

*A Window into the World of Being Human:
The Importance of Liberal Arts Education*

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“I have a liberal arts degree. Do you want fries with that?” In the career-oriented world of the twenty-first century, Americans place a high emphasis on the measurable value of an education. In such a climate, liberal arts can easily seem easily dispensable and elitist. But I would argue from a different perspective. The liberal arts are essential to a university education because they teach us how to be fully human. Studying the liberal arts in college will teach you to understand the world around you, the people within it, and most importantly- yourself.

The hard sciences such as mathematics, physics, biology, and astronomy help us to understand and measure the world we live in. The social and behavioral sciences help us to understand other people- their motivations, fears, and actions. History, political science, and psychology are good examples. Still other fields of study, such as philosophy, literature, and religion, help us to learn about ourselves and our purpose in life. Performing and graphic arts give us the beauty of the past. And, walking in the footsteps of those giants who have gone before us, we learn to create our own symphonies, dances, and works of art.

The task of spewing handy statistics about the value of a broad education, I will leave to people more research-oriented than I am. William Butler Yeats said, “Education is not the filling of a bucket, but the lighting of a fire.” I believe that. What I have to offer here is the testimony of my own experience- memories of how college courses in the liberal arts changed who I am today.

The Introductory Psychology class I took in my freshman year was “one of those classes”, a course I would continue thinking about long after the final exam. One day, as my teacher began class, she announced that today we would discuss different types of schizophrenia and we were going to watch a video that showed people afflicted with that disease. I squirmed in my seat. *Who wants to watch a dumb video about crazy people?* I grumbled inside my head.

When the film started, a person with paranoid schizophrenia was being interviewed by an off-camera psychologist. What I saw surprised me. A distinguished-looking older gentleman with graying hair was speaking quite intelligently while looking into the camera. He was attempting to convince his interviewer that President Bush Sr. was out to kill him. My first reaction was incongruous disbelief. But as he continued speaking, I started wanting to believe him- this man just seemed so, well, *normal*.

And then it hit me. By my biased attitude toward people with mental illness, I had dismissed the dignity and worth of another human being. I had showed no sympathy for a person suffering from a terrible disease. I was embarrassed and humbled that afternoon, between two o’clock and two fifty. I was reminded of words my psychology teacher had spoken in an earlier class; “The first step in fighting prejudice is to admit that you yourself are prejudiced.” Sometimes, I measure the value of a course by how much it shakes me out of my complacency.

In another general education course, Political Science 101, my assumptions were challenged yet again. Heated debates would rocket around the classroom, focusing on such diverse issues as abortion, affirmative action, and the political affiliations of labor unions. Never before had all those “hot button” issues become so alive for me. I was able to talk with people whose backgrounds were the polar opposite of mine.

It might have been in that class that I first met my friend Gerard. Gerard was from Nigeria; both his parents had died of AIDS. He worked four jobs and went to school full-time, while sending as much money as he could back home to support his ten younger brothers and sisters. He worked continuously and slept very little, but I never saw him without a cheery smile on his face and a kind word in his halting English for everyone he met. Gerard had so little, but he radiated joy.

This semester, I am taking music history. The course offers us a closer look at the history and events surrounding classical music. My favorite part is getting to read original letters in the composers’ own words. The “Heiligenstadt Testament” is a letter Ludwig van Beethoven wrote to his brothers. It was found among the composer’s possessions after he died. In the letter, Beethoven discusses his worsening deafness, personal loneliness, depressive episodes, and his firm conviction that his art was great. Reading this letter for the first time moved me to tears. I will quote one of the most moving passages.

“But what Mortification if someone stood beside me and heard a flute from afar and *I* heard *nothing*; or someone *heard a Shepherd singing*, and I heard nothing. Such happenings brought me close to despair. I was not far from ending my own life- only Art, only Art held me back. Ah, it seemed impossible to me that I should leave the world before I had produced all that I felt I might, and so I spared this wretched life...” In a postscript to the letter Beethoven added this heartrending plea. “O Providence- grant me one day of pure *Joy*- the inner reverberation of true Joy has so long been a stranger to me- o when- o when, o Deity- may I feel it once more in the temple of Nature and Mankind- Never?-no-o it would be too hard.” These deep emotions poured out on paper in this letter made Beethoven human for me.

This collage of experiences has a theme; without liberal arts courses supported by a university, none of these moments that shaped me as a person would have happened. I’ll never be finished learning, but I do know that the liberal arts are helping me make a pretty good start.