

# TWO

## ORIGINS

The assumption that young adults should pass through a period of higher education before entering a life of commerce or service is, of course, much older than the United States and older, too, than the English colonies that became the United States. Aristotle identified the years between puberty and age twenty-one as the formative time for mind and character, and it was customary for young Greek men to attend a series of lectures that resembled our notion of a college “course.” In Augustan Rome, gatherings of students under instruction by settled teachers took on some of the attributes we associate with modern colleges (libraries, fraternities, organized sports), and, by the Middle Ages, efforts to regulate the right to teach by issuing licenses were under way in such nascent educational centers as Paris and Padua—presaging the modern idea of a faculty with exclusive authority to grant degrees.<sup>1</sup> In short, college in the broad sense of the term has a history that exceeds two millennia.

But college as we know it is fundamentally an English idea. It was brought to New England early in the seventeenth century by English Protestants who left home in dissent from the established church. To these “Puritans” (as their enemies called them, on account of their putative severity of mind and spirit), education was vitally important, and while they drew upon ancient and medieval precedents, they had particularly in mind their own experience in the colleges of Cambridge and Oxford.

Founded in the thirteenth century, the earliest English colleges were essentially retreats for scholars of divinity whose duties included celebrating mass for the soul of the benefactor who had endowed the college and thereby spared them from menial work. In today’s terms, we might say that the first colleges were groups of graduate students on fellowship.<sup>2</sup> But by the fifteenth century, it had become common for the resident scholars to supply or supplement their living by giving instruction and accommodation to younger students whom we would call undergraduates. These boarders (or, as they were known at Cambridge, pensioners) were sometimes kinsmen of the college benefactor, or candidates admitted on the recommendation of some trusted schoolmaster who spoke for their character and competence in Latin. There were no entrance examinations.

Vouched for or not, undergraduates were guarded and watched since students then, no less than now, were not reliably compliant with the wishes of parents or patrons. One visitor to seventeenth-century Cambridge was shocked to witness “swearing, drinking, rioting, and hatred of all piety and virtue” among the students, who could not be trusted to obey the college rules, including the prohibition against “fierce birds” in their rooms. A few years earlier, a student mob jammed the Great Hall of Trinity

College, smoking, hissing, and throwing pellets at the actors who displeased them in a play written by one of the Trinity fellows.<sup>3</sup>

By the later fifteenth century, the cloistered structure of the Oxbridge college had emerged in its modern form: rooms accessible from an inner courtyard connected by walkways to chapel, library, and hall. The hall—a great room with rushes strewn on the floor to be gathered up and burned from time to time as a means of controlling dirt—was the center of college life. It was in hall that dining, lectures, and sometimes musical and theatrical performances took place; at one end stood the “high table,” where tutors dined in the company of the Master, who, as the only college official permitted to marry, lived with his family in an attached house.<sup>4</sup> Part of the point—an important part—was for undergraduates to witness social and intellectual exchange among their superiors, in the hope that they would aspire someday to be worthy of sitting among them.

To this end, the initiates, or, to use the penal metaphor, the inmates, were kept in, and the public kept out. Traffic flowed through a single point of entrance and exit, the porter’s gate.<sup>5</sup> The student’s day began with predawn worship, followed by lectures, study, and meditation in what was in some respects a monastic regime of discipline and deprivation. This was the stringent world that produced John Milton and Oliver Cromwell (who toughened himself at football in the courtyard of Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge) and, a little later, Isaac Newton.

But if it was a strict and confined world, it was also coddled and collegial—the latter adjective, like the noun “college,” derives from the Latin *collegium*, meaning society or community—in which young men, denied the pleasures of tavern and town, were offered recreation in the college gardens, bowling green, tennis court, bathing pool, or archery range.<sup>6</sup> Among the roughly 20,000

persons who emigrated to New England in the 1630s, nearly 150 were graduates of one of these institutions—better than 1 in every 75 men, a ratio comparable to the college-educated percentage of Americans up until the twentieth century. The college with by far the highest representation (35 graduates or affiliates) was Emmanuel College, founded at Cambridge in the late sixteenth century on what Queen Elizabeth presciently called “a Puritan foundation.” Emmanuel turned out to be the Old English “oak” to the New England sapling planted by Puritan emigrants in 1636 at Newtowne, soon renamed Cambridge in honor of the English university town. To this fledgling New England college a Puritan merchant and Emmanuel graduate named John Harvard bequeathed half his estate and all his library.<sup>7</sup>

In the fund-raising request they sent to prospective donors back in England, the founders of the new college thanked God for seeing fit “to stir up the heart of Mr. Harvard,” and by way of asking others to follow his example, explained the purpose for which they intended to use his books and funds: to “advance learning and perpetuate it to posterity.” The kind of learning they had in mind was, among others, theological learning. In what they would have called a providential mercy, the only book from John Harvard’s library to survive an eighteenth-century fire was a tract entitled *Christian Warfare*.<sup>8</sup>

But it is a mistake to imagine the first American colleges as seminaries devoted solely to doctrine and dogma. Fewer than half of Harvard’s seventeenth-century graduates ultimately entered the ministry, and the study of logic and ethics—classical as well as Christian—took up a considerable part of the students’ attention, as did arithmetic and geometry.<sup>9</sup> Another early appeal for funds, this one specifically for the Harvard library, enumerated the need for volumes on “law, phisicke, Philosophy, and Math-

ematics,” and along with Augustine’s *City of God* and Calvin’s *Institutes*, library holdings included Erasmus’s *Colloquies* and even the bawdy comedies of the Roman playwright Plautus.<sup>10</sup> In short, the American college was conceived from the start as more than narrowly ecclesiastical, with the larger aim, as the historian Samuel Eliot Morison put it, to “develop the whole man—his body and soul as well as his intellect” toward the formation of a person inclined to “unity, gentility, and public service.”

