

# My Piece of the Web

---

*Melissa P. Hepokoski*

Elementary Education Major  
University of Wisconsin Superior

I hereby affirm that this is my own work, an original essay, and agree that it will become the property of the UW System Board of Regents and that it can be reproduced in the public domain.

*(Submitted January, 2009)*

On the coldest and most bitter of nights living near the tip of Lake Superior, I feel warmth and inspiration when I look into the sky and find the bright constellation of Orion. It brings my thoughts to my father who passed away ten years ago in February. In the months before his passing, he was quite ill, and his body was deteriorating. I wanted to give him something to comfort him during his last days with us. At that time, I was collecting books that captured pictures of the universe and all of the galaxies, stars and constellations within. I was drawn, in particular, to a photo of Orion. I painted the constellation with acrylic paint on a canvas board for my father.

From an early age, my father challenged me to open my mind to new ideas and experiences and not to be afraid of travelling to distant places, tasting a variety of foods, or experiencing new adventures. At his funeral, I shared a few words that I felt would give others some indication of how he gave me vision to become a wiser, more thoughtful and open-minded person. Part of what I wrote went like this:

Dad, you are the universe to me. The universe is a beautiful and mysterious place that holds knowledge beyond our understanding. It challenges us to open our minds and to think on higher levels. The universe does not judge, but simply exists harmonious and free. Dad, you are the universe to me.

If knowledge grows from the metaphorical seed, then my father planted that seed in my mind. As my thirst for knowledge grew, I found myself drawn to attend a liberal arts university. I found the university to be a place where I was free to ask questions and seek answers. My studies offered me insight not only into the world around me, but also into myself. In retrospect, I cannot imagine my life without a liberal education background. My liberal education has molded me into the person I am and continues to inspire me to seek knowledge and understanding.

As I consider the ways in which my liberal education has prepared me to become an engaged citizen, a multitude of experiences come to mind. I think about all of the rich and diverse courses I have taken, the thought-provoking questions, and the worthwhile discussions. My liberal education has enhanced my knowledge of my own community and of the global community. The courses I have taken have shown me that these worlds are not separate, but intertwined. The macrocosm of our world and the microcosm of my local community are connected in myriad ways. How I choose to live my life here in my community sends a ripple effect to other parts of the world and to people who live in the ever growing global community.

As a student of the course *State and Local Government*, I learned how to conduct research on current local, state and federal laws. I researched how to effectively participate in local politics and how to work towards change in my community. Before taking this course, I considered voting as my only option when it came to participation in political decisions. I believed that anything above and beyond voting was for *other* people who were either appointed to positions or were simply better suited for the job. Upon completing this course, I learned that I can become an active member of local community organizations. I learned that participating in local politics is not simply an option, but a responsibility for all of those who live in a community. I learned that when a few like-minded people form a community organization to reach a common goal, this is true empowerment.

Now, I pay close attention to local laws regarding our educational system, environmental concerns, and social issues. I continue to participate in exercising my vote and also promote the voting process to others by reminding them of elections and offering rides to polling stations. I have volunteered at local animal shelters and, last year, I participated in several local civic meetings regarding environmental impacts on the neighborhood in which I reside. I have stepped out of the position of being passive and into being an active member in the shaping of my community.

Throughout all of the courses I have taken during my liberal education, there is a common thread which I find most valuable. This is the ability to think critically, and it is the common thread which is at the heart of a liberal education. Though not easily mastered, my liberal education has taught me how to employ critical thinking skills in my daily life. My liberal education has taught me how to make informed decisions based on accurate information.

Oftentimes we see people around us reacting to information that is unclear and unsubstantiated. It is easy to get caught up in this type of knee-jerk response. It is easy to allow emotions to control responses instead of, for example, opening one's mind to the point of view of another. The courses I have taken at the university have helped me learn to be mindful of my thought processes and reasoning. I have learned the importance of research utilizing a variety of established and respected sources. These acquired skills in critical thinking have aided me in scrutinizing what I read in the newspaper or see on television. These skills have helped me embrace people from other cultures or religious backgrounds. These skills have set me free from ways of thinking that are unconstructive and potentially dangerous.

The idea of a liberal education at the university can be found within the name. The Oxford English Dictionary defines *university* as the whole body and representing the universe. Within it lies a gateway to a universe of knowledge that is unveiled for exploration. The university opens doors for the student to consider options for life and offers experiences that build understanding. I have come to believe that a liberal education is one of the greatest ways to prepare individuals to become engaged and effective citizens of their local and global communities. This is accomplished because a liberal education promotes understanding, cooperation, respect for others, responsibility and self-regulation. It teaches students to learn self-worth and value themselves as unique individuals.

If I had not attended a liberal arts university, there are many pieces that would be missing from my life. I may not have learned the impact of the media on society. I may not have opened my mind to people who come from different backgrounds or different religions. I may have never learned to speak another language. I may have never visited a Jewish Temple. I may have never taken a course called *Critical Thinking*. I may have never learned how to write a letter to my senator. I may have never learned how to fulfill my potential.

Now, on these cold and bitter nights, I am reassured that I am following the path that my father would have wanted me to follow. I have embraced my never-ending thirst for knowledge. I have experienced new adventures, tasted a variety of splendid foods, and travelled to extraordinary locations. I have learned to value my role in being a co-creator in this world and my surroundings. I intend to make full use of my piece in our universal web.