



“THE HUMANITIES  
AND THE FINE ARTS:  
THE SOUL AND SPIRIT  
OF OUR UNIVERSITIES”

David Pierpont Gardner  
Graduate Lecture in the  
Humanities and Fine Arts

University of Utah

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By David Pierpont Gardner

To have been invited to deliver the first David Pierpont Gardner Graduate Lecture in the Humanities and Fine Arts fills me with pleasure, pride, and gratitude. Pleasure, because I am able to visit a place our family will always consider special, where we spent ten wonderful and rewarding years serving the University of Utah and the noble cause it represents. Pride, because I am privileged to have my name associated with an endowed lectureship devoted to deepening our understanding of the humanities and the arts. Gratitude, because I hope to be remembered at the University of Utah as one who supports and cares about those disciplines and the humane ends they serve. Let me begin, therefore, by expressing my thanks to Dean Clayton and the Graduate Council, to Professor Sterling McMurrin, who suggested that this lecture be housed in the Graduate School; and to Obert and Grace Tanner, warm and steadfast friends of the University of Utah and of our family, whose influence for good has been enduringly imprinted on our lives and on the universities both here and abroad whose intellectual and moral resources have been strengthened by their generous benefactions.

The title of my address this evening is “The Humanities and the Fine Arts: The Soul and Spirit of Our Universities,” and it deserves a few words of explanation. I chose it, first of all, to underscore the profound importance of the humanities and the arts to the intellectual life of universities and to the activities for which universities act as patrons. Literature, history, archaeology, philosophy, languages, linguistics, drama, dance, music, art in its various forms—these and related disciplines help form the great cultural stream of humane learning and scholarship that constitutes our most precious legacy. The arts and humanities are linked by their common desire to understand human beings in all their complexity and contradictions; their capacity for pleasure and pain in expression and gesture; their potential for good and evil; their instinct for play and their thirst for meaning and purpose. As disciplines, they have a central place in education because they are devoted to the task, as Ben Morris puts it, of “discovering what it means to be human.” (Ben Morris,

"On Discovering What it Means to be Human," in *The Sciences, the Humanities, and the Technological Thrust*, W. Roy Niblett, Ed., New York: Wiley & Sons, 1975.)

In addition to "discovering what it means to be human," one should add that the arts and the humanities help us "make the most out of being human." Rather than assuming a role of less importance in the modern world, they have assumed a more essential one, even if this reality may be less fully appreciated than one might hope. With scientific and technological advances that make the conditions of living less tedious and unvarying, there is "more time in which to be human." There is also "more opportunity to be human."

Through the often maligned, but none the less fabulous, mass media, dance and music and drama are virtually omnipresent. By virtue of the availability and ease of modern transportation the fruits of other civilizations and cultures can be more readily and personally sampled, from the National Palace Museum in Taipei to the British Museum in London to the Prado in Madrid, the Louvre in Paris, the Hermitage in Leningrad, and to the great museums and libraries of our leading universities and major cities. And, finally, our modern world has fostered conditions which require of us a "greater need to be human." The pace of our daily lives, the interdependence of our society, the competitive nature of our environment, all confirm this need as do the more personal experiences of life, such as retirement, or loss of a spouse, or illness, or diminution of physical strength. In such circumstances, our inner resources supply us with the strength, solace, and perspective sufficient to see us through.

The arts and the humanities provide beauty and understanding and appreciation and joy—knowledge and sensibilities that are the furniture of the mind. For example, most of us have had the experience at one time or another of seeing a play that portrayed our own deepest conflicts; or of reading a poem or hearing a song that gave meaning to perceived but unexpressed feelings of our own; or of pondering a philosophical or theological point that echoed our own most fundamental uncertainties about life and its essential purposes. And most of us have had the experience of *not* understanding the value of a particular discipline until an especially gifted teacher in the humanities or the arts unlocked the door for us and showed us how rich an experience a particular subject could be if only it were

approached differently. At their best, and under the right combination of educational circumstances, the humanities and the arts help us to discover meaning and significance in a world awash with trivia. Thus, discovering what it means to be human and learning to make the most of that discovery should be an essential aim of universities everywhere...

Every age has had its own distinctive attitude toward the humanities and the arts and their role in human life. During the Middle Ages, philosophy and theology were considered the highest disciplines one could study; the summit to which all other subjects led. From the Renaissance to the early part of the nineteenth century, one's study of the Greek and Roman classics marked the educated person. Even when the university curriculum was expanded during the nineteenth century to include a far broader range of subjects, a liberal education was always conceived as giving students a grounding in the humanities and the arts. A thorough understanding of these disciplines may have been an ideal rather than a reality in many cases, but the ideal at least reflected a belief that no education was complete without an exposure to those studies. This was true even in the American milieu of practicality, where the idea of an education, broad enough to encompass the humanities and the arts, has always been fundamental to our thinking about education.