Religion, to be sure, came first. To study the Bible was to learn to parse God’s word—no small task, since, in what Christians called the Old Testament, God spoke through shadows (“types” or “*umbra*”) of truths as yet unrevealed, and, in the New Testament, through parables and prophecies requiring informed interpretation. Yet the Bible did not contain all God’s truth. God also expressed his punitive or protective will through historical events (pilgrimages, holy wars) and judgments of nature (flood, earthquake, drought). And he conferred on all human beings the capacity for responsive pleasure at natural intimations of his supernatural excellence such as the celestial dance of sun, moon, and stars, the symmetrical beauty of plants and trees, or the ripples that flow outward in perfect circles when a stone is thrown into tranquil water. God furnished the natural world with what Jonathan Edwards (Yale, class of 1720; appointed president of Princeton in 1758) called “beauties that delight us and we can’t tell why”—as when “we find ourselves pleased in beholding the color of the violets, but we know not what secret regularity or harmony it is that creates that pleasure in our minds.”<sup>11</sup>

The early American college required its students to study not only scriptural texts and commentaries, but also history and natural philosophy—a tripartite division of knowledge corresponding roughly to today’s triumvirate of humanities, social

sciences, and natural sciences. A college aspired to be a place (in Newman's later formulation) where "all branches of knowledge" are "connected together, because the subject-matter of knowledge is intimately united in itself, as being the acts and the work of the Creator." Its subject was nothing less, in Edwards's words, than "the university of things," a phrase that preserves the root meaning of the word "university": the gathering of all knowledge into a unified whole. Until the last third of the nineteenth century, this effort to grasp what Frederick Barnard (the man for whom the women's college at my university was named) called "the beautiful truths which are to be read in the works of God" remained the official purpose of America's colleges.<sup>12</sup>

Today, the word "interdisciplinary" is bandied about at every academic conference and praised in every dean's report, but in fact most of our academic institutions are much less interdisciplinary than were their counterparts in the past. In the early American college, since all studies were unified as one integrated study of the divine mind, boundaries between "fields" or "disciplines" did not exist. "There is not one truth in religion, another in mathematics, and a third in physics and in art," as one Harvard graduate (class of 1825) put the matter. "There is one truth, even as one God."<sup>13</sup>

## 2

Yet this dream of what some today would call "consilience" did not exhaust the meaning of the college idea. For the Puritans, according to Morison,

university learning apart from college life was not worth having; and the humblest resident tutor was accounted a more suitable teacher than the most eminent community

lecturer. Book learning alone might be got by lectures and reading; but it was only by studying and disputing, eating and drinking, playing and praying as members of the same collegiate community, in close and constant association with each other and with their tutors, that the priceless gift of character could be imparted to young men.

Already in his own day (Morison was writing nearly seventy-five years ago), the man who wrote these words was deliberately anachronistic. Even after motorcars had become commonplace, he liked to travel on horseback from his home on Beacon Hill to Harvard Yard, where he tethered his mount to a hitching post before lecturing in riding boots. And even when the “old-time college,” as historians sometimes call it, gave way to the modern university, the appeal to character persisted in official pronouncements of what the university was all about. Writing in 1886, the founding president of Johns Hopkins, an institution mainly devoted to advanced research where undergraduates were initially absent, insisted that a university must never be “merely a place for the advancement of knowledge or for the acquisition of learning; it will always be a place for the development of character.”<sup>14</sup>

Today, this assertion that a college should concern itself with something called character will strike us as a throwback to another time and world. Character, moreover, is a word with a confusing history. It has been used as a synonym for probity, but also for sheer stamina—as when Nobel laureate Arthur Lewis spoke, at his installation as chancellor of the University of Guyana, of character as the determination “to practice the same thing over and over again, while others are enjoying themselves; to push oneself from the easy part to the hard part; to listen to criticism and use it; to reject one’s own work and try again.”<sup>15</sup>

Sometimes the word has been put to unsavory uses. By the early twentieth century, it had become a thinly disguised term of discrimination between the model Protestant gentleman and the putatively grasping parvenu—in particular, the importunate Jew—knocking on the college door. During Morison’s undergraduate years, Harvard’s president, Abbott Lawrence Lowell, proposed “a personal estimate of character on the part of the Admission authorities” in order to control the “dangerous increase in the proportion of Jews” (the top floor of one dormitory had become unaffectionately known as “Kike’s Peak”).<sup>16</sup> And even in the absence of overt bigotry, judgments of “character” tend to boil down to how comfortable the judge feels in the presence of the judged. In a letter to Lowell, Harvard alumnus Judge Learned Hand demurred from the president’s plan for screening out undesirables: “If anyone could devise an honest test for character,” Hand wrote, “perhaps it would serve well. I doubt its feasibility except to detect formal and obvious delinquencies. Short of it, it seems to me that students can only be chosen by tests of scholarship, unsatisfactory as those no doubt are. . . .”<sup>17</sup> If the “newer races,” as they were sometimes referred to, were outperforming the old boys in grades and scores, then so be it: let them in.

