

The Way of the Academy: A Secular Path to Universal Values

By Anthony Canata

I propose here an understanding of the liberal arts college as a secular institution teaching universal values. In so doing, I hope to address the concern, often expressed both inside and outside of academia, that liberal arts colleges do not recognize or teach such values. But I also hope to show that teaching such values – that is to say, pointing students toward universal underlying principles – actually encourages, rather than stifles, the spirit of free inquiry that is the hallmark of these institutions. I suggest that to fulfill their mission, liberal arts colleges should provide a deeply transformative experience, and that to do so they must point students to a profound truth. That truth – the underlying unity of all things – is the secular, but universal, ground of the liberal arts experience.

The liberal arts college is nothing less than a sacred space created for the development of the mind. Joseph Campbell recognized this when he described the role of college as that of a second womb, so to speak, wherein students learn the advanced skills of living in a free and modern society. For him, college is a place designed to provide students with a transformative experience that will enable them to fully participate within the society that they will enter upon commencement from their studies.

If Campbell is right, then a college should possess the hallmarks of a transformative space: a locale of relative prominence, a set of sacred symbols, an enclosing wall without and arresting beauty within. And in fact we need look no further than our own Trinity campus to find such a place. The college occupies the highest point of a capital city, and therefore sits on both spiritual and sacred high ground. Approaching Trinity, the chapel tower – symbolic of our reverence for higher design and purpose – dominates the landscape. The buildings along the Long Walk create an imposing wall, separating the cityscape surrounding the College from the space within. Walking through an archway into the main quadrangle, the idyllic, pastoral beauty strikes a deep chord both in heart and mind. We find ourselves within an arrestingly beautiful, secluded area – not unlike a monastery, a church or a theatre – where normal time seems to be suspended. We know, perhaps in places we cannot yet access or express, that we have arrived at a sacred place – a place oriented in its setting, design, and architecture for the pursuit of higher things.

A place designed for transformation misleads if it cannot articulate the transformative process it intends to provide. I propose that a liberal arts college provide a way for students to shed a fractious and incomplete understanding of their world for one that is grounded in secular, but universal, values. I here suggest that the mind is capable of recognizing, and in fact by its very nature is designed to recognize, the universe as a whole, single entity, and itself as a part of the whole. And I propose that this inevitable insight must be the informing principle of the liberal arts experience.

I would suggest that from the time that we come to recognize ourselves as separate, distinct entities in the world, sometime in our youth, we develop views that protect ourselves and our known world from that which is foreign and therefore threatening. On this view, the spiritual leaders of the universal religions, including Buddhism, Islam, Judaism and Christianity, teach us to overcome that instinct and reconnect to the greater world. I here propose that the way of the mind, the way pointed up by the liberal arts experience, is another way to accomplish that great task.

The task, on my view, is three-fold. First, the college must bring students to recognize the limited, unquestioned nature of their views. To accomplish this task, the college must immerse students in a world where they, and their coveted, known world, become only one of many competing views, all of which have in common the tendency to be overvalued by their adherents. Confronted with such knowledge, students should begin to question and ultimately shed their adherence to such views. This will begin a search for an understanding of the world that more consistent with their new experience of competing views.

Second, the college must show its students the way to free themselves from fears and prejudices in search of higher and higher orders of understanding. The mechanism behind this wonderful phase of discovery is the arresting sense of wonder that one feels when one encounters new ideas. It is the exhilaration of learning, the wonder of discovery, familiar to all of us, that fuels the human desire for knowledge. And it is this desire that the College must use to light the minds of its students. In lecture hall, with written assignments, in laboratories, the knowledge that students encounter must take them beyond their normal boundaries of thought – must continually fire their minds with new thoughts and ideas. The college must light the fire again and again and again, until the students themselves begin to feed the fire, seeking deeper and deeper insights into the world around them. This is

the heart of the liberal arts experience, what we have come to expect at any worthy college. It is the flowering of the mind for which such colleges were designed, and must remain central to the way of the academy.

Third, and crucially, the college must point its students to a universal set of values that will replace those the students have shed. I propose that the shedding of parochial values clears the way for students to seek a higher order, and that one finds the highest order when one finally experiences, in the full flowering of the mind, the simple, but profound, insight that all things can be connected, because all things are ultimately part of the same unity. That profound realization in turn leads to an understanding that what we do with our lives will have an impact on the entire world, and that no part of the world is entirely separate from us. It leads to a life in which we understand, rather than fear, those things unfamiliar to us, because we understand on some level our connection to all things. When we see that we are all interrelated, and that our collective fate is dependent upon the way we treat each other and the world that we share, we are led to a life of compassion for others and sensitivity for all beings.

Here, then, is the grounding insight worthy of the pursuit of knowledge, the insight that grounds the life of the mind that the college provides. It is in fact the same universal truth that we hear from the great spiritual leaders in all times: see that we are all one, and embrace, rather than attack, that which only appears to be other than yourself. The great power of the mind is that it can free itself of the thoughts, values and beliefs that enter it, can question them, ponder them and ultimately accept or reject them. This power makes it possible for us to overcome our fears and prejudices, so that we may live without undue fear in a world that is often foreign to us. I would call the way of accomplishing this task the way of the mind, and I propose that it is what the liberal arts experience is designed to do.

To those who would suggest that it is inconsistent for a college simultaneously to provide an atmosphere of free inquiry and to point the way to universal values, I would say that such a criticism overlooks the fact that colleges inevitably teach values. It is in the nature of colleges to invite students to question what they believe. One way or another, therefore, what colleges teach or do not teach will fill the void that they have created. The college cannot escape teaching values simply by disavowing the superiority of any one set of beliefs or values, because that stance is itself value laden: it implies that all knowledge is equal, that all values are relative.

In any event, it is, in my estimation, irresponsible for an institution to invite students to shed their values without suggesting an alternative way of understanding the world. To be sure, the lighting of the mind suggested here requires the freedom to pursue knowledge, including knowledge of both good and evil, without religious, moral, legal, or societal restrictions. That freedom, however, is not the end value, worthy in itself of protection from assaults by those who fear the consequences of allowing such freedom. I suggest that it is time for colleges to point the way to the universal principle whose discovery requires the freedom to pursue knowledge, which freedom is the bedrock of these institutions.

If there has ever been a need for the teaching of such a universal principle, it is now. We are a global community. No longer is there room for narrow viewpoints or irrational fears of unknown peoples, for such things quickly become deadly as they play out on the world stage. No longer can we act in our local setting without regard for the effects of our actions on other countries or the planet. No longer can we act out of fear rather than understanding. Sometime ago the movement of human beings across the planet ended, the distances between peoples disappeared, and the world community emerged. If we are to recognize the underlying unity of that community, then our colleges must bring their students to a viewpoint found beyond all horizons, a viewpoint that even we, as parents and professionals, often fail to see.

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