

Letters to the Editor 2005

December 30, 2005: N-J COMMUNITY VOICES

The Divide: HUMANITIES AND SCIENCE

by **Dan Kennedy**

Ormond Beach

In recent weeks there have been two articles in the News-Journal concerning relationships between the humanities and science: 'Hubris of the Humanities,' 12-7, by Nicholas D. Kristof and "Strong union between 'snooty' liberal arts, science, '12-16, by Stephen Zeigler. Kristof, a New York Times columnist, tended to blame the 'snootiness' of the humanities for U.S. science failures, while Zeigler, a professor at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, argued that the two disciplines tend to work together and seemed to suggest that the supposed conflict between the two has been contrived. Both positions may be oversimplifications and there are other important aspects of the relationship between the humanities and science to be considered.

During twenty-seven years of a career in three universities ranging geographically from Florida to Hawaii, and several more years after retirement on the adjunct faculty of two other universities, I did not detect any serious conflict between the humanities and science. This is in support of Professor Zeigler's contention. I must add, however, that I did not see any significant cooperation between the two discipline areas either. There have been a few movements or trends in recent years that have been harmful to science, one of which is within the humanities category.

Post-modern philosophical thought is an antithesis to science and reason. Among the views of its adherents are such ideas that all truth is relative and concepts of reality are mentally constructed by people, and thus there is no such thing as objective truth or reality. Further, the scientific methodology of reductionism (i.e. breaking phenomena into small units for purposes of study) is held to be abhorrent. This school of thought, which is within mainstream humanities, has been exerting influence in intellectual circles and is thus something of a threat to science. Consider the attack on reductionism. This methodology has yielded tremendous benefits both in terms of basic knowledge and practical application. For example, our present knowledge of ecological systems has come largely from putting bits of information together that come from reductionist methods.

Other attacks on science worth mentioning have come from New Age thinking (which is outside of mainstream humanities), spending reductions for basic or "pure" science, and the Bush administration's generally antiscientific stance. The generally poor funding of basic research is really alarming. Historically, this has provided a major foundation for numerous practical developments in science and technology. These antiscience trends have already contributed to the lowering of U.S. prestige, power, and leadership. If continued, they will likely accelerate our downward movement globally.

Both Kristof and Zeigler commented on C.P. Snow's famous essay "The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution." Snow believed that the gap and the conflict between science and the humanities are impediments to human progress. Even if Zeigler is right that Snow overstated the conflict element, the gap is something important to think about. To what extent are global problems at least partially due to the humanities not keeping pace with the developments of science and technology? The humanities content includes dealing with concepts of morality, ethics, and values; that is, striving for the "good life" and a "more perfect" world. Is this area of human development on a par with science and technology?

Another element of the gap between the two disciplines noted by Snow is the ignorance in both camps. As he put it, lack of knowledge about the laws of thermodynamics is on an ignorance level comparable to lack of knowledge about Shakespearean plays. Perhaps the world needs more by way of traditional liberal arts type education. The kind of education that might produce scholars well versed in both cultural worlds.

October 6, 2005 **COMMUNITY VOICES**

Wrong to Rip Higher Education for Americans' Unequal Status

By Dan Kennedy

The real heart of the matter is one of preventing the need for remediation. Important to that would be reduction of poverty, parent education programs and good basic medical care for everyone.

In the column "Widening education gap fails America," which appeared in the News-Journal Ideas section, September 29, 2005. David Brooks presented an argument that American colleges and universities are highly responsible for the economic, socio-cultural, and educational gaps between the rich and poor. His ideas are misleading, show misunderstanding, and contain inconsistencies.

In referring to societal stratification Brooks maintains that "...a new sort of stratification is setting in, between those with higher education and those without." He shows that this causes economic disparities, which in turn bring about social stratification. He then says that due to the "social chasm" we are "...beginning to see vast behavioral differences between the two groups." None of this is "new" or "beginning." Differing educational levels have played a major part in socio-economic classification throughout most of recorded human history.

Early on Brooks states that colleges and universities are among the "...greatest inequality producing machines America has known." This is true inasmuch as they are a part of our educational systems. Education in general increases inequality between and among people as was well expressed by the American educator Felix Emmanuel Schelling who said "True education makes for inequality; the inequality of individuality, the inequality of success; the glorious inequality of talent, of genius..." But, the role of higher education is that of increasing already existing strong inequalities. Socio-

economic status (SES) of the family, earlier education, and genetic variables provide a strong foundation for the inequalities that higher education increases.

