

WARP SPEED: HOW FAST TIMES ARE CHANGING OUR PERSONAL VALUES

Stephen Bertman

Early in World War II as England and Germany battled for supremacy in the skies over Europe, both sides raced to build faster and faster fighters and bombers. Allied and Axis planes, however, soon struck an invisible and deadly wall. As test pilots approached the speed of sound — about 760 miles per hour — they encountered a mysterious force that violently shook their fuselages and overpowered their controls.

What **was** this mysterious force?

As an airplane flies through the atmosphere, it creates waves of compressed air. Like invisible ripples, these waves rush outward from the plane at the speed of sound. As long as the plane itself flies at subsonic speed, the waves it generates run ahead of it. But as it nears the speed of sound, the plane begins to catch up with its own pressure waves. Should a plane attempt to penetrate such waves, their tremendous force can rip it apart in mid air.

Following a number of fatal crashes, aeronautical engineers finally figured out how to “break the sound barrier.” They reduced the thickness of the wings and swept them back so they would knife through the air, and streamlined the plane’s nose so it would puncture the invisible wall.

The principles of physics that explain the sound barrier can also help us understand the origin and nature of stress in our lives. As the velocity of everyday life increases — as we fly faster and faster through the atmosphere of daily experience — our “aircraft” encounters a turbulence it was never designed to withstand. As our speed increases, invisible pressures build up, pressures strong enough to shatter the structural integrity of our personalities and our relationships. Ultimately, we may lose control, or the craft we fly may disintegrate.

The simple solution, of course, is to slow down. But if we cannot slow down — or choose not to — the only remaining answer is to redesign our lives, to adapt structurally to our new-found speed.

But what does “adapt structurally” really mean? We are, after all, human beings, not machines. There is no metal fuselage to streamline, no wings to sweep back. What parts of our lives, then, are we to alter?

And if the stress each of us feels is experienced socially as well as individually, what changes must society as a whole make to accommodate itself to faster times?

The answers to these questions will ultimately define the quality of North American life. For the adaptations we make to speed alter the fundamental nature of our existence, not only in terms of our behavior but also in terms of our priorities. A faster culture is a different culture, different not merely in its velocity but in its values. Not stress but rather

our accommodations to it will determine the future character of the Canadian soul.

Social Acceleration

Speed-driven stress is not a new phenomenon in our history. During the Industrial Revolution, the steam engine accelerated transportation and manufacturing and, with them, the tempo of life. In the 1830s a French visitor to America's shores, Alexis de Tocqueville, noted how Americans always seemed in a hurry. And in 1845, Henry David Thoreau sought refuge at Walden Pond from what he perceived as the desperate, locomotive-like rush of society.

By the early 1900s the automobile had begun to change not only the country's physical landscape but its mental landscape as well. Some, like author Booth Tarkington, foresaw the possibility of even greater changes. In his 1918 novel, *The Magnificent Ambersons*, he reflected on the automobile's potential cultural and psychological impact:

With all their speed forward they may be a step backward in civilization — that is, in spiritual civilization. It may be that they will not add to the beauty of the world, nor to the life of men's souls. I am not sure. But automobiles have come, and they bring a greater change in our life than most of us suspect. They are here, and almost all outward things are going to be different because of what they bring. They are going to alter war, and they are going to alter peace. I think men's minds are going to be changed in subtle ways because of automobiles; just how, though, I could hardly guess. But you can't have the immense outward changes that they will cause without some inward ones, and it may be...that the spiritual alteration will be bad for us.¹

While steam and gasoline engines were accelerating the movement of people and goods, electricity was speeding up the movement of ideas. The telegraph, the telephone, and radio — all nineteenth-century inventions — quickened the flow of words by making rapid long-distance communication a reality.

In the twentieth century, the technologies of speed were adapted to the purposes of global war and domestic peace, including the airplane, one of the century's earliest inventions.

