It is a pleasure and an honor to be with you today to explore this topic *Hidden Wholeness: Student’s Search for Meaning and Purpose in College*. This is an extremely important topic for all educators and, I hope, for all people in this country. Many of you – dean of the college staff, counselors, religious leaders, faculty, and various administrators who work directly with students – have dedicated your life to helping students learn to find and create meaning, purpose and wholeness. You work very hard to develop meaning-drenched campus communities in which learning and growth take place. As a president, I want to salute you and your work. It is one of my greatest pleasures to hear alumni – in my case mainly Colgate University alumni – express appreciation for the excellent information and critical thinking skills they learned in college. But for many Colgate alumni, even deeper appreciation is reserved for those who have shown them how to ask and pursue meaning, the multiple ways of meaningfulness, the hidden beauty of images of wholeness, the challenge to be serious authentic individuals who live lives of integrity and truth.

Education, in its most fundamental sense, is about the cultivation of individuals for participation in a community through nurturance in the narratives, practices, traditions, and institutions of that community. This cultivation is important, for we want to educate students to live *into* freedom and responsibility, to live and lead their future communities in their time and place. Education is about “knowing” in its most complex sense: knowing how to be free human beings who belong and participate in community.
In a beautiful phrase by Parker Palmer, we can say that at the deepest level education is always about meaning and purpose and wholeness for “every way of knowing becomes a way of living.” Every form of education, in belonging to a particular time and place with narratives, rituals and practices expressing and contributing to that age, will shape individuals and generate particular types of meaning and purpose for the individual.

In this country, higher education carries within it a vision of wholeness, meaning and purpose closely tied to our democratic vision for wholeness, meaning and purpose for individuals and for society. As Thomas Bender and many others have argued, education in this country was created to prepare young men for meaningful lives as contributors to their community. Education was intended to prepare people for individual productivity (not necessarily material success though that is the current interpretation) and civic participation, even leadership. American education developed as an institution of democracy, as John Dewey would call it, in which the meaning and purpose of democracy and the formation of young men, and later young women, was always already intermingled. Though many historical precedents can be cited for this from Plato to Newman, from Isocrates to Melanchthon, Martha Nussbaum, in her book *Cultivating Humanity*, contends that the idea of liberal education, “a higher education that is a cultivation of the whole human being for the functions of citizenship and life generally – has been taken up most fully in the United States.” We should also note, of course, that most, though not all, educational institutions were originally founded as religious, both in the sense of being sponsored by specific institutions, often Christian and Jewish groups, and in the sense of assuming that some kind of religious nurturance is essential to formation of men (and women) of character and virtue. Religions, in terms of their roles
in our lives, are narratives and institutions of communities that provide meaning and purpose in the context of some vision of wholeness.

I bring us this historical account because it is important to understand that the notion of wholeness, meaning and purpose as a quest for students grows out of a general understanding of education and, more particularly, an American context of liberal education. A hermeneutical understanding of our educational tradition will provide us with resources to think about students seeking meaning and purpose and wholeness. But I also recite this history ever so briefly because I think it is important to underscore the two-fold link between the social and the individual in education. Meaning, purpose and wholeness for the individual is tied to participation in the communal. In our tradition, the continuity and liveliness of the social/communal are ensured best by forming free individuals. As William Cronon once noted, “Education for human freedom is also education for human community.” We have great resources in our traditions of education to address issues of meaning, purpose and wholeness but, equally important I would insist, our tradition of education also asks us to actively address such questions for the sake of our students and our country. Our traditions of education, which in turn support our democratic way of life, require us to support, encourage and even demand that we and our students ask questions of meaning, purpose and wholeness.

Yet, despite my fondness of and commitment to the great strands of education, and western liberal education in particular, these terms of wholeness, meaning and purpose sound a bit strange to our contemporary ears. Is it possible to talk about meaning and purpose in this day and age? Could college possibly have a role in even suggesting that students seek wholeness? What could these words – wholeness, meaning and
purpose – possibly mean in the 21st century? Can we recall the days when parents sent their sons and daughters to college in order to help them develop as citizens and persons?