Yet despite its history of misuse and abuse, there is something worth conserving in the claim, as Newman put it, that education “implies an action upon our mental nature, and the formation of a character.”<sup>18</sup> College, more than brain-training for this or that functional task, *should* be concerned with character—the attenuated modern word for what the founders of our first colleges would have called soul or heart. Although we may no longer agree on the attributes of virtue as codified in biblical commandments or, for that matter, in Enlightenment precepts (Jefferson thought the aim of education was to produce citizens capable of “temper-



ate liberty”), students still come to college not yet fully formed as social beings, and may still be deterred from sheer self-interest toward a life of enlarged sympathy and civic responsibility.

This idea that the aim of education includes fostering ethical as well as analytical intelligence long predates the churches from which the early American colleges arose, and is, of course, much older than Christianity itself. In the *Beit Midrash* of ancient Judaism, typically located physically as well as spiritually near the synagogue, students prayed for insight and clarity of mind before embarking on the day’s Torah study. To join Plato’s academy in Athens of the fourth-century BCE was to acknowledge “a change of heart and the adoption of a new way of life via a process akin to our own understanding of religious conversion.”<sup>19</sup> In first-century Rome, in Seneca’s famous letter on the purpose of learning, we find a measured yet passionate account of the power of liberal education to clear the mind of cant by inviting it to rise above the palaver of everyday life as well as above pedantry:

We have no leisure to hear lectures on the question whether [Ulysses] was sea-tost between Italy and Sicily, or outside our known world. . . . We ourselves encounter storms of the spirit, which toss us daily, and our depravity drives us into all the ills which troubled Ulysses. . . . Show me rather, by the example of Ulysses, how I am to love my country, my wife, my father, and how, even after suffering shipwreck, I am to sail toward these ends, honourable as they are. Why try to discover whether Penelope was a pattern of purity, or whether she had the laugh on her contemporaries? Or whether she suspected that the man in her presence was Ulysses, before she knew it was he? Teach me rather what purity is, and how

great a good we have in it, and whether it is situated in the body or in the soul.<sup>20</sup>

Whether expressed in Hebrew, Greek, Roman, Christian, or the secular terms of modernity, none of these educational aspirations gainsays the obvious fact that all lives are shaped by a mysterious confluence of innate disposition and external influence, over which no institution can possibly exert complete control. Yet the fact that students can be touched and inspired as well as trained and informed has always been the true teacher's aim and joy. In America, where this view of education has been held by traditionalists and progressives alike, Emerson gave it memorable expression when he wrote in his journal that "the whole secret of the teacher's force lies in the conviction that men are convertible. And they are. They want awakening." Teachers have always been—and, let us hope, always will be—in the business of trying to "get the soul out of bed, out of her deep habitual sleep."<sup>21</sup>

### 3

When we turn from teachers to students, another striking continuity over the long history of college comes into view: their age has stayed relatively constant. More than four hundred years ago, the English scholastic Roger Ascham proposed that the ideal time to begin college is at seventeen. Some two and half centuries later, the average age of Harvard freshmen was sixteen and a half. Fifty years after that, at Yale, the average had crept up to eighteen, widely considered to be "the normal age, under reasonably favorable conditions" for college matriculation.<sup>22</sup>

There has been continuity, too, in the way educators describe the stages that young people pass through en route to intellectual and ethical maturity. In this respect, Puritans made little distinc-

tion between college and church. Both institutions existed to serve human beings at war with themselves, tainted by original sin yet harboring the seed of grace—divided, that is, between the will to pride and self-love and the impulse to humility and selflessness. Puritans spoke longingly of the change that can save these creatures from themselves by opening their minds and hearts to hitherto incomprehensible contradictions such as “God’s justice mixed with his mercy” as well as their own powerlessness and perseverance—in short, to the paradoxical nature of existence in all its boundedness and boundlessness. To be educated in this sense—in the root sense, that is, of the Latin *ex ducere*, to lead forth, or, according to an alternative Latin source, *educare*, to rear or bring up children—is to be enlarged by “new affections, and new language,” freed from the limits of jealous self-regard in which one has hitherto been confined. “Education,” as Emerson summed up the matter, amounts to “drawing out the soul.”<sup>23</sup>

Almost a century and a half later, the educational psychologist William Perry, in describing the ideal trajectory from freshman to senior year, offered what was essentially a translation of these first principles. A true education, he believed (as paraphrased by another distinguished educational psychologist, L. Lee Knefelkamp), is one whereby the college student learns to “accommodate uncertainty, paradox, and the demands of greater complexity.” The process, Perry wrote, “begins with simplistic forms in which a person construes his world in unqualified polar terms of absolute right-wrong, good-bad; it ends with those complex forms through which he undertakes to affirm his own commitments in a world of contingent knowledge and relative values.”<sup>24</sup> The terms of description may have changed, but even as it allows for the relativism of modern life, this account of the psychological and ethical growth of college students is remarkably congruent

with much earlier views of what college is for. More than achieving the competence to solve problems and perform complex tasks, education means attaining and sustaining curiosity and humility. It means growing out of an embattled sense of self into a more generous view of life as continuous self-reflection in light of new experience, including the witnessed experience of others.

