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The Liberal Arts as a Way of Being Humane

Written by Mike Meginnis

There is a temptation to say that a liberal arts education is essential because it enables us to find the truth. This is facile, but close enough. While evolving understandings of the universe and our role therein offered by philosophers, scientists and anthropologists suggest it will likely prove impossible to achieve a final and authoritative understanding of reality, one who is versed in the traditions of said thinkers would be closer to such an understanding than one who is not. If we must live without ultimate truth, we can at least try for a contingent truth in its stead.

We cannot presume to construct even a contingent truth, however, without reference to many methodologies and traditions. It is not enough to understand theology - we must also study geology. More difficult still, we must hold one accountable to the other. Theologians must respond to the fossil record. There must be, in short, communication between disciplines.

the alternative is not only dull but potentially deeply inhumane. In the eyes of the literary critic and rhetorician Kenneth Burke, the division of labor leads inexorably to apocalyptic slaughter. When there is a class of military men and a class of scientists, for instance, the military men will tend to subordinate every available resource to their purposes of destruction and domination. They in their role as planners of war will wage war for war's sake. The class of scientists, meanwhile, might be persuaded to quiet their consciences in pursuit of science for science's sake. Put the two together in a room without a third class of thinker - a poet, perhaps - and watch them make the atom bomb.

I don't mean to suggest, and neither did Burke, that they never would have made the bomb if only someone had been there to write a poem. I do wonder sometimes if the Manhattan Project would have been completed had those scientists been allowed to step into the future and read Yukiko Hayashi's "Sky of Hiroshima," just as I hope Truman and MacArthur might have reconsidered US tactics, especially the firebombing of Japan, had they been able to watch Isao Takahata's devastating *Grave of the Fireflies*. What I mean to argue is that the continual state of surprise, of openness, the humbling nature of conflict and argumentation fostered by the gathering of diverse minds into one institution where they are not only expected but required to converse is a necessary protection against sophisticated savagery.

The atom bomb is often employed in such arguments, usually with the clear implication that science is something to be treated with suspicion - something that attends only to the body, and often destructively, while literature, philosophy and religion steward morality and the human soul. While it's true the sciences cannot touch the soul if there is one, it is

hardly the case that they are some inhuman force requiring constant humanizing by pretty, poignant lines of poetry or prose. To the contrary, the works of Joseph Conrad and Rudyard Kipling would have been humanized considerably by an awareness of genetic science and its erosion of the meaning of race. Likewise, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* would have benefited massively from such an understanding. Aristotle would probably have been more generous to women in his writings had he correctly understood their anatomy and their physical capacities, their psychological resources and especially their profound similarities to men.

There are many terrible and convenient possibilities and temptations opened by a selective ignorance of the world and our many ways of knowing. As Burke wrote in the culmination of *Rhetoric of Motives* , "On every hand, we find men, in their quarrels over property, preparing themselves for the slaughter, even to the extent of manipulating the profoundest grammatical, rhetorical, and symbolic resources of human thought to this end." In short, there are always material and cultural incentives to exploit and injure our fellows, and we can always depend on the human capacity for rationalization to help us justify ourselves in violence and graft. Whether by narratives of national greatness, the grandiose music of Wagner, the imperialist poetry of Kipling, cracked pseudo-sciences of white supremacy, political mandate or magic and mysticism, we can count on those with power or plenty, or sufficient hunger for both, to explain and sanctify their wars and our enslavement.

To solve this problem, he believed in was imperative that we try anything and everything, improvising, borrowing from others, developing from others, dialectically using one text as comment upon another." But why stop at texts? The temptation of the kill being so powerful, might we not grant ourselves every possible argument and type of evidence to contradict the murderous impulse? Whether by reason of religious conviction, economic practicality, anthropological concern, philosophical rationale, or even grandiose architecture, mercy and charity are the height of human achievement; they are rarer, more difficult, more precious and more admirable even than our best and least contingent truths.

The best a school of the liberal arts and sciences might achieve, then, is not the pursuit of truth. That would be good, even great, but we can aim for better. We can live together as engines for peace and human kindness. Even as economic blessings allow greater and greater specialization, even as we reach new heights in our own limited professional pursuits through the time and focus this specialization affords us, we can refuse to think strictly as poets, political scientists, computer programmers, chemists, students of physics or future physicians. Together we can help each other to think as *human beings*. Through argument and conversation, through competition and admonishment, through dialogue, we can together resist the kill. We can justify goodness, and, if we are lucky, we can even practice it as a university, a community, and a family.