

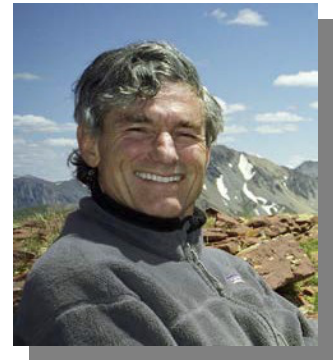
The Gift of Time: At Risk?

T. A. Barron

Essay for The American Oxonian

In this esteemed scholarly journal, I intend to discuss something distinctly *not* scholarly: the enduring importance of the wide-ranging exploration of people, places, and ideas in the Oxford experience. That opportunity for exploration I will call *the gift of time*.

For all of us fortunate enough to attend Oxford, that experience is a multi-faceted gift. While some of those facets are certainly material (the brussels sprouts at Balliol College, for example, always seemed to me to be forged from a substance harder than igneous rock)—the essential core, the most valuable part, of what Oxford gives us is intangible.



Yet that core is tremendously powerful. And more indestructible than those brussels sprouts. It can illuminate our stints at the University. It can shape and inspire our whole lifetimes. It can contribute meaningfully to the development of future leaders.

It is a gift of time.

That gift is extremely valuable ... and also extremely fragile. It is still attainable by today's students at Oxford, but not without new challenges. For the gift of time is at risk—due to several factors I will discuss momentarily.

A Colorado Kid on Shakespeare's Isle

Years ago, just before I left my family's ranch in Colorado to go to the Rhodes Scholarship interviews, my mother approached me. She could see that I was very nervous. She placed a loving hand on my shoulder and said calmly, "Don't try to sound intelligent, articulate, or charming. Just ... be yourself."

That really helped a lot. Yet while it didn't do much to boost my confidence, it did help me realize how much I wanted to learn—if only I could find my way to Oxford. When I did, indeed, arrive at the city of gleaming spires, wide-eyed and eager, I assumed that most of that learning would take place in the lecture halls, tutorial rooms, and libraries of this great university.

I was wrong.

Of course, I had some marvelous academic experiences in pursuit of an Honors BA in Philosophy, Politics, and Economics. And I certainly have the highest respect for the realm of scholarship—higher than ever now that I've had a closer look at the workings of another great

university by serving as a trustee. But the truth is, during my years at Oxford, by far the most important educational experiences came outside academia.

Those experiences fell into three basic categories: people, conversation, and travel.

Unforgettable People

People stretched me in countless ways. Drawn to Oxford from all around the globe, we practiced the sacred art of Japanese calligraphy by candlelight. Drove all night to the Highlands of Scotland so we could climb to the summit of Britain's highest peak, Ben Nevis, in the morning light. Strolled down the ancient, beech-lined roadway that was known in Chaucer's day as "the Singing Way." Sat beneath the same English oak tree that had shaded Matthew Arnold when he wrote his early poems. Talked night after night into the wee hours of the morning (about minor topics such as religion, politics, and the fate of the world). Discovered Oxford's sweetest Evensong service, with candles lighting every pew. Located the home of Oxford's only officially registered Residential Hermit (by the folly on the mound in New College).

We heard spellbinding stories of a childhood in the wilds of Botswana. Ambled down the lovely walking trails of Blenheim Palace's grounds, designed by the legendary Capability Brown (whose name I would use in a novel if it hadn't already been claimed by history). Listened intently to concerts at Holywell. Baked a loaf of crusty soda bread (which we then ate together on the banks of the Cherwell). Tried out the secret way to conjure the spirit of Pan in Windermere's wooded hills (but alas, Pan was on vacation elsewhere on that particular day). Walked upon the ancient Roman roads carved into the far more ancient ridges of Cumbria. Drove all the way to the White Cliffs of Dover ... by way of the Lake District (all right, so we were deep in a good conversation and made a slight wrong turn). Searched for the oldest, most time-worn volume in the Duke Humphries library. Bicycled around the emerald Irish coast (a most successful journey). Went to London to hear our first opera (a less than successful journey). Found the one courtyard in Oxford where it's possible to hear more than twenty bells from around the city all chiming at midnight.