With these ends in view, Puritans spoke almost indistinguishably about teaching and preaching. Consider John Cotton, arguably the leading minister of New England's first generation. In his history of early New England, the *Magnalia Christi Americana* (1702), Cotton Mather (Cotton's grandson), portrays him as a man whose religious faith and scholarly attainment are essentially one and the same. A "*universal scholar, and a living system of the liberal arts, and a walking library,*" he was the very ideal to which every studious young person should aspire. His reputation as a preacher was that of a man not merely erudite and eloquent but also able to inspire young people so they might "be fitted for public service."<sup>25</sup> By his voice and arguments, but most of all by his manifest commitment to the impossible yet imperative task of aligning his own life with models of virtue that he found (mainly) in scripture, he was mentor to his students in the same way that he was pastor to his flock. In his theological writings, which were largely concerned with what we would call moral psychology, he explored the mystery and contingency of learning, which, he believed, sometimes proceeds in steps, sometimes by leaps, sometimes by sheer surprise in the absence of exertion, sometimes by slow and arduous accretion through diligent work.

Such a teacher is convinced that everyone has the capacity to learn and grow, but that the moment of electric connection between teacher and student cannot be predicted or planned. For some students it may never come ("some go all the way through

college,” as Perry put it, “and somehow manage to remain school-boys to the end”); for others it may come when least expected.<sup>26</sup> In order to create the best conditions for it to take hold, such a teacher avoids exhibitionistic erudition, speaks in plain rather than florid language, and, humble before the subject, understands himself as merely the human instrument by which God *may* choose to convey to the student the “spirit of discernment.” Such a teacher also knows there is no telling when, or whether, the transmission will take place.

In our mostly post-theistic academic world, these assumptions may seem remote and possibly bizarre—but perhaps they are less so than they appear. Every true teacher, after all, understands that, along with teacher and students, a mysterious third force is present in every classroom. Sometimes this force works in favor of learning; sometimes it works against it. This is because ideas must cross an invisible interval between the mind of the teacher and that of the student, and there is no telling when a provoking thought will succeed in crossing that space, or what exactly will happen to it during its transit from speaker to hearer. One never knows how the teacher’s voice will be received by the student, in whose mind it mixes with already-resident ideas that have accumulated from prior experience and, perhaps, from other teachers. Sometimes the spoken word is nothing but noise that evaporates into air or has no effect in the mind of the student beyond annoyance or confusion. Sometimes it can have surprising and powerful effects—yet it is impossible to say why or when this will happen for some students and not for others.

The Puritan word for this invisible and inaudible force was grace. One does not need to share their belief—or to be a believer in any conventional sense—to understand what they meant. To explain their concept of grace to my own students

(the rare student at my college who comes from an evangelical background needs no explanation), I sometimes draw an analogy from outside the classroom. Imagine that two college roommates go out together to see a production of Shakespeare's great play, *King Lear*, about an old man cruelly duped by his own children, who is losing his grip on power and dignity and even his own senses, and ends up wandering alone under the open sky without shelter or mercy or hope. The roommates go to see a local production of the play, and when it is done, one of them comes out of the theater saying, "You know, I've seen it done better; let's get a beer," or, "I don't know what all the fuss is about; this guy had it coming, he's a real whiner."

Meanwhile, the other young man has had a devastating experience. He doesn't know why or how, but he finds himself thinking about his own father—about the obligations of children to parents and, for that matter, parents to children; about the savage sadness that comes upon many people in their broken old age; in fact, he finds himself thinking about every aspect of his life in a new way. Does he want to have children of his own? If so, how will he bring them up? Maybe he thinks about becoming a physician; or maybe he's decided to call home to see how his father is doing, with whom he's had a difficult relationship; or, more likely, he doesn't know what to do but feels a sudden conviction that his plans and priorities need to be revisited and revised. One thing he knows for sure is that he doesn't want to end up like Lear wandering alone on the heath. In short, the world has been transformed for him while it remains utterly unchanged for his friend. And yet they have heard the same voices and words, seen the same bodies and props moving about on the same stage, or, to put it in mechanistic terms, experienced the same aural and visual stimuli.

It is impossible to say why something so important has happened to one of these young men and not to the other. Their SAT scores may be identical. In fact, the one whom the play leaves unmoved may have higher scores and better grades and better prospects to make the dean's list. The difference between them is immeasurable by any testing instrument, and has nothing to do with which one has studied harder for tomorrow's exam on Elizabethan drama. While most of us who work in education today have no language to account for this mystery, that does not mean the mystery does not exist.

Such inexplicable human differences were of intense interest to the founders of America's first colleges, and sometimes their efforts to elucidate the differences run closer than we might expect to what we are likely to think today. They believed, for instance, that learning can be blocked by pride (in either teacher or student), and that it can also be blocked by shame. Today, social psychologists speak of "stereotype threat" to explain low academic achievement by minority students who may have been distrusted or demeaned by adults as well as peers ever since they can remember. Some such students, knowing they are expected to do poorly or to fail, find themselves fulfilling that expectation in spite of talent and effort. It's a phenomenon that researchers have shown to be widespread, and is closely akin to what one seventeenth-century minister had in mind when he told his congregation that "sometimes a dejected discouraged Christian thinks he hath so much to say against his comfort, as will put to silence the best and ablest Ministers."<sup>27</sup>

Let me risk one more anachronistic analogy. Consider the Puritans' paradoxical insight that knowledge can sometimes establish itself in the mind only when we give up trying to attain it. This is part of why Newman spoke of the inestimable worth of

contemplation, and Whitman of loafing. The capacity for spiritual surprise, for apprehending without plan or foresight what Emerson called “the miraculous in the common” has been an enduring theme in psychological writing at least since Augustine, whose conversion, reported in the *Confessions*, comes upon him without volition, as a gift unsought and unearned.

