

“What Is Liberal Education?”

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Writing a piece on the meaning of liberal education for the readers of the *Transylvania University Magazine* is like preaching to the choir. Transylvania prides itself on its long tradition of liberal education, and its alumni have been shaped by their experience with it. Yet, recent research has found that even people associated with liberal arts colleges like Transy are often confused about what liberal education means. This includes not only current and past students, but professors and administrators as well. Over half a century ago, a leading educational foundation speculated, “Liberal arts college faculty seldom state clearly what they mean by liberal or general education. Perhaps they do not know.” Maybe the public is confused about liberal education because we in academe are too. It may be time for all of us to pay more attention to what we say we are doing.

In typical academic fashion, let me begin by being difficult. I want to sneak up on what liberal education is by distinguishing it from what it is not. Let’s start with an easy one. The “liberal” in liberal education certainly does not refer to left-wing politics. Liberal education has a very ancient pedigree going back to classical Athens. Preserving the ideals of this 2500 year-old tradition has, in fact, often been seen as conservative or even reactionary. The word “liberal” (from the Latin *liberare*, meaning “to free”) refers to that education which is appropriate for free human beings. (Back then, freedom meant not being a slave and not having to work, presumably because one owned slaves who did it instead. It means something different today.) Needless to say, these are ideas to which people of various political persuasions could easily subscribe. Even the conservative William F. Buckley extolled the virtues of such an education in his book *God and Man at Yale*.

A more common misconception is to confuse liberal education with some particular academic setting in which it takes place. I often hear comments to the effect that colleges like Transy offer a liberal education because of their small size, which encourages personal interactions and individual attention. Small classes are said to allow students to get to know their professors and fellow students as human beings. Transy is all of these good things, but they are not what make it a liberal education institution. After all, there are some much larger and more impersonal schools – say, Harvard – that do a pretty good job of liberal education. And there are some far smaller places – like various schools of hair design here in Lexington – that do not even aim at liberal education. What is more, many think that liberal education is best achieved when students engage in off-campus experiences like internships, service-learning activities, or student-abroad programs. So liberal education is not necessarily the same thing as learning in a close-knit community.

Nor should liberal education be identified with a specific curriculum. Largely because liberal education got started in the classical world, it was equated with Greek and Latin literature for a very long time. Not until the 19th century did educators find this course of studies too narrow. Consequently, a number of modern proponents, wishing nevertheless to maintain the tradition as a fixed canon of almost sacred texts, have identified it with a limited set of Great Books which represent “the best that has been thought and said” throughout the course of Western Civilization from Plato to NATO. But however extensive such a list might be, it still must exclude many important works in the Western tradition, not to mention the numerous other voices that are also part of humanity’s great conversation.

Sensitive to these issues, many educators have come to identify liberal education not with any set of specific works but with a set of specific academic fields of study called the “liberal

arts.” These disciplines in the humanities, the arts, the social sciences, and the natural sciences are characterized by what they are not – namely, they are not *primarily* vocational. Rigorous study in one of these fields, it is thought, constitutes a liberal education. It is, however, sometimes difficult to differentiate vocational courses from nonvocational ones. While acknowledging these ambiguities, the Phi Beta Kappa Society, the foremost national organization dedicated to honoring and promoting the liberal arts, nevertheless concluded, “It is not difficult to distinguish between broad cultivation and technical competence.” I agree, but their claim begs another question. If liberal education is defined by “broad cultivation,” then how does concentrating in any one specific discipline – whether it is part of the liberal arts or not – constitute liberal education? Rather, it is suggested, what is needed is a general education broadly cast across all subject matters. While president of Harvard over a century ago, Charles William Eliot took the idea of breadth to its logical (or illogical) conclusion by arguing that if liberal education is about freedom, then we should let students take whatever they want. By the second half of the 20th century, these various positions reached an uneasy compromise in what is academe’s now widely accepted Trinitarian formula: students spend about one-third of their time fulfilling requirements in their major field, in general education, and in electives. (It is hard to imagine Socrates and Protagoras arguing over the precise number of credit units to be dedicated to each of these three areas with the same passion as do faculty members today.) Many of these conflicting perspectives about *the* curriculum for liberal education make a good deal of sense. My point here is that, precisely because they do, liberal education should not be defined by any one of them.

So where does all of this leave us in our quest for the holy grail of liberal education? It is not to be found in any specific political orientation or academic setting or subject matter. These

things represent mere idols, rather than the true spirit, of liberal education. What makes education liberal is its distinctive purpose. Liberal education aims at the fullest development of the person as a human being. You would think that people don't need much instruction in being human; it ought to come fairly automatically to them just by being born. But the truth is that being human is rather different from being almost anything else. Who we humans are is not precisely fixed either by our genes or by our environments. As human beings, our lives are, to some important extent anyway, whatever we make of them.

