

Parallel Worlds

Interview

“The world doesn’t need business leaders who are indifferent to the effect of their decisions on others.”

The purpose of education, according to **Louis Begley**, is to lead the soul; to prepare people to lead a good life. The acclaimed American author and lawyer reflects upon his own education and talks about his expectations of political and business leaders.

PHOTOS: MARTIN LANGHORST



“It is best to start with good genes and then benefit from good nurture.”

The Focus: Louis Begley, has education turned into a status symbol?

Louis Begley: Yes, I’m afraid it has. It is even more of a status symbol today than it was, say, a hundred years ago. Without a proper education and the right university degree it is almost impossible in the Western world to get a good job with prospects for a bright future.

The Focus: What about all those self-made careers in the dot-com world?

Begley: You will find that most of them are at least drop-out graduate students. You need a high degree of intellectual competence to make your way in the high-tech world.

The Focus: How much influence does education have on the formation of a personality? There is a heated debate going on about whether we are more a product of our genes or our education. What do you believe in, nature or nurture?

Begley: That is an excellent question to which there is no straightforward answer, because quite clearly what you are born with is exceedingly important, but then what happens to you in life is very important, too. So it is best to start with good genes and then benefit from good nurture.

The Focus: In many European countries, students have to decide at an early stage what professional direction they want to take. By contrast, in the United States and Britain, students tend to follow their interests. Which approach do you prefer?

Begley: If the purpose of education is to lead the soul, to prepare people to lead a good life, then I am certain that the Anglo-Saxon system is more likely to attain it. Certainly I was very happy to be in a system that allowed me during the first four years at university to do what I liked best – which was to read great books – and postpone professional training. At the age of sixteen, which is when I entered Harvard College, I was not ready to begin studying law. In all likelihood, I would have refused to do so.

The Focus: Universities in Britain and the United States offer a whole range of activities, compared to which the continental European system is geared towards pure academia, it seems.

Begley: Yes, and towards bad libraries and bad laboratories, overfilled classes, professors who read out their lectures and disappear afterwards. It is a dismal life.

The Focus: Going back to the period you describe in your book *Wartime Lies*, do you think that an unstructured early education outside of established state schooling equipped you particularly well for life?

Begley: I didn’t think that it had prepared me well for university. How could it have? I was taught by my mother, who liked literature but did not bother much about arithmetic or geography, and a tutor who was interested in Polish history and not much else. No one taught me any science. My early education as a preparation for life, taken in some large sense? It’s possible that I learned how to acquire information quickly. I wish I had learned instead how to be thorough and systematic.

The Focus: Did you plan from the outset to study English literature before moving on to undertake training as a lawyer?

Begley: No. Literature was my great love, and there was no question of my studying anything else in college. I gave no thought whatsoever to the study of law or any other professional preparation. It was enough that I got my parents to understand that I would not under any conditions study medicine. My decision to study English literature turned out to be very good. At the time, the professors who taught it at Harvard College were truly extraordinary. When I decided later to study law, it was because I knew I had to earn a living and I couldn’t think of any profession I would like better.

The Focus: Did the studies you undertook before law school have a positive impact on what you did afterwards, and if so, in what respect?

RESUMÉ Louis Begley

- 1933** Louis Begley is born as Ludwik Begleiter in Stryj/Poland (today Ukraine) on October 6, the only child of a family of Polish Jews. He and his mother survive the Nazi persecution and the Second World War in various hiding places. His father, a physician, is conscripted into the Russian army. The family is reunited in Paris after the war. Ludwik receives his first formal education after having been taught privately during the war years.
- 1947** The Begleiter family arrives in New York. Under the anglicized name of Begley they settle in Brooklyn. In 1953, Louis Begley becomes an American citizen.
- 1950** Louis Begley wins a scholarship to Harvard and begins his university studies. He completes his degree in English literature with top honors for the year, together with fellow-student John Updike.
- 1955** He spends his military service stationed at the Headquarter of the Ninth Division in Göppingen, Germany.
- 1956** Begley marries Sally Higginson. In their 14-year marriage the couple have three children. He enrolls again at Harvard, this time at the university's law school. He wins his LLB degree in 1959 and joins the New York law firm today called Debevoise & Plimpton. In the Sixties, he spends several years with their Paris office.
- 1968** He is made a partner in the firm and for many years heads its international practice.
- 1974** After his divorce in 1970, Louis Begley marries the historian Anka Muhlstein.
- 1990** He takes a sabbatical to devote more time to writing. His first novel, *Wartime Lies*,



tells the story of a Polish boy who escapes the Holocaust.

