

JAIME BENÍTEZ

HUMANIST OF THE YEAR 1986



Master Conference

THE CRISIS IN CONTEMPORARY CIVILIZATION

I greatly appreciate the honor granted to me by the Board in naming me 1986 Humanist of the Year. In addition to my gratitude for this unexpected recognition, I am also pleased that the concept of a humanist extends beyond those who study and contribute to the arts. It includes, also, those whose interests are focused on understanding and serving our fellow man and society.

Sócrates said that a good teacher is one who can bring out the best that the student has inside. According to Ortega, education aspires to prepare the student to be who he is, and to be himself in the best world he can help make possible. Well, to be oneself is the most difficult challenge for a human being. It means discovering and bringing out the best in each of us. It is a joint task that involves the participation, with more or less efficiency, of the educator, the educated, circumstances, and the times.

In an extensive dialogue with the Japanese intellectual Daisaku Ikeda, Arnold Toynbee said in 1976 that "Education should help us to understand the meaning of the end of life and should help us to discover the right way to live." I believe the correct spiritual path is fundamentally the same for all human beings. And I believe the correct path was also the same for all in the era before the division of labor, which made it necessary to change humankind's social organization and skills, which went from their original simplicity to a growing complexity.

In the era of skilled civilizations, education tends to meet needs through professional training in specialized fields of learning and special types of knowledge. But before going to work, anyone who has received professional training should take the Hippocratic Oath that is required of those who are entering the medical profession. Each new professional should commit himself to use his special knowledge and skills in the service of his fellow man, not to exploit him. This obligation to serve should be a priority, above the need to earn a living for himself and his family. His ideal should be to devote himself to providing the greatest service, rather than obtaining the greatest benefit.

Our University Law of 1942 established this priority 34 years before Toynbee's statement. I quote its Declaration of Purpose: "The University, in its obligation to serve the people of Puerto Rico, should ... prepare public servants. A public servant should be defined as anyone who benefits from the opportunities provided by the people of Puerto Rico by graduating from the University. In this sense, a public servant is not just those who work in the branches of the Government, but rather anyone who is equipped with a university education in any position, profession, activity, public or private, or type of productive life that begins with the use of the intellectual preparation provided by the University.

"This is the starting point for the university's obligation to stimulate and develop a deep sense of unity among the Puerto Rican people, and a clear, calm and deep disposition toward social responsibility by the graduates of the University is an essential part of this."

"All other objectives of the University of Puerto Rico obviously must be in harmony with this."

This text deserves historical continuity. I do not know why, in 1966, it was eliminated from the current University Law. Retaining the original text is important because it underlines the continuity of the principles. That declaration of purposes should be preserved as witness to the moral commitment that those who benefit from the University have toward the community that makes it possible.

Another time I will examine the responsibility of Puerto Rico's professionals. Today, I want to address those who begin our public education, the elementary and secondary school teachers. They, more than all the other Puerto Rican professionals, have exemplified this ethical ideal of service, more than anyone on our island. Remember them a little.

In 1885, a little more than a century ago, Rafael María de Labra, speaking in the Spanish Cortes, said:

"The entire budget for public education in Puerto Rico is 20,000 pesos, or exactly the same amount as the Governor's personal salary. It has taken nearly 20 years to establish the current Institute of Secondary Education that was decreed in 1866 and we still do not see the likelihood of a Normal School for teachers."

Fifteen years later, in 1900, training programs for teachers began in Fajardo. On March 12, 1903, the University of Puerto Rico was established by law in Río Piedras and the Normal School was transferred there. When I entered first grade in Juncos in 1913, three decades after Labra's statement, the public schools were an important reality throughout Puerto Rico. The Puerto Rican teacher, with his persevering dedication to education, was the key to building a public education system in the short term. I remember that Mon Rivera, the mayor of Mayagüez, explained his curriculum vitae to me before beginning work and told me, with eyes half closed with tremendous nostalgia: "I reached second grade ... in the old school."

From the beginning there were faults, inefficiencies, difficulties of various kinds and at various times in the system, and they still exist today. But there is an undeniable fact. The Puerto Rican teacher has been the society's compass. In his commitment to meeting his social and human responsibility, he has subsidized the public educational system, more than the public treasury, with his personal sacrifices and efforts. This is what the other professions owe to our teachers in the public schools.

Rarely do we stop and think about what an important role was played in our lives by that elementary school teacher who taught us to read, who interested us in stories, in riddles, in reading, in poetry, in history, in geography.

