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Erica Stonestreet

College of St. Benedict | St. John's University, estonestreet@csbsju.edu

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“Splitting Stars and Splitting Wood”

Address to New Members of Phi Beta Kappa (Theta of Minnesota)

May 3, 2011

In recent years, there has been a widespread perception that liberal arts education in general, and humanities education in particular, are gradually being eroded away in the face of tightening budgets and an ever-growing emphasis on the practicality of education. If you're going to college, after all, you're supposed to end up with a so-called “good” job. And what better guarantee of a “good” job than a major in business or science, right? After all, as the joke goes, the humanities major's refrain is always “Do you want fries with that?”

Whether or not the perception about the decline of the liberal arts actually stands up to scrutiny, I tell my prospective philosophy majors when they come to me worried about “What am I going to do with this?” that they can do *anything they want*. This may be a bit of an exaggeration, and I'm sure I don't need to sell the liberal arts to those of you who are in this room; you're all running, teaching at, enrolled in, or (let's not forget) paying for a liberal arts college, and many of you are now members of Phi Beta Kappa, which means you've demonstrated excellence across a broad range of intellectual interests. Now, if we *have* to emphasize skills and payoff, humanities classes (and *especially* a philosophy major, of course!) are great for imparting critical thinking skills and clear written and oral communication skills, both of which open up vast vistas of job possibilities even if you're among the more scientifically-minded.

Now, although the practical value of a liberal arts and sciences degree is certainly important, some might say that emphasizing the pragmatic is the wrong way to defend against the forces of budget cuts and pressure to get good jobs. (In some moods, I'm one of those people.) Instead, the argument goes, we should be emphasizing the inherent value of the liberal arts and sciences — their value independent of any practical payoff they may have. (By the way, this goes for getting non-science majors some serious scientific study as well as the other way around.) An argument from inherent value may be less subject to compromise in the face of a shallow practicality.

What's the Point of Liberal Education?

Those of you who have received e-mails from me have probably seen the quote at the bottom by educator and classicist Edith Hamilton. She writes: "It has always seemed strange to me that in our endless discussions about education so little stress is laid on the pleasure of becoming an educated person, the enormous interest it adds to life. To be able to be caught up into the world of thought — that is to be educated." So in addition to great critical thinking and communication skills, I would add that what the liberal arts and sciences give us is the world of thought to get caught up in.

This idea is illustrated for me in a poem. I first read this poem as an undergraduate, on a sunny late afternoon, sitting under a cottonwood tree in the Arboretum at Gustavus Adolphus College where I'd retreated with my copy of Robert Frost's collected works, and it has stayed with me ever since — enough that, as a graduate student in Pittsburgh, I undertook to memorize it. Although it's a bit long, please indulge me as I share with you "The Star-Splitter."

"You know Orion always comes up sideways.
Throwing a leg up over our fence of mountains,
And rising on his hands, he looks in on me
Busy outdoors by lantern-light with something
I should have done by daylight, and indeed,

After the ground is frozen, I should have done
Before it froze, and a gust flings a handful
Of waste leaves at my smoky lantern chimney
To make fun of my way of doing things,
Or else fun of Orion's having caught me.
Has a man, I should like to ask, no rights
These forces are obliged to pay respect to?"
So Brad McLaughlin mingled reckless talk
Of heavenly stars with hugger-mugger farming,
Till having failed at hugger-mugger farming
He burned his house down for the fire insurance
And spent the proceeds on a telescope
To satisfy a lifelong curiosity
About our place among the infinities.

"What do you want with one of those blame things?"
I asked him well beforehand. "Don't you get one!"

"Don't call it blamed; there isn't anything
More blameless in the sense of being less
A weapon in our human fight," he said.
"I'll have one if I sell my farm to buy it."
There where he moved the rocks to plow the ground
And plowed between the rocks he couldn't move,
Few farms changed hands; so rather than spend years
Trying to sell his farm and then not selling,
He burned his house down for the fire insurance
And bought the telescope with what it came to.
He had been heard to say by several:
"The best thing that we're put here for's to see;
The strongest thing that's given us to see with's
A telescope. Someone in every town
Seems to me owes it to the town to keep one.
In Littleton it might as well be me."
After such loose talk it was no surprise
When he did what he did and burned his house down.