- 1993** Louis Begley is elected president of the PEN American Center and publishes his second novel, *The Man Who Was Late*.
- 1994** Another novel, *As Max Saw It*, is published, again featuring strong parallels to Begley's life story.
- 1996** Begley's novel, *About Schmidt*, concerning a widowed lawyer, is published to huge critical acclaim, followed by a sequel, *Schmidt Delivered* (2002). *About Schmidt* is later adapted for the cinema with Jack Nicholson in the title role.
- 1997** *Mistler's Exit* is published. Begley's elegant take on the converging moments of society, history and individual has made him a highly regarded novelist worldwide.
- 2004** On January 1, Louis Begley became Of Counsel to Debevoise & Plimpton, prior to retiring in 2005 to devote himself to full-time writing. His seventh novel, *Shipwreck*, is published.
- 2007** Louis Begley's latest novel, *Matters of Honor*, appears in print.



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Begley: Absolutely. I learned to read carefully and to extract from difficult texts their meaning. That is an essential skill for a lawyer. I also learned how to write clearly and convincingly. I pondered the lessons about human nature that only great literature can teach us.

The Focus: Did you ever feel that your legal training interfered with your love of literature or your writing ambitions?

Begley: It certainly didn't interfere with my love of literature, although it sometimes interfered with my reading. There were periods when I was too busy to read for pleasure more than an hour or so each day. By the time I went to law school, I had no writing ambitions – other than the ambition to write the best possible briefs and memoranda of law. I said goodbye to writing ambitions while I was still in college, when I realized that I did not like what I was writing. The reason seemed to be that I had nothing to say. That struck me as a good reason to shut up, which is what I did.

The Focus: Because you first had to experience life in order to have something to write about?

Begley: Actually, I had a lot of experience, of the Second World War in Poland, where I had lived until the fall of 1946, and then of resettling in the United States. But I wasn't mature enough to write about my Polish experiences, and I didn't think I understood my new world well enough to write about it.

The Focus: Which professional and personal skills should a political or business leader have today?

Begley: It's always good to have superior brain power, and high professional skills appropriate to the particular business. Clearly, good character is of the highest importance. By character I mean integrity, fully understood moral values, courage, and humanity. What I mean by humanity is less easy to describe, but it includes a good dose of generosity, compassion, and humility. The world doesn't need business leaders who are indifferent to the effect of their business decisions on others,

whether the others are their workers, their customers, or society at large.

The Focus: Can such strength of character be taught at all? And does a classical management education do enough to foster such abilities?

Begley: One wonders what is a classical management education. Is it what is taught at the Harvard Business School, or at Wharton, or at the Yale School of Management? There are significant differences in approach as you go from one institution to another. It is clear to me, however, that a truly excellent business education for this time must include instruction in the humanities: history, political science, and at least an introduction to philosophy. It is hard for me to believe that accounting, financial theory, and marketing are enough.

The Focus: In *Matters of Honor*, your latest novel, Harvard in the Fifties comes across as a mirror of American elite society. What is the relationship between the intellectual and social elite nowadays? And do the Ivy League universities still produce the quality of students they used to?

Begley: If you mean by social elite the “first families” and inherited wealth, I think there is no correlation today between such social elite and the intellectual elite. Incidentally, Harvard in the Fifties had a rather subtle approach to the formation of elites. It did not strive to admit only candidates with the highest high school grades or the highest scores on standardized tests. The university looked for other talents as well, whether in the arts or athletics, and qualities that pointed to potential for leadership. Sometimes the children of “first families” doubtless seemed to admissions officers to be potential leaders. My experience with the quality of students that Ivy League universities still produce is limited, but when I still practiced law I would see class after class of brilliant graduates applying for jobs at my law firm. The best among them did not seem in any way inferior to what I had been accustomed to see in the Fifties.

The Focus: Today, admission at top universities seems to have as much to do with the candidates’ financial resources – through their families – as with real talent.

Begley: I believe that is an overstatement. Universities still try to admit real talent, and there is lots of it in the huge pools of applicants. There is no denying, however, that students whose parents or grandparents have made

huge donations to the university or are likely to do so have an advantage. But was that less true in the past? I don’t think so.

The Focus: Is a multicultural approach to education important, through international schools, for example?

Begley: I suppose you have future business leaders in mind. If that is so, I am convinced that it is important for such students to acquire an instinctive understanding of other people and their quite different cultures. International schools are one way to facilitate such acquisition; exchange programs or apprenticeships that send students to foreign countries are another.

The Focus: What did you personally gain from university?

Begley: The main thing I acquired was a frame of reference; a frame of reference that includes literary views of the world, such as *The Divine Comedy*, which I have learned to regard as a point of view, even though I am an atheist. Another example? I was introduced very early to Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time*, which is about French aristocratic society in the nineteenth century. This particular echelon of French society was a certain kind of bourgeoisie that ceased to exist soon after Proust’s work was written. But his vision of society, the complexity of human characters and the difficulty of judgements is still valid today. That kind of lesson has been a constant map – a constant source of guidance to me.

The Focus: The conductor Nikolaus Harnoncourt once said, “Without art, man is but a beast.” Can a broad-based education help shape the ethics of tomorrow’s leaders?

Begley: I hope so! If that fails, what will succeed?



The interview with Louis Begley was conducted by Ulrike Mertens, THE FOCUS (left) and John J. Grumbar, Egon Zehnder International, London.