

CHARLES EVANS HUGHES

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COLLEGE STUDENTS are likely to look upon themselves as subjects; I should prefer that they regard themselves as predicates. You tend to feel you are subjects in two senses: first, subject to rules and discipline, and to curricula; second, as people without sovereignty or power of command, with no capacity to determine what kind of college this is to be, what its qualities, its reputation, its function, and its product. It is usual to think of yourselves as the governed, as being kept in leading-strings at a time when you have reached a maturity of which you are more conscious than the faculty appear to be.

Today let us shift the emphasis from the subject to the predicate — the affirmative part of the sentence. Upon what you do is predicated what sort of place this will be. If all our buildings were marble halls, and all our sod creeping-bent, thick, and soft as velvet, if all our trees were hoary elms weaving their shadow patterns upon storied walls; and if we had a faculty unique in knowledge, sartorial elegance, and personal charm; and yet had poor students, the institution would not attain a great or solid reputation — and you would not get a good education.

Some of you already know that not all our buildings — especially the dormitories — are marble halls; you will discover in due course that not all

the professors wear Arrow collars, at least they do not always achieve the pictorial effect of the advertisements. All that is, for the moment, beyond your control. But within your own competence is the determination of the quality of the education you will get here.

To illustrate the point I would like to speak about the undergraduate days of a Brown student who lived a long life and a full one. His days were marked by achievement and fame, but crossed by failure and tragedy. He was as human a man as I ever knew, and yet as great.

Charles Evans Hughes entered Brown in September 1878 as a transfer student from Madison University, which now appears on our football schedule as Colgate. Back of him was neither wealth nor influence. He came unheralded and unknown; as the son of a Baptist minister, his financial resources were meager in the extreme.

He did not come to college with a fixed purpose beyond college itself. It is now standard practice to say that in "the good old days" students had already determined upon careers as ministers, teachers, lawyers, or doctors, and that the liberal arts college was really a direct preparation for professional life. But a study of the curriculum available in 1878 shows that it was poorly adapted to direct vocational ends. Moreover, anyone who knows anything about those professions knows that they are so di-

verse in their demands that no single curriculum could meet the professional needs of all.

An important characteristic of this new student was that he was ready to take one step at a time. He lived from day to day, exemplifying the maxim he must have heard a thousand times in home and church, "Take therefore no thought for the morrow." It did not deeply concern him, so far as the record goes or as he later recounted his college experiences, that he had no vocational objective. He was going to college to get what it had to offer. Then he would do the next thing. He was willing to let time and experience show what the next step was to be. Today we can look at him as any normal undergraduate. He was not a pre-law student or pre-anything else — just a college boy taking life in his stride.

It was not until late in his senior year and at the suggestion of a classmate that he turned toward the law. Indeed it was just before Commencement, when, as class prophet, he was writing about the future of his classmates, that he was challenged to say what he would do — and followed the advice of a fellow student. That is only a dramatic example of a vital element in college life then and now. As Hughes, himself, expressed it, "we exerted a strong influence upon each other." With all the changes that time has brought since 1878 that central fact of college life remains unaltered. Student influence

is often far more potent than faculty advice or any other professional "guidance."

When he came to Brown, the future statesman was only sixteen years old, though he had already spent two years in another college. He was tall, and not well developed physically. President Faunce who was a Junior in 1878 described him as "long, lank, extremely slender." He was never of varsity caliber and could not make a team; but he was interested in athletics and managed the baseball team one season. He was a consistent rooter, and made trips long before the days when hitch-hiking facilitated travel. He followed the team even when the modest cost was a serious drain on his resources.

Outside athletics he was a participant in all student activities. He served, as did his son and grandson, on the editorial staff of the student newspaper. What he wrote has been, to some extent at least, identified. It shows him as conforming perfectly to the undergraduate type. He wrote satiric advice to the department of buildings and grounds — good advice, too, which was acted upon a mere sixty years later, to the benefit of us all. He wrote a history of faculty rules and regulations and offered suggestions for further change. The greatest reform he advocated — abolition of the grading system — has not yet been achieved. It may come in time.

He joined a fraternity and entered actively into its life — forensic and intellectual as well as social.

In college — and until the day of his death — he was a good storyteller and could sharpen the point by his hearty and dramatic way of recounting any episode; “he had the reputation of being one of the best wits of the class, and was very quick at repartee.”

He did not lead his class in scholarship, though his standing was high. He was never a grind in any sense of the word. He took honors and prizes only when it appealed to him to do so, not with the efficient purposefulness of the grade-getter. He was the kind of student a teacher likes best — one who does the work for what there is in it, not for the grade or any other reward.

