

Cover Page

Title: "The Spaces Between: Liberal Arts and Citizenship"

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As a first semester student at Madison, I walked away with a schedule including French, an 'Integrated Liberal Studies' course about Western political philosophy, Latin and a comparative literature course centered solely around the epic. At the

time, I did not see this assortment of classes as at all too “liberal arts-y” or its unfortunate and all too common synonym, “unpractical.”

My first semester proved to work out amazingly. I read Homer’s *Iliad* at the same time in two of my courses, understanding it as a piece of literature, as well as a historical text, articulating what the Ancient Greeks thought to be the nature of human beings and the universe. I read St. Augustine and Thomas Hobbes concurrently with Dante’s *Inferno* and *Paradise Lost*, exploring translations of Christianity that are diametrically opposed to one another, all of these thinkers having written in Latin sometime in their lives. In my continuing study of Western Thought, Latin and French references are ubiquitous and having first-hand knowledge of these languages has helped me to absorb the richness of these thinkers.

I share part of my academic history with you, not to recount my experience with a liberal arts education of sorts, but to parse its implications. Personally, my liberal arts education has been about the in-betweens of knowledge and ways of thinking; it has served to fill in the gaps between pieces of knowledge and singular understanding, to change and enrich my original conceptions of truth. I will attempt to explain what I mean by this.

For one of our weekly ‘Advisor Development’ meetings in the L&S Honors Program, with which I am a Peer Advisor, we had a representative from UHS Counseling Services come in to talk to the advisors about student stress. He

used a metaphor about rocks in a jar, the jar representing a perfect resume or the end of a college career. He claimed that many students try to fill the jar with pieces of sand or drops of water like extra curricular activities or multiple majors, when really the jar could be filled much faster with three or four really big rocks such as a great GPA or an exceptional letter of recommendation from a faculty member that one took the time to get to know.

I am going to regard these rocks in a slightly different light. There is no doubt that the big rocks of the humanities, social sciences, natural sciences, a language and a major ground a liberal arts education. However, is the reverence that the term 'liberal arts' commands really only about completing this checklist? About knowing a little bit about each of the major disciplinary categories so that all of us can 'talk to anyone,' well, as long as they are a social scientist, humanist, or natural scientist? In my experience, a liberal arts education has been about the many derivatives of these basic requirements, their points of intersection, and the explication of these connections, a few of which I have described above. My liberal arts education has been about the spaces between the rocks, the water that fills in these spaces.

A year ago, I was a part of a seminar entitled "Diversity Dialogues and Leadership Facilitation." For class one week, we watched two parts of the series *Race: the Power of an Illusion*, which discusses the biological fallacies on which race assumptions are built. In one section of the film, the film quotes a study of

Charles Davenport, a leading eugenics scientist of the early 1900s: “The population of the US will, on account of the great influx of blood from South Eastern Europe, rapidly become darker in pigment, shorter in stature, more given to crimes of larceny, kidnap, murder, rape and sexual immorality and the rate of insanity in the population will rapidly increase.” In another part of the film, six young people of white, black, Hispanic and Japanese races decode their own DNA, making predictions beforehand regarding whose biological make-up would turn out to be most similar. It turned out that Jamil, a black individual, was more similar to Carol, who was white, than Gorgeous, the other black participant in the experiment. Jon, a white student, was as similar to another white individual as he was to an individual whose ancestry was Japanese.

Today, modern scientific innovation exposes the lack of understanding in the assumption that race is biologically constructed. Only after discovering the truth about race, that it is socially constructed, is society forced to move past ignorance and tackle the real issues of economic and social injustice that have resulted from these supposed ‘biological’ conclusions. As students of the liberal arts, it is these assumptions of society that we are educated to overcome, this more authentic and true reality that we aim to know.

Joseph Addison once said “what sculpture is to a block of marble, education is to a human soul.” I would add to that that what a liberal arts education is to an individual, a liberally educated person is to society. Going back to the rocks in the

jar, if we think about a big jar, such as a river, it is the spaces in between where the water flows, from which position the water can shape the rocks. The drops of water are more than the sum of their parts in their effect on these seemingly larger, heavier objects.

*Race: the Power of an Illusion* frightens me when I think about the assumptions under which I have operated in my lifetime. Are people in Africa really more prone to genocide because of their 'tribal' tendencies? Are poor people just lazy? Is HIV/AIDS really a gay or African problem? Of course not to all of the above. But there are other assumptions that I cannot be so sure of overcoming because I am not yet aware of them. This is what my liberal arts education is helping and will help me to do.

After hearing Daniel Tammet speak on NPR, I was inspired to buy his book. *Born on a Blue Day* illustrates Tammet's journey through life as an autistic savant who also possesses the gift of synesthesia, which allows him to experience numbers as emotions and colors. Near the end of the book, Tammet talks about an experience in which the limits of his imagination were tested:

"I still remember vividly the experience I had as a teenager lying on the floor of my room staring up at the ceiling. I was trying to picture the universe in my head, to have a concrete understanding of what 'everything' was. . . for the first time I

had realized that thought and logic had limits and could only take a person so far.”

My response to this quote is that we all have limits; the human mind can only comprehend so much. However, by exploring the spaces between what is considered ‘truth’, our flawed perceptions of reality become ever so slightly more clear. When I think about how much money I am spending on my education, these words of Derek Bok, former Harvard President, help me remember why: “If you think education is expensive, try ignorance.” Bok’s words are a reminder that with education comes foresight, understanding, and compassion. These qualities frame the capacity of liberal arts students to become good citizens as they question the dominant assumptions of society. Although our minds have limits, they are all we know until these limits are explored and the spaces between them are exhausted.