

The Abolition and Preservation of Man

Introduction

In his essay, “Sex, Economy, Freedom, and Community” Wendell Berry writes,

There are two kinds of human economy. There is the kind of economy that exists to protect the ‘right’ of profit, as does our present public economy; this sort of economy will inevitably gravitate toward protection of the ‘rights’ of those who profit most. Our present public economy is really a political system that safeguards the private exploitation of the public wealth and health. The other kind of economy exists for the protection of gifts, beginning with the ‘giving in marriage,’ and this is the economy of community, which now has been nearly destroyed by the public economy. (Berry 138)

In what follows I will describe a similar polemic, a polemic of education that shadows Berry’s polemic of economy. I will investigate the idea that, corresponding to these two kinds of human economy, there are two kinds of education. There is the education of commodity, the kind of education that seeks to produce persons who will maintain and increase the economy of profit. And, on the other hand, there is the education of community, the kind that seeks to foster persons who will maintain and preserve the essential characteristics of community.

The Education of Commodity

The former sort of education—the kind that seeks to produce persons who will maintain and increase the economy of profit—will inevitably gravitate toward the transmission and dissemination of information, since information will be seen as a means to profit and power. Information is the commodity an education provides in exchange for tuition and taxes collected

for the support of public education. The education of commodity sees the student as a consumer or a customer, the faculty member as a producer or a distributor, and its staff as salesmen, advertisers, accountants, retailers, inventory-takers, stockers, transporters, customer-servicers, quality-controllers, and all sundry ‘managers,’ including CEO’s, also known as administrators. The product is “knowledge” (i.e., information), and the market is all those who desire power (“knowledge is power”) and/or profit (“it pays to think”). In this sort of education it is natural to speak of the educated as “productive members of society,” and to measure the success of an educational institution by means of “outcomes,” “exit interviews,” “placement,” “endowments,” and “alumni support.” The guiding factor for educational institutions under this kind of economy—an economy of profit—will be what prospective customers (or their so-called parents) want, rather than what they may need. Indeed, such an economy maintains that there is no distinction between what is wanted and what is needed. A primary tenet of this economy is that any commodity, no matter how unnecessary, can—with persuasive advertisement, constant repetition, and sex appeal—be made into, first, a want, and then a need.

In a word, fashion. Either by setting it or by following it, the successful commodious educational institution must be in fashion. It must have “the latest,” which is, so the assumption often goes, also necessarily “the best.” It must also seek to entertain, for that is how you retain and attract new customers. Consequently, there must be a continuous effort (and continuous funding) for new programs, new projects, new innovations, new equipment, new facilities, new ideas, new methods, and—above all—new positions, filled with new people. This newness must be maintained, even when things are the same. An old idea, for example, must be newly “packaged”; a traditional method must be “incorporated” into a new methodology; an old building must be “renovated” (or, at the very least, renamed); there must be a new “Center for _____ Studies” or a new “Institute for _____ Research” or a new “Center of _____

Excellence.” Implying, of course, that this is the first or the most excellent time and place that such studying or researching has happened. We must have new positions for the same old jobs, and new names and faces of people in those positions—who nevertheless turn out to be essentially the same ones we had before. Fashions, of course, often return, but they return as “new” fashions.

What a student learns from a commodious education, besides the information it provides, is to erase from his mind the possibility that there is any other kind of human economy except an economy of profit. A student learns this by having the lesson reinforced by the very system or institution he is in—a system or institution where those who are paid most are taken to be the most important; where success is measured solely in quantitative terms (e.g., how much outside funding did so-and-so raise for the university, how many and how big were the grants he was awarded, how many publications does he have, etc.); where honors and public recognition are given to those who campaign for it, either openly or by subtler means; where a positive image and favorable customer comments are more important than any tried and true standard. Standards—especially academic ones, which are less interesting and harder to define in quantitative terms—are only as valuable as the profit they might bring. In fact, if you can convincingly *say* you’ve got standards without actually having any, that would be the most profitable. If a student sees these things happening in the workings of the very educational system or institution he is a part of, he will inevitably think less of the possibility of there being any other kind of human economy. The habits that he might have formed with a different sort of education—habits such as thinking through and deliberating about the possibility of other kinds of human economies, formulating and clarifying to himself ideals of thought and conduct, making distinctions between what is and what ought to be, asking whether and to what extent he is responsible for the way things are: habits that, when they become second nature, constitute the

very goal of a liberal education—these habits are mercilessly squelched, if they were ever started to begin with.

