The Importance of Teaching Humanities in Higher Education Institutions: in Defense of Liberal Arts Education

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THE IMPORTANCE OF TEACHING HUMANITIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS: IN DEFENSE OF LIBERAL ARTS EDUCATION

A Thesis Presented

by

Victoria Pleshakova

to

The Faculty of the Graduate College

of

The University of Vermont

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Education Specializing in Interdisciplinary Studies

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Accepted by the Faculty of the Graduate College, The University of Vermont, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Education, specializing in Interdisciplinary Studies.

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ABSTRACT

The humanities have always been under attack in the higher education of the United States of America. Corporate culture of the university requires the most money distributed towards research and specialization, while making employability of the graduates the main goal of education. With two thirds of all majors being in business and finance, humanities don’t seem to play a big role in higher education overall. This work makes an attempt in defense of liberal arts education to our students, and the importance of teaching the subjects like English, Literature and Philosophy independent of a student’s major concentration. Even in our age of specialized and corporatized education, these courses are of great importance. These subjects can help young people find their way in this confusing web of life weaved out of pressure, expectations, failures, problems, fears. What other fields of study can teach them about history of cultures and languages, people who made history; who made contribution to the world in art, literature and science; what young people can learn from them. But most importantly, how to raise questions about life in general and search for answers, how to find meaning, how to know what’s important to them. In general, teaching them how to think.

I would like to take different approaches in looking at teaching humanities to college students in this country, drawing from my own experiences in both Russia and US, my graduate courses at UVM, as well as works of those in the academia concerned with the same matter. I will look at how corporate culture of the university and research-driven education dictate the curricula in colleges and universities; how multiculturalism and political correctness that saturated higher education these days can influence the way humanities are presented, and explore the influence of humanities in our students’ making meaning of their lives.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my professors, classmates, and colleagues who have supported me on this journey through graduate school. First of all, I am thankful to my teacher, mentor, advisor, and friend Robert Nash for bringing the humanities back into my life, for allowing me to look deep within myself to discover what is really important in my life.

I am grateful to my classmates whose narratives opened up my eyes and touched my soul. Their individual stories were inspirational in writing this thesis, and motivated me to become an educator who can relate to her students not only as individuals acquiring knowledge while in college, but also as human beings searching for the meaning of life.

Lastly, I would like to thank the deans of the Continuing Education Department, Carol Vallett and Cynthia Belliveau, as well as Beth Taylor-Nolan, Jennifer Lian, and my other colleagues for giving me the flexibility to work on my Master’s degree, and for their encouragement along the way. The experience I gained working with the students through Continuing Education provided me with thoughts and ideas for my thesis.
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CHAPTER ONE

LIBERAL EDUCATION IN THE US: THE PERSPECTIVE OF A RUSSIAN AMERICAN

“Liberal education ought to give students some taste for, and understanding of, intellectual inquiry conducted at the highest possible level.”

Alan Ryan, *Liberal Anxieties and Liberal Education*

“The intellectual is one who turns answers into questions.”

Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*

“Among the many specialized fields of study that now had a place in the university system, it was the humanities – literature, philosophy, history, and art – that still seemed most alive to the old, unspecialized question on how best to live.”

Anthony Kronman, *Education’s End*

1.1. Scholarly Personal Narrative

I believe that everything we choose to do in life ought to come from the heart. Life is too short to spend on accomplishing things because we may find them useful, or because everyone else thinks they will be good for us. As I describe my personal journey below, I am happy to admit that I have found a way to live my life concentrating on what’s important for me, and what gives my life meaning.

For the writing of my thesis, I have chosen methodology of Scholarly Personal Narrative, created by Robert Nash and described in his book *Liberating Scholarly Writing: The Power of Personal Narrative*. I am grateful for the opportunity to choose this methodology for it gives me freedom and flexibility to connect my personal
experiences and ideas with the works of those in the academia on the subject of the humanities and the significance of their influence on students’ development. I will be using SPN to integrate my personal narrative, opinions, philosophy and ideas into the present thesis. I believe it is impossible do divorce one’s personal experience from the topic one finds him/herself passionate about, and trying to connect a personal narrative with others who feel as passionate. Having the author’s voice present throughout the writing makes working on a thesis a much more enjoyable process. SPN allows for the writing to flow smoothly, which makes it easier for the writer and more pleasant for the reader. Besides, reading about someone’s personal narrative and its connection to the topic may draw the reader in deeper than a typical research thesis or dissertation.

