THE MEANING OF LIBERAL EDUCATION

A LECTURE DELIVERED TO THE
THE GREAT BOOKS PROGRAM
AT MERCER UNIVERSITY

By

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October 2, 2002
Introduction

A few years ago a T-shirt was popular that said: “LIBERAL ARTS MAJOR: WILL THINK FOR FOOD.” The T-shirt tells us an important truth about our society. It has marginalized both the liberal arts and thinking. Despite the irony of spending enormous sums on education and celebrating its value at every turn, the last thing this culture really wants you to do is think. Do you have any idea what might happen to the Gross Domestic Product if an epidemic of thinking were to break out among large numbers of people? For starters, they might begin to ask: why should I buy stuff I don’t really need? Or, they might begin to call politicians to account for the way our resources are being spent to support large corporations while deep human needs go begging. Then the whole system would tank. Perish the thought. So our society wants you to believe, as the T-shirt proclaims, that if you get the tools to think with by getting a liberal education, you are likely to wind up homeless on the streets seeking a handout.

Well I can’t guarantee that you won’t, but if you do you will probably have plenty of unthinking company, since a society that puts down thinking is not likely to have a bright future.

I have been assigned the topic: the meaning of liberal education. The most I can do is offer a few reflections about that broad topic. To get our bearings, we need took at some ideas about the purpose of the liberal arts.

Some Views of the Purpose of Liberal Education

One view that no longer works ties liberal education far too closely to social class. Writing in the last century, Cardinal John Henry Newman (who is always quoted on the subject) suggested that its primary purpose was to make a gentleman. That is, to say the least, quaint. Aside from the fact that it is not very inspiring to women, it belongs to the era when the sun never set on the British Empire. Newman’s characterization of the gentleman included “a cultivated intellect, a delicate taste, a candid equitable, dispassionate mind, a noble and courteous bearing in the conduct of life”—good qualities all, but so bloodlessly expressed that they seem more like the requirements for admission to a London club than something likely to appeal to Americans who, in the spirit of Walt Whitman, like to indulge in a “barbaric
Mortimer Adler did somewhat better when he said that: “The liberal arts are traditionally intended to develop the faculties of the human mind, those powers of intelligence and imagination without which no intellectual work can be accomplished.” True, but altogether too narrowly academic in tone. Intellectual work is what professors do, not how most people would think of their work even if they use their brains to do it. So Adler’s language, if not his view, carries the undertone that liberal education exists to train an academic elite.

A more democratic approach is to argue that the point of a liberal education is to get a good job. Not only is it indispensable preparation for the lucrative professions, but, it is claimed, the breadth of a good liberal education is superior in the long run to narrow technical training even in financial payoff. It is probably true that people with a broad education and an ability to think have an edge in a world where people are likely to have to retrain for new careers seven or eight times in a working life, and whole occupations simply disappear in the ongoing creative destruction of capitalism. But this is increasingly questionable in a time when the simplest, fixated chiphead may receive an entry level salary of $60,000 a year, a college dropout is the richest man in the world, and there are athletes who sign their names with an ‘X’ whose multi-year salaries exceed the endowments of many good liberal arts colleges.

There is a much deeper objection to it in any case. While it is necessary to prepare for the work world, it gets things backwards to suppose that liberal education exists to help us make a good living. It is really the other way around. The point of making a good living is to have the time and resources to live a good life. The point of a liberal education is to help us do that.

Sidney J. Harris, for many years a columnist at The Chicago Sun Times, captured this paramount aim when he said: “The primary purpose of a liberal education is to make one's mind a pleasant place in which to spend one's time.” It appears that millions of Americans do not find their minds a pleasant place, so they spend most of their time being out of them. The drug culture, which continues to flourish despite the farcical war on it, rampant alcoholism, the narcotic of TV, and the stress and depression that keeps the Prozac factories humming amply testify to this. Well that is one way to try make one’s mind pleasant. But it does not work very well in the long run because it is impossible to run away from our minds. Minds are us. Without them we are just blobs of protoplasm. We are forced to
spend our time in our minds, whether we like it or not. So it is a good idea to furnish them well.

