



Beyond College and Career Readiness: Education's Broader Purposes

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Abstract

This essay argues that emphasizing “college and career-readiness” as the major goal of public education is too narrow a purpose for education. College and career readiness, if pursued exclusively, may deprive students of the problem-solving skills they need to live well-adjusted, flourishing lives. The purposes of education that were identified by diverse thinkers from the past may offer a better goal for education: aiming to produce good people. An argument is made that this goal can be pursued by utilizing a liberal arts curriculum featuring core texts. Examples from secondary literature on the value of such an approach are provided.

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When my children were nearing the end of their elementary school years, I asked them a question. "What do you think schools are for?" Both readily answered: "To teach us stuff." Then I said, "What sort of stuff?" My son replied that schools needed to teach students "important things about how to live in the grown up world." I liked how the conversation was going. I wondered, though, just what sort of “things about how to live in the grown up world” he thought he needed to know. So, when I asked him if he could elaborate, he said "You know, things like how to do my taxes and how to get a good job." I was hoping he might have a more philosophical answer—such as “how I can be a happy person,” or “how to be a good person.” After all, I certainly think that if I had to narrow down the purpose of education to just one thing, I would say it has to teach me something about how to live a flourishing life, which I take to be a good one, and a happy one. The answers my son and daughter gave, though, in some ways parallel what the public school curriculum in Kentucky these days is all about. They seemed to be tapping into the larger conversation about education that they heard day in and day out. That conversation served as a catalyst for me to have many further conversations with others and do much thinking about the purposes of education, and how we communicate those purposes to today’s students.

This essay is a brief reflection on the purposes of education and the curricula that serves these purposes. I offer a mild critique of the prevailing view about education in my own Commonwealth of Kentucky, and I enlist some others whose views I share to make this central argument: education should help us with “solving the problem” of living a good life. As part of that argument, I claim that a rich, text-based liberal arts education is the best vehicle to teach us how to do that.

The Current Situation in Kentucky: The Purpose of Education is To Achieve College and/or Career Readiness

Policy-makers and politicians in the Commonwealth of Kentucky decided in 2009 that Kentucky schools had one essential task--to ensure that all graduates were either "college and/or career ready." They gave a name to this goal, calling it "Unbridled Learning."¹ All students were therefore bound for one or two possible destinations after K-12 graduation--they would either go on to college (where they would presumably prepare for some professional career), or else they should be ready to go into some job, technical or otherwise (but one that did not require a four year degree). K-12 schools must prepare students for one of these two trajectories, and this objective defined the mission of scores of Kentucky K-12 schools. Elaborate and complicated accountability measures accompanied this central goal. Determinations by certain benchmarks were made to see if schools adequately prepared students for either or both of these destinations. High stakes testing also formed part of the accountability measures, and this testing dominated the educational landscape in the Commonwealth.

Tensions about education pitched toward strictly vocational ends do not end at the K-12 level in Kentucky. In 2016, the Governor of Kentucky put forward a budget bill that would cut state appropriations to higher education in an attempt limit funding for subjects associated with "arts and humanities." The governor stated that students could study whatever they wished in college, but in his budget, tax dollars would not be used to subsidize students studying "French Literature," but would be used to subsidize engineering students. State colleges and universities were criticized for having programs in "interpretive dance," which would never contribute anything to the state's economy, so the argument ran.² This line of reasoning is not new; Ronald Reagan made similar arguments as Governor of California in 1967. In an article that traced the shifting fortunes of liberal learning at the collegiate level, Dan Berrett, Senior Editor at *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, began his tale with Governor Reagan warning that in a time of economic austerity, the state government could not subsidize "intellectual luxuries" at the state universities, namely, ones that had little to do with direct preparation for a particular job in some growing sector of the economy.³

As a taxpayer, interested observer, and parent, I have thought many hours about this goal of "college and career readiness," and how years of precious time will be spent in Kentucky schools for the Commonwealth's students. I am certainly in favor of students going on to college after their high school graduation. Furthermore, I know how my text-driven, liberal arts-based college education broadened my own horizon and continues to give me guidance along life's way. I certainly am in favor of all students graduating and finding good jobs that pay living wages. Only a foolish person would say he or she is not in favor of college and career readiness. However, it is not a fool's errand to ask if this is a rather limited goal for schools to pursue as the *sine qua non* of their existence. Neil Postman, for instance, was blunt in his assessment about making employability the most important result of an education. In his book *The End of Education*, Postman

1. Nancy Rodriguez, "Input sought on Unbridled Learning Accountability Model", *Kentucky Teacher*. July 31, 2014 <https://www.kentuckyteacher.org/news/2014/07/input-sought-on-unbridled-learning-accountability-model/>. Retrieved June 26, 2019.

