

Less Is More: The Challenge of not Over-Administering the Liberal Arts

Transylvania Seminar

July 25, 2015

I.

Thank you for inviting me to speak at the 2015 Transylvania Seminar. There are many good reasons to choose to join the faculty or administration of a university like Transylvania. For me, however, this seminar played a very important role in my decision. Its existence indicated to me that Transylvania wants to engage seriously in the discourse that surrounds the liberal arts. At a time when there is so much idle talk in the media about higher education and the liberal arts, it is essential that those of us on the inside—those of us who actually write the books and teach the courses and believe in the values that both embody—are engaged in critical self-analysis. For 10 years, this seminar has served that purpose with distinction. I promise that there will be many more Transylvania Seminars where we can deliberate the value of the liberal arts. This point of light will illuminate for many years to come.

I have a British friend, an Oxford trained anthropologist, who decided to become a forensic accountant to earn a living. His primary professional function is to restructure multinational organizations. He took an interest in what I was doing at my previous institution, so we decided that we would periodically meet to discuss my job as dean and where the school was going.

My friend is curious and likes to be informed. I realized early on that our conversations were not going to be entirely pleasurable. At our first meeting, he began by telling me he had read through my institution's entire website and had come away with a single question: "Why does your school exist?"

I was taken off guard and stumbled over the standard answers a dean would have in response to such a question, but he wasn't convinced. He listened for only a short while before he shared his impression of what he had seen on our website in a distinctly British way. He said that the website and, by extension, the school reminded him of an untrimmed hedge.

Now you are probably all familiar with at least one reason schools come to resemble untrimmed hedges. It isn't that those who work at schools are too lazy to trim them. In many cases it is the opposite; administrators try to do too much. As the title of my talk indicates, this is one of the issues I want to address.

One temptation that often leads administrators to try to do too much is the simple fact that they are on campus, in an office, collecting a paycheck. Their employers, employees, and conscience tell them work has to be done to justify their place. So they think up ideas or hear them at conferences, and those ideas look really good in the abstract. Then, with the best of intentions, they try to put those ideas into practice on campuses, often doing little more than adding to the workload of those who are already overworked.

But there are more important reasons why administrators end up creating schools that look like untrimmed hedges. As we look into the future, we see the need

for what people in my position refer to as alternative revenue streams. The cost of our primary function—teaching students in classrooms and providing services to support that endeavor—is rising too quickly relative to the ability of families to pay for it. Most families cannot afford the tuition and fees, so they borrow money to cover the expenses. Schools like Transylvania do their part and offer financial aid to make their education more affordable and to attract students.

Unfortunately, for schools that are tuition dependent—which is the majority—financial aid is lost revenue. So schools are working feverishly to find alternative revenue streams. This has taken the form of online learning, new curricula, new graduate programs, summer rentals of campus space, etc. The hedge begins to grow quickly, and schools don't want to trim anything that might take away from the bottom line. The temptation to address an impending financial crisis by adding anything that might generate revenue is difficult to resist. In the absence of an adequate ontological understanding of the liberal arts and what we are trying to accomplish, short-term fixes to the bottom line abound.

Still, this simplified version of how schools tend to respond to the economic pressures we all encounter brings us face-to-face with the question of identity. Why do we exist? Who are we? These existential questions are widely understood, or asked, or perhaps avoided on a personal level. Many of the courses we teach are intended, in one way or another, to help our students wrestle more insightfully with these questions en route to a deeper self-understanding. Many of the papers that have been presented in this seminar, thankfully, are addressing these questions on an institutional level.

I believe the question of identity is the most important question colleges and universities need to address to avoid losing their way. We know that some colleges and universities will close in the coming years. We need to determine not only how we will stay open, but why.

I would like to address the question of identity in liberal arts institutions by drawing on the work of Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor. In *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, Taylor provides both a phenomenological and historical account of the evolution of the modern self. I intend to argue that his phenomenology lends itself to thinking about the identity of liberal arts colleges.

