On one thing we can agree. American education is in a state of crisis. It is not so easy to find agreement on whether crisis is the exceptional or normal state for American education. Nor is there consensus on just where to locate the source of the current crisis.

I personally join those who see crisis as the norm for American education. During the past half century, American education has undergone five crises measurable at over 7 on the Richter scale of public outcry. Back in my elementary school days the shockwaves of the “penmanship crisis” reverberated across the land. Then came the great “comic book” crisis, creatively countered by teacher-sponsored publication of “Classic Comics” to assure that children would never be deprived of at least a minimal “reading” of Robin Hood or Moby Dick. Then came the great “Sputnik crisis”: our schools were totally revamped to play catch-up with the Russians - and virtually everybody else - who were beating us in science and math. Then the “T.V. crisis.” And now, for lack of a better word, the “S.A.T. crisis” - alarming nationwide drops in SAT scores were noted.

This listing of crises in my time brings me to the question of what may be the source of the current crisis? Actually, I want to suggest that all of the five crises just mentioned may, in different ways - and in a single way - refer to a common source. That source is the failure, particularly in the United States, to recognize for our education a human or existential center of gravity. Instead, American education has been means centered - i.e., presuming that concentration on means would automatically lead to the proper ends. That presumption sets precariously atop the even more radical and fragile presumption - that the ends towards which education provides the means are themselves being automatically provided by three sources outside of education and the students. One of these ends is presumed provided by the special socio-economic opportunity offered by American society, another is presumed provided by the promises of science (and technology), and the other through the promises of faith.

Something common cuts across the five historical educational crises which seems to set off alarm buttons and, with the possible exception of the Sputnik crisis, that is the perceived threat to reading and writing as if these were the very heart of education – or, as we tend to say when we are calling ourselves back to our “center,” “the basics.” If we add math, as indicated in the Sputnik crisis, we have the three “R’s.” These are little red schoolhouse values.

Are these little red schoolhouse values the equivalent of a human or existential center of gravity in education? Only in a society which puts greater emphasis on means than on ends. For that is basically what the three “R’s” are or have been seen as in the U.S. Not only are the three “R’s” presumed to be the keys to all the other values connected with education - the great thoughts, divine and human - but also the keys to success in society.

And herein, at this means level value priority, is where the source of crisis can be discerned. The basics, particularly reading, were seen as the means to the three forms of personal success. In a Protestant America, where individual salvation was accessible through personal
reading of the scriptures, reading was the source to the great educational question of “who am I” answered by religion as a child of God. The other (secular) purposes for reading and writing and arithmetic were towards the development of a scientific or secular understanding of who we are and as preparation for the good life in the sense of socio-economic success.

But success of this tri-modal means (the 3 “R’s”) as basics vis-à-vis the triple ends they were to serve has never been assured in America. While it is nearly certain that illiteracy does not lead to great success in modern society, it is hardly certain that the literate are those most likely to experience religious salvation. Nor is it at all certain that literacy or writing skill will lead to other great educational or cultural insights or, even, to great material or prestige success in society.

M.D.’s, among America’s most successful in terms of earnings and prestige, are neither renowned for their intellectual or cultural depth nor, for that matter, for their superior handwriting. Reciprocally, English or foreign language teachers and philosophers are among the poorest paid (in terms of money or prestige) in our society. As for the rest of us, we can survive quite well in the real world with minimal reading, writing and math skills, because a world for the average literate is created for us on T.V., in sports, and in our reading material.

In fact, those who can create the world tuned to our “basic skill” or “survival” level preparedness are the ones most likely to succeed - both financially and prestige-wise - in America. Teaching to the “basic skill level” can have these undesired consequences of teaching in preparation for mediocrity. This is the problem that goes with an education which considers its fundamental purpose to be basic means preparedness. It leaves the ends simply presumed and unattended to.

But there is a conflict - an ambivalence - even here. For while the crises in American education are generally marked in terms of failure at skills (or means), American educators typically pay lip service adherence to the ideals (the ends) of the traditional liberal arts/humanities-centered education. These ideals are not far from the Delphic injunction to “know thyself” and extended through Shakespeare into the world of conduct to the “To thine own self be true” and to the overarching question of “What is the good life?”

Without denying counter-trends there as well, in Europe - where the humanities evolved naturally, i.e., culturally and historically - it has been easier to keep education’s eye and soul centered on the supreme humanities ends - towards which reading, writing and math were aimed to serve. For this, history revealed that success in “knowing one self” and “being authentic” had much to do with “achieving the better life.” The spiritually creative life crosses all three points optimally.

In America, however, there has always been a conflict between the wisdom inherent in our European heritage and the demands of our unique material conditions against which we have demonstrably succeeded. Thus, the pioneering realism of “one axe is worth a thousand philosophers” - the high standard of living created by the pragmatic mind - vies with the stupendous incarnated spiritual reality expressed in Chartres, Venice, or Florence.

