



## THE GODS OF THE COPYBOOK HEADINGS

**John Silber**, Chancellor  
Boston University

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**O**N MARCH 4, 1825, John Quincy Adams came to the presidency of the United States. In his inaugural address he said:

Since the adoption of [our] social compact, [a generation] has passed away. It is the work of our forefathers. We now receive it as a precious inheritance from those to whom we are indebted for its establishment, doubly bound by examples they have left us and by the blessings which we have enjoyed as the fruits of their labor to transmit the same, unimpaired, to the succeeding generation.

John Quincy Adams was the first president of the United States to speak of the Revolutionaries as belonging to a previous generation. Before him, each president had himself been one of the founders of the nation.

His position had a peculiar poignancy, but it is one in which all responsible individuals find themselves in every generation, and which affects most deeply young people who are completing their education. They look in two directions, behind and ahead.

They look behind to their parents and mentors, to all those teachers who have passed on to them through many generations the legacy that almost two hundred years ago was passed from John and Abigail Adams to John Quincy Adams and by him to his successors and eventually to us.

Young people also look forward. They stand between a generation moving from the scene and a generation yet unborn. It will soon be their responsibility to create another generation and to pass on to it the tradition that was passed on to them. They will be the parents—both physically and spiritually—of the next generation, responsible for passing on an inheritance as good, if possible, as the one they have received.

As I reflect on this process—the handing on of the American inheritance from the founding fathers down to our own sons and daughters, and on to their children—I ask whether the inheritance handed down has been growing or shrinking. In the provision of elementary and secondary education I am not at all sure that my generation has done as well as the generation that preceded it. I received a far better education in the public schools of San Antonio, Texas, than those schools provide their students today. I am convinced that the schools in Boston, where I have lived since 1970, are not equal to the schools in Boston fifty years ago, and certainly not equal to those of a hundred years ago.

It is high time for us to acquaint ourselves with earlier educational standards and expectations, so that we do not diminish the richness of our inheritance, but pass that treasure on to the next generation faithfully and undiminished.

The first objective of early education should be training in the reality principle. It has been argued that the child who grows up with television, finding that the reality of the screen can be altered by changing channels, believes it is just as easy to alter the world

itself, a point made brilliantly by Peter Sellers in Hal Ashby's film *Being There*. (Jerzy Kozinski's novel on which the film was based reveals the pathological epistemology of the television medium.) In a world in which the very young are given such misleading intimations of omnipotence, concern for reality is more important than ever.

A hundred years ago, the child's confrontation with reality began with the realization of death, which might come through the death of a sibling, a friend, or a parent, aunt, uncle, or grandparent, any of which was far more likely than now to be experienced by the young. Today, in contrast, the death of a child is so rare a misfortune as to be thought nearly unbearable, and increases in the life span have significantly postponed the time at which most children experience the death of an elder.

Learning about the fact of death is the most shocking contact with reality. Yet sound education absolutely depends on it because it is the condition on which our full humanity depends. Education should expose us to what is true, to a confrontation with what is real. A true education, therefore, must provide an acquaintance with death and with the conditions by which people can achieve happiness in the awareness of death. It must explain, for example, the essential role of virtue in the attainment of happiness. It must explain that virtue establishes one's worthiness to be happy. These are aspects of reality that must be introduced into the education of a child if the child is to develop fully.

Long before children went to school in nineteenth-century America, or even early twentieth-century America, they learned these things. For several hundred years this confrontation with reality was provided by the *Mother Goose* rhymes. In *Mother Goose* were found moral lessons thought to be far too important to be kept from children until they entered school at age six. The child of three or four learned to repeat: "If wishes were horses then beggars would ride." The child was warned to remember the reality principle and not to be misled by the attractions of wishful thinking.