II.

Taylor's historical analysis of modern selfhood is grounded in a phenomenology of lived experience that attempts to identify the essential elements of identity. For Taylor, our identity is inextricably bound up with moral frameworks or horizons. It is impossible, Taylor argues, for us to make our way in the world without a moral horizon. These horizons provide the context from which our lives draw meaning. They allow us to have an orientation toward the world. They are akin to a map that shows where we stand and the direction we need to travel in order to get to our destinations. Without such a map, he argues, we would be paralyzed, lost, unable to move in any direction.

Taylor describes these horizons of meaning as moral because they are constituted out of qualitative judgments we make with regard to the goods we pursue. "The horizons within which we live our lives and which make sense of them

have to include strong qualitative discriminations.” The qualitative distinctions that constitute these horizons are revealed to us in the activities we pursue and the points of view we hold. The parent provides for the family, the artist creates beauty, the warrior prepares for battle. These endeavors are the practical embodiment of the goods to which individuals are committed.

For many of us, the ontological ground of the goods we pursue and to which we are committed remain hidden or unarticulated. That is, although the goods we pursue are indicative of who we are, we rarely take the time to explicitly acknowledge or reflect on them. We tend to take them for granted. As a result, we often fall out of line with the goods we profess to hold. Or, more subtly, we find ourselves holding goods that are in conflict with each other.

Taylor sees real value in actively articulating these goods, both to avoid self-deception and to empower our living in alignment with those goods. For example, parents who want to be devoted to their children but also want to spend time succeeding at work, or the athlete who wants to train but loves meeting her friends in the pub, must make a choice about these competing goods. Articulating our goods not only shapes but refines our identity. Taylor writes: “Although these frameworks remain in the background for many of us, we cannot do without them. One who has little or no sense of a moral commitment is lost, or suffering from an identity crisis. Were they to lose this commitment or identification, they would be at sea, as it were; they wouldn’t know anymore, for an important range of questions, what the significance of things was for them. . . And this situation does, of course, arise for some people. An identity crisis [is] an acute form of disorientation, which people

often express in terms of not knowing who they are, but which can also be seen as a radical uncertainty of where they stand. They lack a frame or horizon within which things can take on a stable significance, within which some life possibilities can be seen as good or meaningful, others as bad or trivial.”

Whether the metaphor is an untrimmed hedge or the seasickness that comes with no horizon, the message is the same. If we don't pay attention to what our commitments are, or if we commit to goods we know to be false, we become lost or unidentifiable. Moral horizons give life to human agency by enabling us to take a stand. Knowing where we stand enables us to choose in the midst of competing values and points of view. Even if our actions are at odds with the goods we value, we are better off knowing those goods and where we are in relation to them than not knowing them at all.

The framework Taylor is describing does not preclude us from amending or refining or changing our point of view when presented with a more compelling set of values and hence a more useful moral horizon; neither does it guarantee we may not be wrong in our choices. But it does enable us to enter into the conversations with a voice, with an orientation. Taylor writes: “The question ‘Who am I?’ can't be answered by giving a name and genealogy. What does answer this question for us is an understanding of what is of crucial importance to us. To know who I am is a species of knowing where I stand. My identity is defined by the commitments and identifications which provide the frame or horizon within which I can try to determine from case to case what is good, or valuable, or what ought to be done, or

what I endorse or oppose. In other words, it is the horizon within which I am capable of taking a stand.”

III.

Like many of your institutions, it is tempting for a school like Transylvania, with such a long and rich history, to respond to the question “Who are you?” by reverting to its genealogy. But Taylor points out that ancestral voices are not sufficient to adequately address the question of identity. We need to be able to take a stand and express our orientation about what we hold to be good through the actions we pursue in the here and now. This is especially true today when so much of the rhetoric surrounding the liberal arts and higher education in general involves contrasting claims about what we ought to be doing.

