

# IMPRIMIS

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## "Education: The Second Door To Freedom"

by Clarence Thomas

Associate Justice, Supreme Court of the United States

**C**larence Thomas serves as an associate justice of the United States Supreme Court, a position to which President Bush nominated him in 1991. His appointment to the High Court follows a distinguished public career that has included duties as a judge of the United States Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit, chairman of the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, and assistant secretary for Civil Rights in the U.S. Department of Education. Justice Thomas graduated cum laude from the College of the Holy Cross and

earned a J.D. from Yale Law School before entering legal practice as assistant attorney general of Missouri and, later, as an attorney with the Monsanto Company. ♣



*Preview: In this Spring 1994 Convocation address to the students of Hillsdale College, Justice Clarence Thomas offers a powerful, personal testimony to the value of traditional liberal arts education, which, he argues, can free us not only from ignorance, but from our own passions. He also reminds us of the vital roles faith and family must play if such education is to have a lasting impact.*

**R**ecently, while speaking to a group of law students, I was asked what the difference was between the youthful Clarence Thomas and Clarence Thomas the judge. There is much that is different and much that is the same. Over time, the depth of one's faith and experience is bound to increase. Mine certainly did. But there was a real change of direction in life that occurred during my college years. It is my sincere hope that my discussion of this change will be helpful to at least one of you.

When I began at the College of the Holy Cross in the fall of 1968, as a transfer student from Immaculate Conception Seminary, I was confused and intimidated as were so many of my fellow students. It was a time of turmoil and challenge to authority and to those in authority. In fact, it was a time of rudeness and poor manners, no matter how conveniently history is today revised. Although much of our conduct was for what we considered good and noble reasons, we still conducted ourselves in an ill-mannered and reprehensible way. That is both regrettable and unfortunate. But more on that later.

The College of the Holy Cross was the only true opportunity that I had to leave Savannah

for college. And this opportunity only came about as a result of the dedication and kindness of my high school chemistry teacher and a classmate from parochial school, who was a student there. But college gave me the opportunity to take on the challenges of education during a most critical time in my life. And, as is true for so many in this country, education was the only available opportunity to escape a life that seemed predetermined for me. Having lived to see the official end of segregation, education was now the second door of freedom.

### What Education Provides

**I** must first admit that I am somewhat old-fashioned about education. I opposed the move away from the old core requirements and traditional liberal arts education, and I still hold tenaciously to that position. Perhaps it is in some small measure due to my misfortune of having been subjected to "new math" in the ninth and tenth grades. The traditional liberal arts education was a way of showing us that we were to discipline, train, and expand our minds. It provided fewer opportunities to justify intellectual laziness and almost no opportunity to avoid some of the more difficult and exacting courses. Certainly, there were very few of us, who, were it left to us, would choose to study metaphysics or classics.

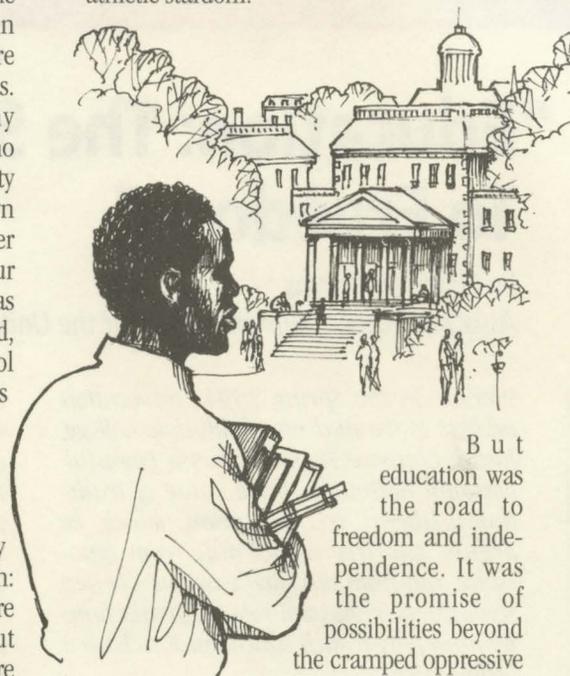
Of course, it would be a fair question to ask why anyone would want to put that kind of stress on himself or herself. To respond to this inquiry requires that I set out what, in retrospect, I see that education provides. Since I am not an educator, I must rely quite heavily on my own experiences.

