



All Men by Nature Desire to Know

When I was growing up, my father and I would listen to cassette-tape recordings of Alan Watts, the British popularizer of East Asian religions and a key figure of the 1960s counterculture movement. In one lecture, Watts invited audience members to consider alternate notions of God alongside the Judeo-Christian stereotype of a kindly old man with a long white beard. “Instead,” Watts pondered aloud, “imagine a deity of unfathomable darkness, like the Hindu goddess Kali, ‘the black one,’ who represents personified wrath and who is often depicted wearing a garland of severed human heads.”

Naturally these words and images disturbed my young Christian sensibilities. I was especially troubled by the suggestion that God might not be the luminous father figure I had been raised to worship.

“Dad, if we believe that God really is a kind old man who blazes with light,” I asked, “then why should we even consider another view—especially one so gruesome?”

“Because not everyone believes the same as we do,” he answered. “It’s important to consider how other people see the world, even if we choose to see it differently.”

I was stunned. With a few simple words, my father, along with Alan Watts, had changed my perspective forever. In that moment I experienced what Thomas Kuhn called a paradigm shift—a change in basic assumptions that leads to a complete revolution in thinking. I now believe it is my father’s most important legacy.

That experience and others like it initiated me into a lifelong passion for languages, literature, art, philosophy, and religion. As I have dedicated myself professionally to these fields, I am often asked why. This is understandable in part; in reading job-market reports, it seems that the riches of the “creative economy” are reserved for but a few. Also, for the past four decades, college tuition costs have outpaced inflation by several hundred times, while state legislatures have increasingly divested from public universities. Together with the 2008 recession, these factors have justifiably caused a great flight of students from the arts and humanities. So why would anyone with such modest aims as raising a family or joining the middle class gamble their hard-earned money on a university degree in sociology or comparative literature? To put it crudely, of what value are the liberal arts?

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While the question is understandable as noted, its skeptical orientation ignores basic facts that prove the liberal arts’ practical value. The first is a misconception about the phrase itself. Rather than the more limited sense of the fine arts, such as painting or sculpture, the liberal arts stem from the Latin *artes liberales*, a kind of universal education befitting a free citizen of classical Greece or Rome. This was opposed to the *artes serviles*, the applied crafts that required physical exertion and were practiced by slaves. (One of the wonders of modern civilization is that the kind of learning once reserved for aristocracy can now be enjoyed by everyone.) Since at least the medieval period, the liberal arts have included the sciences *and* the fine arts and humanities. The goal of this broad-based approach is to furnish a learning experience that pertains not just to one field, as with a vocational degree, but to many.

At its core, such an expansive goal recognizes that the sciences are not at odds with the arts and humanities, as C. P. Snow observed half a century ago in *The Two Cultures*.¹ Architects and archaeologists have long understood this fact, but other professions are starting to take notice. Medical practitioners now seek to understand

the human context of suffering, as shown by a recent addition to the MCAT—a section called “Psychological, Social, and Biological Foundations of Behavior.” Tech workers recognize the need for insights from the philosophy of mind for artificial intelligence projects. Human-computer interaction draws on media studies, design, and psychology to improve interfaces between technology and the people who use it. The burgeoning field of “narrative economics” considers the way stories affect how people make financial decisions.

The emergence of new fields goes along with a second fact, which shows a liberal education’s practical application: the title of one’s major does not always equal the title of one’s job. As Fareed Zakaria told the 2017 Bucknell graduating class, “It is quite possible [that] in five years you will be working at a company that wasn’t founded yet. In ten years, you may work in an industry that didn’t exist today. So what exactly is the kind of training you need?”² This career unpredictability even includes STEM fields, which shift quickly as new innovations replace old ones. For that reason, Zakaria asserted, a broad education is the best way to develop the intellectual agility necessary in a fluid labor market.

