

THE UNLEARNING PROCESS

An Address

by

Hugh D. Galusha, Jr.
President
Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis

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The problem of starting a commencement address is as difficult for the speaker as ending it sometimes is for the audience. Unfortunately, there is a tradition that few of us escape -- a tradition that dictates a blend of evangelism, exhortation, and nostalgia for the hallowed halls of ivy prolonged to a point of mutual exhaustion of the speaker, the faculty, the graduates, and that group of the unsung who made the whole exercise possible -- the parents. Dr. Shepherd has freed us all today with the repeated injunction -- "I don't care what you say, but twenty minutes is all you get." May I say I appreciate the former instruction, and I am sure you will the latter.

Having just changed careers recently myself, our positions are not dissimilar. It seemed to me it might be useful to share some reactions with you. Perhaps paramount is the necessity for accommodation to a new intellectual discipline which is inevitably accompanied by environmental changes. There are still distinct differences in culture patterns that are more than geographic. Occupations and economic position set additional dimensions which must be adjusted to.

The process of adjustment is a dual one -- with learning and unlearning going side by side. Of the two, the unlearning phase I would be inclined to assign the more important role. By our middle years, we have learned an impressive number of things that simply are not so. A formal education is no assurance of escape. In fact, a case might almost be made for the reverse proposition. Supreme Court Justice Jackson said, "It is one of the paradoxes of our times that modern society needs to fear only educated men." A little

reflection will demonstrate why this may be so. For the average graduate of a good college, the exposure to man's accumulation of knowledge to that point of time now reaches awesome proportions. By graduation, the storage areas of the mind have been crammed to the point of bursting with facts, figures, hypotheses, theorems, and conclusions. Some of these bits and pieces, perhaps more than half in the technical areas anyway, are certain to be discredited in the expansion of knowledge, but unless there is a compelling reason -- usually professionally inspired -- the graduate of a few years ago never has the opportunity to replace the old stock. Apart from this factor of obsolescence of knowledge, there is the inevitable disarrangement and deterioration that takes place in attics, storerooms, and similar repositories for seldom used items, for conceptual knowledge and fact knowledge alike, when stored out of context, not only tend to lose relevancy, but can get mixed up together in ways never intended by Professor Jones in Humanities 104 or Professor Smith in Economics 33A. To prolong the analogy, many ideas also become brittle and rigid in disuse -- a quality resulting from lack of exercise. To this then add the special fact that much of the world is being led by formally educated men, and our inquiry assumes a special significance.

What are the results of this? It seems to me there are at least these --

The particular body of prejudices inherent in the culture pattern we are plunged into by our choice of geographic and economic area in which to live -- and each of these areas comes equipped with a full-blown assortment of them -- must be accommodated in part. This is not the sell-out it sounds, for the desire for acceptance is a universal one, and besides within the group prejudices are often attractive support for its maintenance. The distinction

between a conviction and a prejudice is a fine one, indeed. In the process of accommodation, ideas acquired in college and stored away undergo subtle shifts. They may be pushed farther back, or realigned in different patterns. Or a theorem advanced in a classroom twenty years before becomes an immutable law. In this subtle process, labels become substitutes for ideas.

Out of the complex and quite splendid array of pieces of knowledge we carried away from college, those directly related to our profession are maintained reasonably viable, but the others suffer from disuse.

There are few areas of man's knowledge that are self-maintaining. Generally, these may be characterized as those imperatives of common and central elements of thought that are self-evident in a Thomistic sense, about which I shall say more later. The rest of our knowledge -- roughly 98% of our formal education -- is concerned with facts, or alleged facts, which can be lumped under the "what" and "how" categories. It is to these my remarks are addressed. They are the object of the unlearning process. The culling process is at least as important as time goes by as the additive one. Our minds are finite after all, with just so much room. To keep one's mind reasonably tidy is a major undertaking, indeed. It is this reexamination of the mental inventory, accompanied hopefully by judicious culling and replacement of the contents, that I refer to as the unlearning process. In no area is this more critically important than in the social sciences -- the areas of study of man's relationship to man. Preeminent among these is economics. To reconcile David Ricardo, John Stuart Mill, Wesley Mitchell, Walter Heller, and John Kenneth Galbraith requires considerable mental agility. Many of the things I believed almost as articles of faith about the structure of our economy and its care and feeding, I have had to unlearn in these last

two years. Having acquired a certain competence and recognition in one career, it has been a great shock to find out what great changes had been occurring in the world outside my own field. Much of my formal training in economics had become obsolete, and the misconceptions inevitable when one is only a part-time observer, rather than a participant, added a further dimension to the unlearning process. There is scant comfort for the present exponents of the new economics in this admission. Little reason exists to believe they have found the ultimate truths, an admission the more skilled and knowledgeable proponents are quick to admit. Humility about one's own intellectual position usually varies in direct proportion to an ability to destroy someone else's. The last thirty-five years are strewn with the wreckage of economic plans, and the ratio of discredited economists to those of vogue is still above 5 to 1. As Galbraith commented in his delightful little book called "Economics and the Art of Controversy," -- "Those who have learned to love that most nostalgic of all the sounds of our countryside, that of outraged conservatives baying for the blood of an economic heretic, should not feel distressed."