We are, I imagine, all aware that students no longer come to college looking for “meaning” but for success. The Cooperative Institutional Research Program has surveyed students since 1966. They have focused on over 700 campuses and have, all told, surveyed 9 million students. In the first year of the survey less than 50% of students saw their purpose and meaning tied to being financially well off. Just over half said the chief benefit of a college education is increased earning potential. By the mid-1980’s 75% of college students stressed being well off financially as the goal. By contrast, in the 1960’s, 80% of students stressed “developing a meaningful philosophy of life” as the first goal. Indeed, college seems to have been turned into or is turning itself into (probably a combination of both) an institution that is a vocational training – at whatever level – for getting a job to ensure material success.

To address this most important topic about wholeness, meaning and purpose is immediately to stand at the crossroads of an immense historical juncture between education viewed as a moral endeavor concerned with developing young persons into freedom to belong to a democratic society and education seen as Vartran Gregorian once called “the Home Depot of courseware,” a seemingly random listing of courses from which students can pick to receive technical training for one job or another.

I want to dwell with you at this juncture to: 1) clarify some of the difficulties in the quest for meaning and purpose – difficulties that were not prevalent forty years ago; 2) track signs and spaces of hope – the places and spaces we see students being supported in their quest for meaning, purpose and wholeness and 3) identify three strategies to
support students as they find and create meaning, purpose and wholeness at the dawn of the 21st century.

1.) What are some of the difficulties we face in supporting students as they undertake an educational quest for wholeness, meaning and purpose?

First, the psychological structure and cultural patterns of the millennial generation or what David Brooks described as “the organizational kid,” allow little time or space to develop the interiority of meaning, and too much support for individual success as defined by consumption and status. We all see these young men and women: lives programmed by a PDA at every moment, who participate in ten or fifteen major clubs, seek expertise in dance, soccer, student government, and serve as a big sister, all at once! When do they have luxury of time to think about meaning, to reflect, to even allow an existential crisis to bloom and flower? I am sure we all have our stories. During my first month at Colgate I invited student leaders to my house one evening. I had a lovely image of wholeness for the evening: in front of my fireplace, with soft drinks and snacks, I, the new president, would sit and discuss the meaning of Colgate traditions and life in general with our student leaders. They could share with me their dreams and concerns, and we would begin to build those generous bonds of support I experienced as a student. I was a bit disappointed when I discovered that no one could come until 9 o’clock (nearly my bedtime) but I adjusted my expectations. They arrived, grabbed a few cookies, said a few things and at the end of 50 minutes a PDA chirped, and the leader of the student government association announced that he and the others had other meetings to go to, this was very nice, see you later and out the door they went. Over structured, our students do not take the time to develop the interiority required for meaning and purpose.
Indeed, much over structuring seems to be about developing a resume to help one succeed – success is almost always about preparing for a high paying career. America has always emphasized individual success, with practices, narratives, policies and structures that support the individual. But the stress on individual success has been matched and intermingled with a stress on belonging to the community, doing good in the community, responsibility for the community. One of the most interesting books I have read recently is David Callahan’s *The Cheating Culture: Why More Americans are Doing Wrong to Get Ahead*. Callahan traces the many places we cheat, places that are even structured to “get ahead” by culturally acceptable forms of cheating or hidden rules of cheating. Indeed, if one reads Callahan’s book with our topic in mind it is clear that the hidden wholeness in our culture is “getting ahead by any means.” Callahan contends, and I think he is right in some way, that America developed as a country dominated by two sets of values: the importance of the individual in the public sphere on the one hand and, on the other hand, the importance of self sacrifice for the family and community. In our current period, individualism has emerged as unchecked and unbalanced. Individuals do all they can to be successful, measuring their success by material goods, unbalanced by contribution to the good or definition by the whole. The psychological structures and cultural narratives in America that have provided meaning and purpose through communal loyalty, or at least obligation, have eroded and this makes it very difficult for us to help students as they seek meaning and purpose through any sense of the common good or being connected to a larger whole.

