CHAPTER FOUR – THE NATURAL ARISTOCRACY

Chapter four focuses on the roots of liberal education. It does so through centering on Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson who Zakaria cites as forebearers of liberal education in the United States. It then looks at where liberal education is today and what lies ahead for it.

1. Benjamin Franklin - Franklin was one of ten children and he received only two years of formal education, which ended when he was 10 years old. He was the archetype of the self-made man. The essence of Franklin's appeal is that he was brilliant but practical, interested in everything, but especially in how things work. Zakaria calls Franklin the most important American statesman never to have been president. He states, "Franklin was critically engaged, business oriented, technologically obsessed, and socially skilled. He published a pamphlet in which he outlined his plans for a new academy in the colony of Pennsylvania that becomes the University of Pennsylvania which went on to become one of the world's most distinguished liberal arts schools. The purpose of education for Franklin was to produce 'true merit' which meant joining ability with the inclination to serve mankind, one's country, friends and family.

2. Thomas Jefferson and Natural Aristocracy - If Franklin saw education as a path to service for mankind, his great contemporary Thomas Jefferson made a more urgent connection. A liberal education would ensure the survival of democracy. Jefferson would return again and again to the importance of education. He founded the University of Virginia with a specific plan to carry out his ideas of a natural aristocracy. The university was unique in that its physical layout was centered not on the chapel but on the library. He was one of the earliest proponents of electives, believing that students should practice the same freedom at school that they were allowed in a democracy. Jefferson wanted to eliminate class and birth aristocracy, ideas that came to the new nation from its English roots. In politics Jefferson advocated policies to spread education through means such as publicly funded schools. His ideas are today being promulgated through the Thomas Jefferson Foundation, which operates out of the University of Virginia, which he founded. It was my privilege during the latter part of my career to be the associate director of a summer educational program for teachers offered through the Jefferson Foundation. Yes, I know Jefferson was a contradiction of what he wrote and what he lived, especially in the area of slavery. He was an enigma, which makes him a fascinating person to study!

3. From Natural Aristocracy to Unnatural Aristocracy – Zakaria states, For Jefferson, there was one step crucial to creating a natural aristocracy. The poor and the rich had to have equal access to a good education. He then goes on to cite numerous reasons why this is not so today. Colleges today as he sees it are enclaves of students from wealthy families. He asks, "What would these founding fathers make of America today? He points to the wealth inequality in higher education as due to decreased state funding and increased cost being borne by the student. He uses the University of California as an example. I would add the University of Colorado where only about five percent of its funding comes from the state. This is similar to what has happened in the California Universities. He also is concerned about the de facto quotas being placed on Asian American students at the nation's top colleges and universities.

4. Cost and Its Effect on Liberal Education – The average college tuition has increased over 1,200 percent since 1978. That rise in cost is at the heart of many of the concerns about the value of a liberal education, which was affordable to a middle-class family in 1965. We now use the language of 'return on investment' to describe the experience of getting educated. A seminar class at a good college will tend to have a ratio of one professor to 15 students. If you believe that's the best way to teach, it can't be made more efficient. It's
difficult to measure productivity in a field like education. Zakaria then goes on to discuss other issues facing education in the United States. Among them are students taking easy courses, the multiple funding sources for education, and technology.

5. Technology - In regard to technology, Zakaria tells how the internet changed his life as a Newsweek writer when the magazine could not survive and he and everyone else who worked for the magazine was put out of work. He mentions the Khan Academy as an interesting online platform. It is indeed and you can read about it in Kahn’s book The One World Schoolhouse. Kahn has begun working with K-12 schools in the Silicon Valley on individualizing learning on a mass scale. He has also received extensive funding since beginning his online videos that simplify difficult concepts and he has expanded the horizons of Kahn Academy. Zakaria reports that the Kahn Academy now has 3000 different videos ‘that teach everything from algebra to biology to history, and has already changed the way we think about learning.’ A concept called ‘flipping the classroom’ is another online education method that is highlighted. Students listen (or watch) a lecture at home and then work on problems with teachers in school. It is a much more efficient and effective use of both a teacher’s and a student’s time and energy. Passive learning at home by yourself, and active learning at school and with a teacher.”

6. MOOCs – This is the acronym for ‘Massive Open Online Courses.’ Which open access to education. Richard Levin the CEO of Coursera sees MOOCs as “having the greatest impact in the developing world, where it will be possible for millions to get educated who simply would not have other otherwise.” Beyond the developing world potential, Zakaria points to the fact that a large portion of MOOC users in the United States are interested in acquiring a liberal education – or enhancing the one they received years ago. The chapter concludes by asking why people are signing up for courses online if it doesn’t help them get a job, and why do they want to know this stuff? This is explained in the next chapter ‘Knowledge and Power.’

CHAPTER FIVE – KNOWLEDGE AND POWER

This is the shortest of the six chapters. In content, it parallels the ideas put forth in chapter two which looked at the historical development of liberal education. This chapter broadly overviews how knowledge evolved and improved the condition of humanity and then moves on to illustrate how knowledge can be empowering in both positive and negative ways. A few selected excerpts are listed to expand on this.