Without dwelling unduly, I hope, on monetary policy, a few observations about it might be appropriate to my thesis today. The Federal Reserve System is officially charged with the responsibility for our monetary policy. Neither wholly public, nor more than superficially private, its legal independence is heralded by its friends and cursed by its foes, and misunderstood by both. The anomaly of the System's position is heightened when arguments are analyzed. They run full circle. The economic activists view monetary policy as a precise tool of national planning which has been used a) always late, b) seldom correctly, and c) never enough. Opposing these is the alliance of some conservatives and certain of the financial sectors who

regard it as a) disruptive of normal market processes, b) a device to make rich bankers richer, and c) an expression of an international money conspiracy. Between are its political critics, whose positions more often than not defy analysis.

Well, it is not a precise tool. The computer is able to lay bare the numbers of selected economic series of a past period to prove conclusively, if with doubtful accuracy, that the stance of monetary policy at that time was inappropriate. Missing from the statistical analysis is the bewildering matrix of bits and pieces of opinion evidence and sundry financial and economic data that, for want of a better term, we might refer to as economic climatological data, or which-way-the-wind-is-blowing information. Our economy is so complex, and the decision making potential of American industrial and political society so incredibly varied, a defender need not go abroad for the defense to be found in the imponderables of national decisions of other countries.

It is an imperfect instrument because the state of our economic knowledge is imperfect. The horizons seem to extend as fast as our knowledge of economy expands. Foolish indeed is the person approaching today's monetary policy decision from a doctrinaire position. The economic facts, the techniques of gathering them, the relative weights to be assigned, are shifting rapidly. And this is just the reading of the signals. In determining a course of action in the decision making process, an even greater premium is placed upon the mind that takes nothing for granted. For the ground rules are different than they were even a year ago. And they will be different six months from now. In fact, may I express the pious hope -- even sooner. Once the major month of November has past, the fiscal inertia of the

government may disappear. Personally, I feel reliance upon monetary policy alone for the defense of our economy from the attacks of inflation has gone about as far as it can go without serious side effects.

But the quandary of the money managers is only symptomatic of the ferment of our times. It is a hackneyed truism to say -- "this is a changing world" -- change, I suspect, without purpose. Certainly there is little apparent direction. The forms life has taken on this earth have represented adaptations to the changes in the physical environment. But new social and economic dimensions have been added by man to his environment in his attempts to find the road to survival. We now have not only the problems of adjusting to the physical world, but the even more difficult one we have created. Relationships between all the many social clumps, and the mind boggles at the number and variety, require constant adaptation. Traditional concepts and mechanisms of adjustment will not provide the answers, for the time dimension of change has been drastically altered. We no longer think of inter-generation conflict, but of intra-generation.

The meat axe has been substituted for the chairman's gavel. Impatient with the rate of accommodation, social and economic groups show a distressing and increasing unwillingness to wait for the more leisurely interaction of dialog and the polling booth. Moralistic judgments about this being good or bad tend to obscure the fact that fundamental changes in social and economic relationships are in process at a greatly accelerated rate.

To meet this challenge -- and survive, intellectually and spiritually -- requires a quality of mental agility and flexibility. Essential to this are antenna sensitive to change, a willingness to test the new against the old, and the courage to discard the obsolete or reject the invalid.

As you have probably observed, I do not believe in compartmenting either mind or life itself. The years of formal education at the best of institutions -- and certainly this great university is one of them, is most importantly an exposure to the learning/unlearning process; the content of the courses for most of you in non-technical fields has been the teaching material -- the means, rather than the end. A process must be used, or the thought paths grow over. There are permanent values -- and central to them is the intellectual process. To quote Aldous Huxley in Brave New World Revisited --

The value, first of all, of individual freedom, based upon the facts of human diversity and genetic uniqueness; the value of charity and compassion, based upon the old familiar fact, lately rediscovered by modern psychiatry -- the fact that, whatever their mental and physical diversity, love is as necessary to human beings as food and shelter; and finally the value of intelligence, without which love is impotent and freedom unattainable.