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Speech for University of Texas at El Paso

October 22, 2002

What – How – Dishonesty – Hubris

The ideas that I would like to share with you today involve four words: What – How – Dishonesty – Hubris. You might find this an odd combination. Three common place English words and one less common word derived from the Greek. An essay by Professor David Orr at Oberlin College informed my own thinking about these words. You see, Professor Orr believes that universities do little more than train young people for careers in the global economy. So what's his complaint? Isn't this what universities are supposed to do? Prepare students for careers that will provide them with generous salaries. Of course it is. But Professor Orr fears that there is something missing. He believes that true education must emphasize critical thinking. The kind of thinking done by Plato, Aristotle, Hobbes, Locke and Descartes. Men who questioned the accepted beliefs of their day and left us with an intellectual tradition that encourages us to do that same sort of critical thinking. Professor Orr worries about a system of higher education that emphasizes performance standards and testing yet fails to encourage critical thought, creativity and even ecological awareness.

Let's pause and consider how the last thing I mentioned, ecological awareness, might be put to use right here in El Paso and Juarez. This wonderful bi-national city that we all know is running out of water. All the knowledge we need to exploit and market our water resources is available to us in our business and engineering faculties. What is missing is critical examination of a society that allocates resources the way we do. A society that builds golf courses and condos and strip malls and factories **where** we build them. Those are moral and ethical decisions that are best made by critical thinkers our great universities no longer seem to be educating.

Dr. Orr chairs the Department of Environmental Studies at Oberlin and spends most of his time teaching and writing about these issues. It worries me that there are not enough David Orrs in the lecture halls of our great universities today. Or more Paul Woodruffs. Dr. Woodruff has written several plays, two operas, and a novel set in Vietnam. He's also translated important works of philosophy from the Greek. We're fortunate to have him at the University of Texas at Austin. Dr. Woodruff writes that "Higher ed fails when it comes to teaching ethics." He begins his essay with this quote: "Sex is fine. Even business professors will bring up sex in class without a blush. But ethics is becoming taboo among intellectuals—especially the ones who teach in business schools." It doesn't bother Dr. Woodruff that professors discuss sex. What bothers him is that they don't discuss ethics.

This brings me to one of the four words I began with. **What**—yes, what! <u>What</u> is it that you <u>want</u> to achieve? Okay, you want to build a business, you want to be a doctor,

you want to be a lawyer. All noble pursuits. So you answered the question of the What. And it required no ethical or moral deliberation to answer it. But How do you do it? How do you go about it? Do you cheat on an exam? Finance courses are not easy. Medical school is demanding. Law school exams are taxing. How do you achieve the What that you have chosen? The business pages of our newspapers are filled with stories of men and women who knew what they wanted to achieve: Enron, the WorldCom, Adelphia. The leaders of these enterprises emphasized the What and neglected the How. Not only were they Dishonest, but were filled with Hubris. Hubris is the character flaw that destroyed the business they ran and ruined the lives of the people who worked and invested there. Hubris is the belief or presumption that we can get away with certain things. Paul Woodruff teaches his students about hubris in his course on the history of theater. These business executives might have learned something from that course. These business executives believe you and I are dopes. Just plain stupid! They perceive they have a monopoly on brain-power and that we'll never comprehend what they're doing. They are guilty of the worst of sins. They will never learn to correct anything; they have a self justifying mechanism within themselves!

George Santayana reminds us that "those that do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it." History confirms this wisdom. The Romans, Greeks and the Byzantines thought their civilizations were forever. One of the reasons those civilizations fell is because of what Professor Orr describes as a dangerous myth that threatens our civilization: 1)The belief that our culture represents the pinnacle of human achievement, and 2) The belief that we alone are modern, technological, and developed.