My first days of school started in a rather inauspiciously routine manner, a fun trek down Pinpoint Road to catch the school bus for Haven Home School. That was exciting for about a week. Then, I was quite prepared to get back to catching minnows in the creek and tracking down fiddler crabs in the marshes. There seemed to be no reprieve in sight, since those in charge seemed more interested in my going to school than I was. But thanks to the fine mischief of my brother and our cousin, Little Richard (no relation to the entertainer), an opportunity presented itself. You see, they burnt down the house in Pinpoint, forcing my brother and me to go to Savannah to live with our mother. As good fortune would have it, I was left unsupervised, since my mother worked, and school for me at Florance Street School did not start until the afternoon. Under this arrangement, I found ample opportunity to wander through the streets, quite often to the exclusion of school. But it seems that all good things must come to an end; my brother and I went to live with my grandparents. There, the law was laid down: school came before all else. The nuns were always right; and any complaints about them at home would result in nothing more than additional punishment. It did not take a genius or legal scholar to see that this right of appeal was nothing more than mere formality with significant adverse consequences and no possible benefits.

Suddenly, education was paramount. Because they did not have the benefit of education or freedom, my grandparents treasured them both. Freedom they felt would come, so we had to be prepared to take advantage of it. And, even if it didn't, they felt that we would be better off educated. Suddenly, our lives revolved around education. Under no circumstances were we to miss a day of school. Thus, we were required to eat properly, get plenty of sleep, and take regular doses of castor and cod liver oils to avoid any illnesses that could potentially lead to absences. Then there was the warning that no excuses would be accepted and all illnesses would be presumed to be feigned. Indeed, my grandfather announced that if we died, he would take us to school for three consecutive days to make sure that we were not faking. Not a day passed that we did not receive a lecture on the importance of education. And, time not spent on our education was to be spent working.

This attitude toward education and work was constantly reinforced by family

members and neighbors. From my perspective, things did not look good. There seemed to be little hope that I would be allowed to become the next Bob Cousy or Jim Brown, since I could only pilfer tiny morsels of time to pursue my dreams of athletic stardom.



But education was the road to freedom and independence. It was the promise of possibilities beyond the cramped oppressive worlds of segregation and ignorance. It was the way to a better life and a bigger world.

I can still remember and reflect on the wonderful, wonderful hours I spent at the local Negro library, the Carnegie Library. That small library took me all around the world, back and forth in time, around the universe. That time raised as many questions as it answered. It brought me in contact with heroes and villains, with hatred and with love. (By the way, since education was seen to be even more important than work, going to the library allowed me to escape some small amounts of work, and it allowed me to stay out until 9 p.m.)

## The Revolt Against Learning

My grandparents' devotion to education would lead to their tremendous financial sacrifice for me to attend the seminary. Those most difficult days brought me in full contact with the white world for the first time and in contact with academic requirements that, initially, seemed crushing. Latin was a demon to be subdued and Latin class—well, that was a daily confirmation hearing. But, in spite of the angst, my love

of learning grew. Both *Native Son* and *Gone with The Wind*, among other books, were read after lights out with the help of my trusty flashlight.

Education, with its dual role of preparation and personal growth had become a way of life by the time I went off to college in 1968 as a transfer student. I boarded the train in Savannah with my lifelong friend, Robert DeShay. Our train ride ended in New York, where we spent a few days with his uncle, then to Worcester on a Trailways bus. As we passed Holy Cross on our way to the bus depot, my heart pounded with apprehension, anticipation, and hope. Here was another challenge, another chance to escape the narrow confining world in which I grew up and the attendant lack of opportunity. Little did I know that the traditions of that institution as well as the traditions of the nation were on a collision course with challenges to authority. My years in the seminary had been orderly and, with the exception of the events that led me to leave, uninterrupted and uneventful. That would all change.

In the seminary, my life of educational and spiritual growth were only interrupted by sports, corporal works of mercy, and long private discussions, accompanied by the heart-wrenching voice of Nina Simone, with an older black seminarian. We would later travel to Kansas City to participate in a march occasioned by the death of Dr. Martin Luther King. Though I remained in the seminary until the end of May, the assassination of Dr. King effectively ended my attachment to the seminary. How could I stay there when the world seemed to be disintegrating around me? It all seemed so pointless. My dreams of becoming a priest had been dashed, my faith, shattered. I was consumed by almost uncontrolled anger and frustration. All that religion and education had seemed to promise no longer mattered to me. It seemed irrelevant.

