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Liberal Education & Global Community

By Martha Nussbaum

As we celebrate this ninetieth anniversary, the idea of liberal education is more important than ever in our interdependent world. An education based on the idea of an inclusive global citizenship and on the possibilities of the compassionate imagination has the potential to transcend divisions created by distance, cultural difference, and mistrust. Developing this ideal further and thinking about how to modify it in the light of our times is one of the most exciting and urgent tasks we can undertake as educators and citizens.

Knowledge in a time of fear

We live in a time of fear. Since 9/11, Americans have had to face the vulnerability of our towers, our pride, even our chosen institutions and way of life. Fear narrows the moral imagination, making it difficult to view with sympathy the situation of people who live at a distance or who look different from ourselves. Fear leads to polarization. In place of a variegated world of human beings pursuing a wide range of projects out of a wide range of needs, a world of complex interdependencies and of shared problems, fear constructs a simpler world, a world that consists of the vulnerable yet all-important Us and the dark, besieging Them.

Polarization does real harm to our relationships with other nations and with groups inside our own society. The metaphor of a "conflict of civilizations" springs easily to people's minds and lips, obscuring the human needs of people in developing countries, obscuring the complexity and heterogeneity of Islam worldwide, obscuring the variety of needs, beliefs, and interests in the developing world as a whole.

To counter these pernicious tendencies, we need accurate global knowledge and habits of self-criticism. We need theories of global justice and policies that implement these theories. But we need something more fundamental: the compassionate imagination, which can make other people's lives more than distant abstractions. How can we educate American citizens who do take seriously the reality of lives outside America, and who think of political events accordingly? And what role does our tradition of liberal education at the college and university level play in this process of forming imaginative and compassionate world citizens?

Liberal education around the world

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I want to reflect broadly, here, about why the idea of liberal education has been taking root around the world in this time of anxiety, why it is being seen as an urgently necessary idea. When I wrote *Cultivating Humanity*, I believed that it would be a uniquely American book, since, obviously enough, it addressed itself to a system of higher education that exists, more or less, only in the United States. In most of Europe and Asia, university students enter to read a single subject, and education is pre-professional. The idea of a liberal education has roots in other traditions as well as the Greco-Roman--in particular, in Rabindranath Tagore's educational reforms in India, when he founded his progressive school in Santiniketan, outside Calcutta, and, with it, Visva-Bharati ("All-the World") University, dedicated to interdisciplinary cosmopolitan education. In India, however, these reforms have not caught on, and even Visva-Bharati has become as pre-professional as any other Indian university.

Thus, in practice, at least, the idea of liberal education is primarily an American idea. And yet, despite the widespread suspicion of American culture and American ideas, this idea is receiving increasing discussion around the world. I have been at conferences on it in Sweden, Holland, Italy, and Germany; I have participated in the founding of a liberal arts college for women in Bangladesh (an example I shall discuss further). Liberal arts colleges are also springing up in Japan, Dubai, and Karachi. Why? Why is this idea more important now than ever?

All nations face problems of religious and ethnic antagonism internally, and all face our world's growing cultural and religious tensions in international relations. In the case of the nations of Europe, sudden changes in the numbers of immigrants, together with dropping birthrates, are making heterogeneity a fact of life in a way that perhaps it was not before. Suddenly, these nations are recognizing that their curricula for higher education do nothing to form citizens for a pluralistic society and an interlocking world. Programs in ethnic studies and women's studies have sprung up, but unless students want to take a whole degree in those subjects, something that is not likely to lead to good employment options, they are likely to have little contact with these programs. Hence, the American idea begins to look increasingly attractive, and, indeed, urgent.

At the same time, given what I have said about the climate of fear and polarization in the United States, this idea has become more important than ever for Americans, as we struggle to position ourselves in a world that is interdependent, in which only international cooperation will solve problems of hunger, disease, and environmental degradation and produce the possibility of a stable peace among nations. Because America is so dominant, it is easy for Americans to go through life in a bubble of American-ness, speaking English and rarely venturing out of the secure setting of American culture, even when we travel. Only liberal education has the potential to undo these baneful and complacent habits of mind, producing global citizens who can think well about the problems of today's world.

The idea of liberal education is attractive to both Americans and non-Americans, first, because it places the accent on the creation of a critical public culture, through an emphasis on analytical thinking, argumentation, and active participation in debate. This is the first, Socratic part of my proposal in Cultivating Humanity. All modern democracies are prone to hasty and sloppy thinking and to the substitution of invective for argument. A classroom that teaches the virtues of critical analysis and respectful debate can go at least some way to form citizens for a more deliberative democracy. Deliberative democracy is badly needed inside each country. But it is all the more urgently needed if we are ever to create, together, a world community to work on the solution to urgent problems.

