Five

What Is College For?

"Return on investment": that's the phrase you often hear today when people talk about college. How much money will you get out of doing it, in other words, relative to the amount that you have to put in. What no one seems to ask is what the "return" that college is supposed to give you is. Is it just about earning more money? Is the only purpose of an education to enable you to get a job? What, in short, is college for?

We talk, in the overheated conversation we've been having about higher education lately, about soaring tuition, rising student debt, and the daunting labor market for new graduates. We talk about the future of the university: budget squeezes, distance learning, massive open online courses, and whether college in its present form is even necessary. We talk about national competitiveness, the twenty-first-century labor force, technology and engineering, and the outlook for our future prosperity. But we never talk about the premises that

underlie this conversation, as if what makes for a happy life and a good society were simply self-evident, and as if in either case the exclusive answer were more money.

Of course money matters: jobs matter, financial security matters, national prosperity matters. The question is, are they the only things that matter? Life is more than a job; jobs are more than a paycheck; and a country is more than its wealth. Education is more than the acquisition of marketable skills, and you are more than your ability to contribute to your employer's bottom line or the nation's GDP, no matter what the rhetoric of politicians or executives would have you think. To ask what college is for is to ask what life is for, what society is for—what people are for.

Do students ever hear this? What they hear is a constant drumbeat, in the public discourse, that seeks to march them in the opposite direction. When policy makers talk about higher education, from the president all the way down, they talk exclusively in terms of math and science. Journalists and pundits—some of whom were humanities majors and none of whom are nurses or engineers—never tire of lecturing the young about the necessity of thinking prudently when choosing a course of study, the naïveté of wanting to learn things just because you're curious about them. "Top Ten Majors" means the most employable, not the most interesting. "Top Ten Fields" means average income, not job satisfaction. "What are you going to do with that?" the inevitable sneering question goes. "Liberal arts" has become a put-down, and "English major" a punch line.

I'm not sure what the practicality police are so concerned about. It's not as if our students were clamoring to get into classes on Milton or Kant. The dreaded English major is now the choice of all of 3 percent. Business, at 21 percent, accounts for more than half again as many majors as all of the arts and humanities combined. In 1971, 73 percent of incoming freshmen said that it is essential or very

important to "develop a meaningful philosophy of life," 37 percent to be "very well-off financially" (not well-off, note, but very well-off). By 2011, the numbers were almost reversed, 47 percent and 80 percent, respectively. For well over thirty years, we've been loudly announcing that happiness is money, with a side order of fame. No wonder students have come to believe that college is all about getting a job.

You need to get a job, but you also need to get a life. What's the return on investment of *college*? What's the return on investment of having children, spending time with friends, listening to music, reading a book? The things that are most worth doing are worth doing for their own sake. Anyone who tells you that the sole purpose of education is the acquisition of negotiable skills is attempting to reduce you to a productive employee at work, a gullible consumer in the market, and a docile subject of the state. What's at stake, when we ask what college is for, is nothing less than our ability to remain fully human.

The first thing that college is for is to teach you to think. That's a cliché, but it does actually mean something, and a great deal more than what is usually intended. It doesn't simply mean developing the mental skills particular to individual disciplines—how to solve an equation or construct a study or analyze a text—or even acquiring the ability to work across the disciplines. It means developing the habit of skepticism and the capacity to put it into practice. It means learning not to take things for granted, so you can reach your own conclusions.

Before you can learn, you have to unlearn. You don't arrive in college a blank slate; you arrive having already been inscribed with all the ways of thinking and feeling that the world has been instill-

ing in you from the moment you were born: the myths, the narratives, the pieties, the assumptions, the values, the sacred words. Your soul, in the words of Allan Bloom, is a mirror of what is around you. I always noticed, as a teacher of freshmen, that my students could be counted on to produce an opinion about any given subject the moment that I brought it up. It was not that they had necessarily considered the matter before. It was that their minds were like a chemical bath of conventional attitudes that would instantly precipitate out of solution and coat whatever object you introduced. (I've also noticed the phenomenon is not confined to eighteen-year-olds.)

