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What Are the Humanities?

The story is told that at Davidson College early in this century the professor of Bible, a required subject in those days, was in the habit of giving the same final examination every year—simply asking the students to list in order the books of the Old Testament; and students, well aware that this was his habit, customarily prepared for the examination by committing the list to memory. One year, however, the professor, pressed for time and perhaps also thinking that he had got into a bit of a rut, decided instead to ask only for the names of the major and minor prophets. When they saw him write this totally unexpected question on the blackboard, almost everyone in the class froze in panic. But one young man, undaunted by the sudden turn of events, rose to the occasion. "God forbid," he began his answer, "that I should make any invidious distinctions among His great prophets of old, describing some as major and others as minor. And so here, in order, is a list of the books of the Old Testament."

I must confess that, having been asked to define the humanities, I have a feeling akin to that of the student: God forbid that I should make any distinctions among subjects and so here is simply a list of the courses taught at Washington and Lee.

One reason for this response is that there is no complete agreement about what the humanities are, about what areas they embrace or what purposes they serve. A critic of the Rockefeller Commission's report on the humanities, in fact, has declared that the "'humanities'

are a twentieth-century invention, and the term has never had clear meaning." Even the authors of the report itself despair of finding an exact definition, lamely concluding that defining the humanities is "a difficult and continuous process."

Another reason is that, however it's defined, an ancient stigma attaches to the word, which for many signifies the effete, the impractical, the ineffectual. It was said of Erasmus, one of the early humanists, that he looked as if he were descended from a long line of maiden aunts. Later, when the humanities came to be almost synonymous with the classics, their study was often thought to be no more than a useless and pedantic dabbling in Greek and Latin. And just a few months ago a columnist for the Wall Street Journal wrote that whenever the humanities are attacked, it's as if "a suite of virgins" has been "set upon by dogs."

As if it weren't enough to be ridiculed on the one hand as hysterical maidens, those of us who are in the humanities have been widely identified in recent years with what is called a godless, secular humanism that threatens civilization itself. In a book entitled The Battle for the Mind, for example, the Rev. Mr. Tim La Haye writes: "Most people today do not realize what humanism really is, and how it is destroying our culture, families, country, and one day the entire world. Most of the evils in the world today can be traced to humanism, which has taken over our government, the United Nations, education, television, and most of the other influential things of life! . . . We must defeat the humanists and reverse the moral decline that has us on a collision course with Sodom

and Gomorrah." Mrs. Phyllis Schafly believes that humanists embrace an "atheistic ideology" that explains their advocacy of euthanasia, suicide, all varieties of sexual experimentation, pornography, the drug culture, a socialized economic order, world government, military disarmament, population control, the sharing of wealth with third-world nations, and even the equal rights amendment. An associate of Mr. Jerry Falwell says that Satan lies at the heart of humanism: "When Eve listened to Satan and bit into the apple, she was guilty of humanism. . . . And it was humanism that destroyed the great civilizations of Greece and Rome—and it will destroy us." And a clergyman from the state of Washington, with a rhetoric as powerful in describing our problems as his solution to them is simple, declared a few months ago: "Humanists are taking over the country completely. Now they are murdering babies, and homosexuality is rampant. The whole United States is going to be a murdering whorehouse if we keep legalizing everything. . . . The many problems in America—economic, political, social—are God's punishment on America for becoming humanistic. . . . Eliminate humanism, and crime, homosexuality, pornography, and teen-age pregnancy will be diminished."

With enemies like these, who needs friends? In any case, humanists cannot but be flattered that so great a capacity to do evil has been ascribed to them. But the fact is that in general they have been as powerless to effect harm as to effect good, and in making claims for them their apologists have sometimes resorted to rhetoric as inflated as that of their critics. One writer has sarcastically observed that the standard defense of the humanities is that they "constitute the sublime flowering of man's genius, always in danger of being trampled by the

Philistines," and another has bluntly dismissed the claims that have been made on their behalf—from teaching one how to think to promising the redemption of society—as so much "snake oil."

