Teaching, Learning, and the Seventh Sense

In preparing this David Underwood Lecture, I have been mindful that there are no precedents to follow. I have also realized that what happens here today sets precedents for later lectures in what we hope will be a long series. It would be inappropriate and contrary to the purpose of the lecture series to make it an annual eulogy. But it would be altogether improper and inexcusable to proceed in the first one without remembering the person in whose honor and memory the series is presented.

David Underwood was some kind of man, some kind of dean: unimposing, candid, a practitioner of common sense. Maybe it was his sense of irony that made him that way. I recall that not long before he died he got a hearty chuckle out of a crack by a former dean at the University of Chicago who likened his function to that of a man in a white suit with a broom and pan who follows along behind the circus parade to tidy up after the elephants. Our distress and anguish over his death was of the kind that would not have escaped his ironic amusement. As a gentle and compassionate man he would have been sad because we were sad; but he would have broken into a broad grin at the thought of being missed. "Me?" he would ask. "You miss me?" And his surprise would be genuine. Not even his modesty could be false.

We do miss him. It was so natural for us to turn to him for counsel or encouragement. Our first thought when a problem seemed formidable was to reach for the phone and dial 239 or to intercept him as he strode across campus, arms swinging loosely and coattails flapping. The full effect of his absence reached us only gradually. It soaked in after dozens of reminders. But absence is not the right word. His powerful presence still lingers, and it will linger for a long time. The influence on us of a great teacher, it has been said, does not end when he dies, only when we do.

I was privileged to spend many hours with Dave Underwood. Time usually ran out on our conversations. When I stopped in his office or he in mine, we could stretch a ten-minute agenda into an hour. Our talks ranged far and wide. His knack for bringing the wisdom of the ages to bear on the most mundane of problems always intrigued me. Milton, Shakespeare, Emerson, Thoreau, Mark Twain—all in his circle of friends—found their way into conversations that were supposed to be dealing with budget cuts, curriculum proposals, personnel situations, and all the other things deans and division chairmen are expected to worry about.

Our conversations never really ended. We were interrupted by phone calls, of course, by other meetings, by class obligations, and on occasion by the discovery that the time for closing up shop for the day had come and gone. Interruptions—that's what put me on my way and him on his.

I can't recall what it was that broke into our last conversation. As I remember it, I left his office that last Friday he was on campus admonishing him to pay greater heed to his health. Perhaps the time had come, I said, for him to get away from the helter-skelter that troubled him more than he let on, to begin teaching again. To begin teaching again? A foolish thought. He had never stopped teaching. And I was one who never stopped learning from him. Well, we parted. "See you next Monday," I said. "No," he replied "I'll be in Chicago until Wednesday. Nobody wanted to be on this accreditation team, so I agreed to serve." That too was characteristic of him. Extra tasks, difficult ones, sought him out.
Wednesday came, and with it the ominous news. An apprehensive mood descended on the campus. We waited, and we hoped. We cheered the good news and brooded over the bad. And then, after 18 days, came the grim report.

Interruptions we had had before, but this was too abrupt, too final. We should have had time to wrap things up, to close the agenda. I had things I wanted to ask him, to tell him, to share with him. That's what I thought. After all, we had a special relationship, he and I. We respected each other. Our values were similar. We had a lot in common. But that was the core of the uniqueness of this very unique man: he had a special relationship with all who worked with him. Rex, Bill, Betty, Luis, Jim, Sam, Bob, Ken, John... all of us. His interest in our work was genuine. He always had time and patience to help us when we needed it and the good sense to let us alone when we didn't.

We went to him with small problems and came away with large answers—answers he had helped us fashion for ourselves, answers that would fit with other problems that were sure to arise. Wisdom—that's what he brought to his task. I remember discussing with him Norman Cousins' philosophy of consequentialism. Everything makes a difference, says Cousins, and everything is possible. Dave agreed. The possible becomes the inevitable if you don't limit your chances, Cousins goes on. Right, Dave would say. Keep your options open, don't limit the chances. Don't limit the choices, either. Anticipate the consequences. What is the first rule in doing this? Underreact, he would say. When facts support your position, let things move on course, use the facts suggestively. Keep the consequences in mind. And then, unfailingly, would come the literary reference, the historical example, the illustration shaped by reading and creative thought. His sense of irony eased tensions, his engaging wit put things in perspective. He learned well the aphorism that says, Take your tasks seriously, but never yourself.

