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Of Bookworms & Busybodies

Benjamin Storey
Furman University

Michael Glenwood

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OF BOOKWORMS



In 1837, Ralph Waldo Emerson delivered a withering critique of the state of American higher education to the Phi Beta Kappa Society at Harvard. His speech, “The American Scholar,” bristled with barbs at the bearded sages who made up his audience — the Harvard faculty, which had considered Emerson a mediocrity when he was their student.

First, he attacked their worship of old books. “Meek young men,” Emerson said, “grow up in libraries, believing it their duty to accept the view which Cicero, which Locke, which Bacon, have given.” When they accept this authority, he went on, “instantly the book becomes noxious; the guide is a tyrant,” and the reader is reduced to a mere “bookworm.”

Second, he chided the members of America’s pre-eminent learned society for their lack of engagement in active life: a man who lives a life without action, he said, “is not yet a man.” Emerson thus argued for liberation from the tyranny of old books and the embrace of the active life as a corrective to the vices of contemplativeness that, in his view, plagued the scholarly audience before him.

& BUSYBODIES

The virtues of liberal education — and why it is worth pursuing.

Times have changed since 1837. Our scholarly establishment bears only the vaguest resemblance to the one Emerson attacked. Yet we, too, have our characteristic blind spots and weaknesses. What are they? Are we still the passive bookworms Emerson described, or do our difficulties lie elsewhere?

The most obvious problem with American higher education today is its grotesque sticker price. For this, there is plenty of blame to go around. Administrators build legacies by creating programs and positions to address campus concerns, both real and imaginary; these things cost money. Faculty want raises, sabbaticals and research support; these things also cost money. Parents and students want nice gyms and dining halls and dorm rooms, freshly mown grass, ubiquitous Wi-Fi, and, above all, that priceless bubble, reputation. All these things cost money.

But the deeper problem with the contemporary state of American higher education is not financial or even institutional, but philosophical. The present generation of administrators and faculty is not very good at explaining what a liberal education is, and

why students and parents should pay the exorbitant price we charge for it.

When asked to explain ourselves, faculty and administrators face two opposed temptations. One is to wrap ourselves in the mantle of faculty self-governance, haughtily asserting that we do not need to justify our activity to students or their parents, but only to each other, as we bearers of Ph.D.s are the only competent judges of what constitutes a liberal education. Behind closed doors, we go along to get along, indulging our colleagues' research interests, their political hobby-horses, and even their actual hobbies, resulting in incoherent curricula cobbled together out of courses such as "Surfing and American Culture" and "The Horror Film in Context" (real courses, presently taught at prestigious American universities). In the face of this distinctly academic combination of arrogance and fecklessness, increasing public demands for greater accountability are understandable.

This leads to the alternative temptation, perhaps even more dangerous: justifying what we do in terms of the commercial marketplace.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY MICHAEL GLENWOOD

Since we're asking for a \$200,000 investment, we justify its worth in terms of its effect on one's standard of living. There is some truth to this; college graduates earn about \$1 million more over a lifetime than high school graduates, according to the census bureau. But the use of this kind of cost-benefit analysis to justify liberal education is a dangerous game. The economic benefits of vocational courses in nursing or information technology, for example, are far more apparent than those of courses in Shakespeare, theoretical physics, or my own discipline, political philosophy — areas traditionally understood to be at the heart of liberal education.

To be clear, I have no intention of disparaging nursing or information technology. Nurses and computer technicians do real and palpable good in the world, more so than many college professors. But vocational education and liberal education are not the same thing.

What, then, is a *liberal* education, and why is one worth pursuing? What can liberal arts colleges such as Furman say to justify their pricey existence when Americans have begun to question the costs of higher education with growing and justified intensity?

A powerful argument in defense of liberal education was once offered by one of modern society's most acute observers, Alexis de Tocqueville. At the very same moment when Emerson was arguing that American higher education was excessively bookish and too far removed from practical life, Tocqueville argued for the opposite view.

For Tocqueville, one of the defining characteristics of a commercial democracy like ours is its restless mobility, its busyness. Tocqueville knew that the restless activity of American society is part-and-parcel of its distinctive excellences: its extraordinary freedom and widespread prosperity, which he celebrated. However, no society enjoys all good things, and Tocqueville pointed out that an excessive and narrow attachment to activity, business, practicality and change is our characteristic vice. We Americans tend to become not bookworms, but busybodies.

Universities, in Tocqueville's view, can be seen as points of resistance to this American tendency, islands of patience in a culture of haste. In this, he alerts us to one of the many meanings of the word "liberal" in liberal education: liberal in the sense of free from the day-to-day



pressures of productive life. Of what use is liberal education — understood, in this Tocquevillean way, as a little taste of a contemplative leisure more at home in aristocratic societies — to people who are not aristocrats and have no intention of spending their lives locked in libraries?

A liberal arts education can serve as an introduction to a variety of activities that constitute the leisurely, contemplative way of life celebrated by the Western philosophic tradition. Foremost among these activities are the intensive study of old books, friendship centered on conversation, and the cultivation of the capacity and taste for solitary reflection. A liberal arts education can nurture all of these activities,

begetting a lifelong disposition to engage in them.