A second area of difficulty in talking about meaning, wholeness, and purpose is the loss of the social and communal metanarratives of former days. We may or may not like
the notion of post modernity, but François Lytoard’s classic work, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, on the collapse of metanarratives, large narratives of culture and nature as legitimizing or unifying forces seems quite accurate. Cultural metanarratives, supported by cultural practices and institutions, were once largely assumed as normal, the way things are supposed to be. But by the turn of the new century, few Americans assumed the status or durability of the metanarratives of previous days. We became authors and artisans of our own narratives in a way quite unprecedented for most men and women. Be it religion, family, civic society, or America’s role in the world – we began to not belong to our narratives, practices and institutions the same way our parents and grandparents cherished or assumed these narratives. We can cite so many examples here – let me share one that I find especially relevant to my life. Narratives of women’s lives have changed dramatically since the 1950’s. Though race and class have had enormous impact on the narratives by which women lived their lives and gave meaning, the dominant narrative for a woman’s life was that of a wife and mother: a domestic goddess symbolized by June Cleaver. But starting in the early 1950’s a variety of revolutions occurred that changed forever the assumed narrative for women: women started to go to work to meet the demands of an expanding post-war economy; the invention of the pill meant one could choose, or choose not, to have children and limit the number of children; mother work – the years a woman spent in active mothering – fell dramatically; divorce became acceptable; and women’s concerns and voices became counted in public policy and in the courts. By the 1980’s the narrative, institution, and practices of wholeness, meaning and purpose for women in this country had undergone tremendous change. We could find many other examples, but the
point I want to make is not the complete loss of these narratives – I actually think they do still exist – but the fact that individuals do not have them just handed to them any longer – they do not have the same cultural assumed power as they had in former times. We need new narratives, to be sure, but we also need a new way to think about our own narratives and to guide our choices about which narratives we create and embrace.

A third area of difficulty for our students and ourselves has to do with the dramatic changes in the aims, nature and practices of higher education in this country that move us, as educators, away from having meaning, purpose and wholeness at the top on our list of priorities! As I have already discussed, America formed its educational system to serve the civic public, though we have always nurtured the production of knowledge in our institutions of higher education. But after World War II, education has become more dominated by the focus on knowledge and career preparation. The explosion of knowledge, the disciplinary professionalization of faculty, the availability of research funding, the need for more professionals in law, business and medicine, have all led to a much greater emphasis on education as the production of more and more advanced levels of knowing. James Laney, former president of Emory, in his book Education of the Heart, states that until a few decades ago education consisted fundamentally of handing down the big questions about the meaning and purpose of life. He states, “Through it all, education was seen as a moral endeavor, not because it sought to indoctrinate, but because it was a showing of things that people hold to be important. Faculty had authority not only because they were experts in their disciplines, but also because they had common commitments and took seriously the important questions and the responsibility of their answers before a younger generation.”
Other features of our, to use Maxine Greene’s lovely phrase, “landscape of learning” deserve mention and perhaps in conversation you can share your ideas to round out my quick sketch. Suffice it to say that neither the psycho-social construct of our students, nor the culture, nor the institution of education itself is foregrounding or really supporting talk of meaning, purpose and wholeness. In sum, our cultural and educational context makes seeking wholeness, meaning and purpose difficult.

2.) Signs and Spaces of Hope - places and spaces we see students seeking, finding and creating meaning, purpose and wholeness.

And yet these difficulties – psychological construction of the millennial generation; the loss of metanarratives of meaning, purpose and truth; the dramatic shift from education as a moral endeavor to education as a service provider – are not the whole story! Our reality is far more complex than just the landscape we have drawn so far. What is so vastly interesting about the current situation is that education is at a multiple and intertangled crossroads – what traffic controllers in big cities call spaghetti junctions – where the residual signs of past traditions, the current global needs, the forces that make education too narrow, too consumerist and too focused on material success, are mingling with emerging and enduring places where students are building communities, reaching out to help others, engaging in accumulating the skills of politics, and seeking meaning, purpose and wholeness! Indeed, if we go back to my earlier comments about a hermeneutics of education in the US and recall that ways of knowing involve ways of being, we can ask ourselves where we see new ways of being and knowing emerging. We can ask ourselves, recalling Dewey and others, where the individual and community are linked, especially in quest for life together and individually in a democracy. And we can
struggle with Nussbaum and others to retrieve and reinterpret the meaning and purpose of liberal education. If we bring our hermeneutics of education into the present we can discern a foreshadowing of the future. Our task, our real task, is to read the spaces and signs of hope in the current situation and to carefully and creatively enlarge, support, and enact the future that is already in our midst. Let me identify some of the spaces and signs of hope I see as a new emerging future of education in this country.

