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Knowledge and the Humane Society

The American university is a direct descendant from the ancient universities in Europe. These are the oldest institutions, aside from the church itself, in Western civilization. They have survived many periods of trouble, of revolution, and of persecution. But the tradition of learning and of scholarly inquiry has lived on.

Yet there are shortsighted people today who are saying that the modern university has outlived its usefulness, that it must be overthrown and replaced by something else whose nature is unspecified.

Remember, however, that there have been many occasions during the last 700 years when people said that universities were irrelevant or that it was wrong for them to pursue long-term goals in the face of immediate and pressing problems. Fortunately there have been stout-hearted souls who insisted that the search for knowledge would never be outdated by current events and we can all be eternally thankful that the forces of ignorance were so often defeated. They must be defeated again.

Knowledge and the search for knowledge have persisted through the centuries to the enormous benefit of human beings. The world may be troubled and distressed today but think how much better off the people in this country are now than they were 50 years ago or 100 years ago and how much better off they are than the millions of people in countries which have not benefited from the progress of knowledge. We in the Western world have encouraged scientific discovery and its application intensively for 200 years to our vast material benefit. Today we are at a turning point. We can now use our stores of wealth and of knowledge as tools to solve the new problems which now beset our modern society.

What are those of us who have chosen careers in science and engineering able to do about meeting our current problems?

First, we can help destroy the false impression that science and engineering have caused current world troubles. Quite the contrary, science and engineering have made vast contributions to better living for more people.

Second, we can identify the many areas in which science and technology, more considerably used, can be of greater service in the future than in the past to improve the quality of life. While we can make many speeches, and pass many laws, the quality of our environment will be improved only through better knowledge and better application of that knowledge.

Third, we can recognize that much of the dissatisfaction which we suffer today results from our very successes of former years. We have been so eminently successful in attaining material goals that we are deeply dissatisfied that we cannot attain other goals more rapidly. We have achieved a better life for most people but are unhappy that it has not spread to all people. We have illuminated many sources of environmental deterioration but we are unhappy that we have not conquered all of them. It is our rising expectations rather than our failures which now cause our distress.

Granted that many of our current problems must be cured more by social, political, and economic instruments than by science and technology, yet science and technology must still be the tools to make further advances in such things as clean air, clean water, better transportation, better housing, better medical care, more adequate welfare programs, purer foods, conservation of resources, and many other areas.

The discovery and use of knowledge has always been relevant to a humane future. They are equally relevant today.—LEE DUBRIDGE