Just as Richard Wright's *Bigger* Thomas had been consumed by the conflagration of prejudices, stereotypes, and circumstances beyond his control and understanding, I felt myself being similarly consumed. I stood at the brink of the great abyss of anger, frustration, and animosity. The summer before going to college served to reinforce this tremendous feeling of alienation. My grandfather asked that I leave his house; Robert Kennedy was assassinated; racial indignities seemed to continue unabated; and so much had changed for the worse in my hometown. I arrived at college with no hope in

my religion, no faith in my country, and no desire to be in a predominantly white school again. But, in so many ways, I had no place else to go.

Someplace deep inside, however, there was some residual hope that there was hope. Perhaps, the lack of any alternatives forced this feeling on me. Perhaps, it was nothing more than not knowing what to say to all those who had gone before me, who had remained hopeful when there was no reason to hope. Perhaps, it was just stubbornness. In any case, Holy Cross was my beacon on the hill.

My new roommate was also a transfer student, from Northeastern University. He had been an engineering student there, and would now major in biology. I decided to major in English, primarily because I entertained visions of becoming a journalist and because I had great difficulty with the spoken and written word, a prerequisite to communication and continued learning.

My new dormitory was a fabulous place to live. I would live there for a year. I made friends quickly, and they made every effort to make my roommate and me feel accepted. And my roommate was simply superb. He was a model student and an outstanding person. He would quietly have a tremendous impact on my academic performance.

In contrast to this rather normal transition were the events swirling around our country that would affect us all. There was, consistent with my own feeling, significant emphasis on admitting and accommodating black students. To make life better for us, some of the older black students decided that we should establish a Black Students' Union. Since I could type and edit, I was asked to type the Constitution and by-laws. This I did. I later became the correspondence secretary of BSU, a position I retained for most of my college years.

The challenges of a new school were as one could expect, but the times made this transition confusing to say the least. Unlike the safe harbor of the seminary, we, as black students, were right in the path of the upheavals taking place in our society. College campuses across New England and the country in general seemed to be fertile ground for protest and expressions of grievances against all the wrongs in our country. As blacks, we seemed to take the position that our grievance should always be at the top of the list, and we were to be the vanguard. We, after all, were the descendants of slaves, and our race had borne the

brunt of discrimination.

All authority was questioned and challenged. So much that had been taken for granted in the past was now criticized and challenged—from dress codes to values and mores. Suddenly, little if anything was sacred, perhaps with the exception of our self-centered notion of autonomy—which we mistook for freedom. We were pulling away from the cultural mooring that had previously provided stability, structure, and civility—even as imperfections abounded. Major portions of our time and energy (intellectual and otherwise) were spent supporting and reinforcing the effort to rip away the cultural and moral structures that we felt were too confining. It seemed that we constantly engaged in an odd sort of narcissism and permanent temper tantrums. Distractions flourished. There were world problems about which to complain; governmental policies to protest; college rules to challenge; and so much capitalist greed and corruption to condemn. We were without sin, so we could righteously cast stones as we saw fit—with impunity.

At a time when we should have been quiet so that we could learn, it seemed that we already knew everything. And we were certainly superior to all those over 30, who had ruined the country and the world. In a curious way, we had reversed the teacher/student relationship; those with knowledge were to listen to us, who, though without knowledge, had emotion, passion, grievances, and innocence. Our feelings gave legitimacy to the positions we took—even while our logic failed or didn't exist in the first instance. In fact, we were somehow authentic because we lacked the inhibitions of self-control, discipline, logic, and yes, civility.

## Captive of the "Oppressive Society"

**B**ecause I was already predisposed to anger, confusion, and frustration, the environment which we as students created made it doubly difficult to take full advantage of the educational benefits of college. And I am certain that we made it impossible for some of the younger, more impressionable students, especially those who were black. For some reason that I can explain no more than I can explain having had any hope in the first place, I continued to plow on academically. Perhaps, initially, it was purely out of habit and a sense of obliga-

tion. But, even as I moved on, I became increasingly consumed by a seething anger.

During the first semester of my junior year, one of my closest friends was among the students disciplined for protesting the on-campus recruiting of a corporation that did business in South Africa. Because he was one of a number of black students in the protest, it was our view that he and the other black students were more easily identifiable for disciplinary purposes while many of the white students could not be quickly identified and thus escaped disciplinary actions. This injustice was proof positive for me that blacks could never be treated fairly on a predominantly white campus—or in a white society for that matter. I had finally had enough. Most of my fellow black students felt the same way; so we decided to leave.

