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The art of liberation: Life in the liberal arts

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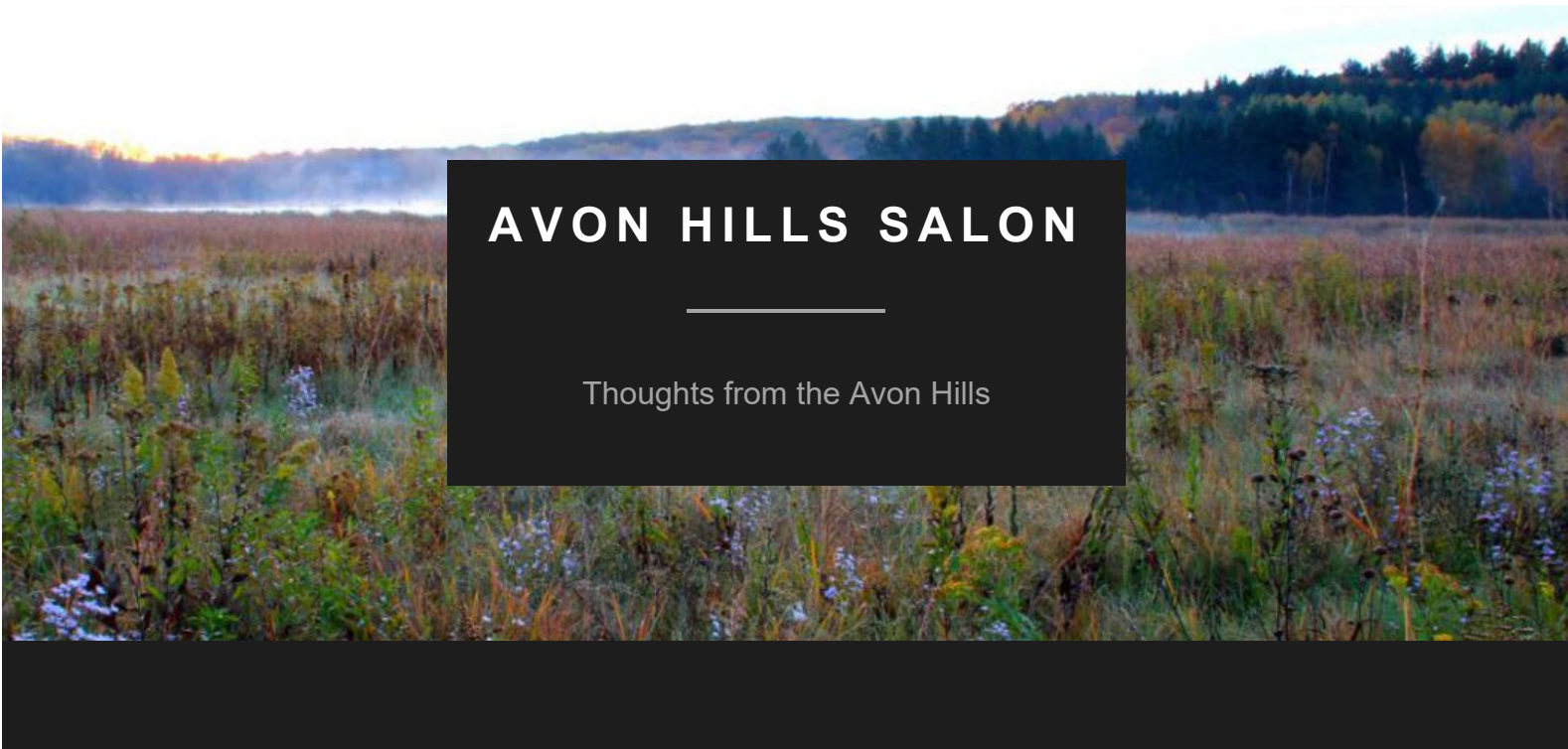
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Jason Schlude on “The Art of Liberation: Life in the Liberal Arts”

