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## That Fine Little House

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# That Fine Little House

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I was intrigued by Sam Schuman's allegory about liberal arts education using Virginia Lee Burton's story of *The Little House*. Sam points out that it was not the little house that changed, but its neighborhood. I would argue that not only the neighborhood changed, but what went on inside the little house. Like most people, my first house was small, and the activities that went on within our house generally centered around a young family and a new career. As the years progressed, I moved to a larger house, and the activities changed from managing teenagers to grandchildren and elderly parents. Like the little house, undergraduate education has changed within and without. In the early years small liberal arts colleges, for example, were able to educate only a few. The research university and its many spinoffs brought democratization. Institutions became open to a much wider spectrum of society. This new university, rather than providing the final polish to an already established upper class, would itself be an avenue toward advancement in the world.

The University of New Mexico, for example, was founded in 1889 by Territorial Act. The first building, Hodgin Hall served to educate 108 students in two departments, Preparatory and Normal. Today, the University's main campus encompasses more than 600 acres with approximately 25,000 students. It offers more than 200 degree programs and majors. The University gave Albuquerque an intellectual life, attracted scholars from around the world, and generally transformed the city.

We know that similar accounts can be given of most of our educational institutions. Of course, the "house" or architecture of colleges and universities is often seen as merely the form of its functions, but in reality it is more. What is often dismissed as style and ornamental forms in buildings—domes and arches in Italy, for instance, or the circular kivas and D-shaped city-houses of the Anasazi—have become, over time, symbols of cultural identity. Architecture can not only embody the spirit of an age. It can stand for the spirit of a particular place and people. At the University of New Mexico, for instance, through the visionary imagination of UNM Presidents like William Tight and architects like E. B. Cristy and John Gaw Meem, the campus became a symbol of New Mexico regionalism through Pueblo Revival style buildings similar to the buildings found at Hopi, Acoma, and Zuni pueblos.

Just as architecture can stand for the spirit of a place and people, I believe that liberal education can stand for the spirit of higher education. It becomes the architectural foundation for building lives. Institutions with eccentric local identities have an immense value in the homogenizing world of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century—if they maintain their individuality.

## THAT FINE LITTLE HOUSE

Irreverent, insensitive change, which is not a part of a process of continuing transformation but an abrupt disconnection with the past, destroys local character and identity. So, the idea of an education that simply gives individuals the methods and skills they need to get ahead in the world is almost certainly inadequate because “job preparation,” in an advanced technical economy, requires morally and socially sensitive people capable of responsible action. It is even more inadequate in preparing citizens for active participation in a complex world. Obviously, with a technologically advanced economy, a skilled and educated work force is essential, but in an enormously complex and interdependent world, a baccalaureate-educated and informed citizenry is even more essential.

The current scrutiny of universities comes from outside of the academy. State legislatures, some feeling the pinch of less funding on the federal level, call for greater accountability. Interest groups on both ends of the political spectrum press their agendas through the power of the dollar and their political clout. Trustees want to apply the principles that made them successful in business to the university, often to the displeasure of the faculty. Within the university, departments and colleges skirmish over shrinking budgets and bridle at the criticisms being aimed at them. Administrators walk the tightrope between working with those who hold the purse strings and those who think they know the best ways to spend money. Notions of a liberal education will be displaced by politically motivated gifts and endowments that increasingly determine what will be taught and who will do the teaching.

Besides concerns about the “educational enterprise” as maneuvered by the marketplace, education in most colleges and universities is fragmented. Students experience the curriculum as a collection of courses rather than as an integrated plan of learning. This encourages students to compartmentalize their learning rather than to make connections. Universities graduate students who are primarily focused on one field but who will need to function in an increasingly complex and interdisciplinary environment in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

Universities emphasize choice through a distribution of core requirements that are often not more than a smattering of isolated courses. Our universities are composed of isolated little houses—departments of culture, geography, language, politics, occupation and economic class. A positive transformation would be to break political fiefdoms of separate departments by extracting scholars from each department for interdisciplinary courses and programs.

In addition, uneven preparation of entering freshmen makes the responsibility of teaching more challenging. Some students entering our universities and colleges were afforded a vast array of privileges allowing involvement in the arts, literature, science, and other fields. However, for other students now entering colleges and universities, experiences are limited. As educators we are aware of the differences and revise our thinking and curricula in ways that will bring the liberal arts lessons into lives lacking the valuable experiences that we enjoyed and through which our lives were enriched. Students with previous experiences are often enrolled in general education courses with students who have minimal or no academic background. Consequently, instructors must deal with vast gaps in knowledge and understanding between the most advanced and the least prepared.

Another obstacle that we must overcome has to do with the idea of liberal arts as rooted in the cult of uselessness. I’m sure that, once the industrial and residential

skyscraper developments around the “little house” that Sam describes made the little house obsolete, unfashionable and outdated, it was characterized as worthless. We are often faced with the same dilemma. As corporations push toward technical/vocational curricula and as more and more students believe that the mission of universities and colleges is to prepare them for the marketplace, liberal arts curricula are attacked as antiquated and useless. Almost everything about “practical” education today is still based on the centuries-old assumption that useful work is all that can possibly matter. Indeed, the work ethos in the United States has probably been the culprit in the long decline of the liberal arts. But as automation threatens to make even ordinary jobs an anachronism for thousands of people, and as medical science continues to prolong the human life span, the technological future may also be one in which work is no longer the key factor in dignifying human life. This ominous prospect is usually ignored by curriculum planners in job-oriented programs.

Liberal learning skills are important throughout the university curriculum. We should strive for a more systematic and integrated learning experience for our students. We need to instill in our students those abilities, skills, ideas, and dispositions that shape their actions. Critical thinking, creative thinking and problem solving strategies, effective communication, and computer literacy are some of the transferable skills necessary to function as educated persons. In addition, I see historical perspectives, global awareness, human behavior and social institutions, literature and the arts, natural sciences and technology as essential liberal arts objectives. A liberal education can also be characterized by a climate of openness and inquiry.

In his essay Sam Schuman writes, “The problem was not inherent in either type of structure: it derived from the competition over limited turf between entities which were created to do very different things, and hence took very different shapes and made incompatible demands on the space they occupied together.” The human world of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century seems caught between two dominant and conflicting forces: first, the desperate need to minimize human conflict by using modern technology to help establish a worldwide community; and second, the urgent struggle on the part of minority cultures and fragile ethnic environments to protect themselves from the homogenizing influence of world states. We, therefore, need to design a human habitat of much better character and quality than the mess we’re actually stuck with. We arrive at the recognition that civilization needs an honorable dwelling place, and that the conditions of making that place ought to depend on what is most honorable in our nature: on love, hope, generosity, and aspiration.

Educational institutions have a special social responsibility to be future-oriented. The present path of human development is unsustainable, inequitable, and therefore unstable. Decisions made will be crucial in determining the human prospects on planet Earth for the next thousand years. Changes in the direction of that path will require entirely new ways of thinking about individual responsibility. Major innovations will be necessary in the institutional arrangements by which the affairs of society are managed. Totally unprecedented levels of interdisciplinary collaboration will be required among the physical, biological, and social sciences, engineering, and the humanities. New modes of communication and cooperation will have to be forged among government, business and industry, higher education, and private organizations and between industrial and developing countries.

## THAT FINE LITTLE HOUSE

The vitality and spirit of the “little house” must remain an important component of a baccalaureate education. Perhaps even the little house itself, which can serve as the Honors Center on many campuses, can remain. It can serve not only as a symbol of liberal learning but a place where it actually takes place.

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