The truth of the matter is that the humanities, however they are defined or whatever claims are made for them, do have something important to offer, and not least of all to the business community. This fact is implicitly recognized by the author of the column in the Wall Street Journal to which I alluded a few moments ago, a column prompted by news that CBS and ABC had agreed to pay the National Collegiate Athletic Association the sum of $265 million over the next three years for the right to broadcast college football games. The announcement, the writer said, had renewed fears throughout the academic world about the decline of literacy and even the survival of western civilization and had sparked debate once again on the question, as the writer phrased it, "What, exactly, are the humanities, and why do they mean anything to us in the last two decades of the 20th century?" The answer, he said, is that they mean absolutely nothing. Society today, the writer asserted, "cares as much about the humanities as it cares about the color of the rain in Tashkent," and it looks on "the affairs of the intellect with a good deal of suspicion, in much the same way that a married man of 50 looks at photographs of Brooke Shields." Of course it doesn't expect its business leaders to have read Shakespeare or Dante, he said, for if it ever should become necessary for a corporation to pretend to learning it can always "hire a speechwriter" or "send its chairman to the intellectual haberdashers at the Aspen Institute."

The issues raised here obviously go beyond the question of knowledge or of intellect. What is at stake, essentially, is not whether one has read Shakespeare or Dante but whether one cares about the values--moral, human, social, aesthetic, spiritual--that are at the center of their work. This is the point of a column by Colman McCarthy, published in the Washington Post just a week ago, concerning a speech entitled "Morality and Capitalism" recently delivered by Mr. Donald Regan at Bucknell University. Instead of "Morality and Capitalism," McCarthy asked, "why not a discussion of the moral responsibilities of capitalism in the 1980s? . . . The current chaos--unemployment, bankruptcies, inflation--is caused by a mix of flawed choices, ranging from longstanding public and corporate policies that treat the natural ecology as endlessly exploitable, to an increasingly militarized economy that creates few jobs and closes the market to innovative businesses that want to serve or produce for human needs." I must say that my confidence that such a discussion would ever take place had not been bolstered by a little item from the New York Times that had appeared two weeks earlier in The New Yorker, which reprinted it, without comment, under the heading "Department of High Finance":

> "The S.E.C. documents indicate that the commission, in declining to take steps against Citicorp, apparently accepted the views of other staff officials, including John M. Fedders, the newly appointed chief of the enforcement division. These officials did not dispute the evidence presented by the

enforcement staff, but described the violations as insignificant and harmless.

"Further, they contended, because Citicorp had never represented to stockholders or investors that its senior management had 'honesty and integrity,' it had no legal duty to disclose breaches of these basic norms.

"These S.E.C. officials also argued . . . that Citicorp's pursuit of profits it knew to be probably unlawful was 'reasonable and standard business judgment.'"

As this last sentence makes breathtakingly plain, the humanities, if they mean anything at all, should have something of value to impart to business, and I shall argue that in fact they do. But I wish first to make clear that I am not implying opposition or enmity between the two. The contrast between them, usually to the disadvantage of business, is by now threadbare, going back at least to the time of Chaucer, who in the General Prologue to The Canterbury Tales pointedly places the dedicated Oxford student—dressed in tatters because he spends his last farthing on books, wise and deliberate in everything he says, selflessly learning and selflessly teaching—next to the pompous merchant, who is apparently crooked and who bores the other pilgrims with incessant talk about the money he's made. But even if the contrast weren't archaic, I'm too sensitive to my own vulnerability to make it. I earn my livelihood by teaching one of the humanities, and I know that the oldest of academic jokes is that a liberal education prepares one to despise the riches it prevents him from acquiring. No, my purpose is not to suggest opposition

between business and the humanities, which in reality have need of each other and which might work harmoniously together for the benefit of both. As long ago as 1935 Alfred North Whitehead wrote, "There is a great function which awaits the American universities, and that is to civilize business: or better, to get business men to civilize themselves. . . . It is not enough that they should amass fortunes in this way or that and then endow a college or a hospital. The motive in amassing the fortune should be in order to use it for a socially constructive end. . . . if America is to be civilized, it must be done . . . by the business class, who are in possession of the power and the economic processes."

What, then, are the humanities? An answer might begin with the conventional classification of knowledge under three headings: the natural sciences (including mathematics), the social sciences, and the humanities. The word used to designate this third category derives ultimately from the Latin humanitas, which was employed at least as early as the second century to identify those studies which, if pursued, would humanize or civilize one in the sense of endowing him with the knowledge and virtues that separate human beings from beasts. If one wished to have a succinct definition, then, he could do no better than choose that by Howard Mumford Jones, who defines the humanities as "a group of subjects devoted to the study of man as a being other than a biological product and different from a social or sociological entity."

