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### Remarks by William B. Allen

#### **Eighth National Conference of the National Association of Scholars “Our Universities and Our Culture”**

#### **“EDUCATION AS METIER: FINDING THE FABULOUS IN THE UNIVERSAL”**

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Thank you. I am very happy to be with you. We will spend a few minutes talking primarily about the question of education – but in a rather narrow and particular way that I will detail for you presently.

At outset I wish to recall something of inestimable value in this culture, which is of course the first peaceful transition of government from one party to another. Thomas Jefferson accomplished that and, thereby, established that the really great ambition could be realized – the ambition to end the cycle of regimes, to enable people to contest for political power within the confining structures of a constitutional regime, and without resorting to *coups d'etat* (which is, of course, the customary human practice when it comes to making political changes).

Our country is unique in that respect (which is not to say that the English constitution has not been long lived). But our country is unique in having deliberately set out to construct a way of life in which people could contest differing conceptions of their political futures without having to resort to practices of exclusion, outright warfare, and the defeat of the enemy in order to produce constitutional changes.

It used to be (consult Aristotle's *Politics* and you will discover it laid out as clearly and analytically as is possible to be laid out) that you could not envision a change of regime, a change of ruling structure or those prevailing in office without contemplating a literal overthrow of those in office. That does not happen in the United States. All happens quite peacefully, within a constitutional structure that is accepted by all participants. There is no legitimate political ambition – I underline, no legitimate political ambition – which cannot be pursued within the confines of the Constitution of the United States. And it was, of course, Thomas Jefferson and his election of 1800 that, with some difficulty to be sure, nevertheless established that wonderful precedent, consistent with the designs of the Founders.

Now approaching another such change in this country, we are made somewhat humble by the reflection that it is two hundred years roughly since we first learned how to do it. So, perhaps we should not take over-great pride in our accomplishment, when we recognize the size of the giant shoulders upon which we stand in practicing it.

### **What is education?**

I point this out because it is going to be relevant in what I say subsequently about the current state of our society and the particular question of education that I want to raise.

Education is of course my metier; it is what I do, it is what I have been involved in practically all of my life. I was once asked many years ago what it was like to be involved in education, to be a university professor. I thought about the question for a moment and reflected that, having gone off to school at age four and never having left school in one capacity or another for the rest of my life, I did not have the foggiest idea. I did not know anything else but education. Of course, that statement is only half-true. For one of the great victories that one acquires with education is the capacity to see beyond the ground upon which one stands, and even to comprehend within one's vision one's own ground, one's own prejudices, one's own point of view. In fact, you might go so far as to say that your education doesn't amount to a hill of beans, unless it gives you the power to look at yourself with a penetrating, critical eye, to understand why you stand where you stand and why you do what you do.

Having spent my life in this enterprise and now in a new dimension of it (as Director of the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia since June, 1998), I am especially mindful of how important it is for us not to take for granted for what we do in the world of education; that is, for me not to take for granted what I do and for you not take for granted what you do, living and acting as we do under the great and inspiring influence of nearly two centuries of tradition and commitment to educational practices, to lively debate (not just as an entertainment but as a way of life), and to the continuing development of literary and philosophical themes (not as a diversion but as an urgent necessity). These are things that one might come to suspect in a world in which education played a less important role than it must play for us if our society is to continue.

One quick example of what I mean by that: In Czechoslovakia we saw people who a decade ago completed what they like to call their "Velvet Revolution" -- the rather peaceful overthrow of the totalitarian government which had been imposed by Josef Stalin (peacefully relatively speaking; for one person did die and more than a few were beaten along the way). But for all practical purposes it was a peaceful overthrow. What we do not generally know is that long period of travail under the totalitarian regime, in which those who played key roles in the overthrow carried on what they like to call their parallel university. Most of them went through a normal university education. Indeed many of them were engineers, physicists, chemists, and mathematicians, because those were the kind of careers that were less subjected to the rigors of political correctness than were certain other careers. But they carried on at the same time elaborate studies in the

political and moral traditions of the west. They read Aristotle, Plato, and, yes, even the *Federalist Papers* and Thomas Jefferson and other such writings, giving themselves an education at great pains, such that when the Revolution occurred what came to light were people particularly well informed and well studied about their possibilities. That is the kind of thing that a people do in proportion as they have a lively sense of the need to understand where they are. It turns out that people who do not have that sense tend to be far less given to reflection, to study, and to analysis. Thus, it lays a groundwork for us.

