

## 1990 Distinguished Teacher of the Year

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Thank you, Provost Berry.

President Catanese, distinguished colleagues and guests, students, friends and relatives:

I extend my personal congratulations to those students who have been honored today. We are all very proud of you. In addition, I would like to thank the FAU students who devoted their time and energies to the Distinguished Teacher selection process. This is indeed a high honor.

I appreciate this award and the opportunity to say a few words about history as a discipline, the role of the liberal arts in the educational process and the particular mission of universities.

In Jane Austen's novel *Northanger Abbey*, the heroine, Catherine Moreland, reflects:

I read...[history] a little as a duty, but it tells me nothing that does not either vex or weary me. The quarrels of popes and kings, with wars and pestilences in every page; the men all so good for nothing, and hardly any women at all – it is very tiresome....<sup>1</sup>

She also wonders at the historian's courage in purposely writing great volumes of history solely "to torment" little boys and girls. How many people share Austen's negative view of history and see it as nothing more than a boring study of irrelevant dates, wars and rulers which fails to tell us in an interesting and intelligible fashion about the experiences of humankind?

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<sup>1</sup> Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey* in *The Novels of Jane Austen*, vol. 5, 3d ed., (Oxford University Press, 1988), 108-109.

Recently 14 million viewers (more than the entire population of the Confederacy) watched Ken Burns' "The Civil War" on public television. This superbly crafted program on a popular subject succeeded in breaking through the historical amnesia that grips many Americans.<sup>2</sup> Without live action, animation or much color, millions watched 11 hours of history largely based on old black and white photographs, diaries and letters. This was an amazing feat in a historically illiterate country infatuated with newness and action.

A recent survey noted that two-thirds of this country's 17-year-olds cannot correctly place the Civil War between 1850 and 1900, and only 25 percent know when Abraham Lincoln was president.<sup>3</sup> If some of these 17-year-olds watched the Ken Burns production, they may have discovered for the first time that truth indeed is stranger than fiction, and historic events and characters can be far more intriguing than "General Hospital."

History, however, is more: than entertainment. It is a discipline that uses the knowledge and understanding of the past to challenge the present and the future. History reflects concern for human values, provides a base of common knowledge and is a critical part of the coherent vision of an educated person.

Abraham Lincoln recognized the importance of the historical process when he addressed Congress on the subject of compensated emancipation of the slaves in December, 1862: "Fellow-citizens, we cannot escape history. We of this Congress and this administration will be remembered in spite of ourselves."<sup>4</sup> Not only is the Civil War still remembered, studied and interpreted; it has significance for our own time. Ken Burns noted that Civil War period's imperial presidency, developing feminist movement, civil rights issues, suspect Wall Street traders making millions, incompetent generals and weapons of unusual destruction remain relevant subjects in the United States today.<sup>5</sup>

One cannot understand American history, however, without learning about western civilization. This knowledge, in turn, reflects our cultural norms. Introduces the complexities of reality, informs our public choices, conveys a sense of civic responsibility in the Jeffersonian tradition and provides us with a common heritage.

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<sup>2</sup> *Newsweek*, October 8, 1990.

<sup>3</sup> Jonathan Alter and Lydia Denworth, "A (Vague) Sense of History," *Newsweek*, Fall/Winter, 1990, 31-33.

<sup>4</sup> Abraham Lincoln, "Message to Congress, December 1, 1863" in Henry S. Commager, ed., *Documents of American History*, (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1963), 403-405.

<sup>5</sup> *Palm Beach Post*, September 22, 1990.

Once we comprehend our own civilization, study of foreign cultures provides us with fresh perspectives and challenges our own societal assumptions and traditions. We further refine and clarify our perception of ourselves through increased awareness of others.

History gives us a sense of direction. Knowing where we have been helps us decide where we are and where we want to go, although a knowledge of history does not make us prognosticators of the future. We cannot simplistically transfer past events to a future framework, but as the civil rights activist Eleanor Holmes Norton has observed: "There is no need to repeat bad history."<sup>6</sup> Consciously or unconsciously, however, we use the so-called lessons of the past to inform our present. For example, last week Senate Majority Leader George Mitchell tried unsuccessfully to persuade uncommitted members of Congress to champion the questionable budget agreement by referring to Benjamin Franklin's reluctant support of the newly drafted, controversial Constitution of the United States two centuries ago. And in conjunction with German reunification, many observers have alluded to World Wars One and Two and the historic dangers of a united Germany.

History's omnipresence should stimulate: voracious appetites for history in all of us. In fact, many of us not only watch historical programs on television, but we read historical non-fiction, autobiographies and novels, watch documentary films, support local historical and preservation societies and try to discover our roots through genealogical investigation.

This regard for history, however, is shared by a minority, and many blame American historical amnesia on the schools. For example, the diplomatic historian Robert Ferrell recently argued that the teaching of history on the secondary level is so poor that individual action is totally ineffective.<sup>7</sup> I am an idealist, however, and I firmly believe that each teacher can make a difference.

