

Toward an American Liberal Education

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What our American civilization owes to the ancient world, to Greece and Rome, is almost incalculable. Democracy, law, the arts, and philosophy have not only survived the age of antiquity but have developed, grown, and continued to bear fruit. Like these other ideas, liberal education is a concept with venerable, ancient roots—the very words “liberal education” have their beginnings in the old idea of the education of free men, gentlemen, whose education was not compelled by necessity, but pursued for its own sake.

But within the liberal arts much has changed, some of it for the better, some not. We have expanded the content of our studies, for example, from the seven liberal arts now to include history, modern literature, and foreign languages. Sometimes we try to fit them all into a trivium/quadrivium procrustean bed; but the legitimate ken of the liberal arts has grown and there’s no reason to fret much over this.

Moreover, we no longer talk about the education of free men but about an education that can set us free. Along these lines, we no longer speak of the education of gentlemen—that class of men most comfortable with convention and their culture’s ways—but often describe a liberal education as that which most powerfully frees us from convention. We seem to have taken this change in stride, though the movement away from the conventional toward the critical is a radical shift.

Nor, most obviously, do we talk any longer about “gentlemen”—with all its exclusivity and class denotations, and its all-too-casual exclusion of the fairer sex. Now we say a liberal education can be for everyone.

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So, like the Church when it found itself proselytizing in foreign lands, liberal education has always tried to remain true to itself while adjusting to life in strange new places. We should continue to think along those lines—to see if we can forge an understanding of the liberal arts that remains true to itself while finding ways to speak to twenty-first-century Americans.

We must do this for two reasons. First, because the culture we Americans find ourselves in (despite the current horrid level of public discourse) is not wicked or everywhere debased—though it is clearly wounded and in need of immense help. Second, because liberal education, if it does not discover how to speak to society in ways our culture understands, and if it cannot make its virtues apparent to the democracy in which we live, will make itself smaller and smaller, lose the audience it wishes to hold, and risk dying by diminishment.

Just how diminished have the liberal arts become? Here are some sobering figures: today the top four higher education majors—business studies, education, the health professions, and engineering—account for 41 percent of all bachelor's degrees, while English and literature accounts for a mere 3 percent. Just over 1 percent of students today major in any of the physical sciences, and philosophy accounts for less than half of 1 percent. There are more bachelor's degrees awarded in “parks, recreation, fitness and leisure studies” than in all the fields of history combined.

Why is this so? First, the most general answer. The liberal arts are dying because most Americans don't see the point of them. They don't get why anyone would study literature or history or the classics—or, more contemporarily, feminist criticism, whiteness studies, or the literature of postcolonial states—when they can get an engineering or a business degree. It's not only that they want a good job and to make lots of money—they often also want to make a contribution to the world, to do something useful for themselves and their neighbors, even their country, and they don't see what “use” the liberal arts (either in their traditional or especially in their newer formulations) are either to themselves or to society.

Besides our students, I believe parents, and the public in general, have two serious concerns regarding the value of a liberal arts education, and these concerns inform all I hope to examine here: first, the *personal* good of a liberal education, its value to the future life of the student, which is no longer as evident as it once was; and second, that except for academic ideologues on the left who passionately believe the liberal arts can be used to bludgeon students to become “social justice” activists, we more old-fashioned instructors are so frightened of speaking the language of usefulness and relevance that we come across less as citizens helping to promote the wider good and more as cloistered, inward-looking

intellectuals. If we have the capacity and the will to be of real use to society, we have hidden it under a bushel. This was not always the case, nor should it be the case. But it is how we are seen and, I'm sorry to say, often how we see ourselves.

We who teach in the liberal arts are always more comfortable with seeing our enterprise as something higher than helping people gain a living. I understand this and, to a degree, I sympathize. Moreover, my aim is definitely not to claim that liberal education must adopt a rhetoric of usefulness to deceive the public into thinking we're something we are not. My point is that the liberal arts are, at their best, not only of immense value—let's even say of "use"—to each of us as individuals, but also to America at large.

The Spirit of American Life

What follows relies on our being clear about two things—the nature of the liberal arts and the character of America. I'll begin with the character of America.

The decades have done little to improve upon Tocqueville's portrait of America. We are, as he notes, a practical people not much given to philosophizing. We are enamored of progress, and have been so blessed by providence that we tend to think that change and progress are almost always friends. We hardly despise the fine or the beautiful, but we almost always think that beautiful things that are useful are much better than simply beautiful things. We are fundamentally utilitarian. Nor can we bear rigid social structures, elitism, or class-based privilege, being irredeemably democratic in our minds and our habits. And while never aristocratic, we have a healthy regard for wealth and have been fortunate to believe, by and large, that the road to riches and independence is achievable through pluck, gumption, inventiveness, and hard work.