Some technological changes are hard to appreciate because they do not occur dramatically. Instead, they emerge gradually, infiltrating our everyday lives little by little even as they transform them. How much they transform them we can only see if we stop to take their sum, as author Jerry Mander has done:

I was born in 1936. At that time there were no jet planes and commercial

¹ Booth Tarkington, *The Magnificent Ambersons* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989 [1918]) chap. 19.

plane traffic was effectively non-existent. There were no computers, no space satellites, no microwave ovens, no electric typewriters, no Xerox machines, no tape recorders. There were no stereo music systems nor compact disks. There was no television in 1936. No space travel, no atomic bomb, no hydrogen bomb, no “guided missiles,” as they were first called, no “smart” bombs. There were no fluorescent lights, no washing machines nor dryers, no Cuisinarts, no VCRs. There was no air conditioning. Nor were there freeways, shopping centers, or malls. There were no suburbs as we know them. There was no Express Mail, no fax, no telephone touch dialing, no birth-control pill. There were no credit cards, no synthetic fibres. There were no antibiotics, no artificial organs, no pesticides or herbicides.... During my lifetime all of this changed.²

The inventions Mander lists are quite specific, but something far more subtle, and much more pervasive, was taking place as the decades rolled on. The very pace of life was picking up, quickened by new technologies that more and more began to typify our society.

Many of these were not mechanical technologies with turning gears and moving belts, but electronic ones that operated at the speed of light, 186,000 miles per second. In the time it takes for a human eye to blink, a signal could travel half-way to the moon.

But we weren't sending signals to the moon — at least, not yet. Instead, we were sending them to each other, with greater and greater frequency. In the fifties and sixties, North America's phone was ringing, its radio was blaring, and its TV was on — all at the same time. And its factories were cranking out more and more cars and appliances and gadgets for people to buy.

Back in 1950, fewer than one out of ten American households had a TV set. By 1955, seven out of ten did, an increase of thirty million households in just five years. And by 1970, television was being watched in 96 percent of America's homes.

Television was more than just a medium of mass entertainment. It was a device that canceled distance, delivering in an instant the images of objects thousands of miles away.

But just as potent as television's speed was its power as an instrument of social change. It changed how our days and evenings were spent. It changed how family members interacted. It even changed where furniture was placed. But more than all these things, it changed us as a culture by making the technology of speed a central feature of our national experience. Never before in history had speed been so intimate a component of personal and social life.

However dazzling technological progress was, its own speed and the social acceleration it produced made greater and greater demands upon the human nervous system. By 1970, author Alvin Toffler was describing

² Jerry Mander, *In the Absence of the Sacred: The Failure of Technology and the Survival of the Indian Nations* (San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1991), 11.

the symptoms of a new disease he said he had discovered, a disease he called "future shock." According to Toffler, future shock was a psychological condition induced by subjecting individuals to "too much change in too short a time."³ Toffler argued that technological and social changes were taking place so rapidly that people could no longer adapt to them. "Future shock," he wrote, "is the dizzying disorientation brought on by the premature arrival of the future.... [U]nless man quickly learns to control the rate of change in his personal affairs as well as in society at large, we are doomed to a massive adaptational breakdown."⁴

Since the publication of *Future Shock* in 1970, the rate of social change has radically increased. Largely responsible for this increase has been the rapid development and deployment of older technologies and the swift introduction and growth of new ones. Supported by an electronic network of instantaneous communications, our culture has been transformed into a nationally and globally integrated system in which the prime and unchallenged directive is to keep up with change.

The computer received scant attention in *Future Shock* — and understandably so. After all, the first word processor did not appear until 1970; the first silicon chip, not until 1971; the first personal computer, not until 1975. Even as late as 1984, only eight out of one hundred American households had a computer. In just two years, however, the figure doubled. And by 1994, there was a computer in more than one out of every three American homes. Meanwhile, during the same period, computer speed was increasing at a rate of 55 percent a year, and E-mail and Internet use were just starting to become commonplace.