In such cases, as Edwards wrote a millennium and a half later, “no improvement or composition of natural qualifications”—no effort, as we might say, to concentrate or focus—yields the desired result. Max Weber, a close student of the Protestant tradition to which Edwards belonged, put it this way: “ideas come when we do not expect them, and not when we are brooding and searching at our desks.” We encounter the same point in Emerson’s lecture on memory, in which he says that sometimes “we are assisted by a dream to recall what we could not find awake,” and in Henry Adams’s account of how his sullen indifference to the music of Beethoven suddenly gave way to an overwhelming sense of its hitherto unheard beauty:

A prison-wall that barred his senses on one great side of life, suddenly fell, of its own accord, without so much as his knowing when it happened [and] a new sense burst out like a flower in his life, so superior to the old senses, so bewildering, so astonished at its own existence, that he could not credit it, and watched it as something apart, accidental, and not to be trusted.<sup>28</sup>

No effort or exertion precedes or leads to this breakthrough. It happens unbidden and in unlikely circumstances (amid the “fumes of coarse tobacco and poor beer” in a Berlin *rathskeller*), but it leaves the listener thoroughly and permanently transformed.



We may know more today than did Augustine, Edwards, Emerson, Weber, or Adams about the basic neurological processes that constitute memory or that account for the pleasure we take in creativity observed or expressed. Yet it is striking how little the latest theories of teaching and learning diverge from long-established views on these matters. Take, for example, William James on how one is sometimes blocked in the effort to retrieve an elusive memory:

You know how it is when you try to recollect a forgotten name. Usually you help the recall by working for it, by mentally running over the places, persons, and things with which the word was connected. But sometimes this effort fails: you feel then as if the harder you tried the less hope there would be, as though the name were *jammed*, and pressure in its direction only kept it all the more from rising. And then the opposite expedient often succeeds. Give up the effort entirely; think of something altogether different, and in half an hour the lost name comes sauntering into your mind, as Emerson says, as carelessly as if it had never been invited. Some hidden process was started in you by the effort, which went on after the effort ceased, and made the result come as if it came spontaneously.<sup>29</sup>

Anyone who has ever stared at a math problem or struggled to write a recalcitrant sentence, and, after giving up, felt the elements fall into place with suddenly obvious ease, knows what James meant. Today, neuroscientists speak of the same phenomenon that he called jamming, but they are likely to use new acronyms such as TOTs (“Tip-of-the-Tongue events”), and come to the unsurprising conclusion that “massing”—or, to use the colloquial term, “cramming”—is a poor study method since exerting unre-

mitting effort can defeat the purpose of the exertion.<sup>30</sup> On the basis of controlled experiment, they recommend that after asking a rhetorical question, a good teacher can get “generation benefits by leaving a pause before giving the answer”—in other words that “a mind must work to grow,” and that students learn more by active thinking than by “passive absorption.”<sup>31</sup> It’s good to have data to corroborate these claims, but the most surprising thing about the findings is that they are presented as discoveries. The latter two phrases, “work to grow” and “passive absorption” are from 1869 (Charles W. Eliot) and 1915 (John Dewey). In 1870, Yale’s clergyman president, Noah Porter, remarked that “the most effective teaching” is teaching by questioning—a pedagogical truth that has never been better demonstrated than in the Platonic dialogues composed some twenty-five hundred years ago.

#### 4

In short, genuinely new educational ideas are rare. But sometimes old ones, such as the Socratic idea that learning is a collaborative rather than a solitary process, can take new form. That is what happened when the Christian idea of monastic community evolved into the idea of college as a place where students live as well as learn together. In this respect, too, the college idea, after it was carried to New England, echoed and extended the Puritans’ conception of the church—by which they did not mean a physical structure of wood or stone (this they called the meeting-house) but a voluntary gathering of seekers who come together for mutual support. Here is John Cotton on what constitutes a true church:

I cannot tell how better to compare it than to a musical instrument, wherein though there be many pipes, yet one

blast of the bellows puts breath into them all, so that all of them at once break forth into a kind of melody, and give a pleasant sound to the ears of those that stand by; all of them do make but one Instrument, and one sound, and yet variety of musick.<sup>32</sup>

In the relatively homogeneous society of colonial New England, this aspiration toward unity in multiplicity—an early version, one might say, of “*e pluribus unum*”—was doubtless more fanciful than actual. But as an ideal it was as basic to college as to the church.

Cotton Mather invoked it when he noted in his history that students in the university towns of continental Europe “board . . . here and there at private houses,” but that the English view, carried to New England, was that they should be “brought up in a more *collegiate* way of living.” College was about young people from scattered origins converging to live together—taking their meals together, attending lectures and sermons together, sharing the daily rhythms of study and social life. At the heart of this “collegiate way” was a concept of what might be called lateral learning—the proposition that students have something important to learn from one another.<sup>33</sup>

This idea, routinely endorsed today in the websites and brochures of many American colleges, has become so familiar that we take it for granted. It is what Nathaniel Hawthorne (Bowdoin, class of 1825) had in mind when he remarked that “it contributes greatly to a man’s moral and intellectual health, to be brought into habits of companionship with individuals unlike himself, who care little for his pursuits, and whose sphere and abilities he must go out of himself to appreciate.” It is what Newman had in mind when he spoke of college as a place where stu-

dents are “brought, by familiar intercourse” into a relation where “they learn to respect, to consult, to aid each other.” It’s what Dewey meant when he described education as “a mode of social life” in which “the best and deepest moral training is precisely that which one gets through having to enter into proper relations with others in a unity of work and thought.” It’s why William Perry insisted that maturity in a college student means realizing there is something to learn from one’s peers.<sup>34</sup>