American practicality and love of the useful predate Tocqueville's observations. Consider the venerable American Philosophical Society, established in 1769 in Philadelphia by none other than Benjamin Franklin. A lovely liberal name, "The American Philosophical Society," but it was philosophy understood in a distinctly American way. It existed to promote "useful knowledge," for the promotion of science understood as the mastery of nature and improvement of the human condition. Thus Franklin would write for the society essays on such "philosophical" matters as the cause and cure of smoky chimneys and on stoves that could consume all their own gasses. Worthy topics, but hardly what we today would recognize as purely "liberal."

To the founding generation, the useful and the good, the practical and the true, often existed without bright lines separating them. No one today can look at the lives of Jefferson or Adams or many of our great Founders and not be impressed by the sweep and depth of their liberal learning. We cannot even read one page of *The Federalist Papers* without being struck by the breadth of classical and historical knowledge not only of the Founders but also of those who read what they were writing in the newspapers of the day.

But part of the greatness of the Founders was that they were much more hesitant than we are to believe that liberal education could not be useful or that other forms of education could not be liberal. Consider Jefferson—linguist, scientist, philosopher, one of the finest liberally educated minds of his day—who had no trouble combining his liberal learning with the serious study of everything from agronomy to viniculture.

If Jefferson could think of a fully educated man as one who understands farming and philosophy, if he had no trouble moving from classical studies to writing a tract upon which a nation would be built, why are we Americans today so rigid in our separation of the theoretical from the practical, the scholarly from the civic?

Because I want us to break down the walls that separate one form of learning from another, allow me do something strange in a journal of an organization devoted to the life of the mind: mount a defense of vocational education.

Consider the many places where liberal and professional or vocational or technical education overlap, even join. A careful look might even reveal that sometimes the subject matter at the heart of other varieties of study is not all that removed from what we in the liberal arts try to do. I'm reminded of a talk that Booker T. Washington, the great proponent of vocational education, once gave:

One of our students, in his commencement oration last May, gave a description of how he planted and raised an acre of cabbages. Piled high upon the platform by his side were some of the largest and finest cabbages that I have ever seen. He told how and where he had obtained the seed; he described his method of preparing and enriching the soil, of working the land, and harvesting the crop; and he summed up by giving the cost of the whole operation. In the course of his account of this comparatively simple operation, this student had made use of much that he had learned in composition, grammar, mathematics, chemistry, and agriculture. He had not merely woven into his narrative all these various elements that I have referred to, but he had given the audience some useful and practical

information in regard to a subject which they understood and were interested in.

I wish that any one who does not believe it possible to make a subject like cabbages interesting in a commencement oration could have heard the hearty cheers which greeted the speaker when, at the close of his speech, he held up one of the largest cabbages on the platform for the audience to look at and admire. As a matter of fact, there is just as much that is interesting, strange, mysterious, and wonderful; just as much to be learned that is edifying, broadening, and refining in a cabbage as there is in a page of Latin.¹

I actually have a hard time with how liberal education looks down on other forms of education because I believe that the liberal arts and professional education could, over the years, have profited greatly by an alliance. I know nursing school graduates who know more real science, more psychology, chemistry, and biology than almost any liberal arts graduate. I know cabinetmakers who know more about design, aesthetics, and material science than most liberal arts graduates. I know businessmen who know much more economics, mathematics, geography, and politics than most liberal arts graduates. Why aren't we in league with such people?

Jefferson believed the fabric of knowledge was best woven from many strands. Why don't we?

Take this one step further. Vocational and professional education aim at *work*, at least initially. But what all might this devotion to work actually entail? How about some truly admirable habits of mind and character, habits we would have hoped the liberal arts might themselves impart? How about attention to detail and persistence? Or the ability to understand cause and effect, to foresee unintended consequences, or to know that single causes can spawn multiple results? How about order and discipline? Or knowing one's capacities and limitations, and where innovation and imagination might lead? Or to have insight into the character of the natural and human world? How about wonder—marveling at the mystery and impossible order a farmer finds even as he studies that leaf of cabbage?

That a farmer might find a universe in his work means that, at the highest level, the vocational arts can have much the same character as the liberal arts when they are at their best. Both modes of study can be doorways into serious inquiry.

¹Booker T. Washington, *My Larger Education* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1911), 142.

