

## **A Framework for the Liberal Arts**

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I want to take just a few minutes to share a bit of my heart with you regarding this topic of the liberal arts. I'll be somewhat narrative in my comments, but all for the purpose of giving you some sense of my own thinking about the liberal arts and concerning our project at Westmont.

I suppose I should begin by declaring that I am a sociologist. Sounds like an admission, doesn't it? Something like "I am an alcoholic." And, quite frankly, it isn't a particularly informative descriptor. Partly, that's due to the field. Like most other disciplines these days, there is a breadth to sociology that makes encountering a sociologist a bit like...well, confronting a pile of manure. There is always the possibility that it will be useful, but very little certainty.

My specific interest is in the sociology of knowledge, and especially the relationship between culture and ideas regarding what is true, or right, or good. Like many other sociologists in the early 70s, that led me to conversations on secularization and modernization. But eventually, I settled into the intersection of epistemology, the history of ideas and the philosophy of science. This sounds a lot better, I know, but it still pretty much looks like a pile of manure.

I give you that more for context than anything else, hoping it will provide you with a bit of understanding as I talk about my own journey. What I want to do, however, is lay out three or four different versions of education that I received while growing up. I think these versions are still out there, and I think most of us get some form of them as we make our way through American education.

Another bit of context, I suppose, is that I grew up on a farm in California, the third child of Mennonite parents, in a family that had been Mennonite for probably over 300 years. We don't know for sure because Mennonites are not big on chronicling their personal history. It's rather seen as a form of hubris. But the journey over the past several hundred years is pretty clear, starting off someplace in western Europe, moving to Russia in the 1780s, then to the American Midwest in the 1870s, and finally to California in the 1920s.

My parents were not separatists, however, and I grew up fully involved in the life of our community. Went to public schools. Didn't wear funny clothes. And, in fact, we looked like prosperous California ranchers: sprawling ranch home, swimming pool, and very nice looking...pick-ups. But the thing to keep in mind is, that although I was fully immersed in the culture, I was also given a value context that was a bit counter-cultural.

The first version of education I received is what I will call "education as necessary." The basic idea here is that education is an alternative to failure. You do well, or you'll get a swift kick in the derriere. Don't disgrace the family. Behave yourself. Do what you're told. And if you don't get a good education, you certainly won't make anything out of yourself.

This isn't a particularly inspiring form of education, obviously, but it is fairly effective. I suspect many of us start out here. I certainly did. And I think the grading system is basically undergirded by this assumption. You study in order not to fail.

The second version of education is what I call "education as helpful." The idea here is that education will provide you with skills and knowledge that will lead to a better life. Perhaps this is just a positive version of the former. Certainly, it remains very pragmatic. But it is also more hopeful. And it can be even inspiring at times.

It's a curious thing, but even though my father was a rather successful farmer, he always hoped that his children would be able to do something else. I think that's because his own journey was truncated by World War II and he never made it to Berkeley as a result. He wound up working in a grocery store, becoming a manager in his early twenties, and then planting potatoes on the side, just to earn some additional cash. But the side business suddenly took off. And he was able to take advantage of a booming economy and build up a large farm in the process.

Nevertheless, he routinely told us—his children—to get an education so that we could secure good jobs and do something with our lives. And, by and large, we listened to his advice. Two thirds of us got a Ph.D., and no one wound up in farming. A few years before his death, however, and while I was already well ensconced in higher education, my dad told me that he always secretly hoped that I would take over the farm. And I was stunned, to be honest with you. Part of me was impressed that he was able to exercise such self-restraint for what he assumed was my good. But his comment also brought a stab of pain, as well. Because I would have loved to have worked with him. And, because I think farming is a rather noble art.

The point is, parents and teachers alike often see education as a way of gaining skills and knowledge that will give one an advantage as one moves into adulthood. Typically, we focus on those things that will help us get good jobs and earn a decent living—especially Americans. But there are skills that will also make us better at living with other human beings and accomplishing a host of other objectives. So stated, education remains a utilitarian concept, but it has a little more nobility attached to it.

A third version of education came to me in high school, during my junior year, from an English teacher who also happened to be my football coach. The book was *The Red Badge of Courage* by Stephen Crane, and the experience was one of learning for the pure joy of it. It's an odd book for such a launching, since it comes with a rough hue. But I found the description of war to be entirely contrary to anything I had ever learned before: very different, entirely probable, and absolutely fascinating.

I became a reader for the first time in my life, not because I had to, but because it was interesting. I suspect that only a football coach could have taken me there, at the time. But it worked. And I very quickly discovered that the same thing was possible in history, and physics, and music. As a corollary, you should know that I also discovered that it was **not** possible in chemistry or foreign language. For me, that is. But the fact is, I was seeing that there was the possibility of pure pleasure in education. And it was a revelation.

