

AVOIDING LIBERAL ARTS SNOBBERY IN MYSELF

by John Mark N. Reynolds, Houston Baptist University

I am a recovering liberal arts snob.

Liberal arts advocates feel besieged for good reason. Many do not understand the value of the liberal arts, we are often the first cut and the last hired at schools, and people mock us with impunity.

What are the liberal arts? They are the part of college ranging from the common core that all students take to the humanities and fine arts majors. These areas train all of us to create culture and how to live well in civilization. At best, they are programs of study for all students and for a few specialists, whose value cannot be measured in what Scrooge would have called “gain and loss.”

People ignorant of their value often call them “fluff” or the “hoops we must jump” to go to college. At some schools, programs are slashed and students viewed as impractical for choosing a liberal arts major. Creating an ugly, but wealthy civilization gives any spiritually sensitive soul the horrors. If you think the arts don’t matter, you have fallen into a mental smallness and ugliness of soul. I have addressed this idiocy many times; Dickens describes it better in *Hard Times*.

Reacting to idiocy can produce idiocy, at least it did in me. My particular idiocy was to ignore the second aspect of the *American University*: training for the ministry of work. Work can be a curse, but work is also the play of a human being and would exist without a fall.

The pain of work, the gratuitous pain is because of sin: God did not create the Dilbert cubicle, sin did. God did create the joy of creating in a team: the real job.

Training for the workforce, properly done by Christians, is as much training for the work of Paradise as is making art. In fact, a job well done to the glory of God is art. As a kid, defensively, I acted like business classes, nursing classes, computer classes were somehow impure. These programs should be bled, I huffed, for the monetary weight that produced glory.

I thought those who “got it” at college were “pure” liberal arts majors. We took plutocrats’ money and purified it by our nobility.

There are three problems with this view. First, it is a heresy. It treats part of man’s discovering the Mind of God, like economics and science, as impure. All truth is God’s truth and that includes the truth discovered by accountants. Few college grads would be proud to announce they are illiterate, but many liberal arts majors, like I was, will shout out with pride that we are innumerate or economically ignorant.

In my lifetime, I spent a short period of time qualifying in New York to sell insurance and learned more in five months than I did in any year of college. I was forced to think about budgets, the connection of money to living, and the beauty of the free market. I saw

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people who warped the free market to be about greed: tyrant capitalists. I saw people who spread freedom to liberate: free marketeers.

I became educated in a huge part of God's creation and gained a respect, that has only grown over time, for humans who can master the skills necessary for those areas. I did this without any sense of self-loathing about philosophy or religious study. Just as gaining knowledge and the ability to appreciate opera (as undeveloped as that remains in me) did not make me an opera star so learning the value of economics or business did not give me those skills.

The second problem with disdain for the "practical" is that it can lead me to live in a dream. I dare to dream, but I cannot live in a dream. A dream is (I am told) a wish the heart makes when it's fast asleep, but I must live awake: especially mentally. For an adult to expect some "parent figure" to take care of the "practical parts" of his life is living in an infantile state. As a thinker I often dream of what could be, but meanwhile I must live in what is. There is a reason Utopianism, killer of millions, often springs for the liberal arts.

My dreams need not be constrained, but my actions must be. Reality, even our broken reality, counts.

Why do we ignore reality? In me, "ignoring" the practical arts was a form of covetousness that I could hide by snobbery. I had chosen a lifestyle and yet did not want to live with all the consequences: I wanted to study Plato and be wealthy too. Some people make more money as a result of their career choices. If I am not careful, I resent the wages of my choice. My lifestyle is different from an accountant, that is my gain, and my choice, but I cannot also demand the wages of an accountants' choices. If I played the oboe, my scholarship money would be greater. If I chose the flute, it will be less. The flute should not sneer at the oboe as a form of revenge.

Finally, it is illiberal to say that I need only learn some things and reject others. The well-educated person has

a curiosity about every field, even if we cannot master or pursue them all. To kill curiosity in myself in any divine or human activity is illiberal and inhuman. The liberal arts snob is no better than the plutocratic snob. The poet who feels proud of his garret, because it is a garret, is as bad as the man who feels superior because of the size of his car.

The vice of the illiberal practical major cannot be chased out with the vice of an illiberal liberal arts major. Instead, God came to me and showed me the beauty of a well-written life insurance policy and said: "Call no field unclean, that I have declared clean." I came to admire those gifted, as I was not, with the ability to grasp financial planning. It was a ministry to humankind that I tried, could not do, but saw as necessary.

Instead, at least at HBU, we are trying to embrace the full task of the American university. We want to expose a student to all of God's creation over four years, but also help them find the main vocation or skill set that will help them create civilization. The human resource manager is a priest and king in the Kingdom of God, the singer is a priest and a king in God's kingdom.

Do we live up to this holistic view? Never. It is a dream and we must acknowledge where we must fall short and where we do fall short, but only so we can slowly, painfully become like Christ. Instead, I aspire and move toward liberal education: knowing all I can and continuing growth into God's Paradise.

Forgive me, Lord, when I call any field unclean; may I eat all the courses in Your great banquet.