I have tried to follow that advice in preparing my remarks for presentation today. I have taken as my guide the comment by Alfred North Whitehead that it should be the chief aim of the professor to exhibit himself in his own true character that is, as an ignorant man thinking, actively utilising his small share of knowledge.

Thinking about teaching and learning leads to thought about the use of our senses. I propose to discuss with you what I refer to as the seventh sense—a sense with which most of us have been endowed, but one that too often remains undeveloped and uncultivated. It is my chosen calling to promote the cultivation and development of that seventh sense.

But before considering the seventh sense, it is necessary to mention the first five, and then the sixth, all of which play an important part in teaching and learning. The first five, of course, are hearing, sight, smell, touch, and taste. The sixth sense is known only as the sixth sense.

We might, however, use another set of five. The first in this set is a sense of purpose. Without goals and objectives, teaching-learning situations are characterized by futility and drift. Without a sense of purpose, the routine that passes as education is nothing more than a rendezvous between the boredom of the teacher and the indifference of the student.

The second sense, the sense of direction, is closely related. Without it—without a jointly held sense of direction, teaching and learning energies are quickly dissipated. Lack of direction shows itself in the triumph of the trivial, in the gathering of useless knowledge. A merely well-informed man, wrote Whitehead, is the most useless bore on God's earth. In fact, Whitehead's whole little volume, The Aims of Education, is a protest against dead knowledge, inert ideas, mental dryrot—all of them handmaidens of directionlessness.
The third sense is the sense of responsibility. It shows itself by our caring that people are depending on us. Teaching and learning situations are enhanced immeasurably if an interdependent sense of responsibility can be cultivated between teacher and student.

The fourth sense in this series is a sense of progress, of movement toward a goal. My most exasperating experiences as a community college teacher occur when I discover—and I seem to discover it anew each semester (proof, I suppose, of my naïveté)—that large numbers of the men and women listed on my class rosters exhibit what I call the "shoplifting syndrome." They try to sneak into my classroom and make off with three credits without anyone noticing them. Sometimes they try to shoplift in absentia. Their sense of progress is simply incompatible with mine. My exasperation turns to disgust and even anger when I realize that many of these shoplifting attempts are in effect being financed by one government agency or another.

Such shoplifters are denied—and so am I—the fifth sense, the sense of fulfillment. Others, though, whose goals are other than dollars or mere credentialization, can usually say: I have achieved my objectives, or at least some of them. I can do what I could not do, and I have gained other things besides. I have made it! I did it!

There is a sixth sense in this series, one that needs no elaboration: Purpose, direction, responsibility, progress, and fulfillment must be kept in harmony by a sense of balance.

Having worked through that set of senses, I discovered that yet a third set of teaching-learning senses needs to be mentioned. The first sense in this set is a sense of the possible. As educators, we speak of overachievers. They are not really overachievers, of course; they merely have an enlarged sense of the possible. Underachievers, both teachers and students, are afflicted with a shrunken sense of the possible, or, we might say, they suffer from an enlarged sense of the impossible.

There is, next, the sense of the probable. Much of our time in life is spent working around the probable, keeping the probable from happening. On the other hand, if the probable is desirable, we work to hasten it, to make it happen.

And inevitably, there is the sense of the inevitable. What can you do with the inevitable? If it's bad, resist it, postpone it. If it's good, hurry it along. If it's here, live with it. The prayer attributed to Reinhold Niebuhr has the possible, the probable, and the inevitable in mind. It goes something like this: God grant me the courage to change the things I can; the serenity to accept what I cannot change; and the wisdom to know the difference.

Living with the inevitable requires a sense of irony—a sense that plays to two audiences. Ironic twists and our understanding of them keeps us going in spite of ourselves. Some of you perhaps share my agreement with Carl Rogers' observation that anything that can be taught to another is relatively inconsequential and has little or no significant influence on behavior; that the only learning which significantly influences behavior is self-discovered, self-appropriated learning; that what has been learned in this way cannot be directly communicated to another; and that as a consequence of these observations it is easy to lose interest in being a teacher. And yet, we teach. My sense of irony changes the way I teach so that, in effect, I work on three levels: I try to reach those who believe that self-discovered, self-appropriated learning is important and are willing to work to acquire it. I also try to get through to those who believe they can gain knowledge and maybe even wisdom by apprehending the elusive experiences and insights of others. And finally, I work, though less effectively, I think, with those who are merely knowledge gatherers with no desire to assimilate knowledge into life.