I recently reviewed some early books used to teach reading and writing—preprimers and primers used in the first grade and even earlier by parents who taught their own children at home. Their authors, capitalizing on the delight that children take in verse, provided rhymed aphorisms for every letter in the alphabet. Here are a few of those aphorisms from the *New England Primer*:

- A. Adam and Eve their God did grieve.  
 B. Life to mend this book attend.  
 (This was accompanied by a picture of the Bible.)  
 C. The cat doth play and later slay.  
 (Cats, you see, were not just pets. They tormented, killed, and ate mice, and children were not protected from that grisly fact.)  
 D. A dog *will* bite a thief at night.  
 (This was an admonition to dogs and thieves alike.)  
 F. The idle fool *is* whipped at school.  
 H. Wrought by hand great works do stand,  
 J. Job felt the rod yet blessed his God.  
 Q. Queens and Kings must lie in the dust.  
 (A child who has not yet gone to school is thus reminded that queens and kings are mortal.)  
 T. Time cuts down all, the great and small.  
 (In case the child missed the point earlier or thought it was restricted to kings and queens, the point is generalized: All people must die.)  
 X. Xerxes the Great shared the common fate.  
 (Now the child, who has not yet learned to read and write, has been told this fact three times.)

This is the way Americans of earlier generations taught the alphabet. This book addresses the child at a far more dignified level than such contemporary efforts as: "Spot and Jane run and play. Run, Spot, run. Catch, Jane, catch. Dick and Jane are friends." It was written in a period before condescension toward children had been elevated to a dogma.

Reality provides the conditions on which pleasure can or cannot be achieved; it also provides the moral conditions on which pleasure should or should not be achieved. This value-freighted reality reveals the conditions that must be met or avoided if there is to be any gratification at any time. Children learned that wishes were not horses because before they learned to read they were taught through these verses that if wishes were horses beggars would be riding, and every child knew that beggars went on foot. Thus *Mother Goose* taught the child that you do not get something merely by wishing. Unfortunately, few politicians appear to have read *Mother Goose*.

This was the normal education of young children before they went to school. It taught them the alphabet and prepared them to read. It also prepared them for something much more important than reading: It prepared them for life.

Consider, moreover, how children learned to write—a skill on the endangered species list in contemporary America. They did so through the use of copybooks, manuals with beautifully handwritten sentences—copybook headings—printed at the top of each page. The children were expected to imitate the excellent writing of the headings by copying them repeatedly on the lined spaces below until they had learned the headings by heart.

Now, what did these copybook headings say? I quote from *The Art of Penmanship*, one of the most widely used copybooks of the period: “Religion conduces to our present as well as our future happiness.” This sentence was in the copybook of children so young that they were just beginning to learn to write. And another heading, “Persevere in accomplishing a complete education.” The child copied: “Persevere in accomplishing a complete education,” “Persevere in accomplishing a complete education,” and on and on until the word “persevere” was learned by heart, and the meaning of perseverance was learned by persevering long enough to write it twenty times.

The educators who prepared that copybook knew that children are naturally fascinated and excited by grown-up words. The educators of that period understood the attraction and the power of language. In these copybooks words appear as treasures, language as a treasure-house, and education as the key. Here are a few more of those copybook headings:

Quarrelsome persons are always dangerous companions.

Employment prevents vice.

Great men were good boys.

Praise follows exertion.

Trifles alienate friends.

X begins no English word.

(Presumably this was before xylophones and xebecs.)

Build your hopes of fame on virtue.

(A Christian and Kantian thought.)

Death to the good brings joy instead of terror.

(A Christian and Platonic thought.)

Zinc is a white semi-metal useful in galvanism.

(If not edifying, this heading was at least semi-informative.)

One may perhaps understand better why the abolitionist movement began in Boston when one reads the copybook headings that shaped the minds of Boston children: “Justice is a common

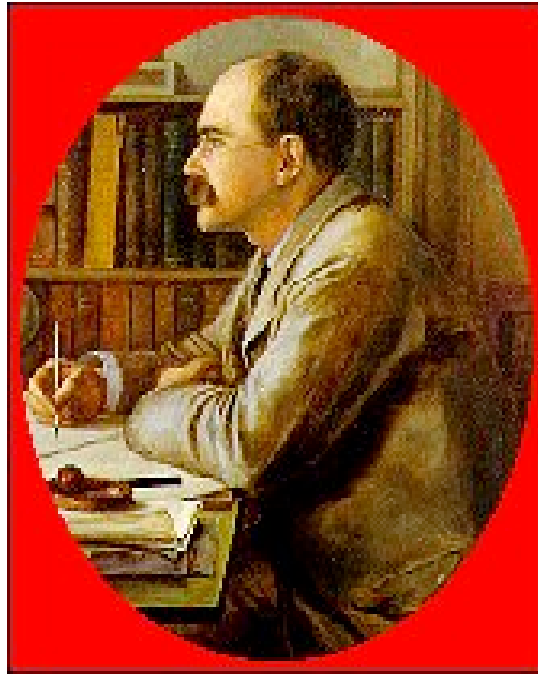
right.” “Magnanimity ennobles.” “Overcome all prejudice.” “Justice will pursue the vicious.” “Zeal for justice is worthy of praise.”