Harris might have made the same point by saying that the purpose of a liberal education is to make one's country a pleasant place in which to spend one's time. There all these other minds around, our fellow citizens, so even if you find your own mind reasonably pleasant, encountering some of the others may make your pleasure short-lived. Many of these minds are in positions that make decisions that affect you. And they may not be very well stocked. A dumbed down society is not a pleasant place to live.

So if you want a pleasant mind and a pleasant country, it just might be worth having a goodly number of liberally educated people around. What will such an education look like?

**The Seven Virtues of Liberal Education**

In the Middle Ages, there were seven liberal arts. They consisted of grammar, rhetoric, and logic (called the trivium); and arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy (called the quadrivium). That particular curricular configuration has long since disappeared over the horizon of history. Rather that go up and down the aisles of the education supermarkets of today, picking out subjects that belong to liberal education, let me focus on some traits that I believe a liberally educated person will have. I came up with seven, for the sake of continuity with the old tradition, which I call the seven virtues of the liberally educated.

The first virtue is mastery of one's language. The ability to read the best that has been written in it, to speak it and write it well, is not just a nice skill to have. It is bound up with your very self. For in a very important sense you are just what you can say. Consider how language can determine the way we think of ourselves. We used to give our opinions about things; now we are asked for input, a word that sanitizes human thought and makes it safe to feed into some computer database. Or, we used to have the possibility of being enthusiastic or disgusted by things; now we are turned on or turned off by them, as though we are simply switches that function in some large and incomprehensible piece of machinery, with no control over being activated and deactivated. When you go to work, you are no longer a person but a human resource, on a par with all the other resources of the company, its operating capital, its plant, its inventory, and the like. These twists of ordinary talk are probably not the result of some sinister conspiracy, but they are not innocent either. They and many others like them reveal something about how
our culture wants us to think of ourselves, and how we obligingly comply.

Those who cannot write well or speak well also cannot think well. They are for all practical purposes ogres, of whom W. H. Auden mused:

The Ogre does what ogres can,
Deeds quite impossible for Man,
But one prize is beyond his reach,
The Ogre cannot master Speech:
About a subjugated plain,
Among its desperate and slain,
The Ogre stalks with hands on hips,
While drivel gushes from his lips.

These days drivel is gushing everywhere, and the only way to keep one’s mind from being inundated by it is to know the language and use it well. I put this virtue first because it is essential to all the others.

The second virtue is a grasp of mathematics and science sufficient to know what a proof is and how to assess evidence. This kind of knowledge offers protection from the myths and speculations masquerading as fact that are emanating with increasing frequency from the twilight zone of pseudoscience. Beyond that, to be ignorant of the great achievements of science in our age is like choosing to put out one eye. You do not really have to master the intimidating mathematics of physics to gain a sense of the significance of relativity theory or the puzzle about the collapse of the wave function in quantum mechanics.

The third virtue is a sense of history. We are not the first to pass this way; and all that is available to us was put here by the blood and sweat of those who went before. The liberally educated are curious about how they lived, their laughter and tears, triumphs and tragedies, for what they thought and did has shaped us and our present possibilities. Moreover, the past lurks in the shadows to grab us when we least suspect. In Mozart’s great opera, Don Giovanni, who arrogantly thumbs his nose at the past, cavalierly invites the stone statue of the man he has killed to dinner and is promptly carried off to hell as his past comes to get him. It is not good to meet the past unprepared. One way to look at 9/11 is to see it as a calling card from unrequited history, the work of a man who dreams of overcoming Arab humiliation by restoring the great Islamic empire of the middle ages. So as we speed on into the future, it is wise to remember the lettering on the rear view mirror: OBJECTS IN THE MIRROR ARE CLOSER THAN THEY APPEAR.
The fourth virtue is a first hand appreciation of another culture. Learning the language and literature of another culture enlarges one’s horizons and increases understanding of one’s own. The best way to acquire this kind of perspective is to live abroad for a sufficient period that one is no longer a tourist. Such an experience provides two things of great educational value: the ability to see ourselves as others may see us, and the feeling that can only come from being a stranger in a strange land. This is an especially important asset since anyone who is liberally educated will often feel like a foreigner in a land where people will trample you to get the last Beanie Baby.

