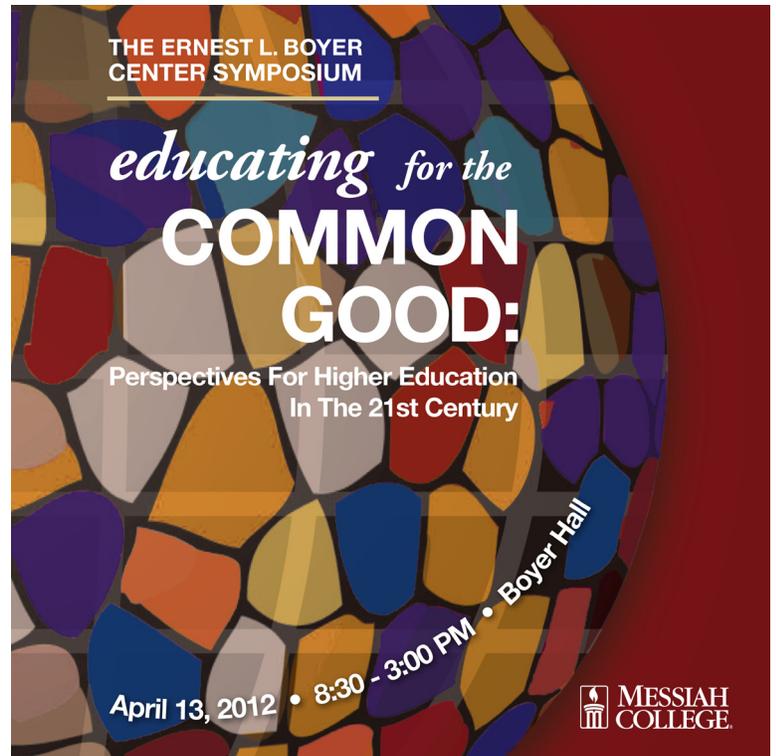


# EDUCATING FOR THE COMMON GOOD

*A keynote by Martin Kaplan*

Messiah College  
Grantham, Pennsylvania  
April 13, 2012



USC ANNENBERG

The Norman Lear  
**CENTER**



Marty Kaplan with Commissioner Boyer in 1978.



Kaplan with Kathryn Tyson Boyer in 2012.

### THE ERNEST L. BOYER CENTER SYMPOSIUM

#### EDUCATING FOR THE COMMON GOOD: PERSPECTIVES FOR HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Ernest L. Boyer, Sr., (1928–1995) was an American educator who served as Chancellor of the State University of New York, United States Commissioner of Education (1977–1979), and President of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. Throughout his career, he offered keen insights into the common good throughout his rich body of scholarship.

The Ernest L. Boyer Center based at Messiah College through its annual symposium invites scholars and teachers from across the disciplines, higher education administrators, and students to bring the ideas of Ernest Boyer into dialogue with the vital questions facing the academy education today. What does it mean to prepare students to serve the well-being of global society? What distinctive skills are demanded of higher education leaders in the contemporary climate? What creative avenues might we pursue to fulfill the interconnected aims of access, equity, and educational excellence?

In addition to providing a venue for dialogue among prominent higher education scholars, the 2012 symposium highlighted the Ernest L. Boyer Center’s recent initiative to catalogue and digitize Boyer’s previously unpublished papers and make them accessible to scholars and educational leaders through a centralized, web-based platform.

For more information on the Ernest L. Boyer Center and their annual symposium, visit their website at: [http://www.messiah.edu/boyer\\_center/](http://www.messiah.edu/boyer_center/)



### THE NORMAN LEAR CENTER

The Norman Lear Center is a nonpartisan research and public policy center that studies the social, political, economic and cultural impact of entertainment on the world. The Lear Center translates its findings into action through testimony, journalism, strategic research and innovative public outreach campaigns. On campus, from its base in the USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism, the Lear Center builds bridges between schools and disciplines whose faculty study aspects of entertainment, media and culture. Beyond campus, it bridges the gap between the entertainment industry and academia, and between them and the public. Through scholarship and research; through its conferences, public events and publications; and in its attempts to illuminate and repair the world, the Lear Center works to be at the forefront of discussion and practice in the field. For more information, please visit: [www.learcenter.org](http://www.learcenter.org).

