"Only Connect..."

The Goals of a Liberal Education

William Cronon

What does it mean to be a liberally educated person? It seems such a simple question, especially given the frequency with which colleges and universities genuflect toward this well-worn phrase as the central icon of their institutional missions. Mantra-like, the words are endlessly repeated, starting in the glossy admissions brochures that high school students receive by the hundreds in their mailboxes and continuing right down to the last tired invocations they hear on commencement day. It would be surprising indeed if the phrase did not begin to sound at least a little empty after so much repetition, and surely undergraduates can be forgiven if they eventually regard liberal education as either a marketing ploy or a shibboleth. Yet many of us continue to place great stock in these words, believing them to describe one of the ultimate goods that a college or university should serve. So what exactly do we mean by liberal education, and why do we care so much about it?

In speaking of "liberal" education, we certainly do *not* mean an education that indoctrinates students in the values of political liberalism, at least not in the most obvious sense of the latter phrase. Rather, we use these words to describe an educational tradition that celebrates and nurtures human freedom. These days *liberal* and *liberty* have become words so mired in controversy, embraced and reviled as they have been by the far ends of the political spectrum, that we scarcely know how to use them without turning them into slogans—but they can hardly be separated from this educational tradition. *Liberal* derives from the Latin *liberalis,* meaning "of or relating to the liberal arts," which in turn derives from the Latin word *liber,* meaning "free." But the word actually has much deeper roots, being akin to the Old English word *leodan,* meaning "to grow," and *leod,* meaning "people." It is also related to the Greek word *eleutheros,* meaning "free," and goes all the way back to the Sanskrit word *rodhati,* meaning "one climbs," "one grows." *Freedom* and *growth:* here, surely, are values that lie at the very core of what we mean when we speak of a liberal education.

Liberal education is built on these values: it aspires to nurture the growth of human talent in the service of human freedom. So one very simple answer to my question is that liberally educated people have been liberated by their education to explore and fulfill the promise of their own highest talents. But what might an education for human freedom actually look like? There's the rub. Our current culture wars, our struggles over educational standards are all ultimately about the concrete embodiment of abstract values like "freedom" and "growth" in actual courses and textbooks and curricular requirements. Should students be forced to take courses in American history, and if so, what should those courses contain? Should they be forced to learn a foreign language, encounter a laboratory science, master calculus, study grammar at the expense of creative writing (or the reverse), read Plato or Shakespeare or Marx or Darwin? Should they be required to take courses that foster ethnic and racial tolerance? Even if we agree about the importance of freedom and growth, we can still disagree quite a lot about which curriculum will best promote these values. That is why, when we argue about education, we usually spend less time talking about core values than about formal standards: what are the subjects that all young people should take to help them become educated adults?

This is not an easy question. Maybe that is why—in the spirit of E. D. Hirsch's *Cultural Literacy* and a thousand college course catalogs—our answers to it often take the form of *lists:* lists of mandatory courses, lists of required readings, lists of essential facts, lists of the hundred best novels written in English in the twentieth century, and so on and on. This impulse toward list making has in fact been part of liberal education for a very long time. In their original medieval incarnation, the "liberal arts" were required courses, more or less, that every student was supposed to learn before attaining the status of a "free man." There was nothing vague about the *artes liberales.* They were a very concrete list of seven subjects: the *trivium,* which consisted of grammar, logic, and rhetoric; and the *quadrivium,* which consisted of arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music. Together, these were the forms of knowledge worthy of a free man. We should remember the powerful class and gender biases that were built into this vision of freedom. The "free men" who studied the liberal arts were male aristocrats; these specialized bodies of knowledge were status markers that set them apart from "unfree" serfs and peasants, as well as from the members of other vulgar and ignoble classes. Our modern sense of liberal education has expanded from this medieval foundation to include a greater range of human talents and a much more inclusive number of human beings, holding out at least the dream that *everyone* might someday be liberated by an education that stands in the service of human freedom.

And yet when we try to figure out what this education for human freedom might look like, we still make lists. We no longer hold up as a required curriculum the seven *artes liberales* of the medieval university; we no longer expect that the classical nineteenth-century college curriculum in Greek and Latin is enough to make a person learned. But we *do* offer plenty of other complicated lists with which we try to identify the courses and distribution requirements that constitute a liberal education. Such requirements vary somewhat from institution to institution, but certain elements crop up predictably. However complex the curricular tables and credit formulas may become—and they can get pretty baroque!—more often than not they include a certain number of total credit hours; a basic composition course; at least pre-calculus mathematics; some credits in a foreign language; some credits in the humanities; some credits in the social sciences; some credits in the natural sciences; and concentrated study in at least one major discipline.