I see it as my fundamental task to try to articulate just such a vision of the educational enterprise.

Much of what I shall be able to accomplish will hinge on my avoiding the difficulties inherent with academic administration. The whole process was described to me not very long ago by a colleague, who told of a hunter who journeyed out to the country one weekend to find a hunting dog for his weekend expeditions. The hunter visited a trainer who rented dogs for the purpose, hired a dog, asked what the dog's name was, and received the reply that this was "Instructor." The hunter carried Instructor out to the field and returned with a bag filled with game. He praised the dog as the most wonderful dog he had ever encountered and vowed to return next season. True to his word he returned and requested Instructor, only to hear from the trainer that the dog was no longer called Instructor but was now to be called Professor. He would no longer answer to Instructor. The hunter said he cared not at all about his name, so long as it was the same dog. So he rented Professor and went to hunt once again. Again he was successful, sung Professor's praises, and vowed to return next season. With the sure return of the season the hunter was prompt in return. He requested Professor only to hear that the dog no longer answered to Professor but would have to be called Dean. He expressed indifference to the name and demanded only that it be the same dog. So he took Dean out to the woods. He returned after a weekend's hunting with a bag with little or nothing in it and a long, dejected look on his face. He complained to the trainer that something had gone wrong and asked for an explanation how a dog who theretofore had been so wonderful could have become such a dismal hunter. The trainer remarked that he was at a loss for an explanation. He knew only that the dog had always performed beyond expectations, "but," he said, "ever since he became Dean all he does is sit on his ass and bark at all the other dogs." Needless to insist, the hunter did not return to look for the C.E.O.

I do not bark at the other dogs, but I do assume the obligation to articulate an educational mission and objective that all can embrace.

Now, thinking about Jefferson's political legacy and the great University he founded, Mr. Jefferson's great hopes were intimately connected with the question of republican government. Accordingly, I tailor my remarks toward what I conceive to be the greatest challenge we face in the late twentieth century *and* a certain inconsistency in the proper understanding of that challenge and Mr. Jefferson's vision of the relation between education and self-government.

I want to pose that to you in order to suggest a role for you to play, work for you to do, in thinking through these questions and trying to assimilate your own experiences in higher education with the challenges that we confront in the greater society.

What did Mr. Jefferson wish for?

Let's ask first why he created his University – a story that you know very well. He created the University because he could not turn the university into his University. His first proposal, of course, was aimed at William and Mary, but – confronted with the embarrassment (as he considered it at the time) of its connection with the church and with the existence of an established institution and board of directors somewhat recalcitrant in the face of his own elaboration of a republican future – Mr. Jefferson turned his mind away from that institution and conceived of an independent, free-standing university that would convey the republican ideal.

That university was to be the pinnacle of a whole system of education penetrating the society. We do not need to remember all of the general descriptions and observations Mr. Jefferson made in proposing his educational statute for Virginia. But you will remember that it was built on a system of local self-government, graduating until it emerged at the pinnacle in the selection of the best students to attend THE university.

Now that process was described by Mr. Jefferson as something akin to raking the diamonds from the dung heap. But he did not mean, in using that unfortunate expression, to depreciate the value of ordinary citizens. For, in fact, he conceived that in the wards (and he spoke of a ward system) the governors of the system of primary education would acquire thereby the arts of self-government.

