

A Liberal Arts Education: Perspective from an Alien  
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For those of you who know me, you will realize that giving a talk without visual aids is taking me out of my comfort zone. In fact, the last time I “read” a speech was at a funeral – I hope that I will make you neither cry nor mourn!

Nothing I will say in the next few minutes is as important as recognizing your achievements. You are an extremely select group of students, students who have gone out of their way to broaden their minds and done so with aplomb. At a time when the requirement of acquiring a foreign language is under threat, you have personally sought out this important part of your education. I think this is especially noteworthy in comparison to your predecessors in phi-beta-kappa because they were required to take two semesters – and you have all gone above and beyond that. You are the *crème de la crème* of a liberal arts education and I applaud you for that. In being honored by *Phi Beta Kappa*, you join a family of such eminent persons as

Alexander Graham Bell	Condoleeza Rice
Kerry Washington	Peyton Manning
Jeff Bezos	Eric Nye
EO Wilson	17 US Presidents
Francis Ford Coppola	38 US Supreme Court Justices

As many of you know, I grew up in South Africa - in apartheid South Africa. It would be safe to say that I did not receive a liberal education. In fact, quite possibly the opposite – a *verkramp* (or socially conservative) education would be closer to the truth. In South Africa the government determined what we could learn, whose political opinions we were allowed to hear, what we could read in the newspapers and what we could watch in the cinema. No South African even knew what Nelson Mandela looked like, as his picture was banned. I probably knew more about the racial atrocities carried out in Australia than I did in South Africa. I never questioned serving my obligatory 2 years in the military, a military that helped uphold the apartheid status quo. Bizarrely, the very first persons of color that I got to know, I met in the army. And I was living in Africa!

Yet my grandmother had been a lecturer of music (the cello to be precise) at the Royal Academy in London, and my maternal and paternal grandfathers started the medical and dental schools in Johannesburg, respectively. My parents on the other hand, and especially my father, supported very strongly the racist regime that governed South Africa. There is a lesson to be learned here – that in just one generation, the rights that our forefathers have fought so hard to win for us, can be eliminated. Forgotten. It is the responsibility of every generation to fight for a full education, free from political and religious interference: **A LIBERAL ARTS EDUCATION.**

I left South Africa in 1990 to pursue a PhD in the Sciences at Cambridge University in England. Now although the UK and Cambridge are very enlightened, the UK educational system is much more aligned with South Africa than with the USA. South Africa had been a British colony for

many years after all. If you do a degree in Mathematics at Cambridge, essentially your first year is Math, Math and Math. Second year is Math and Math. Third year is, yes you guessed it, Math! More than this though, what degree you are allowed to study for is dictated by the courses you select when you are 14 years old. As a father, I know that there are very few students who truly know what they want to do when they are 14. Heck, few people know what they want to do when they are 18.

And this is where the US Liberal Arts Education really comes into its own; freedom to choose, freedom to change, freedom to chart your own educational destiny. I have seen students dead set on becoming Pharmacists when they arrive at UW, go travelling and change to graduate with a degree in International Studies with a view to becoming an environmental lawyer. Or students who were going to graduate with a degree in Theater and Dance become Doctors. Or, a perfect synergy, where an student seeking a BA in English did an Honors course on the interaction between biology and cinema that put her on a path to pursuing a PhD in medical writing. No other country's educational system allows this empowering ability to truly choose. In an era when few people will stay with a single job or in a linear career track for the rest of their lives, you are imminently better prepared for this than any other nation. What a gift. And, you know what, if later on when you are old and crooked like me, and you decide you want to do something else, you can easily return to the University of Wyoming and get a different degree! This is also almost impossible in any other country.

When I arrived in the USA in April 2001, I had never heard of Laramie, or of Wyoming. In fact, I had never heard of a *Liberal Arts* education. One of the problems of the English language is, well, its words. It is an evolving language and the meanings of its words change all the time. There are many examples, but let us take the word *wicked*. In the USA, if you described something or someone as wicked you would invariably mean that it does not have a good character. This is its traditional meaning. In the UK, using the descriptor wicked would now mean that it is super cool. *Cool*, is another example of a word that has completely had its meaning changed!

Some of you are probably sitting here wondering where I am going with this tangent! Well the word *Liberal* has been given a bad rap of late. For a good part of our country, if you started a sentence with the word liberal you might be run out of town! Try telling them you have a Liberal degree, and you would have to run extra fast!! And we haven't even added *arts* to the descriptor. But, in the context of education, liberal is not the antonym of conservative. ***It means that you have been exposed to a wide range of facts and information.***

In fact, in education we should really say the ***Liberalarts*** as one word because the intent was these were the subjects or skills that classical antiquity considered essential for a free person to know in order to take an active role in civic life. The word *liberalis* was used in the terms of "*worthy of a free person*". And arts did not refer merely to painting or sculpting, to which we nowadays have confined this term. Indeed, at the University of Wyoming, the College of Arts & Sciences was actually first simply the College of Arts. *Ars* referred to ***principled practice***. And the study of the Liberal Arts included grammar, rhetoric, logic the theory of music, astronomy,

arithmetic and geometry. More recently, and I am talking about the last few hundred years, the term liberal arts has broadened to include the Arts AND Mathematics, Natural and Physical Sciences, Philosophy, Religious Studies and the Social Sciences. If I were to place my own stamp on the Liberal Arts I would say that we should add International Studies to that mix because I am sure the Romans and Greeks would have if travel had been an easy undertaking some 2000 years ago.

There are many reasons that I raised my family in Laramie (and a big shout out to my wife Margaret who did most of the heavy lifting). I came because of the faculty I met during that visit back in 2001. But it is because of you, the students, that we have stayed. And I thank you for that. Before I finish though, I want to a) applaud you again for your accomplishments and b) give you a charge. I want you to defend the Liberal Arts, in its entirety, from the daily assault that it receives. Yet society has started to place a greater emphasis and value on the Natural and Physical Sciences. We, humankind, will be poorer for it if we do not invest in all components of the Liberal Arts. Regardless of what your degree is in, it will be your job to fight, and this is going to be a bloody battle, for the body of the Liberal Arts, not just its big toe! When I see the slogan that freedom isn't free what I see is exactly that – the things that you need to fully function in society as an informed citizen require effort. We cannot let baseless opinion, alternative facts and pride in disinformation become admirable qualities. It only takes a generation to become apartheid South Africa.