

**The Present of the Liberal Arts:
A Response to Stephen Davis**

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This is a highly personal reaction to Stephen's paper and to the discussion we had on Friday. My responses, like everyone's, tend to develop out of the particular set of my own experiences. I come at this from multiple perspectives. First, I am a Westmont graduate, the first college graduate in my extended family; I came to college with a fundamentalist faith that was largely unreflective, unexamined, and oblivious to the value of academic inquiry. My experience at Westmont was transformative, opening up possibilities for me in the world that I never could have imagined before.

Second, I was an English major who read and was deeply moved by Hawthorne, Melville, the Brontës, Hardy—and who particularly learned to embrace Milton's sense that he could not praise a fugitive and cloistered virtue. Indeed, I came to read Milton not only as urging the challenge and questioning of the views of others, but also particularly as requiring the continuing challenge of my own. This seemed particularly important to me, for I came to believe during my undergraduate years that much evil in the world was done by people who believed that they were doing the right thing. My own particular response to Milton has centrally informed the search that led me to college teaching.

Finally, I am a faculty member who has found in the administrative work I have done over the years a richer sense of communal context for my teaching. I see my work less in isolation and increasingly in connection with the efforts of my colleagues from across the disciplines. And the sum of my experiences leads me to read Stephen's three main points—the loss of educational consensus, vocationalism, and tight budgets, somewhat differently than he does.

I

I am not so deeply concerned as Stephen is about the lack of intellectual consensus in liberal arts colleges, which seems to me the inevitable product of this particular moment in time, and a survivable problem. But I should like to explain that response with reference to a film that I first encountered as an undergraduate at Westmont—Akira Kurosawa's *Rashomon* (1950). In the film, we are confronted with a story of murder and possible rape, though we experience that story not once, as we would in conventional narrative, but four times in four different versions from four implicated witnesses, and the accounts do not agree (1). The struggle to ascertain what happened is interrupted at the end of the film by the discovery of an abandoned baby; one of the main characters in the film strips the child and steals its clothes, whereupon another, a woodcutter implicated in the forest intrigue, takes the child home to care for it.

The film thus confronts us with a serious epistemological inquiry which is finally, set aside in the face of a moral imperative. The implicit message of the structure of the film is that such epistemological inquiry is important and worthwhile, even if inconclusive,

frustrating, and divisive. Inquiry may be a requisite preface to moral action, though the relationship between the two is undoubtedly tangential and potentially arbitrary as Kurosawa gives it to us.

One might draw a parallel to the liberal arts college, where multiple and often conflicting epistemological projects are carried on by people as demonstrably fallible as Kurosawa's characters. But as in the film, these people are still potentially bound together by the demands of community and human need. Indeed, our discussions up to now have emphasized the curriculum almost exclusively, and I should like to bring the residential and social qualities of the experience we construct into the discussion. It seems clear that the liberal arts ideal is implicated in the totality of the experience of the small college, where both the intellectual search and the ethical imperatives of community are basic and important.

Certainly the 1960's and '70's greatly enlarged the scope and aspirations of that community by letting more people join it—more women, more people of color, people of varying ethnic and religious backgrounds, people with handicaps. This diversity made the intellectual articulation of consensus harder, as Stephen observes, though if Kurosawa and I are right, that was not the place to search for consensus anyway. We may create a substantial sense of shared purpose in other important ways (2).

II

Though I recognize the pressures abroad in our society for vocational training, my experience in my own institution and in other liberal arts colleges with which I am most familiar makes me believe that parents and students are still choosing to seek a liberal arts education in large numbers. Indeed, this fall we enrolled the largest and the most diverse class in our history, principally because our yield on accepted students went up substantially. More people wanted what we offered than we had expected. And our experience is not at all unique. Across the country, the good liberal arts colleges are experiencing a success with recruiting that suggests to me that vocationalism is not, at the present at least, a central threat to our survival or direction.

III

Tight budgets, of course, are the norm in all of higher education, but the important thing is to take the further step confronting why and how they might be tight. Anyone responsible for making college budgets these days will tell you that the two budget areas where costs are most difficult to control are financial aid and technology. Financial aid, of course, is not a direct cost in our budgets, but is rather a way of discounting total costs from other areas—an index of the gap between our cost of doing business and the ability of our students to pay. But the biggest force widening that gap is the cost of technology, which I think poses a significant challenge to us, though that challenge arises not only from the costs of that technology, but also from the uses to which it can and will be put.

It is already clear that technologically delivered instruction can be provided through the internet and the visual media from the biggest names in academia at a cost far below the labor-intensive costs of our methods. And just as it has in the entertainment world (where

movies replaced local theatrical production and recorded performances of stars like Kathleen Battle and Placido Domingo are draining support from local live concert venues), technology may well underbid and undermine all but the best of us in the long run, and move a crucial portion of the educational process from the public space of the campus to the private space of the home.

This is a subject too complex to pursue very far here, but the potential removal of education from the communal space of the campus to the private space of the home, leaves us mainly with the epistemological project (and thus removes, if you will, the ethical imperative of the baby at the end Kurosawa's story); this separation may well be our biggest challenge in the years ahead, at least if we seek to preserve the balance I spoke of at the beginning.

Finally, for me, it is the inhabiting of that problematic relationship between truth-seeking and ethical responsibility—the recognition, if you will, of the limited, contingent, finite nature of all revelation, as well as the unrelenting demands of sympathy and love. If we are determined to hang on to both, we may, to paraphrase Ursula LeGuin, come to the liberal arts together, “living, as we do, in the middle.”⁽³⁾

Notes

1. In Kurosawa's story, a bandit, apprehended before the film begins, admits to tying up a samurai warrior, seducing his wife, and finally killing him. The wife, however, suggests that though she was raped and helpless, her husband disdained her as tainted; she suggests that she killed him accidentally after the rape with the knife she had used to cut him free. The warrior, speaking through a medium, contends that his wife disgraced him, and that he committed suicide. Finally, a woodcutter who happened to be passing, provides an account in which all three principles look rather bad, though the woodcutter himself appears to have stolen a critical piece of evidence. The problematic multiple narratives echo Browning's experiment in *The Ring and the Book*.

2. I might add one brief footnote on academic specialization here. Stephen mainly dismisses academic specialization as a problem for the liberal arts; I believe that it can be an important problem in a specific, though solvable way. Even though a number of our new hires are people who have graduated from liberal arts institutions and who thus may be thought to understand our mission, all of them have been trained most recently in highly specialized graduate programs. If we wish them to have the focus and priorities we seek, we will need to socialize our new faculty carefully into the values and priorities of an institution where the majority of the instruction is essentially general education for most students.

3. Ursula K. LeGuin, “It Was a Dark and Stormy Night; or Why Are We Huddling about

the Campfire?" On Narrative. Ed. W. J. T. Mitchell. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981) 195.