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The Heart of the Matter: The Value of a Liberal Arts Education

Laura Taylor

Delivered at the Phi Beta Kappa Theta of Minnesota Induction
College of St. Benedict and St. John's University

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It is such an honor to be with you on this significant occasion, as we celebrate the newest members of Phi Beta Kappa.

Skepticism about the liberal arts

I was asked to talk to you this evening about the value of the liberal arts. This is something about which there has been a great deal of discussion lately.

Critics of the liberal arts have questioned its relevance in the workplace, its effectiveness in earning a job, and the benefits of its high sticker cost. They argue that we must shift higher education toward the teaching of relevant, technical skills necessary for work and life.

For others, liberal arts is a political term. They believe that higher education has become nothing more than an indoctrination in the dogmas of political liberalism, categorized by identity politics and political correctness.

And who wouldn't have reservations about such things? In today's world, the workforce is competitive, preparing for a job seems imperative, and words like "liberal" and "conservative" have certainly become mired in controversy.

So, is it true that there is no demand for liberal arts graduates? Are the liberal arts so broad or so one-sided that they don't prepare you for the real world?

My answer to these questions is, of course, a resounding no. But, I suspect I might be preaching to the choir here.

Recent studies have confirmed that graduates of liberal arts college are not only in demand, but that the career options available to them carry far more breadth and diversity than one usually assumes. A recent sampling of our current seniors' post-graduation opportunities certainly confirms this.

Perhaps this is because the *liberal* in *liberal arts education* is not correlated with liberal politics in the modern sense of the word. Rather, it derives from the Latin and Greek words associated with "freedom" and "growth," which I believe are one of the ultimate goods that colleges and universities can provide for their students.

Relevance of the liberal arts

For me, the true value of a liberal arts education lies in its ability to open one's mind and heart, so that they might fall in lifelong love with learning. This has never been more relevant, more useful, or more important than it is today.

My own Introduction to the liberal arts

My own introduction to the power of the liberal arts came in an undergraduate course called Faith After the Holocaust.

I was an International Business major at the time, but the university that I attended required a broad liberal arts core curriculum that included both religion and philosophy.

So, I took this class partly out of interest, but mostly to fulfill a requirement.

For the first part of our course, Dr. Umansky led us through an historical overview of the complexities and horrors of the Nazi Holocaust of the Jews. We read primary texts, we watched documentaries, we visited the National Holocaust Museum, and we listened firsthand to the testimonies of Holocaust survivors on the six million innocent Jews who were systematically rounded up and barbarically murdered in the camps and crematoriums. The enormity of the crime and the massive, unjust suffering were, quite simply, unbearable.

During the second part of the course, we read the works of various Jewish thinkers each of whom tried to answer the question: "Where was God?" Some thinkers answered that they did not know where God was. To give an answer, they said, would trivialize the evil endured by the 6 million Jews. Other thinkers answered that God was hidden, silent, absent, or even dead. Still others answered that God was there suffering with the victims and weeping with them in their pain.

The work of one thinker in particular stood out to me. In his article "Cloud of Smoke, Pillar of Fire" Irving Greenberg, a contemporary modern orthodox rabbi, said, "*No statement, theological or otherwise, should be made that would not be credible in the presence of burning children.*"¹

For Greenberg, the magnitude of suffering exemplified in the Holocaust could no longer be rationally or theologically justified as part of God's plan for the world. Moreover, he claimed that a theology that does not speak of the divine presence in the midst of those who have been abandoned, burned, or broken could have nothing to say to us.

¹ Irving Greenberg, "Cloud of Smoke, Pillar of Fire: Judaism, Christianity, and Modernity after the Holocaust" in *Auschwitz: Beginning of a New Era? Reflections on the Holocaust*, ed. Eva Fleischner (New York: KTAV Publishing House, 1977), 23.

Later in the article, Greenburg went on to say (and this is the important part), “To talk of love and of a God who cares in the presence of the burning children is obscene and incredible; to leap in and pull a child out of a pit, to clean its face and heal its body, is to make the most powerful statement—the only statement that counts.”

In other words, it is *we* who are called to make visible God’s divine presence in a terribly broken world. If there can be such a strong force of evil in the world as manifest in the Holocaust, then there can also be realized in the world the most incredible good and this comes in the form of the ethical mandate – NEVER AGAIN.

