Lecture 14: Education, The Last Odyssey

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LAST LECTURE

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by
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INTRODUCTION.

As mentioned, I have bachelor's degrees in engineering from the United States Military Academy at West Point and in physics from the Naval Post Graduate School in Monterey, a master's degree in business administration from the University of Utah, and a doctorate in education from Utah State University. My vocation is teaching; my domain is information systems management. My avocation is, and always will be, history. Therefore, I believe that I can legitimately claim an affinity for five of the eight colleges at Utah State University.

As you can see, I am a generalist. You all know the difference between a generalist and a specialist. Specialists learn more and more about less and less until finally they know everything about nothing, whereas generalists learn less and less about more and more until finally they know nothing about everything.

I iterated my background because I believe that it is important for you to understand where I am coming from. I joined the Army when I was 17. During my 24-year career, I spent over one-third of it in school either as a teacher or a student. I must admit that I have learned much more as a teacher than I ever did as a student. But that experience led me to the topic of this lecture. There is a tendency among some to regard their baccalaureate degree as the end of their educational world and the beginning of the "real world." Nothing could be further from the truth. Like the Greek warrior Odysseus, king of Ithaca, you are just beginning the greatest odyssey known.

You remember from your study of the epic poems of Homer, after ten years of fighting so vividly described in the Iliad, that Troy had fallen. The temptress Helen, with the face that launched a thousand ships, was returned to her husband. Her lover, Paris, was slain. The Trojan War was over and the triumphant Greek warriors returned home. As Homer describes in the Odyssey, Odysseus spent ten years wandering the Aegean and Mediterranean seas and their periphery on his journey home to his kingdom in Ithaca. During his odyssey, he encountered many strange beings including lotus-eaters who stole men's memory, sirens who seduced men with their songs, and of course the straits that contained the rocks of Scylla and the whirlpool called Charybdis.

Some would claim that these are myths. I disagree; I contend that they exist today. We all face many of these creatures in our pursuit of lifelong learning. There are still creatures that would steal our memory and impede our quest for knowledge. There are many sirens today who would seduce us by placing demands on our time. Even at a university, we are often so busy pursuing a degree, supporting a family, being a good citizen and member of our church and countless other organizations, that we don't
have time to get an education. We literally find ourselves trapped between Scylla and Charybdis. But, I digress.

In this lecture I would like to address four questions.

What is learning?

What is education?

What is an educated person?

How do we become educated?

WHAT IS LEARNING?

In ancient times learning was described as the search for truth. Two of the greatest teachers of the ancient world were Socrates and Aristotle. Socrates believed in the discourse method in the search for truth. One individual has an idea, a thesis, which she puts forth. Another has a different thesis, an antithesis, which he expounds. Through their discourse or interchange of ideas comes forth a synthesis, a blending of ideas that is closer to the truth than either the original thesis or antithesis. The Socratic approach to learning was humanistic or social. We learn through our interaction with others.

Aristotle, on the other hand, was a logician. He held that, using reason and deductive logic, the individual could divine the truth. The Aristotelian school was revived some two thousand years later during the Renaissance, the Age of Reason. The Aristotelian approach to learning was individualistic and required experimental proofs or empirical evidence. This philosophy was best described by the great French mathematician and philosopher René Descartes who said "Cogito! Ergo sum!" "I think! Therefore, I am!"

These two diverse approaches to the search for truth, or learning, still have vestiges in the modern university. The physical sciences tend to stress logic and experimentation. It has been said that in science one knows nothing until one experiments. The social sciences tend to stress the discourse, the dialectic. The blending of ideas between individuals through the discussion of a case study, for example, leads to a better understanding and learning.

My own view of learning relies partially on the work of a psychologist by the name of Kurt Lewin. Lewin developed the concept of the individual's life space. Our life space is all the individual characteristics and traits that make every one of us unique. It is the sum total of our background and experiences. It is the perspective from which we view our environment.