2. Mike Wynn, "Bevin's Budget Would Cut College Funding. Courier Journal. January 26, 2016. <https://www.courier-journal.com/story/news/politics/ky-legislature/2016/01/26/bevins-budget-would-cut-college-funding/79174172>.

3. Dan Berrett, "The Day the Purpose of College Changed: After February 28, 1967, The Main Reason to Go Was To Get A Job," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 26, 2015. <https://www.chronicle.com/article/The-Day-the-Purpose-of-College/151359>.

warned that making education revolve around economic concerns undermined the very humanity of students and was far too narrow a purpose to sufficiently guide education.⁴

After asking my children the question about the purpose of education, I began asking my teacher education students. They are the next generation of teachers—hope and promise rests with them. They are not yet bound by state educational policy. They are free to form their own judgments on the purposes of schools. I anticipated much candor and thoughtfulness. Almost invariably, though, the answer came back that schools needed to teach things that they were presently not teaching--things that students now need to know but somehow did not learn in school. There is a nagging sense that my students have that they were somehow underprepared for all the challenges that they now seem to face. So when I asked them "what is the purpose of education?" their easy and almost knee-jerk response is remarkably similar to my children's "how to live in the grown up world" answer. When I asked them to elaborate, the top three responses would be as follows: "(1) how to balance a checkbook, (2) how to change a tire, and (3) how to do my taxes." These three things are not (apparently) taught in school, but my students think they should be.

When I got these answers, I stopped and asked them what it is that they do learn in school, even if they think it is not quite what they should be learning. They most often say "whatever we need to know to do well on the tests." Testing is a touchy subject for many graduates of Kentucky schools. They know what it meant for their schools if they did poorly on the accountability measures. Just bring up their high school experience to a classroom full of 18 and 19 year olds and it does not take long before the gushers of emotion overflow with what a "waste of time" they thought testing was in comparison of the real business of life. Like them, I do not believe that merely accumulating isolated facts is equivalent to being educated. As Mortimer Adler once quipped, "the telephone book is full of facts, but it doesn't contain a single idea."⁵ And like Adler, I do not believe anyone would say that a person who has memorized the phone book can be called "educated" simply on the basis of accumulating all that factual knowledge. It is one thing to be a good test taker, but that specific skill is not one that is widely utilized in most careers that I know anything about. So while the standardized tests and assessments my students (and my children) take may indeed show how much factual knowledge has been accumulated, I have to agree once more with Adler who in his later career constantly warned that one should not regard the results produced by standardized testing as evidence of what he called "genuine learning."⁶

What Is the Purpose of Education?

This question often results in a multitude of contested answers. I learned the broad outlines of the various arguments on purpose in education as a doctoral student in the history and philosophy of education, and now teach my own students the basic arguments as well. However, this is a question that is more than a merely "academic" inquiry. Billions of dollars are spent on education in the United States. Countless hours are spent in classrooms by students and teachers alike. Setting an adequate purpose for the enterprise of educating students is an urgent matter.

Having now lived in the grown up world a good long while, I am pretty sure that while learning how to balance a checkbook, change a tire, and prepare taxes are important skills, they are maybe *not* the most essential bits of knowledge one needs to acquire. Calculators, spreadsheets,

4. Neil Postman, *The End of Education: Redefining the Value of School* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 31.

5. Mortimer J. Adler, *Reforming Education: The Opening of the American Mind*. Ed. Geraldine Van Doren. (New York: Collier Books, 1990), 226.