This might be described as the myth of collective Hubris. I remember when I had just graduated from the University of Texas. I believed I was really the smartest person who had ever lived. All you had to do was be around me for ten minutes and you were persuaded that I thought so. I was selling insurance and I called on a farmer and I sold him a policy and when it came time to sign his name he simply made an X. Well, here I am, this genius, and I looked with disdain on him. Of course, I didn't show it because I wanted to sell him the policy. Then after he had bought and paid for the policy, he asked me if I would like to come up and have a cup of coffee with him. Well, I certainly didn't want to do that. I was a genius. Why would I want to be associated with such an ignoramus? But, I gave in and thought I'd spend five minutes with him. The truth is I spent about three hours with him. He just kept talking and talking. I left and got in my car, drove down the highway for just a minute or two, went to the side of the road, and all of a sudden it dawned on me. This man had more wisdom in his little finger than I would ever have throughout my life! It was there at that moment for the first time that I was able to delineate between knowledge and wisdom. We have plenty of knowledge, more so than the human mind can absorb. But where's the wisdom?

When I thought so little of this farmer, I must have forgotten the most important things I had learned at home and at the University of Texas. At home I was raised as a Marxist, by a father who was a self-taught man who spoke Russian and Yiddish and learned to speak Spanish before English because he worked on the West Side of San

Antonio. My father had fled Russia and was determined to do his part in building a just world in this country.

At the University of Texas I was introduced to John Dewey. Intellectually introduced to him, that is. Dewey, as a professor and philosopher, had a great influence on education and I'm suspect he would not be pleased with what we are doing today. He also had a great influence on me. At the University of Texas, I read Dewey's *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, a book that certainly changed my life. I recommend it to you.

Dewey questioned the teachings of Karl Marx. Marx said that the ends justified the means. He saw so much misery among the poor and his sense of outrage was unrestrained. The result was his theory that the ends justified the means. In other words, whatever was needed to change the system was justified. Now, let's go back to the What and the How. I couldn't quarrel with what Marx wanted: a more just and equitable society. But the means (the How) were horrendous, unacceptable! Dewey traveled to Russia and was convinced that a violent revolution leading to a dictatorship was not the way to achieve a just society. The flaw was the dictatorship. The flaw was **How** we would achieve the goal. No matter how noble the What, it's the How that really matters. Dewey also believed that technology and science are wondrous. Let's applaud what science and technology have contributed to improving the quality of life for our society. But he warned that sometimes technology outpaces the ethical standards needed to help all of society. He wrote that "the change has been technical rather than human and moral.

It has been economic rather than adequately social." I'll give you an example: the cotton picker, a wonderful invention! But it put half a million untrained men and women out of work. The technology was wonderful, but the social consequences were devastating.

There are more contemporary examples. Computer programs have allowed day traders and financial analysts and institutional investors to speculate on the stock market during the past ten years. The technology was wonderful. But when the market bubble burst, the social consequences were devastating.

And, of course, there is the one technological innovation that shaped the second half of the past century. The splitting of the atom. We all know the social costs, from the dropping of two atomic bombs on Japan to a half-century of cold War with the Soviet Union.

- Because of this wondrous technological innovation, the consequences of war between India and Pakistan are far greater.

- Because of this wondrous technological innovation, our nation is rushing toward war with Iraq.

- Because of this wondrous technological innovation, we are wondering what and how to react to the fact that North Korea is armed with nuclear weapons.

There's even a high social cost associated with nuclear energy, as we saw in the nuclear accident at Three Mile Island in Pennsylvania and the tragedy that occurred when

safety systems failed at a nuclear plant in Chernobyl. The problems this wondrous technology created have also come close to home. In the year some of you were born, hundreds of people were exposed to dangerous radiation right across the river in Juarez, when hospital machinery filled with radioactive cobalt pellets ended up in a junkyard. And the Texas Legislature came very close to making the tiny town of Sierra Blanca, ninety miles east of El Paso, a repository for much of the nation's radioactive waste. This is progress that Dewey might describe as "technological rather than human or moral and economic rather than adequately social."