At the same time, other technologies were revving society up. Sales of cell phones and fax machines, numbered in the low hundreds of thousands in the 1980s, climbed to seven million a year in just a decade. And by 1997, some two million Americans were carrying electronic pagers.

Yet more important than the popularity of any one of these technologies is their combination, which radically reinforces and intensifies the accelerative effect that each separate technology would have had alone. It is their electronic linkage that keeps pictures, sounds, and data continually coursing on a non-stop, high-speed track, saturating our environment with instancy. And the more our society depends upon electronic information flow and entertainment, the more our everyday lives need to keep up with its speed-of-light pace, since our economic and emotional existence is wired into its circuitry.

Without question, this speed can be exhilarating. It brings us what we need and want faster than ever before. But that same speed can also add stress to our lives.

For example, in a national survey conducted in 1986 by the Louis Harris organization, one out of three people interviewed said they lived

³Alvin Toffler, *Future Shock* (New York: Random House, 1970), 2.

⁴Ibid, 11 and 2.

with stress nearly every day. And six out of ten said they experienced “great stress” once or twice a week. In addition, in 1994, two out of ten people questioned reported feeling great stress almost every day, according to the findings of the Prevention Index survey.

In addition, studies by University of Maryland sociologist John Robinson have revealed a progressive increase in hurriedness over the years. In 1965, twenty-five percent of those surveyed said their lives were rushed all the time. By 1975, the figure had risen to twenty-eight percent. By 1985, it had climbed to thirty-two percent. And, more recently in 1992, Penn State researchers Geoffrey Godbey and Alan Graefe put the figure at thirty-eight percent, almost a fifty percent increase from 1965. Strikingly, those who lived in small towns felt as rushed as those who lived in big cities. Just as strikingly, both groups felt their lives were hurried not only at work but also at play.

The presence of stress in our lives is also revealed by the printed word. In the last five years, almost four hundred articles on stress and time management have appeared in popular magazines. In addition, there are some nine hundred books currently in print on these topics. All these publications do more than just show how popular a subject stress is; they also demonstrate how little control we seem to have over it.

Like it or not, we’ve all been drafted into an army, a peacetime army that fights its battles on the battlefield of everyday life. It’s “time wars” we wage, to use Jeremy Rifkin’s term, wars between the slower pace our minds and bodies crave and the faster tempo our technology demands. And in such wars all of us are combat veterans.

Warp Speed

As the speed of everyday life has risen, we have come closer and closer to an invisible “sound barrier.” Already we can feel the fuselage shutter as it begins to enter a zone of air turbulence that can rend it apart. Already we can feel the controls becoming resistant to our will.

When we land, the engineers who debrief us redesign our plane, and in a matter of time we are airborne again, questing anew for greater and greater speed, striving once again to break the barrier that stopped us before.

But unlike the science of aeronautics, the modifications in design we accept represent changes in ourselves. For in order to maintain acceleration, we will need to accommodate the quality of our lives to the demands of an artificial environment comprised of incredibly swift but unfeeling electrons. Thus it will not be the plane alone that will be transformed, but its pilot as well.

What lies on the other side of the barrier is not simply more speed but another kind of us, a kind we are already becoming.

Like the crew of the Starship Enterprise, “boldly go[ing] where no man has gone before,” we are approaching a velocity called “warp speed,” a

velocity that can warp our behavior and our most basic values even as it desensitizes us to the metamorphosis we undergo. It is a velocity generated by our own inner need and sustained by the powerful technology at our touch, a velocity sanctioned by a society committed to speed.

Warp speed produces its effects by changing our very relationship to time.

First, warp speed disengages us from the past. The speed of our ascent leaves the past far behind us, like a receding landscape viewed from the rear of a roaring rocket, a landscape so progressively miniaturized by increasing velocity that its features lose all recognizable form. Traditions become incomprehensible; history, irrelevant; memories, a blur.

