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Philadelphia Society
“The Liberal Arts, Civic Virtue, and Character Formation”
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Being the junior member of this panel, I will try to say something very brilliant this morning, but if I fail it's because I've forgotten what I learned in Richard Gamble's class at Hillsdale. It was a very fine class that actually made a big difference in my life.

Well, the topic this morning has to do with liberal education, civic virtue, and character—none of which I happen to possess. But I guess it doesn't hurt to have a counter-example up here.

Several years ago I was wandering around the University of Michigan campus, and they have a massive colonnaded building there named after a Mr. Angell. And there was a very curious thing inscribed on the portico: “Religion, morality, and knowledge being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of instruction shall forever be encouraged.”

I'm sure it will come as a shock to all of you that I would bring up that quote from the Northwest Ordinance in relation to this topic. Having gone to Hillsdale College, I can tell you that we are not allowed to graduate from the place without being able to recite the relevant passage in our sleep.

But I was there that day at the U of M, and it was quickly obvious to me—both from the classical architecture and the choice of words on the portico—that this building had been constructed a very long time ago. These days, religion is despised or ignored in most of our universities and public schools, morality is relative, and knowledge is confined to a handful of people, all of whom belong to the Philadelphia Society.

And that, of course, creates quite a predicament for “good government and the happiness of mankind.”

Now, if religion, morality, and knowledge are necessary for good government and happiness, one wonders what you would get without religion, morality, and knowledge. Well, today, instead of good government and happiness, you end up with what has been called—“Hope and Change.”

I want to devote the next few minutes to a particular angle on the topic. There are various ways to diagnose the crisis of our time. The other men here can do a better job than I at making that diagnosis. But since it falls to the rising generation of which I am a part to reclaim the liberal arts, civic virtue, and character development, I want to address myself to the task before us.

Contained within the title of this session are three things we will need if we are to remain a free people. Now, every political consultant tells candidates for office that they must have three issues on which they will run. The three things before us this morning may not constitute a workable political campaign platform, but they are the only means by which our experiment in

self-government can survive. Put differently, we need educated leaders, virtuous citizens, and good communities.

That means that the rising generation of conservatives must fill certain vocations. First, we need teachers of the liberal arts. Second, we need politicians who will recover civic virtue. And third, we need parents who will love and prepare their children to conserve the country.

I am saying this as someone who is still young enough to wonder what he's going to do with his life, but old enough to tell the college students who are present this morning what they need to do with theirs.

Most of you are familiar with John Adams's line about the vocations that are appropriate in different generations. "I must study politics and war," Adams wrote, "that my sons may have liberty to study mathematics and philosophy. My sons ought to study mathematics and philosophy, geography, natural history, naval architecture, navigation, commerce, and agriculture, in order to give their children a right to study painting, poetry, music, architecture, statuary, tapestry, and porcelain."

Well, that's probably an oversimplification. Of course there is a need for politicians and warriors and artists and business owners and scholars in every generation, and Adams himself probably recognized that as a student of human nature. But from time to time there are vocations that are marked with particular urgency. There was a certain close relative of Mr. Adams—her name was Abigail—who wrote in a famous letter to her son John Quincy: "Great necessities call out great virtues."

Abigail Adams wrote that in 1780. And the virtues she had in mind at that time were the virtues of the soldier and the statesman. She went on to write, "When a mind is raised, and animated by the scenes that engage the heart, then those qualities which would otherwise lay dormant, wake into life and form the character of the hero and the statesman."

So first in times like these there is the need for statesmen. In saying that, I'm not just echoing the latest party line about how we need to win at the polls in 2010 or 2012. Real statesmanship that is both prudent and humble, that is thoughtful always of the highest ends and practically skilled at the best means, takes time to develop. It requires a particular kind of education, about which the founders were mindful, and which has been lacking in our recent political leadership. Statesmanship is in short supply today. We think of great national leaders when we hear the word statesmanship, but there is a role for prudent politicians at the local and state levels too, and it is there in fact that future national leaders will find their training. We need wise and good men and women on our school boards and city councils, in our state assemblies and senates, just as well as in Congress and the White House. And I would argue that there must be a clearer and stronger line of communication between conservative scholars and conservative politicians.

Which points us secondly to the role of the teacher who must communicate to the rising generation the fundamental ideas about who we are as human beings—as well as who we are as Americans and as members of particular communities. For the Liberty Fund session yesterday, we encountered a quote from Leonard Read: "To measure a teacher's success, to evaluate his

work, one must ask, Does the teaching induce in others what Aristotle termed ‘activity of soul’?” That seems to me an important and useful question about teachers. The teacher of the liberal arts has probably the most essential role to play in the preparation of leaders and scholars.

But we need teachers in other ways too, and some not even in schools, but also in the other “means of education” that are available for the dissemination of ideas—in journalism, literature, the arts, in the countless relationships we have with our neighbors. I think often of what Whittaker Chambers wrote in his last letter to Bill Buckley in 1961: “Each generation must find its language for an eternal meaning.” That is the task before us.

And third, we need conservators of the American character, men and women who are committed to the development of character in the young especially. And that covers a variety of people—grandparents, coaches, religious leaders, volunteers. One organization that has had a major influence in my life, the Boy Scouts of America, has kept true to its mission of teaching the Boy Scout Oath and Law. There could be no finer statements of the individual responsibility inherent in self-government than the Scout Oath and Law. The Boy Scouts celebrates its 100th anniversary in 2010, and as conservatives we ought to celebrate that.

But most of all, when we’re talking about character development, we’re talking about the family, about moms and dads. The great Russell Kirk gave a lecture series at the Heritage Foundation in 1991. And he had a very good speech that was entitled with a question, “May the rising generation redeem the time?” He talked about the generations of modern conservatism, the first being the generation of which Kirk was a part, and he was addressing the Third Generation—the late Baby Boomers and early Generation X. He said that “the best way to insure a Fourth Generation of intelligent young conservatives is to beget children, and rear them well: the wise parent is the conservator of ancient truths.”

Well the Fourth Generation is now coming of age. Some wonder whether there will be a Fifth Generation of the conservative movement. I don’t worry much about that. Because I would argue that if we think our responsibility is to a movement, we’re missing the point that the movement set out to make in the first place.

The great task facing us has to do not with grand movements, but with an even grander mission—the mission of preserving our little platoons. And I’m afraid that’s been lost amid our demonstrations of what we’re against, so that we haven’t succeeded in getting across what we’re for.

But the up-side is that much of the work of conserving our country and our communities has gone on quietly outside of any organized movement.

I come from a place called Puyallup, Washington, which is the greatest place on the face of the earth—I’m biased about that. Puyallup is a Native American word that means “The Generous People.” And you’d be surprised: we still live up to our name quite a bit. And the thing I’ve learned from the churches and families and small businesses back home is that the people of Puyallup are better at loving and caring for one another than any bureaucracy or mass movement ever was.

Because at the end of the day, human beings need to love and be loved. I'll refer once more to John Adams, from something he wrote in 1789. He poses a universal question: "Who will love me then?" "In this 'Who will love me then?' there is a key to the human heart, to the history of human life and manners, and to the rise and fall of empires."

In the three planks of the platform we're standing on this morning—of the liberal arts, civic virtue, and character formation—are three loves: the love for learning, the love for country, and the love for home.

So I guess I'll close on that—and the thought that the best we can do in our respective vocations is simply to love—to love learning, to love our country, and to love our home.