Moreover, in each such metric that claims to measure institutional success there is an implicit ontological commitment to a good or set of goods. For example, if we consider the income levels of graduates a measure of a good education, we are making an ontological commitment to an overarching good that is grounded in materialistic success. In this case, our hedge grows in the depleted soil of market forces and our students are educated as mere human capital. As Professor Freyman has demonstrated, without such horizons, our educational aspirations are reduced to job training under the guise of skills that are “required of contemporary servants of power and wealth.”

Freyman successfully argues that the discourse of human capital is naïve. It reduces students and the goals of higher education to economic variables and

outcomes that are concerned with “the accumulation of job-relevant skills” to increase “productivity (or output), which in turn increases one’s earnings (or income).... This causal chain (education> productivity> earnings) holds true for both individuals and for nations.” And while these are the goods to which a great many are committed, they do not in themselves constitute the good that Freyman refers to as a full life.

The framework we commit to when education aspires to offering job-relevant skills and productivity in the workplace is based on a truncated ontology of human beings. Once schools make this ontological reduction of human beings to human capital, they adjust how they understand themselves and how they educate students. We look to prepare them to maximize wages or simply fit into the existing market economy. Critical thinking becomes a skill to be applied to spreadsheets, not to the social, cultural, political world in which we live. Such a framework places the goods that grow out of materialism above all others, and it is not surprising that such schools become evermore untrimmed as they try to anticipate the demands of a constantly changing marketplace by adding new programs with the short term hope that they will attract more students.

We can avoid this trap by regularly articulating the goods to which we are committed and refining the moral frameworks that sustain them. (Hence the importance of the Transylvania Seminar and gatherings like it.) For Taylor, this is a fluid process that can only be captured in narrative form. The meaning of our lives, our relationships with the goods we pursue, is not reducible to scientific language or outcome metrics. By articulating the goods that constitute our moral frameworks,

we not only prioritize those goods, we provide meaning to our lives through language and capture what matters to us, not as data points but as the touchstones of our authenticity.

For example, we may need the notion of courage or dignity or trust to make sense of our lives and what we value, but we cannot reduce those notions to scientific data. Once we do, we have changed the subject and the experience about which we are concerned. By forming narratives about our lives, we uncover what Taylor describes as hypergoods. “The picture of moral life in which a hypergood figures is one where we are capable of growth from a ‘normal’, ...condition, in which we acknowledge and orient ourselves by a certain range of goods, to a recognition of a good which has incomparably greater dignity than these. Our acceptance and love of this good makes us re-evaluate the goods of the original range.”

Hypergoods are different from ordinary goods because they inspire awe. Our relationship to a hypergood, according to Taylor, is one of love. Like Aristotle’s unmoved mover, the hypergood generates agency by attracting us toward it. It inspires us to act and to grow beyond our ordinary ways of being. Going beyond our ordinary ways of being, or self-transcendence, is at the heart of what a liberal education can do for students. As Freyman describes it: “Liberal education aims at the fullest development of the person as a human being.”

Hunter Rawlings echoes this idea in a recent op-ed when he describes a genuine education as “a human awakening.” These descriptions of the goals of education have taken many guises since Plato shared the allegory of the cave in

which the prisoner is unshackled and led out of the world of shadows and deception to a vision of reality and the good. If a genuine education leads to a human awakening or a full life, if these are the hypergoods that inspire awe so that we prioritize them in shaping our moral frameworks, we are in a position to re-evaluate other goods in their wake to give shape to the moral horizon of liberal education.

