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CONTEMPORARY UNIVERSITY AND EDUCATION FOR HUMANISM

by

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To a large extent, the universities in today's world are a product of, reflect and often reinforce their indigenous societies. The global problems which have brought mankind together for the first time in its history - have also their impact on the citadels of academic learning. The anguish of the poor, the diminishing natural resources and increased pollution, the threat of a nuclear holocaust, the pressures of the hungry and overpopulated globe, the frustration of the unemployed, the inhumane bureaucracies and the lack of basic human rights and freedoms, the ever increasing terror and violence - all this has helped to create in our societies and universities lonely, frustrated and alienated individuals willing to strike at and destroy both the society and the university.

Contemporary universities are good at their main task of educating and training the professional cadres capable of continuing the ongoing work in their respective disciplines. At times, we do the job exceedingly well by turning out far too many qualified professionals than available places for their employment exist!
It seems to me, however, that in our zealous performance of our professional tasks we often succumb to a myopic vision of our respective disciplines. Thus, philosophers, for instance, abandon wisdom for word chopping, while historians have little or no universal vision of man's inter-related developments through time but only a parochial view of isolated temporal segments of history.

At major universities in the United States, research and publishing are primary functions of our professors. Teaching, even when seriously stressed, seldom enunciates the classical truth that everything has a moral and aesthetic worth as an inter-related part of a greater organic whole.

In our day to day academic activities, we have failed, somehow, to grasp the intrinsic meaning of this humanist lesson. Our universities have become knowledge factories and we have developed specific notions about the knowledge we possess, as being objective, impersonal, instrumental, specialized, and amoral: "Knowledge is of facts, and in themselves facts are neither good or bad. They are simply facts."

In our pursuit of knowledge of facts, we often fail to see ourselves and our students as human beings. This is probably more pronounced at European universities but the cases could be also found at North American universities. We fail to see how human beings are essentially related to one another in order of value. We neglect or choose not to see how each of us is an irreplaceable part of the universe in which we live, not because of what we do but what we are. We fail to see "how if one human
suffers, we all suffer; to see how if the earth is irreplaceably harmed, we are all harmed; to see organic unity in material multiplicity."

This rather sad state of our academe points out the need for an education in humanism at all our universities. The challenge is upon us to develop in ourselves and in our students genuine humanists with an open mind dedicated to a disinterested search for truth.

If we subscribe to the premise that man is not born human but becomes human in a society, then our universities should be "permissive" enough to make possible for our students to choose and make themselves because they find alternatives most suited to them. In this way, the relative personal independence which one can achieve is the supreme human achievement. Thus, to treat every student as an end, never merely a means, should be the cornerstone of education for humanism at our universities.

Contemporary universities should never allow themselves to become closed, elite societies which, as a machine, would require all of its parts to be inter-related to serve a common purpose. Education for humanism requires open universities which would produce only shapes, outlines, rough-hewn blocks, mere possibilities from which any one may select what he pleases and shape and finish it for himself or herself. The person is invited to make of his own life, and thus of himself or herself, a work of art.

But we should go a step further. The average age of students at our universities, at least this is the case in the
United States, is on the increase. At my own institution some percent of all students are over [explain who they are]. Education for humanism calls for a continuous education of our fellow citizens in their mature years.

As human life is not a block to be carved but it takes place and takes shape in periods of time over sequence of phases, a continuous education is an imperative if our senior citizens are not to fit the Shakespeare's image of a person in the winter of his or her life. The passage in *As You Like It* is a satirical sketch, the life cycle of man the poor fool who plays many silly parts before passing through second childhood into the "mere oblivion" of the final stage: "Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans - everything".

Through the university continuous education men and women during their full maturity could prepare for a new way of life in retirement and thus avoid demoralization and collapse which old age usually brings.

Bringing to a close these short remarks of mine, allow me to re-emphasize again that education for humanism requires from our universities to maintain a open mind and open society. Equally important is that we should also extend to all members of our society the open heart and the open hand.

Openness being the framework and truth a primary value, our contemporary universities could do well, in their search for education for humanism, to heed the preference of Democritus: "I would rather discover one cause than gain the kingdom of Persia."