

Lessons from illness

By James O. Freedman

The members of the Dartmouth College Class of 1994 step into the world fortified with the many benefits that a liberal education provides. But what is the value of those benefits?

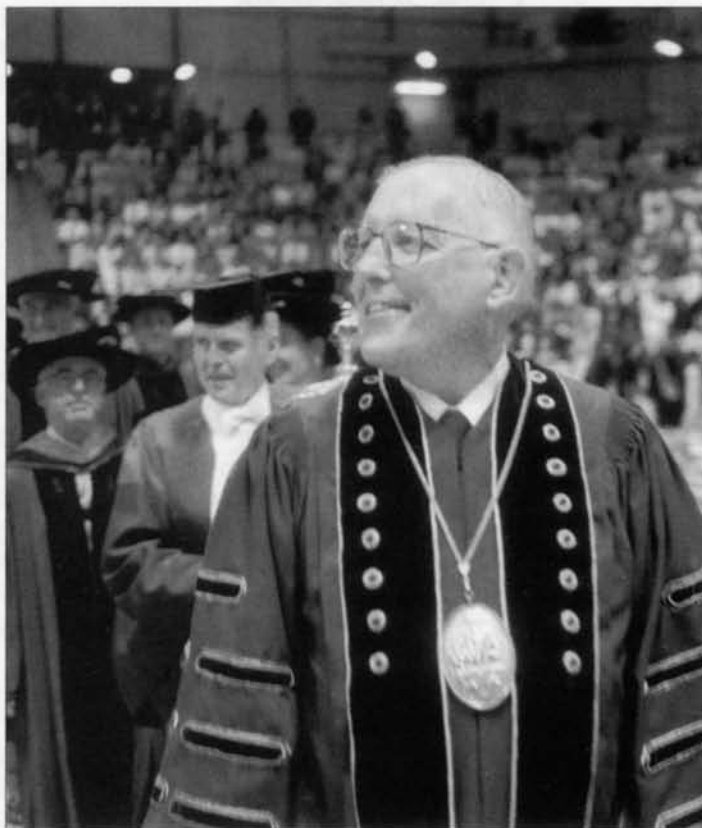
That question brings to mind Benjamin Franklin's famous remark when he was asked, as the Constitutional Convention came to a close, what was the use of the new document. "What is the use," he responded, "of a new-born child?"

The value of a liberal education, like that of a new-born child, depends, of course, on how it is nurtured. Its value depends on how it is made to shape, refine, and deepen our sense of self and others. If we let liberal education make a difference in our lives, it will.

This lesson was reinforced for me two months ago, when I learned that I had cancer. I suddenly came face-to-face — as many others have as well — with fundamental questions of value and meaning. The shock of that medical diagnosis brought home to me the meaning of F. Scott Fitzgerald's observation that "in a real dark night of the soul it is always three o'clock in the morning."

In my lonely hours of introspection, I came to concede for the first time the certainty of my own mortality and to understand the vulnerability of my being. I also came to appreciate more fully that the time allotted to each of us is limited and precious, and that how we use it matters. I knew these things before, of course — intellectually, even emotionally — but never with all my being.

I have been struck by two realizations — first, that life is a learning process for which there is no wholly adequate preparation; second, that although liberal education isn't perfect, it is the best preparation there is for life and its exigencies. It does indeed enable us better to make sense



Dartmouth President James Freedman, pictured here leading the processional at Commencement in June, has ordinarily found the inspiration for his major addresses in the lives and ideas of famous individuals. At this year's Commencement, however, he shared some thoughts from his own life — and his recent experience with cancer. His essay here is adapted from that address.

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of the events that either break over us, like a wave, or quietly envelop us before we know it, like a drifting fog.

During the difficult and dismaying days of the last two months, liberal education has helped me in that most human of desires — the yearning to make order and sense out of my experience. I have come to understand, for example, that literary modes — romantic, tragic, comic, satiric — are not mere academic constructs to which plays or novels may conform. Rather, those narrative categories exist because, as the Greeks and others have understood for millennia, life tends to play itself out in ways that seem romantic, tragic, comic, or satiric — or perhaps all four.

Does liberal education answer all our questions and solve all our problems? Of course not. But, then, it does not pretend to. Show me a fictional character who thinks he or she has everything figured out, and I'll show you an author's rendition of a fool.

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What, then, is the use of a liberal education? When the ground seems to shake and shift beneath us, liberal education provides perspective, enabling us to see life steadily and to see it whole.

It has taken an illness to remind me, in my middle age, of that lesson. But that is just another way of saying that life, like liberal education, continues to speak to us — if we have the stillness and the courage to listen. That reminder is worth more than gold.

The author of this issue's "Viewpoint" column is the president of Dartmouth College.