In those ways and more, the diverse and fascinating people of Oxford were a key element of my life. And of the gift of time.

One person in particular deserves to be mentioned: a history don at Worcester College by the name of Harry Pitt. Deeply knowledgeable, a born teacher, and blessed with a great sense of humor (about everything except his name), Harry kindly invited me to join him on his Sunday afternoon walks around Oxfordshire. Joined by his dog, Flint, we strolled through twisting cobblestone streets, past old Norman churches, around Druid burial mounds, through ruined monasteries, around Cotswolds villages, and across the famous White Horse carved into the landscape thousands of years ago.

All of this deepened my understanding of the many layers of history on the land that Harry affectionately called "Shakespeare's Isle." When, after one long walk, I asked him to recommend the best book on British history, he did not suggest one of the fat treatises on his

library shelves. Instead, he gave me a children's book by Rudyard Kipling, *Puck of Pook's Hill*. This story about two youngsters who travel through time in ancient England, he explained, conveyed something more important than the facts. It conveyed *the magic* of history itself.

I cannot resist telling one more story about this remarkable Oxford character. Harry agreed to serve as Worcester College's dean of disciplinary matters—not so much because of his sense of duty to the college, I suspect, as his desire to live in the dean's spacious apartment whose back door opened right onto the college's lake and walking paths. There was one little problem, however. Worcester had a strict rule that *no dogs* were allowed to live inside the college. But Harry was not about to live anywhere without his good friend Flint.

How did he solve the problem? With ease. He simply registered Flint, on the college pet rolls, not as a dog—but as a cat. Nobody raised any objection. Who would dare risk the ire of the dean of discipline by questioning whether his “cat” was really a dog in disguise?

Then one day, as Harry was walking out of the college, he spied a student leaning his bicycle against the wall—right under a sign that commanded, “No Bicycles Here.” Since this was precisely his bread-and-butter duty as the dean of discipline, Harry strode over in a huff and confronted the student. “Can't you read?” he demanded. “No bicycles here!” The student looked him right in the eye and, without missing a beat, answered, “Oh, but this is not a bicycle. This is a *cat*.”

Whether or not the story is true, Harry had a great laugh while telling it to me over a glass of port. And so, like Oxford's wondrous array of characters, the story became part of my experience. Part of the gift of time.

Extraordinary Conversations

Conversations, like people, are integral to the Oxford experience. Especially conversations with folks from backgrounds, cultures, and places one has not encountered before. When I first learned about a place rich in history called Samarkand from an Uzbeki scholar, heard a halcyon-voiced bard read Celtic poetry, debated Cold War politics with a Russian fellow, probed questions of moral philosophy with my tutors, or wrestled with the arcane principles of economics with my patient teacher Andrew Graham – I grew with every exchange. One conversation with a Tibetan monk lasted until dawn and gave me many new insights, each of them as bright as a Himalayan sunrise. Another with a fellow Rhodes Scholar forever deepened my convictions about the importance of religious tolerance. Still another introduced me to the mating calls of twenty-seven different species of frog.

The topics were endless, the journeys unlimited. But conversations—like Sunday afternoon walks around Oxfordshire—require a fair amount of time. Open-ended, unstructured time. If people are too tightly scheduled, too rigidly specialized in their studies, too reluctant to take the time to meet new people and encounter new ideas ... the gift will be lost.

Remarkable Places

Travel is the remaining opportunity in the Oxford experience that I'd like to highlight. In my case, it became a doorway that led to an infinite number of new doorways. Maybe I got a bit carried away, but during my time at Oxford I spent every penny of money I'd saved from summer jobs and grants in order to travel in Europe, Asia, and Africa. (I also took a year off in the middle of P.P.E. to recover from a seriously nasty case of giardia picked up on the trail in Nepal ... and then to travel some more.)

