

Liberal Education: A Metamorphosis of the Soul

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On my first day of high school, my teacher showed the class a Power Point presentation entitled *The Value of Education*. The first slide read simply this: “Education = \$”. I cringed, not knowing exactly why.

Education, throughout my high school experience, continued to be described to me thusly: college means a diploma. A diploma means a better job. A better job means more money. More money means a good life. But I was troubled by this future. I wondered who had decided what a “better” job is and the criteria for a “good” life made me suspicious. It all seemed so mathematical. High school and college were presented to me as variables in an intricate equation figured by someone else, an equation equaling a person I had not expressly chosen to be. How base, I thought; how common, for me to consent to this nonsensical ritual, for me to become someone else’s ideal.

I went on to college, of course, because it was what everyone told me to do. College is how you become acceptable, they told me; it is how you become an earner. My major at UW-Milwaukee that first semester was International Relations. I liked the way it sounded; I liked the woman I envisioned myself as in this field – a diplomat, a savvy citizen of the world. But as the future slowly became the present, I began to realize that I would only ever be a passably good diplomat. This idea of a person was not someone I bore any resemblance to. She was, rather, a clone of the well-educated, well-moneyed ideal my freshman teacher had presented to me years ago. This woman had earning potential, yes; she was smart and worldly. But she was a puff of air, a daydream. She was not someone I would become, I realized. She had nothing I really wanted.

My moment of clarity came during the winter break of my freshman year. It is not a terribly poetic story, unfortunately – I was watching the film *National Treasure* with my family

and laughing at all the historical errors contained in the script. Other people's epiphanies never seem to involve Nicholas Cage, but mine does – alas, I suppose we cannot choreograph life's important moments. I realized, watching that movie, recognizing those inaccuracies, that there was something I *did* love, something I had brushed aside in my mind for years because it did not fit with the archetype of the marketable, diploma-holding job applicant I had always assumed I should become.

I am, as it so happens, the daughter of passionate, borderline-maniacal history buffs. My family never took vacations; we took field trips. I had not yet learned to walk when I first visited Abraham Lincoln's house in Springfield, Illinois. Since then I have seen the homes of countless dead presidents and a plethora of battlefields. I have traipsed through more museums than I can remember or describe. William Henry Harrison was president for roughly thirty days, and I have stood in his living room; I have shivered in the wind at Gettysburg, listening to stories of that wet land which drank the blood of my countrymen a century-and-a-half ago. I visited Colonial Williamsburg and Washington, D.C. whenever my parents could scrape together the money. These memories are priceless to me; no matter how much I teased my parents about the fact that we never went to Six Flags or Disney World, I would not have changed our vacations for anything in the world. I knew what education was, in my childhood, before someone vandalized it with images of dollar signs. Education was how I had adventures. Education was my family's escape.

The truth is I love American history. Stories of the Revolutionary War are inextricably linked with my memories of Williamsburg; the House of Burgesses is not a factual term to me, but a place I have been and seen and photographed. George Washington is not a mythical hero to me but a brave war veteran upon whose simple tomb I saw my grandfather, another war

veteran, lay a wreath. Thomas Jefferson's Monticello is not for me a name in a textbook; it is a beautiful retreat, nestled deep in the Virginia mountains, that took my breath away.

"Why am I not a history major?" I asked that night while the movie was on commercial break.

"Um, because you can't make any money that way?" responded my sister.

I transferred into an American history class that next semester. I was never absent – not because I was trying to keep up a good attendance record, but because the subject matter riveted me. It was, I realized smilingly, like taking a childhood vacation. The As I got on every paper and every test were more to me than any good grade I had ever gotten before – here, finally, was something meaningful. Here was something I wanted. My English classes, too, were an opportunity for me to read primary sources from the very periods I was studying in my history courses – Daniel Defoe on the Jacobites, Thoreau on the Mexican War. I was intoxicated by my increasing understanding of these fascinating concepts, and by the fact that I was becoming someone I recognized, someone I *wanted* to be.

I also took an English history course, taught by a gentleman I had heard lecture years before when I accompanied my older sister on a day of classes. The professor was an enthralling speaker and thoroughly knowledgeable on his subject. He told anecdotes about Cromwell and Charles II; he rattled off the unemployment rates of Victorian London like they were his own children's birthdays and related witty stories about the disastrous love life of Benjamin Disraeli. He made me want to read his class' textbook. I was enraptured by his comprehension of history and began to wish I could be like him. This professor, I realized, possessed more than a pile of diplomas. And what he was helping me to achieve was so much more than a degree as well. He

had – and I was acquiring – a mind finessed by many years’ scholastic dedication. And that – unlike money, unlike a job – is something which cannot be lost.

My dream is to work at a place like Monticello and give other children the experience I had – the experience of history come to life. I do not know if this dream will be realized. I have no idea of the sort of money I can expect from this pursuit (my gut instinct tells me not much). I have decided, however, that I simply do not care. I want to be like that professor I admired so much. I want to be someone who knows about history, who can answer questions about history, who has spent years saturating her soul with it. I want to live my education.

I know now why I cringed that first day of high school. It is nothing less than profanity, that expression – “Education = \$”. It is a platitude of the most vulgar sort, and I pity anyone who actually believes it. They will never know the empowerment I have found by pursuing my studies. Education means a future enriched by knowledge – knowledge *I* have desired, worked for, and attained. It has been, for me, in every way a transformative experience. As a teenager I was suffocated by apathy, steered by expectations. Now I know the freedom that comes from having a purpose in life. Education will never be, for me, a line on a resume. It has been, rather, a metamorphosis of the soul.