Testing of the Socratic sort frequently produces challenges to tradition, as Socrates knew well when he defended himself against the charge of "corrupting the young." That is why the idea of liberal education will always be contested, in our nation and abroad. But Socrates defended his activity on the grounds that democracy needs citizens who can think for themselves rather than simply deferring to authority, who can reason together about their choices rather than just trading claims and counter-claims. Like a gadfly on the back of a noble but

sluggish horse, he said, he was waking democracy up so that it could conduct its business in a more reflective and reasonable way. A liberal arts college or university that helps young people learn to speak in their own voices and to respect the voices of others will have done a great deal to produce thoughtful and potentially creative world citizens.

That Socratic activity is connected to the deeper idea of an education that is "liberal" in the sense described by Seneca, namely, one that "liberates" students' minds from their bondage to mere habit and tradition, so that students can increasingly take responsibility for their own thought and speech. In his letter on liberal education, Seneca argues that only this sort of education will develop each person's capacity to be fully human, by which he means self-aware, self-governing, and capable of respecting the humanity of all our fellow human beings, no matter where they are born, no matter what social class they inhabit, no matter what their gender or ethnic origin.

This concept of a link between liberal education and a deeper and more inclusive kind of citizenship has a special urgency in these times, for young citizens in all nations. It certainly has a special urgency for Americans, as we struggle with the burdens of being American in an era of American domination, asking ourselves what we owe to the rest of the world, how we can rightly take our place in international debates of many sorts. Americans especially often link up to the rest of the world through a very thin set of connections: In particular, as consumers and people involved in business, we connect to the rest of the world above all through a global market that sees human lives as instruments for gain. If institutions of higher education do not build a richer network of human connections it is likely that our dealings with one another will be mediated by the impoverished norms of market exchange and profit making. And these impoverished norms do not help, to put it mildly, if what we want is a world of peace, where people will be able to live fruitful, cooperative lives.

That is the general task of the liberal arts college or university in our era, as I see it: to cultivate the humanity of students so that they are capable of relating to other human beings not through economic connections alone, but through a deeper and wider set of human understandings.

Citizens in an interlocking world

Citizens who cultivate their humanity need, further, my second element in *Cultivating Humanity,* an ability to see themselves as not simply citizens of some local region or group but also, and above all, as human beings bound to all other human beings by ties of recognition and concern: as "citizens of the world," as the ancient Greco-Roman tradition expressed the idea. Fulfilling that ideal requires jolting the imagination out of its complacency, and getting it to take seriously the reality of lives at a distance--without losing its moorings in family and local loves.

Cultivating our humanity in a complex interlocking world involves understanding the ways in which common needs and aims are differently realized in different circumstances. This requires a great deal of knowledge that American college students rarely got in previous eras. As I have said, the most difficult part of this reform is the addition of adequate instruction about non-American and non-European cultures. I believe that it is urgent that all undergraduates should be led into the rudiments of world history and a basic understanding of the major world religions. They should then learn to inquire in more depth into at least one unfamiliar culture. We must become more curious and more humble about our role in the world, and we will do this only if undergraduate education is reformed in this direction.

One further point that I would like to underline once again is that the study of a foreign language is an extremely important part of developing this sort of global understanding. Even if the language is that of a relatively familiar culture, the sheer activity of seeing the world from the viewpoint of another culture's ways of carving

it up and expressing what is important in it, the sheer understanding of why translation is always imperfect and a reinterpretation, is humbling, and the best reminder there can be that not all intelligent people have the same view of life. It is quite shocking that we have so few young people who speak Arabic, and so few who are really conversant in any non-Western language. There are some data that suggest that the situation is improving, that our students are seeking out foreign language courses. We must strongly encourage them to do so more and more.

Imaginative understanding

But, now, let me turn to the third part of my proposal in *Cultivating Humanity.* Citizens cannot think well on the basis of factual knowledge alone. The third ability of the citizen, closely related to the first two, can be called the narrative imagination. This means the ability to think what it might be like to be in the shoes of a person different from oneself, to be an intelligent reader of that person's story, and to understand the emotions and wishes and desires that someone so placed might have. These capacities for imaginative and emotional understanding are developed by literature and the other arts. The great John Dewey long ago argued that the arts were modes of intelligent perception and experience that should play a crucial role in education, forming the civic imagination. Even before him, Rousseau argued that young Emile would only become a good citizen, with compassion for the poor and the downtrodden, if he did have an education nourished by the narrative imagination of human predicaments.

Courses in literature and the arts can impart this ability in many ways, through engagement with many different works of literature, music, fine arts, and dance. But thought needs to be given to what the student's particular blind spots are likely to be, and texts should be chosen in consequence. For all societies at all times have their particular blind spots, groups within their culture and also groups abroad that are especially likely to be dealt with ignorantly and obtusely. Works of art can be chosen to promote criticism of this obtuseness, and a more adequate vision of the unseen. So we need to cultivate our students' "inner eyes," to use a phrase of Ralph Ellison's. This means carefully crafted courses in the arts and humanities, which bring students into contact with issues of gender, race, ethnicity, and cross-cultural experience and understanding. This artistic instruction can and should be linked to the "citizen of the world" instruction, since works of art are frequently an invaluable way of beginning to understand the achievements and sufferings of a culture different from one's own.