In those travels, I helped to thatch a roof in rural Japan (and earned the nickname O Choku Choi, which means something like "Honorable Butterfingers"). Walked the misery-filled streets of Calcutta, stayed on a houseboat in Kashmir, and explored some of the marvels of India. Hiked in Nepal, visited Everest Base Camp, trekked to the border of Tibet ... then found out just how sick I could get from homemade yak stew. Followed a herd of elephants across Amboseli, Kenya. Swam in the turquoise waters of the Seychelles; barely avoided getting jailed in the Seychelles. Wandered through the colorful markets of Istanbul. Started writing my first novel somewhere in Siberia (which is also, alas, where I should have left it). Fished for my supper in a Norwegian fjord. Witnessed the outrageous treatment of women in Saudi Arabia. Breakfasted at the floating market in Bangkok. Learned some romantic French songs in Aix-en-Provence. Sailed to a remote part of the Philippines. Visited the Amsterdam home where Anne Frank's family hid from the Nazis during those terrible years. Toured the Hermitage in St. Petersburg (then called Leningrad). And, yes ... explored the crumbling mosques of Samarkand.

These experiences, as well as several trips north to Scotland and south to London, were made possible by Oxford's good graces (and the encouragement of Rhodes House). Sure, I had to organize the travel plans, budget the expenses, and arrange the transportation. But Oxford gave me the opportunity—the gift—and I accepted it gratefully.

Cast a Wide Net

A friend of mine, an avid fisherman, is fond of using fishing metaphors. When he heard I was about to attend Oxford, his advice was simple: "Cast a wide net." Through the people, conversations, and travel that Oxford gave me, that's exactly what I tried to do. And into my net swam a panoply of experiences and encounters—some disturbing, many enlightening—that have greatly enriched my life. They have widened my perspective of the world, deepened my appreciation, and guided my choices.

They were a gift of time.

That gift has also made it much easier for me to counsel young people who are—as I was ages ago—beginning to ask some of life's toughest questions. Because of the broader Oxford experience I was fortunate enough to have, when a young man or woman asks me what to do with their life, I always ask two simple questions: First, *what do you love?* Look deep inside yourself, I suggest, to answer that one. Second, *what does the world need?* Look outside

yourself to find that response. Then, I propose, take the answers to these two questions and put them *together*. The result will be, without doubt, a wonderful life.

The Gift at Risk

Now let's turn to today's Oxford students. Is the gift of time still available to them? And are they able to make the most of it? For many reasons, I am seriously worried.

Several factors have combined over the last two or three decades to make Oxford's gift of time more elusive. For some students, I fear, it may be much more difficult to experience than it was for me and my colleagues.

The trend toward academic specialization is chief among those factors. Whereas in the 1970s, fully three quarters of my fellow Rhodes Scholars pursued tutorial-driven Honors BA programs at various colleges, today almost all pursue D Phils or one-year programs which do not include tutorials. In the last few years, only a small handful (one or two per class) have resisted the pressure to specialize and pursued an Honors BA.

Put aside, for a moment, the loss of not experiencing tutorials, one of Oxford's grand educational traditions. The much greater loss, I believe, is that many current students will be confined to such focused academic programs that they will lack the freedom and opportunity to explore more widely—to encounter people from different academic disciplines, ideas from every tradition, and places beyond those immediately relevant to their chosen fields of study.

I am not saying that highly focused academic programs *necessarily* limit opportunities to broaden oneself. I have certainly known doctoral students who tried very hard to make the most of their complete Oxford experience—and who succeeded in their efforts to “cast a wide net.” What I am saying is that the more specialized the program, the more difficult such broadening often becomes.

This trend, as we know, is part of a larger trend in universities worldwide to urge students to specialize—and, too often, to hyper-specialize—before those students have had much opportunity to expand their own minds and hearts. This pressure is fueled, in part, by the financial constriction of university budgets, which in turn is exacerbated by the contraction of endowments and government support for education. The United Kingdom and Oxford University are not, alas, immune from these pressures.

Another contributing factor is a simple, sad fact of our times: Many young people today don't have much (or any) experience with free time. Openly exploring the world around them, whether intellectually or physically, is very different from staying on task—or on schedule—skills at which they are impressively adept. Free time can feel unsettling, or even frightening. The ability to wander quietly and observantly, to be fully present and open to surprising discoveries—in the wondrous realm of Nature or in the mysterious realm of a companion's mind—is very valuable. But it is at risk of becoming a lost art ... especially among the most capable, most highly trained, most accomplished—and most pressured—students.

