

“Freedom from the Shackles”: A Liberal Arts Education

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“The liberal arts are not designed to teach you how to make a living; rather they are designed to teach you how to live” (Heaton 2004). In his speech, “Trivium Pursuit: The Liberal Arts in Public and Private Education,” Rev. John Heaton, Headmaster, New Covenant Schools, argues the importance of obtaining a liberal arts education instead of a vocational education. While vocational schools provide students with the tools necessary to earn a successful living, he claims that a liberal arts education provides students with the tools necessary to live a successful life, such as the ability to think, write, and speak effectively (2004). Both Rev. Heaton’s speech and Stringfellow Barr’s essay, “Liberal Education: A Common Adventure,” support the view that a liberal arts education is the best education that students can receive.

Heaton begins his speech by defining what liberal arts means: freedom. Education in the liberal arts, he says, offers freedom from “ignorance, prejudice, and shackles” (2004). With education, he says, comes knowledge, which frees people from ignorance. In addition, with education comes understanding, which frees people from prejudice. Finally, with education comes expansion or open-mindedness, which frees people from the shackles of narrow-minded thinking. Heaton claims that a liberal arts education literally liberates the person and the mind.

According to Heaton, there are seven distinct liberal arts that can be divided into two different categories, called the *trivium*, and the *quadrivium*, meaning, “the three ways,” and the “the four ways” respectively (2004). The “three ways” or the *trivium*, Heaton says, is made up of grammar, dialectic, and rhetoric.

The grammar, he explains, is made up of the essential and elemental parts of a discipline; it is the core of a discipline. For example, Heaton says that the grammar of mathematics is multiplication tables. According to Heaton, a student must first learn to multiply before he or she can learn to divide because division is built upon multiplication. Likewise, in English, it is necessary for a student to learn grammar before he or she can begin to compose sentences and paragraphs because sentences are built by using grammar. The grammar of a discipline, Heaton explains, is its facts or foundation (2004).

The dialectic, he describes, is the testing of the facts. According to Heaton, the dialectic asks the question, “Why?” For example, a student studying the dialectic would be challenged to provide facts or good reasons for his or her beliefs. A student would not be allowed to respond to a question with the answer, “because that is what I believe.” In the dialectic, the student is taught to defend his or her answers by coming up with good arguments to support his or her statements. The dialectic, Heaton claims, serves to teach students analytical and critical thinking skills.

Finally, the rhetoric, he states, is the communication of facts. The student, he says, now knows the facts, is able to think about them, come up with some original thoughts about them, and is able to write or speak about them clearly and effectively. By this point, Heaton hopes that the student has mastered the subject. He believes that the student should now be able to convey the subject to others through writing or speaking, using his or her own original thoughts and research, perhaps even adding something new to the discipline. The rhetoric, Heaton says, is a period of “discovery and extension of original thought” (2004).

According to Heaton, the liberal arts are “hierarchical”; in other words, he says that a student must learn to do some things before he or she can learn to do others. For example, he explains that the student must learn to master the *trivium* before he or she can move on to the *quadrivium* because the skills he or she learns in the *trivium* are necessary for success in the *quadrivium*. The *trivium* disciplines, he describes, are the “stepping stones” for the *quadrivium* (2004).

The *quadrivium*, or “the four ways,” he claims, is made up of mathematics, music, geometry, and astronomy. As in the *trivium*, he says, it is necessary for the student to master one discipline before he or she can move on to the next. For example, in the *quadrivium*, he clarifies, it is necessary for a student to

learn mathematics before he or she can learn music. Because music is made up of many of the elements of mathematics, it is necessary for a student to be able to understand mathematical concepts first before he or she can understand music. Likewise, a student must be able to understand simple arithmetic before he or she can understand geometry, and so on. Each of the disciplines is built on another, layer upon layer.

Furthermore, Heaton says that there is “a fundamental unity within diversity” (2004). In other words, although all of the disciplines appear to be distinct and separate, they are really all interrelated and connected. He says, “a particular knowledge exists within a unified field.... There is a unity within diversity. ... Liberal arts is the basis for all other educational pursuits” (2004). Heaton believes that a liberal arts education is not only important but also necessary for all students because it provides them with a core knowledge upon which everything else in life can be built.