The human awakening through education, as Plato's cave allegory indicates, is liberating. It frees us to act and to participate in the world with a new awareness, a new understanding. Philosopher Michael McCarthy argues that "a human being cannot be truly free who lacks the power, cultivated by education, to understand, enjoy, promote, and preserve the highest human goods." Just what these goods are is a matter for intense debate, but whatever they are, he suggests, they are essential to our common humanity. Hence bringing the young into a common discourse where they can actively participate in and contribute to our common humanity is an explicit good of a liberal education that ultimately contributes to a full life. Over-emphasizing our areas of specialty is one way we may hurt ourselves as much as market forces hurt us. Remembering that a liberal education is concerned with our common humanity is essential if our students are to mature into living full lives.

In addition to bringing the young into a common discourse to participate in our common humanity, a liberal education ought to evoke in our students the *eros* of mind, the intense human desire to understand. Thinkers from Aristotle to Bernard Lonergan point to an appetite that is deep within all of us to "know, understand, to see why, to discover the reason, to find the cause, to explain" (Lonergan). The desire to know for its own sake is an essential element in a liberal education, and if our

students are lucky, it will stay with them throughout their lives. As professors Renee Monson, Kristy Kenyon, and John Svarlien make clear in their papers, this is an area in which the teacher as role model is crucial. Our visible enthusiasm for knowledge and inquiry and the joy that accompanies that process is infectious. The active mind that seeks knowledge for its own sake relishes an effective freedom that is wholly different from the freedom achieved through consumer buying power.

Related to the good of disinterested knowledge is the love of interiority. The Roman statesman Cato captures this in a paradox: “Never is she more active than when she does nothing. Never is he less alone than when he is by himself.” While thinking looks like idleness from the outside, we all know that it is quite intense, active, and intentional. And while it may look lonely to the non-thinker who is in need of constant companionship, the liberally educated person is never less alone than in the act of contemplation and thought.

In one way, the solitary thinker divides the self in a prelude to action. Deliberation takes account of many sides of an issue before moving forward in action. I can hold different positions in thought prior to acting, whereas action unites the self in choosing one direction over the others. Pericles captured the relationship between thought and action when he said: “The great impediment to action, in our opinion, is not discussion but the lack of that knowledge preparatory to action which is gained by discussion: for we have the capacity to think before we act and of acting too.”

Pericles' quote suggests an additional good that gives shape to the framework of a liberal education. The goods that we hold out as the ends of a liberal education cannot separate our young people from the world. Above and beyond the knowledge and skills that we hope students take away from our institutions is a deep and abiding sense of responsibility for the world and to themselves. Hannah Arendt writes: "education is the point at which we decide whether we love the world enough to assume responsibility for it and by the same token save it from that ruin, which, except for renewal except for the coming of the new and the young, would be inevitable. And education, too, is where we decide whether we love our children enough not to expel them from our world and leave them to their own devices, not to strike from their hands their chance of undertaking something new and unforeseen by us."

The education we offer our students ought to not only awaken them to a life of interiority, but also to a world worth engaging with in ways that are true to that interiority. The wisdom that we hope a liberal education begins to bestow on the young enables them to be responsible for the world while still being true to themselves. If interiority and knowledge for its own sake contribute to a full life, they are part of a cycle in which we also actively engage with the world. A liberal education ought to provide guidance and a splash of wisdom into how that active engagement is carried out. It cannot simply scorn the world where we are best able to express our full humanity.

To suggest that a liberal education ought to prepare students for ways in which they can most fully express themselves in the world is not the same as

reducing students to human capital or a liberal education to the development of skills that are valuable in the workforce. In pursuing the higher goods of a liberal education, we can trust that students will acquire those skills. If we give them opportunities to write about issues they care about, for instance, they will figure out where to put the commas. If we give them opportunities to engage first-hand with issues they care about, they will figure out where to act.

IV.

We recognize that students are often blind to the livelihoods that will allow them to be true to themselves. A liberal education can do more than awaken them to the depth of their own selves; it can provide direction and example and practice and actions related to how that newfound understanding can apply to the work they do. Engaging in a discourse about the ways in which their truest selves can be expressed in earning a living is not the same as posting careers affiliated with various majors outside the career development office. It is the recognition that a full life requires self-expression in how we earn a living.

