An Education Transformation: Reflections on Women's Studies, Feminism, and the Liberal Arts

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As a movie enthusiast—and budding Film Studies major—I make a concerted effort to

revel in the diverse offerings of cinema. One of the first films I experienced in the post-aughts was 2009's *The Blind Side*. I will be the first to admit that I am neither a fan of melodrama nor sports-related flicks, so it might come as no surprise that the Academy Award-nominated movie did not receive my glowing two thumbs up. So while I cannot endorse *The Blind Side* as a personal favorite of mine, it did invite a moment of reflection during this delivery of one of the film's most egregiously clichéd lines:

FRIEND OF SANDRA BULLOCK. You're changin' that boy's life.

SANDRA BULLOCK. No. He's changin' mine.

Though this particular snippet of dialogue won't win the film any writing awards—needless to say, it is not *Citizen Kane* of our time—it touches on an important question that I feel everyone ought to ask themselves at some point during their fleeting lives. What does it mean for one's life to be changed? What are the causes and consequences of such a change? How does one know when he or she has been changed?

I'm not sure if I have the answers to these questions. And I'm not sure I'll be any closer to answering them by the end of this essay. As a student five semesters into undergraduate course work—and probably in the midst of some sort of change of my own—I feel remarkably unqualified to quantify one of the most profound human processes, that which is the transformation. But I am confident that liberal arts educations, as well as the institutions that promote them, play a large role in sparking these individual and social changes we have come to value.

I feel it is necessary to explore this concept of the "liberal arts," for the term has joined the ranks of words like "Excellence" in so far that it has been victimized by imprecise

bureaucratic language. The ever-present college junk mail corps has especially devalued the expression's meaning, with countless pieces of literature boasting vague, yet attractive slogans like, "Strength through the Liberal Arts." Through no fault of their own, an entire generation of students is regrettably living in an Acropolis-sized shadow of what essentially amounts to the basis for all western education.

In today's ultra-politicized climate, where the left and right lay claim to everything from energy and peace to marriage and God, the presence of the "liberal" in "liberal arts" might seem to make little sense, for there is no such thing as a “conservative arts” counterbalance. But in this case, the L-word has little to do with politics and more to do with liberation. It is a reminder that the purpose of such an education is to free its participants from living an all-too narrow life, one marked solely by specialization in one’s studies or career. Instead of promoting any single time-tested tradition, the liberal arts attempts to integrate each discipline into a comprehensive, interconnected view of the world.

For example, the simplest of mathematical functions, let’s say squaring a number, has its applications in astronomy, where it is critical to Newton’s Theory of Universal Gravitation since it relates to movements of the planets, the ratios in between these bodies having been believed by Ancient Greek philosophers to produce music of the heavenly spheres, an idea contained in Plato’s *Republic*, Plato, of course, being perhaps the one of the most eminent philosophers of the western world, a title that could conceivably be bestowed upon Karl Marx as well, whose seminal work *The Communist Manifesto* incited revolution across Europe in 1848, yet perhaps more importantly, managed to change economics by challenging the capitalist model, a system that informs the basis of cultural studies because it explains individuals’ desire to consume “culture” in the form of music, movies, and advertisements, the latter of which is an industry

thoroughly dissected in Women's Studies because it objectifies women and relegates them to domestic roles, both of which were circumstances lamented in the literary works of female writers as British as Jane Austen and as American as Sylvia Plath.

To say that each academic department in the liberal arts spills over into the next would be a massive understatement, for our scientists and scholars and artists do not operate within the confines of their own hermetically sealed vacuums. And neither should students. But to then assume that the liberal arts means "knowing stuff" is incorrect. Its goal is not for individuals to be able to recite information, but rather for them to explore dissimilar areas of study as a means of acquiring the necessary skills—public speaking and logic among them—to live a complete life and to excel in the workplace.

To some extent, my gradual understanding of the liberal arts and the intimate connections between everything has been transformative, as I view the world with a more wide-angle lens than I once did. But to provide a more concrete example of such a drastic change in perception, I must rewind a bit.

Prior to WOM 203, or "Women in Popular Culture," I knew little about feminism, other than that it existed, that men felt threatened by it, and that it might have had something to do with bra-burning (Not true! They were thrown into trash cans). But it became increasingly clear that everything from positions of leadership to the most abstract of concepts, like heroism and bravery, were sculpted by society to be completely male-dominated. Our class analyzed portrayals of women as we read harlequin romance novels, talked about Betty Friedan, and watched an episode of *Sex and the City*. I recall my distress after watching a documentary called "Dreamworlds," which explained how women in music videos are reduced to nothing more than body parts, devalued and sold to viewers as objects of sexual fantasy. Simply by virtue of being

male, I felt guilty, like I was somehow complicit in this sort of behavior.

These experiences and discussions pushed me in directions I would likely have never gravitated towards on my own without the benefit of a liberal arts education. Now, I cannot help but examine gender roles in the films and books I watch and read respectively—be they for class analysis or pleasure ("I'm not sure how I felt about it. It wasn't very feminist friendly"). I've engaged friends and peers alike in interesting dialogue about their perceptions of women and feminism, albeit with mixed results ("Don't feminists hate men?"). How the class will continue to affect me down the road is difficult to say. I certainly hope to read more on the subject, and my curiosity is piqued as to what sorts of roles men play in feminist activism. I have no illusions that my interest in Women's Studies will result in the attainment of widespread gender equality or anything of the sort. But if I can even raise awareness about the subject—as basic as that may sound—then hopefully others will be similarly stretched and stimulated in new ways as I once was.

And isn't that the goal of liberal arts, anyway? To transform our preconceived notions? To shift us beyond our comfort zones into new realms of understanding? To examine the world through a unique, but universal looking glass? It is just as F. Scott Fitzgerald once famously stated, "I was going to become that most limited of all specialists, 'the well-rounded man.'" Sorry, F. Scott. I think (wo)man is a touch more appropriate.