Today, however, it is no secret that the humanities and the arts are facing difficult times within our universities. It is not entirely a question of scarce funding, although this remains a difficult and persistent problem. Without trying to exaggerate the situation, or to suggest a crisis where none exists, it seems to me that the humanities and the arts are confronting a kind of self-doubt and tentativeness that is relatively new. Just a few months ago, for example, the Chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities wondered aloud about the vitality and direction of graduate study in the humanities. Fewer students seem to be choosing to major in these disciplines; and concern about insufficient jobs for those who do enter the profession, is growing. I suspect the situation in the arts is no better, and it may be worse.

Why this doubt and tentativeness? Why this shrinkage in the pool of persons committed to the study of these fields? There are, it seems to me, at least three major causes.

First: the humanities and the arts confront a great challenge,

in that the values and approaches to knowledge that they embody often appear to be at odds with the dominant mode of thinking in our society today: that of science and technology. During the past century or so science has made rapid and spectacular progress in expanding our knowledge of the physical world, from the chemical basis of life to events explicating the origins of the universe. Technology, the practical application of scientific knowledge, has made a more visible—if not a more profound—revolution in modern life, in how we live, the foods we eat, the health care we receive, the products we consume, and how we regard ourselves and the world. But it is also true that the great prestige of science has, wittingly or unwittingly, encouraged a tendency to devalue other kinds of knowledge, especially knowledge sought, sifted, and secured by less empirical means.

I find myself in profound disagreement, however, with those who would contend that the sciences, and its resulting technology, need be at odds with the humanities and the arts, just as much as I am by the reverse of this view. I am troubled that we seem to be, by nature, so competitive a society that we feel obligated to pit different ideas and processes against one another rather than focusing on their intrinsic worth and on their interconnectedness. The sciences and the humanities are, in many respects complementary and supplementary. Each helps us understand our world and ourselves. Each illuminates the other, and when the light from one casts a shadow on the other we should remember that light and shadow require one another for either to have meaning. In other words, we should focus our attention on their shared elements rather than on what is popularly thought to be their mutual exclusivity.

We know that both require a high degree of motivation and dedication; both demand intense self-discipline, and for both, sustained hard work is essential if any degree of competency and insight is to be achieved. The organist confronted with a musical score to read and interpret, two or more keyboards to play, a score or more of stops to push and pull, and footpedals and bellows to manipulate, must approach the instrument with as much concentration and intensity as the chemist who works in his laboratory surrounded by racks of test tubes, vials of inanimate matter, computers, and an array of sophisticated instrumentation. The final product, the results of the endeavors, of the organist and the

chemist, are, obviously, vastly different, but the success of each is predicated upon committed and skilled intelligence creatively engaged. To compose exquisite poetry is in its own way as intellectually challenging as tracing a biological line or isolating an infinitesimal bit of DNA. Each adds to an understanding of ourselves and our place in the larger scheme of things.

Frustrations, aggravations, disappointments and failures are common, in equal measure, to the organist, the chemist, the poet, the linguist, the surgeon, the psychologist, and to others who are engaged in advancement of both knowledge and the human condition.

It is all too common to our universities for the sciences to claim superiority over the humanities—or the reverse. We all too frequently, and with little use, debate which is the more important. In our universities the sciences and the arts and the humanities possess both strengths and imperfections. Each should acknowledge its own before judging the other. For example, those in the humanities often note that students in the sciences, and related fields, lack exposure to literature, music, philosophy, or archeology. But, should not those responsible for the humanities, make sure that the principles of physics, the fundamentals of mathematics, the elements of orderly research procedures, are part of the core of the humanities and arts curriculum? I am not suggesting that these disciplines should be indistinguishable, but I am convinced that each must learn from the other and share their separate and significant values. We need, if anything, to make sure that both elements contribute to the quality of life and that the contribution of each is fully and freely recognized and appreciated.

Charles Darwin, in his autobiography, lamented the fact that as he grew older he found himself less and less able to enjoy literature and art and music. "My mind," he said, "seems to have become a kind of machine for grinding general laws out of large collections of facts... and if I had to live my life once again, I would have made a rule to read some poetry and listen to some music at least once every week; for perhaps the parts of my brain now atrophied would thus have been kept active through use. The loss of these tastes is a loss of happiness..." (Quoted in Walter Kerr. *The Decline of Pleasure*. New York: Simon & Shuster, 1962.)

And not just happiness. We need the wisdom of the arts and humanities to help us make the choices and decisions the future will

inevitably thrust upon us. Science and technology may be responsible for many aspects of the modern world, but they cannot alone explain its meaning or its purpose to us. Many of the enormously complicated problems the expansion of knowledge has brought along with it—questions touching on serious matters of ethics and morality—cannot be solved or answered by science. For example:

- Do we have the right to create new forms of life?
- How can we productively engage our capacity for prolonging human life and diminishing human suffering?
- How can we commit to peaceful purposes the power of the atom instead of permitting that power to paralyze us with fear for our very existence and for the planet we each share with one another in infinite space?