It has often been noted that the humanities were invented by the Romans in their recognition of a debt to the Greeks and that they gradually evolved

over the course of centuries as the core of what came to be known as the liberal arts, which by the fourth century had become fixed at seven. These were divided into two parts, called the trivium and the quadrivium. The trivium, as the word indicates, consisted of three subjects: grammar, which meant the study of literature; rhetoric, the study of language and particularly of its beauty and eloquence; and logic. The quadrivium consisted of arithmetic; geometry, which often was indistinguishable from geography and practically was equated with surveying; astronomy, which was related to such a practical problem as fixing the calendar (before the Norman conquest, ordination to the priesthood in England required the ability to compute the date of Easter); and music, which was entirely theoretical and mathematical.

The liberal arts were eventually adopted by Christianity, which found in Proverbs 9:1 ("Wisdom hath builded her house, she hath hewn out her seven pillars") biblical support for the belief that they should be seven in number; and the great spokesman for Christianity in the medieval period, St. Augustine, declared that they were necessary preparation for sacred studies. With the Renaissance came the rediscovery of Greek and Roman antiquity, which either supplanted or supplemented the scholasticism of the Middle Ages and gave greater emphasis to the Greek heritage than to that of the pragmatic Romans, and from then until sometime in the nineteenth century the humanities were largely identified with classical studies. Since then, however, our view of the humanities has broadened to include all of man's significant artistic and intellectual achievements, and the simplest way to regard them at the present time is to think of them as embracing four areas: languages and literature; history; philosophy; and the arts.

These, then, are the areas I have in mind when I refer to the humanities. But what, one asks, is their special value? What do they offer of such importance that we now have not only a National Endowment for the Humanities but a Commission on the Humanities and an American Association for their advancement as well? I'm certain there'll be disagreement about my answer to these questions, but I believe there can be general assent to a list of seven qualities or characteristics--one for each of the seven liberal arts--that I associate with the humanities.

First, I think of the humanities as studies pursued for their own sake, without any practical or utilitarian purpose in mind. They are thus liberal studies, by which is meant the opposite of "servile" or "menial." "Liberal" derives from a Latin word meaning "free" and denotes pursuits that are to be distinguished from mechanical and mindless work/—slave labor. Liberal studies, then, are pursued simply for their own enjoyment, merely for the pleasure they afford. What often strikes one about life today is the absence of this sense of the liberal, the almost complete joylessness, let's say, with which culture is pursued by a typical family of tourists: the husband, his shoulders bent under the weight of photographic equipment, recording on film the architectural masterpiece before him but never seeing it directly with his own eyes; the wife, determined to check off every point of interest recommended by the tour guide, leaving the magnificent museum with a relieved sigh that she has now "done" that; the son, intent on learning the proper response, asking whether the Shakespeare comedy he has dutifully watched was intended to funny; and at night the three of them settling in securely at one of the thousands of Holiday Inns, which successfully advertise that wherever in the world they may be located they offer their guests nothing unfamiliar.

Perhaps we've lost the excitement of intellectual adventure and, despite our material comforts, suffer from the Puritan strain that George Eliot brilliantly depicted a century ago in the heroine of Middlemarch, Dorothea Brooke, who finds it impossible to appreciate the treasures of Rome because she thinks its great artists wasted their time painting beautiful pictures when they should have been eradicating the ills of the world. Yet whatever the explanation, there is in this view of things a grimness that suggests what Thoreau called a life of "quiet desperation." It reminds me of the nineteenth-century jurist of whom it was said that he could have found life endurable had it not been for its pleasures. Cato, the pragmatic Roman, measured everything by what it would produce. But Cicero, the great source of the humanistic tradition, considered the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake the highest form of mental excellence. "All of us," he said, "are drawn to the pursuit of knowledge, in which to excel we consider excellent, whereas to mistake, to err, to be ignorant, to be deceived, is both an evil and a disgrace." After our physical needs have been satisfied, Cicero thought, the first object to which we're attracted is knowledge. "As soon as we escape from the pressure of necessary cares," he noted, "forthwith we desire to see, to hear, and to learn; and consider the knowledge of what is hidden or is wonderful a condition of our happiness."