1. Civic engagement and learning: The movement of civic education in this country is vast and sustained. In recent years educators, educational associations, and students have returned to the long and deep American tradition to educate citizens. Thomas Ehrlich’s book Civic Responsibility and Higher Education is a wonderful chronicle of hope about all the current work to promote civic learning in this country. At Colgate we have developed a philosophy of residential education which attempts to ensure our students have the skills necessary for democracy: the skills of debate and communication; the skills of community building and conflict resolution; the skills of building civic life through social events, working together for common goals, and living together in small communities that walk across difference. Let me give you four illustrations of a quite comprehensive academic and residential program in civic education. A) Our Upstate Institute supports students and faculty in bringing Colgate’s intellectual capital into partnerships with community groups. Students and faculty are helping to develop an Abolitionist Hall of Fame in Peterboro, New York; helping low-income families complete tax returns, getting Social Security benefits for disabled children, and stabilizing the economy of our county; and science students and faculty are working to understand acid rain in the Adirondacks. B) Our university formed the
Partnership for Community Development investing in the village and local economic and cultural development and “blurring the boundaries” between the school and community. Such investments and relationships have improved the village and Colgate considerably but, more importantly, it enacted our mission to relate individual and community as always already together in a democracy. C) We are in the process of supporting student self governance. This has meant teaching conflict resolution skills to settle roommate disputes; establishing community councils in living units; bringing our third and fourth year theme houses, Greek-letter houses, and neighborhoods under the governance of a council led entirely by the students. D) We are making a conscious attempt to teach skills of walking across diversity, giving incentives for groups of students to work together, and continuing research by students and faculty on diversity and community. On our campus, and I imagine elsewhere, students are finding incredible wholeness, meaning and purpose in doing the political and civic work of engagement. A sense of wholeness for the community and the self begins to emerge as students work with each other and with faculty and community partners to make a difference, to create common bonds, to make a better place for all. Theologically speaking, we have to take seriously that acts of kindness, working to mend the world, and charity toward others are all acts of meaning and purpose in the context of an explicit or implicit wholeness.

2. Another sign and space of hope, for me, is programs in international affairs and off-campus study. On our campus, international affairs includes support for international students, clubs and activities focusing on world cultures, language and politics, and our very large study abroad program. Seventy-five percent of our students study abroad, half of them on trips led by Colgate faculty. Colgate sponsors 24 semester-long faculty-led
programs, and approximately 22 shorter term programs. Colgate programs are designed by academic programs or departments to provide students with a semester of intensive study within their major or minor. This is a huge commitment and one, I must confess, I wondered about in terms of expense. And I mean by expense having 24 or more faculty leaving campus for semesters or extended periods to lead these trips. Our faculty has made a tremendous commitment so that our students – trained in remote, rural New York – will understand and become citizens of the world. And what I have begun to realize, now in my fourth year, is that when you take these programs and activities together, it is a space of wonder, of creation of meaning and purpose, an exploration of how community and self interact, and the beginning of a quest for a wholeness that includes not just oneself but the whole globe. Engagement in international affairs often “counters” the isolated self that many millennial students have; encountering other cultures checks the “naturalness” of the organizational kid. The imagination is stretched and made flexible; the narrative for self now has to include a narrative of the world. The cool thing to do may no longer be simply what one’s homogenous peers do back home.

Additionally, serious exploration of the arts, culture and politics on campus now bring the world to campus just as study abroad programs take campus to the world. These signs and spaces of hope are about being real in the world and, quite literally, expanding the horizons of and for meaning, purpose and wholeness.

3. The third sign of hope is renewed, and perhaps even new, interest in religion, spirituality and what we might call the “Big Questions.” On our campus – and probably on yours – we have a whole new generation of students who are extremely interested in religion and/or big questions. In 2003 The Higher Education Research Institute started a
major multi-year research project.\textsuperscript{xv} The current report is based on survey data of more than 100,000 students attending 236 colleges and universities. Students reported high levels of spirituality and idealism, they expressed many spiritual values and virtues. 83% of the students believe in the sacredness of life; 80% have an interest in spirituality; 76% search for meaning/purpose in life.