The principle behind all these assertions may seem self-evident to us, but it is by no means universally so. With a few exceptions—such as Roosevelt Academy in the Netherlands (a branch of the University of Utrecht) or Lingnan University in Hong Kong—the residential college is virtually unknown outside the Anglo-American world. That is part of the point of Randall Jarrell’s college novel *Pictures from an Institution* (1952) (a thinly veiled portrait of Bennington College), where émigré professors, grateful as they are to have found sanctuary from the Nazified universities of Europe, simply can’t absorb the strange American notion that “students might be right about something” and the professor wrong.<sup>35</sup>

It is hard to overstate the importance of this idea of lateral learning. It is the source of the question that every admissions officer in every selective college is supposed to ask of every applicant: “what does this candidate bring to the class?” It underlies the opinion by Supreme Court Justice Lewis Powell in the “affirmative action” case of *Bakke vs. University of California* (1978), in which the court ruled that consideration of a candidate’s race is constitutional for the purpose of ensuring “the interplay of ideas and the exchange of views” among students from different backgrounds. These are modern reformulations of the ancient (by American standards) view that a college, no

less than a church, exists fundamentally as an “interaction of consciences,” and that admission should be based primarily on the candidate’s “aptness to edify another.”<sup>36</sup>

5

The place where the idea comes alive, or at least where it can and should, is the classroom. Here is an account of what the idea in practice meant for one student, born and schooled in China, who came to the United States not long ago in order to attend Bowdoin (founded 1794), where he encountered the modern version of the Puritan principle that no communicant should “take any ancient doctrine for truth till they have examined it” for themselves:

Coming from a culture in which a “standard answer” is provided for every question, I did not argue with others even when I disagreed. However, Bowdoin forced me to re-consider “the answer” and reach beyond my comfort zone. In my first-year seminar, “East Asian Politics,” I was required to debate with others and develop a habit of class engagement. This sometimes meant raising counterarguments or even disagreeing with what had been put forward. For instance, one day we debated what roles Confucianism played in the development of Chinese democracy. Of the 16 students in the classroom, 15 agreed that Confucianism impeded China’s development; but I disagreed. I challenged my classmates. Bowdoin made me consistently question the “prescribed answer.” That was the biggest challenge for me.<sup>37</sup>

A necessary, though not sufficient, condition for this kind of learning is small class size—which is why, in all but the very rich-

est institutions, educational and fiscal interests are always in tension. The educational premise is simple: a class should be small enough to permit every student to participate in the give-and-take of discussion. The economics are simple too: the lower the ratio between students and faculty (especially tenured faculty), the higher the cost.

Yet in many colleges the principle is defended with impressive ferocity, especially by alumni who want future students to have something like the experience they had, and who make generous contributions to that end. I have seen it at work in an array of institutions, at public colleges such as the Beaufort branch of the University of South Carolina, or Norwalk Community College in coastal Connecticut, as well as at colleges in what is sometimes called the American “heartland”—some of them keenly aware of their Protestant (if not strictly Puritan) heritage, such as Valparaiso University in Indiana, Wheaton College in Illinois, Baylor University in Texas, Geneva College in western Pennsylvania, to name just a few. Of course, the institutional and individual descendants of the people who invented the idea of lateral learning exercise no monopoly over it. It is not a Puritan idea, or a Protestant idea; it is a timeless idea—as evident in Talmudic debate or Socratic dialogue as in the Anglo-American college. But in the context of such a college it presents certain distinctive problems and possibilities.

A renowned teacher at my own institution, Lionel Trilling, remarked near the end of his life that when, “through luck or cunning,” small-group discussion works well, it “can have special pedagogic value.” Coming from Trilling, whose quietly reflective style gave him great intensity in the classroom (students called him, with no irony intended, “Thrilling Trilling”), this was high praise. What he meant was that a small class can help students

learn how to qualify their initial responses to hard questions. It can help them learn the difference between informed insights and mere opinionating. It can provide the pleasurable chastisement of discovering that others see the world differently, and that their experience is not replicable by, or even reconcilable with, one's own. At its best, a small class is an exercise in deliberative democracy, in which the teacher is neither oracle nor lawgiver but a kind of provocateur.

Let me offer an example from my own experience. It was a literature class in which the students also happened to be teachers themselves—high school teachers from a public school in central North Carolina. One of the poems we read together was a well-known poem by Emily Dickinson, of which these are the first two stanzas:

My Life had stood—a Loaded Gun—  
 In Corners—till a Day  
 The Owner passed—identified—  
 And carried Me away—

And now We roam in Sovereign Woods—  
 And now We hunt the Doe—  
 And every time I speak for Him—  
 The Mountains straight reply—

This poem may be read as a woman's account of how it feels to be confined to the status of an instrument of a man's will, allowed only enough independence to serve as a facilitator of his pleasure. At first, the students seemed convinced by such a reading, and they added to the discussion many particular insights that tended to support it.