A personal appropriation of art is the fifth virtue. If you have never had the experience of being possessed so completely by a poem that at that moment seemed addressed to you and no other, or been stopped in your tracks by a Van Gogh in a museum, or been transported beyond the ordinary world by Mozart’s Requiem, or some other powerful music, you are not only not liberally educated, you are missing your life. The power of art is in some ways very mysterious. The heart of this mystery lies in the ancient doctrine of imitation, or mimesis. Consider the blues. How strange that singing about the sadness of life can have a healing or uplifting effect. Tragedy operates in the same way to transform life’s dark moments into beauty through the power of representation. In any case, art reveals dimensions of our humanity that cannot be known in any other way.

The sixth virtue, especially necessary in these times, is a sense of the intellectual boundaries. The liberally educated understand that no single paradigm applies to everything. There is a phenomenon of our time that might be called the fanaticism of specialization. There is nothing wrong with specialization and it is unavoidable in any case given the vast explosion of knowledge. But there is also a tendency for people with a particular expertise to extend its methods, principles, and paradigms beyond the area of its legitimate application. Such people live in what G. K. Chesterton called “the clean well lit prison of one idea.” Here is a story that aired on National Public Radio that illustrates a paradigm gone berserk:

An American businessman was at the pier of a small coastal Mexican village when a small boat with just one fisherman docked. Inside the boat were several large yellowfin tuna. The American complimented the fisherman on the quality of his fish and asked how long it took to catch them. The Mexican replied, "Only a little while." The American
then asked why didn't he stay out longer and catch more fish? The
Mexican said he had enough to support his family's immediate needs.
The American then asked, "But what do you do with the rest of your
time?" The Mexican fisherman said, "I sleep late, fish a little, play with
my children, take siesta with my wife, Maria, stroll into the village
each evening where I sip wine and play guitar with my amigos. I have
a full and busy life, senor. The American scoffed, "I am a Harvard
MBA and can help you. You should spend more time fishing and with
the proceeds buy a bigger boat. With the profits from the bigger boat
you could buy several boats, eventually you would have a fleet of
fishing boats. Instead of selling to a middleman, you would sell directly
to a processor, eventually opening your own cannery. You would
control the product, processing and distribution. You would need to
leave this small coastal fishing village and move to Mexico City, then
Los Angeles, and eventually New York City where you will run your
expanding enterprise." The Mexican fisherman asked, "But senor,
how long will this all take?" To which the American replied, "Fifteen
to twenty years." "But what then, senor?" The American laughed and
said "That's the best part. When the time is right, you would announce
an IPO and sell your company stock to the public and become very
rich - you would make millions." "Millions, senor? And then what?"
The American said, "Then you would retire. Move to a small coastal
fishing village where you would sleep late, fish a little, play with your
kids, take siesta with your wife, stroll to the village in the evenings
where you could sip wine and play guitar with your amigos."

The seventh and final virtue on my list is the courage to pursue the big questions of life. These are
the questions that religion and philosophy traditionally try to answer. Three of the biggest are: Who are
we? and Where are we? and What is good? What sort of world do we live in and what is our place in it?
Are we creatures of a creator or merely accidents of blind cosmic processes? Do we have some special
dignity and worth? The answers to these questions will determine our outlook on an equally important set
of questions, namely, how should we live our lives? What are our moral obligations to others? To future
generations? What does social justice require of us? What is human happiness? What is a good life? It
takes some courage to reflect seriously on these questions, because thinking can be painful. But without
working answers to these questions, we simply cannot live. So for those who choose to evade them,
something will fill the vacuum. They are then likely to lead the lives that have been scripted for them by
the consumer culture. Whereupon they will be condemned to ride around with bumper stickers on their
SUVs that ask: ARE WE HAVING FUN YET?.

These then are my seven virtues of the liberally educated. They are not ornamental qualities, but
essential to people who want a full life, who want to be all they can be, as the army promises, whether they
choose to work as plumbers or professors. If these virtues were more abundant, our minds and therefore
our land would be a happier place. As it is, we are stuck with what Walker Percy called the sadness of
ordinary mornings.

Are You a Pear in a Bottle?

Now suppose you are persuaded that you would like to have these virtues. How do you go about
acquiring them? The answer seems obvious enough. You go to a good liberal arts college and get a
degree, right? Not so fast! We need to be careful here.