We often hear complaints, sometimes justified, about what the schools do not do. Remember that one of the things the schools do not do, and never have done, is take the message about violence or consumerism into the students' homes. Puerto Rican society in general, and the new and broader middle class specifically, have turned their backs on the public schools for decades now. People who teach there do not send their children there. They don't look toward the public schools. They seek other solutions for the question of education. They have washed their hands of the system, its problems, its programs, its future. The social and human cost of this abandonment, of this indifference, grows ever higher. One of its most adverse effects is the social segregation that annuls one of the best achievements of our earlier elementary schools, the educational integration of our school-age population.

The most urgent educational reform needed by the system is a radical change in the public's attitude toward the public schools. We cannot give up for lost the institution that four fifths of our children and youths attend in search of education. We must provide books to school libraries and to every student, microscopes for the laboratories, musical instruments, sports equipment and, above all, the hours of teaching that are needed. We must once again think of the public schools as a center of hopes and civic loyalty.

The situation is critical and desperate. We must use imagination and individual will to help the public schools resolve their crisis. Students who leave school are not the only dropouts. The other dropouts are the citizens who do not come to the aid of teachers and social workers to provide support and help.

Robert Oppenheimer offered us some very valuable guidance when he said: "I do not know how much can be done to restore the balance between what is known to some of us, and what is a part of a common culture; but it should not be by our default that we leave things as they are, nor for any lack of vigor in developing the manifold, difficult, partial remedies. They all rest on our fulfilling, as best we can, and in one of the many different senses of the word, our role as teachers."

Are these the words of someone who has no complaints about Puerto Rican society in his long term as an educator as both a teacher and an institutional director? On the contrary. It is because I know the value of public support, public interest in the work of education that I feel inclined to make this urgent warning about the public schools.

The university professor enjoys more privilege on the job, more comfortable working conditions, broader cultural horizons. He is part of an ancient tradition that begins in Athens with the Plato's Academy for studying the natural sciences and the human sciences back in the year 387 B.C. He belongs to a congregation of scholars, to a site surrounded by libraries, laboratories and cultural stimulation. Such was the case at the University of Puerto Rico in 1931 when I came to join its staff for one year, after six years of studies at Georgetown University. I stayed for forty, eleven as an instructor and the rest as institutional director.

What did I find at the University of that time that led me to choose to abandon my career as a lawyer before I ever started it and dedicate myself to teaching and study?

In addition to an interesting group of fellow staff and an indispensable library, it was the students who induced me to decide to change my vocation.

Daily in those old classrooms in Baldorioty or Pedreira I confirmed the distant echo of Aristotle's dictum that "all men wish to learn." The students' avid minds, their intellectual curiosity, their continued questioning beyond the classroom led me to keep studying and learning along with them in the process of examining the big questions of contemporary civilization.

It is said that good teachers can teach what they learned last night with the aplomb of someone who has known the subject all his life. I do not share that opinion. I never hid from the students the fact that we were walking side by side in search of knowledge and that the answer to their questions today was something I learned last night.

In remembering my students from back then, today's topic turns to the course in which I fired my first academic shots: "Contemporary Civilization." That unforgettable six-credit course was my greatest intellectual reason for living. Among his many lectures, Terence warned us that "I am a human being, so nothing human is strange to me." My academic enthusiasm led me to share, first with my students, and later from the rector's office with the entire university, the works of Homer, of Sophocles, of Plato, of Dante, of Descartes, to incorporate, through the General Studies Program, what Ortega y Gasset called in *La misión de la Universidad* the first phase of academic life. Along with that, the desire to incorporate foreign professors into the staff, to send young staff members to the best institutions of learning abroad, to encourage study trips to Europe, led to controversial moments when I was accused of trying to be more Western than Puerto Rican.

In personal terms, my roots are so deep in this historic soil, and I feel so tied to Puerto Ricans, both living and dead, that I consider it a privilege and a responsibility to be here and to serve here. I have never believed it necessary to make a display of this attitude nor this irrevocable commitment.

Being a good Puerto Rican, and hopeful that others would also be - each in his own way - I considered Goethe's exhortation in *The Education of Wilhelm Meister* to be valid: "The

best way for a man to get to know himself is to take a trip around the world." Traveling to other environments, by ship or airplane or, if you prefer, through the imagination from inside a library, is the best preparation for arriving back on our own soil. We can then glimpse Puerto Rico from a more realistic and broader perspective and contribute more effectively to its future. Two of the great poets in our language, Rubén Darío and Luis Palés Matos, traveled the world in their imagination and in their readings before they ever left Nicaragua or Guayama. And yet ... one traveled to Paris, the other to Timbuktu, with greater creativity than many who have traveled the earth, sea and skies.

The great teachers of all times help us explore the course of Contemporary Civilization.