I like to envision our life space as a series of concentric bubbles that surround each and every one of us. The innermost bubble contains characteristics and traits that even we may not recognize. The outermost bubble is the facade that we put forth before the world. I was raised by a New England grandmother...
who told me that there were three me's: the me that she saw, mischievous and troublesome, the outermost bubble; the me that I saw, the knight in shining armor doing deeds of daring; and the real me, that only God saw, the innermost bubble. My grandmother only had a sixth grade education. I am sure she never heard of a Johari Window or of Kurt Lewin's life space. But she understood people, at least little boys.

Learning, then, as I envision it, is the process of expanding our life space. It is the process of growth by experiencing new people, new ideas, different worlds, and different times. It is the most exciting process known to the human race. We will return to Kurt Lewin later.

While working on my doctorate in education, I was told that, in the short term, learning is the internalization of knowledge. I like that definition. I am not sure I understand it; but, I do like it. In the long term, learning presumes changed behavior as a result of experience or knowledge. This is fortunate because we can measure behavioral changes. It is much more difficult to measure the internalization of knowledge. We try, but it is illusive. You, and you alone, determine what to internalize, what to make a part of yourself, and thus learn. Therefore, all learning is self-learning.

It is also important to understand what learning is not. Learning is not necessarily correct or good. We learn bad habits as well as good, sometimes more quickly. They are usually more fun. Learning is not necessarily conscious or deliberate. Much learning is subconscious; we assimilate it from our environment, from our role models. Learning is not necessarily cerebral. It often springs from our emotions, our perceptions. Learning is not necessarily normative. Unfortunately, most of us do not fit the bell-shaped curve. Finally, learning is not synonymous with education, which brings us to our next question.

**WHAT IS EDUCATION?**

Learning is a process. Education is a goal. B. F. Skinner reportedly observed that education is what remains after learning is forgotten. Education should be holistic and address the six potentials of the individual: physical, emotional, social, intellectual, aesthetic, and spiritual. Some appropriate educational goals might be as follows.

**Physical:** Physical goals must transcend maintaining a healthy body and lifestyle. The human body is the most complex system yet devised. It is a masterpiece of evolution and survival. Yet, life, as we know it, is in danger of becoming extinct on this planet. And it is not enough just to become aware of our own physical needs for our own well-being. We exist in an almost closed system, the planet Earth. Like any system, it has a built-in symbiosis of checks and balances that we don't fully understand. That balance is in danger of being destroyed, not necessarily through maliciousness but through ignorance. Therefore, we
must become educated to the needs of all living things if any of us are ultimately to survive.

**Emotional:** Philosophers, theologians, scientists, and others have long argued over what separates humans from the other inhabitants of this system we call Earth. Some postulate that it is our ability to reason and create; others, that it is our ability to walk uprightly and the position of the thumb for grasping tools; still others, that it is our immortal soul that makes us unique. Certainly all these things and more contribute to our uniqueness. I would suggest that emotion should be added to the list. We are emotional beings.

The human body receives its input from the environment through the physical senses. However, that input is interpreted at least partially by our emotions. It is obvious that we must learn to control our emotions and to use them. But there are two aspects of emotions that are crucial to the learning process. Emotions are the foundation for much of our beliefs and our value system. Values are central to education. Further, emotions are the basis for humor. There may be some humor that appeals to the brain, most appeals to our emotions. Our value system and our sense of humor are control mechanisms. They add balance and direction to our educational goals.

**Social:** Humans are, by nature, gregarious. Within any society, we tend to form groups according to our similarities and differences. Yet, humans exist on a continuum. Most of the “differences” between people--race or the color of our skin, religious beliefs, and even the male-female dichotomy--are more artificial than real. In the Olduvai Gorge in Africa, anthropologists have found fossils and have formulated theories that suggest we all have a common ancestor, a common “mother,” an Eve. Whether this is so or not, society would be far better off if we worried less about our differences, which are relatively trivial, and concentrated instead on how much we are all alike.

This suggests an educational goal of developing sensitivity to the needs and concerns of others. To establish rapport and to have empathy with those who are perceived as “different” requires that we expand our life space. Rapport and empathy can only occur when different individuals have intersecting life spaces. The larger our individual life space, the greater our experience and knowledge base, and the more sensitive we become to the needs of others.