In short, commodious education attempts to reduce all judgments to judgments of quantity; to render students incapable of qualitative judgment. And it does so both in its form—persons incapable of qualitative judgment are most often found in positions of authority—and in its content—the more information, the better. And “the latest” information too; after all, we live in a fast-paced, ever-changing world. The “cutting edge” is the best edge—never mind anything away from the edges. To the commodious, the old, simply because it is old, is dull and boring.

The worst and most dangerous implication of this kind of education is that, as in an economy of profit, human beings are devalued. In commodious education teachers are, in principle, dispensable, just as factory workers are in an economy of profit. The most important people are the managers, those who administer the business of education. As in any business, these administrators are supposed to do all they can to maintain and increase as much as possible the profit margin. This entails such ignoble tasks as advertising (i.e., finding the lowest common appetite of your prospective customers—children and teenagers, in the case of education—and tweaking it for all it’s worth), recruiting (i.e., flattering), fund-raising (begging), finding tax loopholes (cheating wherever you can get away with it), haggling for bargains (including bargains in hiring), keeping the customers happy (lying to them in order to insure that “the customer is always right”), and, if things start to go bad, getting out with as much as you can for yourself. Above all, these people make it clear that administrative positions, especially their own, are an absolute necessity. This kind of inhuman administrator will be more numerous and more prominent in a commodious education.

As for teachers, the administrators of commodious education know that, practically speaking, the time has not yet come to be able to do without them, but teachers are thought to be

inefficient, compared to many of the more technologically advanced tools we are now employing to transmit information. And to the extent that teachers are still needed, the managers of commodious education will seek to use them in such a way as to increase profits. In many commodious educational institutions this means larger classes, lots of adjuncts and teaching assistants, distance learning, online courses, extensive use of multi-media, standardized textbooks and curricula, and a constant mantra of one or more of the following expressions: “You are not a teacher, you are a facilitator,” “Technology is a valuable tool,” “The times are changing more rapidly than ever before and we must change with them,” “A paradigm shift is taking place in education,” “The virtual university is the university of the future.”

These expressions, and the frequency with which they are bandied about, are indicators of a philosophy of education that places education’s end squarely in the commode. Such an education produces neither health nor wealth, only waste, even though it may be seem to be profitable to those who promote it. The cost of this seeming profit to the few is the loss of humanity for all. If followed to its logical end, it means the abolition of Man. Just as an economy of profit inevitably looks upon other persons as mere means to an end—thereby eliminating the virtues of generosity, respect, gift-giving, and treating persons as ends in themselves—commodious education teaches students that persons, too, are mere tools to be used and managed for profit. This dehumanization is implicit in the very language of educational administration: personnel offices are now offices of “Human Resources”; departments are now “educational units”; students are no longer taught by teachers, they “access their own learning experiences” with the help of “facilitators.” No matter the euphemistic abstractions, they still reduce people to objects.

At many Universities in the United States commodious education is the philosophy of education held to by most of its administrators. Many Deans of Colleges traditionally antithetical to the idea of commodious education—Colleges of Arts and Sciences, Humanities, or Fine

Arts—have swallowed the bait that would, if their faculty follows them, spell the end of these Colleges. They do not seem to understand that there is no use for the humanities or for the arts in a commodious education. Such studies serve no practical end in a world of profit—they can be flushed. If they can be salvaged at all, it will only be by turning them into social sciences (for sciences can be used for profit) or businesses. The study of literature, for example, could be transformed into a branch of sociology or political science; the study of art could be shaped by its use as a means of advertising; the study of music might be transformed into a preparation for entering the entertainment business. So it is not surprising to find a former Dean of a College of Fine Arts and Humanities, in a speech to the faculty, saying,

