

The Blaze

"There's the bullshit, then there's The Blaze."

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The Antioch Legacy

The Dazzling Vision and Relentless Passion of the Founders

"The chief limitations of humanity are in its vision, not in its powers of achievement."
—Arthur Morgan

By JIM MALARKEY

MANY EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS are designed to reproduce the patterns of our culture and the systems of our society. They socialize students to adapt to the world as it is as the surest means for getting ahead. Currently these colleges design programs to, as they say, "meet market demand." Research can offer statistics as to what most people want and how they like it. We hear students nowadays want country club colleges with successful sports teams as well as majors that will lead to high paying careers. To make money, institutions chase markets, obsess over branding, and yet often wind up resembling one another.

But what about the uncommon student, the one who is questioning the whole show? Or the one who has grave questions about the direction in which the world is going? One who does not want his or her thinking to be dictated by either religious orthodoxy or by advertising agencies? What about students who don't fit the profile of the ordinary American student who wants to fit in, slide through and get ahead? What about those who think we need to create altogether new ways of living and working together? Or those who actually want to see the world, instead of being satisfied with sound bites and graphic images?

What about those who are deeply concerned about the vital issues of our day, such as the grave environmental challenges we are facing, US involvement in the Middle East, or the increasing disparities of wealth in the US and abroad? What about those disturbed by the control of the media and the political machine by large-scale corporate interests? Or by the conditions and restrictions pertaining to women worldwide?

What about those who are driven to invent new cultural forms that express perspectives and experiences largely hidden from official view? What about young people who want to wake the nation from its virtual sleep walk, who want to raise hell, artfully? What about those young students who want the US to finally live up to the provisions stated in the Constitution and Bill of Rights, and believe all governments should honor the ideals enshrined in the UN Declaration of Human Rights?

Since the 1850s such non-ordinary students have found a home, a haven, a workshop, a think tank, or an ashram here on these sacred grounds of Antioch College.

Today is Founders Day and I would like to address the visionary genius of Antioch's founders. There are too many of them to do justice to in one short talk. Antioch is in perpetual ferment and re-invention. In addition to some remarkable presidents, there have been numerous faculty and students who have left their mark, enriched the college and benefited the world. But I will speak about two whose vision and passion have clearly left an impact still with us today: Horace Mann, who started the College in the mid 19th century, and Arthur Morgan who renovated it in the early 20th century. My aim is to emphasize the kind of thought process I believe these founders

went through, since I consider it central to what I regard as the irrepressible Antioch spirit of inquiry and action. As you will see, this method of inquiry has produced a vision and program that is what we might think of as holistic and progressive. Today we can draw lessons from these founders based on what they said and did. Yet it is especially important for us to ask how we might be inspired by their example to invent, create, persist, and succeed given the challenges we face at this moment.

In attempting to reconstruct their thought process, I have abstracted the following steps: the visioning process is initially sparked by the persistent experience of tension between, on the one hand, how the world is, and, on the other hand, how the world ought to be, how it can be, how it must be. They itch, feel discomfort, get irritable, speak out, rant, rave, until ultimately they seek to resolve this conflict by asking this question: what is it that we need to learn in order to change the world from what it is like to what we would like it to be?

This quest becomes a college environment, a curriculum, and a pedagogy. The program involves impartial, sustained, fearless inquiry into how things are and how they work, the laws and dynamics, the problems and the pain, as well as the achievements and triumphs. Inquiry also involves how things ought to be, that is: which values, visions, systems, rules, laws, habits are the most conducive to human well-being and the most sustainable over time?

The founders are clearly pressed to question: What can I do? What can we do? In pursuing this line of thinking one may enter with crude notions, often idealistic; but one's vision can be refined, relations with like-minded others identified, a shared set of values and commitments discussed. An ideal community formed.

Dialogue becomes necessary: what kind of world do we want? Are we capable of it? Or is humanity doomed by its own internal demons? The curriculum becomes a terrain of struggle: how are the readings, discussions, projects, etc., actually yielding a deeper understanding of the world and its prospects?

The pedagogy involves another struggle: precisely how are the assignments and projects developing the skills students will need to address the challenges we face in the world? What is the role of the faculty at such an institution? Can informed citizens truly change the world? What methods work, once we know what needs to be done? How can we make sure we do not unconsciously repeat the errors of the past?