**Intellectual:** This is the most obvious educational goal. Intellectualism is built upon on insatiable curiosity. In fact, curiosity is a *sine qua non*. On the south side of Merrill Library, there is a sign over one of the doors that reads “Center for the Study of the Causes of War and the Conditions for Peace.” I have pondered that sign for 14 years. At the risk of being simplistic, my studies of military history lead me to conclude that the causes of war are singular. Someone has something someone else wants, and both parties are willing to fight for it. That something may vary--land, hegemony, or power--but if both parties are willing to fight, there will be war. The conditions for peace are equally singular. It is laid down in every major
religion I know of. My Bible says it simply: "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." But, I digress.

Intellectual goals must extend beyond our majors, our departments, and our chosen profession. The human mind is far more complex and far more powerful than any computer ever built. Parallel processing, heuristic reasoning, and simultaneous multiple sensor interpretation are all dreams of the computer scientist and are all an integral part of every human brain. This potential power must be used to transcend our own immediate problems and opportunities. It must be used to dream impossible dreams, and more importantly, to make those dreams come true. According to the Bible, one of the oldest questions man has ever asked is "Am I my brother's keeper?" The answer is yes! If any of us are to survive, the answer must be yes. This is an opportunity that should be addressed by our emotional, social, and by our intellectual goals.

Aesthetic: One of the reasons I choose academia as a second career is the opportunity to enjoy the fine arts. I have been privileged to attend performances in some of the finest opera houses and theaters in Europe and in America. Yet, I believe we have some of the best here in Utah. Ballet West and the Salt Lake City Opera are outstanding. Utah State University offers some outstanding talent, also. I have never seen a more powerful Othello than the performance given some years ago by Vosco Call of our Theatre Arts Department. During the winter season, I saw John Pierce play the lead in Neil Simon's delightful comedy *Brighton Beach Memoirs*. I have since seen the movie, and it just doesn't measure up to the USU production. And there are other examples such as the Old Lyric productions in the summer and the Shakespearean Festival in southern Utah.

Our aesthetic goals focus on the beauty of life. Much of the beauty and culture of society resides in its arts and music. They instill happiness in an otherwise sometimes dreary world. Beauty can also be found in our natural environment. We are living in one of the most beautiful areas of the world. Utah offers something for everyone. The *Desiderata* by Max Ehrmann ends with the following. "With all its sham, drudgery, and broken dreams, it is still a beautiful world. Be cheerful. Strive to be happy." And that is an appropriate educational goal.

Spiritual: One of the myths of youth is immortality. I used to be immortal. I was immortal when I went to Vietnam. Other people could die, but not me. Then seven years ago this month, I went for a Sunday afternoon bicycle ride. I ended up with ten broken bones, a brain concussion, a crushed vertebrae in my back, and the loss of hearing in my left ear. It was one of the best things that ever happened to me. It forced me to recognize my own mortality.

Lao Tzu, in the 5th century before Christ, wrote the *Tao Te Ching* as advice to the political rulers of ancient China. In one passage he writes:
Thirty percent of the people love life and fear death, another thirty percent prefer death and avoid life, another thirty percent fear both life and death. Only ten percent have the wisdom to accept both life and death as facts and simply enjoy the dance of existence.

Spiritual goals should address the ultimate question: What is the meaning of life and death? In conjunction with our emotional goals, spiritual goals superimpose a value system upon our life space. They help us transcend our human frailties.

You must establish your own educational goals. Goals are moving targets. When you achieve one goal, you establish another, hopefully more challenging, one that will continue to expand your life space. Goals will help you become an educated person, which brings us to our next question.

WHAT IS AN EDUCATED PERSON?

One hundred years ago the question would be considered irrelevant. College graduates were educated in that they would have at least been exposed to most of the knowledge of the western world. An examination of the Utah Agricultural College Announcement of its opening Year catalog (1890-91) indicates the following. The purpose of the college was to promote a liberal and practical education in the pursuit of agricultural and mechanical arts. All freshmen took courses in composition and rhetoric, English, literature, arithmetic, algebra, trigonometry, physics, and chemistry. Sophomores studied German or French, bookkeeping, geometry, botany, horticulture, and agricultural chemistry. In their junior year, they added geology, zoology, and political economy. At this point, the prescribed courses began to diverge depending upon the student's declared major. All graduates would have had at least a broad introduction to almost all of the physical and social sciences. Of course, the domain of knowledge was much smaller in 1890.

