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Liberal Arts Education and the End of the World as You Know It

Hello. Welcome to your college education.

I want to talk a little bit this morning about what you've gotten yourself into.

A Minnesota artist and friend, Rachel Breen, titled an exhibit of her work earlier this year "Seven Meals." Her premise was that the thin wall of separation between civilization and barbarism could be defined in material terms as seven consecutive meals. In other words, a community or society deprived of seven meals in a row will devolve, turn against itself, discard centuries of custom and ritual, sacrifice meaning and morality on the stone cold altar of basic material need.

If you want to get a feel for what this could look like and feel like, you might want to read Cormac McCarthy's novel *The Road*, in which a man and his young son rummage desperately across an American landscape left desolate and without a food supply by a nuclear event. Hunger has turned the dwindling populace into scavengers and cannibals. The parent-child relationship at the center of the story is the only light left in a perpetual moral night. The father is a kind of Robinson Crusoe figure, intent on using the skills, knowledge and judgment acquired in better times to construct some sense of order. The problem is that he's shipwrecked in Hell. Culture has taken an acid bath in raw necessity.

This is a frightening idea that gives one pause: Everything that matters to us can fall apart.

...You're probably asking yourself right about now how your college education has gotten off to such a bleak and depressing start.

But my friend's exhibit and McCarthy's novel don't simply draw our attention to the delicate and vulnerable state of the world and our place in it. Their art also quietly raises the more fundamental - and more challenging - question of what holds it all together in the first place.

Because at the same time that they ask their audiences to reflect upon such disturbing prospects, they are calling upon us to notice what matters most, to appreciate what is valuable to us and why we deem it so - to consciously and deliberately examine HOW we bring ourselves together and attend to our needs as a society or community.

At the same time that their work directs our attention to why food matters, for example, we are reminded of why ART matters.

Because at the same time, it is precisely by picking up the novel, by attending the art exhibit, by thinking and conversing (even arguing) about what these mean, that we are doing some of that work of holding it all together.

And because, at the same time, the critical examination of these questions – the question of what matters most, of what brings us together and what drives us apart – unavoidably turns our attention and our imagination toward another truth: the way things are now is not necessarily as they SHOULD or always WILL be. Society - and its histories and possibilities – also matters.

This is a powerful idea that gives one pause... and, like it or not, responsibility: Things could be different. (And most probably will be.) The way that we live our lives is mutable, transformable, improvable.

The question of what matters most to us, and the question of HOW what matters finds a place in the way we live together – IF it is to continue to matter, IF it is to be reflected in the way we live together - needs to be examined, contemplated, discussed, critiqued. Dare I say it? ... Studied.

Art and thought, history and society, and the material conditions of life and culture (their economy, certainly, but also the biology and chemistry and physics of it all) are all inseparably connected. And they matter enough to be studied, together.

You've come to the right place. The paradigm for study that you have chosen by coming to this place is the Liberal Arts tradition. This means four years of immersion in multiple ways of knowing and questioning. I assume you are already aware of the requirements for graduation: language study; a first-year symposium nourished on reading, writing, and discussing; social sciences; natural sciences; humanities; fine arts; ethics. Multiple ways of knowing brought together in your education.

What you may not be aware of is that these requirements reflect an understanding about what education should be, an understanding that dates as far back as the ancient Greco-Roman world. This model of education was named the LIBERAL Arts because knowing in this mode was considered a mark of liberation, the distinction between a free person and a slave. In the modern interpretation of the Liberal Arts tradition, knowing is a way of transformation, of improvement, of freedom for both the individual and the society in which he or she lives.

Language is fundamental in the Liberal Arts tradition. For the ancient Greeks and Romans, language (or *logos*, which is Greek for both language and reason) was the foundation of all other ways of knowing.

In other words, language matters. This is, in an important sense, the first lesson of the Liberal Arts.

In a democratic society, language is the primary medium in which we define our disputes, and play them out endlessly. There is, of course, the obvious benefit that we are able to settle our disputes peaceably through language. And yet, in language nothing is ever really settled, everything remains open to change. And this is a good thing, because the anarchism implicit in language makes authoritarian control of meaning impossible. Language allows things to be unsettled, while bringing us together in conversation and debate.

Language socializes thought. And politicizes it – as evidenced by the fact that when I pronounced the word “socializes” just now, many of you winced at the negative connotations of the term generated by the rhetorical maneuvers of public debate over the past year or so. What I have in mind is the fact that language brings things to mind from other people’s minds. Indeed, when we talk about the “life of the mind” we are talking about a common heritage of thinking and imagining in which we commune... in language. Language names and represents, transports and transforms the mute object world; it brings philosophical and scientific abstractions out of the ether and into communities, into dialogue. It gives the individual imagination a societal home, and grants public voice to private experience.

And in a culturally diverse society, different languages map the cultural histories and identities of those with whom we live in association. The languages you speak will shape the relationships into which you are able to enter. The languages you understand will propel your travel across the invisible boundaries of cultural difference. Your ability to enunciate yourself with a tongue other than your native tongue will name and transport you into new communities.

Language, art, history, society, the material conditions of life are all studied together in the Liberal Arts tradition. Keep this in mind when you contemplate and discuss, and critique – as students tend to do - the world language requirement, the writing assignments in your First Year Symposium, and the mathematics and natural science and social science requirements. Keep this in mind as you explore the question of what matters, of how our world is organized, of how it can or should be different.

Once again, welcome to your college education. It may very well be the end of the world as you know it. I’m sure you will be pleased to know that meals are included.