Then, toward the end of the session, as we were considering the later stanzas (“And do I smile, such cordial light / Upon the Valley glow — / It is as a Vesuvian face / Had let its pleasure through —”), one usually voluble member of the class, who had been strikingly silent, spoke up. What she said was roughly this: this poem moves me as an expression of erotic power. It reads like a transcript of my own marriage (“And when at Night — Our good Day done — / I guard My Master’s Head — / ‘Tis better than the Eider-Duck’s / Deep Pillow — to have shared —”). It celebrates the completion of one human life by its cleaving to another. It is a love poem about how surrendering the will can enlarge the self. What we concluded at the end of our discussion was not that one side or the other had won the day on behalf of its preferred reading, but that the poem existed in the difference between them.

I can think of many such occasions when a student’s intervention broke up a complacent consensus in my class. And yet small classes hardly guarantee large learning. “There will be students,” as Trilling went on to say, “who cannot be induced to say anything at all, and there will be those who cannot be kept from trying to say everything.” And, he added, “even a measured articulateness does not ensure the cogency of what is said.”

This remark puts me in mind of a story our son told my wife and me some years ago on a visit home from college. He was taking an art history course, and the discussion leader, a graduate student teaching for the first time, projected onto the screen a slide reproduction of Alfred Stieglitz’s famous photograph “The Steerage,” showing emigrants packed onto the deck of a ship in New York harbor. One of the students, very bright and self-assured, launched into a discussion of the “liminality” of the voyagers, as conveyed by the blurry quality of the image; the journey, she said, had half-erased them, leeching out of them their



Old World identity before they had formed a new identity in the New World. Other students developed the point, contributing competitive allusions to various theories of “hegemony” and “alterity” until one student suggested that the teacher try adjusting the slide projector. Sure enough, the image came sharply into focus—but the discussion went on undeterred. The moral of the story (of special salience to the humanities these days) is that it’s always a good idea to bring one’s bullshit meter to class, and to expect that now and then the needle will jump off the dial.

And yet a well-managed discussion can be of exceptional effect. It can envelop the mind in multiple perspectives that lead toward what William James (a great teacher to whom W.E.B. DuBois looked as “my guide to clear thinking”) called “that ideal vanishing-point towards which we imagine that all our temporary truths will some day converge.”<sup>38</sup> That phrase captures a distinctively American conception of truth as always in flux, in-the-making rather than ready-made. This pragmatist conception of truth runs counter to the idea of revelation received and absorbed by persons who have nothing to add to it except their consent. In that sense, it is an idea at odds with the “Augustinian strain of piety” that animated the Puritan mind and out of which several of our first colleges took form. But Puritanism also had within it a proto-democratic conception of truth emerging through discussion and debate among human beings who are inherently equal.

## 6

There was another form of teaching toward which the founders of the first American colleges felt particular devotion. This was the lecture—originally a medieval term (derived from the Latin *legere*, to read) for reading aloud and explicating scrip-

tural, patristic, or classical texts by scholars whose students, in the pre-Gutenberg era, rarely possessed books of their own. In the Puritan tradition, the word “lecture” acquired a more specific meaning. By the later sixteenth century, in parishes where the resident clergyman was unable or unwilling to satisfy the public demand for preaching, unsatisfied laity sometimes hired supplementary lecturers, typically men fresh out of college, whose charge was to preach several times each week—on weekdays as well as on the Sabbath.

Committed as they were to what I have called lateral learning, Puritans nevertheless suspected that too much talk from the laity with too little guidance from the clergy could lead to insolence and heresy—and so they stressed the need to hear from learned lecturers as well as from themselves. In fact, their zeal for sermons became a point of sore dispute in old England, where the state church emphasized the sonic and scenic aspects of public worship—the sound of the organ, the sight of the scarlet-clad priest seen in light refracted through stained glass. For those who took seriously St. Paul’s injunction that “faith cometh by hearing” (Romans 10:17), this kind of spectacle was both too little and too much. One reason they emigrated to New England in the first place was their belief that the infusion of grace was likeliest to occur not while a penitent sinner was witnessing the sacraments or even while taking communion, but when he or she was listening to a gospel preacher whose voice could melt the heart.

The ideal listener was inwardly restless, measuring the preacher’s claims against his own experience (“Go home and consider whether the things that have been taught were true or no,” John Cotton told his listeners), searching her mind for scriptural analogues to what he or she was feeling.<sup>39</sup> Although a lecture takes place in public, listening to it was—and, ideally, still is—a fun-

damentally private experience. “The preacher’s words had taken a deep impression on my conscience,” one young Englishman reported in his diary around 1590, yet the same words made so little impression on his friends that they “fell upon me in jesting manner,” full of mockery and contempt.<sup>40</sup> Puritans were so committed to this half-private, half-public form of religious experience, and so convinced that the lecture-sermon was among God’s ways of sorting the saved from the damned, that in early New England, to which one faction removed in order to found sermon-drenched churches, the average churchgoer could expect to attend roughly seven thousand sermons in a lifetime, which amounted (since a sermon might last two hours or more) to nearly “fifteen thousand hours of concentrated listening.”<sup>41</sup>

This was the context—a world saturated by the spoken word—in which the American college first arose, and from which the modern college lecture derives. Scientists have believed in it as strongly as those whom today we would call humanists. Two centuries after the founding of Harvard, we find William Barton Rogers, a professor of chemistry at William and Mary and the University of Virginia, who went on to become the first president of MIT, unfavorably comparing “exclusive textbook study and recitation” to the “greater impressiveness of knowledge *orally* conveyed.”<sup>42</sup> The tradition that Rogers invoked was not, as we might think, that of the thundering preacher who sends forth settled TRUTH from his pulpit or podium. There were, no doubt, such preacher-teachers, and always will be. But the real power of the tradition lies in its exploratory reflectiveness, as when the teacher speaks from sketchy notes rather than from a controlling script, in order to allow spontaneous self-revision. He or she speaks from inside the subject, with an openness to new discoveries even while moving through an argument

made many times before. No good lecture (or sermon) should be closed to second thoughts; it must have a dialogic quality—a spirit of self-questioning that draws the listeners into honest inquiry into themselves.