Not to belabor this point, but we in the liberal arts must explore every avenue to be of service to those who teach in non-liberal areas and, in turn, find what we can learn from them. Long ago we concluded that the fine arts could live fruitfully beside the liberal arts. Moreover, we have come to understand that liberal education and religious education can be compatible as well. Why do we continue to fear moving closer to our various professional, vocational, and technical brethren?

I do not mean that we in the liberal arts should visit our schools of law or business or engineering and lecture them on what we're sure they don't know—lecture them on ethics or social justice or on how to be more “humane.” We've been doing that haughty kind of work for years, and it generally turns out badly for everyone.

What can we profitably do together? We can start by asking the best and most sympathetic of us to work with the best and most sympathetic of them to recreate courses and an environment that existed when, for example, our law schools did more than graduate legal technicians, but educated professionals—when the philosophy of law and legal history courses, developed and tailored by law professors, formed the center of an attorney's legal studies, when not only “constitutional law” but the history of the Founding and the philosophy of the Constitution were serious legal courses. After that we can make the interaction mutual—by inviting a business professor to make a presentation to your philosophy class on the morality of private enterprise and trade, or by asking a law professor to address a history class on the development and meaning of the rule of law from antiquity to the present.

If all this sounds like a call for humility on our part, it is. Remember, Americans are hardly lovers of aristocratic pretensions. If we want the liberal arts to survive and be respected in this country, we must defend the liberal arts honestly, but without arrogance. What we possess and profess is wonderful, but it is not made more wonderful by demeaning other ways of learning. Vow, for example, never to repeat after W.E.B. Du Bois, who cuttingly proclaimed that while Booker Washington wanted to make men carpenters, he wanted to make carpenters men.

We win no converts by saying such things. The larger world knows that carpenters—and electricians and nurses and businesspeople—are fully men: good in themselves as well as providing a practical blessing and public benefit. Does the world know what *our* good is—our good not only for ourselves but for others?

I've spent a lot of time comparing liberal education to other forms of education, trying to pinpoint why they are not only worthy but prospering,

while we are diminishing. The truth is, they prosper because they often know more about this place we call America than we do.

The Liberal Arts and the Personal

Yes, the study of the liberal arts in America is surely in decline. But this wasn't always the case. For years, the liberal arts in America had a firm hold on one immense and valuable truth, and, under that truth, prospered well enough: While the study of business or agronomy or medicine might teach good and valuable things, and also help make you and your family comfortable and financially secure, the liberal arts could offer something of perhaps even greater value: insight into so many of the things that really matter—some acquaintance with the history of the world and the various types of people, good and evil, we will encounter in this life; guidance in addressing our deepest questions—What is love? What is justice? What is integrity? Does God exist? If so, what is asked of me? What is truth, and how do I recognize it? In brief, the liberal arts promised to open for students a door inscribed Wonder that led to a room called Understanding.

We all know what the liberal arts, especially the humanities, have done to this grand vision. Great literature, great ideas, great books, great men and women—all diminished. Take, for example, how we see ourselves today—as true liberal artists not because we have an understanding of our most important questions and some insight into the possible answers, but because we fancy we have learned to think “critically,” which translates, more often than not, into merely being critical.

“Critical thinking,” not discovery and delight, is the mantra of so many of our colleagues; it has almost come to be seen as the heart of the liberal arts. We have radicalized the word “liberal,” reshaping it to mean freedom from the accepted, from the conventional, and freedom to “express ourselves” no matter how untutored our opinions might be. But this is a sad mistake. In place of wonder and understanding, we now pride ourselves on our liberation from the past, from all that might be learned from old books, old thinkers, and old ideas. Unmooring us from the tradition, this glorification of the critical can only work to our detriment.

Into all this, come our students. And with our students come their parents and relatives. And with them comes the perennial question: “I’m happy that you’re majoring in medieval history/lyric poetry/classical Greek—or gender studies/film criticism/the literature of colonialism and rebellion—but what, exactly, will you *do* with that?”

Now, I do not consider this an unfair or snarky question. It's important both because it evidences concern for our students' future (including their material future), as well as concern for all of us together. Everyone knows what good the study of medicine or agricultural science or civil engineering does for society. But the public cannot be expected make an immediate connection between expertise in literary theory, for example, and the country's well-being.

But what, you should ask, would you have us do? We in the liberal arts have always espoused studying our subjects "for their own sake." What would you have us do? Speak the language of practicality, of *usefulness*? We don't know how.

Okay, then learn.

Those of us in the liberal arts must at least understand, even if we're hesitant to articulate, the liberal arts within a framework of "use"—or, to use perhaps a more palatable phrase, "within a framework of value." By this I mean formulating a defense of the liberal arts as "of value" not only to the individual but also "of value" to society, to America at large.