What was it then that marked this student and made him notable in college long before he attained national and, ultimately, international fame?

Three things: the first was rigid self-discipline, a habit that followed him through all the years of his long life. I saw him often when he was Secretary of State. He was the most prompt, devoted, and conscientious Secretary that we have had in modern times. You could almost set your watch by the time of his arrival at the cold granite structure across Executive Avenue from the White House. When he left he almost always carried a bag full of papers for study at home. He never discussed an issue with a foreign diplomat without having mastered not only the précis prepared by his staff but the entire documentation. It required a prodigious effort and long

hours; but he followed the routine without exhaustion, for there was no waste motion.

He was Chief Justice when I came to Brown and several times I stayed in his home in Washington when there on University business. During his periods of leisure he was entirely relaxed and full of good conversation, but when the appointed time came for him to be at his desk that moment found him at his work and fully absorbed in it. Such habits of self-discipline were only the continuation of methods he followed in college.

Most people find it harder to get themselves to work than they do to labor after they start. Many people develop so much internal friction that they work against themselves more than at the job. People think of self-discipline as cramping their style and limiting happiness. Actually self-discipline is no kill-joy; when well developed it gives a relaxed sense of power and focuses the mind on the instant problem.

Concentration, it is called; but that is a poor word to describe efficient mental work. For when people concentrate consciously they are often thinking more about thinking than about the matter in hand. A better way of describing the characteristic of a disciplined mind is the absence of diffusion — complete escape from self-interruption, physical or mental, emotional or tangible.

For Charles Evans Hughes self-discipline had

come, through long habit, no longer to require an effort of the will; on the contrary it released his will to effective constructive effort. When he read his college assignments he neither counted the pages nor measured the time, nor was aware of any other thing until the task was done. No one who wastes time has much leisure. The person who learns through consistent self-discipline to do his work is never too busy; he has leisure for other things.

Leisure suggests the second dominant characteristic of this student. He had time to spare and he used it for the best of all recreation — intellectual pleasure, emotional interest, broadening his taste, sharpening his perceptions. He read without guidance outside of class assignments — omnivorously. He read through most of Dickens while at Brown and told me of the immense enjoyment he had from it. If you have a lively and broad sense of humor, Dickens will delight you; if you have a deep social concern, Dickens will stimulate it; if you want to study human nature, Dickens is a rich mine. Hughes also read Thackeray, Macaulay, Victor Hugo, Emerson, Scott, Hawthorne, and many others. He read on many topics and always with zest. There was nothing of the prig in this wide reading, nothing of self-conscious self-improvement, no effort to learn "how to win friends and influence people." His reading was complete enjoyment of leisure time.

Hughes gained much in the classroom, but far

beyond that he made direct acquaintance with the great literature of his day. Thus he acquired vicarious experience upon which he was able to draw throughout his life. He did not have to grope through every problem himself and learn every lesson at first hand; he could recall the issues and situations historical and fictional characters had faced before and he knew the consequences of their choices.

There was a third characteristic of this youthful scholar which will make him seem almost as grim as the rigid self-discipline and the rich use of leisure time. He was not contemptuous of his memory. Recently it has been fashionable to admire "memory" from the grandstand. Many think dreamily how wonderful it would be to know all that John Kieran knows, but remain contemptuous of the process by which such omniscience in sports, poetry, natural history, and other fields is acquired. Some people have natural gifts of memory, but there is no aspect of the intellectual life which so repays cultivation.

The effort of memory is painful at first, but if the effort is long pursued it can produce a memory so muscular that remembering is as easy as breathing. When I was a very young historian a young mathematician made sport of me because I had to memorize so many dates. He said he would never adopt a vocation which drew so heavily upon the powers

of memory. Whereupon he became a stockbroker and has had to recall from day to day, month to month, and year to year the quotations of many stocks, the highs and lows, the yield, the histories of numerous companies, the nature of their management — a welter of data which makes the memory task of the historian seem relatively simple by comparison.

What Charles Evans Hughes studied he remembered, what he read for pleasure in his leisure moments he was able to recall without effort. Over the years he cultivated that faculty. On one occasion when he was in private practice, during the interim between his two periods of service on the Supreme Court, I heard him argue before that body. His opponent — a former Attorney General of the United States — had copious notes and many assistants. Mr. Hughes spoke without a paper before him; quoted at length; gave citations by case, volume, and page. He did it unerringly, without strain or obvious effort.