If there is to be effective moral education, it must begin in early childhood. Children’s education started when they began learning the language. These copybook headings were the efforts of an earlier generation to pass on their moral heritage to their children, to acquaint their children with nature—not merely physical but moral and spiritual. By introducing moral and spiritual reality into the education of the child, they expressed their concern with educating the child in all dimensions of reality, to prepare children, in short, for a true and complete human existence.

It was not enough to teach penmanship merely as beautiful writing. It was important to have something to write about, to have content throughout the curriculum, a content that was the distillation of a high culture. It presented as aphorisms the things that thoughtful, understanding people would be expected to know about the nature of the world, about the nature of society, about the nature of the universe, and about themselves. The full meaning and justification of these aphorisms were provided in later stages of the curriculum in the works of Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Spinoza, Kant, and many others.

But it never crossed the mind of eighteenth- or nineteenth-century parents or teachers that their principal responsibility was to be a pal to their children or to try to make life easy, comfortable, convenient, or maximally pleasurable for them. Rather, it was their duty to prepare the children, through exposure to reality, for the uncertainty of human life and the ever-present “possibility of death. Children were led to the realization that virtue and achievement count, and that since death cannot be avoided, they should prepare for death by living well. It was fine to welcome pleasure when it came, but children had to recognize the folly of basing their lives on mere pleasure-seeking.

If we are to recapture this wisdom, we must go back to the copybooks and primers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. I do not mean that we should literally reintroduce them into the curriculum. But we must reintroduce their subject matter. We must return to reality. And that requires us to look to the past because the past necessarily shapes the future. If our future is to be as strong, as good, as fine, and as just as our past has been, we must reassert what was best in a more distant past out of which that more recent past came to be.



**RUDYARD KIPLING**  
**1865-1936**

Kipling's 1919 poem *The Gods of the Copybook Headings* is prophetic. The poet speaks as the voice of mankind:

As I pass through my incarnations in every age and race,  
 I make my proper prostrations to the Gods of the Market-Place.  
 Peering through reverent fingers I watch them flourish and fall.  
 And the Gods of the Copybook Headings, I notice, outlast them  
 all.

We were living in trees when they met us. They showed us each in  
 turn  
 That Water would certainly wet us, as Fire would certainly burn:  
 But we found them lacking in Uplift, Vision, and Breadth of Mind,  
 So we left them to teach the Gorillas while we followed the March  
 of Mankind.

We moved as the Spirit listed. *They* never altered their pace,  
 Being neither cloud nor wind-borne like the Gods of the Market-  
 Place;  
 But they always caught up with our progress, and presently word  
 would come  
 That a tribe had been wiped off its icefield, or the lights had gone  
 out in Rome.  
 With the Hopes that our World is built on they were utterly out of  
 touch,

They denied that Moon was Stilton; they denied she was even  
Dutch.

They denied that Wishes were Horses; they denied that a Pig had  
Wings.

So we worshipped the Gods of the Market Who promised these  
beautiful things.

When the Cambrian measures were forming, they promised per-  
petual peace.

They swore, if we gave them our weapons, that the wars of the  
tribes would cease.

But when we disarmed they sold us and delivered us bound to our  
foe,

And the Gods of the Copybook Headings said: "Stick to the Devil  
you know."

On the first Feminian Sandstones we were promised the Fuller Life  
(Which started by loving our neighbour and ended by loving his  
wife)

Till our women had no more children and the men lost reason and  
faith,

And the Gods of the Copybook Headings said: "The Wages of Sin  
is Death."