Equally interesting to me is the “democratization” of religion on our campuses (and in this country). Diana Eck, a noted historian of religion, has demonstrated immigrant patterns in America bring in a host of religions so that the US now has the widest range of religious faiths in the world. Furthermore, as compared to earlier generations of immigrants, these new immigrants – “Buddhists from Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, China and Korea; Hindus from India, East Africa, and Trinidad; Muslims from Indonesia, Bangladesh, the Middle East and Nigeria; Sikhs and Jains from India; and Zoroastrianism from both India and Iran among others – and all can and often do keep in touch by reading home newspapers on the internet, satellite phone lines, cable TV.”\textsuperscript{xvi} The founders of this country could not have imagined how democracy of the many for the many – the American ideal of e pluribus unum (from many, one), continues.

It is also the case, at least on our campus, that students are again hungry to talk about and debate big questions. Robert Connor, president of the Teagle Foundation, organized a “listening” — a national discussion of spirituality and religion.\textsuperscript{xvii} Robert Connor identifies the “big questions” as “Who am I? What am I going to do with my life? What are my values? Is there such a thing as evil? What does it mean to be human? How can I understand suffering and death? What obligations do I have to others? What makes work, or a life, meaningful and satisfying?”\textsuperscript{xxviii} He has observed that students are clearly
asking these questions again, and many faculties are clearly nervous about their ability to address them as compared to teaching well-defined subject matter in a discipline! Interest in religion, spirituality and the big question doesn’t fit into neat and tidy boxes, let alone denominational structures, but is present and it is very much about students seeking meaning, purpose and wholeness.

4. The fourth encouraging sign is spaces of discussion about the aims of education, including assessment, academic freedom, accreditation, funding, and public perception of education. These are lots of different topics I am bringing into this space but I want to suggest that we need to find places to talk vigorously about what Whitehead once called “the aims of education.” Colgate’s faculty has had a most fascinating discussion on assessment. We are facing accreditation where models of assessment appear to be the new opportunity, or hurdle. In addition, we are aware of national, federal and state discussions about assessment and accountability of higher education institutions. Like most liberal arts faculties in the country, we viewed the issue with suspicion, distrust and even hostility. (Just how does one quantify real understanding of a course in Shakespeare as compared to just parroting facts about Shakespeare’s texts?) But our provost and faculty soon began to engage in a strong, wonderful and complex discussion: What are the aims of courses? How do we give evidence in various disciplines? What do we want students to learn? And one by one, departments and programs are working on models of assessment. Or to take another example, members of our Board of Trustees were concerned last year when Hamilton College – our close friend and neighbor – experienced a quite upsetting issue about academic freedom that ended in, on the one hand, the cancellation of an outside speaker, and, on the other hand, many
confused alumni. (Faculty and students at Hamilton seemed to think through the issue quite well.) During a board meeting, after I made a very brief presentation on the various issues involved in the term “academic freedom,” I opened the floor for discussion. Very quickly we were in the midst of a wonderful discussion of free speech, academic freedom, the nature of teaching critical thinking, and so forth. I think every trustee felt it was the best of many really wonderful conversations on our board. My point is simple: we need to use this public discussion to think in new ways about education given the global and technological challenges of the present day. I am very impressed with AAC&U’s project called “Liberal Education and America’s Promise: Preparing Students for an Era of Greater Expectations,” which seeks to retrieve our American tradition and prepare students for the needs of the 21st century. What is impressive about the campaign are the conversations and the sheer energy around the real aims – the meaning, purpose and vision of wholeness in education. We can’t expect our students to talk about meaning, purpose and wholeness if we refuse to discuss the very space that will cultivate their conversations! Indeed if one assumes – and you can probably tell I do – that education is a type of secular theology – our own attempts to have a conversation about the meaning and purpose of education are very important in setting the stage for our students to have conversations about meaning, purpose and wholeness.

3) Three strategies to support students as they find and create meaning, purpose and wholeness at the dawn of the 21st century.

