

HERE'S THE BIGGEST REASON LIBERAL ARTS STILL MATTER

by Eric Miller, Geneva College

Howard was a talker, and he talked ideas.

For the first six years of my teaching career we shared a hallway, and an hour here, an hour there, in offices on either side of the hall.

A historian, Howard spoke with a flair that seemed to flow from his hyphenated last name: Mattson-Boze. The conversation that began when I showed up sixteen years ago for an interview died only due to natural causes.

It was a warm conversation, at times heated. Howard was a midcentury liberal of Stevenson-Kennedy vintage; I, young and contrarian, usually landed to the left and right at once of wherever Howard happened to be—sometimes on purpose.

I looked on the liberalism Howard winsomely defended with little appreciation. Or, rather, with too little appreciation: this is what he helped me to see.

As a teenager growing up just outside of Chicago, Howard had found his political soul reading the *New York Times*' accounts of the McCarthy era—his sense of outrage was visceral, he told me.

He, the son of Swedish immigrants, was inspired by the liberal hope of a common decency and generosity.

Through the many shifts in liberalism he remained

faithful, stumping door-to-door for votes, taking the Democratic side in public debates, and, above all, keeping the ideals at the heart of the liberal tradition before our eyes.

Slowly, in my case, skepticism softened into admiration. And that admiration took root mainly because Howard wasn't, in the end, a mere political liberal. Before that, he was an intellectual liberal.

Therein lay a treasure I could not deny.

In the liberal arts Howard was a master. He knew the lineage that had formed him so finely, and delighted in it.

A conversation with Howard took one from ancient Athens through medieval Paris to nineteenth-century London in ten minutes flat. He dipped into Kierkegaard in the spirit of a boy playing baseball in spring.

As he spoke, whether across the table or behind a lectern, his eyes gleamed with contagious purpose.

When he died this past January, many former students remembered the discussions he and his wife hosted through the years, evenings spent on “the deep questions of life,” as one, now himself a professor, put it.

Howard taught, in the words of another, “the classical liberal ideas that we live by today.”

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This was simply what college was for, to Howard. More particularly, it was what he thought our college was for, despite countervailing winds. The ideals that spark our way do not live by books alone, he knew, but through people—people living in places structured for their preservation and advance.

Howard believed that without generosity of mind and depth of spirit this world is a harsher place. About the ideas themselves, about their truth, we might—we will—disagree.

But apart from a foundation of respect for ideas and their centrality in our lives, all debates about their worth, and about the world itself, move from incivility to hostility to worse. And the great hope of liberal society, of a place where we live together in honor of the dignity of life, fades like fall.

The liberal arts aren't the only pathway toward our highest ends, to be sure. But they have aided decisively all pathways we've ever known, keeping them clear, straight, and manifest.

The darkness many of us feel today, in an age marked by so vicious and spurious a form of "realism," may in part be the fruit of the liberal arts fading among us, leaving us, inevitably, less free.

I know what counsel Howard would offer. He would urge deep, costly institutional commitments to preserve and prosper liberal learning.

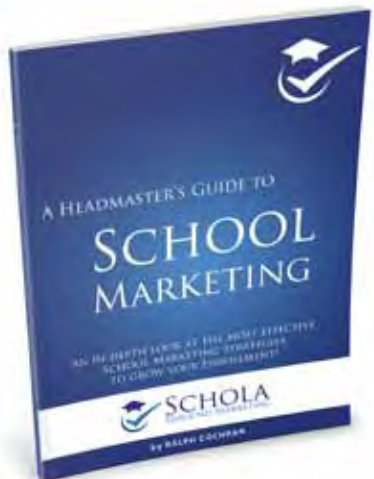
Do we have the will to heed it?

Howard, hopeful soul, would no doubt smile at the question.

And say, "Yes."

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