This part of the curriculum has strong affinities, today, with thought about education in the international women's movement. I would like to conclude this essay by describing the way in which the ideal of liberal education, with a particular focus on the arts, is currently playing a role in efforts to extend higher education to a greater number of poor women in developing countries, one crucial part of creating a deliberative world community to work toward global justice and peace.

Educating women in developing countries

One of the gravest problems faced by all developing countries is the education of women. In about one third of the world's nations, fewer than 50 percent of women can even read and write. In the nations of South Asia--India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan--the gender gap is large, although regional variations and the shining example of Sri Lanka show that this gap is not caused by economic necessity and can be solved by wise public planning. Public universities do far too little to recruit women from deprived rural backgrounds and to give them the remedial training they often need. Moreover, even more important, the narrow pre-professional training on offer at such universities does not do well at preparing women for leadership positions.

Often trained to be passive and unassertive, women do not learn to think critically or to question dominant assumptions of gender that define their role. In general, the female leaders of the nations of South Asia, both academic and political, tend

to be people who have been lucky enough to get a liberal arts education abroad; these, of course, are likely to be the wealthy few. For this reason, some new efforts at educating women have increasingly turned to the liberal arts model; both in Dubai and in Karachi, such enterprises are being tested.

One ambitious such enterprise is still in the planning stages, and I am excited about being involved in it. An international group, led by a lawyer from Bangladesh named Kamal Ahmad, is establishing a new University for Women. Called Asian University for Women, it will focus on women from South Asia and on women from less than prosperous rural backgrounds. It has been given a land grant by the government of Bangladesh, quite a progressive government on women's issues. The ideas nourishing the curricular planning derive from many sources and are truly international. One prominent source is in the educational ideas of Rabindranath Tagore, whose Santiniketan school focused on training of the imagination through the arts. As middle-class women, formerly not encouraged to express themselves publicly through dance and the other arts, learned to do so, women's empowerment was greatly advanced. Amita Sen, mother of Amartya Sen, the Nobel laureate economist, was such a woman, and her demonstrations to me of some of the choreography that she and Tagore performed together give me a rich sense of this tradition and the exhilarating sense of freedom that it promoted.

The group of curricular planners for AUW is mostly from South Asia, but I have been honored to be involved. One thing we all feel very strongly about is the idea of liberal arts education. Even though this is not a popular type of education in the region, AUW is committed to it out of the shared belief that nothing else can produce the sort of resourceful and critical world citizen that these nations badly need if they are to solve their problems. Our curriculum is still in progress, but here is what one of our planning documents says about the core principles for the humanities:

> The general aim of this part of the curriculum should be to produce young women who can think resourcefully for themselves, participate in discussions of current events and the problems of their region with the capacity to criticize received ideas, with sufficient confidence in their own ideas and initiatives, and with respect and understanding for people who think differently. It is very important that these women be widely and generally informed about world history, world religions, and the ethical debates surrounding globalization and other related pressing issues, and that they should become intelligent participants in these debates, with a strong awareness of ethical issues. At the same time, it is also very important to develop the imagination, so that these women are able to express themselves through the arts and to think creatively about the predicaments of people near and far.

We intend to have, in the first year, a focus on critical thinking and writing, and then a study of major accounts of social justice, with special emphasis on the problems of developing countries. Throughout the curriculum the theme of gender will be woven in, and women will be encouraged to think critically about gender roles, even while being encouraged to do gender differently, becoming active and participatory rather than docile and quiet.

Such ideas are realized in many American universities, but they are increasingly under pressure from cost-cutting and increasing pre-professionalism. But our own preference for this mode of education is no mere accident, no mere local prejudice. It is a preference that has good arguments behind it, when we think about citizenship in the contemporary world. It is for this reason that this idea, more or less despite its American connections, is increasingly catching on elsewhere in the world, as a way to empower women, to energize democracy, and to enrich global debates. It would be most unfortunate if Americans turned away from liberal education by decreasing expenditures on the humanities and arts: These are among the commitments of which Americans can be most proud.

Liberal education is in one way frightening. For it requires opening the personality to change and questioning, to the possibility of moving out of the security of one's own comforting habits. In this time of fear, it is all too easy for Americans to resist this challenge, to look for comfort to a less challenging idea of education, rooted in pre-professional and economic aspirations. To close one's "inner eyes" is comforting; to open them with an educated compassion is difficult and painful. But only an education that reveals our common human strivings and our common human vulnerabilities, challenging us to see the distant truly, can lead us into a world of peace and global cooperation.

Rousseau said of such an education, "Thus from our weakness, our fragile happiness is born." Or, at least (since we live in difficult times) it might be born. But if this happiness is to be born, our liberal arts colleges and universities will be, I believe, its cradles.

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