MAY 13, 2020

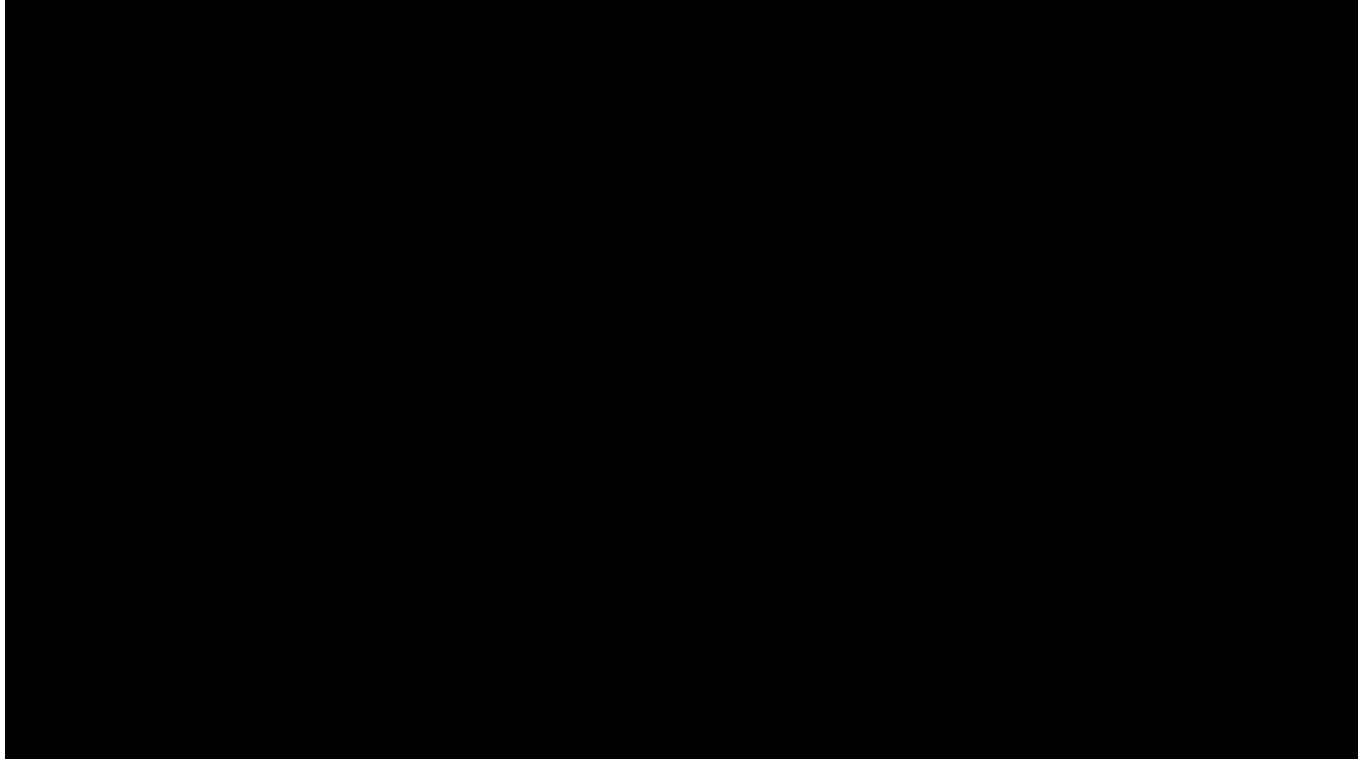


Every year at colleges and universities across the United States, the spring is a time to induct new students into Phi Beta Kappa, the longest standing academic honor society in our country. Phi Beta Kappa celebrates talented students who have chosen to pursue a liberal arts education, rich in its study of the humanities, languages, natural science, mathematics, social science, and fine arts. The idea is that there is something special about a liberal arts education that makes for deep understanding, incisive thinking, clear and compelling communication, and ultimately personal growth, leadership, and success, broadly defined. At the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John’s University, we, too, celebrate

these students, and in doing so celebrate the liberal arts mission that drives our community. Given the opportunity to address these students and our community at such an unusual time, I asked myself an important question: why does a liberal arts education matter, especially at such an

imperfect moment?

