

**Open Letter on the Jane Addams Andrew/Carnegie Fellowship
Class IX**

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This essay appears in its original letter form. It is a year-end reflection on the ninth class of Jane Addams Fellows (1999-2000) that emphasizes philanthropic studies as an exercise in liberal education. It was written on 14 June 2000.

Dear Dan and Wendy:

Yesterday's year-end retreat prompts these reflections on the Jane Addams Fellows Program.

After lunch, when we went around the table and asked everyone how their minds have changed over the course of the year, Shana captured it best. She said that when she arrived last August she had worked out for herself what she thought about philanthropy and came to this program to move further toward her goal of someday heading a nonprofit organization. She didn't claim that she knew all the answers, but she had answered the basic questions to her own satisfaction. Ten months later her answers had become questions – new questions as well as old ones reconsidered and rethought. If she arrived with provisional answers she was leaving with an enduring set of questions.

Shana's comments and those of the others mirror those we've heard over the past nine years: *studying philanthropy the way we study it permanently changes the way people think*. That confirms my conviction that *the study of philanthropy is best conceived of as an exercise in liberal education*. In some cases we bring Fellows into a new kind of intellectual life; in other cases we merely confirm a natural inclination to be reflective.

You may recall that along the way I've said that if we're successful Jane Addams Fellows will pursue their diverse careers determined to be *public*

teachers: people who can help others think their way through the complex problems and issues that are the core agenda of life in a democratic civil society. The Fellows themselves will also find in philanthropy *help in their search for meaning, purpose, and hope in their lives*. They will practice Whitehead's advice to *seek simplicity – and distrust it*, and take seriously Harry Williams' caution that *systems of explanation illuminate up to a point, and then falsify*. I know of no better mnemonic reminders in a sound-bite culture of simplistic doctrine and litmus-test ideology. Jane Addams Fellows have grasped the value of Karl Weintraub's maxim that a liberal education is willingness to confront *the complexity of things*.

The retreat is one of the times during the year when we review the program as a whole together. We talked at length about the basic elements of the program: the core seminar; the directed reading with other faculty members; the internships; the three dozen or so meetings with leaders from all three sectors and with foundations and nonprofit organizations; the so-called "coffees" where we talked about books the Fellows themselves suggested we read and discuss. In passing we talked about their opportunity to attend the national conference of their choice, and for the first time this year, the opportunity for them to attend the Council on Foundations conference.

Yesterday they devoted most of their attention to advising Wendy and me about how to improve things for their successors (for they are quite willing to point out to us where we fell short this year and how things could be better next time around). We had talked earlier and at some length about their participation in The Fund Raising School, an experience that wins high marks from the Fellows every year.

The Fellows talked with candor and humility about their efforts to come together as a group -- and about their efforts to determine "where RLP is coming from." They reflected on their role in the painful selection process

for “JAF-X,” recalling the long but intense hours of discussion as an important “bonding experience.” They felt proud of their role as organizers and preparers and cooks and hosts of the cookout last Saturday in our back yard, another bonding experience. Passing allusions to a variety of activities and events and relationships outside my ken suggested a rich flow of informal experience that programs like this can only hope support rather than disrupt the things that are structured and planned.

We touched on readings and on people, both sources of ideas and insight. There was a small core of readings that won favor with all of them; there were some readings that hadn’t registered at all, largely because of my failure to limit the scope of reading so that we could discuss things more carefully. The program exposes them to other approaches to the study of philanthropy, other points of view, other values. That happens in a context in which their own personal abilities and performance are tested in the reality of life in community organizations: the quandary of the Fellow who found a first internship for an excellent organization but working for an unresponsive and even uninterested supervisor, and left that for an internship under an excellent supervisor but working for a terrible organization. Another Fellow working for a start-up non-profit, and a third writing a position paper on diversity for a long-standing non-profit still trying to define itself. Echoes – and sometimes clanging cymbals -- of the internship experiences could be heard in our seminar discussions all year long.

I was of course most interested in the seminar because that is where the philosophy of philanthropy as liberal education is hammered out. The seven basic questions (plus or minus two) were asked of noble causes and uncertain organizations as well as of the Fellows themselves: *What is going on? What is **really** going on? What business is it of yours? What (as Lenin famously demanded to know) is to be done? Why **us**?* And so on.

We started with an effort to provide an overview of the subject; the outline I left with the Fellows yesterday compresses what I have to say as compactly as possible – or as compactly as I can make the case. It was prepared for a group of senior fund raising professionals and so it is a reminder to balance the demands of How and Why. The first semester is largely a matter of providing a knowledge base so that we have something in common to talk about and explore together. We didn't do that very well this year; in the past we've done better. The second semester was devoted explicitly to philanthropy and liberal education. Each year I realize once more than the notions of "liberal education" and "general education" that are part of my cultural literacy are not shared with the younger generation (literally *half-a-century* younger than I).

