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Liberal Arts Essay 2008

I do, in fact, have a younger sibling, an eight year old brother. If he were a bit older and were entering UW-Madison as a freshmen (and I certainly hope this happens some day), I would tell him this:

You managed to get into a good university, so you probably have career goals. I bet, like most people, you see college as an investment. The newspaper, the internet, and our mother can tell you that it is a very sound investment, that it will pay out huge dividends. People with university degrees make more money—it's a fact. Furthermore, this is how they explained college to you when you were a senior in high school. When guidance counselors said 'you should think about your future,' they meant and you understood 'you should think about what job you want and what you will buy with your paycheck.' I will bet that at some point someone has even made you map out alternative 'career paths' in boxes on a flow chart. The house with a hot tub and marble floors is your incentive to make it through college.

No one in this life or the next will punish for approaching college this way. It is a perfectly reasonable attitude. Indeed, it epitomizes all sorts of values that we hold dear. I am a junior this year, and I still get uncomprehending stares from our relatives when I remind them that I am a history major. I can tell that they are thinking, "why on earth should anyone choose to study anything besides finance?" "We had to work in a factory, how lucky she is to go to college, and as a girl besides!" I promise they will say things to you like "work hard and make something of yourself!" "Live the American dream!" "Be like Horatio Algiers!" Now, I am not telling you that you should deliberately avoid 'making something of yourself.' However, for the time you are in school, you should not treat your studies simply a means to an end, as four years of drudgery before you get to start making money and buying cars. You would be selling yourself short. Liberal education is perhaps the one chance you will be given to become something besides the product of simple force and circumstance.

Heading into college, it is useful to think about how the inventors of the 'liberal arts' system originally understood their creation. In Rome, an education in the 'liberal arts' was seen as the program of study befitting a free (*libere*) citizen. This was 'freedom' in a fairly restrictive sense meaning that a freeman did not work in trade and had the leisure and the independent means to engage in scholarly pursuits. For such a person, the cultivation of the liberal arts was the first and highest occupation. He/she valued wealth and power only in so far as they enabled a greater enjoyment of the pleasures of the mind. During the late Renaissance, Erasmus and his cohort held up this classical model of education as the ideal of an 'active' and integrated pedagogy that would develop the whole person in their intellectual as well as moral and emotional capacities. The modern liberal arts curriculum, with some exceptions and some amendments, is still that proscribed by Thomas More and Erasmus.

Significantly, these men believed that humanity was not a given, but rather is a laborious achievement. For them, the liberal arts, taken together constituted the ensemble of pursuits that distinguish human beings from beasts. Down through the ages, countless thinkers have continued to remind us that although human beings walk upright, there is really very little that actually distinguishes our societies from herds of sheep. And really,

it makes sense. Given that we are basically hardwired the same way as other animals, there is absolutely no reason why we should be any less bound by habit and material conditions. Routine is extremely reassuring and wants and needs are very powerful things. Birds have followed the same migration patterns for millennia. It is perfectly natural that we too should seek out patterns and familiar terrain.

That is the essence of our opportunity as students of the liberal arts. It is our one tiny interval of relative free will where we can truly say no and resist, where we can make our own path. We can choose to chart our course by the knowledge we gain rather than by economic aspirations or convention. This is not an act of adolescent willfulness where you stay out past ten o'clock even though mom told you not to. The sort of resistance I am talking about requires much more modesty—it is about constantly interrogating the assumptions that you take for granted. It is about making yourself uncomfortable and allowing your studies to change your mind and transform you from within. It is at most a semi-conscious process. This is why it is dangerous to come into college with lots of preconceived ideas about how the world works and what you expect it to give you.

Be forewarned that there will not be anyone standing over you with a stick, or even with a red pen, making you learn. Most professors have accepted the realities of grade inflation, and you will probably not be punished very severely for not learning. Your teachers will not do the hard part for you. It is not because they are lazy or mean, but because they know their own limitations. They are there to help you, but they cannot learn for you. You have to become an intellectual adult. You cannot read for an exam, for a professor, or for a report. You have to read for yourself. Above all, you must try not to be arrogant. Be honest with yourself and with your teachers—you have to understand what your capacities are and what they are not. This may seem obvious, but it took me a long time to figure it out, and I wish someone had explained it to me early on. I promise that doing these things will not hurt your chances at getting into law school or medical school. You can still have your own pool table someday if that is what you decide you want. However, you will be a better person and you will have made your own decision.