The lesson is from the eleventh chapter of the book of Genesis.

*… the LORD came down to see the city and the tower that the men were building. The LORD said, "If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them."*

This fall we are celebrating liberal education by starting a new general education program. Yet as with many things we celebrate, we don’t agree what liberal education really is. The Gen Ed report says it is “undertaken without concern for topical relevance or vocational utility.” But the rhetoric about learning divorced from relevance masks an important historical fallacy about our university and its purposes, and I’d like to take the occasion of an anniversary that is also occurring this fall to recall what Harvard is all about.

More than a hundred of the Puritans who set anchor in Massachusetts Bay were Oxford or Cambridge graduates. But Harvard University was not created on the Oxford or Cambridge model. Those universities exist because in medieval times, teams of teachers banded together to create academies. To this day, the professors literally own the Oxford and Cambridge colleges. They decide not just the degree requirements, but how to invest the endowment.

Not so here. Remember how Harvard began. To quote the words chiseled into Johnston Gate,

“AFTER GOD HAD carried us safe to New England, and we had built our houses, provided necessaries for our livelihood, reared convenient places for God's worship, and led the civil government, one of the next things we longed for and looked after was to advance learning and perpetuate it to posterity; dreading to leave an illiterate ministry to the churches, when our present ministers shall lie in the dust.”

That’s just how you go about civilizing a wilderness continent. After the houses and the jobs and the churches and the government, you’d better start a college, because you may never see another boatload of university graduates.

So unlike the English universities, we are an institution created by lay people—not by academics. That’s why our governing boards are mostly businesspeople. If we don’t like what they think about what we teach, I suppose we could, as those English scholars did back in the 11th or 12th century, go start our own university, where we could make all the decisions.

Short of that, we have no right to be an ivory tower. We were never about learning purely for learning’s sake. We were founded for civic purposes, and we have a responsibility to the society we serve.

Right up through the Civil War, our common purpose was defined by our course catalog, which fit on a single page. Curricular diversification came with President Eliot, who over his 40-year presidency abolished all requirements on students and developed a Faculty of experts in dozens of disciplines. Right from the start, Eliot set Harvard, and all of American higher education, on its anti-utilitarian track. “Poetry and philosophy and science do indeed conspire to promote the material welfare of mankind,” he acknowledged; “but science no more than poetry finds its best warrant in its utility. Truth and right are above utility in all realms of thought and action.” No wonder the Engineering School had a hard time getting off the ground under Eliot.

One hundred years ago this fall, Abbott Lawrence Lowell became President and began to push Harvard back toward its civic roots. He had been in the wings for decades, fuming as Eliot dismantled the old college. Lowell has lately been reviled for his anti-Semitism, his anti-feminism, and his homophobia. But I prefer to look to Lowell’s magnificent vision and beyond such failings, which were widely shared in America. I hope perhaps, while I was dean and appointing Masters, I found a constructive way to expiate Lowell’s sins once and for all.

At his inaugural in 1909, Lowell looked around him and saw not merely an ivory tower but a tower of Babel. “The object of the undergraduate department is not to produce hermits, each imprisoned in the cell of his own intellectual pursuits,” Lowell said, “but men fitted to take their places in the community and live in contact with their fellow men.” But Eliot had disaggregated the College over four decades, and no one knew what the point of it was any more. “The present state of the American college bears the marks of a period of transition,” he said. “The transitional nature of existing conditions is seen … in the lack of any accepted view of the ultimate object of a college education.” When President Faust wrote on Sunday of “The University’s Crisis of Purpose,” she was but paraphrasing what Lowell had said a century before.

Lowell instituted general education requirements. He built the Houses, which he described as a “social device for a moral purpose.” And he began to rein in the professors’ self-serving autonomy. Five years into Lowell’s presidency, Bertrand Russell visited Harvard from England and didn’t know what to make of the place. The faculty lacked, he said, “the atmosphere of meditation and absent-mindedness that one associates with thought—they all seem more alert and businesslike and punctual than one expects very good people to be.” Educated at the other Cambridge, Russell simply couldn’t understand why any university would want to be relevant.

The civil war between useful and liberal learning has gone on long enough. As we try to recapture some shared values in our new curriculum, let’s accept that however pure our intellectual ambitions or how applied our engineering inventions, we are all here in service of a public good that is larger than ourselves.

- Harry Lewis, September 8, 2009