

On the Purpose of a Liberal Arts Education *

By Robert Harris

VirtualSalt, March 14, 1991 (<http://www.virtualsalt.com/libarted.htm>)

When they first arrive at college, many students are surprised at the general education classes they must take in order to graduate. They wonder why someone who wants to be an accountant or psychologist or television producer should study subjects that have nothing directly to do with those fields. And that is a reasonable question--Why *should* you study history, literature, philosophy, music, art, or any other subject outside of your major? Why should you study any subject that does not help to train you for a job? Why should you study computer programming when you will never write a program? Why study logic when all you want to do is teach first grade or be a church organist?

In answer to this question, let's look at some of the benefits a liberal arts education and its accompanying widespread knowledge will give you.

I. A liberal arts education teaches you how to think

1. You will develop strength of mind and an ordered intellect. The mind is like a muscle; exercise makes it stronger and more able to grasp ideas and do intellectual work. Exercising the mind in one area--whether literature or sociology or accounting--will strengthen it for learning in other areas as well. What at first was so difficult--the habits of attention and concentration, the ability to follow arguments, and the ability to distinguish the important from the trivial and to grasp new concepts--all these become easier as the mind is exercised and enlarged by varied study.

You will also learn that thinking has its own grammar, its own orderly structure and set of rules for good use. Many subjects help the student to develop an ordered mind, and each subject contributes in a slightly different way. A careful study of computer programming or mathematics or music or logic or good poetry--or all of these--will irresistibly demonstrate the structure of thought and knowledge and intellectual movement, and will create the habit of organized thinking and of rational analysis. Once you develop good thinking habits, you will be able to perform better in any job, but more importantly, the happier your life will be. After your class in programming or poetry you may never write another line of code or verse, but you will be a better husband or wife or preacher or businessman or psychologist, because you will take with you the knowledge of organized solutions, of hierarchical procedures, of rational sequences that can be applied to any endeavor.

2. You will be able to think for yourself. The diverse body of knowledge you will gain from a liberal arts education, together with the tools of examination and analysis that you will learn to use, will enable you to develop your own opinions, attitudes, values, and beliefs, based not upon the authority of parents, peers, or professors, and not upon ignorance, whim, or prejudice, but upon your own worthy apprehension, examination, and evaluation of argument and evidence. You will develop an active engagement with knowledge, and not be just the passive recipient of a hundred boring facts. Your diverse studies will permit you to see the relations between ideas and philosophies and subject areas and to put each in its appropriate position.

Good judgment, like wisdom, depends upon a thoughtful and rather extensive acquaintance with many areas of study. And good judgment requires the ability to think independently, in the face of pressures, distortions, and overemphasized truths. Advertisers and politicians rely on a half-educated public, on people who know little outside of their own specialty, because such people are easy to deceive with so-called experts, impressive technical or sociological jargon, and an effective set of logical and psychological tricks.

Thus, while a liberal arts education may not teach you how to take out an appendix or sue your neighbor, it will teach you how to think, which is to say, it will teach you how to live. And this benefit alone makes such an education more practical and *useful* than any job-specific training ever could.

3. The world becomes understandable. A thorough knowledge of a wide range of events, philosophies, procedures, and possibilities makes the phenomena of life appear coherent and understandable. No longer will unexpected or strange things be merely dazzling or confusing. How sad it is to see an uneducated mind or a mind educated in only one discipline completely overwhelmed by a simple phenomenon. How often have we all heard someone say, "I have no idea what this book is talking about" or "I just can't understand why anyone would do such a thing." A wide ranging education, covering everything from biology to history to human nature, will provide many tools for understanding.

II. A liberal arts education teaches you how to learn.

1. College provides a telescope, not an open and closed book. Your real education at college will not consist merely of acquiring a giant pile of facts while you are here; it will be in the skill of learning itself. No institution however great, no faculty however adept, can teach you in four years everything you need to know either now or in the future. But by teaching you how to learn and how to organize ideas, the liberal arts institution will enable you to understand new material more easily, to learn faster and more thoroughly and permanently.

2. The more you learn, the more you can learn. Knowledge builds upon knowledge. When you learn something, your brain remembers how you learned it and sets up new pathways, and if necessary, new categories, to make future learning faster. The strategies and habits you develop also help you learn more easily.

And just as importantly, good learning habits can be transferred from one subject to another. When a basketball player lifts weights or plays handball in preparation for basketball, no one asks, "What good is weightlifting or handball for a basketball player?" because it is clear that these exercises build the muscles, reflexes, and coordination that can be transferred to basketball--building them perhaps better than endless hours of basketball practice would. The same is true of the mind. Exercise in various areas builds brainpower for whatever endeavor you plan to pursue.

3. Old knowledge clarifies new knowledge. The general knowledge supplied by a liberal arts education will help you learn new subjects by one of the most common methods of learning--analogy. As George Herbert noted, people are best taught by using something they are familiar with, something they already understand, to explain something new and unfamiliar. The more you know and are familiar with, the more you can know, faster and more easily. Many times the mind will create its own analogies, almost unconsciously, to teach itself about the unfamiliar by means of the familiar. It can be said then, that the liberal arts education creates an improvement of perception and understanding. (This process explains why the freshman year of college is often so difficult--students come with such a poverty of intellectual abilities and knowledge that learning anything is very difficult. After a year of struggle, however, an informational base has

been created which makes further learning easier. The brain has come up to speed and has been given something to work with.)