One can hear my answer in this recorded address. It was originally posted on CSB/SJU’s Phi Beta Kappa Facebook page on May 4, 2020 (<https://www.facebook.com/CSBSJUPhiBetaKappa/>). The full text follows below.



Greetings to you, students, faculty, staff, and family of the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John’s University. And congratulations to the new members of Phi Beta Kappa. My name is Jason Schlude, a professor of Classics and chair and of the Department of Languages and Cultures, and I have the honor of addressing you today. Phi Beta Kappa is the oldest and most widely known and respected academic honor society in the United States—and we are proud to welcome you to it. It is a society whose mission is to promote the study of the liberal arts and sciences and to highlight their vitality in our world. In this way, the occasion at hand is also a celebration for our whole campus community—a campus community that in this present moment is flung far and wide, but a community that remains united in its vision for the world. Whatever drew each of us to St. Ben’s and St. John’s, we have all come to appreciate how important it is to become whole scholars and whole people. By growing in every direction at once, we know we offer the world the best of ourselves.

To begin, I wish to acknowledge our present circumstances. I know this is not the address you were expecting. This is anything but a perfect moment. We are not together in person, in a hallowed hall, surrounded by friends and faculty, literally feeling the warmth of so many jolly bodies sitting together on a warm spring afternoon. I am not standing before you in my doctoral gown from the University of California, Berkeley, a gown trimmed in gold, striking in its deep blue, a color so distinctive it is called, in fact, “California blue.” There is a serious public health crisis at hand, with students seemingly cast to the winds too early, each of them—each of you—living in so-called isolation, likely lonely, wondering what the future will hold. This was a decision made out of concern for your safety and for your community’s safety. It would not be an exaggeration to say that we made it out of our love for this community. Before I say anything further, I can assure you the professors, coaches, and staff of St. Ben’s and St. John’s prize your welfare above all else and remain steadfast in their commitment to helping you envision and realize your future, step by step, wherever you may be at this time. Even so, that fact cannot erase the disruption, disorientation, and distress you are feeling.

It is hard to know what to say in these circumstances. And I certainly don’t feel like the perfect person to address you in them. Who am I to speak to you? We are all complex in our own ways—impossible to neatly sum up. I’m a father, a husband, a friend, a teacher—more, too, I suppose. These are important roles—ones I would not give up for the world; they are my world—but they don’t distinguish me as particularly unusual. Most important for this occasion is my identity as a teacher. I am a professor of Classics, the field that studies the ancient Mediterranean and Middle East, especially Greece and Rome. It is the original interdisciplinary field of study, the original liberal arts major, involving study of language, literature, history, philosophy, religion, anthropology, art, architecture, archaeology, and geology. In this way, my daily life is the pursuit of liberal arts education. To that, I can speak. So let me speak with you today as a teacher in the liberal arts who would like to offer a few humble reflections on this tradition, however imperfect these reflections may be.

To fully appreciate the power of a liberal arts education and how it can be an anchor for us in the turbulent waters of this historical moment, we need to begin with the roots of the “liberal arts” and the freedom to which they point. These English terms arise from the Latin language. “Arts” come from the noun *ars*, *artis*, meaning “art” or “skill.” These arts then involve practical skills, a detail sometimes lost in translation. But they certainly also are bound up with the idea of an art, a finely tuned craft with creative power, with aesthetic beauty.