We live in a nation governed under law but no matter how many laws, nor how good, nor how comprehensive they may be, law cannot make decisions for us. Good decisions cannot be legislated. The law, at its best, reflects our collective attempt to promote ethical behavior. It cannot mandate it, for people are free to choose, informed only by the consequences of their acts. What is good, what is desirable, what works and what does not work, comes from the thinking, the knowledge, and the experiences of the past. To protect and advance humanity and human causes, we must know history, philosophy, ethics, and the religions of earlier generations and other cultures as much as we need to learn about our own times and circumstances. We need not, we should not, be slaves to the past but we must understand it if we are to be capable of making choices for the future that prove to be wise and beneficial ones not only for ourselves but for our society as well.

It is a cliché that “politics is the art of the possible.” But as with politics, life too is a process of accommodation; give a little, take a little, get agreement, get it done, concede, insist, seek consensus. (Family life frequently is not dissimilar.) It should be of grave concern to each of us, however, if accommodation surpasses, or suppresses principle. Worse still, if such shunting aside of principle occurs less out of malevolence or greed or ego, than out of ignorance. To understand the basis of enduring principles and knowing where, and when, and how, and under what circumstances they should remain inviolate is fundamental to living and life. Where better than in the study of humanities, in the most expansive definition of the term, can the knowledge, values, perspective, and

experience be discovered upon which to make principled decisions and wise choices?

We cannot teach the truths of the humanities and arts to our students, of course, if we have lost faith in them ourselves. Thus, one of the challenges for these disciplines is to restore their own sense of self-confidence in addressing the central questions and dilemmas of our age.

A second, and more recent challenge, is the trend toward vocationalism among our students. Vocationalism has always been an important part of American life, but it has become a stronger force in our society as a result of the social turmoil and economic troubles of the 1970s and early 1980s.

It leads to an over-emphasis on the narrowly practical at the expense of a broader and longer range perspective on what students need to learn. The distinctions between training and education are blurring. Universities, of course, both train and educate. They are not mutually exclusive. But neither are they the same. Training prepares one to do something. Education helps one understand the significances of it. Training tends to be more transitory. Education more enduring. Training helps prepare one for gainful employment. Education helps prepare one for informed and intelligent living. Yet the pressures of the job market can be very great. So great, in fact, that the temptation to take the short view rather than the long can be overwhelming. Universities, however, are obligated to take the longer view knowing that they are institutions uniquely able to do so; and, if they do not, who will?

The *Chronicle of Higher Education* recently reported that two surveys of academic officers at nearly five hundred American colleges and universities revealed that the “humanities are losing many of the ablest undergraduates while the sciences and engineering are gaining them.” (“Top Students Move to Science Studies, Leave Humanities,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 22, 1984.) The reason: concern about the poor job prospects after college, according to 51 percent of the officials surveyed; an additional 21 percent attributed the trend to worry about getting a job after graduate school.

As I have already mentioned, the unfavorable prospects for recent humanities Ph.D.s has raised serious concern about losing an entire generation of scholars in those disciplines.

Interestingly, some of the greatest support for taking a course

of liberal studies in our colleges comes from alumni—materially successful alumni as often as not—and we in higher education would do well to encourage students to talk to alumni as they think about what serves their own best long-term educational interests. Dr. Clark Kerr recently noted in a Carnegie Commission study, based on the results of a survey of what graduates thought about their education and what they would do so differently, that many wished they had spent more time on liberal learning “for the sake of the lives they led and the jobs they now held, and much less time on specialization.” (Clark Kerr, “Liberal Learning and the College or University President—A Predominant Current Record of Neglect.” proceedings of the 70th Annual Meeting of the Association of American Colleges jointly with the American Conference of Academic Deans, San Francisco, January 13, 1984, p. 9.) Just last month the *Chronicle of Higher Education* carried a story about the increasing number of adults, many of them with college degrees, who are choosing to take up continuing education in the liberal arts. Among the reasons, the article speculates, is that “such students, now that they have been out of school for a while and gained some experience with living, have come to appreciate life’s complexities and are returning to the liberal arts because they want to read and discuss and reflect on enduring human questions.” (More Adults Return to College to Study the Liberal Arts,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, April 25, 1984.) Surely one of the important tasks we face as teachers of the young is that of giving them a sense of what those complexities are, and how the humanities and the arts can provide students insight and understanding as they deal with those complexities in their own lives and in their relations with others.

