

## The Vocabulary of Learning: In the Beginning Was the Word

Essay by St. Olaf English Professor Emeritus Graham S. Frear

Completing a working life which spanned the years from 1947 to 1988, I am convinced more than ever of the difference between schooling and education. Schooling is the regimen which preoccupies one's life from kindergarten through college. Education is the result of those arduous years in classrooms, extensive reading lists and more lectures than one remembers. Schooling enables one to comprehend and education enables one to cope.

Emerging from those years of schooling, one acquires a rich vocabulary with which one confronts the rigors of life which always challenges us. My tools and weapons were a vast vocabulary. Part of my college vocabulary was the jaw-breaker *polymorphonuclear neutrophile*, a type of blood cell I encountered in my first major, biology. Here one discovered the vast complex of a world of structures and relationships, of pattern and process, which is the stuff of life itself.

Another word of significance was *cosmopolitan* stressed by a widely informed and sophisticated teacher of foreign languages who emphasized the need to embrace a wider world of diverse cultures and ideas which contrasted with a restrictive and inhibiting provincialism. We must become part of a *cosmos*, the well-ordered social environment in which we *polis* must live and survive.

Another word was introduced in art class, the graceful word *chiaroscuro* which expressed the relation of light and dark which gave form and dimension to otherwise flat structures. So *chiaro*, clarity, draws from darkness or *oscuro*, that which is not revealed as multi-dimensional. Thousands of other words were fixed during those years of schooling which provided the means of relating a host of disparate things into a cohesive insight we call education. Horizons were extended, and chaos became not only intelligible but manageable. Words were the tools of understanding.

Such vocabularies provided liberation defining true education which enabled us to cope with ever-increasing complexity unimpeded by prejudice and narrowed perspective. We could become productive citizens of a larger world, a world where Copernicus and Shakespeare were equally at home, where the sublime musical patterns of Mozart shared the same space with the brilliant insights of a Rembrandt. In the beginning was the WORD and in the ending also.