Mean laughter went about the town that day
To let him know we weren't the least imposed on,
And he could wait — we'd see to him tomorrow.
But the first thing next morning we reflected
If one by one we counted people out
For the least sin, it wouldn't take us long
To get so we had no one left to live with.
For to be social is to be forgiving.
Our thief, the one who does our stealing from us,
We don't cut off from coming to church suppers,
But what we miss we go to him and ask for.
He promptly gives it back, that is if still
Uneaten, unworn out, or undisposed of.
It wouldn't do to be too hard on Brad
About his telescope. Beyond the age
Of being given one for Christmas gift,
He had to take the best way he knew how
To find himself in one. Well, all we said was
He took a strange thing to be roguish over.
Some sympathy was wasted on the house,
A good old-timer dating back along;
But a house isn't sentient; the house
Didn't feel anything. And if it did,
Why not regard it as a sacrifice,
And an old-fashioned sacrifice by fire,
Instead of a new-fashioned one at auction?

Out of a house and so out of a farm
At one stroke (of a match), Brad had to turn
To earn a living on the Concord railroad,
As under-ticket-agent at a station
Where his job, when he wasn't selling tickets,
Was setting out, up track and down, not plants
As on a farm, but planets, evening stars
That varied in their hue from red to green.

He got a good glass for six hundred dollars.
His new job gave him leisure for stargazing.
Often he bid me come and have a look
Up the brass barrel, velvet black inside,
At a star quaking in the other end.
I recollect a night of broken clouds
And underfoot snow melted down to ice,
And melting further in the wind to mud.
Bradford and I had out the telescope.
We spread our two legs as we spread its three,
Pointed our thoughts the way we pointed it,
And standing at our leisure till the day broke,
Said some of the best things we ever said.
That telescope was christened the Star-Splitter,
Because it didn't do a thing but split
A star in two or three, the way you split
A globule of quicksilver in your hand
With one stroke of your finger in the middle.
It's a star-splitter if there ever was one,
And ought to do some good if splitting stars
'Sa thing to be compared with splitting wood.

We've looked and looked, but after all where are we?
Do we know any better where we are,
And how it stands between the night tonight
And a man with a smoky lantern chimney?
How different from the way it ever stood?

Maybe my interpretation of this poem is naïve, but I love it because I think it celebrates the love of inquiry for its own sake. (Overlooking, of course, the insurance fraud Brad McLaughlin perpetrates!) And I love it because it ends with a question. *Do* we know any better where we are? Or what our relationship to the universe is? I like to think that the poem asks us to think so — the narrator realizes that the telescope doesn't have to have *practical* value to have value. Still, that question resonates: Do we know any better where we are? It seems like it, but just why is hard to pinpoint. Intrinsic

value is like that sometimes. We know it when we see it, but we can't always explicate it.

That kind of open-endedness takes some getting used to. Understanding that big questions don't have easy answers, and in fact resisting easy answers, isn't the exclusive domain of philosophy, though it might be most obvious there. The kind of ambiguity that we find in life is found throughout the liberal arts and sciences, which is why liberal education is so good at preparing critical thinkers and clear writers. Liberal education is an antidote to the kind of homey, comfortable thinking that the narrator of the poem observes in himself and his fellow Littletonians. "What do you want with one of those blame things?" the narrator asks Brad ("well beforehand"). He calls Brad's wish for a telescope "loose talk," or if he doesn't himself believe it's loose talk, then he attributes this attitude to his fellow villagers. They're not comfortable with what they can't see the point of. And what's the point of having a telescope? It'll just show the same old stuff, only bigger. So what? Or else it'll just raise more questions than it answers, and why make that kind of trouble? Life is, after all, a lot easier when you've got everything figured out and don't get too curious.

But life has a way of throwing questions at us that are as hard to avoid as they are hard to solve. Some of my colleagues across the curriculum who teach ethics seminars remind their students that if you're at all a thoughtful person, at all considerate of others, then the questions of ethics are unavoidable — rather like questions of nutrition: you might answer them better or worse, but answer them you will. Education in the liberal arts helps to inform us about the problems we might face, the facts that might help us face them, and the kinds of thinking it will take to face them successfully. If we stick to narrow vocational training, we might not be as equipped to tackle these problems, and in all likelihood we won't enjoy doing so. Liberal arts education is our version of Brad McLaughlin's telescope.