The Impact on Future Leaders

The gift of time is not merely a luxury. As wonderful as it is for its own sake, it carries enormous utility—especially for the future leaders who come to Oxford.

In a world facing major problems on every front—in international security, the environment, economics, technology, humanitarian crises, and more—the need for constructive leadership has never been greater. Given the complexities of such problems, as well as the rapid pace of change and the increased specialization of knowledge, what the world needs most are leaders who can comprehend wide varieties of knowledge and belief—who can cross the boundaries that divide fields of study as well as peoples and places.

In sum, the most valuable kind of specialist today is the generalist. So let us do whatever possible to help our scholars avoid becoming people who know more and more about less and less.

Purposeful Leisure

Yet there is, today at Oxford, at least one countervailing force: Rhodes House, under the visionary leadership of Elizabeth Kiss, has been working hard to sponsor events that enable students from many different origins and academic disciplines to meet each other, share ideas, and join together in common areas of interest. These Rhodes House events offer great opportunities for students to expand their friendships—and to discover their own gifts of time.

What advice do I have for today's young Americans at Oxford (or at any other educational institution around the world)? Whatever your background, whatever your academic specialty, seek out your own expanding experiences. And do so with vigor and delight!

This may require creating new, unscheduled opportunities for leisure. Call it, if you like, *purposeful leisure*. If that phrase sounds paradoxical, so be it. The key is to pursue any and all occasions you can find to grow and learn and travel and dream Big Dreams.

Now, this exhortation may sound idealistic to some. But is it any more idealistic than Cecil Rhodes' bold initiative to establish scholarships at Oxford over a century ago? The primary goal of those scholarships, he wrote, was "to improve the lot of humankind through the diffusion of leaders motivated to serve their contemporaries, trained in the contemplative life of the mind, and broadened by their acquaintance with one another and by their exposure to cultures different from their own."

Rarely have any higher ideals been brought into reality than in the Rhodes Scholarships. Note, in particular, the founder's emphasis on *broadening* those future leaders of their societies. That is the hidden virtue of Oxford, the gift of time to expand and stretch oneself beyond comfort zones and prior experiences.

The Rhodes is especially well positioned to accomplish that goal. During my years managing a venture capital and acquisitions business (before I switched careers to try my hand at writing books), the essential question in analyzing any new investment opportunity was always this: What is its competitive advantage? Its distinctive competence? What qualities set it apart from the rest of the competition?

That revealing question applies to all forms of human endeavor, not just to business. And the key competitive advantage of the Rhodes—what truly sets us apart from our distinguished competition—is that it seeks to find people who are not merely academic stars. Sure, they are often brilliant scholars. But what sets them apart—and what sets the Rhodes Scholarships apart—is that they have something more than a high intelligence quotient. They also have what might be called a strong character quotient.

Rhodes Scholars are selected for more than a glowing college transcript. They are chosen fundamentally for their qualities of character: Leadership. Creativity. Honesty. Boldness. Generosity. Compassion. Humor. Optimism. Dedication to helping the world in some way.

All those qualities can be dramatically deepened, informed, and strengthened by Oxford's gift of time.

What to Live For

Allow me to conclude with one more story. This experience happened quite recently—at a gathering of Rhodes alumni.

At that event, one articulate fellow (who is now a professor at a military academy) stood up and lamented that undergraduate education—and the Rhodes Scholarship at Oxford—are forcing young people to be overly scheduled and overly specialized. They are not, he maintained, given enough freedom in their academic lives to explore, play, and wander without clear utilitarian goals. To experience leisure. To develop their deepest values, their highest priorities.

To use another phrase, they are not encouraged—or sometimes even allowed—to “cast a wide net.”

So far, I agreed with everything he had said. Then, in concluding his remarks, he declared: “Our young people may know what they are willing to die for. But they do not know what they are willing to kill for.”

As much as I support the general thrust of his comments, I strongly disagree with his choice of metaphor. The highest purpose of education—whether at Oxford or anywhere else—is *not* to know what to kill for.

It is to know, deep in one's bones, *what to live for*.

From: The T. A. Barron Official Website www.tabarron.com

That is the essence of Oxford's gift of time.