Likewise, in his essay, “Liberal Education: A Common Adventure,” Stringfellow Barr argues that a liberal arts education is both important and necessary. Barr does not think that students in America are getting the type of liberal arts education that they need. He thinks that students should study the “Great Books,” or the classics, in order to gain insight into past generations, which will in turn help them to understand their own generation (Barr 1955, 451). Today students are not literate enough, he claims, because they have not received the proper education in liberal arts education, which would teach them not only how to read, but also how to understand and enjoy the “Great Books.” He says, “Millions of our college graduates are simply not well enough educated to be able to read them [The ‘Great Books’], or to want to read them” (452).

Barr asserts that educators must make children start reading the “classics” at a young age and must teach them how to read and enjoy them so that when they are older they will continue to read and understand them on a higher level. The great thing about the “classics,” he says, is that they can be enjoyed on many different levels. He states that literacy is a never-ending process that should be continued throughout a lifetime. “Maybe we should think of literacy as an indefinitely expansible process,” he says. “Maybe our ideal for each free man should be that he become as literate as possible” (453).

According to Barr, students should learn to read, write, and communicate effectively, and, he believes, like Heaton, that students must receive a liberal arts education in order to do that. In addition, he agrees that students must master both the *trivium* and the *quadrivium* in order to succeed in life. He says, “It is when the child stretches his mind to follow what seems at first like gibberish that his own command of language steadily expands” (454). Students need to be challenged, he asserts, and by reading the “classics” of each discipline, even though they might be difficult to understand, students learn to expand their minds and their comprehension and understanding, thus becoming better communicators. He says, “This, I would suppose, is why over long centuries men have turned to books: in order to tune in on the Great Conversation that we call civilization. This is what it means to be the child of a great civilization and not a cultural bastard” (454).

Barr believes that it is every person’s duty to receive a good education so that he or she might be able to contribute to society. He argues that students need to be awakened from “intellectual somnambulism” and that they need to start contributing something worthwhile to their society; they need to be intellectuals (456). All too often, he says, people become so consumed with their own field of study that it becomes all they know. People can become so technical in their language, he states, that they cut themselves off from communicating with others outside of their field. However, Barr argues that if people were to receive a liberal arts education, then they would be able to communicate with everyone and join in on the “Great Conversation.” He says, “‘That is not in my field’ never exonerates a human mind from inquiry” (458). He believes that people should continually be looking for ways to learn, to grow, and to expand their minds.

Barr provides an inspirational and motivational conclusion: “Yet the classics are still there. We even pay them lip service. With their exuberant intellectual vitality, they could bring us back to life, rid us of

our academic false modesty and our ill-concealed anti-intellectualism, and receive our people's vision of the common good. If such things happened, there might be what men call a revival of learning" (462).

Heaton and Barr's claims about the importance of and need for a liberal arts education are valid. A liberal arts education is beneficial because it teaches students how to think, write, and speak on many different subjects and disciplines. With a liberal arts education, students are able to expand their minds and intellects, thus creating a better and smarter people, and in turn a better and smarter civilization. Those who receive a liberal arts education are more well-rounded than others; they usually have a better perspective on life and are able to relate to more people in both their personal and professional lives.

A liberal arts education also liberates people from isolation. Heaton suggests that a liberal arts education liberates people from ignorance, prejudice, but it liberates them from isolation as well. A person with a liberal arts education is able to communicate with many different people on many different subjects, which allows him or her to widen his or her social circle. Many times people get so caught up in the technical jargon of their professions that they become more and more closed off from the world, being able to communicate only with the few people who share their profession and who understand their language.

However, people who have a broader education are able to communicate with a broader audience; in America where we live in this "melting pot," it is not only important but necessary to have a broad rather than a specialized knowledge in order to live and to communicate with each other. A person can only obtain this type of broad knowledge from a liberal arts education. By receiving a liberal arts education, students will be able to reach more people, become more successful, create more change, and make more of an impact in the world, making a liberal arts education the best education students can receive.

Works Cited

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