Here we dwell, for a moment, at this interesting educational spaghetti junction. We want to get through the difficulties of the “organizational kid;” we need to help students figure out their lives but we do so in an era of very few “naturalized” narratives,
and our own house has fallen into its version of being an “organizational kid,” so to speak. But we do see spaces and spirit of hope which build upon the traditions of education in this country; we feel the impulse of freedom in community in the nature of education; and we glimpse emerging visions of what it might be to be human in a very new and very different global context. How do we understand our work in all of these places and paths? I want to suggest some strategies that, now reframed, may help us support our students and education in general for the quest for wholeness, meaning and purpose. The three are simple, and are about the educational process as much as they are the product:

1) We need to support what Nussbaum and others have called “narrative imagination” as a fundamental act of education, 2) We need to support the cultivation of practices and habits in education that support meaning and purpose and 3) We need to support our students and ourselves in retrieving the spirit of utopian realism that is central to American thinking. Three principles: narrative imagination; practices and habits; utopian realism.

Narrative Imagination: Martha Nussbaum introduced the term “narrative imagination” as an important aspect of liberal arts by which she means the ability to imagine what others are feeling, doing, and practicing; the wonder of being able to see new ways and new worlds. Nussbaum argues that perhaps our greatest need is to make sure we have strong and flexible narrative imaginations so we can see new possibilities for our life together. But the notion of narrative imagination is not new, indeed it may be the basic tool of liberal education, the “phronesis” of the Greeks, the “sensibility” of a Matthew Arnold, the “wide-awakefulness” of a Maxine Greene, the “world traveling” of a Maria Lugones, the poetic imagination of a Paul Ricoeur. For narrative imagination is
the ability to comprehend our situatedness, to sustain an attitude of wide-awakefulness, to imagine differently, to understand value systems held by others, and to see differently meaning and purpose in action. Meaning and purpose can and must be an act of the imagination as much as an act of understanding the present and the past. The play and hard work of narrative imagination is not easy for the organizational kids who want to rush through life, build a resume, and claim their views are right.

One can easily imagine the class discussion in English or Chinese, in Political Science or Geography if the faculty member facilitates a practical dialogue as well as a theoretical analysis. But we can also tend these bright burning fires of the imagination in other programs. Surely study abroad programs invite the flourishing of the poetic imagination, the wide-awakefullness of empathy as really understanding how others feel and live their lives, not simply how we would feel if we lived their lives. Arts programs – booming on our campus and I hope on yours – give our students the capacity they need to be poets for meaning, purpose and wholeness. Programs in civic learning are about imagining new possibilities for life together, and the conflicts help students engage in empathy – imagining how others have different values, meaning, and purposes. As Nussbaum maintains, the narrative imagination allows aesthetics, morality, politics and meaning to come together. And we must do this in a decidedly forward-looking way, recalling Emily Dickinson’s “the possible's slow fuse lit: the imagination.” Let us understand our lives as educators as poets of new possibilities. Let us create, as Walt Whitman called them, “democratic poets.”

A second strategy is and should be a focus on **practices.** By practices I mean the ongoing embodied and embedded activities of a community that create meaning and
purpose within individual and community. A practice is a pattern of meaning and action that is both culturally constructed and individually instantiated. Practices are socially shared forms of behavior that mediate between what are often called objective and subjective dimensions. Practices set their own internal standards of excellence, or flourishing. Practices create capacities for seeing and knowing, for being and doing. Habits and skills, of course, are the individual’s instantiation of broader cultural practices. Some, but not all, practices of over scheduling combine with a narrative of intense pressure for success to create an inner self that is overly anxious without time for reflection and leisure. Without creating habits and practices that produce life-giving and sustaining meaning and purpose, we fail at the basic aim of education. At Colgate our residential education programs discovered that focusing on practices and skills for diversity, self governance, and community building was far more successful than long, long talks about values. We discovered that many students don’t have the skill set necessary for self governance, skills that result in holding each other accountable or resolving conflicts. We learned that providing incentives and support to help students to walk across difference during their regular activities was immensely successful. One very popular program is a social fund for which student groups that don’t ordinarily work together apply. They must plan a meal together and some kind of social event together. This very successful program is not aimed at talking about values; it is aimed at shaping practices and teaching skills. Being a self in community means that individuals can be formed in capacities of doing, seeing, judging, being, becoming. There can be occasional nervousness when I talk about being conscious of practices and providing skills – some hear it as social engineering. But I think in education – all forms of education – we are
always shaping the self in community through practices. The issue is: what habits, skills and virtues do the practices cultivate? Our task is to be conscious of it; to be critical of where words and actions do not meet, to support our students as they master the practices of democratic community and human fulfillment in the 21st century.