Step back for a second. When we in the liberal arts complain that so many students, sometimes our best students, pursue their studies in non-liberal fields, whom do we blame? We blame the culture—its commercialism, its materialism, its love of money and enjoyment. Or we blame the parents, who constantly push their kids into lucrative or prestigious fields. Or we blame the shallow, insecure students, who are blind to the importance of my course on women and biblical patriarchy or my seminar on the racist roots of the American Constitution.

I don't mean to make light of the situation, because it is serious to the life and health of the liberal arts. But the best, perhaps even the only way to stand our ground in the face of practical studies that promise so much is to show that the liberal arts are not "irrelevant," not merely "academic," but valuable for all of us and deeply useful for each of us.

In reformulating a defense of the liberal arts, especially the humanities, we must begin by putting aside all those overblown platitudes and flowery banalities about ourselves and our disciplines—how we educate "the whole person," how we alone make students "well-rounded" (whatever that might mean to an undergraduate), how we feed the spirit and elevate the soul, how we are the source and font of ever so much humane, ethical instruction—and present to prospective students and their parents what actually *is* the peculiar excellence of the liberal arts.

John Henry Newman once stated that the liberal arts are that “great but ordinary means to a great but ordinary end.”² What might he be talking about? For starters, how about learning to read? What an ordinary thing, you say! Yes, but reading carefully and sympathetically (again, not exactly “critically” but sympathetically) opens the door to something amazing—to another person’s mind. Indeed, it even gives us the power to possess minds of people long dead! Jefferson’s body may be mouldering in the grave, but his mind can still live in ours. His mind, his ideas and reasons, can live forever in us because he wrote and we have learned how to read. So ordinary... and so great.

Moreover, as I mentioned, most adolescents are looking for answers to their deepest questions—questions about love and justice, loyalty and betrayal, happiness and desire, nature and its workings; questions about justice and right, equality and tyranny; questions about what I owe myself and what I might owe others. These questions are neither academic, nor pedantic, but part of that great human compendium of universal, and, yes, ordinary, concerns.

But these great issues of human existence are mulled over first and foremost in the liberal arts. And while not every weighty concern is resolvable, we can at least help our students grapple with the reasoning the greatest minds can present to us regarding them. In fact, until we were recently told otherwise, we in the liberal arts always knew we had the best books.

But let’s not make the virtues of the liberal arts too metaphysical. In my own area of politics and political philosophy, for example, some answers are given. If you want to undermine tyranny, here’s what you must do. To combine individual rights with mass democracy, these are things you have to consider.

Still, in trying to revive an older view of the liberal arts, where do we begin? I know that some of the best and wisest among us want to portray the liberal arts as the home of radical questioning, of critical thinking, or, to shift metaphors, as the hammer that smashes all idols. As my teacher, Allan Bloom, was fond of saying, we must see the liberal arts as the solvent that dissolves convention and the power that can liberate our students from the tyranny of the three Ps—Parents, Priests, and Poets.

Though I once bought into this view, I find that approach less and less persuasive. I was reminded recently—this time by Josef Pieper—of a sentence in Aquinas’s commentary on Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*: “The philosopher...is related to the poet in that both are concerned with *mirandum*, with wonder.”³

²John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University* (1852; Garden City, NY: Image Books, Doubleday & Company, 1959), 191.

³Josef Pieper, *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*, including *The Philosophical Act*, trans. Alexander Dru (New York: Pantheon, 1952; San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2009), 82.

The liberal arts do not begin in doubt, but in wonder. We begin as Miranda did, the marvelling one—not as critics of the world but as overwhelmed with its wonder. From there all our questions flow—Why is the universe as it is? What are people really like? What am I to do?—all great but, in a real way, ordinary matters.

To begin with wonder is perhaps a start to answering our initial question: Of what use is a liberal education to *me*?

The first benefit of a liberal education is that it begins to satisfy the human craving for insight on our most serious, basic questions, perhaps even “to see the world and see it whole,” when that longing in us is most alive.

Does a liberal education have any outwardly useful or practical benefit for me as an individual? Yes. Again referring to Newman, a liberal education gives us a clearer, more conscious view of our own opinions and refines them. It helps us “to disentangle a skein of thought, to detect what’s sophistical, and discard what’s irrelevant.” It shows us “how to influence others, how to come to an understanding with them, and how to bear with them.”⁴ In helping us overcome our ignorance of the past through the study of history and our ignorance of human nature through the study of philosophy and literature, we are less likely to be ruled by slogans or unexamined opinions, less likely to be moved by emotion alone or by demagogues, and less easily duped, because we have a conception of the evil possibilities of our natures.