Getting a liberal education and getting a liberal arts degree are by no means the same thing. You
get a degree (call it a credential) by amassing a certain number of course credits in the curricular pattern
specified by the college. This credential is essentially what you are paying your tuition for. You enter into
a contract to do whatever your teachers require to the best of your ability and in return you get a degree.
In doing so, you will get some training, pick up some information, and perhaps, even better, some lasting
knowledge. You know this drill, you have been doing it most of your life. But fulfilling the contract by
passing courses, even with good grades, does not automatically provide you an education, especially not in
the sense of my seven virtues.

Let me speak to you as purely as a professor for a moment. Here is a bedrock truth. We can
inform you, we can expose you to things you never heard of before, we can explain things, we can sometimes entertain you, we can often bore the hell out of you, we can set up good learning environments (or not), we can test you, we can grade you and credential you, and you can like us or hate us. But however well or badly we do those things, there is one thing that we absolutely cannot do, even if we stand on our heads—and that is: educate you. That is because the educational part of an education requires a personal investment from you that is not in the contract. If you do not make that investment of yourself, you can get a college degree without coming close to an education. By personal investment, I mean a kind of active mental engagement that falls largely outside the routine of going to school.

For most of your life now you have been going to school, year in and year out, learning useful and important things, to be sure, but also being shaped by its demands on its timetable. The result is what I will call your school-self, which consists of a collection of habits and strategies for surviving and doing well in this enclosure. Your school-self is largely reactive, waiting for the requirements, and, in general, having its buttons pushed by the demands of assignments, tests, and grades. Let me offer you a metaphor for this self. The Swiss make a wine called bonne poire, good pear. Each bottle of this unique vintage contains a fully grown pear. How do they get the pear in the wine bottle? Very simply: when the pear trees are in bloom, they hang the bottles on the trees and let the blooms grow into mature pears inside them. Your school-self is a pear-in-the-bottle self, an unnatural product of an artificial environment.

Fortunately you have another self, your real self, which is who you are outside of class. That real self is the one that is overjoyed when class is over, and looks forward to vacation when your time is your own. It is that part of you that does not want to be in school at all, that if given the choice of going to school or not would say with Melville’s Bartleby “I prefer not to.” And it is that self, your real self, that has to be engaged when we talk about real education. There is nothing particularly mysterious about the kind of engagement I am talking about. It is mainly a matter of maintaining possession of your own mind, of preserving a sphere of intellectual self-direction, so that you stay in charge of your education, instead of letting the institution bottle you. The hallmark of this mental self-direction is intellectual curiosity, which translates into an ability to develop an enduring interest in some topic, the pursuit of some question that goes beyond an assignment or that may have nothing to do with school work at all. You get curious about something, a question nags at You. You pursue the answer, maybe in the library or with a search engine on
the internet, or by asking someone who is likely to know. You pursue it because you want to know—\textit{you!} Not because some teacher has assigned it, or you expect to be tested on it, but because you, and no other, want to know. What the question is and where it comes from does not matter. It could come from something you read or that was said in class, or it could come from something you saw looking out the window because the class was boring, or from any place else.

What matters here is that you are actively in charge, and are using the educational resources available to you, not being used by them. When that happens regularly you are educable, not merely degreeable. Oh, you still have to fulfill the contract of course. But you can now drink the wine in the bottle instead of just being the poor pear inside it.

By way of reinforcing the point I just made, it is a startling fact that, in contrast to getting a degree, getting an education in our society is virtually free. Suppose you said to yourself—\textit{not} that I am recommending this—\textit{suppose} you said to yourself: I don’t want a degree, but I do want the virtues of an education. Well then it is a simple matter, given the availability of libraries, computers, the Internet, and other similar assets in our society, to gain access to the resources that you need, and at virtually no cost. The only thing that you cannot perhaps get in this manner is a good grounding in the sciences, where you need access to laboratory equipment. But otherwise you could educate yourself entirely on your own at minimal cost. All you need is the desire to use the resources. Given that you do want a degree, however, a good liberal arts college is a good place to get an education as well as the credential, because it has collected all the resources in one convenient place, and because there are likely to be some people around who know the difference between real mental nourishment and intellectual junk food, and can steer you to the best resources..