In a way, this concern is a response to a deep ontological rift that has taken philosophers two millennia to adequately address. In its most familiar guise, it is the rift between mind and body. In discussing the virtues of a liberal education, in particular the goods of interiority and knowledge for its own sake, it is easy to reinforce the mind-body distinction. If we are vigilant about staying aligned with the hypergoods of a liberal education, however, we can help students better understand

the ways in which earning a living can help them discover their true callings and their deepest selves.

One of my favorite examples of this comes from a blacksmith named Gregory Gladwell, who is quoted by David Michael Levin in *The Body's Recollection of Being*: “My wife went round, keeping her eye open for bolts, latches, handles, grates; drawing them and finding their dates, and I made more of them as exactly as you’re not likely to tell the difference. Mind you, it took time. It took hours. But it was a fine thing for me to have something lying on the bench before me made by one of the old men, and my hands doing again what his had done.... Hands last a long time, you know. A village sees the same hands century after century.”

Gladwell reminds us that work can be an expression of self, and the self it expresses does not operate under the illusion of being a self-made individualist, an illusion that is so pervasive in our society. It is a full self, living a full life by distilling and expressing the constellation of relationships in which it finds itself, in accordance with what Gladwell demonstrates he values most. Over time this becomes an expression of lived wisdom and a deep connection of self to the world. In his work as a blacksmith, Gladwell values place and the inheritance of generational wisdom passed on through the hands that execute his craft. This type of wisdom may not be evident in the strokes of a keyboard, but it gives us insight into the importance of work as an expression of our deepest selves. Making our students aware of this connection opens them to possibilities they may otherwise never see.

Students are not human capital and education is not a commodity. Nonetheless, we all need to be aware of the concerns and frustrations that are frequently expressed in public discourse today.

If I were to spend \$40,000 on a car, I'm fairly confident I would leave the car dealership with the car I wanted. When I pay \$40,000 to my daughter's school and she can only register for one of the four classes she wants, I have to recognize that the two "purchases" are not comparable. Sometimes we need to remind parents that what they are purchasing when they pay their child's tuition is unique. They are not buying a car or a class. They are purchasing the opportunity for their child to work, to encounter professors who teach and, hopefully, inspire, and to interact with a community of inquiring peers. Of course, students should also have access to guidance about paths to graduate schools and professional life. But they need to remember that the harder they work, the better the education they will get.

Insofar as that education opens students to a full life, we need to help them recognize that the effective freedom of interiority and knowledge for its own sake is distinct but not divorced from the freedom that comes from earning a living and an adequate wage. With sufficient moral frameworks that articulate and refine higher goods, we can avoid reducing the liberal arts to skills development and our institutions to training centers. This approach requires that we trust the ability of students to tap into the transformative experience of a liberal education. We need to be clear in articulating what it is we are offering and provide the conditions for faculty and students to engage in the pursuit of the goods they seek. Beyond that, administrators need to be careful about becoming overly ambitious or involved.

Bureaucracy does not inspire awe nor lead to human awakenings. Effective administration establishes the conditions in which awe-inspiring interactions can happen in the classroom.

There will be constant pressure to feed the hedge and let it grow. But we can keep it trimmed and our horizon constant if we remain committed to articulating and pursuing the appropriate goods to which we aspire. I believe this is essential for schools that want to survive the coming contraction among small private colleges. For those without a clear answer to the question “Why do we exist?” it will be difficult to endure.

The Transylvania Seminar is an excellent venue to begin crafting an answer to that question. To the Transylvania faculty members who have made this gathering such a success for the past 10 years, I say thank you. To all the organizers, to the staff, and to the many, many participants, I say thank you. And, of course, for your time and your forbearance, I say thank you. Let me send you home with a quote from Thomas à Kempis to end this year’s seminar: “At the Day of Judgment, we shall not be asked what we have read, but what we have done.”