Second, study in the humanities is to a large degree a study of the past, not because of some antiquarian interest among humanists, and not simply for the obvious reason that most of the great works in the humanities are from the past; but because of the innate desire to

preserve inherited wisdom, to link generation with generation, and to provide the bond of a common heritage that is vital to a healthy society. The past can be intimidating, of course, and a whole school of literary criticism has grown up around the idea of the creative hostility later writers may feel toward earlier ones. But it can also be usefully humbling, as when the exasperated Master of Trinity College reminded an arrogant junior colleague, "No one is infallible—not even the youngest of us." The study of the past may not enable us to avoid repeating its mistakes, as is sometimes argued, but it enlarges the mind and gives a broader perspective of the human drama than that implied in a term paper, recently submitted at W&L, which began: "From 1970 until modern times . . . ." The humanities are turned toward a past in which are found most of the treasures of mankind, the masterpieces of art, literature, and philosophy that Matthew Arnold, in one of his most frequently quoted comments, called "the best that has been thought and said in the world." Unlike the sciences, the humanities are not cumulative or sequential, do not build one upon the other and so advance knowledge; they are timeless in the sense that they treat the basic, universal, and eternal concerns of human experience. It is one of the commonest of platitudes to observe that today's schoolboy will live to see scientific developments of which Einstein may never have dreamed, but it's unlikely he'll live to see another writer of Shakespeare's genius. Edward FitzGerald, the translator of The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam, recognized this a century ago, when, in the midst of some of the exciting scientific advances of

the mid-Victorian era, he wrote to a friend: "The present day teems with new discoveries in Fact, . . . and every day turns up something new. But no new discovery can give us a Homer or an Aeschylus."

Third, the humanities are concerned with all that touches the human being as a human being. The range of their sympathies is virtually unlimited, embracing everything from agreement with the elated Hamlet who exclaims, "What a piece of work is a man! how noble in reason! how infinite in faculty! in form and moving how express and admirable! in action how like an angel! in apprehension how like a god! the beauty of the world! the paragon of animals!" to understanding of the mad Lear when, seeing Edgar disguised in "the basest and most poorest shape / That ever penury, in contempt of man, / Brought near to beast," he calls man a "poor, bare, forked animal." The humanities see man as complex and many-sided, possessing body, mind, and something indefinable named soul, with physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual longings of infinite variety. And like Browning's Fra Lippo Lippi, they insist that their business is to represent all of life and to consider it a crime to omit a single detail. At the same time, however, the humanities seek a unifying principle, some way to order one's response to the bewildering multiplicity of life and to sort out the innumerable stimuli that daily bombard our senses. Wordsworth once proclaimed that in human life there is "a dark / Inscrutable workmanship that reconciles / Discordant elements, makes them cling together," and to locate and utilize this hidden power is among the aims of the humanities. They

recognize the human desire to unify and harmonize, to relate one experience to another, to see the connection between this part of human life and that part. We are interested in nearly all kinds of knowledge, Arnold said; but when we acquire knowledge we have an irresistible impulse to relate it to sides of our being other than the intellectual side—to relate it, for example, to our moral or aesthetic sense. Behind the humanities, then, is a driving principle that Wilhelm von Humboldt, the nineteenth-century German statesman, described as the ultimate goal of man—namely, "the highest and most harmonious development of his powers to a complete and consistent whole."

Fourth, the humanities are concerned not merely with the acquisition, the preservation, and the unifying of knowledge. They are still more concerned with the cultivation, the enrichment, the enlargement of the mind. "When I speak of Knowledge," John Henry Newman wrote in what remains the classic statement of the ends of a liberal education, "I mean something intellectual; something which takes a view of things; which reasons upon what it sees, and . . . invests it with an idea." This enlargement of mind, Newman went on to explain, "is the power of viewing many things at once as one whole, of referring them severally to their true place in the universal system, of understanding their respective values, and determining their mutual dependence." The humanist recognizes that while facts are inert, ideas are not; as Alfred North Whitehead once observed, ideas "won't keep." For the humanist, therefore, the mind should be open, responsive,