Second, warp speed plunges us toward the future. The features of the future rush toward us like the fireballs of a meteor storm, blinding us to what lies farther ahead hidden in the cosmic night. Brilliant inventions, glittering products, glistening data, and luminous celebrities — each swarm brighter than the last — sweep past us in successive waves, dazzling our eyes.

Nullifying a vision of the past and negating a true view of the future, warp speed isolates us in the present. Marooned there, we turn to the present as our exclusive basis for fulfillment and gratification, as our sole source of security in a cosmos where all other sources of security have been stripped from us by our onrushing speed. Hurling through time, we cling to the moment.

The Power of Now

As we travel at warp speed, we fall under the sway of a new force, the power of now. The power of now is the intense energy of an unconditional present, a present uncompromised by any other dimension of time. Under its all-consuming power, the priorities we live by undergo transformation in a final act of adaptation to electronic speed. Our lives cease to be what they once were, not so much because life itself has changed, but because the way we see it has.

The power of now replaces the long-term with the short-term, duration with immediacy, permanence with transience, memory with sensation, insight with impulse.

Unlike the monastery or the desert where mystics once attained transcendent perspective by withdrawing from the world, the realm of now is an environment of pervasive sensory stimulation and swift flux, a continually altered cosmos that offers us no fixed horizon. As a consequence, our lives come to be characterized more by their random trajectory than by any reasoned destination.

The individual, the family, and society at large are all being transformed by the power of now. Not only is the power of now altering

their nature, it is changing the very meaning these words have in our minds. Thus, under its influence, both reality and our understanding of reality are being reshaped.

The Fluid Individual

As individuals, the power of now immerses us in an atmosphere of transience and flux. We float on the current of an electromagnetic sea, a sea whose waves are visible on the screens of television sets and computers. Even as it seductively entertains or informs us with its content, each medium indoctrinates us with its form, a form characterized by instantly changing images. As a result, we become progressively desensitized to the importance of continuity and wholeness in our lives. Inured to what is temporary, we lose touch with the permanent.

In a culture fed by a fast-moving electronic stream, those who “go with the flow” to find excitement and fulfillment inexorably speed up their lives. More than simply inducing stress, the prolonged acceleration of behavior can lead to marked changes in personality, changes evident in one’s external appearance and inner sensibilities. Through diets and plastic surgery, individuals today seek the transformation of the outer self in the shortest possible time. Meanwhile, through psychotropic drugs and teachings that promise shortcuts to happiness and well-being, they seek the transformation of the inner self as well.

By assigning the highest priority to speed, the power of now undermines the value of those experiences and activities that require slowness to develop: psychological maturation, the building of meaningful and lasting human relationships, the doing of careful and responsible work, the creation and appreciation of the arts, and the search for answers to life’s greatest problems and mysteries. At the same time, by encouraging the immediate gratification of the senses, the power of now obscures the need to cultivate those skills and virtues — patience, commitment, self-denial, and even self-sacrifice — without which no civilization can long endure.

Fulfilling the need to feel a certain way, satisfying the desire to look a certain way, the power of now shapes the individual within and without. Like a chameleon, whose colours change to match the background against which it moves, the individual fluidly glides across the landscape of time, continually altered in body and mind by the addictive energy of an artificial present.

The Centrifugal Family

The symbolic gravity that once let families keep their feet on the ground has been replaced by a new, whirling momentum that has torn the traditional family asunder, confusing old identities and relationships. As a result, the “centrifugal family” has become one of the most salient

features of North American society.

The force of social acceleration has in fact modified the very definition of love. Influenced by high-speed technology and a culture of quick turnaround time and instant results, individuals expect life to express-deliver the love they need, and grow restive when it does not. We come to expect the imperfect human beings in our lives to operate as efficiently as our computers, quickly losing patience with those we might otherwise love if they do not answer as swiftly, or respond as rapidly, or obey as readily, as the machines we know.

