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Liberal Studies: Achieving Depth of Understanding through Breadth of Study

Portfolio Reflective Essay, Spring 2013

There are many persons who now decry the 'waste of time and resources' consumed by a liberal arts education, the concern being that these studies yield no marketable skills, thus making them irrelevant to today's world.¹ North Carolina Governor Pat McCrory is among these, although he did say that he believes in a liberal arts education, just not in public, state-supported schools. McCrory wants to reorient the curricula in these schools to focus on courses of study which will get state residents jobs.² John H. Newman, in his seminal work on the university and its purpose originally published in 1854, stated that:

"[The purpose of a liberal arts education is to] open the mind, to correct it, to refine it, to enable it to know, and to digest, master, rule, and use its knowledge, to give it power over its own faculties, application, flexibility, method, critical exactness, sagacity, resource, address, [and] eloquent expression."³

William Cronon, the noted environmental historian, amplifies Newman's remarks when he states that:

"More than anything else, being an educated person means being able to see connections that allow one to make sense of the world and act within it in creative ways. Every one of the qualities...listening, reading, talking, writing, puzzle solving, truth seeking, seeing through other people's eyes, leading,

¹ A recent survey of 229 employers issued by Millennial Branding and Experience, Inc. finds employers are seeking out liberal arts majors almost as much as engineering students. (Schwabel, Dan. "Millennial Branding Student Employment Gap Study | Millennial Branding - Gen-Y Research & Management Consulting Firm." *Millennial Branding - Gen-Y Research & Management Consulting Firm*. Salem Communications Corporation, 29 Jan. 2013. Web. 1 Mar. 2013. <<http://millennialbranding.com/2012/05/millennial-branding-student-employment-gap-study>>).

² Bennett, Bill. "Interview with N.C. Governor Pat McCrory." *Town Hall*. Salem Communications Corporation, 29 Jan. 2013. Web. 1 Mar. 2013. <media.townhall.com/townhall/bennett/GovMcCrory1.29.13.mp3>

³ Newman, John Henry, and Martin J. Svaglic. *The idea of a university*. Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982. Print.

working in a community—is... about connecting. A liberal education is about gaining the power and the wisdom, the generosity and the freedom to connect."⁴

My course of study in the Master of Arts in Liberal Studies program has validated Cronon's contention completely. With few exceptions⁵, each course builds upon and intersects with multiple other courses. For example, *Contemporary Non-Western Literature* and *Global Arts* each present readings and discussion relevant to societal problems in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. This information was reinforced in a general sense by the films and discussion in *Reel World*, a course in which cinema was used to convey these problems in graphic detail. *Modern Problems in the Middle East* yielded further insights into the roles of religion and resources in the perennial conflicts endemic to not only the Middle East but the Maghreb countries as well. Lastly, *Dangerous Minds: Terrorism* provided a window through which the current unrest in the Middle East and its degeneration into violence and terrorism could be viewed. These studies provided the facts as well as the historical, cultural, religious, and geographic contexts one might use to synthesize a broad albeit in-depth picture of the problems in this war-torn region and why solutions continue to be elusive despite the best of intentions.

"In true liberal education, the essential activity of the student is to relate the facts learned into a unified, organic whole, to assimilate them as the body assimilates food or as the rose assimilates food from the soil and increases in size, vitality, and beauty. A learner must use mental hooks and eyes to join the facts together to form a significant whole. This makes learning easier, more interesting, and much more valuable. The accumulation of facts is mere information and is not worthy to be called education since it burdens the mind and stultifies it instead of developing, enlightening it, and perfecting it."⁶

Sister Miriam Joseph, 1937

The critical importance of and latitude to achieve such a synthesis is what sets a graduate program apart from its undergraduate counterpart. While undergraduate courses could potentially yield similar results, too often the plan of study revolves

⁴ Cronon, William. "Only Connect: The Goals of a Liberal Education." *The American Scholar* Autumn (1998): 114-118. Print.

⁵ Here I'm speaking of *Clue: Detective Fiction*, my first course taken in the MALS program and one that I took just for fun and to "get my feet wet" in the graduate curriculum.

⁶ Joseph, Sister Miriam. "The Liberal Arts." *The Trivium: The Liberal Arts of Logic, Grammar, and Rhetoric*. 4 ed. Philadelphia: Paul Dry Books, 2002. 7. Print.

around courses in one's major area of concentration, the number of such making it difficult to achieve a multidisciplinary dimensionality. Thus, while the undergraduate student might take eight or more courses in his major field, the additional requisites do not amplify or expand the student's knowledge in any sort of synthetic manner.

It has always been my belief that a solid liberal arts foundation should be an integral part of one's intellectual development. True, much of such a broad field of study is factual in nature – the impact of geography on the growth and relative power of nations and nation-states and the holistic comparison of one nation with another, to name but two examples. That said, the real advantage of such an education is to serve as the raw material for the subsequent global synthesis of issues which transcend various fields of study.