**Great Books: A Resource**

One of the best resources we have available here is \textit{The Great Books Program}. Its unique virtue is the way it makes many key resources of liberal education available to an engaged mind. It is probably the best we can do in a school setting. In a conversation, both teachers and students submit to the discipline of a book, and as they question the text, the text may also question them. The books themselves are classics, which are sometimes thought to be merely museum pieces. But that is not so. The best definition of a classic I know comes from the novelist, Italo Calvino, who said: “A classic is a book that
has never finished saying what it has to say.” You have to be open to hearing it, of course. Not every book will speak equally to everyone. Some, when they do speak, will speak directly to your soul. Others present the great ideas that have shaped and continue to shape our lives and are embedded in the institutions that define us. They confront us with great questions about justice, the basis of state authority, the tension between faith and reason, and issues about the achievements of our knowledge and its limits. Yet others seem to speak so directly to our current problems, it is difficult to believe that their message has had to travel across centuries to reach us.

Let me give you a few examples of these. If you are thinking about starting a war, it might be a good idea to read Thucydides’ account of The Peloponnesian War, which had catastrophic consequences for the Athenian empire. If you are interested in understanding the psychic forces that explode in terrorism, then the *Iliad* may speak to you. There you will hear how Agamemnon disses Achilles, coming close to depriving him of his very identity, and how the deadly rage that comes from this humiliation leaves him sulking in his tent while the Greeks very nearly lose the Trojan War. Some human beings would rather die than live in humiliation. Recent suicide bombings make clear that humiliation and the rage unto death are still with us.

In the same vein, if you want a primer on a hopeless cycle of violence of the sort that is going on between the Palestinians and the Israelis, you could do far worse than listen to the lesson of Aeschylus’ *Oresteia*. The trilogy opens with a watchman gazing at the hills looking for the signal fires that will jump from mountain to mountain announcing the victory of the Greeks at Troy and the return of the triumphant Agamemnon. The chain reaction of the reddish signal fires, each begetting the next, warns of a similar chain of bloodletting to come, as Agamemnon, who sacrificed his own daughter to appease a goddess, comes home to find his wife waiting for him with a knife to avenge this wrong. Agamemnon’s son, Orestes, must now avenge his father’s death by killing his mother. And the Furies will then pursue Orestes as one murder inexorably gives rise to the next. The equation by which spilt blood calls for more spilt blood will never be balanced unless and until a different idea of justice can take hold to break the chain. The warring parties both seek the help of Athena who sets up a court of Athenian jurors who fail to convict Orestes. The unhappy Furies meanwhile are consoled by Athena, as civilized institutions replace the law of blood for blood. Aeschylus puts the lesson of his story this way:
'Tis Zeus alone who shows the perfect way
Of knowledge: He hath ruled,
Men shall learn wisdom, by affliction schooled.
In visions of the night, like dropping rain,
Descend the many memories of pain
Before the spirit's sight: through tears and dole
Comes wisdom o'er the unwilling soul-

Twenty five centuries later, the pain has apparently still not been sufficient for wisdom to come o'er unwilling souls.

For a somewhat different kind of pain, consider the following: Statistics show that the average American spends thirteen uninterrupted years watching television. The pollution that now spews forth from this medium in the guise of news and entertainment is turning even the wealthiest suburb into a Maquiladora of the mind. As these electronic emanations seep into our souls, civility in public discourse declines, issues that require thought are reduced to ten second sound bites, violence and banality rule in programming, titillation and distraction reign in the news, the American attention span shrinks to that of a gnat, while ever present commercials bombard us again and again with a single proposition: happiness consists of having stuff and more stuff. These symptoms point to an underlying misery that is well captured by the following:

For we have reached the place of which I spoke,
where you will see the miserable people,
those who have lost the good of intellect....

Strange utterances, horrible pronouncements,
accents of anger, words of suffering,
and voices shrill and faint, and beating hands,

all went to make a tumult that will whirl
forever through that turbid, timeless air,
like sand that eddies when a whirlwind swirls.

Is there a better description of the Jerry Springer show? Never mind that it comes from the third Canto of Dante’s *Inferno*.

**Conclusion**

This is as good a note as any to end on. The particular section of hell Dante is describing is for those miserable people who have lost “the good of intellect.” I can sum up the point I have been trying to make tonight simply by saying: liberal education aims to help us avoid the hell of losing the good of intellect.