1. Cicero believed that it was in our nature to be “drawn to the pursuit of knowledge.”

2. The ancient Greeks were the first to try to understand the world in an abstract sense. They called such an exploration philosophy, which means “love of wisdom.” This involved understanding not only human nature but also nature itself. The latter exploration they called “natural philosophy” – which much later became known as science. Over time, a divide grew between the study of human beings and the study of nature.

3. The search for knowledge gave human beings power. That power has been used for good and ill. But on the whole, there has been a steady and persistent effort to improve human life. Over the last five hundred years, however, the consequences of knowledge have been positive, and over the last two hundred, staggering ly positive.

4. Of course it’s self-evident that medicine, vaccines, and hygiene have all contributed mightily as a testament to scientific knowledge. But the softer sciences and humanities have also yielded powerful benefits. Human beings have organized themselves in more productive ways, economically, politically, and socially.
5. Knowledge can be used for terrible purposes. Fascism, communism, and Islamic fundamentalism have all managed to weave a dangerous ideology out of elements of knowledge. But people have always sought power, and some of them have justified that pursuit through bad ideas. These ideas, in almost all such cases, are covers for power grabs. Countries like Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia failed because other countries, such as the United States, opposed them. And free societies like America prevailed in large part because they had greater staying power, because their organizing ideas were superior.

CHAPTER SIX – IN DEFENSE OF TODAY’S YOUTH

This final chapter raises the question ‘does a liberal education make us better human beings?’ Zakaria moves from this question to explore what is popularly known as the millennials. This is the group born between 1982 and 2000 which would make the oldest 33 and the youngest 14 or15. The term millennial comes from the work of Neil Howe and William Strauss, social science writers on generational issues. They published four books on generational issues, the last being “Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation” written in 2000. The primary thesis of their writings is to connect culture with the shaping by history that surrounds us which is recurrent in four twenty-year cycles. William Strauss died in 2007 at age 60 of pancreatic cancer. Today the work turned out by Strauss and Howe dominates discussion of what’s going on with the current generation versus previous generation they named generation X, and prior to them the boomers.

Zakaria does not treat the overall development of Strauss and Howe’s generational model, but instead uses it to elucidate views of today’s youth. He begins with a critical view of millennials in a 2001 Atlantic magazine article by David Brooks based on meetings Brooks had with Princeton University students and professors. “Brooks found intense activities by the students were mainly in the service of building a resume and come with little intellectual curiosity. Even more noticeable, to him, was the total lack of desire to think about moral issues, to be introspective, or to focus on the building of character or virtue.” Brooks negative critique is repeated in 2014 by William Deresiewicz who writes a book ‘Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite and the Way to a Meaningful Life.’ Deresiewicz bluntly calls millennials “entitled Little Shits.” Zakaria, in reaction to this states, “after having been pilloried for trying to destroy the bourgeois order in the 1960s and 1970s the youth are now scorned for being too bourgeois.” Zakaria goes on to say, “students’ focus on achievement has not produced young men and women who are in some way mean, selfish, or cruel. I find them to be thoughtful, interesting, and stimulating. The data show that students today combine their worldly aspirations with a strong desire to do good. According to a 2014 Nielson report the three causes they care most about are education, poverty, and the environment. Millennials are leaning forward, engaged, inclusive, and tolerant, and they believe that commerce can be lubricated by conscience.”

1. On Job Hopping by Youth – “today everything is in flux. You must be entrepreneurial and recognize that you will need to change jobs and even careers over a lifetime. No company will stay loyal to you, nor can you lock yourself into one place.”

2. On political Views of Youth – “A lack of enthusiasm for politics reflects a broader social trend. Most Americans are deeply disenchanted with politics, Younger Americans believe that the U.S. government has become dysfunctional and polarized. Today’s students don’t seem as animated by big arguments as generations of the past did over central philosophical-political contests of ideas such as between communism and capitalism.”

3. What does define youth? – “Our youth are not very ideological. Our age is defined by capitalism, globalization, and technology. The icons of the age are entrepreneurs, technologists, and businesspeople. The young reflect today’s realities. Their lives are more involved with economic and technological forces than with ideology and geopolitics. It’s a
new world and the young know it.”

4. Getting Meaning From Life – “College students today search for morality and the meaning of life in different ways than in prior ages, they seek truth, but perhaps through quieter avenues than the heroic ones of the past. The objective most important to students, besides making money, is raising a family.”

5. The Times We Live In – Zakaria concludes by saying: “Because of the times we live in, all of us, young and old, do not spend enough time and effort thinking about the meaning of life. We do not look inside of ourselves enough to understand our strengths and weaknesses, and we do not look around enough – at the world, in history – to ask the deepest and broadest questions. The solution surely is that, even now, we could all use a little bit more of a liberal education.”