I am convinced that the founders who designed Antioch College went through this kind of process as they drafted the themes and principles of an Antioch education.

Horace Mann grew up learning of the values and ideals expressed in the Gospels and the Greek and Roman Classics as well as the ideals of the early American Republic. But around him he saw a society rife with corruption, the cruel institution of slavery, a sexism that denied women equal education and equal pay, unremitting religious dogmatism, extreme poverty, lack of opportunity, plus the devastating effects of alcoholism. In this fledgling democracy, beset with so many divisions, the people utterly lacked the education needed to realize what its leaders had identified as their inalienable rights.

Mann was proud to be an American but ashamed to die complacent before its failings. Prior to coming to Antioch, he had already become known for pioneering the common school system in the state of Massachusetts. Mann had conceptualized the urgency of universal education in America this way:

"...The establishment of a republican government, without well-appointed and efficient means for the universal education of the people, is the most rash and foolhardy experiment ever tried by man. Such a Republic may grow in numbers and in wealth. As an avaricious man adds acres

to his lands, so its rapacious government may increase its own darkness by annexing provinces and states to its ignorant domain. Its armies may be invincible, and its fleets may strike terror into nations on the opposite sides of the globe, at the same hour. Vast in its extent, and enriched with all the prodigality of nature, it may possess every capacity and opportunity of being great, and of doing good. But if such a Republic be devoid of intelligence, such a Republic, with all its noble capacities for beneficence, will rush with the speed of a whirlwind to an ignominious end..."

Horace Mann accepted the presidency of the new Antioch College since it afforded an opportunity to put his vision to action in higher education. He and his spouse, Mary Peabody Mann, arrived in Yellow Springs in 1853 to commence this difficult task of addressing the world's ills through sound education. At his inaugural Antioch address Mann directed the audience to:

"Look into the marts of business, the halls of government, the framework of social relations. See how avarice overreaches by law, or plunders without law; how fraud rises to wealth on steps made solid by perjuries; how governments are perverted from the welfare of the governed to the selfish ends of the rulers."

In the face of these stark injustices, Mann couldn't resist envisioning a society in which the disparity between rich and poor would be greatly reduced, where slavery would be abolished and fraternity established, where

writing, was emphasized. Independent study was initiated. Unlike elsewhere, academic awards and prizes were disallowed at Antioch so students would not become lured away from the genuine rewards that come from the pursuit of excellence for its own sake. But for Mann the high intellectual and physical standards were of any value only if the moral or ethical character of the student was perfected alongside.

In his inaugural address of 1853 Mann warned, "to render the cultivation of the intellectual nature beneficial or even safe; nay, to save it from being baneful, it must be accompanied by moral education. As warp and woof, when woven together, make a texture a hundred fold stronger than either taken by itself, so must moral education be inwrought with intellectual to give strength to the character of youth.... In a man devoid of morals, the intellect often acts as a mighty pander to all the evil passions. In a man devoid of intellect to foresee consequences and weigh probabilities, a blind devotion to one... object makes havoc of whatever other... objects may stand in its path."

Sterling morals, determined scholarship, avoidance of tobacco and the devil's brew. And over two hours of exercise every day. Four years of this regimen and students were ready to save the Republic and, in his immortal words, "win victories for humanity." At his final commencement address of 1859 Mann defined those victories. "Nothing today prevents this earth from

being a paradise but error and sin," he proclaimed. He then identified the following errors, not just for the benefit of students, but also to enlist the large crowd in the crusade:

"The disabilities of poverty; the pains of disease; the enervations and folly of fashionable life; the brutishness of appetite, and the demonisms of passion; the crowded vices of cities, thicker than their inhabitants; the retinue of calamities that come through ignorance; the physical and moral havoc of war; the woes of intemperance; the wickedness of oppression, whether of the body or of the soul; the Godlessness and Christianlessness of — are the hosts against which a war of extermination is to be waged, and you are to be the warriors. Never shrink, never retreat, because of danger!"