The powerful source of human equality that was the printing press; the changed view of the world that accompanied the discovery of the Americas; the religious and political shudders that came with the Protestant Reform; the great figures of rationalism and the enlightenment; the development of experimental science, of skills, of the theory of progress, of education; the effects of the three great revolutions, the United States, the French and the Russian; industrialization, ideologies, were elements illustrative of mankind's course through history. We are this contradictory social creature that loves and hates, that ignores and learns, that creates and destroys.

As the contemporary civilization about which I began to reflect with my students 50 years ago has unfolded over the course of the century, its scientific and technological development have markedly intensified. These routes lead on one hand to the precipice and on the other to significant innovations and multiple contradictions.

What is the threat of the precipice and the contradiction? What set of facts and focuses should we consider central to asking such a broad question? Why do these routes give us a glimpse of hope?

We live in what Barbara Ward called "the global village". This super village called earth where nobody is an island has a population of 4.5 billion inhabitants. In the economic planning of developed countries, we hear talk of "global banking" and "global marketing".

The proof of the precipice came with the tragic flash on August 6, 1945, when the first atomic bomb fell on Hiroshima. Three days later, the second one fell on Nagasaki. World War II ended with the defeat of three aggressive powers -- Germany, Italy and Japan. The war also ended with a total of 100 million dead, humanity in pain, and a planet threatened with the possibility of destruction.

Rehabilitation plans and programs began for the devastated countries and new technologies and resources were developed. The United Nations was created. Traditional imperialism came to an end. The Third World rose and new communities emerged. Maps and borders were altered.

At the same time, the struggle between the Western world and the Communist bloc began. This struggle, which played out in various places, was called the Cold War. At that time, there was a peace initiative that arose that had no historical consequence and captured nobody's attention, but which reflects some of the unexpected difficulties inherent in any attempt at understanding. These difficulties have only become greater in subsequent years.

In the early 1960s, Pope John XXIII tried to serve as an intermediary between President Kennedy and Premier Khrushchev in the search for world peace. The Pope believed that an intervention by someone of good will and capable of political neutrality could achieve a rapprochement between the leaders of the two world powers in this much needed quest for peace. He was willing to involve himself in such an effort. As writer Roland Flameni describes in his book *The Pope, the Premier and the President*, the Cold War Summit came to nothing and the Pope disregarded the Vatican bureaucracy to explore this new effort.

Premier Khrushchev appeared inclined to accept the opening and sent signals to the Vatican, including birthday wishes sent to the Pope.

Caution prevailed at the White House. For the first time in the history of the United States, a Catholic had been elected president. Kennedy's commitment to the American public and religious groups to scrupulously comply with the constitutional mandate for the separation of church and state was decisive in winning the election.

The president's advisors, and he himself, did not feel authorized or able to accept the intervention of the Pope in such a fundamental issue of foreign policy. The audacious initiative stopped in its tracks. Not long thereafter, in October of 1962, the confrontation between Kennedy and Khrushchev in the Caribbean occurred. Soon after that, in June of 1963, John XXIII died. In November of that year, Kennedy was assassinated and in October of 1964, Khrushchev was ousted as head of the Russian government. In the short term, the historical scenario created by those leaders changed, but the crisis continued. The arms race between the two superpowers intensified. Each acted under the assumption that more weapons would make the world more secure. As a result, the United States invested one third of its budget in military expenses. The Soviet Union burned up an even larger share of its budget in war spending.

The Vietnam War, the conflicts in the Arab world, and religious fanaticism have caused pain and suffering in much of the world. In those places, people suffer misery, injustice, uncertainty. But the current crisis is not limited to those regions. It is seen there in various forms, and in other ways in modern, industrialized societies with greater cultural and technological resources, but the problems are universal, such as the elimination of terrorism, violence, cruelty and indifference toward fellow man.

If we start from the belief that mankind finds dignity in being human, not inhuman, we can calculate how far below this level of ethics we have fallen today. The ethical development of mankind has fallen behind because of our complacency with technological development. The main problem is that less and less we are people who live based on ethical principles and are becoming automatons susceptible to certain techniques that rule our conditioned responses.

Thirty-one years ago, Vance Packard, in his seminal book *The Hidden Persuaders*, showed that the free press in 1950 in the United States, whose ultimate objective is the consumption of its products, depended on advertising for two thirds of its revenue. These advertisements are created by specialists who use in-depth studies about how to manage better the subconscious psychology. Public relations experts have extended the techniques of psychological manipulation to electoral appeals in democracy. We have seen in the United States and in Puerto Rico that one of the deciding questions in a candidacy is, will I be able to raise the millions of dollars needed for my campaign?