Soon after I came to Brown he spoke at the Washington Alumni Dinner in March and agreed to give the same speech at Commencement in June. At that time he spoke from this platform and with no manuscript repeated the speech word for word. In the midst of one of the most exacting, time-consuming, and exhausting jobs in the United States it seemed as nothing for him to commit to memory

an address that took half an hour to deliver.

While Hughes was at Brown he had great teachers. He said of them, "I could ask no greater privilege for any college student than to come under the direct guidance and inspiration of such men." President Robinson he called "majestic and severe" — "the embodiment of the moral law" — and as a disciplinarian, "terrifying." "If I learned to know the president well, I had the fear he knew me better." But as a teacher, who despised cant and hated sham, Robinson "shook youth out of carelessness and indifference into a realization of individual responsibility and power; the student went forth from his instruction with a new birth of purpose and courage."

John Lewis Diman, Professor of History and Political Economy, "stimulated [his students] to the highest pitch of effort and heroic endeavors in individual research." John Larkin Lincoln's liveliness of spirit and personal charm made him in the deepest sense of the word a teacher of the humanities. Albert Harkness, whose "Latin Grammar" was a work of art, will always be remembered as a teacher whose precise and exact scholarship, whose insistence upon the disciplines of precision, whose sense of proportion, and whose grace and finish of style made him outstanding.

Hughes fully acknowledged the influence of these and others upon him. But they would have been

the first to have said that the boy with such powers of self-discipline, with such zest for intellectual life, with such breadth of horizon in interest and activity, and with such faith in the enjoyment and utility of memory contributed more to the University than he took away from it. That was indeed the case even while he was an undergraduate. It was yet more notable throughout his long career. As the great reform investigator of the insurance companies, as Governor of New York, as Justice of the Supreme Court, as Secretary of State, and finally as Chief Justice, he reflected credit upon this University. The dividends through seventy years upon Brown's investment of buildings and endowments and teachers in his development repaid the University a thousandfold.

As a student Hughes was not a subject, he was a predicate. He was not inert material upon which the faculty labored; in word and act he was the affirmation of the real college. As an undergraduate he was human, joyous, natural, never stilted or self-conscious, but deeply intellectual, broadly cultural in his interests. Through college and in after years he gained by the accretions of memory and by the development of his reasoning powers an intellectual stature so towering that no statesman with whom he came in contact could surpass him. And his whole personality was strengthened by tough moral fiber. He could not speak an equivocal

word; no one could doubt that he meant what he said and said what he meant. During the long period of public service his moral character was in all respects, public and private, without "variableness, neither shadow of turning."

Not everything Hughes did was successful, and he met with stubborn opposition. He was a man as sensitive as any you could find. At least two presidents of the United States did their best to make him miserable, but no one could tell it from his appearance or actions. In the great battle over the Supreme Court, he not only maintained silence but carried his burden with stoic calm — at disastrous cost to his health.

He met with disappointments, for he went to bed in November of 1916 with his election to the presidency announced by most leading dailies and woke up in the morning to find that a handful of votes in California had lost him that great office. Within a year of his death he talked the whole episode over with me in the calm of retrospection. Everything he said showed that he had kept the experience in right perspective from the day it happened, for as long as he lived. He met that stunning disappointment not only with good temper but with generosity; for he lent strong support to the man who had defeated him.

Some of the things he did most successfully turned to ashes. The Washington Conference was as brilli-

ant a maneuver as can be found in modern diplomatic history; yet it did not ultimately prevent war with Japan or lead to the lasting peace for which he labored. But I never heard him express a word of regret for the effort he had made. He had done his best and was willing to take the verdict of history upon that effort.

His life was shadowed with sorrow when illness and death invaded his family. Those who knew him best realized how much family meant, how strong were the ties. But the observer saw more of gratitude for lives he had shared than repining at their loss.

Charles Evans Hughes was a man among men, who could tell a story with the gusto and liveliness of a great actor, but his public behavior showed a dignity befitting public responsibility. He had as warm and attractive a personality as ever held itself in leash in the discharge of public duties.

He was innately modest. After he retired I urged him, as did many another, to write his memoirs. His answer was always that memoirs tend to employ hindsight to put the best face on the author's own efforts and discount the achievements of his opponents. It was better, he felt, to leave judgment to the impartial historian and the verdict to time.

Whatever place is accorded to Hughes in history, the roots of his greatness were nurtured on this campus in college days. If today this University

has a group of students with like self-discipline and similar intellectual drive, with equal breadth of taste and interest, with comparable zest for life, its fame will run the country over and its future will be ensured. And if you learn self-discipline, the rich use of leisure, and the delights of a trained mind, you will take from this Hill a real education.