People come on the earth unequal in various ways. For example, some are born with better central nervous system wiring than others, and this can be important for learning aptitude. However, inherent aptitude can certainly be improved by environmental factors (e.g. child raising practices, nutrition, parent expectations).

Consider this example of a child raising practice that research has shown to be associated with socio-economic status. Concerning discipline and restrictions we often hear children asking "Why can't I do that?" In families of lower socio-economic status the response is quite likely to be "Because I said so!" or "I'll take the belt to you if you do!" In higher SES families the response is more likely to be "Because it may hurt or inconvenience other people" or "Because its not safe" followed by explanations as to "why." The latter responses not only promote the development of ethical and safety standards, but also foster abstract (verses concrete) thinking, both of which are important in school learning. Brooks does acknowledge the importance of child raising practices and states that "...financial barriers are not the main issue...", points which seem to be inconsistent with his thesis of blaming higher education for inequality.

A pertinent issue for some years now is the role of higher education in regard to the remediation of academic deficiencies. Ideally, colleges and niversities admit those who are best qualified to benefit from their academic programs. To do otherwise leads to lowered admission and academic performance standards. Remedial education should come before college or university admission and should be provided by public and private educational programs. Adult education programs operated by public school systems often offer good help of this sort. It is not only a waste of resources when colleges and universities provide remedial education, but it is also a sham giving the false impression that admitting academically ill prepared students is a social good.

I must qualify this opinion a bit by saying that a legitimate role for community colleges may be the providing of remediation for students who are minimally weak in one or two basic academic skills. In such cases students can often progress faster through a combination of regular coursework and remediation.

The real heart of the matter is one of preventing the need for remediation, and this takes us back to the foundation variables discussed above. Important for prevention would be such things as reduction of poverty, parent education programs, and good basic medical care for everyone. These measures would help people come closer to achieving at their maximum levels of potential.

But, don't expect inequalities to disappear. Nature and education are certain to continue producing a variety of inequalities in people.

Kennedy, Ed.D., a retired university educator, lives in Ormond Beach.

'Angry' man still fights for pet causes

By MARK HARPER Staff Writer 02 August 2004
Copyright © 2004 News-Journal Corporation

HOLLY HILL -- The path to angry leads past strip malls and strip joints. It leads past banks where you can check your cash and liquor stores where you can cash your check. It leads to a wooded lot with a SAVE THE LOOP sign in front and a Toyota Prius in a partially hidden drive.

It is a long road, 84 years and counting. Toward the end, your hands can shake uncontrollably and your mind trips over a detail or two in most conversations. This is where **Gordon Williamson** lives, and he's not shy about saying it: "I'm an angry, old man."

How did this veteran of the Pacific Theater in World War II become so worked up?

It is a passion that grew from an adventurous life.

As a young singer from just outside Baltimore, he moved to Florida well before Disney, so he could attend Stetson University in DeLand. In his words, it was a "natural wonderland" teeming with unique plants and animals in balance with an environment so clean he could smell the citrus trees.

He was into his fourth year at Stetson when he left, joining the Navy in 1944. He saw action and survived several close calls.

But when a wave threw him against a boat, he suffered nerve damage that he believes caused the tremor that slows him even today.

Back in the States, he landed jobs at radio stations in Annapolis and Washington D.C.

Before long, he was hired on at WTTG, the first television station in Washington. He started as a booth announcer, introducing programs, and became an on-air personality, reading news and playing the straight man alongside a children's show character named Hoppity Skippity.

"I even have people come up to me today and say they remember the show and were devoted fans," he said. "It was fun to do."

The era was a pioneering, fun time, and Williamson was involved in some groundbreaking moments.

For instance, he can't remember whether it was 1947 or 1948, but he recalls working as a commentator on the first broadcast from Capitol Hill, a House Armed Services Committee hearing involving then-Gen. Dwight David Eisenhower.

Williamson also played Santa Claus and met such entertainment giants as Louis Armstrong, Frank Sinatra, Bob Hope, Duke Ellington and Billie Holiday as they visited the station for live, on-air performances.

Eventually, he moved into advertising and executive positions at television stations and ad agencies in Greensboro, N.C., Charleston, S.C., and Orlando.