For now, I want to argue for the importance of the first activity I mentioned — studying old books with precisely the kind of devotion Emerson attacked in "The American Scholar." What good does this activity do for students, particularly those who do not plan to be scholars? What does it offer them in terms of the roles they can expect to play in life when they leave college — as someone's future husband or wife, as someone else's future mother or father, and as a human being who longs for happiness and desires to understand his or her place in the world?

A comment from the philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau provides a useful starting point for considering this question. According to Rousseau, philosophy is something "man needs in order to be able to observe once what he has seen every day." Rousseau was famous for his paradoxes, and this statement is surely one of them. After all, what can it mean to say that we need something as abstruse as philosophy to observe what we see every day — the things most familiar to us?

Another philosopher, Josef Pieper, helps us understand what Rousseau is driving at. Pieper offers a telling critique of the limits of the mind of the *bourgeois*, the productive citizen of a commercial democracy (that is, of all of us, insofar as we are all citizens of such a regime and must work for a living). The *bourgeois*, for Pieper, "accepts his environment defined as it is by the immediate needs of life." When we look at the world, we tend to see everything in terms of its utility

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or practical significance. We see that money, for example, is an eminently useful thing, and rarely interrogate its meaning further. We see that food is useful for eating, and rarely wonder what it means to be a being that eats.

This ready-made utilitarian perspective on the world is indispensable to all of us insofar as we are practical beings. We do not ordinarily ask what stop lights mean; we stop, as we should. However, to see something in practical and utilitarian terms is to take its meaning for granted, and this way of looking at the world tends to become all-pervasive. Bit by bit, Pieper cautions, we slip into taking “*everything* for granted,” which leads him to wonder, “Are we to take our very existence for granted?” Surely there are some things — love, family, nature, God, our own souls — we do not wish to take for granted. After all, to see one’s spouse or one’s children in utilitarian terms is not to see them at all.

To see the people around us and the natural whole we inhabit on their own terms, to wonder at them and encounter them in their full mysteriousness, requires that we struggle against the grain of the practical and utilitarian perspective that is necessarily dominant in our lives as working Americans. Here, the liberal arts can help. Indeed, the liberal arts can be understood as nothing less than the arts that teach us how to avoid taking our existence for granted.

If the point of liberal education is to help us see things with fresh eyes, and thereby really *see* them, what can it mean to say that intensive, even reverent, study of old books is at the heart of such an education? How can the encounter with the old help us to see things anew?

As an example of how an old book can teach us really to see things, as if for the first time, consider what one might learn about love from Plato’s *Symposium*. Popular culture is endlessly productive of songs and films and YouTube clips that offer to teach us love’s meaning, some of which have interesting and true things to say. But their range is limited, for they are the products of a relatively narrow and familiar slice of history and usually offer slight variations on themes we’ve heard before, rather than shocking us into seeing a phenomenon such as love in all of its real and invigorating *strangeness*.

The myth told by Aristophanes in Plato’s *Symposium* is a perfect window into that strangeness. According to Aristophanes, each of us once had four legs, four arms, two faces, and two sets of genitals. We ran by tumbling in a circle, “were awesome in strength and robustness,” had “great and proud thoughts,” and therefore launched an assault on the gods. The gods defeated us, and punished and hobbled us by cutting us in half, an operation that left us longing for our primordial wholeness. Aristophanes calls that longing *eros*, “the bringer together of [our] ancient nature,” “the desire and pursuit of the whole,” the search for that missing half of ourselves that alone could make us feel *complete* again. Aristophanes thus explains why human love longs not merely for sex, but for embracing one another and holding each other tight —

as if trying to form a physical whole out of two irremediably separate bodies — for his myth describes those embraces as our response to our experience of ourselves as painfully, almost unnaturally, incomplete.

A few pages later, Plato has Socrates recount the lessons in love taught him by a mysterious wise-woman named Diotima. According to Diotima, “*eros* is the whole desire of good things and being happy.” It is the ubiquitous longing felt by every human soul for the all-comprehensive flourishing which alone, for the ancients, merited the name *happiness*. Diotima explicitly contrasts her view to Aristophanes’ claim that love is a longing for physical wholeness, “for human beings are willing to have their own feet and hands cut off if their opinion is that [they] are no good.”

Plato thus gives us two accounts of love, both profoundly evocative, but plainly in conflict with each other — which is precisely his intention. For the conflicts between these two accounts of love force us to wonder whether love is, most fundamentally, the desire for happiness or the desire for wholeness. To ask that question is to ask the Socratic questions that unify Plato’s dialogue: What unites the many phenomena that we refer to as love? What is love, in and of itself? What does this longing, so potent in all of us, long *for*?

Plato’s dialogue does not tell us what the answer is but leads us, instead, to interrogate our own experience. He thereby turns our experience into a question for us, which is in some ways to show us that experience for the first time. For it is when we experience a phenomenon such as love as mysterious, as inexplicable in terms of the clichés we have all learned to parrot about it, that we really see it with our own eyes — really *experience* it. Strangely enough, this self-aware, experientially lively ignorance has to be learned. This is precisely what the liberal arts have to teach.