In the Carboniferous Epoch we were promised abundance for all,  
By robbing selected Peter to pay for collective Paul;

But, though we had plenty of money, there was nothing our money  
could buy,

And the Gods of the Copybook Headings said: "If you don't work  
you die."

Then the Gods of the Market tumbled, and their smooth-tongued  
wizards withdrew,

And the hearts of the meanest were humbled and began to believe it  
was true

That All is not Gold that Glitters, and Two and Two make Four-

And the Gods of the Copybook Headings limped up to explain it  
once more.

As it will be in the future, it was at the birth of Man-

There are only four things certain since Social Progress began-

That the Dog returns to his Vomit and the Sow returns to her Mire,

And the burnt Fool's bandaged finger goes wabbling back to the  
Fire;



And that after this is accomplished, and the brave new world begins  
 When all men are paid for existing and no man must pay for his  
 sins,  
 As surely as Water will wet us, as surely as Fire will burn,  
 The Gods of the Copybook Headings with terror and slaughter return.

If we have the courage to face reality, we will know and proclaim these harrowing truths: that the degenerate society consumed in pleasure-seeking will not survive (“the wages of sin is death”), that the society that will not defend its freedom will lose it (“stick to the Devil you know”), that a society that consumes more than it produces will go bankrupt (“if you don’t work, you die”). We ill serve ourselves and our children by preparing ourselves and them for a life of freedom and easy pleasure that may never come and most certainly will never last. We had better prepare ourselves and them for reality—a reality that is infused with moral laws as surely as it is infused with physical laws; a reality in which there is no consumption without production, no freedom without defense, no self-fulfillment and no self-government without self-disciplined persons who govern themselves, persons who are capable of subordinating their desires long enough to achieve the conditions on which freedom and survival, and even pleasure, depend.



It is often said, mistakenly, that students on graduation finally go out into the “real” world. That is an expression of escapism. It suggests that they were avoiding the real world all the time they were in school. But no world is more real than the world of ideas in

which students are, or should be, immersed from kindergarten through college. And educators should ensure that reality is packed into the curriculum so that their students, prior to graduation, will confront reality as presented through the ideas of the copybook headings. Then on graduation they will find themselves in the same world that they learned about in school and in college, and will be guided by ideas and principles that can anchor their lives and can give meaning, direction, and support.

These ideas should prepare young people for the disappointment that is an essential part of the joy of living. All of us must live with disappointment, accept limitations and imperfections. We live in a world of becoming and change. Inevitably we will sometimes be disappointed with friends. We will sometimes be disappointed in marriage, disappointed in institutions, and sometimes disappointed in ourselves. Thus if we are to retain our joy in life, we must find much of that joy in spite of disappointment, for the joy of life consists largely in the joy of savoring the struggle, whether it ends in success or in failure. Our ability to go through life successfully will depend largely upon our traveling with courage and a good sense of humor, for both are conditions of survival. It is for this reason that educators should stress the importance of living with reality and therefore with disappointment.

When I look to the future of our country over the next twenty-five years, I find it difficult to be hopeful in the conventional understanding of that word. But it is easy to be hopeful at a more profound level. The difficult years that lie before us may turn out to be far happier than the twenty-five years through which we have just come, for the ancients knew that happiness is more often achieved in adversity than in luxury and affluence. Juvenal rightly said, "Luxury is more ruthless than war." We now face the disappointments that follow affluence—indeed, that go hand in hand with luxury. As our affluence begins to erode and the struggle for survival increases we may find in adversity greater opportunities for personal achievement, fulfillment, and happiness.

We must quickly come to terms with our unavoidable imperfections and with the unavoidable imperfections of our institutions. We must find it possible to live happily in an imperfect world with self-confidence and joy, for there is stern reality to be faced and much hard work to be done. We must join with one another to build a sounder foundation than pleasure, a foundation of enduring happiness that comes through triumph over one's self in a world not of our making by achieving a disciplined and moral relation to

reality. Courage, personal renewal, and, ultimately, happiness may follow from a regained sense of ourselves as a free people joined in common cause on behalf of our free nation, prepared to do, and prepared to do without, whatever is necessary in order to preserve what is best in the American way of life. The phrase may be shopworn, but the reality behind the phrase is still our last, best hope.