6. Adler, *Reforming Education*, 167.

roadside assistance (or the owner's manual of the car) and certified public accountants are there to help us if we need them. Furthermore, I have had enough career changes to know (and have watched friends and family do the same) that the career you prepare yourself for in school or college is not necessarily the one you end up doing for the rest of your life. I agree with Eva Brann, who warned schools against taking up vocational education when students are too young an age in her book *Paradoxes of Education In A Republic*. Her concerns with an undue emphasis on vocational studies for young students are summarized with this quote:

[T]here is a premature vocationalism. Here people too young to know themselves and too uneducated to learn easily are encouraged to acquire specific skills for immediate economic reasons.⁷

In this meticulously argued book, she encouraged both schools and colleges to consider the merits of an education centered on reading, discussion and contemplation, particularly through wide reading in what are sometimes called “core texts.” Brann called for an education that centered on literacy in such a way as empowered students to “be able to reflect, and specifically to reflect by reading works of others, [in a] recovery of meaning.”⁸ She warned that too much emphasis on vocationalism in education with an emphasis on “today’s world” might result in graduates being stuck in “uncongenial careers” that are not economically viable in “tomorrow’s world.”⁹ I agree with her. Education should be about more than the rather limited purposes so many have implemented in recent decades. Brann’s argument can be bolstered with other diverse voices, including from among those who exerted substantial leadership within American society and education. Consideration of three such persons who argued that the purpose of education differs from mere “college and career readiness” follows.

John Adams (1735-1826) was the first Vice President and then second President of the United States. Adams’ contributions to the founding of the United States are many. His advocacy for the fledgling nation overseas during the throes of the American Revolution helped ensure the country’s survival. Further, Adams was the only President among the first five who did not own slaves. And John Adams has another distinction that even fewer have: he was a President whose son, John Quincy Adams, also became President.

While serving as an ambassador to the Dutch during the Revolutionary War, the senior Adams received a letter from John Quincy in 1781 that detailed his school activities. Ambassador Adams wrote back with pleasure noting that young John Quincy was underway in learning Latin, which by 1781 was certainly not essential for most vocations. Adams noted that in reading Latin literature there was a great deal to be learned about human nature, politics, and history. In the closing words of his letter, though, he imparted some fatherly advice about the purpose of education to his son: “You will ever remember that all the End of study is to make you a good Man and a useful Citizen.—This will ever be the Sum total of the Advice of your affectionate Father.”¹⁰ Adams was clear in what he thought the purpose of education was. It was to make a person good and an effective citizen. The subjects studied should contribute to this purpose.

7 . Eva T. H. Brann, *Paradoxes of Education In A Republic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 27.

8. Brann, 16.

9. Brann, 28.

10. John Adams to John Quincy Adams, 18 May 1781,” Founders Online, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/04-04-02-0082>. [Original source: The Adams Papers, Adams Family Correspondence, vol. 4, October 1780–September 1782, ed. L.H Butterfield and Marc Friedlaender. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973, pp. 117–118.]

Adams, like several other of the Founders, wrote extensively about the importance of education in the life of the Republic; this letter to John Quincy is not the only instance of his commenting on the importance of study. Many of his other writings highlight this theme of education as a means to producing good people and useful citizens.¹¹ Perhaps the elder's admonition about the purposes of learning reverberated in his son's mind long into the future. In addition to serving as a President, J.Q. Adams should also be remembered for his defense of the Mendi Africans in the famous *Amistad* case, and throughout his life, Adams was an opponent of slavery.¹² John Quincy Adams seemed to take his father's advice in the service to his country: he strove to live a life of service and virtue.

An additional support for a purpose of education beyond college and career readiness is found in the writings of Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929-1968). His legacy as a Civil Rights leader continues to provide inspiration fifty years after his death. While he was still an undergraduate student at Morehouse College in Atlanta, King wrote to *The Maroon Tiger*, his campus newspaper in 1947. His essay was entitled "The Purpose of Education." His eloquence and insight was already evident, despite his young age. King noted that as he discussed the subject of education with his classmates certain statements his peers made concerned him. Too many of his classmates were confused about the purpose of education in his view. King believed that while education was certainly meant to give students a capacity to think to the height of their powers, it must go further than that. He argued that an education that only fortified the intellect stopped short of education's full promise. He wrote that the purpose of education was to build up the student in both "intelligence and character." Any education that left off character development was not worthy of being regarded a "true" education in his view.¹³

King called for an education that merged character development with building up the reasoning capacity of students. Good character consisted of treating others fairly, kindly, and with charity. Good thinking demanded that these character traits accompany acts of individual brilliance. In this short essay, King alluded to some of the horrors that had recently occurred on the global stage (he was writing only two years after the end of World War II), and he pointed to acts of discrimination and prejudice in the United States. He understood that an education that focused on building up the intellect in technical prowess without building up character could lead to tragedy. There is consistency between what Dr. King wrote and what John Adams wrote. Education must assist with our becoming thoughtful people committed to the common good.