Perhaps of greater importance is what this synthesis provides an individual from a cognitive and intellect-expanding point of view. Seeing many issues from a global and organic perspective has the proximate effect of providing new and deeper levels of understanding about oneself and the world around him. I delved into the cultural, political, and social causes and effects of terrorism, thus coming to grips with not only the "terrorist problem" but also an understanding of why the current policies of the United States and other countries designed to fight terrorism are doomed to failure from the start. I developed a much deeper appreciation for the role of women in not only social and historical contexts but also economic and environmental ones. I developed a life-changing appreciation for sustainable living through studies which included not only design and planning but also the impact of human interactions with the environment. Most importantly, my plan of study has had the effect of completely deconstructing and then reconstructing both my belief system and attendant world view. I'd like to dilate several of these issues with an eye toward identifying "universal themes" common to groups of courses within the Master of Arts in Liberal Studies program.

What surprised me the most in my MALS journey was my discovery that, for me at least, the **breadth** of coursework and its attendant assignments as well as the student/student and student/instructor interactions resulted in a much greater **depth** of knowledge and understanding. This contrasts sharply with my vision of how I would

construct and prosecute my MALS education. When I applied for admission, my essay focused upon a single area (social policy) and a single concentration (healthcare delivery), my plan being to tailor my course of study to topics and courses all of which were designed to yield a depth of knowledge in these specific subjects. My goal in this was to drill down to the sociopolitical bedrock of healthcare reform and perhaps become a more credible voice for transformation.

What I discovered, however, was a renewed appreciation for the benefits of casting a wider academic net and in the process accruing a much greater holistic benefit than a single subject focus could have ever yielded. Why was this so important to me? From the time of my graduation from college, my worldview had been narrowing slowly but surely, my sociopolitical position becoming more conservative. I believe this was for several reasons.

The first of these is that living one's life cloistered in a mental neighborhood far from the disquietude of reality provided some comfort as well as a sense of stability. Certainly, my eyes saw evidence of poverty and environmental rape on a daily basis. My work in the hospital brought me into direct personal contact with many who suffered from social injustice, persecution, and disenfranchisement. Even in my choice of family vacations, I literally chose to ignore the fact that the Walt Disney Company destroyed an area the size of San Francisco (47 sq. mi.) to build Disney World, instead taking my children to walk its paved streets and plastic gondolas rather than experience the Everglades, the Okefenokee Swamp, or Arches National Monument. Cognitive estrangement or suspension of disbelief as put forth by Samuel Tyler Coleridge, can make even the worst of transgressions transparent and therefore invisible.

A second reason for my retreat into pseudo-ignorance is that my chosen profession is so demanding of time, energy, and cognitive resources. It has been much easier to go to work for 65 hours a week, take care of the few with whom I come into contact, read and study solely in my profession, and effectively maroon myself on a cognitive desert island "far away from the madding crowd" (apologies to Thomas Hardy). It takes effort and initiative to read outside the massive amount of literature published monthly in the field of medicine, the benefits of doing so not so readily apparent at first glance.

Thirdly, there is a substantial amount of peer pressure to remain blissfully conservative and blind to one's surroundings. Physicians as a whole tend to be conservative, choosing to watch Fox News rather than the BBC, choosing to read the Wall Street Journal rather than the British edition of The Economist or Foreign Affairs. While there are some inter-specialty differences in this area, primary care providers are very

homogeneous in their views. As an example, practicing physicians who believe that healthcare must be socialized if it is to survive represent less than 2% of the total.

My MALS experience has been as illuminating to me as the removal of Saul's (or at that time the man renamed as Paul) scales by Ananias upon his arrival in Damascus was to the apostle himself. Each course added to the foundational knowledge acquired in those preceding it, encouraging lateral connections and comparisons that I scarcely imagined. While I initially was unable to see a connection between *Clue: Detective Fiction* and subsequent courses, it does indeed exist. That course, taken as my initial foray into graduate studies, was merely supposed to be "fun", and yet it proved the perfect introduction. It forced me to challenge every appearance and assumption, not just those that "felt wrong" on the surface, but also those which seemed (or were made to seem) almost axiomatic.

A perfect example is that of terrorism. The "party line" in the Western world is that terrorism is anathema and morally reprehensible in every instance and yet our country among many others was founded in no small measure through the effects of terrorism. Many, including President Barack Obama, opined that justice had been served by the hunting down and killing of Osama bin Laden, and yet his assassination would have been a gross violation of many civil rights had it occurred on US soil and directed against a US citizen. Is justice what the US says it is? Is morality defined by the Christian Bible? In my studies, I wrestled with these issues – successfully, I believe.

Conditions conducive to the spawning of terrorist groups might be viewed from environmental, political, religious, social, and historical perspectives. Such information may be derived from relevant literature and film, religious works such as the Tanakh, Bible, and Qur'an, contemporary media sources (Al Jazeera, Foreign Affairs, The Economist and countless others), sociopolitical data bases (e.g. the annual Global Competitiveness Report published by the World Economic Forum), primary texts, and ecological, environmental, and sustainability references such as *Global Issues in Context* (published by Gale).