If we are to succeed in attracting more and better students this college has to be more *entrepreneurial* collectively . . . There is a paradigm shift which is occurring with increasing speed. This is the shift from an emphasis from [sic] superior teaching to superior learning. With the advent of the computer and other technological milestones, the way we teach students is changing. We can no longer teach them everything they need to know. There is simply too much information at their fingertips. We have to teach them how to access their own learning experience to be successful teachers.

As if instructors could *ever* teach the students everything they needed to know: as if what they need to know is “information”: as if the “success” of both teaching and learning consists in producing androids that can “access their own learning experience.” In fact, it is not at all clear what the Dean means by this expression. Is a computer—or any other ‘technological milestone’—like a bank account, or a filing cabinet, full of ‘learning experiences’ which teachers simply have to help students learn how to ‘access’? Does it mean teachers can all quit teaching literature, philosophy, music, dance, painting, etc. and become equipment operators, perhaps

‘specializing’ in ‘accessing’ websites and video catalogues devoted to what they used to teach? If this counts as “successful” education, then the degrees conferred by such a university are really degrees in Diddling for Profit and Pleasure. This is apparently how some commodious educators think students will become humanized and cultivated.

Nor is it surprising to find the Dean of Continuing Education at the same university speaking the same language. In an article in the local newspaper she writes,

We are in the middle of a paradigm shift. Directly and indirectly, technology has influenced education for the better, and all indications are that the trend will continue. . . the ease of access to all sorts of information is phenomenal. But is it “good” information or “bad”? A new skill—or really a revised skill—we all need in this age is the ability to evaluate what we find on the Internet and determine whether we should believe what we read or even act on it. (Audley)

She does not go on in the article to say anything more about what this new (or revised) skill that we will all need consists in, nor how such a skill will be taught. The assumption is that this skill *is* currently being taught. Clearly, such a skill will be the most important skill of all in an age where any and all kinds of information is at our fingertips. But, just as clearly, commodious education is, in principle, opposed to the acquisition and development of such a skill. Such an evaluative skill requires standards by which to make proper judgments. If, for example, we are to judge whether or not the news report we are reading over the internet is factual or not, we would have to know what counts as a fact, and also what counts as reliable reporting. We then are in a position to ask whether or not this particular report is accurate. This seems to be the primary kind of evaluation that this Dean has in mind, because the rest of the article takes education to consist mostly, if not completely, in the acquisition of information. But even this kind of discernment—knowing what to take as factual and what not—is not advantageous to commodious education,

because the facts might show how unnecessary, costly, and extravagant are many of the programs, courses, building projects, and administrative positions that are currently funded. As you might expect, then, this Dean of Continuing Education, being a proponent of commodious education, conspicuously avoids giving any sort of factual accounting for her claims that “We are in the middle of a paradigm shift” and that “technology has influenced education for the better.” What facts *could* she give to support such sweeping claims? What information has she been accessing? And how has she evaluated this information for its facticity? Having some familiarity with Thomas Kuhn’s notion of a paradigm shift, I am amazed that she is able to escape the historical situation she and the rest of us are in and say with such confidence that we are, indeed, “in the middle” of such a paradigm shift in education.

But the evaluation skill must be more than just being able to tell whether the information ‘accessed’ is factually accurate or not. A more fundamental ‘skill’ is being able to distinguish between information and a sales pitch. So called information can be ‘given’ for a whole host of reasons, very few of which are simply for the benefit of the one to whom it is given. A salesman, for example, can give perfectly accurate information, but his purpose is to sell something, usually something not needed. Producing indiscriminate spenders is, of course, one of the goals of a commodious education, so the development of this evaluative skill is not to be encouraged. The development of such a ‘skill’ would require that we ask students to consider questions like “What is the measure of a good life?”; “Is there an order or a purpose to this life that would constitute its true fulfillment?”; “What is the value of money, possessions, and time compared to the value of a fine or virtuous soul?” and to seek the answers to such questions with the fervor that is their proper due. Clearly, the development of this kind of evaluative skill would be counterproductive to an economy of profit, and would not be included in the curricula of

commodious education. Thus we find the Dean of Commodious Education manifesting the symptoms of this unused evaluative skill:

Practically every advertisement, TV commercial or piece of information about anything has an Internet site where you can get more information or, for that matter, buy something. Think of the uses of the Internet for learning. As a college student in apparel merchandizing, my daughter went onto the Internet and visited the sites of the French and Italian couturier houses. It would have been months before she got access to those collections in traditional print form. (Audley)

The connection here between “getting information” and “buying something” is telling, as is the unquestioned assumption that apparel merchandizing is an academic subject. There is little doubt in anyone’s mind that by far the most common use of the internet is not simply to “get information”—not for the sake of the learner *as a human being* who by nature (as Aristotle says) desires to know—but, rather, it is to buy and sell. Everything from batteries to bombs to babes. The most common internet suffix is .com. The sites with the most hits invariably have something to do with sports, or sex, or both. The internet is primarily a marketplace, not a school. Unless, of course, one thinks of school as a kind of marketplace too—a place which instills the practices and the ‘skills’ of buying and selling. Commodious educators serve their cause by making this false identity between school and marketplace, and making it in such a way as to present it as something to be cheerful about.

Of a piece with the devaluing of human beings by seeing them as both users of commodities and as commodities themselves, is the commodious educator’s speaking of them as objects in general—complex objects, to be sure, but objects nonetheless. Not only does this remove all moral and ethical questions from the commode of education, it also removes the mystery and wonder of what it means to be human and the joy that can come from contemplating the beauty

of Creation. By considering the human organism an object, we make it both explainable and usable—explainable by modern neuro-psychology (or some other variant of the sciences), and usable by the politically powerful. For the commodious educator, this is a source of optimism: the more science tells us about the human organism, the quicker and more effectively “we”—those select few who are in the know—can use it to complete the educational goal of turning out “productive citizens” to serve the economy of profit. Thus, we find the sort of educator that is unique to our time: the Cheerful Nihilist.

Once again, the Dean shows her commodious colors:

Indirectly, technology has helped us understand better how humans learn. Through technology that scans the brain in action and other research that is being reported with greater frequency, scientists have learned how the brain receives information and then processes it. Using this information, teachers can more effectively and efficiently facilitate learning for all sorts and kinds of students.

Noticeably absent from this effervescent passage are any specifics that might help us understand it. Any (noncommodiously) educated reader will want to have certain expressions clarified, such as “how humans learn.” How they learn *what*? Which humans does she have in mind? Another puzzling expression is “the brain in action.” Is the brain ever *inactive*? And what, precisely, is the connection between brain activity and learning? I can think of many examples of someone whose brain activity might be very high, but who fails to learn much at all. What do these scientists—the ones who have “learned how the brain receives information and then processes it”—take to be the “information” that *the brain* receives? And what makes them think that the “brain processes” they observe constitute “learning”? (Wouldn’t you already have to know what learning is in order to associate or identify a brain process with it?) When they “learned” that this is what the brain does when someone learns, what “information” did *their*

brains receive and what “processes” did *their* brains go through in order to determine that they were discovering the secret machinations of “learning”? (Did *they* learn this, or did their *brains* learn it? Or was it cooperative learning? And was it “brain friendly” learning?) It is hard to imagine a more stunning piece of nonsense than this passage; or a clearer indication of how commodious education wastes the intellect.