As I packed all my belongings that night, I teetered precariously over the abyss. No one really cared. We were doomed. College didn't matter. Indeed, life itself didn't matter. I wanted to go home. But what would I tell my grandparents who had suffered far more indignities than I had? What would I tell my neighbors? What would I say to my friends who had always said that the "man" wasn't going to let me do anything? What, some day, would I say to my own son or daughter? What would I say to myself? I knew I could not stay; but I also knew I couldn't go home. After we had left campus, to my surprise and ultimately to my relief, wiser heads prevailed, and we returned.

My own personal anger continued to ferment well into the spring semester of my junior year. It was then, after a number of confrontational protests, that I finally began to question openly what had happened to me. It should have been obvious. I had become drunk with anger. I had become addicted to being a victim of oppression; and I was angry that whites controlled the fate of blacks. I was out of control with hostility. I was going to destroy either myself or someone else. Something had to change and change soon. I could not continue to let my passions rage out of control. I was consumed by animosity even though little had happened to me personally and even though I got along fine with all of the other students with whom I came in contact and even though I was doing just fine academically. I was angry for all oppression and injustice not mine personally.

Unfortunately, this anger was not helped by my living on a dormitory floor reserved for black students, which, though not totally segregated until my senior year, further isolated those black students who lived there from the rest of the student body. As a result, there were few if any forces to counter my own bitter feelings. Being up there was a mistake under any circumstances; it was disastrous at that time for me. The environment itself seemed to encourage me to continue in a direction that was dangerously negative. This seemed to be the abyss I had feared. I was addicted to the status of an oppressed person. I was a captive of the "oppressive society." All could be explained in terms of oppression. All facts and reasoning that disproved my feelings were rejected as lies and deception; all half-truths that supported my feelings were gospel. All individuals who agreed with me were good. All who disagreed were Uncle Toms or racists. All who partially agreed were half-steppers. I had become passionately obsessed with matters of race. Today, I sometimes hear of those who criticize me now, and I chuckle: If they only knew that I had thought that their reasonable efforts within the "system" suggested that they were "co-opted by the man" and that they were "sell-outs."

Some months ago I saw the movie "Menace II Society." It is a discouraging movie. But the reality that it portrays is far more discouraging and tragic. In one scene, an adult is trying to convince a young man to discontinue a life of violence and drug dealing and leave south central Los Angeles for a better life. In doing so, he said something that caught my attention because I had repeated a similar observation to myself so many times. He said, and I am paraphrasing, "You can hold on to anger inside and let it eat you, or you can control it and make a difference." But this is easier said than done.

It has been unfortunate over the years to see anger such as mine accommodated. It is said that we are an emotional people; we are expressive; we feel deeply; we have rage. Often, it seems as though the cultural elite think that we are inherently unqualified to do much more than feel bad about what has happened to us in this country and, of course, follow their lead. Culturally, we are supposedly not attuned to precise or exacting analysis. I have found it curious how this could be complimentary. It always has seemed like a different way of reiterating the old stereotype that we made good singers

and dancers. But, then, life is full of odd twists and turns.

## Freedom from Our Own Passions

For reasons even they could not have fully understood, my grandparents were right that education was the door to freedom—freedom from the confining world of segregation and freedom from the destructive forces of our own passions.

Education is more than books, computers, and catalogues of facts. It should appeal to and enhance calm, sober judgment. It should encourage deep reflection about complicated, difficult problems. In the end, education, together with maturity and experience, should help us along the road to gaining wisdom. Education should also assist us in acquiring virtuous habits and ridding ourselves of non-virtuous ones.

During those confusing times, as the events of the 1960s and my maelstrom of swirling emotions pulled me toward the abyss of permanent animus, any number of my professors pulled me back or at least kept me from going over the brink. They refused to accommodate my feelings; they demanded that I think rather than feel.

Though I could name a number of professors and courses, I will be content to use one course as an illustration: Readings in Renaissance Prose. I can still remember being scared beyond comprehension when I first entered that class more than 25 years ago. I was clearly in over my head. But, for 25 years, I have been unable to shake Cavendish's "The Life and Death of Cardinal Wolsey" or Roper's "The Life of Sir Thomas More."