This was Mr. Jefferson's ideal. People would take responsibility at the local level for those things that fell well within the range of their abilities. They would exercise those responsibilities, and nothing would be kicked to a higher level, save the kinds of responsibilities that could not be answered immediately at the lower level. Thus, one looks not only at the design of an educational system but at the design of a political system inherent in Mr. Jefferson's educational plan.

The most important parts were the universal character of education at the primary level and, then, the graduated discovery of those souls who would be most susceptible to further education at later levels until, finally, the very best endowed of Virginia's citizens would be given at the university the education befitting statesmen. They, of course, would go on to fill the seats of government and the roles of leadership in society.

Now, what's wrong with that idyllic picture is simply this; while it accurately reflects the distribution of talents among human beings as we may assume (I hope I don't have to argue for that!), and meaning that as one progresses from the greater number to the smaller one encounters the rarer talent, what is not accounted for is what Alexis de Tocqueville observed in the 1830s in his visits to the United States – namely, that there is a kind of democratic ethos, a love of equality which does not necessarily yield to that very candid observation about the distribution of talents among human beings.

That is to say, not only may people moved by the passion for equality desire material outcomes that are like unto material outcomes achieved by others, but they also desire status in a manner like unto the status achieved by others. These two things make the idea of meritocracy (which is what Mr. Jefferson was designing) very hard to

accomplish; they make the idea of a natural aristocracy (to use his own words) inconsistent with the majoritarian impulse of democracy.

So the question of inconsistency is simply this: how can one develop within a system that explicitly avows the authority of the majority, respect for the graduated differentiation of the talented among the many, such that the talented are respected by virtue of their talent alone and not by virtue of any invidious distinctions or any particular or peculiar advantage that derives from their relative social positions?

Did in fact Mr. Jefferson design a system of education that could alter what has been the millennial human story; that is, preferring those like oneself or one's own or one's own family to those who are better? Or, was he overly optimistic, overly sanguine, somewhat utopian in this vision?

I would suggest that he was overly optimistic, somewhat utopian in this vision, because he did not frame in the context of this vision a sufficient understanding of the need for governing arrangements to structure people's choices, to pose the choices in such a form that they could not answer them without deferring to the standards of meritocracy that he wished.

I will further suggest to you that what reveals this to us is the real subject of my remarks, namely, how contemporary education fails and how we need desperately to discover what to do about that failure.

### **What is the failure of our education today?**

So, the first question is: What is the failure of our education today?

If we understand by education what I said at the outset, a power that enables us to see with clarity our own circumstances, our own understandings – if we mean by education liberation from mere prejudice, then it is safe to say, today, that our education fails us. Rather, far from liberating us from prejudices it does little more than to demand faithful adherence to prejudices.

To make this very clear, let me give you a couple of examples. In the nature of things, these examples are pertinent to our social and political reality but distant enough to foster a reasonable degree of objectivity.

In the troubles in Los Angeles in 1992 – riots or uprisings, as you prefer – something occurred on the morning after the riots, the first morning on which the schools reopened after the riot. It was very informative.

A school teacher in the Compton area – which is south of Los Angeles and which was involved in the general area of rioting – returned to her classroom to find 27 second-grade youngsters all dressed in new clothing. She looked out and thought there was a problem. Rather than to follow her lesson plan, she said, "Let's talk about this. Let's talk about the right and wrong of looting. Do you think it's right to loot, to steal from others." She was surprised that the question was puzzling to the children. The question puzzled

the children in the sense that, not saying the obvious things, such as, well, it's wrong but we did it and we couldn't resist it or everybody was doing it and so we did it too – none of that was said. The students manifested genuine confusion about the application of moral principles in this context. They communicated that they were not certain how they were supposed to decide what's right and what's wrong. One student finally stood forth and said, "Well, Miss, it's right and it's wrong."

