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Metaphors of the Market Economy and The Learning Community

Written by Ben Sippola

As a student attending Butler University and pursuing a degree in the liberal arts, I am frequently asked the collegiate icebreaker of "what is your major?" This question is most always accompanied by its counterpart "what are you planning to do with that?" After answering the first question with a liberal arts major, this second question is usually asked sympathetically or in utter astonishment that I could possibly spend four years of my life studying biology, history, sociology, or literature. However the question is not merely "what will you do with your liberal arts degree?" Rather, it is "how will you make money in the cut-throat market economy with the tools of a liberal arts education?"

Previous to college these questions were omnipresent in my thoughts. How am I going to make enough money to be happy? However after gaining a liberal arts education, these initial thoughts of "money making" have taken a backseat and have been replaced by aspirations of becoming a member of the world community where true value lies in the ability to see the world from multiple perspectives and understand the intrinsic worth of belonging to a society of life long learners.

My initial preoccupation with making money prior to attending college is understandable. The discourse surrounding contemporary higher education is dominated by the clichés and metaphors of the market economy. Our student lives are mediated through slogans like *money doesn't grow on trees, money is power, and another day another dollar. Time is money* and so is education. Students come to an institution like Butler with the expectation that upon paying tuition they are to be provided with the goods and services necessary in the *real* world to make money. Thus, admissions counselors are salespeople, professors provide goods and services, and the student inevitably becomes consumer. However, the university as a metaphor for the market place is shallow to say the least.

To view the university as a place in which the individual is either commodity or producer is small-minded. This idea does not take into account the formation of relationships and the invaluable communities that form between students and professors. While money tends to come and go, relationships and communities last a lifetime.

In promoting the true value of belonging to a community of learners, Henry David Thoreau says it best. In describing what the student gains through the educational commune Thoreau states, "Tuition, for instance, is an important item in the term bill, while for the far more valuable education which he gets by associating with the most cultivated of his contemporaries no charge is made" (1898). Thoreau makes the vital distinction that the

"more valuable" education comes through association with one's classmates and professors. To view education solely as a monetary exchange diminishes the college experience entirely. I am certain that the conversations with my classmates and professors throughout four years at a liberal arts institution are the most valuable aspect of my education, preparing me for a future in which I will be forced to form new friendships and communities to be successful. It is the liberal arts community that makes this type of learning possible.

You may still be wondering what "type of learning" I am describing. I am talking about learning that emphasizes the importance of community, a form of learning trained at a liberal arts institution. With community comes the priceless opportunity to not only learn from others, but also to learn about others. To look outside one's self-centered mind is the most critical skill one learns from a liberal arts education. The liberal arts prepare the individual to analyze the world from multiple perspectives, to take into account not only one's own situation, but also the circumstances of one's fellow world citizens. It is through this ability that one realizes the common thread between all humanity and discards meaningless theoretical ideas such as nation, race, ethnicity, and language. It is only through communal learning that one can begin to understand the interrelatedness of all humanity, the plights and struggles of one's fellow men and women, and how to improve the world through human interaction. The liberal arts education forces the individual to look internally, discovering that as a human one holds an inherent duty to act in a selfless manner for the benefit of one's community members.

John Milton, arguably the most well educated man of the 17th century, stresses the importance of a learned community. He states, "The chief part of human happiness is derived from the society of one's fellows and the formation of friendships...For what can we imagine more delightful and happy than those conversations of learned and wise men" (797). As the university is dominated by a series of clichés revolving around money and happiness, there is one cliché that holds true. *Money does not buy happiness*. As Milton highlights, there is nothing more delightful than a society of friends and conversations between learned and wise men. What Milton means is that there is nothing more beautiful than people who can converse intelligently about the world. In order for this to happen, one must understand the world and its various perspectives and viewpoints. There is nothing fascinating or astounding about a solitary small town perspective. The world needs liberal arts to provide the foundation for a desire to learn about one another and to appreciate the many beautiful perspectives that color the planet.

Communal learning is the basis behind the primal love of the liberal arts education. It is why we love the Woods Lecture and Visiting Writers series that Butler puts together every year. We love to learn, but more importantly we love to learn from each other. There is one last cliché that holds true in the world of academia and that is *you cannot put a price*

on education. Another item you cannot put a price on is belonging to a community. When the two are combined, education and community, the product is Butler University.

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