

Shedding the Cuticle

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“I don't like volunteering at homeless shelters or whatever. I'm just not a 'people person,’” an acquaintance had once explained to me. “Besides, those people are gross, and I couldn't handle it. I would probably vomit.”

I cringe as I recall that conversation now, and am even more ashamed that before I began college, I probably would have agreed with such views. Why? Because I didn't follow world events, I wasn't civically engaged, and I cared only for myself, for my own comfort and entertainment. I was, in a word, vacuous. Most people argue that a liberal arts education allows one to use knowledge from many disciplines to understand the world and solve its problems, and while that is certainly true, in my case, the liberal arts have made me less of a jerk.

I began my first semester of college as a theater and English major and planned on becoming a wildly rich and famous author and actress (stop laughing). But I soon found my plans being shaken off their foundation by two writing classes that focused on the Rwandan Genocide and Sierra Leone's civil war. Before then I had dismissed all violence in Africa, thinking, “Why don't those people just stop fighting?” I knew nothing of ethnic conflicts, rebel militias, weak states, coups, or the horrors of child soldier recruitment, but by analyzing academic texts, news reports, interviews, memoirs, and documentaries, I realized that war-torn countries are not inhabited by anonymous, moving shapes, but real human beings, like me, with complex thoughts and feelings, who are living through shocking atrocities. And I was determined to find out why this was so.

During my second semester, I quickly exchanged my theater courses for ones in political science and over the next two years, began touring such landmarks as American Government, U.S. National Security Policy, and International Politics, and later, African American Studies, Intro to Arabic, Comparative Genocide, and the Politics of Development. Each one of these

classes was as influential to me as the two writing courses mentioned above. They introduced me to new concepts, new sides to each story, new ways of looking at things. I began to understand what all the bad news was about—the killings, the famines, the rise in global temperatures, the water shortages, the scandals, the oppression, the protests, the corruption. Everything fit together, and I had a place in this mess, a mess which, I learned, is awash in gray. There are no concrete right or wrong answers, no black and white solutions, no definite good guys or bad guys. The overall picture of the puzzle was enormous and multifaceted, but visible.

I continued my education outside of the classroom as well by attending speeches by Ishmael Beah and Grace Akallo, both authors and former child soldiers, and as treasurer for the History Club, I voted to help pay for Grace's travel expenses. I attended a screening of the *Invisible Children* film, which details the story of Uganda's child soldiers, as well as the campus *Voice to Vision Exhibit: Holocaust and Genocide Survivors Share Their Experiences*. In 2008, I worked as a civic engagement intern for Dr. David Siemers and the American Democracy Project, and currently serve as a research assistant for Dr. Druscilla Scribner, analyzing United Nations reports for constitutional gender legislation.

Thus, my metamorphosis did not occur in one spectacular, dramatic, Hollywood-style flourish. Instead, it happened over two years, in increments. And real, lasting change, as we know from the failure of fad diets and the success of consistent changes to eating habits and exercise, happens little by little, over time, to where we can't quite fathom how we ever used to eat/talk/think such junk. Incremental changes are perhaps best modeled by our friend *Scutigera coleoptrata*, the ever-beguiling house centipede. As an arthropod, the house centipede moults several times until it reaches maturity. When it emerges from the old shell, in its teneral stage, it is pale, soft, and vulnerable. It is during this vulnerable stage that growth occurs, before the new

outer cuticle hardens and darkens to form the new exoskeleton, the new armor. One might say that before school, my personal growth was hindered by my old, rigid, self-protective armor, until my liberal arts education shook it loose, and kept shaking until I had shed most all of my hard, dark qualities. The qualities that led me to think that people in need were "gross."

Fame and fortune are the furthest things from my mind these days—they seem the height of silliness. I've started donating money to international charities and volunteering my holidays in soup kitchens and elderly homes, because I now know that very little separates me from them. Each night before retiring to bed, I sit for a moment and look around my tiny apartment, quietly amazed at what a lucky girl I am. To have the opportunity to go to school, to vote, and to drive, to sleep safely without tanks rolling into my house, to walk down the street without having to dodge RPGs. And the only reason I can enjoy these things is because I had the extremely good fortune to be born in a developed country. Not because I'm particularly special or deserving of them. Not because my insides are any different than someone in, say, Somalia. This realization is especially humbling, and I'm not entirely sure that it would have occurred to me at all if I were now receiving technical training instead of a liberal arts education.

So to summarize, my liberal arts education has triggered in me an overall process of moulting, which I expect will continue through graduation. It changed a beauty school dropout into a budding humanitarian. It changed my entire career path, it saved the world from my "acting skills," and it helped me appreciate everything I used to take for granted. And finally, the liberal arts have made me more, well, liberal. Liberal in giving my time and money to those in need. It changed me into more of a "people person," one who cares about the safety and comfort of my fellow people.