1.2. What led me to Humanities?

Hemingway said that the best training for an early writer training is unhappy childhood.\(^1\) Start with thinking about the hardships of the childhood, and you got plenty of material to unpack. I guess I can tell my childhood was on the hard side, with my parents splitting up when I was four, and being raised by my grandmother. I owe a lot to my grandmother, for she taught me to read and write at an early age. By choosing the right books and asking me the right questions, she taught me to think and analyze. My sister was born when I went to the first grade. My mother, sister and I lived in a small studio, and being a big sister, I was responsible for cleaning, dishes, buying bread and milk. All that did not seem like hardship to me at the time, and it never occurred to me to question my responsibilities. At least I don’t think that growing up too soon made me think, analyze and write at that early age.
In the fourth grade, at the age of 10, we no longer were just elementary school kids who went to school to learn how to read and perform basic math. Reading classes were turned into Russian Literature, drawing into Arts and Art History, music classes changed from simply singing songs together to listening and interpreting classical music. It is those classes that I remember the most, and those teachers I will be grateful to for introducing me to the world of liberal education.

The Russian Literature class became my favorite when we got a new teacher of Russian language and Literature. She was young and humble, just out of college, and it was hard to believe she was going to introduce us to the endless sea of famous Russian thinkers. The young teacher told us to never read a book without a pencil in our hand. She challenged our thinking by leading class discussions based on the books we read, and by choosing topics for compositions and essays that would certainly bring us to a different level of appreciating the writers and poets, and the times they lived in. I never had trouble writing about the books I enjoyed, they always seemed to bring new thoughts and ideas. She never gave up on students who didn’t seem to grasp the idea. She would ask questions, one after another, facing the student who was raised from his or her seat, until the student untangled the logic of the given question and came to the conclusion.

When time came to think about my future profession, everyone suggested that I should go to medical school. I wasn’t into sciences, but I considered the advice my family and friends were giving me. I even considered going to a different high school, with concentration on sciences, which prepared students for medical school. Somehow it didn’t work out, and I still couldn’t figure out what I wanted to do. In Russia, you have to
know the major when you apply for college or university, and the time was ticking. I was six months away from graduating from high school when a friend suggested that I should go for English, to become an interpreter or a teacher of English as a second language. I talked to my mom, and we found a tutor for me, because English in my school wasn’t taught at a level that would allow me to pass an entrance exam. The competition was tough, and I wasn’t surprised when I didn’t get in Teachers’ Training College. I got a job at the Foreign Languages Department as a lab assistant, and one kind English professor allowed me to sit in his first year classes. I had a chance to polish my skills throughout that year, and so I was able to get into college on a full scholarship. For the first two years, I was a straight “A” student and that must have played a role in my getting a scholarship to study for a year at an American college.

1.3. Coming to America

Just a few years ago, a simple Russian undergraduate student couldn’t dream of coming to the United States of America to study. We all heard of Harvard and Colgate, and we knew that American system of education was one of the best in the world. One couldn’t expect less from “the leader of the world”. My dream came true after the fall of communism. I had a chance to apply for a year at an American college on a full scholarship, sponsored by American government. The idea behind the sponsorship was to learn about democracy in the US, go back to Russia and help my country in implementing it as former Soviet Union was making a drastic change from one form of government to another. I was one of the fortunate students to be selected into this program, based on my academic achievement and knowledge of the language. The fact
that I am now living in the US and writing this work shows that I didn’t quite fulfill my promise of helping my country, but that’s a different story.

The four of us, from the former Soviet Union, felt very welcomed at Utica College in upstate New York, and were taken really good care of throughout the academic year and beyond. I didn’t quite experience a culture shock and accepted everything as it was. At least I thought I did. I met some American students but found more in common with other international students or those Americans who have had experiences abroad. After a month or so into the semester, Alex from Moscow decided to share his US college experience with us and summed it up in one sentence: “They are so dumb!” Although I didn’t feel as strongly as Alex did about my American classmates, I couldn’t help but think about my own experiences.

In our Public Speaking class, we had an assignment to make a speech about any chosen word and its definition. While I chose the word “conformity”, some of my classmates picked “condom”, “cafeteria” and “retirement plan”. Whose definition was more likely to dig deeper, and what those choices could tell me about my classmates?