A few years ago, E.D. Hirsch and his colleagues developed a list titled "What Literate Americans Know." The list includes such items as J.D. Salinger's The Catcher in the Rye. This book has probably been banned in more schools across this country than any other book with the possible exceptions of James Joyce's Ulysses and D. H. Lawrence's Lady Chatterly's Lover. But it made the list, as did Ulysses.

The Charge of the Light Brigade by Alfred Lord Tennyson also made the list. As a military historian, the charge of the Light Brigade during the Crimean War has always intrigued me. The scene is Balaclava on the Crimean peninsula in the early 1850's. The British and their allies are fighting the Russians and their allies. On the day of the famous charge, the Heavy Brigade of Scottish cavalry had already made a spectacular charge and had overrun a Russian artillery position. The Light Brigade of English cavalry literally chafed at the bit for its share of the glory. The valley into which the Brigade charged was shaped like a horseshoe with Russian cannon on both sides and at the far end. The Light Brigade, in one of the greatest military blunders, charged the guns at the far end of the valley, a distance of over three miles. The Light
Brigade was thus subjected to cannon fire from both sides, all the way in and all the way out. Six hundred seventy-three men rode into what Tennyson called "the valley of death." One hundred and ninety-five came back, most of them wounded. I have never understood men's penchant for glory. The price you pay is far too high.

Vietnam also made the list. In the 1960's, amid all the turmoil and civil demonstrations, I was preparing to go to Vietnam. Like many individuals, both within the military and without, I had questions as to why we were there and what we were expected to accomplish. I asked a senior officer, who had been to Vietnam and whose innate wisdom and sense of justice I respected, what I should study to prepare me for the Vietnam experience. He suggested that I read two books. The first was *A Street Without Joy* written by Bernard Fall. The second was *A History of the Peloponnesian War* by Thucydides.

The first selection was obvious. Bernard Fall's book dealt with the experience of the French forces fighting in what was then called French Indochina from 1945 to 1954. The "street without joy" was a stretch of coastal plain from the old imperial capital at Hue northward to the Cua Viet river. I later had the dubious pleasure of serving on the street without joy. Most people who went to Vietnam never read Fall's book. This was unfortunate because we managed to duplicate every error the French made. And we lost, just as surely as the French had, because we never answered the two basic questions: Why were we there and what were we expected to accomplish?

The second selection was much more difficult to comprehend. The Peloponnesian War took place some 400 years before the birth of Christ. I had read Thucydides at West Point; it was required reading. But this time I ignored the military aspects and concentrated on the political nuances. Two great city states, Athens and Sparta, waged war for thirty years to gain dominion over the then known western world. Athens was a naval power and had built her empire on commerce and control of the sea lanes. Sparta was a land power and had built her empire on the strength and courage of her army. Both powers had formulated alliances to aid in their war.

As the war continued to drag on and as casualties mounted, popular support of the Athenian people and the senate began to wane. The populace protested an unpopular war, and Pericles, the great orator and general, had to address the senate to elicit its continued support. In later years taxes were raised to support the growing cost of arms and men. The generals and admirals were under constant attack at home for their conduct of the war.

Their greatest blunder was the Athenian invasion of the island of Sicily. The Athenians had to be provisioned by sea over a long supply line. The Sicilians did not fight conventionally. They certainly did not know when they were defeated. Finally in frustration and despair, the Athenians withdrew. The Athenians
won battle after battle, but in the end they lost the war because the Sicilians refused to quit. I hope all this
sounds familiar. We played out the same scenario in Southeast Asia. By the way, if you would like another
viewpoint on the futility of war, read the Greek playwright Aristophanes, particularly his comedy *Lysistrata.*
Aristophanes lived and wrote during the period of the Peloponnesian War. But, I digress.

Education is not measured by any lists or our ability to memorize. It certainly is not measured by our
ability to regurgitate facts and figures. It is measured in two ways: the first is the breadth and depth of our
knowledge, and the second is the ability to synthesize that knowledge and to apply it to the solution of new
problems. I would submit that after 2400 years, the writings of Thucydides are as relevant to an understand-
ing of the war in Vietnam as most of the writings of modern analysts.