active, and thus creative. But it must also be critical, seeing things as they are. Ideally, as Arnold said of Sophocles, it should see life steadily, and see it whole—meaning as a whole. It has opinions, but bases them on evidence; it has convictions, but forms them by thoughtful reflection. It admires lucidity of thought and clarity of speech, believing that the unintelligible is not wisdom but gibberish. It is a disciplined mind, aware of the dangers of a little learning, of sloppy and emotional thinking, of hasty and premature judgment. But it is also a receptive and flexible one, knowing that if there is to be true enlargement there must be magnanimity of mind and spirit—generosity, breadth of sympathy and understanding, hatred of bias and all that artifically restricts and binds, freedom from pettiness and base motive. To have such a mind is to be what the humanist calls civilized. And why possess such a mind? Because the mind is one's constant companion. "It is for want of self-culture," Emerson wrote in one of his most famous essays, "that the superstition of Traveling . . . retains its fascination . . . . Travelling is a fool's paradise . . . , At home I dream that at Naples . . . I can be intoxicated with beauty and lose my sadness. I pack my trunk, embrace my friends, embark on the sea and at last wake up in Naples, and there beside me is the stern fact, the sad self, unrelenting, identical, that I fled from."

Fifth, the humanities are ultimately concerned with values. They hold with Matthew Arnold that the central question of human existence

is a moral question—how to live—and with John Ruskin that there is no wealth apart from life itself. From its very beginning the study of ethics has been at the heart of humanistic training, and for centuries the religious impulse has provided a powerful impetus. Since the Renaissance, for example, it has been virtually impossible to distinguish the humanities from humanism, which, whatever its critics may say about it, is a complex amalgam of the sacred and the secular that in its early form has been described as "Christian faith in alliance with God-given reason." Interpreted by writers like Erasmus and Thomas More, it sought to inculcate virtue as well as wisdom, and its influence was pervasive, as in Spenser's allegorical Faerie Queene, written "to fashion a gentleman or noble person in virtuous and gentle discipline." In their concern with virtue, with values, with moral issues, the humanities constantly raise questions about the meaning and worth of things. They make ethical, intellectual, and aesthetic judgments, criticize and evaluate, compare the value of one thing with that of another, distinguish between ends and means. They repeatedly ask why? and for what purpose? When told by admirers of scientific progress that a cable had been laid between England and India which had transmitted both a message and a reply, Ruskin asked, "But what was the message, and what the answer? Is India the better for what England said to her? Is England the better for what she replied?" When informed that trains now ran twelve times daily between two London suburbs, Arnold answered that the trains merely carried passengers from a dismal life in one suburb to a dismal life in the other. It is the quality of life that counts, and that quality is dependent on more than material, scientific,

and technological advances. It is finally to be judged by criteria found in the humanities—in philosophy, and literature, and art.

Sixth, the humanities are concerned not simply with the question of how to live, but with the more fundamental question of how to get through life. George Eliot, the novelist, thought the central problem of human existence was how to get through it without resorting to opium. Gerard Manley Hopkins, the Jesuit poet, believed the supreme manifestation of Christ's divinity to be not His crucifixion and resurrection but His incarnation—His willingness to undergo the drudgery of everyday life. The medieval Church made the sixth deadly sin Sloth, known as acedia, which in its extreme form became a paralyzing depression or despair. In the nineteenth century it was given memorable expression by John Stuart Mill in a crucial chapter of his autobiography. "Suppose," he asked himself at the age of twenty, "suppose that all your objects in life were realized; that all the changes in institutions and opinions which you are looking forward to, could be completely effected at this very instant: would this be a great joy and happiness to you?" And he immediately answered with a terrible and devastating "No!" Eventually he recovered, largely as a result of reading the poetry of Wordsworth, in which, he said, he found "a source of inward joy, of sympathetic and imaginative pleasure, which could be shared in by all human beings." The humanities, particularly literature and the arts, may have this effect, because they help to interpret life for us. They speak directly to the human mind and the human heart, at deep and hidden levels, reaching the innermost recesses of our being, and eliciting thoughts and emotions of which we believed ourselves incapable. The fundamental craving of human

beings is for meaning and significance in their lives, and the humanities seek to satisfy this craving. They engage our emotions, arouse our sympathies, awaken our minds, quicken our lives, and in different ways address various needs we feel as human creatures. Fiction, for example, liberates us from ourselves; satire deepens our understanding of the world; comedy releases our laughter; and tragedy, in some strange and mysterious way, helps us explain the inexplicable, accept the unacceptable, endure the unendurable.