As a consequence, marriage — a “diachronic” pursuit implying a commitment that reaches across time — is fast becoming an anachronism. The fact that our material culture is characterized by things that do not last and, indeed, were never intended to last imparts the expectation of impermanence to our human relationships as well. Traditional marriage thus becomes vulnerable to wear precisely because it stands as an affirmation of constancy in an increasingly inconstant world.

Even anniversary gifts have been redefined by technology and speed. The traditional gift for a first wedding anniversary used to be paper, but now it is clocks. The traditional fourth anniversary present used to be fruit or flowers; now it is electrical appliances. The fourteenth anniversary was once commemorated with crystal; today it is celebrated with watches.

Social acceleration is also responsible for a deterioration in the meaning of parenthood and childhood. In a fast-moving, sensually-oriented society like ours, the virtues of sacrifice and long-term commitment — so essential to effective parenthood — become rare. At the same time, acceleration corrupts the very meaning of childhood. Children born in a microwave culture absorb its tempo internally and “mature” too fast, precociously experimenting with behaviors from spending to sex, while lacking the judgment that only gradual maturation could provide.

At the other end of the biological spectrum, the old suffer the effects of rapid and turbulent change. In a society governed by the pull of the present, the old are looked upon as more and more irrelevant — even by themselves — as they continue to lose touch with the quickly-shifting topography of the land they once knew. Their most socially acceptable option is to look and act young and not dwell on the past. As a result, the family and society itself come to lose one of their most precious possessions, a sense of connectedness with the past that could, like a gyroscope, stabilize them in turbulent times.

It is no accident that the life of the family is in such danger today. Diachronic commitment, so necessary for family survival, is a concept alien to our society. Alien also is the concept of continuity. Continuity is different from mere transience, for continuity emphasizes not moment but meaning, the meaningful connection of parts — female and male, young and old — into a living whole bonded by common purpose, a whole in

which energy (for the family, the energy of love) is given and shared. The increased incidence of family breakdown today permeates the environment in which people live with an atmosphere of impermanence that seeps into the interstices of every human relationship. Family fragmentation rather than being an exception has become the rule.

One thing is certain: never before in history has a civilization been so deprived of the cohesiveness of family as a defense against the centrifugal force of change.

Hyperculture

In a fluid social environment, the acceleration of one activity tends to induce acceleration in other activities. Thus speed begets more speed. While electronic connectivity gives contemporary culture its cohesion, it also sustains its acceleration.

The social consequence of connectivity and speed is a synchronous society, a society unified by instancy and acutely attuned to the moment. In such a society, people are not separated by rigid barriers of space or time but coexist synergistically, joined by neural networks governed by the principles of data consumption and sensory gratification.

The end product of such high-speed synergy is a "hyperculture," a culture whose most distinguishing trait is a pathological, self-justifying speed inimical to humane values. In such a culture, so-called deviant behavior, including violent and criminal acts, is actually not an anomaly but is in fact consistent with society's highest goal: get as much as you can as fast as you can.

Democracy is peculiarly susceptible to a hyperculture's power. While all forms of government change to some degree, democracy is especially vulnerable because it is designed to respond to the potentially unstable moods and variable sentiments of a large populace. The only stabilizing influences on a democracy are its traditions. A speed-driven hyperculture, however, is anti-traditional. Focused almost exclusively on the present and thereby deprived of long-term historical memory, citizens in a hurried society tend to lack the knowledge and perspective they need to make wise political decisions. The nature of the power of now thus poses a profound challenge to the longevity of this nation. Yet only last year Prime Minister Jean Chrétien said: "We understand that speed is not the most important thing in a knowledge economy. It's the only thing."⁵

The Time Machine

Over a century ago, H G Wells wrote *The Time Machine*, a tale of a daring adventurer who traveled through the fourth dimension. Journeying faster than the speed of light, he landed on an Earth he barely

⁵ Speech, St. John's, Newfoundland, September 22, 1998.

recognized, a future world of both savage desolation and tender promise in which creatures of darkness battled creatures of light in a struggle that would determine our planet's destiny.