Education adds a dimension of richness and vitality to our lives. It allows us to express ourselves
more precisely. A few examples follow, some good and some bad. When the Russian nuclear reactors at
Chernobyl had that tragic accident which included a core melt down, an article described nuclear energy as
“Promethean fires.” In Greek mythology, Prometheus was a Titan, half-god and half-man, who stole fire from
Olympus and gave it to mere mortals. As his punishment, he was chained to a rock, and the birds of the air
feasted on his liver during the day. Every night his liver grew back so that his torment would go on forever.
(The Greek gods were a vicious lot.) But what could be more poignant than to describe nuclear energy as a
gift from god that has within it the seeds for the torment and eventual destruction of humanity.

I worked with a young captain in Vietnam, a West Pointer. He kept a statue of Sisyphus on his desk.
It was his commentary on the whole Vietnam experience. You may not have heard of Sisyphus. Odysseus
knew him. Odysseus met him in Hades. Sisyphus was a former king of Corinth, noted for his cruelty, who
had displeased the gods and was sentenced to spend eternity pushing a boulder up a hill only to have it
come rolling down again. Sisyphus is the ultimate symbol of pure frustration and futility. That young captain
resigned his commission and left the army. They lost a good man.

On the other hand, the lack of knowledge can inhibit our ability to interact with our environment. For
example, one of the principal characters on the TV comedy “Cheers” is Cliff, the mailman. Part of Cliff’s
appeal is his way with words; he uses malapropisms. In one episode he spoke of a loss of memory as being
“magnesia.” In another, he described a stream branching into two parts as a “detergent” stream. The word
malapropism comes from an 18th century play called *The Rivals,* written by the Irish playwright Richard B.
Sheridan. In the play a character, Mrs Malaprop, has a penchant for misusing words, thus, the term “mal-
apropism” was born. Malapropisms have been a mainstay of comedians ever since.

As another example, I had some students visiting my home. And I remarked that I had a problem
with an apple tree in the back yard. There was a branch growing about eight inches off the ground. This
made it difficult to cut the grass beneath the tree, and I had to stoop to pick any apples that grew. One of my students observed that if I were patient, as the tree grew, the branch would rise and the problem would be solved. It is distressing to think that we may have students at Utah State University of Agriculture and Applied Science who do not know that trees grow from the top, not the bottom. This brings us to our final question.

HOW DO WE BECOME EDUCATED?

Modern universities, unfortunately, tend to train specialists. As the domain of knowledge in every area becomes more extensive, that training tends to become more narrow, more specialized. Every time there is a plea for more general education in our curriculums, the case is made that there is so much esoteric knowledge that is required, that there simply is no room left for education. There are some bright spots. The College of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences recently introduced a program called the Area Studies Certificate in Liberal Arts and Sciences, an excellent program that I commend to all of you. And less anyone be offended that I used the infamous “L-word,” I would refer you to the purpose of this University as stated in the 1890-91 catalog mentioned earlier. I could not find a “liberal” education mentioned in our current mission statement. That is unfortunate.

It is too late to procrastinate over whatever educational deficiencies we might have. The Persian poet Omar Khayyam, in the 12th century, wrote:

"The moving finger writes; and, having writ,
Moves on: nor all thy piety nor wit
Shall lure it back to cancel half a line,
Nor all thy tears wash out a word of it."

The moving finger is Time, writing in the book of life. In the College of Business we teach that all managers have five basic resources that they must manage: people, things, money, information, and time. Of all of these, you can have enough of every one except time. Time cannot be saved; it cannot be hoarded. Every minute wasted is irretrievably lost. "The moving finger writes," and you cannot call it back, you cannot relive the past.

It is also too late to rationalize or to blame others for our deficiencies. "My father can't spell, and I can't spell either." Spelling is not hereditary. We must take the responsibility for our own education. Remember, all learning is self-learning. The existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre observed that we are our own creation. We determine what we will internalize or make a part of ourselves and, therefore, learn.