And while we are at it, we might as well make the *most* of our lives. This has meant different things to different people throughout history. What has remained fairly constant, however, is the idea that whatever the "good life" is, it does not just happen – it requires a bit of effort and guidance. The 17th century French *philosophe* Fontenelle got it right when he wrote, "We are, to the extent that we know how to be wise, the artisans of our own life." People make themselves, but not in circumstances of their own choosing. We can't do much about the limitations imposed on us by physical reality – although God knows we keep trying. The freedom to fashion our lives as we imagine is also limited by our dearth of imagination. It's the lack of vision thing. Here's where education comes in.

It helps to know what life has to offer. Vincent Price, the famous 1950s horror movie actor and less famous art connoisseur, once quipped, "People tell me they don't know much about art but they know what they like. What they should say is that they *like what they know.*" By expanding what students know, liberal education widens their appreciation of life's alternative possibilities. "Appreciate what?" you might ask. What is it that really matters? Posing that question is the first step in a liberal education. Liberal education is the life-long examination of the big questions in our lives: Who am I? What does it mean to be human? What can humans

accomplish? What is freedom? Thus, not the Great Books, but the Great Questions. The questions define a liberal education, not the answers. Answers will often differ from person to person and from one period of time to another, but the questions are those that all humans face. Asking them of ourselves is the mark of our humanity.

“The proper study of mankind is man,” wrote Alexander Pope. Whatever the subject matter, the real objects of study in liberal education are the students themselves. Socrates noted that the unexamined life is not worth living. Self-examination is not just navel-gazing. It is not done for its own sake, but in order to lead a richer life. Of course, we should never confuse *enriching one’s life* with *getting rich*. The art of living is not the same as making a living. The Kentucky poet Wendell Berry recently told graduating students at a nearby college that “You must refuse to accept the common delusion that a career is an adequate substitute for a life.” Certainly having a good job can contribute to human flourishing. And there is no reason why the competencies developed in liberal education might not be useful in one’s subsequent career. But the real vocation for which liberal education prepares students is the full-time job of being human.

The sad thing is how much of life’s richness is unappreciated. Let me give you an illustration. My wife and I visited Rome a few years ago, during which we toured the Vatican, including a stop inside the Sistine Chapel. Decorating its walls and ceiling is a series of frescos painted by Michelangelo that are among the world’s greatest artistic masterpieces. The center vault of the ceiling depicts the iconic “Creation of Adam.” In it, God extends a pointed hand toward Adam, who mirrors his creator by extending his hand back to receive the divine spark. This panel expresses both the divinity of God and the godlike nature of humans, who are created in God’s image. Just as God created human beings, so do humans create masterpieces like the

frescoes in the Sistine Chapel. From overhead, Michelangelo calls upon us to appreciate our humanity in all its glory. It is discouraging how many of my fellow tourists were so busy with mundane activities that they failed to notice that inspiring message. Instead they chattered among themselves, skimmed their guidebooks, snapped one another's pictures, texted their friends, plotted their afternoon shopping excursions, followed dutifully behind their tour guides from one end of the chapel to the other – and many never even looked up at the ceiling. Long ago, Marcus Aurelius observed that the worth of one's life is measured by the seriousness of its undertakings. Life is too precious to waste in playing a perpetual game of *Trivial Pursuit*.

The sad fact is that many people sell their lives short by living only a part of it. Many years ago at a party with my then fellow graduate students and their families, I was introduced to the wife of a colleague. In answer to my question, "So, what do you do?" she replied, "I'm *just* a housewife." Over the years, I came to know this woman rather well, and what I discovered was a remarkable human being who could not be defined by any social role. She was so many wonderful things, not *just* any one thing. Or consider the case of Anna Sam, who worked as a cashier to pay her way through college in her native France. Anna was thoroughly alienated by her menial job until one day, largely to occupy her mind at work, she decided to mentally collect anecdotes for a future book about her experiences as a cashier. Even before ever writing a word, Anna began to see herself and her world with new eyes. She realized that she was not *just* a cashier; she was a human being who had something profound and witty to say. A run-away best-seller, her subsequent book *Tribulations of a Cashier* transformed many lives, not just Anna's. Other cashiers who read the book told her how much it had changed their perceptions of themselves as well. And members of the public related how they had begun to perceive and subsequently treat cashiers differently, like real human beings.

Liberal education is like Anna's book. It seeks to reveal and unleash our inner human being. Its central lesson is: *Ecce Homo* ("Behold the Person"). We are all potentially so much more than our conventional selves. And whatever this quality is, we share with our fellow human beings. This insight is not new. Sages and saints have been telling us its truth for a long time. Repeating it here may be unnecessary. In many ways, however, it is a message all the more critical today. We live in a world where technological imperatives, the "creative destruction" of market forces, and the totalizing logic of instrumental rationality reduce human beings to the status of things. In the face of modernity's dehumanizing prospect, perhaps liberal education is needed more now than ever. It can help to release us from the prisons of our own construction. It leads us back to ourselves again.