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To: Ray Handlan

From: Bob Payton

Subject: Intergenerational dialogue

When I turned 75 last year it occurred to me that 75 is a "teachable moment" - that is, a life-event that can be used as a teaching and learning experience. Seventy-five is a time to make an assessment; it is also a time to summarize whatever it is that one would like to pass on to a successor generation. My notes carry three labels: old age, grandfather, and wisdom. I recognize myself as authentically old; I am newly a grandfather, for the second time; and if I've learned anything from my life experience it is time to pass it on.

That's the first point. The second point is borrowed from an essay on old age by Cicero: "Old age has to be fought against." There is clinical evidence as well as lessons learned from experience and observation to encourage old people to remain active - mentally as well as socially and physically. The third point is that senior and retired faculty members may feel a special need to be intellectually engaged with their peers.

My proposal is that we organize a discussion group of older liberal arts faculty members who would respond positively to being part of a continuing discussion group, perhaps meeting once a month for structured but informal discussion - "exploratory discourse" is the term I've used in my teaching. We will try out this idea at a dinner meeting later this month. I've proposed that we talk about the events of September 11 from the perspective of the liberal arts. I may amend that to suggest we discuss the possibility that we are in the early stages of World War III.

A discussion of this kind among a group of a dozen or twenty senior and retired faculty members would be interesting, but it might become more valuable if we could find a way to bring the faculty group together with a group of graduate students - candidates for the master of arts in philanthropic studies and the Jane Addams Fellows, for example.

What do aging academics think about the issue? What do young graduate students think? Such a discussion is analogous to the conversations that grandparents and grandchildren rarely have in our society and culture, a conversation that skips the generation in between. The elders have left the scene of the action; the young people are not yet in it. Each brings a perspective and critique different from those of the generation in charge of the world at the moment. The intergenerational dialogue between elders and young people is not heard by the society at large; the voice of educated people whose knowledge is grounded in the liberal arts has been dismissed as irrelevant at a time when material values have come to dominate all other ways of looking at life and the world. The fact of the matter is that those running things are too busy to reflect on what they're doing, too committed to established ways of thinking and acting to be self-critical or open to new ideas and values - or to reconsider old ideas and values.

My proposal is that we bring together the elders and the young people in an intergenerational dialogue intended to intrude alternative worldviews into the larger social and political conversation.

In the process we will quickly learn whether people in the seventies and people in their twenties have anything in common to talk about; whether they can learn something from each other; whether the two groups could agree upon some advice they might jointly pass along to those age 35-65, say, who are preoccupied with the urgent and important work of making a living.

In Cicero's essay on old age he remarks in passing how important it is for young people to begin thinking about old age while they're still young. If a person wants to achieve a respected old age, Cicero argues, the path to achieve it begins in youth. That is why older people and younger people should meet and talk together and become acquainted and exchange ideas and opinions. To keep themselves relevant, they should talk about things that are going on now that can be illuminated by the past and that foreshadow the future. My generation likely won't be around to see the consequences of a third world war, but we have some first-hand knowledge of the Second World War and of the several "lesser" wars since, as well as inherited myths and histories of the "Great War" when the counting started.

I am preoccupied with such matters these days. But my generation has also had other things on its mind that we still want to talk about. A colleague and friend of mine who has just retired after a rewarding career as a professor of philosophy and I have begun to get together occasionally because it turns out we share an interest in jazz. We're both interested in the history of jazz, what of the past still survives and what of the present appeals to our older generation. There are similar shared interests in other fields of the arts, in gardening and watercolor painting and golf, and in small grandchildren.

But the interest that I propose to encourage and cultivate is the intellectual life, the culture of the liberal arts, the world of books and ideas and talk. It is from that worldview that I propose to bring together peers as determined as I am to fight against old age.

The only expenses I anticipate are those associated with occasional joint dinner meetings with the young people, most of whom will need subsidy; the expenses of an occasional visiting lecturer; the costs of copying essays and articles, perhaps purchasing an occasional book. My hope is that we plan for three years with the possibility of extending it a second three-year period. I'll add the financial details shortly.