

SPELMAN COLLEGE LECTURE  
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“LIBERAL ARTS: ARE THEY STILL THE KEY TO  
UNLOCK THE NEW MILLENNIUM?”

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(Author's Note: This is an invitational lecture given at Spelman College, Atlanta Georgia , for the annual Sophomore Convocation. It resulted from a meeting of two professors , myself and Dr. victor Ibeanusi, of Spelman, on the 1999 Fulbright Summer Study to Germany, and our ensuing friendship. It is focussed on reinforcing the values inherent in the Liberal Arts educational Tradition, which I have a zealous and righteous love for.)

First, an introductory definition of Liberal Arts Education:

(after World Book Dictionary) 1. education for cultural and intellectual development, rather than as a preparation for a business or profession. education in the liberal arts. 2. wide education or experience.

A new millennium? What's it really mean? And what's in store for the hungry mind in search of intellectual pursuits? Perhaps it is merely incidental, this millennium, the result of a numbering convention, Anno Domini, the Christian era. But regardless, a good reason to reflect, consider, imagine a new and better human prognosis. And as sophomores, you are on the edge of that point in your formal education where your own interests can begin to determine your coursework. The world is opening to your mind's desires.

I've been alive for more than half the twentieth century, and frankly, I'm relieved it's behind us. It's been a fairly messy business, and I think we can do better! I don't want to do a morose tally of the good , bad and ugly, but let me briefly defend my own relief:

- major genocides, beginning in Armenia in 1915, through Russian purges and revolutions, World war I,
- The Spanish flu, World economic depression for decade,
- World war II
- Lynchings, Asian genocides
- the Cold War, Nuclear Bombs, Vietnam, Afghanistan
- Rwandan genocide, Bosnia, Serbia, ...

Perhaps a billion people died in wars and genocide in the 20th century. This is unimaginable to almost all human beings. How many is a billion, after all??

1,000,000 seconds=11.5 days      1 billion seconds=33 years!!!

On the positive side for this swell past century, let's run down a few of its glories:

- the Nobel Peace Prize
- the gradual elimination of slavery as an institution
- vaccines for a huge variety of diseases, a longer life with less pain for many of us. Let me use my maternal grandmother for an interesting case: Eda Gruver Heavener Yerger, married twice, born Bucks County Pennsylvania, July 1887. Died same county, December 1982. She was 95 years old. Just think of the changes she witnessed in her life:

- the end of horses as a dominant transport,
- the inventions of the tractor, milking machine, aircraft, automobile, airships, rockets, television, radio, and that hugely wondrous communication device that so changed our lives, the telephone. Nuclear energy and war, the Sputnik, moon and Mars landings, cable TV and the Apple computer. She was born when Grover Cleveland was president, only 22 years after the civil war, and died when Ronald Reagan was president, about the time many of you were being born.

A balanced tally would indeed be difficult for the twentieth century.

What are we to create in a new millennium, with this history, using this wondrous tradition of Liberal arts, this intellectual pursuit? The word liberal...Hmm a badly abused word in some senses. Let's look at its deeper meanings, its etymology. *Libertas*: Latin root of liberty, from liber, meaning free!! Liberty equals freedom, as in give me liberty or give death... serious business. As in Statue of Liberty: Hmmm Liberty, especially in French republicanism and mythos, is a LADY! No small detail is this! Now this IS INTERESTING, MY SOPHOMORES! Liberty has hugely important feminine attributes; nurture of the learned, enabler of freedom, breaker of bondage. What's the connection here? It is METAPHORICAL! I believe the symbolic importance of a feminine image of Lady Liberty is simply this: Liberal education is both the SOURCE and DEFENDER of all liberties. Without the foundation of liberal education and its wide experience in the human endeavor, its sources of tools, tradition, its ability to shape the liberal mindscape, liberal political and social systems would crumble, would be without foundation. Why?

Because liberal education is the best means we know to build a case, a faith, a strength of conviction to defend and secure a liberal (i.e. a free) system of government, of thought, and action. Liberal forms of government should pass one major litmus test: do they attempt to maximize human liberty?

A quick check of the various political systems and ideologies will show the power of this test:

Russian or Chinese Communism= NO

Aristocracy= mostly no, some cases maybe...