Now, the child had not become a politician already, learning how to speak out of both sides of her mouth. I think the child meant this: for some persons in certain circumstances it's right to do wrong. This is a lesson that has been somehow inculcated and which is pervasive. People who see themselves as oppressed – as it is now popular to say – and who understand themselves to have suffered injuries, whether directly or only vaguely conceived, further arrive at the conclusion that people in those circumstances may abstract from the ordinary rules of morality and social engagement.

This is a lesson that we have delivered, not simply in our schools but in our education in a larger sense – meaning with respect to this very question that our education has failed to conserve clear cut, well-articulated standards of right and wrong. You may contrast this with the situation that prevailed in my own boyhood, when of course oppression was no less manifest in our society, and when indeed I experienced it personally.

My father at that time was captain of a commercial fishing vessel in a small segregated town in the south. He did particularly well because he was good at his craft – a craft in which one earned by virtue of one's labors. In fact he earned in the early 1950s a salary that was so good that I did not earn the equivalent until I had long been a professor, teaching more than 20 years later. In the year in which he earned that amount of money in a small southern town, it was deemed unacceptable for a black man to earn that much money and therefore to acquire that degree of independence within that social framework. So, powers that be intervened to deprive him of that employment.

We eventually came to understand what happened, saw it as an injury, and saw it as oppression. But we did not derive from that fact the conclusion that what we needed to do was to injure someone else in turn. Rather, we rededicated ourselves to labor to vindicate the promise of this country and to demonstrate that such conduct was unjust and, in addition, that we were capable, through education, self development, and other principles, of making a vital contribution not only to our own circumstances but to the society in general.

Somehow in that day and age, in the early 1950s, people could experience oppression, could have a present consciousness of it and resent it, and yet still adhere to standards of right – not come to believe that the response was to do wrong. Nor, did we think that to have suffered wrong became a justification for doing wrong to another.

Now, those are very personal examples I've offered. If you wonder how to apply those very personal examples, I suggest that you look at something like the 1991 Civil Rights Act, where for the first time in our country's history, distinct standards of justice for the same infraction were written into the law – standards different by circumstances. It is there said that if you are minority or woman, you must meet one standard of proof in

filing a discrimination complaint under the law. If you are not, you must meet another standard of proof. This means, of course, different standards of justice.

We know that most of the debate over preferences in our society is a debate over the question of when it is right to do wrong to others.

Is it right to do wrong to someone in order to make up for a past wrong to someone else? This is not, therefore, simply a classroom question but an education that is pervasive through social practices generally maintained and rigorously argued for.

But, I wouldn't want you to make the mistake of thinking that, because I refer this to the society in general, that it is not present in our classrooms. Ultimately, these kinds of standards only emerge out of what takes place in our classrooms.

It was early in this century that the political scientist, Arthur F. Bentley, formulated the argument in defense of a theory called pluralism. I know that we use the term commonly today. We all speak of America as a pluralist society, and in which diversity is a rule. And we generally think that the term somehow is rooted in the founding experience. You have doubtless heard some teacher, somewhere attribute the term to James Madison, and maybe even to the tenth *Federalist Paper*. But that is a fiction; it is not true. You will not find the word pluralism anywhere in the *Federalist Papers*. Nor will you find the phenomenon described in *Federalist* ten descriptive of what we call pluralism today.

What Mr. Bentley defined, and what he meant and literally said, was that "all politics is group politics." That is, there is nothing that takes place in the realm of politics that is not derived from group interest. Therefore, principles of affiliation, association, and identity are the foundations of politics. That simple argument has dominated our education ever since.

Thus, we have persisted in inculcating notions of group identification, group enjoyments, and group sufferings above notions of individual rights and individual responsibilities ever since.

That is one of the reasons our education has failed us.

It has left us with the impression that we do not need to confront ourselves as individuals – to ask ourselves what we believe, why we believe it, what we merit, and why we think we deserve it. Rather, it is sufficient just to check off on some standardized form the group to which we belong, in order to discern what our entitlements are.