But while television is a sweet spot of memories for Williamson, it is also a source of sourness.

"I think it's lost its soul," he said. "It seems that anything goes and there's so much deception.

"They can spin something that's not correct into something the public believes is true."

As ownership of most television stations has fallen into the hands of the same seven or eight conglomerates, the business has lost much of its originality, he said.

He and wife Natalie Dix, the retired Daytona Beach News-Journal editorial page editor (who first met Williamson at Stetson in the 1940s), limit their viewing to mainly news-oriented programs and Comedy Central's "The Daily Show with Jon Stewart."

Instead, he spends a lot of time admiring the mostly wild plants and flowers that provide cover for his home.

"I believe cutting trees is responsible for other problems we have today. We bare too much land and it allows the sun to dry it out and reduces our evaporation."

He's convinced deforestation has altered the state's climate, raising temperatures. "We seldom hit 90," in the 1940s, he said.

Politically, he had embraced the conservative message of Barry Goldwater in the 1960s, but he returned to Florida in 1970 and his concern for the environment grew. He switched to the Democratic Party in the late 1980s.

Williamson volunteered for environmentalist Reid Hughes, a Democratic candidate for Congress in 1982 and 1990. Hughes said his background in television and radio was invaluable to his campaigns, though Hughes lost close races to incumbents both times.

"He works harder than the rest of us," Hughes said. "He has been an inspiration to the environmental constituency with his leadership."

Another cause Williamson took up was overpopulation and its societal and environmental effects. For years, he traveled the state, giving presentations on the problem.

But the message never seemed to catch on.

"I think I'm more disillusioned by the human condition than anything else," he said. "I think I'm frustrated because in Florida, we're continuing to do the things that are not good for us.

"I'm a pessimist, I guess, and I hate to be a pessimist. I look across the world and I see people starving and I see genocide and what's going on in Iraq and Palestine and I'm frustrated that I can't do anything about it."

Williamson insists his anger has little or nothing to do with his family life. He was married once, and divorced, and has not spoken to his adopted son for many years.

He stays busy. He travels and continues strategizing with groups such as the Volusia-Flagler Environmental Action Council. He talks about finishing his life story.

In quiet moments at home, he admires the lizards he claims drink from a manmade pond he had dug in his backyard in Holly Hill, an otherwise largely urban city. He watches the koi.

He notices an air potato vine growing on one of his palm trees, and thinks to himself, "Gee, I've got to get that taken care of."

He tries to steady that tremor.

More Gordon Williamson History at:
<http://kidshow.dcmemories.com/hoppity.html>

copy and paste the above web address to your ISP

Gordon Williamson, creator/producer/performer, writes: "I originated the show... at the request of Walter Compton and Roger Coelos, manager and program director of WTTG, Channel 5 respectively, who were concerned that the New York feed of Bob Emery's Small Fry Club had little to interest Washington and WTTG audiences. The reaction to our show was gratifying. We had no doubt that we carried the audience in the 6-6:30 PM time period across the board. Proof of that assumption came from the fact that we had the 25 local children daily who were part of the show, 5 days a week. That's 125 children weekly, [booked] for more than a year ahead of time. Besides producing the show I performed as 'straight man' for several years with Jules Huber who was cast as Hoppity Skippity. We had regular entertaining guest segments who entertained and never condescended or patronized or embarrassed our on-camera guests. We made Saturday public appearances in neighborhood theaters and did special events.

President Truman was instrumental in having the Moppet Shop awarded a Patriotism Award by the Veterans of Foreign Wars, and the National Congress of Christian and Jews awarded us a Brotherhood Award. I left the show in 1953 in order to move to station management. They carried on without me." Jules Huber as "Hoppity Skippity" with his Rabbit Rangers and (for several years) straight man, Gordon Williamson. Broadcast live from the WTTG-TV 5 studios in the Raleigh Hotel, downtown at 12th Street & Pennsylvania Ave., N.W. Aired on WTTG-TV 5, at various airtimes From November 1948 to December 1956:

Gordon tells us: WTTG was the first TV station south of the Mason-Dixon Line and since I was hired as their only announcer before they went on the air commercially in 1946 , we have determined that I am, the first announcer of commercial TV in the entire south, Dr. Goldsmith had Channel 5 on the air experimentally early in 1945. I joined the station in October of 1946, about a month before the FCC licensed us to begin commercial broadcasting.