By the standards of 1895, Wells' machine was state-of-the-art — “a glittering metallic framework” fashioned of ivory and brass and transparent crystal, a device fitted with a saddle and two white levers: one for moving forward into the future, the other for moving back into the past.

Accustomed as we now are to space exploration, Wells' design may seem technically naive. But simplistic as it was, it nevertheless embodied a visionary concept: that human beings by their inventive genius might someday be able to break the restraining bonds of time and travel to other eras, future or past.

Though the fulfilment of such a dream may be far off, a time machine of sorts already exists — in fact, one more powerful than Wells' imagination could ever have conceived. The machine can accommodate not merely one passenger but an entire society. And it is energized not by a mysterious crystal but by the spirit of technology itself.

Unlike Wells' time-traveler, we shall not arrive on an alien landscape. For it will not be the world, as much as ourselves, that will be altered. For we are being transformed, even at this very moment, by our extraordinary velocity and by the emergence of a newly insistent force — the power of now.

It is impossible to know the long-term effects of our transformation. The one thing we can be sure of is we will never be the same.

The Corruption of Education

One force that can slow down an irrationally accelerated society is the force of education, for education connects us with the abiding values of an earlier time and with the humane traditions of our race.

At its best, a university seeks to promote the permanent and enduring, as opposed to what Pope John Paul II in his 1998 encyclical called the “fleeting and provisional.” The traditional liberal arts college and university stands for the ideal, not the pragmatic; the genuine, not the artificial; the spiritual, not the commercial.

Yet higher education today is not impervious to the pressures of the power of now and its enticements. So much in our society has already been commercialized, commodified, and quantified, it is no wonder then that our educational institutions are being similarly transformed. Today, like any good corporation, the university consults its sales charts and marketing surveys to determine what should be taught. It aims for higher productivity and judges the merits of its workers by the number of units produced, failing to realize that some disciplines will never be cost-efficient because they are so labor-intensive. The university turns to technology (TV monitors, computers) and large classrooms to multiply its

achievements, forgetting that humane arts must be humanly transmitted on a human scale else their intrinsic value is lost.

Notwithstanding logos, slick packaging, and mission statements, few institutions take the time to contemplate what the irreducible core is without which a university ceases to deserve the name.

The typical university of today teaches customers how to make a living instead of teaching students how to live. It mistakes data for wisdom, while its classrooms become more networked but at the same time less intimate, more virtual but less real.

Herein lies the supreme challenge the humanities will face in the twenty-first century. In a fast-paced society governed by commerce and technology, the humanities stand as an anomaly. The more a university aligns itself with commerce and technology, the more the humanities will become isolated. Naked and exposed, their vulnerability will only invite calculated acts of "ethnic cleansing" undertaken in the name of profitability and the greater good.

A hypercultural environment pollutes a campus in other ways. In the first place, it devalues those activities that are inherently slow and time-intensive: contemplation, reflection, meditation, appreciation. Such activities are just so much "down time" in a computer-driven world. Secondly, high speed severs us from the past and from a sense of history, thereby robbing us of the one standard by which we could measure the present. To a society on the move, history is just so much excess baggage.

The Humanities as Counterculture

Flux, or change, has always been characteristic of the natural world. Its dynamic presence was observed twenty five centuries ago by the Greek philosopher Heraclitus. As Heraclitus put it: "Everything flows and nothing stays. You can't step into the same river twice."

Today, however, the flux inherent in the world of nature has been radically augmented by technology and commercialism, which have jointly accelerated the degree to which our lives are surrounded by motion and change. As a consequence, we are immersed in an ocean of transience, a surging sea of electronic impulses churning with materialistic flotsam and jetsam. This sea joyfully lifts on its waves all things that are evanescent, simultaneously eroding the shores of permanence that for ages have defined the coastline of humane conviction.