One could give countless further examples of phenomena old books can teach us really to *see* for the first time. Concerning children, John Locke quotes a marvelous aphorism from an ancient author: “the greatest reverence is owed to children.” We tend, rightly, to revere the old; Locke here suggests that we also revere the new. For our example, as Locke points out, always leaves its mark on these mysterious little bundles of possibility, who will, eventually, replace us. On Locke’s account, being in the presence of one’s children, exacting observers that they are, is not a little like being in church.

When it comes to our happiness, Aristotle can help us see it anew when he argues that happiness is a life dedicated to “the activity of the soul in accordance with virtue.” Raised as we are amid swarms of hedonistic images that might lead us to believe that happiness consists of a limitless pig-out enjoyed before a never-ending Super Bowl, Aristotle’s argument reminds us that we feel ourselves most alive, and experience our being most fully and joyously, not when we belly up to the trough but when we put our beings *to work*, exercising our highest faculties not for the sake of profit but because such activity

is intrinsically delightful. Given this understanding, the seminar room, the surgeon's theatre, the basketball court and the soup kitchen are all more likely places to look for happiness than the bar or the beach.

Finally, on the question of the character of the world in which we find ourselves, the book of Genesis can help us see that world anew by raising what is perhaps the most basic questions there are: Why does the whole, the universe, exist at all? Why do we experience it as beautiful, and as ordered in a way our minds can, at least partially, understand? Giving full and final answers to such questions is, of course, probably beyond the capacity of the human mind. Nonetheless, by raising those questions, Genesis can allow us to see the world not as a mere collection of natural resources to be exploited for our practical benefit but as an astonishing marvel at whose source we can only wonder.

By opening our eyes to the strangeness of our life and its many gifts, old books can thus help us to experience love, family, happiness, and the question of the whole on their own terms. One does not necessarily need to go to college to experience this revelation, but it helps.

The books I've drawn on are from distant times and places. They contain strange images, demanding arguments, and paradoxical propositions that are most difficult to understand, particularly on a first reading. To pierce them requires a level of attention almost impossible to give them when immersed in the responsibilities of post-collegiate life, when work and children typically demand the best of one's time and energy. Leisure, guidance from properly trained teachers, and the company of fellow inquirers who share the openness characteristic of the young can be enormously useful in the study of such difficult yet rewarding texts. The university is uniquely suited to provide a home for this impractical yet demanding activity in a relentlessly practical world.

It is a remarkable testament to the unique genius of our country that, in spite of its utilitarian and commercial nature, it has seen fit to make this kind of education, truly liberal education, the passkey to its most respected professions and a widely available, if expensive, good. It has perhaps done so because, from our Puritan origins,



Americans, who care so much about the goods of the body, are nonetheless keenly aware that we also have souls, and that souls need their own kind of food.

As Peter Lawler of Berry College, who spoke at Furman in 2010 as part of the Tocqueville Program Lecture Series, has pointed out, the Puritans believed that “nobody was above work, and nobody was below leisurely contemplation about our true destiny.” In this sense, while liberal education may seem impractical when considered from the vantage point of the commercial marketplace, it looks distinctly more practical if we ask what is

practical for beings who are more than just bodies, and are possessed of more than just bodily needs.

Perhaps Emerson was right to warn the Harvard faculty about the tyranny of old books and the vices of idleness in 1837. Over the long term, however, it seems to me that Tocqueville more deeply understood the relationship between liberty and liberal education in democratic times. For Tocqueville understood that hyperactivity, not idleness, is the characteristic vice of democratic peoples, and that the present, not the past, is most prone to tyrannize over the democratic mind. If liberal education can liberate the mind from that tyranny, one could seriously defend it as priceless.

“Priceless,” however, is a vague term, and a liberal education in our time costs an enormous amount of very real money. Can universities justify charging, can families justify paying, all those hard-earned dollars for what liberal education has to offer? That is for administrations, faculties, students and parents to decide.

But perhaps we can think more clearly about the proper price of a liberal education if we see it for what it truly is. Liberal education, rightly understood, is the most useful tool available to us in what George Orwell called the “constant struggle” necessary “to see what is right in front of one's face.” Liberal education, rightly understood, is the education that liberates the human person from the very real and costly temptation to take one's whole existence for granted. [F]

The author, an associate professor of political science, joined the Furman faculty in 2005.

This essay emerged from the inaugural Francis W. Bonner American Scholar Lecture, delivered by Benjamin Storey on August 31, 2011. The lecture series was established by Furman's Phi Beta Kappa Society (Gamma of South Carolina) to recognize the spirit and tradition of Ralph Waldo Emerson's Phi Beta Kappa lecture on August 31, 1837.

The series highlights the ideals of Phi Beta Kappa, the nation's oldest

academic honor society, and the centrality of liberal learning in the American experience, and is designed to give students a better sense of how their degrees fit into a broader world of ideas at the commencement of a new academic year. It is named in honor and memory of Francis Bonner, longtime university provost and academic dean, who championed the establishment of a Phi Beta Kappa chapter at Furman.