But what should we make today of this time-honored trust in the power of the spoken word? In our wired world, it is hard to imagine sitting for hours in a drafty meetinghouse silent except for the sound of the preaching voice, pinned to one's pew by the eyes of a clergyman who seems somehow privy to one's secret sins. Some educators today think that the college lecture has become as obsolete as the hellfire sermon. Rather than listening continuously, many students are e-mailing, texting, and checking their "smart" phones during class. As for those who do unplug themselves for a while, what, exactly, are they supposed to get from a long monologue when they are accustomed to surfing and multitasking and "dealing with multiple information streams in short bursts"? It's a question that goes to the larger question of whether America's colleges can still lay claim to a useable past.

At least the beginning of an answer is suggested by Emerson's comment that "it is not instruction, but provocation, that I can receive from another soul." The hallmark of the great lecturer has always been the power to provoke, and there is no reason to think this power diminished. In fact, in our age of degraded public speech, such a lecturer fills a need—if not, to use today's ubiquitous marketing language, a niche. One lecturer may be hotly demonstrative, another so shyly inattentive to the students in the room that they feel they have eavesdropped on a private conversation between the speaker and herself. I still hear from Columbia alumni of a certain age how they flocked to listen to Meyer Schapiro, the great art historian whose glowing eyes and transported smile as he spoke of Cézanne or Kandin-

sky led more than one student to say, “Whatever he’s smoking, I’ll have some.”

Or consider this account of William James by another grateful student, George Santayana:

Perhaps in the first years of his teaching he felt a little in the professor’s chair as a military man might feel when obliged to read the prayers at a funeral. He probably conceived what he said more deeply than a more scholastic mind might have conceived it; yet he would have been more comfortable if someone else had said it for him. He liked to open the window, and look out for a moment. I think he was glad when the bell rang, and he could be himself again until the next day. But in the midst of this routine of the class-room the spirit would sometimes come upon him, and, leaning his head on his hand, he would let fall golden words, picturesque, fresh from the heart, full of the knowledge of good and evil.<sup>43</sup>

In this passage we get not only a portrait of a great teacher but a glimpse of what college at its best can be.

7

To anyone even glancingly acquainted with the history of American education, it is hardly news that our colleges have their origins in religion, or that they derive their aims, structure, and pedagogical methods mainly from Protestantism, and, more particularly, from the stringent form of Protestantism whose partisans were called—at first derisively by their enemies, later proudly by themselves—Puritans. Many colleges, both old and relatively new, retain vestiges of their religious origins in, for example, the neo-Gothic architecture of the library or in a chapel

spire that rises above the center (or what was once the center) of campus and from which everything else radiates outward.

Yet many academics have a curiously uneasy relation with these origins, as if they pose some threat or embarrassment to our secular liberties, even though the battle for academic freedom against clerical authority was won long ago. If you were to remind just about any major university president today that his or her own institution arose from this or that religious denomination, you'd likely get the response of the proverbial Victorian lady who, upon hearing of Darwin's claim that men descend from apes, replied that she hoped it wasn't so—but if it were, that it not become widely known.

This is a pity and a waste, since there is much to be learned from the past, including the clerical past, about the essential aims and challenges of college education. We tend not to remember, or perhaps half-deliberately to forget, that college was once conceived not as a road to wealth or as a screening service for a social club, but as a training ground for pastors, teachers, and, more broadly, public servants. Founded as philanthropic institutions, the English originals of America's colleges were "expected," as Morison put it, "to dispense alms to outsiders, as well as charity to their own children."<sup>44</sup> Benjamin Franklin, founder of the University of Pennsylvania, who was both a conservator and renovator of the Puritan tradition, put it this way: "The idea of what is *true merit*, should . . . be often presented to youth, explain'd and impress'd on their minds, as consisting in an *Inclination* join'd with an *Ability* to serve Mankind, one's Country, Friends, and Family . . . which Ability should be the great *Aim* and *End* of all learning."<sup>45</sup>

Franklin's friend Benjamin Rush founded Dickinson College a hundred miles west of Philadelphia, in Carlisle, Pennsylvania,

with the stipulation that it be built near the courthouse—so that its students, as Dickinson’s current president puts it, could make the short walk to “observe government in action” and become “engaged with their society in order to prepare them to lead in it.”<sup>46</sup> In our own time, when some colleges seem to have less than a firm grasp on their public obligations, such precedents—from both the era of religion and of Enlightenment—should not be cause for embarrassment but for emulation.

As for obligations to our “own children”—to students, that is—it may help to recall the derivation of the word by which we name the person who stands at the lectern or sits at the head of the seminar table. That word, of course, is “professor”—a term that once referred to a person who professes a faith, as in the Puritan churches, where the profession was made before the congregation as a kind of public initiation. Surely this meaning is one to which we should still wish to lay claim, since the true teacher must always be a professor in the root sense of the word—a person undaunted by the incremental fatigue of repetitive work, who remains ardent, even fanatic, in the service of his calling.