The fifth sense, you have figured out if you are keeping pace with me, is a sense of humor. This has nothing to do with a comic sense, nor is it found in something often mistaken for classroom humor, that is, sarcasm. Rather, it shows itself in a light moment, a cheery remark, a quick exchange, a denial of grimness,
an appreciation of human foibles, a delight in puncturing balloons of nonsense, a recognition of one's own limitations.

There is a sixth sense also in this series, one that, again, needs no elaboration, and that is common sense.

Take your pick of these sets of senses; they all go with the seventh sense—a sense that provides a perspective on all the rest. I am speaking of a sense of the past.

A sense of the past is closely linked with and perhaps preceded by a sense of the future. It has been said, ironically, of course, and I concur, that unless one knows the future he cannot hope to understand the past. Those who encounter difficulty in studying the past or who have no interest in it are often those who because of immaturity or some other reason, have no idea of where they will be in the future, where their nation and the world will be in the future or even that there is a future. One variant of an often-told story has a derelict crawling on the sidewalk in Times Square. "What are you doing?" asks the officer. "I am looking for my billfold." So the officer joins the search. After a few minutes he looks at the derelict and asks, "Are you sure you lost your billfold here?" "Oh no, I lost it in the Bronx." "Then why are you looking for it here." "Well, the light's a whole lot better here." A good many of our students are hoping that the light is better here as they busy themselves at, to use their term, "finding themselves." Maybe the seeds of a sense of the future have begun to germinate in their minds.

When I speak of a sense of the future as a sixth sense, I am not speaking as a futurologist. I do not mean to suggest that we should become preoccupied with such things as the prospect of genetic manipulation, automated highways, intelligence-raising drugs, synergetic structures, or sapiential authority systems (rule by the wise guys?). I mean simply that those with a sense of the past, of yesterday, as it were, know also that there is a tomorrow, and that yesterday and tomorrow have today in common.

And when I speak of a sense of the past as an indispensable sense I do not claim for it any particular therapeutic value—nor, however, do I deny that possibility. It surely has as much such value as some of the therapies that are being tried today. In a world of encounter groups, transactional analysis, sex therapy, psychotherapy, Gestalt therapy, est, I Ching, transcendentental meditation, and yoga, the benefits derived from knowing and understanding relationships between past, present, and future can hardly be scorned. In his recent book, A Complete Guide to Therapy, Dr. Joel Kovel notes how times have changed: "Once, survival was the principal goal. In the Depression...people obviously had no objection to happiness, but they didn't feel they were entitled to happiness as well as survival." The new idea, he says, is to use therapy to add something to life rather than to take away something negative. Tying into the past can add something to life, and in that sense I suppose a case could be made for its therapeutic value. Perhaps there is value also in the educational benefits a sense of the past brings. Someone once remarked that the educated person was one who had found out most of the more important ways in which human beings have made fools of themselves and had thought about them long and seriously enough to have acquired an aversion to them.

I must acknowledge, of course, that given the condition of the nation and the world today, understanding relationships between past, present, and future can be enough to drive people to therapy. A look at energy and environmental problems, for example, might do just that. Dr. Kovel points out that disappointment in dreams for better lives has driven peoples' hopes inward, leading them to seek contentment in their own lives, rather than in the vision of a transformed society. It has also led to the decline of a common goal. Perhaps this inward turn—if it in fact has occurred or is occurring, accounts for a decline of interest in the past, for the past is held only in common. No individual can stake a claim in the past, and the
past of individuals is of interest only in relation to the communities of which they were a part.

If we look closely at the difficulties that beset us, the powerlessness, the meaninglessness, the valuelessness, the sense of isolation, the self-estrangement that is felt by many individuals; when we contemplate the bewilderment of the present moment, the acceleration of time, the accumulation of events, the growing force of daily happenings; when we ponder how things are disjointed and displaced and people are disoriented and disillusioned, something has to help us make sense out of it all, and a sense of the past is indispensable for that purpose. History may be, as historian W. Stull Holt has called it, a damn dim candle over a damn deep abyss, but it is at least that.

