

## The Cultured Human Being

Some thoughts about liberal education have come to my mind over the last couple of months, and I thought I would pass them on to you. There is nothing terribly original in these ideas; others have made these points before and made them much more clearly and elegantly than I could ever hope to make them. But I think that in the push and shove of our busy lives, it is easy to lose track of things. I know this happens to me. You may agree with what I have to say, or you may disagree. All of this is fine. But I offer these thoughts in the hope that they will encourage a continuing conversation about the liberal arts.

I would argue that the main purpose of a liberal arts education is to encourage students to become cultured human beings. When our mission statement talks about forming good men, I believe it means men of culture. I have thought this for a long time, but I recently read an article by Joseph Epstein that brought this to mind again. Epstein refers to the well-known work of Matthew Arnold, Culture and Anarchy, in which culture is defined as getting to know “the best which has been thought and said in the world.” Epstein says quite rightly that today this implies other best things. We could each come up with a list of other best things that we should experience, and these things are not defined exclusively by Western Civilization or Eastern Civilization. One of my teachers put it this way: liberal education is experience in things beautiful.

This experience elevates the soul. It lifts people up and helps them to appreciate their place in the universe. It makes them modest, because they understand that there are things more important than them. It helps them see past the noise and the trivial enticements that take up so much of most people’s lives. Cultured human beings stand apart from others, because they see life from a different perspective. Arnold says that this experience with culture could bring about “an inward condition of the mind and spirit...at variance with the mechanical and material civilization in esteem with us.”

Some have suggested that the crown jewel of liberal education is critical thinking. I disagree. Critical thinking is important but by itself it does not define a cultured human being. One might be quite capable of thinking critically and still be a vulgar, limited person. Nor is liberal education about forming the “well-rounded” person. A well-rounded person is no more than a person who has learned a little about a lot of things, but one can be well-rounded without being cultured. Liberal education is about the pursuit of culture.

The college’s core requirements are the way in which we define culture. We should give these requirements much more attention. Jim Arieti wrote an excellent piece entitled “Liberal Arts and the Human Soul” in which he discusses in some detail some of the ways in which our core curriculum helps to shape our students’ souls. The minute we talk about core requirements as mere distribution requirements, we have lost our way. The core is our authoritative statement of how we understand culture. If we think of our core as an institutional process for achieving departmental equity, we are no longer committed to the liberal arts.

The liberal arts are demanding. The kind of teaching needed to form a cultured human is difficult and must be defined by face-to-face learning, at least most of the time. It cannot be done wholly online, and it cannot be done in huge lecture halls. In addition, it takes time for students to be introduced to radically new ideas, to reflect on them, and to be changed by them, so a liberal arts education will take years. It cannot be rushed. The best environment for this kind of education is a residential college, so that students and faculty can get to know one another, meet

outside of the classroom, and talk about the issues students are facing as they try to integrate the new things they are learning. All of this means a liberal arts education will be expensive. We need to be able to defend the fact that the kind of education we offer is so important, so labor intensive, that it cannot be as inexpensive as other kinds of education.

Students also need a certain atmosphere within which to grow and develop into cultured human beings. They need what our mission statement calls “an atmosphere of sound learning.” This atmosphere is not just something which supports the academic program. It has its own purpose and integrity. A cultured human being is not just someone who has learned new things in the classroom. Culture is knowledge but it is also behavior. Using Aristotle’s terms, culture requires both intellectual and moral virtue.

Liberal arts colleges should strive to instill good habits of behavior through their residence life programs, their clubs and fraternities, their sports, and other campus activities. For years, we have done too little to support this atmosphere of sound learning. Our students take their classes seriously, but too many believe that when they leave the classroom or (if they are athletes) when they leave the field, their behavior is their own business. I have heard students say with pride that “they work hard and play hard,” but this is exactly the wrong attitude. The habits of behavior that we develop in many ways define who we are. The way we relate to people who are different from us matters. The things we consider recreation contribute to our character. Our whole community needs to rededicate itself to creating this all-important atmosphere of sound learning.

And we need people of culture more today than perhaps ever before. Even at his time, Arnold spoke of “culture as the great help out of our present difficulties.” Our students—if they become cultured human beings as a result of the liberal arts education they can receive here—can be the leaders of tomorrow. They can bring a deeper understanding of the world into anything they do, and they can serve as examples of men of character to all those around them. Being a cultured human being is good in itself; it does not need to have a purpose beyond itself. But our country needs leaders, and cultured human beings can be the kind of leaders we need in politics, business, non-profit organizations, and in every part of every community.

What we do here is noble and it is important, if we do it well. But if we lose our way, we risk squandering a great opportunity for ourselves and for our students. I think we should return to first principles and reconnect with the vibrancy and relevance of the liberal arts. I look forward to talking to you about these things in the coming days.

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