The “liberal” element has been politicized in modern society. Whether that is accurate is not for

me to judge today. But the root of the word signifies something else. In Latin, the verb liberare means “to free.” This is a crucial concept for the liberal arts. Students who pursue them develop their arts and skills to “free” themselves. This freedom may look a bit different for each of us—but there is surely a freedom to be found in the liberal arts, and we hope you have found it in your time at St. Ben’s and St. John’s and will continue to enjoy it throughout your lives. On the one hand, this is a freedom from a narrow perspective. Whatever your primary academic and professional interest, you have embraced a broad course of study, including the humanities, sciences, mathematics, multiples languages, fine arts, in addition to courses in religion and ethics, where multiple fields are brought to bear on questions of meaning and morality. In this work, you have been freed from seeing the world from a single point of view, freed from ignorance, freed from a poverty of ideas, we might say. And for many, there is an additional liberation. A liberal arts education gives you the ability to improve the physical circumstances of your life as well. Anyone, no matter what one’s socio-economic background, can find a salvation in the liberal arts: the ability to use their arts and skills to move beyond an upbringing limited in its tangible resources and pursue a life with greater financial opportunity and security. In other words, the liberal arts offers a liberation from a poverty of ideas and a material poverty. We were all poorer, in one way or another, before we pursued a liberal arts education.

The liberal arts world is one I have a personal history with, as we all do. I was one of those students with a more modest background. I grew up in St. Louis, MO. My father was a stone mason, my mother a secretary and then nurse’s aide. They had four children, among whom I was last. While they were preparing for my arrival, they had to find a new home under unexpected circumstances. They had to buy fast and cheap. And the result was a house over 100 years old with plaster disintegrating before our eyes. We had to take the walls down ourselves, the plaster and wooden slats dragged out bucket by bucket and dumped in the backyard. Then we tried to put them back up. That took money and energy, and my parents were short of both at the end of long work hours. Practically as long as I can remember, at least one, if not multiple, rooms of the house had no walls. Often you looked upon rough boards into which old asbestos siding was tacked. The walls were only closed up following my undergraduate years. It was a home I loved—and sometimes hated. It was all I knew, and yet I rarely brought any friend there, out of sheer embarrassment. The best man in my wedding went to high school with me (I was his best man, too). He still drives past my old home every day on his way to work. But in our friendship of nearly 25 years, I bet he entered my house fewer than five times. I was too good at listening for his car so I could meet him on the street—or porch, if necessary.

My parents, however, also knew the importance of education—a broad education. They had an

absolute faith in it that seems increasingly hard to find today. In fact, since we lived in areas where public education was underfunded, and the only affordable private option was Catholic education, years before I was born my family converted to Catholicism just so we could attend a Catholic grade school (a requirement apparently). Even so, it was a sacrifice for my parents—but they made it. And I knew what a gift it was. Already at 10 years of age I knew that education was my ticket out, my ticket to more. This proved the beginning of my path to a liberal arts education. I went on to attend a Jesuit high school, where I learned just how much I loved learning anything and everything, and how growth was to be found in pursuing the unknown and strange, rather the familiar and comfortable. So I next went to Macalester College in St. Paul, MN, where I pursued my liberal arts education. When selecting my majors, knowing I wanted to study everything, and that would make me a versatile thinker and citizen, I picked the most interdisciplinary fields I could find: Classics, religious studies, and geology. And then, knowing the power that teachers had in my life, I wanted to be one. And so four years later, I found myself driving my dad’s old Ford F-150 pick-up truck to California, to pursue graduate study in ancient history and Mediterranean archaeology at Berkeley. It was a place I never thought I would live. California was an alien world to me.

Why I went there is a story that suggests a liberal arts education can offer another, third form of liberation to its students as well. When I was thinking of what graduate school to attend, a dear college professor who had attended Berkeley gave me an important piece of advice. She said, “Yes, you want an excellent university. But make sure to look at what their doctoral gowns look like, because you’ll be wearing that gown for a long time. There is nothing like California blue.” I laughed. But I did know what her gown looked like. Beth wore it to every convocation at Macalester—and it was gorgeous. So I went to Berkeley.