The potential reduction of human beings to automatons whose decisions are reactions to manipulation by their subconscious is not limited to advertisements to sell objects or candidates' images. It goes much further.

Distinguished biologists are currently exploring the desirability of improving human nature through genetic alterations.

For example, Edward O. Wilson, professor of sciences and director of the Museum of Comparative Zoology at Harvard University, in his book *On Human Nature*, after suggesting that scientific materialism is the only source of knowledge that modern mankind can depend upon, claims that genetic experiments are the main hope for future improvement.

On page 6 of his book he warns us: "The only way forward consists of studying human nature as part of the natural sciences. It is desirable to integrate the natural sciences into social studies and the humanities." At the end of his thesis (p. 208) he claims: "Like other branches of science, the study of human genetics continues its rapid expansion. Over time, a broad knowledge of the genetic basis of social conduct will be accumulated. Techniques for altering the genetic complex will be available to us through molecular engineering and will achieve

rapid selection through cloning. Even limiting ourselves to the minimum, slower evolutionary changes will be possible through conventional eugenics." And Professor Wilson continues:

"The human species can change its nature. Will we choose to do so? Will we stay with this inferior and fragile structure made partially of obsolete adaptations that date to the Ice Age? Or will we push ahead toward stages of higher intelligence and greater creativity, accompanied by greater or lesser emotional responses?

"Can we implement new patterns of sociability through altered genetics?"

Convinced that "the rapid dissolution of transcendental values" can only be overcome through "scientific materialism," Professor Wilson carries his convictions to the final consequences. He asserts that mankind's better future requires us to remake its genetic base and introduce into the organism the artificial intelligence it lacks.

I have extensively quoted this distinguished scientist because his doctrinaire radicalism helps us see better the ultimate consequence of converting the human body into an object of eugenic experimentation. The truth is that the triumph of science has lent a general validity to anything that can be achieved through it. Under this perspective, experimenting with mankind justifies any project, until it fails.

Now, at its highest point, we must evaluate and reject this project of scientific totalitarianism. There are deep ethical reasons to retain the essential nature of human beings. We cannot surrender to the laboratory the work that Adolph Hitler claimed and wanted to implement with the Aryan race. It is possible that eugenics could successfully create a creature different from human beings, free of uncertainty, conflicts, imperfections, poetry, a perfect robot. But, is it desirable for us to become something else?

The great U.S. writer William Faulkner, upon receiving the Nobel Prize in 1950, said: "I refuse to accept that the end of man is near ... I believe man will not merely endure, but will prevail. He is immortal, not because he alone among creatures has an inexhaustible voice, but because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance."

According to Faulkner, the poet and the writer's duty is to reveal this truth. It is his privilege to help mankind endure by praising his heart, remembering his courage, his honor, his hope, his pride, his piety, the sacrifice that have made possible a glorious past. The poet's voice does not necessarily have to recount the heroic exploits of man, but it must support his impulse toward salvation.

In 1962, John Steinbeck, speaking from the same platform, recalled Faulkner's speech in 1950. And he added: "We have usurped many of the powers we once ascribed to God. Fearful and unprepared, we have assumed lordship over the life and death of the whole world of all living things ... Having taken God-like power, we must seek in ourselves for the responsibility and the wisdom we once prayed some deity might have. Man himself has become our greatest hazard and our only hope."

As Pedro Salinas told us poetically, while contemplating the sea from Puerto Rico, before Faulkner and Steinbeck made their respective warnings from Stockholm: "Nothingness is in a hurry." We have the obligation to counteract this rush by nothingness, raising our own spirit and the desire around us for finding and following this path of effort, of creative energy, of generosity with our fellow man, and the demands of ourselves that throughout history have distinguished the search for the greater potential that we have inside.

I believe in the critical importance of science and its indispensable link to the future of the world in general, and of course, Puerto Rico. But neither science nor technology nor the two together constitute humankind's main reason for being. Mankind was not made for science, but rather science was made for mankind.

I quote the French humanist René Grousset: "Science and the political economy should not become inhuman. The creations of man should not escape his hands and evade our

control. The human heart should not abdicate its rights over the inventions of the human mind. In this we have declared war between the man of humanism and the man-robot. And the future of all of humanity depends on the resolution."

The drama of human destiny is based on its uncertainty, in our capacity and our duty to shape it. We do not have to become one-dimensional creatures, nor be reduced to a formula.

We are potential. The great accomplishment of humanism has been discovering, honoring, recognizing and stimulating this potential. Education's main task is to open the way for the best that each student has inside. The best quality education, offered to all, is essential to the hope for a world where the ethic of coexistence, the rights of others, and our own duties inspire our conduct.