Third, the liberal arts in general and the humanities in particular teach a skill that occupies pride of place in what Daniel Pink calls “the conceptual age.”³ That skill is communication. As companies compete to put products into the homes of ordinary people, they realize the importance of using words and images that ordinary people understand. For example, the ubiquity of classical mythology in advertising—Nike, Pandora, Saturn cars, Oracle Database, the double-tailed siren of Starbucks—reveals the importance of cultural symbols to the marketplace. Also, communication is vital in today’s globalizing economy. Knowledge of foreign languages has become a priority for any organization with interests abroad, as seen in the growing demand for website “localization,” namely the process of adapting a website to local language and culture.

But to speak only of the liberal arts’ practical value is to give them short shrift. Just as important, if not more so, are the intangibles that flow from a broad-based education. One of these is that learning itself is pleasurable, as anyone who has attended live theater or developed a new talent can attest. Another is that, in a time of widespread mistrust of mainstream media, weighing arguments and evidence has become an essential skill for everyday life, and that is gained through a liberal arts education. A third immaterial benefit of the liberal arts is that they enrich our cultural references, elevate our level of conversation, and encourage more self-awareness.

In short, a broad liberal education helps us to achieve what economists now term “human flourishing,” or what classical philosophers used to call “the good life.” Of course, the “good” signaled here does not necessarily mean religious and civic morality. Many are tempted to tout the arts and humanities as a path to positive social

agency, as indicated, for example, by studies showing that empathy is promoted by reading fiction. But as Lee Siegel pointed out in a 2013 *New Yorker* piece, empathy is not always consonant with right action. Used to improper ends, empathy can in fact “enable someone to manipulate another person with great subtlety and finesse.”⁴ So we should be cautious to assume that broad learning automatically inculcates ethical thought and behavior.

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Instead, a liberal arts education’s most valuable contribution beyond practical benefit is to encourage a more reflective way of life. Reading political philosophy may not make us moral, but it does urge us to think more deliberately about what morality means. Exposure to foreign cultures might inspire as much provinciality as cosmopolitanism, but at least it forces us to confront our own cultural assumptions, even if we finally decide that those assumptions are the ones we want to maintain.

Making the time and space for such reflection speaks to a secondary benefit of the contemplative life, which is slowness. To mull over age-old questions entails a lifetime of thought—a slow, grainy meditation that is both increasingly rare and an ever more-needed corrective to the digital age’s breakneck pace.

Above all, living a reflective life makes us more human, as I began to appreciate many years ago while listening to Alan Watts with my father. Consistent thoughtfulness nurtures a deeper, richer existence by feeding a basic mortal urge: the search for truth. Aristotle famously begins his *Metaphysics* by saying, “All men by nature desire to know.”⁵ As if in affirmation of this claim, the history of human endeavor speaks to a relentless drive to unravel the mysteries of the natural world, to understand our own place within that world, and to define goodness and beauty. For that reason, the intangibles of universal learning are probably best enjoyed as savory in their own right. And insofar as a liberal arts education fosters this enjoyment, it benefits all who receive it.

Notes

1. See Charles Percy Snow, *The Two Cultures* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1959).
2. Fared Zakaria, "Commencement Address by Fared Zakaria," Bucknell University, 21 May 2017, *News and Media*, bucknell.edu/news-and-media/events-and-calendars/commencement/photos-speeches-and-videos/commencement-speeches/commencement-2017-fareed-zakaria-address.
3. See Daniel H. Pink, *A Whole New Mind: Why Right-Brainers Will Rule the Future* (New York: Berkeley Publishing Group, 2005).
4. Lee Siegel, "Should Literature Be Useful?" *New Yorker*, 6 November 2013, newyorker.com/books/page-turner/should-literature-be-useful.
5. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, book 1, chapter 1.

For further reading, take a look at the references listed in the notes as well as these texts:

- George Anders, *You Can Do Anything: The Surprising Power of a "Useless" Liberal Arts Education* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2017).
- J. M. Olejarz, "Liberal Arts in the Data Age," *Harvard Business Review* (July–August 2017): 144–45, hbr.org/2017/07/liberal-arts-in-the-data-age.