What is a sense of the past? It is a sense that sees things in context. It recognizes that everything that happens is related to what has preceded it and to other things happening at the same time. In the long sweep of history there are few surprises. A sense of the past perceives continuity and stresses the connectedness of things. A sense of the past enlarges our circle of acquaintances and expands our reservoir of experiences. A sense of the past frees us from the limits of time and the bounds of place. As Thomas Fuller wrote 350 years ago, in words you will find inscribed in a wood-carving on my office wall, "History maketh a young man old without either wrinkles or gray hairs, privileging him with the experience of age without either the infirmities or inconveniences thereof."

The principal purpose of the Underwood Lecture is to provide a faculty member the opportunity to discuss with his or her colleagues how David Underwood's humanistic ideas can be furthered at Florissant Valley Community College, by and within the lecturer's discipline. I have been doing that only indirectly; I shall attempt to be more specific in a few moments, but before proceeding I must touch on one point and elaborate on a second.

First, I make no claim for the superiority of the discipline of history over other disciplines. It would be improper to use this platform for that purpose. It would be foolish as well: I can count, and I can see how we historians are outnumbered in this assembly. You may have noticed that I have so far scarcely used the term "history;" I have referred, rather, to a sense of the past, a sense which is useful if not essential, in my judgment, in most disciplines.

Second, as I contemplate my work in my discipline and you in yours, we cannot ignore the environment in which we work--an environment quite different from the one we enjoyed during the first decade of this college's existence. Some of the change, our sense of the inevitable tells us, is attributable to the diminishing financial resources of the Junior College District and to changing public attitudes on higher education, while some merely parallels the retrenchment occurring in higher education in general. Some of the change, though, is the responsibility of those who, in my judgment, have failed to appreciate what has made this college and this district so vital, so dynamic, so unique. In the past year we have been put, so to speak, on the rear seat of a tandem bicycle. Our pedaling provides the power for the college's progress, but our handlebars won't move. We have little influence over the direction we are heading. As the incredible events between February 18 and February 25 proved--the events that left us branded with the squiggle--we don't even have braking power. We must be careful, of course, that we don't become preoccupied by our plight. Black sharecropper Nate Shaw, beleaguered as he was all his life by the white man, remarked as he observed boll weevils destroying his cotton crop: "All God's dangers ain't the white man." We have to remind ourselves that all God's dangers ain't at Wilson. As Nate Shaw looked at the damage wrought by the boll weevil he mused: "Folks need pestering to wake them up to their limit." Whether we have been woke up to our limit remains to be seen, but one way or another we must find a way of getting our hands back on the handlebars.
Failure to do this will have consequences far greater than those that affect our monthly paychecks. In a keen, though discouraging, analysis in the July 26 Chronicle of Higher Education, Arthur Cohen—perhaps the only person with the stature to do it—describes a process that he believes has made the community college teacher a recluse. The process has had a head start in other institutions, but it has, I fear, set in here. For various reasons—which Cohen enumerates... 

Old-line faculty members at community colleges have cut themselves off from the controlling ideas of their profession and their institutions. Isolating themselves in their classrooms—certainly, they believe, with good intentions—they have become recluses. They have clung to the pseudo-academic freedom of the closed classroom door. They have spent themselves in efforts to reduce class size. They have sequestered themselves from trends in community college education, from community education, adult education, off-campus activities.

Similarly, these teachers have pulled themselves away repeatedly—one is tempted to say suicidally—from the lines of power within and around the colleges. Faculty members have never been in a position of being institutional managers responsible for setting policy; that power has always rested with the governing boards and administrators. But we now see faculty members refusing even to serve on college committees, where at least the illusion of power is still present. We see teachers refusing to become members of speakers' bureaus, where they would interact with the community in their areas of presumed expertise. "Serve on a committee? Go off-campus to speak? Why should I?" This is the reclusive complex in full blush.

Don't say it can't happen, isn't happening, here.

In a short presentation like this I can only begin to outline my ideas on developing a humane sense of the past. I shall touch briefly on five points. The first is that an interest in the past is inherent in each of us. The task of the teacher is to bring out that interest. As Richard Niebuhr has written, we are to history as fish are to water. We can't live outside of it. Have you ever noticed how frequently this interest in the past shows itself among sports fans, just to cite an example. I once heard baseball described as a series of ceremonies enacted for the purpose of establishing records for the fans and sportscasters to talk about. There are even records, I have discovered, for inactivity. On June 26, some recordkeeper (historian) has noted, the shortstop for the Texas Rangers played nine innings without a putout or an assist. The old record, I believe, was held by Calvin Coolidge.