## EDUCATING FOR THE COMMON GOOD

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I'm delighted to be here at Messiah College, home of the Ernest L. Boyer Center, for this symposium on educating for the common good. It's wonderful that Kay Boyer, who has a special place in my heart, can join us as we celebrate Ernie's work.

For 10 years – from 1974 to 1984 – my life, and the life of the Boyer family, were happily intertwined. It began when I was a graduate student at Stanford. As a Danforth Fellow, I spent a couple of summers at the Aspen Institute in Aspen, CO.

In 1974, I staffed a workshop there for Ernie. He was then chancellor of SUNY, which he'd built into the largest system, with 72 campuses. For some years, chancellors from 8 of the largest state systems had been getting together unofficially, with rotating hosts, to learn from each other's successes and headaches.

Now it was Ernie's turn.

He knew they'd be talking about the systems they ran – about their structure, finance, governance, personnel, and so on. But he wanted to begin the discussion by looking outward, at the world beyond the university – at issues like globalization, scarcity, technology, changes in the culture, the workplace, the life cycle, changes in the concept of "student" to include all learners of all ages and conditions.

I later came to understand how "Ernie" this approach to education was – to turn first to the urgent social context, to the broader challenges and changes that were roiling society. In the course of those two weeks, I also noticed how often Ernie kept making the connection between the social context and the mission of higher education.

Clarity of purpose was everything. What are we trying to do? What are we educating FOR? Asking that was so Ernie, too.

He wanted those two weeks in Aspen to be a time for those chancellors to step back, reflect, see the big picture, play with possibilities... and then to bring their creative insights from the mountaintop back down into the realm of the practical. That explains the title of the book I edited that came out of it: *The Monday Morning Imagination*. The dreamer meets the manager.

Two years later, Ernie decided to step back and reflect again – not for a couple of weeks, but for a semester-long sabbatical in the fall of 1976, this time to think about the purpose of the undergraduate curriculum.

By this point, I – a newly minted PhD – had joined the staff of the Aspen Institute full time. Ernie asked me if I, too, could take a semester's leave and think about curriculum with him, and be his co-author on a book.

And where would we do this, I asked? His answer clinched it for me.

Cambridge, England, perhaps the most beautiful university in the world, where I had spent two blissful years as a Marshall Scholar. We had a great time. I'll never forget cooking Thanksgiving dinner for Ernie and Kay and Stephen in the little kitchen of my flat. You haven't lived until you've roasted a turkey in an English oven whose gas was hooked up to a meter that you literally had to keep plugging with shillings every five minutes so it wouldn't go out.

For three months, all week long, Ernie and I would talk and read and write, and then on most weekends, we'd all go exploring different parts of England.

I want to read a passage from the opening of the book we wrote.

*We were fortunate to have as a setting for this work the University of Cambridge in England, where one of us was a fellow of Wolfson College and the other a returning alumnus of St. John's. The text was put together during a marvelous sabbatical in what may well be the most beautiful university in the world.*

*At one point in the thick of this work we took an excursion into the English countryside that landed us, one night, reservationless, in the crossroads town of Devizes. The place is particularly undistinguished and would probably be forgotten by now had it not been for two special circumstances. One is that we happened to be there the night of Election Day, 1976, in the United States. We watched the returns by satellite, in the chilly sitting room above a pub, well into the night and again in the hours before dawn, speculating about the America into which Jimmy Carter's leadership would take us. The other special circumstance came later in the morning. Our bellies full of sausage, chips, and eggs, and our rented car full of chatter about late returns, poll data, and political appointments, we drove across Salisbury Plain to stand in silent wonder at Stonehenge.*

*Those few days helped put our work on this essay in perspective, orienting it in the most vivid way possible to the past present, and future. We had no idea then that a few days after our return to the United States a series of phone calls would bring both of us to Washington and the Office of Education. We could hardly know in Devizes how closely our futures were linked to those images beamed across the ocean. Though we sensed that morning the dramatic claim that Stonehenge and humanity's past powerfully exerted upon us, we had yet to realize the claims that FOB 6—the Kremlin-like name of the HEW building that houses the Commissioner's office—would stake on our future.*

Past, present, future: you heard that theme in there? I'll come back to it.