How do we become educated? Basically, we become educated by expanding our life space. Let
me give you Lutz’s Laws for self education. First, read and read well. The final report of the Study Group on the Conditions of Excellence in American Higher Education recommends that college students take three simple tests. First, explain the theories, methods, and conclusion covered in the major articles in a comprehensive science magazine, such as Scientific American, to include the implications for the quality of human life, health, the environment, the economy, law, and public policy. Second, pick up a foreign newspaper, in a language you have studied, and be able to recount the world, national, and cultural issues presented in the paper. Finally, present a high quality analysis of a set of data, texts, or artifacts in your major field or discipline and a high quality synthesis of information in your major and minor fields.

These three tests suggest a breadth of knowledge that can only be gained through extensive reading in multiple fields. Why is this important? Because advances in technology and improvement in the quality of human life depends more and more on the blending of multiple disciplines. In my field of information systems, the latest microchip is biological and blends a traditional life science with the physical sciences and engineering.

Second, question, question, question. One of the most frustrating challenges for any teacher is to try to elicit questions from students. Learning is an active process, we must be actively involved. We all have a tendency to passively accept whatever is said by someone standing at the podium, or whatever is printed in a textbook. Teachers and textbooks are as fallible as anything else. When I was a young soldier, I thought that Army manuals were handed down from above on Mount Sinai. Then one day I was assigned the job of writing one. I discovered that most things in print were written by someone no more intelligent than I was.

You must decide what is true and meaningful in your life space. Knowledge for knowledge’s sake has little value. Knowledge must be related to your educational goals. Accept nothing without applying reason; use the Aristotelian model of deductive logic.

Third, dare to fail. Education implies growth. Growth implies new experiences, new challenges. Inherent in growth is the risk of failure. I am a fan of the great Hollywood musicals. I would love to be able to dance like Gene Kelly or Fred Astaire or even Patrick Swayze. However, as my wife can attest, I won’t dance. Since I don’t dance well, I refuse to go on the dance floor because I don’t want to humiliate myself. And this is a weakness on my part. Many of us inhibit our own growth because we are afraid to try, afraid to fail. The American culture places a premium on winning. No one remembers who lost the Super Bowl or who were the nonmedalists at the Olympics. Yet, in every race there can be only one winner. This obsession with winning discourages trying unless victory is assured.

This is unfortunate because we often learn more from our failures than our successes. In my field,
information systems, after a new system is designed we test to failure. Failure defines the constraints and limits of the system, it also defines the areas in which the system can grow and improve. Therefore, if we would be educated, we must continually test to failure. That is the key to expanding our life space and to growth.

Fourth, keep your sense of humor. Mark Twain mused that “our Heavenly Father invented man because he was disappointed in the monkey.” I grew up reading Twain, but I don't always agree with him. To my mind, God is the first and foremost systems engineer. God created the most intricate and beautiful systems ever known. But when it comes to man, I believe that God was just building a prototype. After examining the prototype and noting the errors, God then created the perfect being, woman. But, I digress.

A sense of humor helps us keep our perspective and our emotional balance. Have you ever had one of those days when, in accordance with the Peter Principle, everything that can go wrong, does go wrong? The tension and the anger builds until a certain point, then the whole thing becomes ludicrous. And you have to laugh for fear you will cry. Our sense of humor helps us understand that in the vast universal scheme our personal problems are often quite trivial. And if we are to grow, we must have the ability to laugh at our problems, and at ourselves. We must learn not to take ourselves, or life, too seriously.

Finally, start now; not tomorrow, not after graduation, now. Your time line isn’t going to grow any longer. I have often thought that education is wasted on the elderly. Youth need education. You have your entire lives ahead of you and face far more dangers in your travels than Odysseus ever did. Set your educational goals now, so that you may continue the process of learning. It is truly a lifelong process.

In closing, the great German writer and philosopher Gōethe wrote, “One ought every day at least, to hear a little song, read a good poem, see a fine picture, and, if it were possible, to speak a few reasonable words.” In the spirit of Gōethe, I hope this evening I have been able “to speak a few reasonable words.”

As for me, preparing for this Last Lecture has allowed me to renew my acquaintance with some very old and very dear friends. For this, I thank you.
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