If interest in the past is inherent, what happens to it in the classroom? That question leads to my second point. As Page Smith has answered it, "If one wished to kill history as a humane study, it is hard to imagine a better system than the one currently in use in our schools and colleges. It is rather as though we were to substitute courses in anatomy for courses in literature as an avenue to the understanding of man." Smith is concerned particularly with history losing its spirit and its soul by getting hung up on social science analyses. I share that concern, but I am also bothered by more practical matters. We speak, for
example, of "covering" material. Usually that means putting a blanket over it. We test for the inconsequential because the consequential is so difficult to test. Someone, somewhere, a long time ago decided that history could be taught as effectively to large groups as to small; so we stand in front of seas of faces and wonder how we can facilitate genuine inquiry and discovery learning. Practical considerations compel us to attempt to do that which cannot be done, that is, to try to move chunks of information through 30 or 40 or 50 heads simultaneously, hoping against the odds that some of it will make sense to some of them.

Also against the odds, we (that is--those who share my philosophy of history and of teaching) try to make history what it should be, a liberating art. My third point is that, as a liberating art, history lifts us out of the present moment, it puts us in touch with men and women of lasting importance--not always the rich and the powerful and the famous, but also the poor, the simple and the humble. As a liberating art, it confronts us with liberating and humane ideals--ideals expressed in such terms as life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, ideals that make the study of history not a scientific enterprise but a moral one.

And that is my fourth point. Quoting Page Smith again, "It [history] is the study of human beings involved in extraordinary drama, and its dramatic qualities are related to the moral values inherent in all life. History is in large part the story of the men and women who have suffered and sacrificed to create the world in which we live. . . . History is concerned with the actions of individuals and social groups, and since such action almost invariably has been undertaken in the name of certain values and ideals, the historian must make judgments on the actors and their actions." He must implicitly or explicitly take a position on the issues he considers, even though doing this would seem to strain scholarly objectivity, whatever that is. The historian's position will be based on certain moral assumptions and on the humane values he holds. There is no virtue, I believe, in remaining neutral on issues involving humane values. "Judgment," Smith says, "is a continual part of the dialogue of the historian--although if he is true to his muse, he will temper his judgment with understanding and compassion." Understanding and compassion, I would add, are humane values of the sort that the study of history seeks to cultivate if it is to be regarded as a moral enterprise.

My fifth point responds to the question, "How do we do it?" We start by clarifying our understanding of the terms "past" and "present." As Carl Becker argued so lucidly in his famous essay, "Everyman His Own Historian", there is, strictly speaking, no "present." The present is at best no more than an infinitesimal point in time, gone before we can note it as the present. But we cannot live without a present, "so we create one by robbing the past, by holding on to the most recent events and pretending that they all belong to our immediate perceptions." In so doing we create a telescoped present, a spurious present. The extent to which the spurious present may be "enlarged and enriched will depend upon knowledge, the artificial extension of memory, the memory of things said and done in the past and distant places." The future, as I suggested earlier, refuses to be excluded, and, as Becker says, "the more of the past we drag into the spurious present, the more an hypothetical, patterned future is likely to crowd into it also." And so, "memory of things said and done, . . . running hand in hand with the anticipation of things to be said and done, enables us, each to the extent of his knowledge and imagination, to be intelligent, to push back the narrow confines of the fleeting present moment so that what we are doing may be judged in the light of what we have done and what we hope to do."
What, then, does cultivation of a sense of the past accomplish? Ironically, it eliminates the past as past, making it instead an integral and living part of our present world. If we are successful, the dead come to life in our classrooms, not on our terms but on theirs. If we are successful, we relive the experiences of the ages. If we are successful, we absorb the great ideas humanity has developed through the vicissitudes of time.

We are not always successful, of course. Our spirit sags and our zeal flags at times. Our ideals are battered and our standards are assaulted, but we persist. Maybe such talk as I have engaged in here amounts to building castles in the air. But there is nothing wrong with that, said Thoreau. That's where they should be built. Our task is to put foundations under them.

And how do we do that? We are back where we started. We do it by the cultivation of our senses, not only the biological five, but the other senses I have mentioned. And we do it because our commitment to humane ideals leaves us no choice. The seventh sense—the sense that recalls these humane ideals and lays them before us, can be and is a unifying sense. Perhaps an individual can survive without it. A community cannot, a nation cannot, the world cannot. Perhaps that realization is what makes the cultivation of a sense of the past, not a job, but a commitment and a calling.