Sixty-five years ago, John Dewey, and the remarkable professors I studied with at the University of Texas, inspired me to question the social costs associated with technology. They provided me with the critical thinking skills that continue to enrich my life today. And it was reading Dewey that finally helped me realize that I wasn't really a Marxist. After all, I have made a great deal of money as a businessman. I became the wealthy capitalist my father feared. But I have never ceased to believe that our capitalist system can be improved. That it can be made more just than it is today. That the great wealth it creates can be more equitably distributed. How do we do that? Where are my answers? In eight and a half decades, I've been made increasingly aware of the problems. But this smartest guy that was ever born is short on answers. You are the generation that has been the beneficiary of all these great scientific advancements. But you cannot lose sight of the social consequences Dewey wrote about. We're winning the technological battle. But we're losing the social one.

- We're the richest nation in the world. Our university system includes the best cancer-treatment system in the world. Yet 40 million people go without health insurance.
- We are the richest nation in the world, yet our public schools go begging for money because we refuse to adequately fund them.
- We are the richest nation in the world. Yet as Senator Eliot Shapleigh reminded me recently, our banks take far more money out of our communities than they put into them.
- We are the richest nation in the world, yet the percentage of the poor among us remains the same while the new wealth our economy creates is concentrated in the hands of a small number of people.

This concentration of wealth has real costs for real people. Consider what happened at Enron before the company collapsed. The executives and bosses froze the retirement accounts of their workers. Then, as the workers watched, the bosses sold their stock for a total of $1.1 billion, just before the stock collapsed. By the time the workers were allowed to sell the Enron stock in their retirement accounts, the stock was worthless. The behavior of these executives, and the Hubris that allowed that behavior, also destroyed the wealth of Enron's shareholders: The owners of the company. This concentration of wealth threatens the very system of capitalism that creates the wealth. Ravi Batra, an economics professor at SMU, warned us about this fifteen years ago, when he looked back on the cause of the Great Depression of 1930.

Dr. Batra wrote: "Economists generally blame the cataclysm of the 1930s on faulty monetary and fiscal policies of the U.S. Government. In fact, the primary cause of that depression has so far eluded the experts. There was nothing new in the monetary and fiscal policies of those times. The government had followed similar policies during previous recessions. What was so different that turned an ordinary recession in 1930 into an unprecedented collapse? **The unprecedented concentration of wealth that peaked in 1929. The concentration of wealth is again rising in the 1980s and beginning to assume the menacing levels of the 1920s."** Our system does not work when a small group of people have all the money. You know, when I was a youngster, we played marbles for keeps. But if I won all the marbles from my opponent, I gave him back ten. Not because I was kind or good. **I wanted them all!** But even at that age I understood that if I had them all, I would have no one with whom to play.

In today's economy, too few people control all the marbles. Too much of the money that should be earned by working people is tied up in stock options, executive salaries, in mansions, villas, and vacation homes owned by CEOs. You have got to change that. You have got to make our capitalist system more just. There is a practical reason for you to do so. The system will not continue to work if it isn't changed. I'll conclude by again borrowing from Professor David Orr. He observed that Communism failed because it produced too little at too great a cost. Capitalism will fail if it continues to produce too much and share too little at too high a cost to our children and grandchildren. We cannot continue to build a world of sybaritic

wealth for a few and Calcuttan poverty for a growing underclass. If we do, our economic system will fail.

There is a higher reason why we cannot stand by while wealth accumulates in the hands of a few. To do so represents ethical and moral failure. That is evident here in El Paso, a city that looks across a river into a community that has far less wealth than we do. Our capitalist economy is a global economy. But we're not just participants in an economy. We are individual members of a local, national, and global community. We must bind together and have concern for one another! Yes: As Sophocles observed 2,500 years ago when he wrote the play, Antigone, let us remember his words within this community called the world: "We were born not to share in hate but to share in love."