But here I am drifting back into practical terms — deeper practical terms, probably, but not the terms of intrinsic value. So let's return to the subject.

The “Argument” for Inherent Value

The poem also depicts a man taking a kind of leap of faith, giving up a stable (if difficult) life for the sake of having a telescope, and perhaps some more uncertainty. From the outside, it looks like that’s the kind of risk you take when you study the liberal arts. You don’t aim directly at mastering some list of skills, so the liberal arts don’t look too practical.

But Brad, and apparently the narrator too, thinks his was a risk worth taking — they “said some of the best things [they] ever said” because of that telescope. Their lives are enriched; the telescope “ought to do some good if splitting stars / ‘Sa a thing to be compared with splitting wood.” Some people, like my husband — who is an engineer — might think that philosophers split hairs rather than wood, but leaving that aside, we see a comparison that leaves us with another question. *Is* splitting stars (or hairs) a thing to be compared with splitting wood? Is reading Plato, Goethe, Darwin, or Cantor to be compared with building bridges or balancing corporate books? Yes and no, right? No, reading and discussing Plato’s doctrine of forms probably isn’t going to bear directly on whatever it is you’ll do to put food on the table (unless you have the unlucky fate of being by nature a philosopher). But the comparison isn’t in practical value. It’s in having value at all. And in that case they are comparable.

Splitting wood *is* worth the time and effort; so is splitting stars. But the “worth” there is of a different type. Getting caught up in the world of thought by studying Plato’s forms doesn’t heat the house. It has a worth it’s hard to explain, but that doesn’t mean it isn’t real. Just because we, with our smoky lantern chimneys, don’t change our status in the universe by contemplation, doesn’t mean it’s not worth having the tools to contemplate. The changes might not be manifest in the world; they are more likely manifest in the quality and meaning we perceive in our own lives and those of others.

The liberal arts and sciences provide us with the tools to enrich ourselves, and if we value ourselves, we should value what enriches us. It’s a bit paradoxical really: the reason to value something intrinsically is that doing so is instrumentally valuable to our well-being. This is similar

to what's known as the "paradox of hedonism": the way to achieve pleasure is, paradoxically, not to pursue pleasure directly. If you're always aiming to get pleasure, you're distracted by that aim ("Are we having fun yet? ... Are we having fun *now*?") and never notice the inherent pleasurable of the activities you engage in. But as soon as you give up the consciousness of your aim and lose yourself in the activity (playing a musical instrument is a prime example here), you've achieved your pleasure. In the terms I've been discussing, the parallel is that in order to achieve a good life, a meaningful life, we need to stop worrying about the surface manifestations of that life — the practicalities — and concentrate on the inherent interest that the world of ideas we explore in the liberal arts and sciences holds for us. Will we then go and make something practical of our lives? I think so.

What I'm arguing is the same old argument that has been around for centuries: we might do well to redefine what's practical. A "good" job shouldn't be defined in terms of salary and benefits and a good commute. It should be defined by how well it suits you, whether it makes a difference to others — in short, whether what you do has meaning. Ideally, we shouldn't have to separate our work from ourselves. We should be doing what we love, so that we can lead lives that are meaningful from the inside. Of course, that's an ideal that's hard to achieve, and we often end up compromising a bit in order to get a reasonable mix of the diverse things we value. But some of what we value, we value intrinsically, and we would do well to keep that in mind. Those of you who have been inducted into Phi Beta Kappa tonight will go on to *do* wonderful, practical things. But for four years, you have been caught up in the world of thought, and you will keep getting caught up in the world of thought as you move forward. You are educated. You will always have that, because it is intrinsically valuable.

Erica Stonestreet is an Associate Professor of Philosophy.

Editor's Note

Phi Beta Kappa is the nation's oldest and most widely known academic honor society. Only about 10 percent of the arts and sciences graduates of these distinguished institutions are selected for Phi Beta Kappa membership. The ideal Phi Beta Kappa has demonstrated intellectual integrity, tolerance for other views, and a broad range of academic interests. Each year, about one college senior in a hundred, nationwide, is invited to join Phi Beta Kappa. Membership in Phi Beta Kappa shows commitment to the liberal arts and sciences, and to freedom of inquiry and expression. (<http://www.pbk.org/>)