Rebuild our defenses, balance our budget, achieve energy independence, rid our cities of crime? Of course! Educate a new generation for reality, for responsible productivity rather than irresponsible consumption? Of course! Regain our sense of direction as a nation, a sense of direction as individuals who seek not pleasure but the lessons of the Copybook Headings and respond creatively and responsibly to those lessons? Again, of course! If we do not, we will succumb to the consequences of ignoring them.

We should heed the words of John Quincy Adams: “Think of your forefathers; think of your posterity.” That is to say, we must think of ourselves. And the way we can effectively express our concern for posterity is through the education of our children. 📖

*Dr. John Silber is Chancellor of Boston University. With education and our children at the forefront of the debate on America’s future, Chancellor Silber is an extremely timely speaker with almost three decades of education experience. He is a founder of Operation HeadStart and pioneered the unprecedented partnership to operate the Chelsea, Massachusetts public schools and build a model for transforming urban education and American life.*

*His philosophical ideas have been put forth in his best-selling book Straight Shooting: What’s wrong with America and How to Fix it. Nothing that we cannot fix if we use our heads, argues John Silber, America’s most outspoken and articulate university president. In this challenging call for change in our troubled society, Silber draws deeply on two sources: his work as a philosopher and his widely varied experience in school and out.*

*Appointed president of Boston University in 1970, Silber transformed an academic and financial backwater into a thriving center of excellence. What makes him different, and what made the transformation possible, is the passion of his intellectual and moral convictions and the courage and clarity with which he expresses these convictions.*

*For Silber, traditional American democratic values are not outworn clichés, but real and living imperatives which demand that we understand who we are and what we must do. He offers a sane, vigorous, and compassionate vision of how America can still change course and restore these values—among the poor and in our racially divided society, our schools, our courts, our government, our military, and our foreign policy. John Silber tackles America’s urgent problems head-on. A whole man speaks here with persuasive logic and real passion.*

*Education: “The crisis of our schools is the crisis of our democracy”*

*The Underclass: “Its basis is not choice but deprivation—a deprivation which, destroying freedom, amounts to slavery”*

*Ethics: “It is a common mistake to suppose that what individuals do professionally is separate and distinct from their ethical responsibility. On the contrary, the professional’s paramount ethical obligation is to be professionally competent”*

*Recognizing that America is too young to step down, to retire into the second rank of nations, John Silber urges renewed reliance on what is finest in our nation’s heritage as we face the challenge of creating a stronger, better America in the last decade of the twentieth century. His lecture topics include: The Importance of Moral Education and Making the Future Work: Our Schools and Our Country.*

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## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Dear Max,

I just wanted to let you know how the Great Books are being used in the lives of the students here in Stockholm at the school where I teach.

Students were expected, as part of their History course, to write a 3-page essay on an idea selected from the list of 103 ideas. They were then coached in how to use the Syntopicon which enabled them to make an even more specific choice based on the outlines. The students then proceeded to read at least three sections from works listed in the reference section of the Syntopicon, aim to understand the text and then seek to identify manifestations, distor-

tions, echoes or confirmation in historical events or series of events to help prove their theses.

It is an indescribable joy to see the diligence with which these twenty-eight 16-year olds applied themselves, searching for the meaning of the writings in the Great Books, researching for connections, points of convergence and wrestling with some serious questions.

Here are some of the theses of their papers:

The media's portrayal of the female body shows a bias in their thinking about *beauty*.

History is littered with illustrations of people who are confused about the nature of *happiness*.

The nature of man determines the need for *Government*.

Swedish neutrality during World War II illustrates a view of the mean between *pleasure and pain*.

One attitude towards *truth* reveals how one thinks about right and wrong.

History reveals man as one who exploits the connection between a crushed body and a crushed *soul*.

We have not regretted acquiring the complete set of the Great Books for our school. It is certain to be an investment that will aid the impact on the lives of these serious young people whom I have the honour to teach here at Engelska Skolan Söder in Stockholm.

Thank you Max,

Theophilus van Rensburg Lindzter

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## **WELCOME NEW MEMBERS**

**David Richardson, Australia**

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