That is what our education offers us. Nor do I care if you speak of literary education – in which fancy theories of deconstruction have become the vogue and which talked about, what? Relationships of power! And what is meant by "relationships of power" in these theories? Relationships between groups – the oppressors and the oppressed. Or, if you speak of political science, or economics, or philosophy, or any thing else, the reality is that, we have been in the last several years particularly subjected to an onslaught of preaching about certain needs of mutual respect among groups, and

which begin with the assumption of a mutual exclusivity of group identification.

### **What do we need to change in education?**

Hear me carefully; I mean what I say!

All the talk about diversity is predicated on the notion that fundamental terms of identification are mutually exclusive as among groups – that there is no crossing of groups.

A wonderful story appeared in the *Daily Bruin*, the newspaper of the University of California, Los Angeles, in October, 1992. The story was about a young student, a woman, white, who had braided her hair in cornrows. While walking through campus she was confronted by another student, a woman, black, who challenged her for appropriating the culture of black people – and seeing that appropriation of another group's culture as an expression of a will to oppression, "stealing what is ours," as it was put.

Now, the woman was entirely serious. She really believed that this mutual exclusivity should be the rule. Many years ago, we used to talk about multiculturalism in America. When we first began to do so, we had a premise – namely; that all cultures can be made visible to one another on the basis of commonly shared human experiences and human nature. Thus, we could speak of multiculturalism because we thought that beneath culture was that universal identity. Then we ceased to speak about multiculturalism in that way. That is why the term diversity came generally to substitute for the term multiculturalism.

Diversity means that every group must be taken on its own terms, and no group can pretend to understand any other group.

This is at the root of most education that takes place in our country today. In fact, you might think this term diversity is meant, ultimately, to replace the term, university – *di*, of course, meaning "two," substituting for the term *uni*, "one." "University": one turn, one turning, one ultimate foundation, being replaced by the notion of two or more foundations – the end of common human identity.

Thinking still of a decade ago, we can identify the most dramatic case that I can bring to your attention of the change required in our education today. At that time, we witnessed Mr. Jefferson being repudiated by highly elevated, dignified representatives of our society, members of the Committee on the Judiciary of the United States Senate. Those Senators or at least a majority of them sat before the nation and challenged the notion that natural law had anything to do with the Constitution of the United States and, in doing so, rejected the Declaration of Independence. That, of course, is where the universal argument, the natural law argument is laid out most explicitly and clearly among our founding documents.

Those were not just ordinary Joes walking down the street. They were members of the United States Senate, the Committee on the Judiciary, who denied that what Mr.



Jefferson called the "laws of nature and of nature's God" have anything to do with our Constitution. I'm not here to make an argument for natural law; I think it altogether palpable that without natural law there would not have been an American founding, there would not have been an American Constitution.

The real question is: How could a nation elevate to such high station people with such an impoverished education, save that, in that nation, education has generally failed?

You will perceive my answer to be the latter: our education has failed in this respect and this is where change is most needed.

Rather than bidding us to see our situation clearly, it simply repeats cant phrases, cant prejudices, designed to reflect the taste of the day rather than to preserve the true purpose and function of education. And, by the way, not only is natural law present in the Constitution through the Declaration of Independence, it's also present in the text of the Constitution. Article one, section eight, clause ten empowers Congress to pass laws to deal with problems arising under the "law of nations." The law of nations was not then positive law in the United States. It was a law, the *jus gentium* as it was traditionally understood, which can only be interpreted in light of the law of nature, from which *the jus gentium* descends.

I am not a genius, although I do have some knowledge and familiarity. But, the fact of the matter is that this particular understanding ought to be the common experience of everyone who receives the finest education this country has to offer. When it is not, our education fails us.

### **Can we recover education through universals?**

What are we going to do about this? It's an immense problem.

How are we going to decide what education is?

How are we going to break free from this enormous trial and difficulty?