I started this address today mentioning that Berkeley gown, which I now share with Beth. I absolutely love it. I love it because of all that is wrapped up in it. Even if you were seeing me today in that California blue, you likely couldn’t guess at most of it. You might not know that every year of graduate school—for the first four years—felt like my last. I didn’t know all the languages that were needed, whether those were additional foreign languages I had yet to learn or the polished and specialized English vocabulary that seemed required for graduate seminars. I didn’t come from a major research university where scholars lectured to you at length, giving you a grand vista of antiquity, connecting all the people, places, and dates so that you were left with an interconnected mental map. I mostly knew islands on the map and the ocean that separated them was unknown and formidable. I had my liberal arts education—and I applied it like a scrapper using every last survival skill, deliberately crisscrossing the new geography and creating my own

map. Still, I felt hopelessly behind, year after year, wondering if I could keep up, if I had another year in me.

As these anxieties filled my mind, routinely when the academic year was drawing to a close, I would walk across campus, through Sproul Plaza, for those who know it. Most of you have seen pictures of it, from the 1960s, filled with the students who launched the free speech movement—another freedom that sprung from liberal education. This was a unique place in the world that played its part in liberating us from the past. It was an imperfect achievement, to be sure. Not all have freedom of speech yet—not fully. And yet the freedom was real. While I only attended Berkeley in the 2000s, the various products of free speech were still to be found in the plazas, some serious, others far less so. A political comedian set up shop to heckle the educated, reminding professors and students alike that we did not have all the answers. We didn’t even have all the questions. A man showed up most days around noon to blast John Lennon from his boombox and broadcast a conspiracy that led to his death. Student groups ran all manner of stunts, the most memorable being a pine-wood derby race. But this was unlike any pine-wood derby race I had seen. The vehicles had been purchased from adult specialty stores and were unusually aerodynamic, every color of the rainbow, and did not roll down the track, but rather vibrated at adjustable rates. Another man stood on a stool atop a bucket, denouncing the brutality and injustice in the world, while shouting, “Happy, happy, happy.” At times, instructors and staff put up picket lines to win living wages and better health benefits, strikes temporarily preventing undergraduate education and key student services. In another standoff, students hoisted themselves into giant oak trees and set up tents in the canopies to prevent their removal for a new construction project. This led to a lengthy standoff that ran up security costs and produced violent exchanges with police officers tasked with safe removal of the “treesitters.” Sometimes it was hard to know when justice crossed the line.

As I would stroll through this bizarre world, I made a point to stop by the bookstore. There, year after year, I would pause to look at the Berkeley doctoral gown, draped upon a confident mannequin. And I wondered whether I would ever wear that gown. I wondered if I would abandon graduate school and disappoint my professors. Of course, I knew that was rubbish. I knew those teachers would be proud of any choice I made, as long as I gave every task my all, determined what was my next and best step, and then took it. What was most important for me in those moments and what stayed with me, before I passed by the gown again to return home, cook dinner, and then crack the books once again, was that my past professors believed in me. They helped me to grow and make it to Berkeley. They had the confidence that I could do it. Beth, Andy, Nanette, and Calvin were always with me—and still are.

Several years later I did finish. And graduation came, providing another illustration that life was not perfect. I found out that the official Berkeley doctoral gown was nearly \$1000. At that point, I was still a graduate student, and my wife and I had our first baby boy. The gown was certainly not an essential need—and the expense could not be justified. This was the cost of food that would feed our family for two months. In addition, I learned my parents could not attend the graduation, which was hard to bear; ill-health and anxiety springing from it prevented that. And yet it remained a day I will never forget. My father-in-law and his wife did not attend the ceremony, but they generously purchased the gown for me as a surprise—a very sweet surprise. And while my own parents could not come, my amazing mother-in-law made a point to be there. She and my wife stood behind me, and I held in my arms my new son who played with the gold tassel on my cap. It was imperfect, but it was beautiful—a charmed day in my life, if ever there was one. The gown still represents the many imperfections of my life.

