2002: America and the Curricular Review

It pleased the Lord that Solomon has asked this. And God said to him, "Because you have asked for this, and have not asked for yourself long life or riches or the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself understanding to discern what is right, behold, I now do according to your word. Behold, I give you a wise and discerning mind."
I Kings 3: 10-12

I have no personal memory of World War II. I was born less than two years after my father came home from fighting it, but it never figured much in the daily discourse of my childhood. My father spent three years in the European theater, but except for running across his uniform up in the attic, I saw little evidence of the war or its importance in my father's world. I think he had put it behind him, as he did with many other things in his life. He was grateful for the peace and prosperity that America provided, but he did not talk much about where they came from.

My understanding of the second world war came from my education. Perhaps my earliest realization that something had changed during the years before and after my birth came not in the classroom, but while I was walking to school, I suppose in the first or second grade in the early 1950s. The mailbox which I had known only as drab was suddenly bright blue and white. I think someone must have explained to me that there had been a war, but it was over now, and the country could cheer up.

Harvard had its own transformation after World War II in the form of the creation of its general education curriculum. A distinguished faculty committee wrote a book that was meant as a blueprint not just for Harvard but for all of American higher education. It was called General Education in a Free Society, but it was known for short as the "Red Book." It proceeded from a fairly simple premise: that human civilization had almost been extinguished during the war, and that colleges, and Harvard in particular, had a responsibility to make sure that the students it was educating did not let that happen again. The Red Book was the origin of the division of learning into the three areas of Natural Sciences, Social Sciences, and Humanities, which have proved so natural and useful that they have long survived the replacement of the curricular divisions of the Red Book by the Core areas.

The Red Book was not about "values education," was not jingoistic, was not even about teaching patriotism. It included no program for instilling civic values, as such. Though it was mainly western in perspective, it was not exclusively so, and America was more something that emerged from the west than its crowning glory. One could graduate from Harvard with a Red Book degree and not know the US Constitution from the Declaration of Independence. Yet there was, at a dignified and elevated level, a sense that the thinkers and scholars and writers of the past had been engaged in intellectual activity of which all of humankind could be proud, one that provided, for some at least, meaning in life and motivation for preserving the products of human civilization, and one that gave rise to the ideals that made us free men and women. It implied that we had been given something good, and that it was our job to improve it and make sure that others would have it in the future.

When I was well into my adulthood I came to realize that the wonderbread world in which I had grown up was a great deal more complicated than it had looked to me at the time. My father, the son of a German Lutheran immigrant on one side and a Russian Jewish immigrant on the other, must have wondered who precisely were the vanquished and rescued individuals he encountered while he was in the Army in Europe. No wonder he never referred to himself as anything but American.

The world that produced the Core Curriculum was even more complicated. The small attention to other cultures was seen as a prime deficiency of the Red Book, and intellectual deconstruction and skepticism were values as important as reverence and preservation. The Core had no particular motivating philosophy, except the importance of education and learning themselves; its goal was to make its students into lifelong active learners with a variety of perspectives on how to think, but with less than the Red Book of a shared understanding of what was worth knowing. We are ever more part of the complicated world that the ineptly named "Core" described.

What will the next curricular review bring? We have just come through a year in which America has been reminded of her dependence on the rest of the world, and of the fact that her fundamental values of freedom and equality are not accepted universally. We rely on these freedoms more in this old University than anywhere, especially the freedom to speak and to have a rational argument, an argument in which distinctions are respected and broad labels are avoided. I wonder, when we finish redesigning our general education program for the next generation of students, whether America will have any special place in it, and if indeed if it will have a motivating force behind it at all. It seems to me that in this free society, we should want to teach young minds how to learn, but also to inspire their souls to grasp and to sustain the best humane ideals that our shared heritage has given us.