Oligarchy (i.e. Central American style) = definitely NO!

Republic= YES

Democratic Scandinavian Socialism= YES

Consensus Anarchy= perhaps YES, not really tried..

Italian or German Fascism= Definitely NO!

This was a superficial and incomplete rundown, but it speaks to my point.

As an educated elite, and you are becoming that, and need not apologize for it, one of your major responsibilities to hopefully emerge from your education is to “defend the faith” in liberal political systems. The American Civil Liberties Union distributes a poster with a quote from Thomas Jefferson which cuts right to the heart of the matter:

“THE PRICE OF LIBERTY IS ETERNAL VIGILANCE!”

Make no mistake: the wolves of oppression and enslavement are constantly at the door.

Let me give you a fearsome example of this in an historical perspective: ALWAYS, ALWAYS, THE FIRST TO BE SOUGHT OUT AND DESTROYED IN A REVOLUTION, whether political, religious, cultural, are the INTELLECTUALS, the great orators, the leaders, the lawyers. (RE: Shakespeare’s early, surly recognition in the phrase :“First , we kill all the lawyers”, from Henry VI), and the university intelligentsia, the Jews. Make no mistake. The intellectuals , which I implore you to join proudly, are always the biggest threat to oppressors, tyrants, theocrats, and dictators. Why? Because they value liberty and know its history. THEY CAN QUESTION AUTHORITY, AUTHORITATIVELY! (EVER SEEN THAT WONDERFUL BUMPER STICKER which simply urges: Question authority!)

Stalin in Russia started a series of purges and incarcerations, such that twentieth century Russia has for four generations doggedly annihilated its intelligentsia and even its middle class, leaving it without enough competent people to run the country, consequently leaving it to criminals. Mao Tse Tung in his brutal Red Guard Era sent all the educated classes to the countryside to languish in obscure suffering for a decade (This is agonizingly described in the magnificent story of four generations of Chinese Women , a book entitled, “The Wild Swans” by Jung Chang), and the French revolution went to extremes in its eradication of classes, punishing the intelligentsia as co-conspirators with the Bourgeoisie. At the dawning of the Western intellectual tradition, the political powermongers of Athens killed Socrates , one of the first great critical thinkers and political critics, the man who invented the questioned life, condemning the unquestioned life as not worth living.

Does this marvelously lucid Socratic credo still hold? Oh yes, I believe it does. The Socratic method, the probing questioning of every premise of every thought, sharpening the mind, the clarity of expression, the ability to defend a point of view, to do liberal things, how could this become passé’?

The New Yorker Cartoon:

Yes unfortunately the examined life may not produce fabulous wealth, compared to those who don’t question their lives, or confront their own

ethical dilemmas. You see money has nothing much to offer in answering three of the most crucial questions in life:

Where did we come from and why are we here?  
 What are we supposed to do?  
 Where are we going?

Can liberal education answer any of these powerful questions?  
 Emphatically I say yes! Conclusively, No!

Some answers? Let me try to tease out a few I've gleaned.

As to why we are here? One of the best answers I've ever encountered is simply expressed in an unlikely place. The Academy Award winning movie "Dances with Wolves" has this most beautiful scene in it. Kevin Costner, whose Sioux name is 'Dances with Wolves' is out on the high plains learning Sioux culture and traditions with his friend and Sioux mentor, the holy man "Kicking Bird". Kicking Bird acknowledges Costner's progress in his self-education with the words:

"You are on the path to becoming a real human being. It is a beautiful thing to see." This is a most elegant expression of why I believe we are alive, here, now: to live a fully human life, to become complete, fulfilled, and to be a fulfilling human participant in this merry pageant of life. It is the unspoken glory of the University faculty: to see students on the path to becoming fully liberated in thought and human potential. The path to a full human being: TO BE LIBERALLY EDUCATED!!

And what are we supposed to do with this life? David Mabry Lewis says most cultures answer this question by regarding life as a pilgrimage. Life allows you to seek what is sacred. This is again, close to the essence: what are the sacred verbs?

TO COMMUNE, TO SACRIFICE, TO SAVE, TO LOVE, TO WORSHIP,  
 TO HONOR, TO SEEK TRUTH, TO DO UNTO OTHERS WHAT YOU  
 WOULD HAVE DONE TO YOU.