Society is a conspiracy to keep itself from the truth. We pass our lives submerged in propaganda: advertising messages; political rhetoric; the journalistic affirmation of the status quo; the platitudes of popular culture; the axioms of party, sect, and class; the bromides we exchange every day on Facebook; the comforting lies our parents tell us and the sociable ones our friends do; the steady stream of falsehoods that we each tell ourselves all the time, to stave off the threat of self-knowledge. Plato called this *doxa,* opinion, and it is as powerful a force among progressives as among conservatives, in Massachusetts as in Mississippi, for atheists as for fundamentalists. The first purpose of a real education (a "liberal arts" education) is to liberate us from *doxa* by teaching us to recognize it, to question it, and to think our way around it.

In *Teacher,* Mark Edmundson describes the man who played this role for him when he was seventeen and thereby saved him from the life of thoughtless labor that appeared to be his fate. His teacher's methods were the same as those of Socrates, the teacher of Plato himself: he echoed your opinions back to you or forced you to articulate them for yourself. By dragging them into the light, asking you to defend them or just acknowledge having them, he began to break them down, to expose them to the operations of the critical

intelligence—and thus to develop that intelligence in the first place. The point was not to replace his students' opinions with his own. The point was to bring his charges into the unfamiliar, uncomfortable, and endlessly fertile condition of doubt. He was teaching them not what to think but how.

Why college? College, after all, as those who like to denigrate it often say, is "not the real world." But that is precisely its strength. College is an opportunity to stand outside the world for a few years, between the orthodoxy of your family and the exigencies of career, and contemplate things from a distance. It offer students "the precious chance," as Andrew Delbanco has put it, "to think and reflect before life engulfs them." You can start to learn to think in high school, as Edmundson did—you're certainly old enough by then—but your parents are still breathing down your neck, and your teachers are still teaching to the test, in one respect or another. College should be different: an interval of freedom at the start of adulthood, a pause before it all begins. Is this a privilege that most young people in the world can only dream of? Absolutely. But you won't absolve yourself by throwing it away. Better, at least, to get some good from it.

College also offers you professors. Yes, it is theoretically possible to learn how to think on your own, but the chances are not good. Professors can let in some air, show you approaches that wouldn't have occurred to you and put you on to things you wouldn't have encountered by yourself. Autodidacts tend to be cranks, obtuse and self-enclosed. A professor's most important role is to make you think with rigor: precisely, patiently, responsibly, remorselessly, and not only about your "deepest ingrained presuppositions," as my own mentor, Karl Kroeber, once wrote, but also about your "most exhilarating new insights, most of which turn out to be fallacious." You want some people in your life whose job it is to tell you when you're wrong.

College also gives you peers with whom to question and debate the ideas you encounter in the classroom. "Late-night bull sessions" is another one of those phrases people like to throw at the college experience, a way of shaming students out of their intellectual appetites. But the classroom and the dorm room are two ends of the same stick. The first puts ideas into your head; the second makes them part of your soul. The first requires stringency; the second offers freedom. The first is normative; the second is subversive. "Most of what I learned at Yale," writes Lewis Lapham, "I learned in what I now remember as one long, wayward conversation in the only all-night restaurant on Chapel Street. The topics under discussion—God, man, existence, Alfred Prufrock's peach—were borrowed from the same anthology of large abstraction that supplied the texts for English 10 or Philosophy 116." The classroom is the grain of sand; it's up to you to make the pearl.