But the United States, for its youth and the enlightenment period in which it developed, has always been pulled towards one extreme of a broadly Western dichotomy - i.e., applied reason - and, ironically, has compensated for this distortion by ending up with two extremes. The one, applied reason, aligns its education with the practical: the inventive side of creativity - that of original products. An education so centered has found itself on the side of business enterprise
and of science which produces technology. The other extreme is a value placed on the non-material: the non-rational - e.g., blind faith, from which all moral direction is presumed to be given. Thus, we live between a value-free science/tech/business side and a side wherein all moral direction is presumed to come from religion and be taught in church or Sunday School. Our Constitutional church-state split reflects a clean-cut division between these two tendencies, where the great secular issues are consigned to the public schools and the great moral issues to the Sunday schools. But this arrangement leaves a split between the extremes which was at least recognized when American education concentrated on character building. But this character building had at its origins the Judeo-Christian moral tenets, not humanistic ones. In distinction to and precisely as a corrective for this dichotomy, the humanities - as these evolved in Europe - did so to serve as the great arbitrator between the extremes of faith and science. For it was recognized by painful historical experience that BLIND faith can easily come to ignore the earth and reason and that a positive science can come easily to play DUMB to all experience it cannot measure. The humanities developed in the West to fill this void between the “blind” and the “dumb.”

The humanities are most completely identified with the humanistic tradition of the West. The Delphic injunction to “know thyself” is fully associated with the two notable periods of humanism in the West, the Hellenic and the Renaissance, and less so with either the extremes of faith - where this question carried one outside of him or herself to God’s answer - or of reason (science), whose answer to this question awaits full disclosure of the laws of nature by which we are explained. The humanities, by contrast, sought Man’s answer from both religion and science - both, each in their different ways, were seen as responding to the human centered question, “Who am I?” and “How should I act?” in order to foster “the better life.”

During these historical humanistic periods (and this is exactly what distinguishes these as humanistic), the stress was on the truths emerging from the conflict between idea and material, as in Greece, and spirit and nature, as in Renaissance Europe. Human truths related to the human’s dual nature which was inherently in conflict and was therefore the starting point for all questions relating to self-knowledge.
It is a conflict which rests at the heart of both Western and Eastern philosophies, though dealt with differently in each. The Western way has been development of the humanities. Look at the Durer print called Melencholia 1. The central figure represents the creative individual. Surrounding this glum figure are products representing science, math and technology to that date. There is an animal, representing domestication of animals - a step which changed the lot of humankind during the Neolithic period. There are navigational tools - geometric figures and so forth - all heavily laying on the ground. But, sadly (which explains the title Melencholia), as far away as ever, somewhere over the rainbow, remains - inaccessible - infinity. The print, according to Panofsky, represents humankind’s inability to fill “the satisfaction gap” from the finite and temporal - the animal side of being human - to the infinite, eternal, or God-like side which man knows in his heart, thought, and imagination. This conflict between man as animal and as God is the existential or human center of gravity which American education has failed to recognize. There is nothing in the little red schoolhouse educational values that would guarantee that this central end of exploring humanness at its heart would be satisfied. Consider the following translation of a poem written by an eleven-year old Italian boy:

Look, like many men
excited, frightened
the first snow flakes
They seem to be running
away, everywhere,
mesmerized,
without a goal
Looking at them
I remember the Jews.
It looks as if
they don't want to
come down, as if,
when they touch
the earth
they would meet
their end.

- Mario Denti

Two of the three little red schoolhouse values are implicated in this poem. But what score on the SAT, even 1600, would indicate the potential for a poem like this? On the other hand, insights of the sort found in this poem are not unknown from illiterates. We don’t know if Socrates or Jesus could read or write. We do know that the 6th Patriarch of Buddhism and that Joan of Arc could neither read nor write. We know that such insights as these of the young poet and of these sages can also come off the pens and brushes of artists or be found in the compositions of musicians. What on our SAT’s would reveal this level of insight or would help our educators to determine how far along a student is in terms of the classic goal of knowing oneself?

American education has paid lip service to the humanities - but this even as it has never recognized the existential conflict which centers those humanities. How much of our literature or history or math or social sciences has been taught with the Delphic “Who am I?” in mind as the central goal of education? By valuing science as we have, presuming that it holds the ultimate answers in its method, we have devalued the humanities to the level of mere “pre-science.” By valuing technology, which directs our lives or serves it, we have presumed that the “higher self” is that which is infinitely adaptable to the changes this technology brings. In other words, self is defined and known via technology - as we now come to know our cognitive selves through computer simulation - or how we knew ourselves previously by the mechanistic idiom of past sci-tech.

We have taught history and literature not so much as an opening of our collective memory in the effort to know who we are, but as a cultural or nationalistic vehicle or form or series of cheap and useless lessons in what not to repeat. We have been singularly antagonistic to philosophy, especially when it asks questions we have consigned to religion in our church-state compromise.

All of this must be contrasted with the French high school experience which terminates in “année philosophique” - the year of philosophy. There, all the questions asked in the preceding years relative to “Who am I?” now come to culmination as the human meanings of literature, science, art and the social sciences are integratively developed. The answers are not measured on standardized tests but require of the student considerable oral and written development. All of France awaits the baccalaureate exam questions and answers which are published and broadcast, discussed, and debated nationally.