As one final example, I will turn to an educator, Professor Richard Mitchell, who lived from 1929 to 2002. Though not as widely known as either Dr. King or President Adams, Mitchell was a college professor in New Jersey, teaching classics, English, and courses for those seeking teacher certification. He wrote a number of books and also published a newsletter called the *Underground Grammarian*. During the height of his popularity while publishing this newsletter, Mitchell came to the attention of Johnny Carson, and he appeared on the Tonight Show a few

11. As another example, see his document "Thoughts on Government" written in 1776, which enjoyed wide circulation among the delegates to the First Continental Congress. His pamphlet urged "the instruction of the people in every kind of knowledge that can be of use to them in the practice of their moral duties...and of their political and civil duties as members of society...ought to be the care of the public...in a manner that never yet has been practiced in any age of nation." The sense is that education forms the whole person, not for a narrow vocational interest, but rather, for participation in civil affairs and daily living. John Adams, "Thoughts On Government," in *The American Republic: Primary Sources*. Bruce Frohnen, ed. (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2002), 196-199. See also Elwood P. Cubberley, *Public Education in The United States* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1934), 90.

12. For a fuller account, see <https://www.nps.gov/people/john-quincy-adams-and-the-amistad-event.htm>

13. See <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/purpose-education>. Original Source: Clayborne Carson, Ralph Luker, and Penny A. Russell, eds. *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr. Volume I: Called to Serve, January 1929-June 1951*. Website date accessed July 3, 2019 and September 8, 2020.

times. Appearing on a late night talk show is something few academics manage to do, and illustrates that there was a time that Mitchell's writing had the attention of several notable people in the United States, even if he never was a household name. Mitchell's books often use satire to make profound points—and the follies and foibles of modern education were frequent targets of his wit. In his book *The Gift of Fire*, Mitchell wrote that one of the purposes of education was to “make us good.”

There are such nourishing and reasonable, and even obvious, ways of describing and understanding education, and then pursuing it, that some strange species of credit must be given to our schoolers, who have ingeniously concocted countless other ways that are debilitating, silly, and unlikely...there is the understanding of education with which I began, education as that which makes us able to be good. Able. A disarming proposition. Who can be against the ability to be good?¹⁴

Perhaps the statements that I have cited—the points made by Eva Brann, John Adams, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Richard Mitchell—provide enough compelling evidence that there were and are many diverse voices who would argue against a narrow vocationalism in education, calling instead for an education's whose central purpose focuses on the production of “good” people, capable of thoughtfulness and civic virtue. I recognize that “goodness” is a contested notion, and not everyone has the same definition of it. However, like Mitchell, I think few will object that goodness should not be a human aspiration, whatever its exact nature might be.

Now, suppose for a moment that the question of the purpose of education were to be agreed on, as I have stated it. Suppose, if only for the sake of argument, my readers all agreed that education should, as its ultimate goal, be about the creation of a thoughtful, good person. For the sake of the argument, I will call this person a “flourishing person.” The adjective “flourishing” seems to take in what I personally mean by “happy and good.” Those who read this essay may recognize these as the terms that are often associated with educational perennialism.¹⁵ I recognize that this is not a new argument, but it is one that should not be assumed to be familiar to all. This argument needs to be renewed in every generation and set beside other arguments for the purpose of education, such as the prevailing one in Kentucky today, that of “college and career readiness.”

I believe the next question that should be asked is this: “what is one necessary attribute in life to achieve this condition of flourishing?” I would reply that it is the ability to effectively solve problems. I further believe that “problem solving” is certainly a skill that any public school with a competent teaching staff can provide its students over the course of 13 years. As to just what I mean by “problem-solving,” I mean nothing more complicated than the ability to reason well, and to think well, and then to apply the results of that thinking to difficulties and challenges of life that are encountered. I think good thinking can lead to living the flourishing kind of life that I believe Adams, Dr. King, Jr., Mitchell and Eva Brann had in mind.