College is not the only chance to learn to think. It is not the first; it is not the last; but it is the best. One thing is certain: if you haven't started by the time you finish your BA, there's little likelihood you'll do it later. That is why an undergraduate experience devoted exclusively to career preparation is four years largely wasted. The purpose of college is to enable you to live more alertly, more responsibly, more freely: more fully. I was talking with a couple of seniors during a visit to Bryn Mawr. One of them said, "The question I leave Bryn Mawr with is how to put my feminist ideals into practice as I go forward." I liked "ideals," but I loved the first part. A real education sends you into the world bearing questions, not resumes.

Learning how to think is only the beginning, though. There's something in particular you need to think about: yourself. Liberal arts education is traditionally justified on the grounds of public interest,

as a training in the skills of democratic citizenship. The classroom, in this conception, is a workshop of republican virtue: reasoned debate, principled dissent, respectful mutual engagement. There is much to be said for this idea, but it sells the enterprise extremely short. Before and beneath the public good that such an education does, there is a private one—we might say, *the* private one. "You're here for very selfish reasons," the legendary Columbia professor Edward Tayler would say to his freshmen the first day of class. "You're here to build a self." Whether this activity redounds to anybody else's benefit is, for the time being, beside the point. A self is something that you need to develop for your own sake, and it is not a quick or easy or even, often, a pleasant process.

Building a self: the notion may sound strange. "We've taught them," David Foster Wallace wrote about today's young people, "that a self is something you just *have*." It isn't that you don't have one at all, when you're a kid; there just is not a whole lot to it. In the words of the great Romantic poet John Keats, the world is a "vale of Soul-making." Not a "vale of tears," in the traditional phrase—a valley of sorrow that the soul is compelled to suffer through on its way to a salvation that lies *beyond* this world. And not a "soul" in the traditional sense, either, something eternal and unchangeable, somehow remote from and certainly other than our earthly self, and only involved, in any case, in matters of sin and virtue. By soul, what Keats meant *is* our earthly self, understood in its totality—moral, intellectual, sensual, emotional, our whole being. And by calling the world a vale of soul-making, he meant that experience itself is the crucible of its creation.

"Do you not see how necessary a World of Pains and troubles is," he wrote, "to school an Intelligence and make it a Soul?" (Necessary pains and troubles—helicopter parents, and those who wish to play it safe in general, take note.) The world is still a scene of

sorrow, in Keats's conception, but also of pleasure and love and every other emotion: "a Place where the heart must feel and suffer in a thousand diverse ways." The heart feels, he says, and the intelligence is educated by reflecting on that feeling. Everyone is born with a mind, but it is only through this act of introspection, of self-examination, of establishing communication between the mind and the heart, the mind and experience, that you become an individual, a unique being—a soul. And that is what it means to develop a self.

So what does college have to do with it? College helps to furnish the tools with which to undertake that work of self-discovery. It's very hard, again, to do it on your own. The job of college is to assist you, or force you, to start on your way through the vale of soul-making. Books, ideas, works of art and thought, the pressure of the minds around you that are looking for their own answers in their own ways: all these are incitements, disruptions, violations. They make you question everything you thought you knew about yourself. "True liberal education requires that the student's whole life be radically changed," writes Allan Bloom. "Liberal education puts everything at risk and requires students who are able to risk everything." The process isn't comfortable, but it is exhilarating. There's nothing "academic" about it. If it happens right, it feels like being broken open—like giving birth to yourself. "An education," Lapham quotes an old professor, "is a self-inflicted wound."

I talked before about thinking your way beyond received opinion, *doxa,* and now I'm talking about thinking about yourself, but these are finally a single act. To change the way you look at the world is inevitably to change the way you look at your life, and vice versa. They are not even really separate things. Of all the beliefs we absorb before we're old enough to question them, the most powerful, as well as the most personal, are those that tell us who we are—that seek to determine our identity and our values. College is the place to

start to determine them for yourself, to figure out, as the Columbia historian Mark Lilla has put it, "just what it is that's worth wanting." To find out not just who you wish to be, but who you are already, underneath what everyone has wanted you to think about yourself. To discover new ideals and new desires. To start to answer for yourself that venerable pair of questions: what is the good life and how should I live it?