So President Carter appointed Ernie as his US Commissioner of Education; Ernie asked me to be his Executive Assistant, whatever that meant; and we all moved to Washington. I also became Ernie's speechwriter – by default. I never could find anyone else to hire that he liked.

It was quite a ride. President Carter's Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare – HEW, as the agency was then known – was Joe Califano, who had learned his rough-and-tumble politics at the knee of President Lyndon Johnson.

One of President Carter's campaign promises was to create a separate Cabinet-level Department of Education. Now Joe Califano had no intention of giving up the E in HEW, but he couldn't admit it, because that would be insubordination. So he delegated to Ernie the job of torpedoing the plan. And Ernie delegated that job to me. That, it turns out, was what an Executive Assistant does. Being whipsawed between Secretary Califano and the White House nearly did me in.

After a year and a half at the Office of Education, I was invited by the Vice President, Walter Mondale, to become his chief speechwriter, which I did, moving over to the White House for the rest of the term, until we lost the re-election in 1980. When Mr. Mondale began his presidential race in 1983, I became his deputy campaign manager.

In between those two campaigns, I worked with Ernie at the Carnegie Foundation, where he'd become president, on a book about the American high school. After a landslide defeat in 1984, I moved on to Hollywood, to work for Disney, and Ernie and Kay moved on to Princeton, where the Carnegie Foundation relocated.

There's a thread that runs from the Aspen workshop, through to the book we wrote in Cambridge, to many of Ernie's speeches, to the High School book, through to this gathering here at Messiah, and that thread is the question of mission, of purpose. Educating for what?

The common good. It's something Ernie and I never stopped wrestling with. What's common about it? What's good about it?

"The common good" is not a description of a thing; it's the name of a value. It's a normative term.

And once you acknowledge that "the common good" is a norm, if your ambition, as ours was, was to address all of American higher education – not only communities of believer-scholars like this one here at Messiah, but the whole mosaic of modern America, in all its clamorous diversity of beliefs and unbeliefs – then all the questions posted by that diversity and modernity come tumbling after.

The common good: What's so good about it? Is it a true, eternal goodness that transcends time and place? Or is it a historical goodness; a goodness that claims to be universal, but in fact is contingent, tribal, the socially-constructed goodness of a specific society at a particular moment in time?

The common good: What's common about it?

What agendas does it conceal? Whose interests does it serve? Whose needs does it marginalize? In other words: the common good: Sez who?

To the founders of Harvard, the first American college, in 1636, questions like these would have been as comprehensible as Martian. The Puritan God is the common good. End of story. Every student studies the same subjects, because every student worships the same Creator. But two-and-a-half centuries later, to the president of Harvard, Charles W. Eliot, the god is Science. The common good is American Progress.

What subjects should our students master?, Eliot asks in his inaugural address. Ancient studies or modern studies? Classics or mathematics? Metaphysics or physics? His answer: We would have them all, and at their best. At Eliot's Harvard, there are no requirements. It's all choice.

Where does this lead? In 1920, Archibald MacLeish looks at the American curriculum, and what he sees is "intellectual anarchy." The reason isn't a failure of will; it's a failure of worldview.

"There can be no educational postulates," MacLeish says, "so long as there are no generally accepted postulates of life itself. And there has been no real agreement as to the purposes and values of life since the world gave over heaven a hundred years ago."

In 1946, with communism a rising threat, and with American colleges opening their doors to new students more widely than ever before, James Bryant Conant issues "General Education in a Free Society," known as the Redbook.

Conant is the president of Harvard, but the Redbook's intended audience is not just Harvard, it's all of American higher education. The Redbook's god is freedom. Its faith is faith in democracy. Its common good is *e pluribus unum* – making one out of many, making pluralism coherent, making diversity different from anarchy. The Redbook's curriculum mirrors democracy's high wire act, the balance between self and society.

If our common good contains a tension, so must our common curriculum. We must study the past, but not be oppressed by it. "We must reconcile the sense of pattern and direction deriving from heritage," it says, "with the sense of experiment and innovation deriving from science." We are a free society, it says, but "there are truths which none can be free to

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Students must marinate in this paradox. In the Redbook’s words, “If toleration is not to become nihilism, if conviction is not to become dogmatism, if criticism is not to become cynicism, each must have something of the other.”