We have obviously come a long way from the *artes liberales*—and yet I worry that amid all these requirements we may be tempted to forget the ultimate purpose of this thing we call a liberal education. No matter how deliberately they may have been hammered out in committee meetings, it's not clear what these carefully articulated and finely tuned requirements have to do with *human freedom.*

And when we try to state the purpose of such requirements, we often flounder. Here, for instance, is what one institution I know well states as the "Objects of a Liberal Education": "(1) competency in communication; (2) competency in using the modes of thought characteristic of the major areas of knowledge; (3) a knowledge of our basic cultural heritage; (4) a thorough understanding of at least one subject area." This is the kind of language one expects from an academic committee, I guess, but it is hardly a statement that stirs the heart or inspires the soul.

One problem, I think, is that it is much easier to itemize the requirements of a curriculum than to describe the qualities of the human beings we would like that curriculum to produce. All the required courses in the world will fail to give us a liberal education if, in the act of requiring them, we forget that their purpose is to nurture human freedom and growth.

I would therefore like to return to my opening question and try to answer it (since I too find lists irresistible) with a list of my own. My list consists not of required courses but of personal qualities: the ten qualities I most admire in the people I know who seem to embody the values of a liberal education. How does one recognize liberally educated people?

1. *They listen and they hear.*

This is so simple that it may not seem worth saying, but in our distracted and over-busy age, I think it's worth declaring that educated people know how to pay attention—to others and to the world around them. They work hard to hear what other people say. They can follow an argument, track logical reasoning, detect illogic, hear the emotions that lie behind both the logic and the illogic, and ultimately empathize with the person who is feeling those emotions.

2. *They read and they understand.*

This too is ridiculously simple to say but very difficult to achieve, since there are so many ways of reading in our world. Educated people can appreciate not only the front page of the *New York Times* but also the arts section, the sports section, the business section, the science section, and the editorials. They can gain insight from not only THE AMERICAN SCHOLAR and the *New York Review of Books* but also from *Scientific American,* the *Economist,* the *National Enquirer, Vogue,* and *Reader's Digest.* They can enjoy John Milton and John Grisham. But skilled readers know how to read far more than just words. They are moved by what they see in a great art museum and what they hear in a concert hall. They recognize extraordinary athletic achievements; they are engaged by classic and contemporary works of theater and cinema; they find in television a valuable window on popular culture. When they wander through a forest or a wetland or a desert, they can identify the wildlife and interpret the lay of the land. They can glance at a farmer's field and tell the difference between soy beans and alfalfa. They recognize fine craftsmanship, whether by a cabinetmaker or an auto mechanic. And they can surf the World Wide Web. All of these are ways in which the eyes and the ears are attuned to the wonders that make up the human and the natural worlds. None of us can possibly master all these forms of "reading," but educated people should be competent in many of them and curious about all of them.

3. *They can talk with anyone.*

Educated people know how to talk. They can give a speech, ask thoughtful questions, and make people laugh. They can hold a conversation with a high school dropout or a Nobel laureate, a child or a nursing- home resident, a factory worker or a corporate president. Moreover, they participate in such conversations not because they like to talk about themselves but because they are genuinely interested in others. A friend of mine says one of the most important things his father ever told him was that whenever he had a conversation, his job was "to figure out what's so neat about what the other person does." I cannot imagine a more succinct description of this critically important quality.

4. *They can write clearly and persuasively and movingly.*

What goes for talking goes for writing as well: educated people know the craft of putting words on paper. I'm not talking about parsing a sentence or composing a paragraph, but about expressing what is in their minds and hearts so as to teach, persuade, and move the person who

reads their words. I am talking about writing as a form of touching, akin to the touching that happens in an exhilarating conversation.

5. *They can solve a wide variety of puzzles and problems.*

The ability to solve puzzles requires many skills, including a basic comfort with numbers, a familiarity with computers, and the recognition that many problems that appear to turn on questions of quality can in fact be reinterpreted as subtle problems of quantity. These are the skills of the analyst, the manager, the engineer, the critic: the ability to look at a complicated reality, break it into pieces, and figure out how it works in order to do practical things in the real world. Part of the challenge in this, of course, is the ability to put reality back together again after having broken it into pieces—for only by so doing can we accomplish practical goals without violating the integrity of the world we are trying to change.

6. *They respect rigor not so much for its own sake but as a way of seeking truth.*

Truly educated people love learning, but they love wisdom more. They can appreciate a closely reasoned argument without being unduly impressed by mere logic. They understand that knowledge serves values, and they strive to put these two—knowledge and values—into constant dialogue with each other. The ability to recognize true rigor is one of the most important achievements in any education, but it is worthless, even dangerous, if it is not placed in the service of some larger vision that also renders it humane.