The conversion of our civilization into a culture of instancy and impermanence has produced a fundamental shift in human consciousness and values, a shift that poses an unprecedented challenge to the survival and dissemination of the humanistic tradition. That tradition represents what Robert Maynard Hutchins used to call "the

great conversation,”⁶ a multicultural dialogue begun thousands of years ago and carried on in dozens of tongues ever since, a conversation which has sought to debate and answer “momentous questions of permanent relevance”⁷ about the meaning of the human enterprise, the business of being human. The problem we now face as humanists, however, is the same problem we now face as human beings: not anything as narrow as the mere obsolescence of old books, but the universal disintegration of all things that have an intrinsic connection with the past. The hyperculture we inhabit is ruled by the power of now, the power of an unconditional present, uncompromising and uncompromised by any other dimension of time.

In devising strategies to keep the humanistic tradition alive, we must abandon the naive belief that we can make the humanities relevant to society, for contemporary society’s underlying premises are antithetical to the very notion of tradition. More so than ever before, the teaching of the humanities today constitutes a counter-cultural activity.

A Fading Motto

Like so many colleges and universities, the University of Windsor has a motto: “Bonitatem et disciplinam et scientiam doce me.” It means “Teach me goodness and judgment and knowledge.”

The motto is in Latin, the language of the Catholic Church and, before that, the Roman Empire. But its origin is much older still. The words come from the Old Testament, a verse from an ancient Hebrew song (Psalm 119:66) in which the worshipper prays to God to instruct him in the ways of righteousness. The words of the motto are in Latin because they are taken from a translation made by St Jerome around the year 400. Since our university was originally founded by Basilian priests, it is the Latin version they chose.

The motto embodies a set of priorities. The first and most important thing the psalmist prays to be taught is “bonitas” (goodness), then “disciplina” (judgment), and lastly “scientia” (factual knowledge). The spiritual basis for this gradation is clear: facts alone are inadequate unless we possess a capacity for critical judgment; yet even that capacity is inadequate if not infused with goodness. Thus, of all subjects the most important is moral.

Over the more than thirty years I have been a professor at my university, I have seen changes in its curriculum that parallel changes in society. It is “scientia” (factual knowledge) that has risen and “bonitas” (goodness) that has fallen as a subject worthy of study. As courses in

⁶ Robert Maynard Hutchins and Mortimer J Adler, *et al.*, eds., *The Great Books of the Western World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press/Encyclopedia Britannica, 1952), vol. 1.

⁷ Moses Hadas, *Old Wine, New Bottles: A Humanist Teacher at Work* (New York: Pocket Books, 1963), 129.

natural and social sciences have multiplied, programs in religion, philosophy, and literature have declined or been eliminated, often not because of a genuine lack of student interest as much as administrative bias.

To be fair, the administrators are right. They, better than I, know what is popular. And their judgment is confirmed by graphs reflecting enrollment patterns for the last three decades in colleges and universities across North America.⁸

Each year I quiz my students to see if they recognize “Bonitatem et disciplinam et scientiam.” A couple of hands may go up in class of a hundred. These are the students who recognize their school’s motto. If, however, I then ask the class what the words mean, not a single hand is raised.

These test results reflect not just the decline of Latin or of Biblical literacy, but something much deeper: the forgetting of both words and their symbolic meaning. By losing touch with a motto, my students have lost touch with an outlook on life.

It may well be argued that the world no longer needs spiritual guidance, that secular values are sufficient to take us into – and beyond – the twenty-first century. But what disturbs me is that my students are not given permission to choose. Materialism and technology have in effect revised the curriculum, foreclosing not only whole subjects but an entire set of human alternatives once known but now deliberately ignored.

Our Need for the Humanities

In the future, speed-of-light technology will more and more come to dominate our lives and define our values. In a world with so many insensate forces arrayed against the flowering of the human spirit, it is precisely the humanities that society will so desperately need. The humanities are not all we need or will ever want. But without them we will remain forever poor.

⁸ See Alvin B. Kernan, ed., *What’s Happened to the Humanities?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997).