One of the things that first made me sensitive to this question has to do with a class that I taught with some frequency (and I don't usually repeat any class at all, by the way), and that is a class called "Moral Fables." I have been teaching this class because I discovered in my own studies that it was a neglected area.

The genre of the fable has a very special kind of power, of making the value of the truth apparent to human beings and, indeed, to every human intellect. I know of no human intellect that cannot be shown the value of the truth through the vehicle of fable. That is a remarkable claim (if you think about all the studies and demonstrations you have been exposed to, and how they variously affect people), the only one which can be brought to every level of understanding.

Fables do this, of course, by the instrumentality of the lie, the fiction. Every fable is a fiction, but it is a special kind of fiction. It is a transparent fiction, and by virtue of its

transparency, it immediately reveals the truth. The lie that beasts speak, for example (and most of our fables tend to be of that genre, though not all), immediately concentrates the attention on the specific human application. One does not come away thinking of a fox upon hearing the fable of the sour grapes – or better still, upon hearing the fable of the dog and the shadow. In the latter tale, we find a dog walking along with a bone in his mouth, crossing a stream, seeing the reflection in the stream and imagining it to be yet another dog with a bone. Being covetous of the other bone, and reaching for it, the dog loses the bone he had. No one really imagines a dog doing that upon hearing the fable; we immediately and instantly convert it into human powers and characteristics and arrive at a judgment about what it is proper for human beings to do, a judgment about human nature.

So, fable has this tremendous power to make the question of nature evident to us. Thus do I teach the course, and along the way I spend a lot of time on Fontaine – Jean de La Fontaine, who wrote in the era of Louis XIV in France of the seventeenth century.

Fontaine explained his use of the genre in two ways that are very important.

First, he claimed that, through fables, we could acquire in the realm of moral and political principles the same kind of familiarity with axioms that we have acquired through Euclidean geometry in the realm of natural sciences. And, if we pay due heed to those axioms, we would be able to make as much progress morally and politically as we had already made at that time in the natural sciences.

Second, Fontaine indicated that, having derived the first hint of the possibility of doing this through fable from Plato's *Phaedo*, in which Socrates tells the story of how he began to set to meter the fables of Aesop, after fretting over a dream he had long received from the god, that he was supposed to make music, and having thought before that making philosophy was making music but that, just in case and before his death, perhaps he would make some real music to hedge his bet. This claim caused Fontaine to wonder whether, if music was supposed to make men better (and those were his words), one shouldn't discern how it does so.

### **How fabulous is the universal?**

Without taking up the question of the broad and narrow meanings of the word music, I want to focus your attention only on the question of what it means, through the power of discourse, to make men better.

Better than what becomes the question. It's not meant to be a relative question in Fontaine. When one aims to make men better, what one aims to do is to make them act consistently with the highest elements of their nature.

One fable that Fontaine tells illustrates this very well. The fable is called "Education." In this fable, he tells of two dogs, Caesar and Laridon. I shall recreate it for you.<sup>i</sup>

Caesar and Laridon were two dogs sprung from the same loins, he begins. They

have the same noble lineage. They fell under the nurture of differing masters, and one was set free to roam the fields but was disciplined, while the other was simply a kitchen dweller. The one who was the kitchen dweller came to be called "Laridon" for that very reason, because we *may* translate Laridon from the French to "Porky."

Caesar chased and felled boars in the fields and developed a vigorous constitution; he obtained his name by virtue of his excellence, the virtue of his being, his soul, his disciplined nature. The master protected Caesar, the fable continues, only allowing him to mate with the finest of his breed. Thus, his lineage retained his fine characteristics.

Laridon, on the other hand, happened to mate with whatever he happened to come across and, in fact, spread mongrels throughout France. This little fable, told in those terms, is meant by Fontaine to illustrate something about education for us.