7. *They practice humility, tolerance, and self-criticism.*

This is another way of saying that they can understand the power of other people's dreams and nightmares as well as their own. They have the intellectual range and emotional generosity to step outside their own experiences and prejudices, thereby opening themselves to perspectives different from their own. From this commitment to tolerance flow all those aspects of a liberal education that oppose parochialism and celebrate the wider world: studying foreign languages, learning about the cultures of distant peoples, exploring the history of long-ago times, discovering the many ways in which men and women have known the sacred and given names to their gods. Without such encounters, we cannot learn how much people differ—and how much they have in common.

8. *They understand how to get things done in the world.*

In describing the goal of his Rhodes Scholarships, Cecil Rhodes spoke of trying to identify young people who would spend their lives engaged in what he called "the world's fight," by which he meant the struggle to leave the world a better place than they had found it. Learning how to get things done in the world in order to leave it a better place is surely one of the most practical and important lessons we can take from our education. It is fraught with peril because the power to act in the world can so easily be abused—but we fool ourselves if we think we can avoid acting, avoid exercising power, avoid joining the world's fight. And so we study power and struggle to use it wisely and well.

9. *They nurture and empower the people around them.*

Nothing is more important in tempering the exercise of power and shaping right action than the recognition that no one ever acts alone. Liberally educated people understand that they belong to a community whose prosperity and well-being are crucial to their own, and they help that community flourish by making the success of others possible. If we speak of education for freedom, then one of the crucial insights of a liberal education must be that the

freedom of the individual is possible only in a free community, and vice versa. It is the community that empowers the free individual, just as it is free individuals who lead and empower the community. The fulfillment of high talent, the just exercise of power, the celebration of human diversity: nothing so redeems these things as the recognition that what seem like personal triumphs are in fact the achievements of our common humanity.

10. *They follow E M Forster's injunction from* Howards End: *"Only connect..."*

More than anything else, being an educated person means being able to see connections that allow one to make sense of the world and act within it in creative ways. Every one of the qualities I have described here—listening, reading, talking, writing, puzzle solving, truth seeking, seeing through other people's eyes, leading, working in a community—is finally about connecting. A liberal education is about gaining the power and the wisdom, the generosity and the freedom to connect.

I believe we should measure our educational system—whether we speak of grade schools or universities—by how well we succeed in training children and young adults to aspire to these ten qualities. I believe we should judge ourselves and our communities by how well we succeed in fostering and celebrating these qualities in each of us.

But I must offer two caveats. The first is that my original question—"What does it mean to be a liberally educated person?"—is misleading, deeply so, because it suggests that one can somehow take a group of courses, or accumulate a certain number of credits, or undergo an obligatory set of learning experiences, and emerge liberally educated at the end of the process. Nothing could be further from the truth. A liberal education is not something any of us ever *achieve;* it is not a *state.* Rather, it is a way of living in the face of our own ignorance, a way of groping toward wisdom in full recognition of our own folly, a way of educating ourselves without any illusion that our educations will ever be complete.

My second caveat has to do with individualism. It is no accident that an educational philosophy described as "liberal" is almost always articulated in terms of the individuals who are supposed to benefit from its teachings. I have similarly implied that the ten qualities on my list belong to individual people. I have asserted that liberal education in particular is about nurturing human freedom—helping young people discover and hone their talents—and this too sounds as if education exists for the benefit of individuals.

All this is fair enough, and yet it too is deeply misleading in one crucial way. Education for human freedom is also education for human community. The two cannot exist without each other. Each of the qualities I have described is a craft or a skill or a way of being in the world that frees us to act with greater knowledge or power. But each of these qualities also makes us ever more aware of the connections we have with other people and the rest of creation, and so they remind us of the obligations we have to use our knowledge and power responsibly. If I am right that all these qualities are finally about connecting, then we need to confront one further paradox about liberal education. In the act of making us free, it also binds us to the communities that gave us our freedom in the first place; it makes us responsible to those communities in ways that limit our freedom. In the end, it turns out that liberty is not about thinking or saying or doing whatever we want. It is about exercising our freedom in such a way as to make a difference in the world and make a difference for more than just ourselves.

And so I keep returning to those two words of E. M. Forster's: "Only connect." I have said that they are as good an answer as any I know to the question of what it means to be a liberally educated person; but they are also an equally fine description of that most powerful and generous form of human connection we call *love.* I do not mean romantic or passionate

love, but the love that lies at the heart of all the great religious faiths: not eros, but agape. Liberal education nurtures human freedom in the service of human community, which is to say that in the end it celebrates love. Whether we speak of our schools or our universities or ourselves, I hope we will hold fast to this as our constant practice, in the full depth and richness of its many meanings: *Only connect.*

From *The American Scholar*, Volume 67, No. 4, Autumn 1998. Copyright ® 1998 by William Cronon.
William Cronon, Frederick Jackson Turner Professor of History, Geography, and Environmental Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, is the author of *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature* and *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West*, which won the Bancroft Prize in 1992.