**C. S. LEWIS ON LIBERAL ARTS EDUCATION** *Gregory Dunn April 1, 1999*

When I received my Master of Arts degree, as a gift I was given a T-shirt that read, "Liberal Arts Major: Will Think for Food." The gift drew a smile then, and the phrase draws a smile now, for it is a common sentiment that those who pursue what is called a "liberal arts education" may have refined intellects but may also have difficulty paying the bills once out of school. In truth, it is a widely held perception that such an education is, at best, impractical and unnecessary and that it is preferable to obtain a more useful degree, such as accounting, nursing, or engineering. After all, with the time and expense of college education today, what use is it to leave school without developing any marketable skills? In short, what good are the liberal arts?

In answering this question, we will find it helpful to look to C. S. Lewis for insight. Although best known in his roles as imaginative writer, Christian apologist, and literary critic, we should not forget that his profession was first an Oxford tutor and later a Cambridge professor and that he spent the balance of his life–nearly forty years–in the academy teaching literature. As such, Lewis wrote many incisive essays offering a number of reasons why the pursuit of a liberal education is truly indispensable.

**TO PRESERVE CIVILIZATION**

The first reason we study the liberal arts has to do with freedom. That freedom is an integral part of the liberal arts is borne out in Lewis’s observation that, "*liberal* comes of course from the Latin, *liber*, and means free." Such an education makes one free, according to Lewis, because it transforms the pupil from "an unregenerate little bundle of appetites" into "the good man and the good citizen." We act most human when we are reasonable, both in thought and deed. Animals, on the other hand, act wholly out of appetite. When hungry, they eat; when tired, they rest. Man is different. Rather than follow our appetites blindly we can be deliberate about what we do and when we do it. The ability to rule ourselves frees us from the tyranny of our appetites, and the liberal arts disciplines this self-rule. In other words, this sort of education teaches us to be most fully human and, thereby, to fulfill our human duties, both public and private.

Lewis contrasts liberal arts education with what he calls "vocational training," the sort that prepares one for employment. Such training, he writes, "aims at making not a good man but a good banker, a good electrician, . . . or a good surgeon." Lewis does admit the importance of such training–for we cannot do without bankers and electricians and surgeons–but the danger, as he sees it, is the pursuit of training at the expense of education. "If education is beaten by training, civilization dies," he writes, for "the lesson of history" is that "civilization is a rarity, attained with difficulty and easily lost." It is the liberal arts, not vocational training, that preserves civilization by producing reasonable men and responsible citizens.

**TO AVOID THE ERRORS OF OUR TIMES**

A second reason we study the liberal arts is to avoid the prejudices of our age. "Every age," Lewis writes, "has its own outlook. It is specially good at seeing certain truths and specially liable to make certain mistakes." The way to avoid being ensnared by the popular errors of our day, then, is to rub minds with the great men of the past, and the only way to do that is to read books.

But they must be the right sort of books. Lewis is adamant that a diet of contemporary books will not do the trick. "All contemporary writers share to some extent the contemporary outlook," he writes, and this outlook brings with it a "great mass of common assumptions" that conceal a pervasive "characteristic blindness." Even those writers who seem most opposed to each other will share this intellectual blind spot and will thus make similar mistakes. "Where they are true they will give us truths which we half knew already," Lewis writes. "Where they are false they will aggravate the error with which we are already dangerously ill."

The only remedy is to cultivate a discipline of carefully reading old books. His advice: "It is a good rule, after reading a new book, never to allow yourself another new one till you have read an old one in between." In this way, we are able to identify and correct those misperceptions that prevent our seeing the truth.

Lewis makes clear that the reason we consult the minds of the past is not because they were perfect; in truth, they were as subject to their own blind spots as we are to ours. The crucial difference is that they did not have the *same* blind spots. Such writers will not likely affirm the errors we now make. We will now not likely make the same errors they did. As Lewis writes, "two heads are better than one, not because either is infallible, but because they are unlikely to go wrong in the same direction."

**TO PURSUE OUR VOCATION**

A third reason we study the liberal arts is because it is simply our nature and duty. Man has a natural thirst for knowledge of the Good, the True, and the Beautiful, and men and women of the past have made great sacrifices to pursue it in spite of the fact that, as Lewis puts it, "human life has always been lived on the edge of a precipice." In his words, "they propound mathematical theorems in beleaguered cities, conduct metaphysical arguments in condemned cells, make jokes on scaffolds." So, finding in the soul an appetite for such things, and knowing no appetite is made by God in vain, Lewis concludes that the pursuit of the liberal arts is pleasing to God and is possibly, for some, a God-given vocation.

Everyone is called by God to do some work, yet each calling is different for each person, and part of the art of Life consists in finding and fulfilling this calling. As Lewis writes, "a mole must dig to the glory of God and a cock must crow." Further, those who pursue a life of learning perform a valuable service for those who do not. "Good philosophy must exist," Lewis writes, "if for no other reason, because bad philosophy must be answered." If those who possess the inclination and leisure for the life of the mind refuse to enter the arena of ideas–"not to be able to meet the enemies on their own ground"–then they will place those who have no such inclination and leisure at the mercy of proponents of bad ideas. In Lewis’s words, "nonsense draws evil after it." As Lewis concludes, "we can therefore pursue knowledge as such, in the sure confidence that by so doing we are either advancing to the vision of God ourselves or indirectly helping others to do so. . . . The intellectual life is not the only road to God, nor the safest, but we find it to be a road, and it may be the appointed road for us."

Last year marked the centenary of C. S. Lewis’s birth. He was a good man and a rigorous thinker, and he has changed the lives of many through his insightful writings. We are fully justified in honoring his life. Further, we will honor his legacy by remembering the indispensable nature of a liberal arts education. Truly, we ignore the liberal arts only at our peril. Without them we will find ourselves increasingly unable to preserve a civilized society, to escape from the errors and prejudices of our day, and to struggle in the arena of ideas to the glory of God.

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