is both a provocation and an invitation. It both beckons and beggars the words of our responses. The silence of mystery makes itself our responsibility, and education is the process of taking that responsibility upon ourselves, not simply as our task or even our adventure, but as our very identity, our way of responding to the question that Mystery compels us to ask, "Who am I?"

By calling our very existence into question, Mystery confers on each of us the dignity of Freedom: the ultimate and inviolable freedom of conscience by which we take responsibility not just for what we do, but for who we are, for our identities as persons. And so it is through the power of Mystery that education becomes a liberation into the inviolable human dignity of both having the responsibility to decide what the meaning and value of that humanity shall be, and at the same being able to respond to the question of our identities through the liberating process of education.

The tradition of Liberal Education and its contemporary transformation into Liberal Studies for the sake of life-long learning makes us inheritors of a legacy that traces back to the Greek city-states, but also to the earliest beginnings of scriptural monotheistic religion. Both share in common, amid their important differences, an unqualified affirmation that the meanings and values that take place in human existence when it is educated into its fullness confer on us a dignity as persons that is absolute and unconditional. Liberal education is not task driven; it is not a means directed toward achieving an end or purpose beyond itself. Rather, it is practice for the "game of life." A game is what we do in our "free time," what we enjoy playing at when we are freed from the necessity of work. Genuine liberal education should

be playful, not because life is not serious, but because we enjoy a dignity as free persons which must not ever be enslaved to tasks that, however necessary or useful or advantageous, are undertaken for any reason other than to enable us to become more fully human, more authentically what we already are and what we shall choose to become. The Greeks understood the purpose of liberal education as practice for the dignity and responsibility of citizenship with our fellow human beings, on the grounds that through no other form of life could a human being become more free, more truly "excellent" at playing and enjoying the game of life.

Over the last five years, I have been privileged to serve as the Director of the Doctor of Liberal Studies Program at Georgetown University, and with your kind indulgence, I would like to share with you what has been a genuine education, for me at least, into a richer and more satisfying understanding of just how important the Liberal Studies movement is for our society. Please understand that my motivation here is not to brag on our program in particular or to tout the doctoral degree as being somehow more "prestigious" than the M.A. Rather, my point is that in the context of the doctoral degree in Liberal Studies, the question implicit in all lifelong liberal education becomes most explicit: What is the point? Why bother? What can it do for me? Whenever I am called upon to explain our Program to educational audiences, and especially to prospective students, inevitably the question arises, "Is it the same as a Ph.D.?" Very often this question carries with it the unspoken, but still loudly reverberating further question, "…or is it just a more accessible knock off?" My answer, intended not quite as cynically as it might sound at first, is always the same. In comparison with the Ph.D., there is good news and bad news about the DLS degree.

Bad news first. If you ambition a long-term career in academia as a tenured faculty member at a research University, the DLS degree could put you at a competitive disadvantage. Let me explain: Candidates for the Ph.D. degree are being trained as researchers in a particular academic discipline to work in a professional capacity in academia or in other established research venues, and the goal of that research is to produce new knowledge in a specialized field of investigation. The contribution of that research is justified by the presumption that knowledge is a value in itself, however many may be its practical applications. At present and into the foreseeable though perhaps not indefinite

future, hiring at Universities is conducted by academic departments, and rarely, if ever, would they be attracted to candidates whose doctoral education is not specialized in their own discipline. We take very seriously what we view as our responsibility to alert prospective candidates to this potential competitive disadvantage.

At the same time, we take equally seriously our concomitant responsibility to alert prospective candidates that if they ambition not simply getting but meriting advanced leadership positions in areas that seek to address the most pressing and most contentious issues confronting contemporary society, then the DLS degree might very well prepare them for effective service in these challenges far better than a Ph.D. possibly could. Again, let me explain.

Anyone familiar with Liberal Studies is aware of the two characteristics that distinguish it as a field of study from the more traditional academic disciplines and departments: interdisciplinarity and values reflection. The goal of the doctoral degree in liberal studies is not primarily research and the production of new knowledge, though it may well be the case that interdisciplinary research has that result as a secondary effect. I would suggest that the proper purpose of the kind of interdisciplinary framing of questions and issues together with reflection upon the significance of those issues for the well-being of persons and societies is best characterized as the education of public intellectuals.

In the sense that I am using the term here a public intellectual is first and foremost an educator in the best tradition of liberal arts education, consonant with the first emergence of that tradition with the Greeks, especially Plato in his *Republic* where he envisioned education as focused on the formation of the whole person toward the ideal of citizenship. Obviously in this context, the public intellectual as educator is not to be found exclusively or even primarily in academic institutions, but rather working in every field of endeavor and social concern to create communities of dialogue and deliberative judgment about how best to conduct the workings of society for the common good. Public intellectuals as educators take their place by assuming leadership roles in creating functional communal groups engaged in authentic dialogue, which is neither debate nor the search for rational consensus. Rather their effort remains focused on how best to deal practically with issues that resist both theoretical resolution and adequate majority

decision. They seek to foster participation in the process of discerning the best ways to create and maintain the most effective conditions for innovation, experimentation, and implementation and evaluation of new approaches that respond directly to the immediate needs and long-range goals of the people and institutions most directly affected.

This conception of public intellectuals as liberal arts educators outside the boundaries of traditional academic institutions is deeply consonant with the Jesuit educational tradition in which Georgetown stands. While always affirming knowledge as a value in itself, authentic Jesuit education is never satisfied with knowledge simply for its own sake, but rather strives to put that knowledge in the service of "the greater good" which is the good of human persons and their societies. The Doctor of Liberal Studies degree is a professional degree in the sense that all doctoral degrees, including the Ph.D., are aimed at professional practice in a specific field of endeavor. But in the case of the DLS, that field of professional practice is not research but rather leadership and public service, and specifically the service of educating the populace to be more capable of confronting the complex issues and making the difficult deliberative decisions about situations like climate change, scarcity of natural resources, international law and policy, gender and racial/ethnic diversity, economic and social justice, and the myriad of other questions for which our culture is urgently and anxiously in search of responses with which and by which we all can live with a sense of dignity and accomplishment.

Society has profited by the contributions of experts in every field through the relevant knowledge which they can bring to bear on diverse areas of human endeavor. But as our history makes increasingly clear, expertise by itself cannot sustain, safeguard, or enhance the quality of human life except in the context of a society which, as Jefferson insisted, is well-educated—not simply in the range of academic disciplines, but also educated in the processes of dialogue and deliberation by which such knowledge becomes humanly fruitful and productive.

It is to this end of producing public intellectuals as educational leaders in every area of societal practice that Georgetown's DLS program dedicates itself and has begun producing graduates who effectively embody and make good on that commitment. My current role in that program, coupled with more than three decades of classroom teaching and learning in Liberal Studies, make the

award conferred here tonight an honor for which I am deeply grateful. Thank you for your kind attention.