Like his illustrious predecessor, from an early age Arthur Morgan was beset with the realization that humanity was not living up to its capacity and that the solution lay in reforming education. Morgan was disturbed by widespread political corruption, economic inequality, and rampant waste. He observed with alarm the increasing decline of community life. Morgan believed that colleges and universities should be designed to prepare students for constructive engagement in the world. But, instead, these institutions seemed trapped in frivolous traditions that inhibited students from seeking change and left them disinclined to advocate it. Specialization, in spite of the many advances and discoveries it had spawned, left college graduates unable to see life whole and collaborate across the professions. In his experience as an engineer Morgan had discovered over and again that engineers, lawyers, and other professionals were too narrow in their interests and perspectives. Disastrous decisions were the repeated result. Corruption saw to it that one's friends instead of the best rose to the top.

Morgan's thinking seemed to follow the same process as Mann's: what kind of educational system would best prepare graduates to creatively and effectively engage the critical challenges of his era? Soon after he came to Antioch in 1920, Morgan designed a holistic liberal arts program that would equip students to become world-wise and ethical-minded entrepreneurs or agents of change. Integral to an Antioch education were these emphases: the conscientious search for purpose, the alternation of work and study, the broadening of general education, and the development of the whole

personality nurtured in a vibrant learning community. The vision was lofty, the curriculum original, and the expectation exceptional. Morgan was passionate and persuasive. He traveled the country to recruit a world-class faculty whose background and commitment would insure the success of this unique program. The College was soon featured in articles in prestigious magazines. Within a few years Antioch was achieving national recognition. Its students came to vie with the best in the country by any measurement.

But in spite of Morgan's relentless efforts, behind the success of Antioch were first the mission, then the model. In his Thanksgiving address to students and faculty in 1924 he declared:

"Our dream is of a time when aspiration, enthusiasm, and commitment to fine purpose, developed to the utmost, shall control and use all the energies of life; of a time when aspiration and consecration shall be directed and rigorously disciplined by science, illumined by ripe acquaintance with great minds and spirits, supported by sound physique, prepared for effective work by thorough training, and made acquainted with the world by rich experience. Then we shall dare to dream great dreams, of ourselves and of our world made new, without fear that they may be but mists of the night to vanish when daylight comes."

Morgan expected that students so disposed would shed outworn assumptions and habits as they moved between periods of work and study in an atmosphere of continuous inquiry and application. At Antioch, they would build their own community while broadening their horizons by learning from the histories and literatures of other civilizations. Morgan realized that this mission would be lifelong. It would grow best if unbound by national borders and blinders. As expressed in his widely circulated Antioch Notes:

"If we can survey the whole cultural inheritance of mankind, select the elements of universality and of most enduring values, and weave them into the texture of our national thought and life, we can forerun a greater and finer civilization than the world has known. Education in America must mean nothing less than this."

Yet one sees over and again in Morgan's work an ability to conjugate the ideal with the real in order to chart a wise course of action. He was well aware of the risks posed by great passion when too narrowly channeled, whether on the part of radicals or reactionaries. Morgan admonished his readers to be vigilant and methodical:

"The reactionary would keep his whole inheritance for fear some good might be lost. The radical, one who pulls things up by the roots, would cast it all away because of the evil it contains. The problem is never so simple. The good and evil are mixed together and frequently look alike. Only skill, knowledge, discrimination, and wisdom can distinguish them. Liberal education at college should develop ability to replace blind 'radicalism' and blind 'conservatism' by the capacity and desire to discriminate."

Many educational institutions reproduce the current practices of our culture and society. Very few are founded to persistently question those patterns and, where warranted, to explore alternatives that are more healthful and sustainable. Antioch has been one such progressive institution. In the years after he assumed the presidency in 1921, Arthur Morgan's vision and passion would propel the College from obscurity to national prominence. In the years ahead, Antioch would evolve its curriculum as it incorporated new faculty; and the College would refine the process of community to involve students at every level. But I believe that one characteristic persists over all these years: Antiochians relentlessly "dare to dream great dreams, of ourselves and of our world made new."

At this time, when Antioch rests unsteadily on the precipice of its existence let us summon the energy needed for Antioch to fearlessly address the challenges of our age. New ideas and new strategies will emerge. But I believe that the prescient visions and aims of the founders is even more essential today: to educate the whole person, to integrate inquiry and action, to build community through shared governance, to honor the vital roles of both science and ethics, and to promote—across the span of arts and sciences—the determination to achieve victories for an ever more imperiled humanity. 🔥

