

WHY A LIBERAL ARTS DEGREE IS COMPLETELY WORTH IT

by John Macias, St. Gregory's University

*It just might help you become a more virtuous person.
And isn't that what it's all about?*



But what are you going to *do* with that degree?

Every English major, music major, and philosophy major has learned to deflect or ignore this question. Then they grow up and start asking the same question of their own kids.

Turns out most Americans think the whole purpose of a college education is to get a job—to be marketable to potential employers. College, the theory goes, is really just the price of admission to meaningful and sustaining work.

In such a cultural climate, a liberal arts education seems to have no value at all. A literature degree will

not teach you to fill out a balance sheet, and Aristotle will not help you change a tire. Such studies “bake no bread,” as they say.

But the liberal arts in fact have plenty to offer us—in this Jubilee Year, I would like to suggest that liberal arts are an important tool precisely for cultivating the virtue of mercy.

How so? Well, mercy, as Aquinas explains, is the virtue whereby we are able to recognize another's pain and feel it as our own. He calls it a “heartfelt sympathy for another's distress, impelling us to succor him if we can.”

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Alasdair MacIntyre, in his book *Dependent Rational Animals*, echoes Aquinas in explaining that “to understand another’s distress as our own is to recognize that other as *neighbor*” [emphasis mine]. So, if I am a merciful man, then I see each individual as my neighbor, deserving of sympathy when suffering, regardless of his relationship to me. This is precisely the lesson of the Good Samaritan of the Gospel.

Being an English major or a music major can contribute mightily to these facets of mercy as explained by Aquinas and MacIntyre. How? Well, the liberal arts are those branches of study and research ordered, not to some practical end, e.g., healing a broken bone or building computers, but to the attainment of truth for its own sake. These studies are, quite strictly, “pointless.” They seek to discover the truth about reality simply to know it, because knowing the truth is what—beyond the balanced ledgers and the innovative codes written for our technologies—we are ultimately made for.

In the liberal arts, a central question concerns the nature of the human person. What is a human being, what are its powers, and what separates human persons from animals and plants? Philosophy and theology take a more universal scope, while literature, poetry, and the arts seek to concretize these systematic views of the human person. These arts, when correctly pursued, allow us to recognize the common nature that each and every human being possesses. Regardless of race, sex, religion, or economic status, all human beings seek after the same ultimate good.

Therefore, liberal arts help us recognize our shared humanity. They help us to understand who we are as persons, and to detect the things that cause our nature distress. They help us to take it a step further, not merely recognizing the suffering of others, but also understanding that the suffering person in fact has a relationship to us, regardless of who he is. The arts burnish empathy, which in turn drives action to improve our lives and the lives of those around us.

So the liberal arts—while they might not guarantee six digits upon graduation—are an important tool in developing the virtue of merciful regard, in expressing the human condition and then inspiring action to move mercy—and justice, and assistance, and human dignity—forward.

And that’s precisely what we can do with such a degree.