The truth is that I don't particularly like the phrase "develop a meaningful philosophy of life" as a description of what you're supposed to do in college. For one thing, it's bloodless. "Develop a philosophy" sounds like you're composing a treatise. For another, it's static. You develop "a" philosophy, and then you carry it around in a box for the rest of your life, removing and applying it as needed. The process goes much deeper than that—it goes all the way down to the bottom—and it's incomparably more fluid and provisional. It doesn't stop the day you graduate, or really ever. Lapham's wound never heals, for the self that sustains it cannot return to a state of innocent unconsciousness. What you should really want to develop in college is the habit of reflection, which means the capacity for change.

I've been using the word *soul,* and though I'm not religious, I find that only a religious language has sufficient gravity to do these questions justice. For we are speaking of the most important thing: no less a thing than how to live. We might propose, then, that you should arrive at college as at the beginning of a pilgrimage—a movement toward the truth and toward the self. That you should come to seek conversion, though you know not yet to what belief or way. That you should approach ideas as instruments of salvation, driven by a need to work things through for yourself, so that you won't be

damned to go through life at second hand, thinking other people's thoughts and dreaming other people's dreams. It's been said that people go to monasteries to find out why they have come, and college ought to be the same. We are born once, not only into nature but also into a culture that quickly becomes a second nature. But then, if we are granted such grace, we are born again. For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses his mortal soul?

Far from only training workers to contribute to the GDP, or even citizens to play a role within the public sphere, a true education, like a true religion, enables you to stand apart, and if necessary, against, the claims that others make upon you. The self is a separate space, a private space—exactly that inner space that Madeline Levine has found to be lacking in so many of her adolescent patients now. It is a space of strength, security, autonomy, creativity, play. You can live without a soul, D. H. Lawrence said, on ego and will alone—you can "go on, keep on, and rush on"—but you won't have very much inside you. People who behave like that, E. M. Forster has a character remark, are incapable of saying *I*. They cannot even say *I want*, "because 'I want' must lead to the question 'Who am I?'" So they only say *want*, without the *I*: "want money," "want mansion," "want Harvard."

In *Higher Education?*, Andrew Hacker and Claudia Dreifus remark that the purpose of college is to make you a more interesting person—a nice formulation, as long as we stipulate that the person to whom it is most important to be interesting is yourself, if only since that is the one with whom you have to spend the rest your life. But being interesting is very different from credentialed self-actualization, as David Brooks would call it. Being a quadruple major does not make you interesting. Editing the college newspaper while singing in an a cappella group, starting a nonprofit, and learning how to cook exotic grains—this does not make you interesting. Interesting is not accomplished. Interesting is not "impressive." What

makes you interesting is reading, thinking, slowing down, having long conversations, and creating a rich inner life for yourself.

The purpose of college, to put all this another way, is to turn adolescents into adults. You needn't go to school for that, but if you're going to be there anyway, then that's the most important thing to get accomplished. That is the true education: accept no substitutes. The idea that we should take the first four years of young adulthood and devote them to career preparation alone, neglecting every other part of life, is nothing short of an obscenity. If that's what people had you do, then you were robbed. And if you find yourself to be the same person at the end of college as you were at the beginning—the same beliefs, the same values, the same desires, the same goals for the same reasons—then you did it wrong. Go back and do it again.

"I might as well get an education," Margaret Atwood has a character say. "That's how they talked about it, as if an education was a thing you got, like a dress." It should be obvious by now that the most problematic part of that idea is the word "you." "You" don't get an education. "You" is the variable in that expression. "You" is what an education operates *upon*. "Education's what's left over," goes the common jeer, "after you've forgotten everything you've learned." But the person who first formulated that idea was James B. Conant, the president of Harvard, and he did not mean it as a slur. Most of what you come across in college will inevitably fade from memory. What's left over, precisely, is you.