As in our current public economy where we have a political system that safeguards the private exploitation of the public wealth and health, a commodious education exists to safeguard the private exploitation of our nation’s greatest wealth and future health: our youth. It is precisely this sort of education that is lauded and promoted by Screwtape, the senior devil who gives the dinner speech in Hell in C.S. Lewis’s satirical piece, “Screwtape Proposes a Toast.” As Screwtape says, “the real end [sought by those in Hell] is the destruction of the individual. For only individuals can be saved or damned, can become sons of the Enemy or food for us.” (68) “Do you realize how we have succeeded in reducing so many of the human race into ciphers? This has not come about by accident.” (57) In short, Screwtape explains, it has happened through a transformation of education: “The basic principle of the new education is to be that dunces and idlers must not be made to feel inferior to intelligent and industrious pupils. That would be ‘undemocratic’.” (65)

The Education of Community

I now want to move to the other pole: the education of community. To clarify the coordinates of this pole, it’s perhaps best to begin with a practical and particular case. In many public schools one of the recent changes in the curriculum has been the elimination of what used to be called Home Economics, and the introduction of a new “science”: Family and Consumer Science. Now, this may seem to be merely a change in nomenclature, but the truth is that *Home Economics* has

been eliminated from the curriculum. It is true that many of the same skills that used to be taught in Home Economics—sewing, cooking, money management, child care, and so on—are now taught in Family and Consumer Science, but what is missing from the “science,” *because* it is now a science, are the underlying but invisible attributes that once made these skills valuable *to the home*. (The same attributes that have been eliminated in making sex education a matter of merely “informing the public” so that students can practice “safe sex.”) By teaching these skills as part of learning a “science,” modern educators necessarily leave out any question or discussion about the humanizing effect in the practice of these skills. There is a sense in which they are quite different from other skills, such as accessing the web, creating Power Point presentations or learning to program your DVR. For the skills associated with home economics have always been learned and practiced with the aim of serving others rather than one’s self alone. To view these skills as part of the practice of a “science” is to ignore or misunderstand their uniquely human purpose, and to leave out of one’s economy those invisibles that make it an economy of the *home*.

But an economy of community—and the home is a community—by definition includes these invisibles and gives to them their proper place in the hierarchy of goods. It can easily be seen that if these invisibles—i.e., the virtues of trust, mutual respect, diligence, patience, thrift, discipline, forgiveness, and so on—are included in an economy, they will occupy a higher place than the material goods with whose management they are concerned. For example, in an economy that includes thrift, *how* money and material goods are managed will be far more important than *how much* there is to manage. The spirit of gift-giving will be far more important than the gifts themselves. To give an example of pertinence to those who teach the humanities, developing a student’s ability to read literature will be more important than the particular works of literature read with them. This is not to say that material possessions, gifts, certain works of

literature, etc. are unimportant, nor that some are not better than others, but only that their importance *as objects* is less than the moral and intellectual virtues by which they are judged and used.

And there is another aspect to the logic of invisibles that justifies their high place in any economy that includes them. It is in the peculiar nature of these invisibles that they can only increase by their being expended, not by being saved or hoarded. The more they are distributed, the more numerous they become and the stronger they become. They are not “commodities,” for there is no limit to them. And if they were commodities, it would make no sense to compete for them; they would destroy the commodity market by making it irrelevant. Thus, a commodious education, like an economy of profit, necessarily excludes these invisibles from its curriculum. But an education of community includes in its curriculum both the visibles and the invisibles; both wisdom and knowledge. It exists to both form and inform. It is, in a word, humane. This “home economy” is the economy of community Berry has in mind. And its education is one that primarily aims at the development of individuals who are thoughtful, cultivated, careful and independent. An educator with this aim *cannot* see the student as an object, but only as a subject. And, as a subject, someone like himself, possessed of a will, an intellect, and a heart, and therefore capable of success or failure. Such an educator will not see his teaching as a business deal, an exchange of goods or services from which he seeks to benefit himself or “society,” but as the privileged task of passing on a gift to another soul. C.S. Lewis, in *The Abolition of Man*, describes the contrast this way:

Where the old [education] initiated, the new [education] merely “conditions.” The old dealt with its pupils as grown birds deal with young birds when they teach them to fly: the new deals with them more as the poultry-keeper deals with young birds—making them thus or thus for purposes of which the birds know nothing. In a word,

the old was a kind of propagation—men transmitting manhood to men: the new is merely propaganda. (34)

Although Lewis is here speaking primarily of the formation and transmission of proper passions, the principle applies across the curriculum. For one of the goals in, say, the sciences is to form and transmit orderly and critical thought. Both the mind and the heart are in need of this formation; but in either case, the end is not to produce well-built machines or even well-informed decision-makers, but well-formed souls. Education-as-propagation can therefore take place only if that education is a manifestation of practical love.