The third strategy of our work is to foster an attitude of utopian realism, a term I once heard from Cornel West but which is part and parcel of much of the American tradition – certainly codified in pragmatic philosophers such as Peirce, Mead, and Dewey. More recently Alan Wolfe has instantiated utopian realism in his book Return to Greatness which calls for America to retrieve and reframe its tradition of aspiring to be a great society. Utopian realism is about imagining in front of us what it is to be great; envisioning wholeness for communal and individual life; always dreaming of the utopia for all. This is, as West points out, a decidedly pragmatic philosophical attitude. In this view meaning and purpose are created and have value by pointing toward a not-yet realized and even largely imagined future. In democracies it is, as Richard Bernstein said of Dewey’s vision, always the task before us. Utopian realism is the return to dreaming, to aspiring, to hoping for wholeness as a reality before us – the utopian impulse. But it is also, equally, a way of ordering values in the current situation. The ultimate vision of value, wholeness, and happiness allows one to accept the imperfections, sacrifices and struggles of the present – the realism attitude. Embracing a future-oriented sense of wholeness for any given time requires us to never turn a present expression of meaning or purpose into a rigid code for others to follow, or a fundamentalist set of beliefs apart from time and place. In my own discipline of Christian theology, various great thinkers such as Augustine, Tillich and H. Richard Neiburh have talked at length about the need to order
the penultimate and the ultimate, the relative and the eternal. One of the great functions of an idea of God is that it both gives meaning, infusing the temporal, but it also limits the instantiation of that full meaning. Said differently the problem of idolatry – consumerism, research, metanarratives – is that it attempts to fix “greatness” and “intimacy” in the here and now by a kind of fundamentalist gesture of purity and unchangability of something quite temporal.

Utopian realism involves a spiritual attitude, a kind of secular theology that, I suppose, few of us engage in any longer but is, I think, essential to healthy forms of meaning and purpose. We need to get our students and the “futurers” of our country to ask these big questions, these questions of utopian wholeness and vision.

In conclusion, I want to underscore three essential points in my argument: First of all, education assumes that wholeness, meaning and purpose are best understood as questions about the community as well as the individual. The environment we nurtured, the practices we institute, the attitudes we adopt in our institution are crucial to setting the context for the individual in community. We need to support individual students in their quest for wholeness, meaning and purpose and we need to pursue the quest for wholeness, meaning and purpose in education itself. Secondly, though there are significant difficulties in pursuing wholeness, meaning and purpose for undergrads (the psycho-cultural structures of undergraduates, the loss of metanarratives in culture, and the changes in the mission of higher education) there are many spaces and trends in higher education of real hope for wholeness, meaning and purpose. By all means, we should pay careful attention to civic engagement, questions of religion, interest in international programs, and debates about higher education. These are not “fun things to
do” or secondary to our mission. These trends need to be understood, nurtured, and moved to the center of our attention in liberal education. Finally, I have advocated that we understand our real work as creating narrative imagination, supporting practices in our educational culture of wholeness, meaning and purpose, and adopting an attitude of utopian realism as we seek to shape education and, in this way, the future of society for individual and communal wholeness, meaning and purpose.

x See, for instance, the argument by Bruce Kimball concerning the two different traditions of liberal education that have been intermingled and in tension with one another in the American educational system. Orators and Philosophers: A History of the Idea of Liberal Education, Expanded Version (New York: College Entrance Examination Board, 1995).
10 See, for instance, the argument developed by Burton J. Bledstein in The Culture of Professionalism: The Middle Class and the Development of Higher Education in America (New York: W. W. Norton & Co, 1978).
Nell Noddings has recently made a call for a new discussion about the aims of education in the *Happiness and Education* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A genealogy of Pragmatism* (Madison, Wis.: the University of Wisconsin Press, 1989). In this text West uses the term “prophetic pragmatism” for what I later heard him call utopian realism.