Seventh and last, the humanities have a purpose that extends beyond themselves; to put it simply, they have a social mission to perform. It is true that they have not always seemed to have this aim, nor have their proponents always appeared capable of carrying it out. Over the centuries humanists have been portrayed as thin and poor, like Chaucer's Oxford student; austere and ascetic, like Erasmus; aloof, ineffectual, and elitist, as academicians were alleged to be in this country late in the 1960s. But whatever the shortcomings of their practitioners, the goal of the humanities has always been the enrichment of society itself. The fact that they may be pursued for their own sake does not preclude, as Newman pointed out long ago, their serving a useful purpose. By humanitas the Romans meant not simply mental cultivation but also moral and civic responsibility, just as by the term from which we get the word idiot the Greeks meant a "private" person, isolated in his ignorance from the rest of mankind. The aim of the Renaissance humanists was to educate the prince and to produce not scholars but citizens and statesmen. Milton, in some

respects the embodiment of humanism, defined "complete" education as "that which fits a man to perform justly, skilfully, and magnanimously all the offices, both private and public, of peace and war." Newman said that the aim of a university was to raise "the intellectual tone of society," cultivate "the public mind," and purify "the national taste," and in a similar vein Arnold insisted that a principal component of the humanistic tradition was a social ideal—"the desire for removing human error, clearing human confusion, and diminishing human misery, the noble aspiration to leave the world better and happier than we found it." More recently, in 1952, Judge Learned Hand argued that the study of the humanities was essential to what he called "political wisdom" and to training one in the performance of his duties in a democratic society. However they may be caricatured, therefore, the humanities are concerned not only with man thinking, as Emerson defined the scholar, but also, as Emerson was quick to point out, with man acting as well.

To summarize: The humanities are subjects, studied for their own sake, which consist largely of treasures from the past and which express the diversity and complexity of human life. Ideally their study leads to the cultivation of the mind, to the formation of moral and aesthetic values, and to the enrichment of life. And beyond their value to the individual is their value to society as a whole.

But what does all of this have to do with us tonight? The answer some of you are perhaps expecting from me is the familiar one: I'll depict the world as facing a crisis of unparalleled dimensions, declare that there is but one answer to our problems, and then call for greater

funding of the humanities. That is the tone of the dreary report by the Commission on the Humanities, and if you believe I I'm going to conclude on the same note I hope to disappoint you. Instead I'll try to avoid the pretentious, keeping in mind the salutary example of Lord Halifax, that pious English diplomat of the Second World War who was said to have held at least three conferences a week with the Almighty and to have returned from each of them misinformed.

As I was preparing these remarks I reread, by sheer coincidence, two pieces in close proximity to each other that pointed toward the same conclusion. One was a story in the Washington and Lee alumni magazine about last year's Institute, describing the responses of some of its participants. "The Institute was very helpful to me," said one, "in my efforts to acquire a better understanding of myself and my values." The other piece, in a recent issue of The New Yorker, was a remarkable essay on Freud by the psychiatrist, Bruno Bettelheim, who argued that for English readers faulty translation had obscured what is of central importance in Freud's work—"the direct and always deeply personal [appeal] to our common humanity," "the confidence that [the] demanding and potentially dangerous voyage of self-discovery will result in our becoming more fully human." The good life, Freud believed, was "one that is full of meaning through the lasting, sustaining, mutually gratifying relations we are able to establish with those we love, and through the satisfaction we derive from knowing that we are engaged in work that helps us and others to have a better life," and we are aided in this effort, he thought, by the "elevating insights" and the "cultural achievements" of those who have preceded us and have helped to mold our humanity. A conference of the kind in which you are now participating is

unlikely to solve the problems of the world overnight. But what it can do, during the days in which you reflect on the "elevating insights" and the "cultural achievements" that are the legacy of the humanities, is to help you acquire a better understanding of yourself and of your values, as it did for last year's participants; to give you a deeper sense of the common humanity of which Freud wished to make us aware; and thus to return you to your work, as Alfred North Whitehead put it, with a new "zest for life."