4. General knowledge enhances creativity. Knowledge of many subject areas provides a cross fertilization of ideas, a fullness of mind that produces new ideas and better understanding. Those sudden realizations, those strokes of genius, those solutions seemingly out of nowhere, are really almost always the product of the mind working unconsciously on a problem and using materials stored up through long study and conscious thought. The greater the storehouse of your knowledge, and the wider its range, the more creative you will be. The interactions of diversified knowledge are so subtle and so sophisticated that their results cannot be predicted. When Benjamin Franklin flew a kite into a storm to investigate the properties of electricity, he did not foresee the wonderful inventions that future students of his discoveries would produce--the washing machines, microwave ovens, computers, radar installations, electric blankets, or television sets. Nor did many of the inventors of these devices foresee them while they studied Franklin's work.

"Genius is one percent inspiration and ninety-nine percent perspiration." --Thomas Edison

"Chance favors the prepared mind." --Proverb

III. A liberal arts education allows you to see things whole

1. A context for all knowledge. A general education supplies a context for all knowledge and especially for one's chosen area. Every field gives only a partial view of knowledge of things and of man, and, as John Henry Newman has noted, an exclusive or overemphasis on one field of study distorts the understanding of reality. As one armchair philosopher has said, "When the only tool you have is a hammer, you tend to see every problem as a nail." All knowledge is one, a unified wholeness, and every field of study is but a piece or an angle or a way of partitioning this knowledge. Thus, to see how one's chosen area fits into the whole, to see the context of one's study, a general, liberal education is not merely desirable, but necessary.

2. A map of the universe. A well-rounded education, a study of the whole range of knowledge, produces an intellectual panorama, a map of the universe, which shows the relative disposition of things and ideas. Such a systematic view of reality provides an understanding of hierarchies and relationships--which things are more valuable or important than others, how one thing is dependent on another, and what is associated with or caused by something else. As abstract as this benefit may sound, it is just this orientation that will give you a stable foundation for a sane and orderly life. Many people waste their lives in endless confusion and frustration because they have no context for any event or decision or thought they might encounter.

3. Life itself is a whole, not divided into majors. Most jobs, most endeavors, really require more knowledge than that of one field. We suffer every day from the consequences of not recognizing this fact. The psychologist who would fully understand the variety of mental problems his patients may suffer will need a wide-ranging knowledge if he is to recognize that some problems are biological, some are spiritual, some are the product of environment, and so on. If he never studies biology, theology, or sociology, how will he be able to treat his patients well? Shall he simply write them off as hopelessly neurotic?

The doctor who believes that a knowledge of cell biology and pharmacology and diagnosis will be all-sufficient in his practice will help very few patients unless he also realizes that more than eighty percent of the typical doctor's patients need emotional ministrations either in addition to or instead of physical treatment. The doctor who listens, and who is educated enough to

understand, will be the successful one. A doctor who has studied history or literature will be a better doctor than one who has instead read a few extra medical books.

The preacher, who would produce effective, understandable, memorable sermons that will reach his flock, will need a thorough knowledge of--yes--English composition and logic, that he might preach in an orderly, clear, rational manner. As writing and thinking skills have declined in recent years, so has the quality of preaching. In fact, you have probably noticed how disorganized, rambling, and consequently boring many young preachers are today--how many uncertain trumpet tones are sounding now. The preacher may be a brilliant theologian, but as long as he believes that the only rule of preaching is, "Talk for twenty minutes, say 'Amen' and sit down," he will continue to be ineffective. ...

IV. A liberal arts education enhances wisdom

1. General knowledge will plant the seeds of wisdom. It will help you see and feel your defects and to change yourself, to be a better citizen, spouse, human being. Wisdom is seeing life whole--meaning that every realm of knowledge must be consulted to discover a full truth. ...

V. A liberal arts education makes you a better teacher

But, you say, I'm not going to be a teacher. To which I say, yes you are. You may not be a school teacher, but you might be a preacher, journalist, social worker, supervisor, Sunday School teacher, lawyer, or missionary. Each of these roles is essentially that of a teacher. But more than this, you will almost certainly be someone's friend, a husband or wife and probably a parent. As friend, spouse, and parent you will be a teacher, sharing your life's knowledge and understanding with another daily and intimately. In fact, any time two human beings get together and open their mouths, teaching and learning are going on. Attitudes, perceptions, understandings, generalizations, reasons, information--all these are revealed if not discussed. ...

VI. A liberal arts education will contribute to your happiness

1. A cultivated mind enjoys itself and the arts. The extensive but increasingly neglected culture of western civilization provides endless material for pleasure and improvement, "sweetness and light" as it has been traditionally called (or by Horace, *dulce et utile*--the sweet and useful). A deep appreciation of painting or sculpture or literature, of symbolism, wit, figurative language, historical allusion, character and personality, the True and the Beautiful, this is open to the mind that can understand and enjoy it.

2. Knowledge makes you smarter and smarter is happier. Recent research has demonstrated that contrary to previous ideas, intelligence can actually increase through study and learning. Educated and intelligent people have, statistically, happier marriages, less loneliness, lower rates of depression and mental illness, and a higher reported degree of satisfaction with life.

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* Abridged version of the original. Religious references and other sections have been taken out.