In my studies on global terrorism, I found all of these sources to be invaluable. Most of my courses expanded my understanding of the roots of terrorism, many in multiple ways. *Current Problems in the Middle East*, *Contemporary Non-Western Literature*, and *Global Arts* each contributed to my growing appreciation of the festering and desperate anomie⁷ that serves as a fertilizer which, when applied to the seeds of disaffection and disenfranchisement experienced by primarily young single males, seeds sown on the barren fields of desperation and desolation, bears its poisonous fruit in the guise of

⁷ Arendt, Hannah. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1951. Print.

unpredicted and unpredictable violence designed to shock populations and destabilize governments. *Dangerous Minds: Terrorism* amplified and extended these insights and led to an understanding of why Western policies have failed miserably to ameliorate the "terrorist threat" and why theater and operational approaches will never work in this regard. It is only with a full appreciation of the issues that a successful strategic approach can succeed.

Women serve as the backbone of most cultures, having done so beyond the timeline of recorded history, perhaps even language itself. They have traditionally served as what might be called the logistical "tail", providing shelter, food, and other essentials and thus allowing the somewhat stronger and often faster men to serve the roles for which they are best suited, namely hunting and territorial defense. This function is critical to the success of all cultures, including today's. It is interesting to speculate on the exact origins of agriculture, but I suspect that women played the major role in the initial attempts at cultivation and domestication.

Although none of my courses really speculated upon the role of women in planning for and prosecuting mankind's future on Earth, it is interesting to speculate on that topic, especially in light of changes in agriculture made necessary by changes in the environment and the economy. Women may once again assume the role of Master Gardener, perhaps in a hybrid sense, bridging small plot high intensity community plantings with larger acreage, multi-crop operations which blend tree perennials such as olives, apricots, and pecans with smaller shrub perennials such as blueberries, blackberries, and the like, interspersed with islands of truck crops, grains, flowers, medicinal, and other annuals. Men, the driving force behind the so-called green revolution, may revert to their traditional roles of hunter-gatherers but bent to the pursuit of relevant research, transportation, and distribution, thus achieving some semblance of balance. In a very palpable sense, this division of labor impacts directly upon the roles of both in maintaining sustainable cultures and communities, beginning with their design and extending through the various morphologic cycles.

The last area that I'd like to address is that of the transmogrification of my personal belief system and worldview. I was raised in a Christian environment, became agnostic in college and for years thereafter, and then settled back into a version of Christianity in mid-life. Although the teachings of Christ served as good practical advice, I was always bothered by the vexing problem of theodicy and what I considered the failure of all mainstream Western and Abrahamic religions to address this issue in any reasonable way. I sought guidance from Eastern teachings, in particular Hinduism, Taoism, and Buddhism. Each of these brought clarity to some facets of the problem but also failed in the final analysis to completely justify the dichotomy and existence of good and evil.

Since beginning my current course of study in September of 2009, I have invested a substantial amount of time and mental effort in pursuit of what I like to call a true Theory of Everything (TOE), one which accommodates the physical and the metaphysical alike and, most importantly, resolves the theodicy question⁸.

This system of belief, one which really has no name but shares some features of panentheism, allows for the legitimacy of all religions and faiths, positing that these are in actuality systems which provide structure and stability to societies rather than any sort of long-term, post-mortem state, condition, reward, punishment, or destination. Good and evil are artifacts of these systems and are framed to support each society and its members. There are no absolutes of good or evil as individual cultures and societies set their own standards for behavior based upon circumstances and historical position. For example, cannibalism is acceptable in some societies but absolutely proscribed in most. Chemical weapons were acceptable prior to World War II but considered inhumane (is this the same as evil?) thereafter. By getting rid of the concepts of absolute good and absolute evil and recognizing that the two are really simply points along a moral, cultural, and ethical spectrum, the problem of theodicy disappears. This can only happen outside of religions proper. Taoism embraces the need for both but is truly more of a philosophy than a faith (my opinion only).

My belief system helps me put not only my personal life but also global issues into perspective. It is not fatalistic or random. Instead, it gives purpose and meaning to everything that is and everything that occurs. It links quantum physics and cosmology together intimately, posits the existence of not only a multiverse scenario as suggested by Stephen Hawking but an infinite number of universes, each with its own set of physical laws and properties. It is not intended to supersede other faiths and belief systems but instead allow for and legitimize them under one large umbrella.

The above discussion brings my studies full circle and perfectly illustrates the principle I mentioned above – that deep understanding is better acquired by breadth of study than by a focused but narrow penetration into a topic. This has had a major impact on how I live, embracing all persons and cultures knowing that each has something to contribute to me personally and, by extension, the world. It has made it much easier for me to exam problems from many different perspectives and levels. It has emphasized the importance of a very broad, almost Medieval (in the sense of the

⁸ For an interesting description of such a broader TOE, see Artigas, Mariano. *The Mind of the Universe: Understanding Science and Religion*. Radnor, Penn: Templeton Foundation Press, 1999.

Trivium and Quadrivium), foundation of knowledge. Lastly, my MALS course of study has opened a new course of study to me (a Master of Arts in Social Responsibility and Sustainable Communities) which will make the final years of my life of greater value to both the Earth and the humans that forage upon it.