And from these bipolar norms, the Redbook derives a curriculum whose rules are so complex that even Harvard doesn’t adopt it. That’s a taste of the history recounted in the book Ernie and I wrote. That’s the conversation we decided to join. Ernie was a man of deep faith. But the case we made was agnostic.

Our goal was to find consensus on what the common good is – to identify norms that would be broadly accepted as normative even in a secular world of diverse individuals who want different things out of education. We believed we found those norms in the universal realities of time and biology.

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What’s common in the common good that we proposed is our shared existence in time. We all have a past; we all have a present; we all, until our time ends, have a future. And what’s good in the common good that we proposed is the existential imperative of life itself – the biological continuity of our human species on this fragile sphere called Earth.

And from that norm came a modest proposal for a core curriculum. We declared that an understanding of the past from which all of us come should be required of all students.

In mandating the study of history, we were explicit about the pitfalls and dangers of studying history: The breathless rush through centuries. The seductiveness of neat packages. The assumption that our current account of the past, or our tribe’s account of the past, is the best account of the past.

We declared that a fundamental commonality of the present is the centrality of symbols.

All students, we said, should be aware of the many symbol systems we use to encode and decode messages. They should be familiar with the languages of words and numbers, music and images, movement and art.

Also common to the present, we said, and also given a place in the core: Our participation in groups and institutions. Our relationship to nature and technology. Our need for well-being.

But the defining element of our proposal, I think, concerned the future. And it is here, I believe, that Ernie’s ideas speak most urgently to us today. Our argument was this: On every day, in every act and every choice, we make a future that either all of us will share in common, or no one will share at all.

There is only one human predicament. We are all custodians of a single planet. Whether we know it or not, whether we like it or not, we are interdependent. We all belong to one human family. Our fates are inexorably intertwined. The norm of our book, our answer to the question, Educating for what?, is contained in its title: Educating for Survival. Survival is the common good.

“Based on what we know today,” we asked, “what is the future?”

“Air and water will continue to be polluted,” we wrote. “The exponential depletion of natural resources will go on unchecked. The proliferation of nuclear weapons could lead to war, or to an unsteady succession of threats, crises, and international blackmail.

“Overcrowding and starvation, coupled with drought and an inability to produce enough food, will take their phenomenal

toll. A change in climate, perhaps the melting of the polar ice caps due to the heat blanket of the earth's atmosphere, could be disastrous.

"Social unrest on a national and global scale may well be directed against the unequal distribution of wealth. Moneyed interests, and the powers of science and technology, may be perceived as encroaching on the individual's freedom and quality of life."



Almost 40 years ago, and it sounds like what I saw on the news last night.

Our institutions of higher learning, we said, citing labor leader Gus Tyler, "should remake themselves to confront the challenge of human extinction. Let there be a core course on Survival of the Species (SOS for short). Its object would be, first, to make each of us aware of our common peril.

"Making survival the *raison d'être* of higher education could breathe new life into the curriculum and could give fresh motivation to students and faculty in search of involvement."

It's this idea of involvement that I want to end on.

Educating for the common good – however you define it – is about more than the formal curriculum, more than taking or teaching courses.

It's about how those values are lived. The common good requires community. And community isn't a syllabus – it's a way of life. Community demands engagement. Taking responsibility. Being of service.

Those are the values that Ernie went on to elaborate in his work on the professoriate. They're the values that Ernie lived by. They're the values, I know, at the heart of Messiah's mission. And they're the values at the heart of my own tradition.

We Jews believe the world is broken. We believe that our life's task is *Tikkun olam* – to repair the world. We believe that our responsibility is to try to put the pieces of this broken world back together.

Or maybe – as novelist David Levithan put it – "maybe it isn't that we're supposed to find the pieces and put them back together. Maybe we're the pieces. Maybe, what we're supposed to do is come together. That's how we stop the breaking."

*Tikkun olam*. Repairing the world. Stopping the breaking. Coming together. That's what Ernie's work was about. And that's what we're trying to do here today. Thank you for including me in this conversation.

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