So here we sit—or perhaps you are standing. I’m in one room of my house, my two kids are in another room, sometimes playing happily, sometimes arguing and trying to pry the prize of the moment from one another’s hands. Maybe they will break through the door at any moment. My eleven-year-old son is writing a song with a friend called “What a weary little world,” my five-year old is sad since he can’t see his friends anymore. He longs for the day that he can drive on the highway in sight of our house. I’m tired and my patience is short—and there is still so much isolation, frustration, and pain in the weeks and months ahead. You are where you are, most of you far from campus, not with those friends and faculty I talked about earlier. Maybe you are alone right now—in one way or another. I hope you and your family are secure in your food, shelter, and health. Or maybe you are experiencing uncertainty in your life in one or all these ways. That thought pains me. But I know this is true for many of you.

Yet I would suggest your liberal arts education has prepared you for this, too. It offers you not only liberation from ignorance and liberation to achieve a better life, but a third liberation: freedom from the perfect. Despite what some may say, the liberal arts have prepared you for the imperfect, for the real world. The real world is a place of poverty and abundance, pain and pleasure, anxiety and anger but also hope and gratitude, loneliness and love. It is a world disorienting in the complexity of its problems and experiences. In preparation for that world, have you taken a course of study that has offered you only oversimplified problems with perfect, uncontested answers? The questions you have faced at St. Ben’s and St. John’s have been far more difficult to understand and articulate, with answers even harder formulate. What is the right balance between individual freedom and national security? What about individual freedom and

public health? How can we balance national and international interests? How do we find and understand God in a world of so much pain—and yet wonder and joy? How should we approach economic development while protecting the environment? How can we push the frontiers of science and technology and be ethically responsible? What is the proper balance between freedom of speech and protecting the dignity of every human being? How do we cherish our own familiar traditions and embrace different, unfamiliar traditions of new community members? How can we correct the grave injustices of racial and gender discrimination in a world where one person’s gain is perceived as another person’s loss? How important is the relationship between history (however ancient or difficult) and our increasingly modernist world? And how can we as poets, potters, painters, pianists, photographers, how can we as artists best engage, represent, challenge, and shape this world? This is your liberal arts education—an education that eschews the perfect, and values the hard, the intractable, and the imperfect.

Each of us at this moment, seemingly on his, her, or their own island, lives with an imperfect world. We accept that—and yet we must cling to the beauty that it still offers. This beauty includes your many accomplishments to date, academic, athletic, and otherwise. I hope, too, that for many of you your family is at hand—maybe a mother or father, if they are in your lives, maybe a grandparent, aunt or uncle, brother or sister. I bet if they are with you, and you pause a moment to look in their eyes, you will see a pride and love born of a lifetime—your lifetime—spent feeding you, bathing you, dressing you, listening to you, supporting you in every way possible, watching you take step after step, proud at every one, now seeing you fully as adults, ready to go out and change the world that needs you. I wager you will see gratitude in their eyes because you have let them be part of your life. And remember, too, you are in the hearts of so many who are stretched across the American landscape and world—and those hearts can be a shelter as well. The group I know best are teachers. My teachers’ hearts held me—and still hold me, adult that I am. And our hearts at the College of St. Benedict and St. John’s University hold you at this imperfect moment. We spend our days wondering if you are okay, wondering what you are feeling. We are frustrated at how unfair this is for you. We try to do our best to give you what you deserve, as imperfect as it is at this time. But as we do this, know that we do hold you in our hearts every day. I can guarantee the pride, love, and gratitude that we all feel when we reflect on your time at St. Ben’s and St. John’s. We cherish that you have spent this part of your life with us. In it, we have come to know you. We have learned your fears and seen your momentary failures. But we also have witnessed your talent, tenacity, accomplishments, contributions, and hope. And we love you for all of this complexity.

A perfect world would be welcome perhaps, but a life blind to all else would be very small. I prefer

freedom from the perfect, because the imperfect is a central part of life, because struggle is our companion. But we must never forget the beauty that is in the world. Today the beauty that it offers is you, wherever you are, however you may be. You are beautiful. And the art of liberation, offered by the liberal arts, only helps us to see it more clearly, no matter what the circumstances facing us. Congratulations and thank you.

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