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Bologna and Blogs: A Student's Journey Towards Actualizing The Purpose of His Higher Education

Written by: Andrew Erlandson

Many students look forward to that magical graduation date when they will suddenly be equipped "to do something to make the world more sensible or more peaceful or more civil or more intelligent," as the late Dr. Marshall Gregory says in his forthcoming book, *Good Teaching and Educational Vision: Not the Same Thing as Disciplinary Expertise*. These students misunderstand the key to this challenging quote. When Gregory urges us "to do something" beneficial to the people around us, he doesn't exhort students to wait four years to start. That would be silly. As Boris Pasternak wrote in his novel *Dr. Zhivago*: "Man is born to live, not to prepare for life."^[1] The community of the Liberal Arts and Sciences encourages its students to actively pursue rationality, civility, and peace in the present moment through integrity of thought and action.

Our educational system's logic proceeds as follows: perform well in middle school in order to get into high school honors classes. Achieve excellence in high school in order to be accepted to a renowned university. Excel in college in order to get a good job. Get a good job in order to retire early, so that you can putter around for a few years before dying. Right? The Liberal Arts and Sciences has broken me out of this rut by removing the phrase "in order to," freeing me to concentrate on the world I live in, not the world I plan on occupying. Otherwise we end up following someone else's orders until we go tumbling off a cliff like lemmings.

When I enrolled in *EN 455: Writing In Schools*, I wasn't aware I would drive to Shortridge High School twice a week to make sandwiches. That's right, bologna sandwiches with that rubbery cheese. Unlike other collegiate classes, this one wasn't an opportunity to learn so much as an opportunity to act in the world. The focus was on helping the Shortridge students, not our grades. Utilizing our experience studying creative writing, we mentored the students in writing poetry, fiction, and nonfiction. We fed the students to ward off distraction, joked around with them like peers, gave them writing exercises, and supported them in any way we knew how. My proudest moment was watching the shy eighth grader I had worked with stand up in front of the whole class and present her poem about how irritating it can be dealing with annoying people. It was a special moment for all of us.

As a student of literature, I must ask myself how time spent analyzing *The Divine Comedies* or *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* prepares me to make the world "more congenial to human flourishing," as Dr. Gregory put it. My answer came in November of 2012. A professor in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences came under attack by a student for the wording of her syllabus. Although the article was not hateful in and of itself,

a number of thoughtless, hateful, and bigoted messages were sent to the professor as a result.

I wrote two articles in response to the event that I posted on my blog. Taking as measured and rational approach as possible, I examined first the student's argument and granted that there may be class curriculums that treat certain genders, ethnicities, or sexualities less favorably than others. Then I looked at the language used in his article, which claimed that the professor was asking the class to "disavow" their identities. The actual wording asked for students not to take any single type of identity "as the norm."^[2] My training taught me how to challenge the blatant misuse of logic and rhetoric, especially because of the harm it was causing to another person. I challenged that the twisted wording undermined the credibility of the author's argument.

Within hours I was the new target of vitriol from online users that underscored the importance of Dr. Gregory's call to civility and rationality.

My faith in the importance of the Liberal Arts and Sciences community came later that week when an open forum was held to address the situation. This conversation embodied the spirit of the Liberal Arts and Sciences. The word "conversation" originates from Latin "com-" meaning with and "vertere," meaning to turn.^[3] A true conversation involves two or more people "turning together" through thought. In this way the community navigated through this trying situation. For example, many attendees of the forum instinctively wanted to cast aspersions at the student author. The community guided each other away from such sentiments, because they lacked integrity, respect, or relevance.

It was important that the open forum was separated from the virtual realm. With online comments, a person can carry their extreme opinions, express them, and never worry over who they hurt or what reaction they provoke. The online community is a collection of disparate, anonymous, and isolated speakers who aren't required to listen or engage in conversation with the rest of the community. The open forum resisted this phenomenon by fostering rationality, civility, peace, intelligence, and the growth of those speaking and listening. Everyone brought their opinions, but had to engage with others and acknowledge, if not agree with, their thoughts. It was the catharsis necessary to ease everyone's frustration and extinguish the fire that had raged on Facebook and Twitter for days.

Marshall Gregory's words embody the spirit of the Liberal Arts, and express how my studies have been more than educational. They have given me the drive to actively participate in the world, the opportunity to defend against dishonest discourse, and the clarity to live a deliberate life.

^[1] Pasternak, Boris. *Doctor Zhivago*. Trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky. New York: Vintage, 2010. Print.

[2] Lovelace, Ryan. "Students Told to Disavow 'American-ness, Maleness, Whiteness, Heterosexuality'" The College Fix. N.p., 27 Nov. 2012. Web. 31 Jan. 2013. <<http://www.thecollegefix.com/post/12062>>.

[3] Douglas Harper. "Online Etymology Dictionary." Online Etymology Dictionary. N.p., n.d. Web. 31 Jan. 2013. <<http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=conversation>>.