For Whom the Schoolbell Tolls: Hemingway, NAFTA, Soren K. and Gen Ed

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Hemingway, NAFTA, Soren K. and Gen Ed. What, you ask, have they in common? In a phrase, the environmental slogan: think globally, act locally. But that's the sum, not the substance of my argument.

Hemingway, NAFTA, Health Security and Academics

Ernest Hemingway, of course, drew the title of his political romance from a climactic question in John Donne's oft quoted meditation. Donne had established his geological metaphor that a clod of earth is inescapably part of its continent and drew the moral that what befalls one ineluctably impacts the other. Hemingway's novel—now nearly sixty years old—issued a clarion call for his age to side against tyranny in the struggle that wrecked Spain. That he favored surrogates of a socialist communism which in its homeland had already slaughtered millions of its citizens over representatives of a still nascent Nazi madness and that he used a heroic figure, the engineer Robert Jordan, to advance the cause of classless socialism only document the blindness of his class and the superficial analysis he made.

Intellectual confusion and superficial analysis were also illustrated in discussions concerning the recently enacted North American Free Trade Act, NAFTA. I hope not to add to either here. For I cite NAFTA merely to call attention to a fact, one that a glance around our homes makes obvious. Computers in our study, TV, VCR, and stereo equipment in our living room, clothes and shoes in our closet, cars and yard equipment in our garage: all silently declare that we inescapably live in and generally benefit from a global market.

And to a considerable extent the same global economic forces now drive the debate, long overdue, about America's Health Security Bill. This, of course, does not gainsay other factors in the debate: large numbers of citizens who lack coverage, the high cost of health care and even health insurance, etc. Still, the fact that the United States is the only industrialized nation which lacks universal health care significantly impacts our major corporations in their attempts at world commerce and serves to explain the urgency of the pending debate.

Academic persons easily perceive the hidden agenda behind arguments raised by the most vocal opponents of NAFTA and National Health Security. Thus, trade unions opposing NAFTA appear like contemporary Luddites, bent on protecting jobs of their members at enormous financial cost to others. In like manner, academics glimpse the self interest which galvanizes health insurance agencies and physicians groups to oppose
national health care: the former fear the outright elimination of many agencies in favor of a few giants, while physicians discern the greatly enlarged role primary care nurses will have in delivering ordinary health care.

The great question for academics is, how discerning are we when questions in which we have a vested interest arise? General Education is such a question. And it is here, like physicians with Health Security and unions with NAFTA, that we are apt to identify our interest with that of our clients, our students. And, of course, although they are related, they are not identical. For while General Education at GVSU is a decidedly local phenomenon, nevertheless, like NAFTA and National Health Security, it requires all persons, especially academics, to think globally. For our students, like the Saturn workers in Tennessee a decade ago, deserve a clean sheet on which to plan and erect their life's work.

Soren K, Walter A., Albert S. and Gen Ed

About General Education there are many interesting questions, of recent and more distant vintage. Like other academics, I have many opinions—perhaps even some knowledge—about a number of them: liberal arts in medieval and early modern universities, the Yale 1829 curriculum, 19th century Oxford and Cambridge, German research and graduate universities, Harvard's innovations from Eliot to Rosevsky and Bok, educational theorists from Comenius to Dewey, specialized (vocational or professional or technological) education, multiculturalism, etc.

Indeed, I have proffered some remarks in a separate document, "AuShaLinKi: Program from Paradigms", for your consideration. Here I offer what appear to me more important observations.

The 19th century Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard surveyed the omnipresent, systematic Hegelian philosophy regnant in German universities and culture and acutely observed that while Hegel had erected a splendid, white marble palace, human beings actually dwelt next door in a ramshackle shed. Such seems equally true for the many schemes of General or Liberal Education—including to some degree my own "AuShaLinKi". More to the point and of infinitely greater weight, similar criticisms have come from a plethora of American education's well wishers, including philanthropist Walter Annenberg and American Federation of Teachers president Albert Shanker.

In December 1993 billionaire publisher (TV Guide, etc.) Walter Annenberg donated half a billion dollars to American education. His gift is even more generous but quite unlike that made a century ago by Lord Gifford, publisher of the Encyclopedia Britannica, to Scottish universities. And the difference is instructive. Lord Gifford endowed four Scottish universities with annual lectureships that would bring to each campus the world's brightest academics to lecture (and publish) their researches on mankind's relation to the cosmos and to the divine; William James, Rheinhold Niebuhr, Gabriel Marcel, Anthony Kenny, Alvin Plantinga, etc. would in time hold those

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professorships. Annenberg's more generous gifts, by contrast, are dedicated solely to improve elementary and secondary public education and those institutions, Brown University, for example, which have clearly sought to assist public education and schools. As a highly successful publisher, Annenberg, we must assume, is still attentive to the needs of his market.

That America's elementary, middle and secondary schools greatly need improvement is a familiar cry from American businesses, which must annually spend billions to make minimally literate even those who gain a high school diploma. And highly respected thinkers like Lester Thurow, Dean of MIT's Sloan School of Business, and Robert Reich, the Rhodes scholar companion of our President and now our Secretary of Labor, carefully document these needs. In his Head to Head Thurow surveys Japanese, German and American education, finding the latter sadly deficient. Reich, in his Work of Nations—a deliberate echo of Adam Smith—repackages a familiar adage to summarize his researches: in our global society a rising economic tide raises, he asserts, only selected boats, namely, those containing oarsmen trained to manipulate symbols, whatever countries they work in.

Finally, and most surprising, Albert Shanker, for thirty years president of the American Federation of Teachers, in various speeches and op-ed pieces flatly states (1) that the overwhelming majority of American school children—perhaps 90%—are not learning much; (2) that middle class kids are getting their junior high and high school educations in college and (3) that most American youngsters would not be admitted to university in any other industrialized country.

So as GVSU—along with many other institutions—addresses Gen Ed it would be well, whatever lofty goals our rhetoric establishes, to set a floor for our discussion. Let it be our minimum goal to make each GVSU student at graduation time as generally literate and numerate as their global competitors were when the latter entered their universities. To do less is to continue at the collegiate level the failures of American education; to do more, perhaps as much as AaShaLinKi suggests, is imperative. In sum, we must act locally now—and hopefully at both levels—in order to enable our students to think—and work—globally during their twenty first century. Otherwise, for each student the school bell tolls not a wake-up call of the spirit but a funereal tocsin of the soul.