Everyone probably remembers a teacher from our academic careers who profoundly influenced us. Why was this teacher so impressive? She or he must have had comprehensive knowledge of the subject and skills in communication. In addition, good teachers believe in a vision or purpose of education and see education as a cooperative rather than an adversarial enterprise. The popular stereotype of Professor Kingsfield as portrayed by John Houseman in the television program "Paper Chase" may be

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<sup>6</sup> Elaine Partow, ed., *The Quotable Woman, 1800-1981*, (New York: Facts on file, 1982), 431.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Ferrell, *OAH Newsletter*, February, 1990.

entertaining, but it does not lead to successful learning. Constructive history teachers want their students to do well; they enjoy being challenged in the classroom, respect individual thinking and encourage class participation. They engage in scholarly research which informs and revitalizes their teaching. They help students to learn how to read documents, weigh sources, interpret contradictory evidence, grasp the essentials of historical era and then write about it in easily comprehensible, direct English. A good teacher in any field should respect the facts, value alternative points of view and refuse to suppress unpleasant or contradictory data.

Additional suggestions for the teaching of history at the secondary level include: (1) teaching more history and separating the discipline from social studies; (2) adopting textbooks which challenge students and are not "dumbed down" to the lowest common denominator; and (3) mainstreaming the history of women and minorities into all history classes so as to avoid a one-dimensional, unrealistic, skewed view. History students should learn about primary sources, personal artifacts, oral history and family history. Ideally, students gain an appreciation of the value of history by "doing" history. As students learn to collect and evaluate evidence objectively and relate the cause and effect of events within a time perspective, they are learning analytical skills important in all academic disciplines as well as in life itself.

History is the most ecumenical of the social sciences and humanities, and a knowledge of history is an indispensable requirement for teaching the liberal arts including literature, languages, philosophy, the fine arts, mathematics and the natural and social sciences. Critics of the liberal arts, however, suggest that none of the above subjects is particularly valuable. They argue that: (1) liberal arts are inherently impractical, esoteric and unworldly; (2) a liberal arts degree is a poor credential in the job market; and (3) liberal arts are outdated and out of step with the times. Perhaps some of these critics were persuaded by rhetoric in the last presidential campaign suggesting that "liberal" represents deviant or unacceptable behavior and/or philosophy in our society.

The word "liberal" means open-minded, tolerant, generous and favoring progress and reform. How could we find any better attributes for our educational program in this country? The liberal arts impart basic life skills: (1) the ability to read, write and speak with clarity and precision, (2) the habit of disciplined inquiry, (3) some understanding of other times and cultures, (4) a sense of the interlocking of our world in its sociological, biological and physical dimensions, and (5) an awareness of the larger issues of our life and era and their significance on a personal, ethical and global scale.

A liberal arts education prepares us for the future, while narrow training prepares us for the world that was. We face a new world order with few historical precedents.

Liberal arts provides us with tools needed to meet the unknown, while enriching and challenging each one of us. The Florida State University System has recognized these truths, in part, with the General Education and Gordon Rule requirements.

The first universities were established seven centuries ago, making Florida's universities youthful in comparison. These early institutions were established to convey knowledge to others, and this is still the primary function of all universities. The liberal arts formed the basis of instruction then, and worthy universities today struggle to maintain this scholarly commitment in spite of the vocationalism challenge.

A Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching study in 1986 found that 90 percent of high school students see college as training for a specific career rather than as a place to become a more thoughtful and effective citizen.<sup>8</sup> While recognizing the needs and desires of students, intellectually committed universities must focus on a quality education rather than on careerism. Otherwise, they are betraying the student. They must encourage excellence in teaching and research in all disciplines as well as dedication to learning. Finally, a strong integrated curriculum related to an educational whole is necessary to provide all students with the great commonalities of learning.

Successful universities cannot exist in a vacuum, but must serve as a focus for the intellectual life of the surrounding communities. Effective faculty take the educational process beyond their institutions and involve the community in the life of the university. Teachers and administrators must keep on demonstrating to the public that their institutions are vital to society.

Teachers are the filament of the educational web. In some parts of the country, university, college, community college and high school faculty meet periodically to share knowledge. Interaction with others in their discipline produces many dividends for faculty as well as students. This is just another reminder that people, not institutions, are the basis of the educational process.

Healthy institutions, regardless of age, are always in the throes of trial and renewal; consequently, FAU is not alone in facing challenges. Productive transformation occurs in an atmosphere of tolerance for the individual and with a community of spirit. Faculty, students and administrators must agree on the basic goals of the institution. Universities striving for excellence (as well as their funding agencies) must remember that faculty, students and the library are the essence of a university and that education shapes the very future of our society. When revenues fall short, education should be the

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<sup>8</sup> See Ernest L. Boyer's *College: The Undergraduate Experience in America*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1987).

last area to be cut, not the first. Reliance on lottery funds for essentials clearly reveals the educational game of chance that is being played in Florida, and everyone suffers.

FAU has an able faculty and committed students. I am confident that with thoughtful utilization of talents and resources and a clearly articulated philosophy developed through consensus, Florida Atlantic University can join with other fine educational institutions in preparing students for the challenges of the twenty-first century. We need to direct, not be victims of, technology and the forces of change. We must remember that education is the debt the present owes to the future, and discharge our responsibilities with imagination, dedication and wisdom.

Thank you very much.