AS TO WHERE WE'RE GOING, I HAVE LESS SATISFYING ANSWERS. THE LIBERAL ARTS TRADITION HAS MANY GLORIOUS examples of authentic lives, but we all must perish. Who can know? We can become immortal through literature, that great magic squiggly art of writing. Think of the great immortals of literature; Tolstoy, Shakespeare, Herotodus. This is a true form of immortality.

Richard Buckminster Fuller once said, "I think I am a verb." To this I would add, I want to have lived a life which can best be expressed in poetry.

With this segue, I want to move to some fabulous poems from my experience, which reflect the huge value of wide reading, and the wondrous

communion of human experience. Poetry is magic. What happens with poetry is far beyond the words. It is inferred feelings, uniquely heard, uniquely interpreted, in a unique moment of a unique life: yours. Magic.

Poems are the best metaphor I know for expressing the intensity of world-wise human experience, the most complete, deep and satisfying communication is poetic. Here are some of my favorites.

Jalaluddin Rumi--Sufi poet of 12th century AD Asia Minor, wrote in Arabic, love poems , parables, religious mystical poetry.

I would love to kiss you.  
 The price of kissing is your life  
 Now my loving is running toward my life shouting  
 "What a bargain, let's buy it!"

Come to the orchard in Spring  
 there is light, and wine, and sweethearts in the pomegranate flowers  
 If you do not come, these .. do not matter  
 If you DO come , these do not matter

Stephen Dobyns English Professor and poet.. Syracuse University.  
 'Katia Reading' from his Collection: "Velocities"

## KATIA READING

The book is golden with an orange spine, and the girl reading leans back in her chair, one leg outstretched, the other tucked up: one foot on the edge of the seat. Because of her short red skirt and purple halter, her bare legs and feet, you decide the room is hot that it's a midsummer evening. But the girl reading has forgotten the evening, the house around her, the city beyond her, has forgotten her small body tucked into her chair. Instead she is encompassed by her book in a way one is surrounded by a sunlit summer morning, except her head is turned slightly to one side as if she found the page too bright.

All this is a painting you have seen often, and often you have wondered what the girl is reading. At first you thought the book was something frightening: the way her head is turned from the page, the way she has forgotten the presence of her body. It's a long thin book, too thin for a novel; and you have come to think it must be poetry. Seeing her makes you remember the first time you read a poem that moved you, not even realizing it was a poem, but feeling you saw yourself on the page; saw yourself with nothing to redeem you, as a creature who wears his body like an ill-fitting suit of clothes.

Perhaps you would have laid aside your book, but so completely was the world lifted up out of its daily banality that you kept on reading. What had your life been until then? First you ate something, then you bought something, then you went bowling; a world where men passed their lives peering under the hoods of cars. And like the girl in the painting, you must have turned your head slightly, as if from a loud noise, and you too became like someone who has left on a journey, someone who has become the answer to his own impossible riddle: who condemned to a room is at last free of the room.

The poem 'Katia reading' expresses the utter shift of awareness which comes the first time you read a poem that moved you. I want to share that poem which first moved me with you now.

In Just by e e cummings

In just-

    Spring  
 when the world is mud-  
 luscious the little

lame balloonman  
     whistles far and wee  
 and eddieandbill come  
     running from marbles  
 and piracies and its

    Spring  
     when the world is puddle-wonderful  
 the queer old balloonman whistles  
 far and wee

and bettyandisbel come dancing  
     from hop-scotch and jump-rope and its spring  
 and the goat-footed balloonman whistles far and wee

This poem was in an eighth grade reading book which was used in my junior high school. My teacher was a young woman of no exceptional talent, but she loved poetry, and I was **MOVED** by this. I'd never heard anything quite like it and I crossed a threshold which I knew was important . I remember it like it was yesterday. Powerful stuff. I could visualize **EVERYTHING** in this poem, and the language use and tempo of this poet's work were so unique and creative it changed my entire view of what language could do. This is the power of the liberating education.

Thank you all profoundly for this opportunity to share my life with yours, to invite you to the best world you can know: the one you invent through your own education, the intellectual and literary world of humanity, kept safe and waiting for you in the tradition of the Liberal arts education.

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