From the former:

Who list to read and consider with an indifferent eye this history may behold the wondrous mutability of vain honors, the brittle assurance of abundance, the uncertainty of dignities, the flattering of feigned friends, and the fickle trust to worldly princes. Whereof this Lord Cardinal hath felt both of the sweet and the sour in each degree—as fleeting from honors, losing of riches, deposed from dignities, forsaken of friends, and the inconstantness of princes' favor. Of all which things he hath had in this world the full felicity as long as that Fortune smiled upon him; but when she began to frown, how soon was he

deprived of all these dreaming joyous and vain pleasures! The which in twenty years with great travail, study, and pains obtained, were in one year and less, with heaviness, care, and sorrow, lost and consumed. O madness, O foolish desire, O fond hope, O greedy desire of vain honors, dignities, and riches, O what inconstant trust and assurance is in rolling Fortune!

And from Roper's biography of Thomas More: On his way to die,

Sir Thomas More, as one that had been invited to some solemn feast, changed himself into his best apparel. Which Master Lieutenant spying, advised him to put it off, saying that he that should have it was but a javel [low fellow].

"What, Master Lieutenant," quoth he, "shall I accompt him a javel that shall do me this day so singular a benefit? Nay, I assure you, were it cloth-of-gold, I would accompt it well bestowed upon him, as Saint Cyprian did, who gave his executioner thirty pieces of gold." And albeit at length, through Master Lieutenant's importunate persuasion, he altered his apparel, yet after the example of that holy martyr, Saint Cyprian, did he of that little money that was left him send one angel of gold to his executioner.

And so was he by Master Lieutenant brought out of the Tower and from thence led towards the place of execution. Where, going up the scaffold, which was so weak that it was ready to fall, he said merrily to Master Lieutenant: "I pray you, Master Lieutenant, see me safe up and, for my coming down, let me shift for myself."

Then desired he all the people thereabout to pray for him, and to bear witness with him that he should now there suffer death in and for the faith of the Holy Catholic Church. Which done, he kneeled down and after his prayers said, turned to the executioner and with a cheerful countenance spake thus to him:

"Pluck up thy spirits, man, and be not afraid to do thine office. My neck is very short. Take heed therefore thou strike not awry, for saving of thine honesty."



different conclusions about particulars. The tenets of Western civilization are not etched in stone; the West is the most self-critical of cultures. Reason is exalted, and reason leads to a look, a second look, and where necessary, readjustment, redefinition, and change.

I have often had occasion to think, with the benefit of hindsight and two decades of reality checks, how I would have pursued my college education were I given another chance.

I would steadfastly avoid activities that tend to inflame the passions rather than ignite the desire to learn, concentrating on a curriculum that closely approximated the old core requirements and traditional liberal arts education. I would surround myself with friends who were interested in and excited by ideas, not causes. (And I would play football—at least until I was hit hard enough to suggest conclusively that it was a bad idea to do so.) I deeply regret that I did not take advantage of all that college had to offer. And I am grateful that in spite of my obstinacy and resistance, so many wiser heads still found a way to expose me to a fine education. But I am convinced that I received far less than was made available to me. For this, I have no one to blame but myself.

## A Common Culture

**W**hat I mean quite simply is that by focusing so passionately on the differences among us, I overlooked so much of what we have in common. Like it or not, we do have a common culture that informs our institutions and our conduct. We have a culture and a country that has borrowed much from other cultures, including those from which our respective ancestors came. I would celebrate and learn more about what we have in common as a starting point to understanding other cultures and to appreciating our differences. This approach, I believe, would encourage greater participation in all that higher education has to offer rather than reinforcing our differences to the point of intramural and cultural segregation.

I believe that education is, indeed, the second door to freedom. It can take us beyond the emotional confines of our passions, beyond the security of our preferences and to the boundless vistas of intellectual growth that only come from the calm, patient inquiry of our rational capacities—to think rather than just feel, to act methodically rather than react predictably.

Finally, it would be my hope that my

education would provide me with the humility to know that there is much more to learn as life progresses and with the courage not to be intimidated by disagreements or vocal, faddish criticism. I would hope that I would not be afraid to ask myself at graduation: Have I taken full advantage of all that has been offered? Have I merely gone along with the crowd, or did I arrive at my own carefully reasoned conclusions? Am I prepared to think through problems and assume my responsibilities as a citizen, or am I content to agitate? Do I know more about the culture in which I live and its underlying principles and philosophy, or am I content to cast stones at its imperfections? Am I prepared to lead if called upon, or am I content to complain and brawl?

Each of us here will have that one moment in time when all that we have learned and all that we are will be called upon and required. None of us knows exactly what that challenge is or when it will occur. But taking advantage of all Hillsdale College has to offer will allow each student here to assert, with conviction, as Abraham Lincoln did: "I will prepare myself, and when the time comes, I will be ready." ▲

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