Now, I don't think that what he means is what we know as the nature-nurture debate. For, interestingly enough, one notices in the case of Caesar that, while he is disciplined and not allowed to mate with whatever comes along, he is also left free. In fact, Fontaine says at the end of the fable, the elements of his nature were favored by the discipline. Thus, Caesar was the dog who was raised to be, as the Marines like to say, the best that he can be; while, Laridon, in effect, was not raised. He was indulged, fed, left to roam, and assumed not to require any particular challenge in his growth and development.

That's the end of the fable as Fontaine relates it.

What does it mean to us?

I think it means something like this: The assumption that it is enough just to convey prejudices and otherwise to leave people *a la* Jean Jacques Rousseau, to follow their natures but without discipline, is a terrible mistake.

An era of good feelings or preachings about harmony, or preachings about respect are very poor substitutes for hard earned respect through diligent effort and demonstrated merit.

Our education fails us when we are no longer called upon to demonstrate merit in any way that is tied to our relationship with our fellows. We are often asked to demonstrate merit, we are often given hard tasks, but we are insulated from any connection between our accomplishments and our relationships with our fellows.

Mr. Jefferson thought that human nature could not avoid the eminence of merit once it had demonstrated itself; that if we challenge everyone with the same or similar work and the same or similar exams or challenges, then we could identify those who shine and pay true deference and respect to them.

It appears, instead, that the great impulse today is quite the opposite.

While there is respect of one sort for those who shine, there is likely to be more envy than deference, or, worse still, there are likely to be greater attempts to define away

the shining. For example, we use race norming and other forms of invalidating testing procedures, or we just attack the idea of testing itself. In all of this, we attack universal standards of judgment, as if the distinctions they give rise to were invidious.

Any challenge that produces distinction, insofar as the distinction is socially visible, comes under attack in the age in which we now live.

That is perhaps the most palpable sign of the failure of our education.

I think, then, that we have a great responsibility as individuals.

That responsibility is to try to free ourselves from the prejudices of our universities, which treat universals as fictions.

Our responsibility is to try to give ourselves what our society refuses to give us today, and that is a true education in universal principles.

We might well conclude that, unless we are capable of disciplining ourselves, none of us shall ever become the Caesars; we are all far more likely to become the Laridons of the world.

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<sup>i</sup> **APPENDIX: "EDUCATION" BY FONTAINE**

Jean de La Fontaine warned young men and women that an education that fosters a passion to tell the truth will fail to achieve a good effect, if it does not also convey fit means to tell the truth. He thought that well educated youths could become "capable of great things" if only they could hit upon that happy combination. Indeed, "as, by the definition of the point, the line, the surface, and with other very familiar principles, we come to understandings which measure out heaven and earth, similarly, with the reasonings and consequences that one may derive from" his fables, moral judgments no less significant may be accomplished.

Perhaps, though, it is well to ponder that fable about "education," in order to measure the implications of Fontaine's warning. The fable reads as follows:

Laridon and Caesar, brothers from one loin,  
himself one in a line of famous, beautiful, well-bred, and hardy dogs,  
fell into the hands of two different masters one time long gone.  
The one rummaged a forest, while the other besieged a kitchen.

Each had previously a different name;  
but opposed nurturings  
Fortifying in the one the natural fortune  
While altering it in the other, a certain kitchen slave named the  
latter, Laridon.

His brother, living many a high adventure,  
Chased many an antelope through the woods, dropped many a boar,  
Was the first Caesar the canine race had hailed.  
Folk were careful to prevent some unworthy mistress  
from passing corrupted blood through his children.

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The neglected Laridon declared his affections  
to every the first object to pass.  
He single-handedly ignited the population boom in his realm.  
He made mongrels common throughout France,  
a separate breed, whose dangers folk avoided,  
a pole apart from the Caesars.

One does not always follow one's ancestors, nor even one's father;  
With little care, and time, fate brings on decline.  
For mere failure to cultivate nature and its gifts,  
Oh! how many Caesars turn Laridons!

Inasmuch as youths do not control their educations at the most critical moments, no one can ignore the question, "What should be done when education fails?"