If anything is a “life skill,” surely good thinking about how to live a good life is a one such skill. Thinking is a skill that can exist on a sliding scale of sorts—not all students need to have the same level of accomplishment in this area. There is room for individual difference—but everyone should be taught how to think to the best of his or her ability. Not everyone who goes through

14. Richard Mitchell, *The Gift of Fire*, chapter 9. Retrieved from <https://sourcetext.com/the-gift-of-fire-chapter-nine/>. Date accessed July 3, 2019.

15. For a concise explanation of the perennial philosophy, see George F. Kneller, *Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (New York: John Wiley and Sons Inc., 1964), 107-113.

school or college is going to become a medical doctor who holds life and death in her hands as she wields the scalpel; not everyone is going to become a major diplomat who tries to think through the implications of this high level discussion or that policy decision that can affect the lives of millions of people. Thus, not everyone needs the particular skill of scalpel wielding or world diplomacy. However, I suppose we all need to know how to think, how to reason, and any sort of job beyond the most basic ones will call on one's ability to reason clearly.

This is not a particularly original argument to make, but I think it is one that still has merits. I believe that the arguments put forward by Aristotle and St Thomas Aquinas on human nature can still inform the work of educators. These thinkers believed that there exists a hierarchy in nature; that there is a kind of vegetative nature, an animalistic nature, and then there is a human nature. They argued that what makes humans "human" is this capacity of reasoning. Furthermore, they both argued that human happiness is bound up in the reasoning of the human person. As reason is perfected, the happiness of the individual is more fully realized.¹⁶ I believe they thought that good thinking led to good living. I believe this is the kind of good living that is urged on us by the people whose views I have previously cited. Education can and should contribute to this kind of good living.

Many decisions that students will make require careful thought. Of course, many things in their lives will be rather mundane, and not that much thought has to go into some, maybe even several, of the day to day decisions and activities they do. However, there are always those decisions that do matter more than others, wherein we should do some of our most careful and deliberate thinking, and that is when our education has the greatest chance to "pay off." Who will I marry? Will I marry? What career should I pursue? Where should I live? How do I cope with grief? How do I raise my children? Should I have children? How do I become a graceful loser or a gracious winner? How do I set my priorities about how I spend my discretionary income? Should I tell the truth, always, even if it costs me in the short or long run? How do I talk with my mother or father about giving up his or her car keys or other aspects of independence? How do I answer my children who ask me why some people are prejudiced? What do I say when a friend asks for advice about leaving spouse and children behind to pursue a dream of becoming a shepherd in the Outer Hebrides?

In those situations and maybe dozens (hundreds?) more, we hope that we can benefit from the accrued effects of our education. Individuals need to know how to think, and they hopefully want to know how to think *carefully*, at that. I suppose that it is possible just to blurt out whatever comes immediately to mind, and then do it. It is always possible to act on mere impulse and not put a moment's thought into things and deal with the consequences later. And, sometimes, people do. But not always. Sometimes they "stop and think." And yet, how well prepared are we, by our education, for these critical moments and questions? These seem to be the kinds of problems that people need to know how to solve more so than many of the other kinds of problems schools focus on. Can we be taught how to find answers to these perplexities and to discover reasoned guidance to life's most essential questions? If a person cannot be given "the" answers, can he or she nevertheless be taught how to think through the problems and put forward at least tentative, but still reasonable, solutions? Can "good" solutions that tend to the personal and public good be found for those dilemmas?

I believe it is possible to educate persons in such a way so as to enable them to do the kind of thinking that leads to good outcomes for themselves and others. I do not think that emphasizing

16. Thomas Aquinas, *The Cardinal Virtues*. Trans. Richard J. Regan (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2005), viii.