I’m reminded of Abraham Lincoln, who, while he hardly went to school at all, was by any and every measure liberally educated. He read, as we know, biographies and histories, the Bible, Shakespeare, and literature, especially poetry. He did this for a kind of highest use, not just to know how better to write or speak, but, as one of his biographers said, “like one who...desires also to have patterns of what life should be.”⁵

The Liberal Arts and the Civic

Still, if all his education did was to make Lincoln into a private man useful to himself in his everyday life, few of us would notice, or care. What we remember was that Lincoln—and before him the great men of the American Founding—knew that what was good for them as private intellects might also be of great value, of great use, to creating and then recreating a nation, perhaps a world.

⁴Newman, *Idea of a University*, 191.

⁵Lord Charnwood (Godfrey Rathbone Benson), *Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 1917; Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, Inc., 1997), 10.

Jefferson learned from his study of modern moral and political philosophy the self-evident truths that lay behind the writing of the Declaration of Independence. Using his study of the history of all prior democracies and all confederacies, coupled with deep reflection on what we were once bold enough to call “human nature,” James Madison became the father of the Constitution. Without their philosophical, political, and historical studies of the preconditions of popular governments and the nature of tyrannical rule, Madison, Hamilton, and Jay could not have written *The Federalist Papers*, nor could the populace have read them. It was hardly modern political science that fostered the making of America—it was the liberal arts.

Beyond the formation of statesmen, what use did the Founders see in a liberal education for the rest of society? I think they understood quite well that while the liberal arts originated in aristocratic societies, these studies were of the greatest value to democracies, where all of us are rulers. Under such circumstances, what do we want of ourselves and our co-rulers? To be ignorant of the past? Without knowledge of our laws and mores and the reasons behind them? Blind to our national principles and the arguments for them? Do we want neighbors who are crude, blind to the beautiful, devoted to their daily tasks and little else? Who would want to be ruled by people like that?

Newman said much the same thing: Our studies aim “at raising the intellectual tone of society, cultivating the public mind, supplying true principles to popular enthusiasms and fixed aim to popular aspirations, giving enlargement and sobriety to the ideas of the age, and refining the intercourse of private life.”⁶ I could devote a paper to each of these seemingly ordinary but truly great aims, but will share some thoughts on just one, the cultivation of the public mind.

Although it’s unfashionable to say this, the liberal arts once gave a lovely gift to society: it transmitted the great heights of culture, this culture, to everyone. While other parts of a university education might be forward-looking, the liberal arts had no hesitation in looking backwards. There was the understanding that the liberal arts played a conserving role. It preserved for everyone, not just for the elites, beautiful music, fine art, high culture, fabulous literature, great poetry. In this regard the liberal arts weren’t ashamed to be Western, or even Eurocentric. Indeed, we had a kind of honest pride in being the caretakers of such wonderful treasures, our treasures. Liberal education once knew that keeping the culture alive was actually one of the most publicly useful things it could do. It gave beauty and intelligence, tone and cultivation, as Newman says, to society.

⁶Newman, *Idea of a University*, 191.

The liberal arts were intended for more than the private enjoyment of a few lucky students or the purview of the rich and well-born—what they preserved and transmitted were the gift the liberal arts once gave to everyone. Back then, the liberal arts didn't feel bad that Dante and Homer were dead white males. Nor did we, the children of working men and the grandchildren of immigrant women, feel bad about it either. In fact, humanists actually thought, and rightly so, that keeping Shakespeare alive was a valuable, universal gift, not an ethnocentric act.

So, in having been given such treasures, it is our turn to repay the past—by keeping it alive. Conserving the words and thoughts and works of great men and women is not only of the highest use for us individually and as a society, but an act of repayment, an act of justice, to each of them as well.

I imagine that sounds like an ending, but it isn't. I want to tie the liberal arts back to its role in the health of our country. For the liberal arts to prosper once again, we have to prove that an American liberal education can exist, one that rightly honors what America rightly honors; one that helps this country understand itself and the principles that undergird it; one that has regard for our fellow citizens, respects their character and abilities, and wants not merely to criticize but to improve their lot; one that makes us smarter in areas that really matter. That is, a liberal education that satisfies the Founders' hopes that we citizens would be so knowledgeable about history, so cognizant of our duties, so intelligent about the alternatives, and, above all, so thoughtful regarding the principles that give life to the country, that, as James Madison once said, liberty and learning would continue to lean on one another.