I call this the “hedonistic version of education,” using that term not in a negative sense but as a description of a fairly raw form of enjoyment. I think it’s the same thing that happens to someone who learns to play an instrument well, or paint a landscape, or uncrack a formula for the first time. Frankly, outside of formal education, I think this experience comes quite early in life. Watch a small child at play, for example, and you will see this same form of pure joy. The delight of a child looking closely at a butterfly is almost palpable, isn’t it? Of course, it might soon thereafter be followed by the butterfly being decapitated, or more likely, losing its wings. So it’s a bit dangerous without some moral discernment. But it’s there. And sometimes we’re able to kindle that same spirit in formal education as well.

In his latest book (entitled *Respect in a World of Inequality*) the well-known sociologist Richard Sennett talks about this in relationship to playing the cello. It’s something he learned as an adolescent but continues to do on a regular basis. Why? Well, in his youth, he says it gave him a permanent sense of “craft-love.” I like that term, by the way. By “constructing an accurate, free sound I experienced a profound pleasure in and for itself,” he notes, “and a sense of self-worth which didn’t depend on others.” This kind of craft-love, he argues, represents a counterweight to a market-driven society in which people assign value to each other (and themselves) according to socioeconomic status. That last comment is interesting to me, by the way, not only because I think he’s right, but because, in making it, Sennet is trying to give craft-love some kind of usefulness or larger value. More on that later.

A final version of education I will call “life-changing,” or “transformative education.” This assumes that one can be, in some sense, improved through education: bettered in some way, made more whole, or more fully human. Becoming a bit more like what the Creator intended, might be another way of saying it. Sometimes this has a moral dimension to it, where one learns how to behave oneself. The book *Black Like Me* was such a book for many in my generation, where we literally found ourselves in someone else’s skin, and learned a bit more about the consequences of our own actions as a result. And this conference, it seems to me, is an effort to explore this dimension of education, as we think of the relationship between justice and education.

But transformative education can take place in many other ways as well. It happens on the athletic field, for example, with a coach who cares more about character than the scoreboard. It happens in biology courses, where the consequences of poor stewardship are made crystal clear. And it happened, for me, periodically on Sunday mornings when I went to church, and got an education about right and wrong and the purpose of my life in this neck of God’s universe. The point is, a transformative education occurs in many different locations—sometimes by intention and sometimes not.

Now, I say all of this as kind of a background to our thinking about the liberal arts. And obviously this is a complicated conversation, since the liberal arts have been claimed by many different traditions and rooted in fairly divergent epistemologies. But I’ll be rather bold and suggest that I think a good liberal arts education ought to include all four of these versions of education. The first two are the easiest, since almost any form of education promises to be helpful in one way or another.

Actually, there are those who contend that the liberal arts should not be helpful, wanting to distance it from any form of utilitarianism. But I personally find almost all of those arguments to be more provocative than substantive. They do help you to move to one of the other versions of education, but they almost all carry with them an underlying assumption that even this form of education will be good for you in some sense, and rewarding--existentially (at least).

What we typically do in the liberal arts, however, is that we talk about higher-level skills, such as thinking critically, and communicating effectively; skills that help us refine the art of living. These have a certain cache to them but they are still in the realm of utility.

The last two forms of education—the hedonistic and the transformative— are more difficult but also tend to get at what is viewed as especially valuable about the liberal arts. They are more difficult because they require a teleology of some sort, and we're not very good at talking about such things in this post-modern world. We skirt around it when we advocate for the hedonistic quality of a liberal arts education. And we'll talk about the pure joy of learning and the delight of opening up a new universe. But of course, when we do this, we're banking on the hope that our students will "get it" even if it isn't named. The unstated premise is that this project is good in some sense. Selfishly good, at the least. But good in some bigger sense, as well. For the being—the human being—is doing something that fits its essence and its capacity.

All of this is much more apparent as we move into transformative education, since that requires the question: what is it that you want someone to become? Again, one can disguise the teleology, but it's going to be there nevertheless. Transformation is inherently normative, whether we obscure the norms or not.

What we seem to like best, these days, is what one might call transformation by accident. I've found it curious to go to testimonial dinners where students, who are scholarship winners, will give glowing reports about how their education changed their lives. And the people who provided the scholarship are sitting in the audience, shedding tears of joy and absolutely rejoicing in the life that has been changed by the education received. And yet, it may also be the case, that no one at the institution that provided the education will claim to be attempting such a thing. That is, we're happy to take credit for transformation when it occurs, but we don't want to tell anybody precisely what we're doing ahead of time.

Perhaps this is the quandary of the post-modern moment. On the one hand, we all know that education is rooted in all kinds of pre-theoretical assumptions, which impact the education as well as the educated. On the other, we have no categories for saying that one thing is better than another, and therefore we have little guidance in how to actually go about engaging in transformation. And so we tend to deny that that's what we are really trying to do, even though every faculty member I know takes enormous pride in their students who have gone on to accomplish any number of worthy things. It's an odd moment.