“college and career readiness,” as we have in Kentucky, is the best way to achieve this kind of education. It is simply not a broad enough purpose for education. Nor do I believe that teaching that focuses on proficiency in standard testing will necessarily result in producing people who can stand up to the “tests” of life all that well. My belief is that the traditional liberal arts curriculum is still the best curriculum there is to teach students the “thinking skills” that will best serve them throughout the long round of life’s many difficulties and problems. Most particularly, I think that a liberal arts curriculum that includes reading what are sometimes called “core texts” is *one* of the best things we can do, particularly if we are interested in learning how to solve or at least attempt to solve our specifically human problems in good ways. Here I am thinking of the problems that relate to human goodness, character, and to use my chosen word, “flourishing.” Many of the world’s core texts centered on these very issues.

To be clear, when I say that schools should teach students how to think, and then I immediately reference problem solving, I have something different in mind than learning how to build even more powerful and intrusive cellular phones, for instance. I am not after solutions to the kinds of technical problems that very few of us will ever be called on to solve. Richard Mitchell, who raised similar concerns in *The Gift of Fire*, decried that educators had replaced “nourishing and reasonable...ways of describing and understanding education” with ones that were “debilitating, silly, and unlikely.”¹⁷ Mitchell rightly noted that the kind of “problem-solving” in schools today mostly revolved around figuring out at what time trains would arrive at stations and how to manipulate diagrams of certain figures to get certain other kinds of figures. These are problems, to be sure, but they are not the kinds of problems that in the long run matter all that much, as Mitchell eloquently noted. And yet, as he argued, and I am now, schools spend an exorbitant amount of time in schools teaching students how to solve these kinds of problems, and often to the exclusion of providing the kind of education that focuses on solving the actual problems of human nature.¹⁸ The kind of problem solving in connection with our education that I have in view is found in this quote from Thomas Jefferson in a letter to John Page in 1763:

The most fortunate of us all in our journey through life frequently meet with calamities and misfortunes which may greatly afflict us: and to fortify our minds against the attacks of these calamities and misfortunes should be one of the principal studies and endeavors of our lives.¹⁹

Calamities and misfortunes seem to be our common lot. And it is the proper work of education to “fortify our minds” against these calamities and misfortunes. As Martin Luther (the Protestant Reformer, not Martin Luther King, Jr.) once remarked “Those wise men [Virgil and other classical poets] knew, what experience of life proves, that no man’s purposes ever go forward as planned, but events overtake all men.”²⁰ Whenever a calamity or misfortune arrives, we search for solutions, if in fact they may be found. In the event that we have faced similar problems before, we may use our memory, and turn back to some previously learned answer based on experience. Certainly not all our problems lend themselves to that kind of solution, however. Many of the

17. Mitchell, *The Gift of Fire*, Chapter 9. <https://sourcetext.com/the-gift-of-fire-chapter-nine/>. Date accessed July 3, 2019.

18. Mitchell, *The Gift of Fire*, Chapter 5. <https://sourcetext.com/the-gift-of-fire-chapter-five/>. Date accessed July 3, 2019.

19. From Thomas Jefferson to John Page, 15 July 1763,” Founders Online, National Archives, accessed April 11, 2019, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-01-02-0004>. [Original source: *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, vol. 1, 1760–1776, ed. Julian P. Boyd. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950, pp. 9–11.]

20. Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*. Trans. J.I. Packer and O.R. Johnston. (*Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 1990*), 83.

problems we face are unique—to us, anyway, but they are not always unique to the whole of human experience.

In those circumstances where personal experience is no guide, we could appeal to things we have read and learned. By tapping into the world-wide body of literature known as the “great books,” and by teaching through the means of the liberal arts, public schools can build up the fund of “experiences” students have, and they can seek to train them to use their reason as they explore them. Not everything in life has to be learned through the “hard way” of direct, personal experience. Exploring the way luminaries of the past have struggled with their problems holds much promise for training students “how to think.” As Lee S. Shulman put it, when people are the beneficiaries of a liberal education, they come to understand that they are heirs to the past in significant ways, and the knowledge that one generation possesses is due in part from the intellectual gains made in former times.²¹ There is a past worth learning from, after all, and access to this past can be gained through the liberal arts curriculum, which most usually includes courses in history, literature, and some of the rudiments of clear thinking and writing. As William C. Bagley explained in his book *Craftsmanship In Teaching*, all of human experience has been “crystallized in books.”²² Acquaintance with good books therefore gives us access to how others who have gone before us have grappled with the essential human problems.