Which brings me to the third challenge facing the humanities and arts, which is a challenge shared by the other disciplines as well. That is the challenge presented by the ferment of curricular change working its way through American education. The roots of our current situation go back to the very nature of our educational enterprise: we have sought to educate large numbers of students, not an elite, and so it is not surprising that consensus on what should be learned at the undergraduate level has been hard to come by. Our uncertainty over the curriculum reflects to some extent the heterogeneous nature of the population for whom we are educationally responsible.

The educational upheavals of the 1960s further shattered the

already fragile coherence of the undergraduate curriculum. A concern for what was called relevance and for greater student choice led to the abandonment of a number of traditional courses and requirements, that led to an even fuzzier focus in our undergraduate offerings. Far too many students graduated after four years of college without ever having understood the cross-connectedness of the subjects they studied; many, in fact, experienced little more than an accumulation of credits and courses, loosely organized and bearing only a modest relationship one to the other.

A homey example, perhaps, but whenever I see a university catalogue, I am reminded of a supermarket with its myriad of useful and tempting, but disparate, objects on display. Like the university catalogue, there are so many items from which to choose. The question at hand is, does the shopper select well? The uninformed, the immature, the hasty, the prejudiced, the poorly advised, the inexperienced, may fill the basket exclusively with junk foods—or only with bread and potatoes. No reference is made to what it takes to prepare a well-balanced meal that is also nutritious and delicious—or, in the case of the university catalogue, what constitutes a complete and integrated education.

This state of affairs is hardly conducive to preparing students to assume adult responsibilities in a demanding and rapidly changing world. Nor is it the best way for colleges and universities to use the human and financial resources at their disposal. Despite the admitted difficulties of making curricular decisions for a diverse and pluralistic student body, we must make them. As Clark Kerr has aptly stated:

Every college should have a conviction about the knowledge most worth knowing, and this ought to be the result of careful intellectual consideration. The curriculum should be more than just the sum of the consequences of internal and external pressures. But as I look at curricula around the country my perception is that the curricula of today reflect more the internal pressures of student choice and departmental rivalries, and external labor market pressures to add this or that or the other subject, than they do any careful intellectual consideration. That is quite a condemnation. (Ibid.)

Indeed it is. It is especially telling because Dr. Kerr is talking about matters that we cannot blame on society or the economy or our students—only on ourselves. If we are unwilling to make deci-

sions about what is essential to undergraduate education, can we blame our students for responding to the pressures of the job market or personal whim in choosing what to study?

Many colleges and universities throughout the country today are studying and struggling with these issues. This is encouraging. We should be doing so. Let us devoutly hope that we shall do so everywhere.

The challenges we face in the years to come—whether we think about individuals or institutions—cannot be met by people who have never struggled with the problems of ethical choice or who have never learned from the past experience of the race as it is recorded in history, art, myth, or philosophy. They cannot be dealt with by those who have never learned that mastery of nature must be matched by dominion over ourselves, that we must work just as hard at comprehending human needs and motivations and impulses as we do at understanding the interactions of physical forces or the influence of economic developments or the dynamics of nation states. We will never be adequate to the great tasks of our age, in other words, until we have come as close as we can to becoming whole. The humanities and the fine arts are integrally related to that experience of wholeness because they touch us at the deepest levels of mind and personality. As long as education aims at producing whole individuals—not just trained intellects—they will be inseparable from any effort to prepare young people for the future.

I began by describing the humanities and the fine arts as the soul and spirit of our universities. I chose those two words deliberately. Both mean “an animating principle,” something that gives life and energy. But each has a further meaning that is also relevant to what I want to say. “Soul” stresses the idea of responsibility or destiny; “spirit” suggests quality of movement. The humanities and the arts are the soul and spirit of universities in the sense that they are connected, first, with understanding and accepting our responsibilities and our destinies as human beings; and second, with reminding us of the qualitative as opposed to the merely quantitative dimensions of the human experience.

To experience the arts, to study the humanities, is to add height, depth, and breadth to our living. It is manifest in the simplest forms and in the most mysterious complexities. The arts and the humanities provide inward awareness and outward sensitivity. They

evoke a response, a physical, emotional, and intellectual blending, that is unique in our lives.

In March of this year, I had the pleasure of hearing the novelist Herman Wouk speak about his perspective, as a writer, on the humanities and the fine arts. When our astronauts walked on the moon, he said, they left prints that will never change because no wind will erase or obliterate them. Like these “footprints on the moon,” the arts and humanities have a permanent and imperishable value in our lives and in our times that will outlast the trivial and transient preoccupations that are swept away with the first stirring breeze. They bring the riches of the past into the present, provoking us to admiration and wonder, about both our world and our individual place in it. Who could have expressed this point better than did T. S. Eliot with whose profound and beautiful lines from *Four Quartets*, I conclude my lecture:

We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive at where we started  
And know the place for the first time.