As Berry points out, practical love begins and is rooted in the “giving in marriage.” The same kind of trust, commitment, and mutual care that exists in marriage—or *ought* to exist in marriage—is present in any communal relationship. He says:

[T]he fall of community reveals how precious and how necessary community is. For when community falls, so must fall all the things that only community life can engender and protect: the care of the old, the care and education of children, family life, neighborly work, the handing down of memory, the care of the earth, respect for nature and the lives of wild creatures. . . . And so here, at the very heart of community life, we find not something to sell as in the public market, but this momentous giving. If the community cannot protect this giving, it can protect nothing—and our time is proving that this is so. (Berry 138)

But

[M]arriage, family life, friendship, neighborhood, and other personal connections do not depend exclusively or even primarily on justice—though, of course, they all must try for it. They depend also on trust, patience, respect, mutual help, forgiveness—in other words, the *practice* of love, as opposed to the mere *feeling* of love. (Berry 139)

Included in this list of “personal connections” is also that of teacher to student. Teaching, too, is an exercise in practical love. Commodious education, however, in “liberating” students and teachers from the principles inherent in community life, has inevitably become a matter of mere political power.

So now, with these coordinates clarified, we can better see the pole we are at. We can see that the second sort of education will inevitably gravitate towards the practice and personification of proper care: care for one’s family, friends, neighbors, countrymen—even one’s enemies. In an education of community, knowledge-as-information will be subservient to knowledge-as-practice; good character will be even more important than accurate information; power will be governed by practical love. What gets taught, and how it gets taught, will be determined and shaped by the idea that an education—like friendship, citizenship, or marriage—cannot be bought or sold, only given and received. Unlike commodities—which have a price, and are finite and temporary—the elements of an education of community will be taught and arranged in order of their universal, infinite, and eternal value; their pricelessness. In an economy that includes such priceless things, there is no danger and no fear of these things being inequitably distributed, because a universally valuable, infinite, and eternal good can not be diminished by its distribution, even a universal, infinite, and eternal distribution. And any attempt to make such priceless goods unavailable to anyone, or to hide them, or to deny their existence is a confession of the worst sort of ignorance: ignorance of even the possibility of love. In an economy of community, practical love for others is itself the highest virtue because without it no community is possible, no matter what other virtues or goods might exist. Thus, in an education of community, this virtue is the foundation of both the content and the form of education. As Socrates says in Plato’s *Symposium*, love is divine when it is rightly directed and when it is rightly given: for the good of our fellow man. So it is in the shaping of this spirit of love—to

love what is worthy of our love and to hate what is worthy of our hate; to desire what is most desirable and to abhor what is most horrible—that the humanities and the fine arts can be both most *effective* and most *affective*. In these arts we are *shown* the possibilities of good and evil, even the uneasy mixture of them within an individual soul or community. But these things are shown in such a way as to test and to shape our passional responses to them. As Plato says, the civil war between our reason and our appetites will be decided by the disposition of our spirit. The danger in commodious education, as it is in an economy of profit, is the shriveling of the spirit. A commodious education produces spiritless people: “men without chests.” (*The Abolition of Man* 35-36) Only a passionate desire for the good will ensure a victory for an economy of community. It is that passion, that desire for the good (and that hatred for evil), that can (and ought to be) evoked and shaped in the study and practice of the arts and the humanities. But such practical love can only be transmitted in an education of community.

We must look, then, to the ultimate giver, the ultimate teacher of such love. He is the one who said, “You cannot serve both God and Mammon.” (Matthew 6:24)

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