Especially for a liberal arts college, I might add. Because I do think we are about human flourishing: about enabling people to not only gain helpful skills and not only enjoy fully the world that they've been given, but also to enable them to flourish and to become better than they had ever imagined they could be. Indeed, I would argue that that's why the liberal arts are at the

heart of American education. Because it is doing something that everyone else counts on. It's cornerstone work, in other words.

At least, that's what I believe. And that has a lot to do with the way we come at things at Westmont. Westmont is what I would call a "framework college." That is, we affirm a specific framework, a certain set of convictions, out of which these issues can be pursued. We don't assume that all colleges should be framework institutions, by the way, nor that our framework should be the only one employed. But we do rather like our framework, and indeed affirm it with great joy and gratitude.

We are sometimes called a Christian liberal arts college, though that isn't my favorite way of putting it. We are, rather, a liberal arts college with a particular frame, that being a Christian world and life view. "Christian" itself is a rather broad term, having within it many different traditions. And we are rooted in some of those traditions more clearly than others. But, the framework itself is very helpful. It enables us to not only explain why one should acquire skills and knowledge, but to what end.

Learning is enjoyable, for example, because that's how we were created. Becoming a certain kind of person is good, because it improves not only one's life, but the lives of others as well. Fully exercising one's gifts is delightful because it delights the Giver. We do not require our students to accept this framework. But we do want them to understand it, and consider it as a frame for their own educational journey. And, certainly, we assume that our faculty are here because they find this framework to be both palatable and profitable, fitting their own assumptions about that which is good, and right, and true, and also find it a good context to pursue such questions.

There are pros and cons to this kind of approach to the liberal arts, of course. The primary disadvantage comes when there isn't a good fit between the framework and the person. I don't simply mean tension, by the way, because I think tension often produces a good education. But sometimes, when the disagreements become severe, the whole thing can just be exasperating. And then the education is not edifying, it's a pain in the neck. The great benefit, however, is that such an education gains hugely in purpose and reason for being. It is not deceptively transformative, in other words, but clearly lays out what its intentions are. And at its best, it can be that genuinely helpful, hedonistic, and life-changing experience that I think ought to characterize a liberal arts education.

Let me close with a story. Last June, our third and last child graduated from high school. She went to a local public school here in Santa Barbara, and so we invited family and friends from out of town to join us in the celebration. As a result, when I awoke the next morning (the day after graduation), the house was rather full. And I, being someone who likes a little solitude early in the morning, decided to jump into the car and go down to the cemetery here in Montecito.

If you haven't seen it, you should go down there sometime, by the way. It's just down the road from here, but it's perched on a bluff overlooking the Pacific Ocean. It's one of the most beautiful settings for death that I've ever seen. I go there periodically because it's not only

lovely, but the people residing there are immensely polite. I'm rarely disturbed. Actually, you may have heard that being a college president is a bit like walking around in a cemetery: a lot of people are under you, but nobody's listening. And this morning, that's exactly what I wanted. I was rather happy about our daughter's fulfillment of her high school career. And I wanted to ponder the moment in silence. And give thanks.

So I pulled up to my favorite spot close to the ocean's edge. And then noticed a balloon attached to a gravestone not too far away. The balloon caught my attention, not only because it's a peculiar sight in a cemetery, but because this balloon was very familiar to me. In fact, one just like it was attached to our other car back home—a car frequently driven by our new graduate. It said on it "2002," and it was a balloon given to all high school graduates in Santa Barbara the day before.

The sight of it kind of took me back. And I quickly got out of my car and made my way over to the gravesite, only to encounter a name that I knew all too well: *Erik Kester*, the gravestone said. And I knew immediately what had happened. Erik had died just two years before of cancer—a form of cancer that had taken his sister a few years earlier. Erik would have graduated in the class of 2002. And so his friends and family took the balloon that belonged to Erik, and attached it to the headstone.

Two things happened at that moment. First, I cried, thinking about the loss that family has suffered. But second, I recommitted myself to the kind of education that we're pursuing here at Westmont. Why? Because it seems to me, a liberal arts education needs to be valuable from the perspective of the grave. Regardless of whether that comes at eighteen, twenty-one, or fifty, or ninety-five.

It needs to be not just a set of skills that will take you someplace, but a life worth living, both now and forever. If it hasn't acquainted you with the joy of learning, I think it has failed. If it hasn't improved your character, or encouraged your love for others, or expanded your universe, than I think it has been short of the mark. And, I would say (and this is the frame from within which I work) if it hasn't enabled you to be a more faithful steward of the gifts God gave you, honoring Him in how you use them, it has failed as well.

Jesus said, "The greatest commandment is to love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your mind, all your soul and all your strength. And your neighbor as yourself." I think that's good advice, in life and in death. And I think it's a great foundation for a liberal arts education, especially from the perspective of the grave. Thank you.

## Works Cited

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