Like a good liberal arts education, the lessons of this class have stayed with me for the last 18 years. It challenged my assumptions about “progress” and “civilization,” about human courage and human folly, and about good and evil. It broke me out of my narrow-view of history and theology to see that they fields are not simply about dates and facts, doctrines and theories. But, more importantly, this class removed the false sense of security that there are “right” answers to big questions. It made me deeply uncomfortable, but is also left me wanting more.

I immediately changed my major, and as they say, the rest is history. A requirement that I had intended to get out of the way had become a part of my way. My window on the world had been opened wide.

So, what is the value of a liberal arts education? And how is it useful in the real world? I believe that the answers to these questions can be found in certain habits of the mind and heart that are necessary for reflective citizenship. They are the habits embodied by the members of Phi Beta Kappa sitting before us today.

Habits of the Mind

They think critically.

They question.

They consider others’ perspectives.

They listen.

They speak clearly.

They interpret.

They analyze.

They experiment.

They grapple.

They create.

They explore.

They solve.

They imagine.

They reason.

They read.

They write consciously.

They see opportunity.

They wander.

They innovate.

They err.

They practice.

They connect.

They grow; and

They fall in love with learning.

Students of the liberal arts study foreign languages, they learn the pleasure of debate, they write poetry and music, they solve mathematical formulas, they explore religion and philosophy, and they study cultures and perspectives other than their own. They learn how much people are different—and how much people have in common.

In times of great division, the capacity to take seriously multiple viewpoints, to self-assess, and to uphold the rigors of fact-based reason and inquiry with compassion and cultural agility is imperative. Without these skills, discussions all too often degenerate in to heated arguments, hazy understandings of science and history, or thoughtless tweets.

It strikes me that we need reflective citizens that *in-habit* these habits of the mind today more than ever.

Habits of the Heart

In addition to these habits of the mind, however, there are also habits that stir the heart and soul. These are not something that can be measured in grades or exams, but rather in the way we live our lives. I wish to speak about two of these habits in particular—resilience and kinship.

First, a liberally educated student is resilient. A good liberal arts education teaches students to think outside the box, to fail elegantly, to overcome obstacles, to adapt, and to learn from their failure. It gives one the capacity to be resilient and to overcome diversity.

An undercurrent of trauma runs through everyday life: things break, people hurt our feelings, friends and family become ill or die, violence erupts in our neighborhood or in cities halfway across the globe, and we inevitably experience pain, disappointment, heartache, insecurity, separation and loss.

Some days it will feel like your house is coming down. But, you can get through this. Dig deep. Draw on the skills you've learned here. In time, with a little creativity, empathy, resourcefulness, self-awareness, and a whole lot of bravery and grit, what initially feels unbearable can become manageable. A broken heart still beats.

Liberally educated students also understand kinship. Mother Theresa once said, “We have forgotten that we belong to one another.” In his article “Only Connect: The Goals of a Liberal Education,” William Cronon notes contends that liberal education nurtures human freedom and growth in the service of human community. We are not truly free until all are free. Thus, he argues, we must exercise our freedom and liberal arts training in such a way as to make a difference in the world and make a difference for more than just ourselves.²

It is we who must jump into the fire and recognize the humanity of others who have been made to feel like non-persons. We must stand with marginalized, the suffering, and those whose dignity has been denied because of their race, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, ability, religion, national origin, citizenship, socioeconomic status, or immigration status. This I believe.

It is not easy. In fact, it requires resilience, strength, courage, and determined wit. But, I have seen the students here at St. Ben's and St. John's demonstrate these values on numerous occasions. You have created community art, organized protests, produced documentaries, started social media campaigns, given theatrical performances—all with the goal of igniting social change in our community. To use St. Benedict's poetic

² William Cronon, “Only Connect. . . : The Goals of a Liberal Arts Education, *The American Scholar* 67, no. 4 (1998): 73-80.

language, you have attend to things with the ear of your hearts. You have remembered that we belong to one another.

You all amaze me every single day—both inside and outside of the classroom.

Conclusion

To the inductees of Phi Beta Kappa sitting before us, your college experience has given you the time and the space to re-imagine yourselves and the world you live in.

But, tomorrow you must be prepared to roll up your sleeves because the world is waiting for talented men and women like you to lead it to a better place. You have the power to co-create the just and equitable world that we all deserve. Do so with long study and great love.

This, for me, is the heart of the matter and the true value of a liberal arts education, and it has never been more relevant, more useful, or more important than it is today.

You are the architects of the world we live in. You are stewards of this sacred space. Rise to the occasion, and go forth with all your heart.

Congratulations to our newest members of Theta Minnesota!