Many human problems hover at the level of personal relationships or making personal choices that call on us to forgo momentary pleasures for the sake of long-term gains, and science may not have the answers to all these kinds of problems. Many of them are moral, ethical, political, and for lack of a better term, *personal*. And yet it is just here that the sharpest contrast between present-day education and past times education lies. There is not much room in “college and career ready” curricula for reading core texts—and often, for the liberal arts subjects themselves. The objections are easy to imagine: “well, if you are going to be an English professor, sure you need to read those old books, but not if you are going to be an engineer.” I am not so sure that objection has merit. There may come a day in the not too far off future that we will wish many more of our scientists had read Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* and thought long and hard about it. We may already be living in such times. As the late president of St. John’s College Stringfellow Barr once wrote

The atomic bomb has dramatized...what happens when we cultivate one field [of study] hard and leave the others to lie fallow. ...[humankind] simply cannot afford to know so much more about nuclear physics than it does about the moral and political problems that the atom raises.²³

Barr went on in that essay to defend liberal arts education, especially the reading of the great books, as one best suited to the times, and perhaps even the *only* education versatile enough to help students meet the myriad of problems that lay ahead in their lives.

21. Lee S. Shulman, “Aristotle Had It Right: On Knowledge and Pedagogy” in *The Wisdom of Practice: Essays on Teaching, Learning, and Learning to Teach*, Ed. Suzanne M. Wilson. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004), 407.

22. William C. Bagley, “Education and Utility,” in *Craftsmanship In Teaching* (New York: Macmillan, 1911), 109. “[H]uman experience is crystallized in books...when a discovery is made in any field of science,—no matter how specialized the field and no matter how trivial the finding,—the discovery is recorded in printer’s ink and placed at the disposal of those who have the intelligence to find it and apply it.”

23. Stringfellow Barr, “Education: Now and to Come: Liberal Education: A Common Adventure.” *The Antioch Review* 15.3 (1955): 300–312. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4609810>

The research and anecdotes from Earl Shorris's excellent book *Riches For the Poor: The Clemente Course in the Humanities* might further support the point that learning in a liberal arts curriculum really does enable students to learn how to solve problems, particularly the problem of finding a flourishing life. In his book, Shorris recounted his experience teaching humanities to impoverished adult learners in New York City. They were students who previously had no access to a liberal arts education but were invited to participate in a project called "The Clemente Course."²⁴

Those who agreed to participate were held to a rigorous schedule of reading difficult books and then discussing them with their highly qualified instructors. Shorris and his participants found that more than anything, it was the acquisition of knowledge, the kinds of knowledge that were contained in the books the students were reading, that led to breaking cycles of poverty and helping these adults find their "voice" and thereby seek change. The students found that what they learned helped them toward solving problems of various kinds—be it the systemic problem of their poverty or the situational problems for which they needed solutions.

Shorris provides numerous compelling anecdotes about how people from varied backgrounds found the inspiration in the humanities and liberal arts to change the trajectory of their lives. He related how one of the project's partners, Rafael Pizarro, grew up reading texts by authors such as "Dante and Sophocles," cultivating an interest in the humanities, and attending a liberal arts college. Pizarro told the story how his brother did not follow the same path, but instead chose the life of the streets and ended up in prison after committing serious crimes. As Shorris told it, Pizarro believed that the only tangible difference between the path of his life and his brother's life was the influence of the humanities.²⁵ Later, Shorris told the story of a man named David Howell, a participant in the Clemente course.²⁶ Shorris once received an unexpected phone call from Howell, who relayed the news that he had been involved in tense work situation.²⁷ Howell explained that he had gotten into a heated exchange with a co-worker, but the tension was defused as Howell considered how Socrates might respond given a similar situation. And as Shorris told it, Howell's moment of reflection about Socrates' reasonableness led to a much happier ending for his own story.²⁸ These two "real world problems" were provided real world solutions by way of liberal arts encounters with core texts. These anecdotes from Earl Shorris' book demonstrated how what Howell and Pizarro learned in the humanities to chart a better way. The humanities do teach us valuable "real life" lessons when taught well.