Of course, the French approach to the classic questions - earlier in history couched in theological and religious terms - is basically rational, with a strong bent towards the philosophical. But the meaning of rational in France and on the Continent generally is
considerably broader than it is in this country. It includes, for instance, feeling, passion, and artistic insight. But also, the French tend to see intelligence in a much broader sense than we do when they use the word éspírit (spirit) and the Germans Geist for this intelligence which extends to and from the soul.

For this reason, when the French made their historical split between the Church and State, the form this split took relative to education was significantly different from our own arrangement. The new secular centered education in France would continue to ask the big spiritual questions posed by the Church originators of education, but ask these now from a humanistic or secular vantage.

And while the “Who am I?” questions centering French high school education are still quite (overly) rationally posed by Oriental standards or by standards of the “incomprehensible mystery” of Christianity, the French approach at the minimum suggests that such questions can be broached in formal education settings and even represent the ultimate goal, or as I’ve put it, the existential or human center of gravity of that education. In other words, what the French hold as central to their education we pretty much ignore in our own.

Isn’t this self-evident when we declare an educational crisis in America at the first sign of a deterioration of handwriting, a decline in reading or writing skills, or broadly a decline on an SAT measure? But nobody asks how much or little we know ourselves as a consequence of education and never has a crisis been proclaimed based on this humanistic criteria. Alan Bloom (Closing of the American Mind) recognizes that the crisis in American education goes considerably deeper than the means or skills level and that it has to do with a loss of values associated with the humanities. His central complaint is that the American mind is closed precisely because it is indiscriminately open - or infinitely tolerant. He blames this “openness to a fault” on the permissive atmosphere of the ’60s. Yet on deeper reading we find that this equal openness to everything has its roots in the history of the age of reason.

Nietzsche’s existentialism was, Bloom acknowledges, a valuable and necessary corrective to the sterile notion of detached reason which founded science and nearly all thinking of the age of reason. This existentialism pointed to both limits to and possibilities for reason which must be existentially centered, or centered in the human engagement. It was, according to Bloom, succeeding existentialists who turned this vital existential or passionate reason into no reason and then, ultimately, “into just a 1960s tolerance of everything.”

Bloom had a quite bad experience of the ‘60s - having been on the brunt, or paddled side, of student demonstrations. Many of us college professors have a much more generous view of those times. It was precisely against the sterility of education that most ’60s students rebelled. Their call was for relevance. What they couldn’t get in their classrooms they sought in readings of sages - East and West - like Lao Tzu and Herman Hesse from distant times and places. They got it in the philosophies of their rock music. They sought to understand themselves in encounter and consciousness groups, through understanding of their bodies, through psychedelic drugs and through meditation, diets, martial arts, etc. All of this while the values of ’50s and ’60s education was inordinately centered on social conformity, psychological adjustment, or corporate goals.

The ’60’s movement was centered on the Human Potentials Movement, and this ran parallel with and even overlapped humanistic psychology and education. Maslow, among others, called in
those times for much of what Bloom calls for today. He spoke of his own dialogue across
centuries with the great thinkers and posers of the great “Who am I?” questions such as
Socrates, Aristotle, Spinoza or Jefferson. His terms for self-knowledge and being true to one’s
self were “self realization” and “self actualization.” Of the question “What is the good life?” he
explored the development of utopias based around persons who know themselves to the level of
the divine and whose authenticity makes them fully trustworthy. He proposed such a model for
business in his treatise “Eupsychian Management.”
Potential applications of newly discovered or rediscovered humanistic principles were extended
to a variety of areas through such thinkers as Carl Rogers, Sidney Jourard, Arthur Combs,
Sidney Simon, among many others who helped in the early development of the Association for
Humanistic Education.
It is my view, as I take the chair of President of this Association, that humanistic psychology in its
various forms and spheres - including and especially education - has been operating as an
historical surrogate for a humanities which, in American education, had been undergoing a
near-death experience. The values which center humanistic psychology and education are akin
to those which have centered the humanities at their best and which have been the most sorely
lacking in recent American education. This humanistic movement has penetrated by a variety of
means and through sources in the Occident and Orient into the human centered question of
“Who am I?” Human-centered in no way precludes science or faith, but does not settle for the
world view of either. It recognizes both as personal and historical extensions of human inquiry.
In fact, the humanistic movement has been developing sophisticated human sciences
approaches to research which are attuned to such human inquiry.
But above all, as regards education, humanistic psychologists and educators presume that each
individual has a higher or greater self which - even and especially at the level of the child - can be
addressed and honored as that which he or she shares with the best of our humanness. To
ignore, deny, or demean that dimension of the child - especially in education - and not to address
questions most significant to that greater self in all of us is to deny that child’s and our own most
precious birthright.
If, then, it is true - as the Bloom book and several other significant critics now indicate - that there
is a strong need for the re-establishment of the humanities at the heart of our schools, then
humanistic psychology and education are in the best position to lead this resurgence.