The Fellows are well-trained in academic skills (hence their high grade point averages and academic honors and awards) but are not for the most part well- or widely-read, especially in history, the classics, and the humanities. They are politically correct in their insistence that minority cultures have their proper place and are given due respect. Because most of them are ideologically liberal in their worldview, it is very difficult to gain a fair hearing for "traditional" ideas and values. I am obligated to provide a conservative or other contrarian perspective whenever one is lacking (which is most of the time).

The seminar, given its own biases, is a seminar on the philanthropic *tradition* with an emphasis on the history of philanthropy in *Western* culture. At the same time, no Fellow in the course of the nine years has been unwilling to engage with me or with other Fellows on basic ideas, convictions, points of view, values. We have added new readings each year drawn from non-Western cultures (the seminar has never been limited to the West). Some of the readings have been entirely new to me. I think I can say that every philosophy brought into the discussion gets a fair

thought, action, and passion, and fails when it fails to keep those in consciousness and in balance.

Over the years most of the Fellows were social science majors as undergraduates. My guess is that 80-90 percent of the 120 applicants for JAF-X were social science majors.) That means that most of them come to the program with thin backgrounds, if any, in philosophy (including

ethics), literature (especially the Western classics), and history (of any kind). When I decided to add Erasmus to the reading list in the second semester I realized I would have to surround him with other important figures of the age, especially Luther, but without some shared previous exposure to Cicero and Augustine and Aquinas, I could do very little. As you know from the essay, “Thoughts on the Group Topic,” that I wrote for the discussions on the idea of tolerance, study of Erasmus and Luther might help us understand real world contemporary phenomena like the fall of Yugoslavia and the savagery of ethnic conflict in the world. I failed this year but I will try again.

The ambiguity of philanthropic concepts like tolerance came out well in our discussions despite my (nostalgic) lament about the thinness of cultural literacy and core knowledge in contemporary American life and education. We got better at it during the course of the year, partly by reading and discussing literature as well as history and philosophy. My own tolerance was sorely tested by some of the works that the Fellows recommended that we all read and discuss -- or that *I* read to advance my education in what these young people have discovered to be of value to them. Ideas in the context of literature reveal subtleties that the prevailing academic discourse of cognitive rationality ignores or can't control. Literature brings us back to the individual and personal that are the soul of philanthropy. Is there a more engaging survey of the prevailing ideologies than The Curious Enlightenment of Professor Caritat? Sharper insight into human frailty than The Screwtape Letters? (Wendy: Next year we'll read Pilgrim's Progress as well as Geertz's essay on “the social history of the moral imagination.”)

The personal and individual experience of the internship blends well with the personal and individual insights of literature; the history of the Social Gospel balances well the polemic of The Contract With America. Twenty Years at Hull-House gives individual and personal meaning to social

scientific studies of poverty and the inner city. “The Gospel of Wealth” is an effective individual and personal statement that reveals the shallowness of most corporate pronouncements on the bottom line.

Reprise: The Jane Addams – Andrew Carnegie Fellows Program is an exercise in the study of philanthropy as liberal education. The word “study” is interpreted to mean “to explore.” Fellows are encouraged to “learn for oneself” rather than for others or for honors and recognition. Fellows are expected to work together as well as independently; this is not a program in which participants are focused only on themselves. Fellows are required to balance study and work and to test both against the other. Fellows are given heuristic questions and maxims to serve as mnemonic reminders of the ambiguity and complexity of “voluntary interventions in the lives of others for their benefit” and other dangerously ambitious notions. Heuristics rather than axiomatics, rules of thumb rather than fixed parameters, questions rather than formulas, inquiry rather than doctrine, shared exploration and discovery rather than pre-packaged knowledge and information, heuristics rather than algorithms.

It means a great deal to tease out the endlessly unfolding implications of the basic if banal starting point: *Things go wrong; things could always be better*. It is humbling to find that one’s own convictions have their limits, one’s own will and determination can fall short, that passion can fuel action but confuse thought. From the too-simple to the too-complex and back again. As I discovered the other day in an essay by Michael Oakeshott : Milton’s prescient phrase in “Samson Agonistes” when the messenger brings word of the death of Samson, to “tell us the sum, the circumstances defer.” Both sum and circumstances are what we’re about.

For me the most gratifying and reassuring aspect of working with these young people the past decade is that despite the decades of time that

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separate us we are able to talk, share ideas and opinions, influence each other, learn from each other, even become in a real sense *friends*.

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