A Liberal Arts Degree Is More Important Than Ever  
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In our fractious world, discussions can all too often degenerate into arguments and shouting matches. The recent presidential election provides the most extreme case in point. The [*Chronicle of Higher Education*](http://www.chronicle.com/?cid=UCHETOPNAV) has reported, for example, incidents of on-campus behavior causing fear and anxiety among students and faculty. College presidents have scrambled to issue statements encouraging students and faculty to be civil to each other. Add to this the omnipresence of social media and the cacophony becomes deafening.  
   
Usually simply agreeing to disagree is the best we can do. That's where a liberal arts education comes in. Dedicated to the free and open pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, a liberal arts education provides a multi-faceted view of the world. It enables students to see beyond one perspective, encouraging them to understand others' even if they don't agree. It instructs us to base our opinions on reason, not emotion. Although not a panacea, it can help individuals on every side of a debate have productive conversations leading to, if not agreement, at least détente.  
   
People often assume "liberal arts" is a political term. As it's used in academia it's closer to the idea of broadening the mind and "liberating" it from parochial divisions and unthinking prejudice. It encourages the questioning of assumptions and reliance on facts as well as an understanding that even facts can be interpreted differently through different lenses. Ideally, it enables individuals to gather information, interpret it, and make informed decisions on a wide variety of topics.  
   
My introduction to the power of the liberal arts came in an undergraduate course studying the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Two of our readings were [*The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*](https://www.amazon.com/Civilization-Renaissance-Italy-Jacob-Burckhardt/dp/0486475972) by Jakob Burkhardt and [*The Waning of the Middle Ages*](https://www.amazon.com/Waning-Middle-Ages-Paperback/dp/1849028958) by Johan Huizinga. Until then, I had assumed (as most high school students probably still do) that history was a series of facts and events that you simply had to get in the right order. Once you did that, you could see how one thing led to another. From there, you could see why they happened the way they did, and that was it.  
   
These two historians, however, presented two entirely different ways of interpreting this period of history. *Civilization* looked at the Renaissance as the flowering of the Middle Ages; *Waning* saw it as rising from the cultural exhaustion of the same period. Using the same basic set of facts, the authors came to different conclusions about how Western civilization had proceeded from one era to the other. And in doing so, they presented different ways to think about the significance of the events we had always been taught were simply part of a timeline.  
   
I'm no scholar of the Middle Ages or the Renaissance, but the lesson of these readings has stayed with me for over 40 years: Our understanding of the world depends on where we stand and how we interpret what we see and know about it. Through them, I was broken out of a narrow view of history to see that it isn't just facts and dates, but also the way they are interpreted and used. Neither historian was "wrong" and both relied on more or less the same basic information. Yet, they provided views of human development that challenged my assumptions about "progress" and "civilization" not just in history but in other areas as well. My window on the world had been opened wide.  
   
It's not just the "soft" subjects like English and sociology that constitute a liberal arts education. People often talk about STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) courses, as totally separate from "liberal arts" courses. They think of "science" as "real" in a way that anthropology or art history are not: an atom is an atom, after all. But scientific phenomena are also subject to interpretation and debate as they are observed and theories are created and tested. Even a cursory knowledge of evolutionary theory or the light as wave/particle debate demonstrates that point.  
   
The "hard" sciences are ways of seeing the world and trying to understand how it works just as much as psychology or political science are. A good liberal arts curriculum puts students in touch not just with ways of interpreting the world around us but also with the fact that the world can be "interpreted" in the first place. Ultimately, it tries to help us understand our place in it and our relationships with each other.  
   
A liberal arts education can be very frustrating. It forces students to see multiple viewpoints and continually challenge their own. It removes the comfort of assuming there are "right" answers to big questions, that civilization moves in a linear fashion or that facts are facts no matter who looks at them. But it also introduces students to the pleasures of debate and the ever-expanding world of ideas. It opens doors, enabling the mind to go wherever it wants in the pursuit of knowledge and understanding. It bends toward openness instead of containment.  
   
In times of great division, the capacity to see others' viewpoints and the imperative to assess one's own become more and more important. A liberal arts education works for us, no matter what our political leanings are. We need it now more than ever.

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