Shorris's book was not just a collection of stories, though. He discussed how statistical and behavioral research was conducted with the Clemente Course's students. He worked with a researcher who employed a variety of highly-regarded research questionnaires, scales and inventories, and pre- and post-test information with participants in the Clemente Course. The empirical research demonstrated to Shorris' and others' satisfaction that the anecdotes that participants told about how the humanities had helped them were corroborated with statistical data. The research suggested that studying the humanities had given the participants "improved problem definition and formulation" and many other social and cognitive gains.²⁹

A quote from Mortimer Adler summarizes why I believe a text-centered, liberal arts education offers the best approach to teach the kind of problem-solving students most need.

24. <https://clementecourse.org/>

25. Earl Shorris, *Riches for the Poor: The Clemente Course in the Humanities* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2000), 124-125.

26. Shorris, *Riches for the Poor*, 148.

27. Shorris, *Riches for the Poor*, 148.

28. Shorris, *Riches for the Poor*, 149.

29. Shorris, *Riches for the Poor*, 153-154.

There are some human problems, after all, that have no solution... These are matters about which you cannot think too much, or too well. The greatest books can help you think about them, because they were written by men and women who thought better than other people about them.³⁰

However, despite the evidence that Shorris offered, and despite the pleas that Adler, Stringfellow Barr, Eva Brann, and many others have made, the liberal arts curriculum continues its decline in American public education, at both the secondary and post-secondary levels. The reasons for this decline are probably many, and it is outside the purpose of this essay to recount all the reasons. The decline has been probably hastened by the emphasis on the so-called “STEM” subjects of “science, technology, engineering and manufacturing,” but there are other factors to consider.

Debates about the canon have also contributed to the decline of the use of “great books” in liberal arts education. Proponents of the liberal arts and core texts must honestly and forthrightly deal with the issues raised by utilizing a canon limited to a Euro-centric and male dominated list of authors. It is encouraging to see how some teachers are working through the issues surrounding which books to read and which to set aside in the K-12 curriculum. For example, in *The Record* of Kappa Delta Pi professors Katherine Landau Wright and Matthew Thomas engaged in a thoughtful discussion on the continued use of certain classic core texts in K-12 classrooms while making room for more recent titles from diverse authors. In “Who Cares About *The Grapes of Wrath*? Arguments For Balancing Choice And Classical Literature,” both Wright and Thomas agree there can be no one perfect list of core texts, but there nevertheless is much to be gained when a student’s education includes reading seminal texts chosen from among diverse authors. They highlight the importance of selecting books that deal with what they call “global themes;” ones that help students grapple with issues of “universal application” such as friendship, aging, and what they term other “transcendent values.” Reading core texts that deal with these issues also hones students’ ability to become discerning, thoughtful readers.³¹

Defending the liberal arts curriculum and its use of core texts is a complex position to take in today’s educational situation. The issue of the canonicity within the “great books” curriculum poses one problem, and the fact that technical, career-oriented subjects will be the default subject matter for the “college and career ready” curricular approach poses another. With the emphasis on career and technical subjects, students may well be learning how to solve problems related to manufacturing and robotics, but they may be leaving schools inadequately prepared for many of the “human life problems” that will be waiting.

Nevertheless, I remain hopeful that there can still be a place for the liberal arts and core texts in both school and collegiate curricula. If the liberal arts and core texts are to retain even a small foothold in the curriculum, then those of us who continue to believe in their relevance and ability to contribute to the living of a good life must speak up and advocate their use, if even in a different sort of way, and with an awareness of the need for greater sensitivity in their selection and use. For those of us in teacher education, there exists a unique opportunity to speak about the wider purposes of education beyond its mere utilitarian ends of career preparation and teaching us how to do mechanical tasks that can be learned on our own, outside the classroom. Reminding our students that life can be lived with joy and even happiness, and that the liberal arts and core texts

30. Mortimer Adler and Charles van Doren, *How To Read A Book* (New York: Touchstone, 2014. [orig published 1940]), 332.

31. Katherine Landau Wright and Matthew Thomas, “Who Cares About *The Grapes of Wrath*? Arguments for Balancing Choice and Classical Literature,” *Kappa Delta Pi Record*. Vol. 55, No. 4, 148-153.

offer thoughtful perspectives on how to achieve such a joyful and potentially happy life, remains a much needed task.

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