There was a different story in my junior English class. The professor liked to ask questions to provoke some thinking. Silence was a typical answer. In many instances, I seemed to be the only one in class to know who wrote “Uncle Tom’s Cabin” and what an eagle meant for Americans. When after yet another question that started with “Who knows…..” I raised my hand, the professor didn’t call on me to answer but said with a sigh: “Victoria knows… Do you people do anything besides going to school?”
I brought up this instance not to brag about how smart I was compared to “dumb” American students, but to raise the question of who is to blame for those students’ failures to know basic things about their own culture, let alone having a desire to learn and be challenged in their own thinking. What would it take to make them “worldlier”, more erudite, and more caring about history and language and cultures?

1.4. Russian Education: Specialized, Yet General

I had a tremendous experience and had a chance to learn about the American education system from within. Having spent a year at Utica College of Syracuse University, I was able to draw parallels between USA and Russia in terms of higher education. First of all, in Russia we had to know the major before applying, and the curriculum was set for us for the next five years before we could leave with a diploma. We didn’t have a choice in picking subjects and courses, and there were quite more courses in Russia that we had to take per semester than in the US. In American terms, I had a major in Teaching English as a second language with a minor in Psychology. I guess the curriculum developers in the Russian Ministry of Education realized that you have to know human behavior in order to be a successful teacher.

One thing that is probably common among educational institution all over the world is to train citizens that would contribute to the growth of their country through their professions. Ever since communism, Russians have underlined the importance of family and personal life in being a good worker, and a good citizen. They quoted Marx’s saying that “family is the cell of the society”. Maybe due to that, we had courses that not only prepared us for the future occupation, but also prepared us for life. Why on Earth would
an English major need a course on Human Anatomy and Physiology and First Aid? We did, for the whole year. From breast feeding to applying a tourniquet – we covered it all. We were ready to start a family or assist those in need.

The majority of the curriculum of course, heavily consisted of courses on English grammar, Literature, Linguistics, Pedagogical methods, and Psychology. But even in a recovering atheist state, we were required to take a history of religion course, as well as Western civilization. To be good citizens, we were required to study political science, Russian Constitutional Law, Economics and Ecology and environmental preservation. The course on Logic helped us sharpen our analytical skills, and I especially enjoyed two full semesters of Philosophy. Even though the corruption and low salaries among the professoriate and administration made the Russian education less desirable, the depth and details of the information we were given was far beyond what I have gotten in the United States. If I were to compare, in my own words I would call Russian education more “challenging” and “required”, while American would be “easier” and “popular”. Even though we didn’t have a choice in picking courses, and the disciplined enforcement of knowledge does remind me of one in research-based US education, the education we received in Russia, seemed truly Liberal. We were equipped not only with the professional knowledge, but also with the knowledge of what I would constitute a “worldly” person, or an intellectual. It seemed that a lot of different courses were pieced together the way courses were taught in ancient Greece. For example, arithmetic, astronomy, music and geometry were grouped together as major subjects in the study of
“harmonics”; and the Sophists taught grammar, logic and rhetoric, the last two of which are not considered important in American schools.²

1.5. My “Americanization”

“If you want to be a writer, you must do two things above all others: read a lot and write a lot”, said Steven King.³ When I was in college, I used to read three books at a time. One would be for my own pleasure and enrichment, usually fiction, classical or modern. Another one would be for an English class, to learn and master the language. And the third one would be for fun, something I’d read over a meal, or while taking a break from studying. Short stories by Mark Twain or Chekhov were perfect for that, though not quite light and fun, they were always witty and thought-provoking, lynching the drawbacks of humanity.

Over the years spent in this country, I started to feel the influence of the market. I have become lazy, and I started to feel a “layer of fat” enveloping not only my brain, but my soul as well.⁴ I turned into a consumer. I fully succumbed to the luxury of materialism which I did not have growing up in Russia. Now I had bank accounts, credit cards, plenty of clothes and shoes, and even a car. Instead of reading, I was watching TV with hundred of channels; instead of philosophizing with my Russian friends in the kitchen into the wee hours, I was having superficial conversations with my American friends, because it didn’t seem necessary to dig deeper when you’re at a bar or on the couch, watching a sports game. I still can’t figure out why I lost the desire to continue learning. Was it because I found myself worldlier than my American counterparts, and so I didn’t have to work on myself anymore? Was it because of the language? Maybe I couldn’t express
everything I wanted to say in English due to my lack of these language skills, or I simply didn’t think it could be translated from the rich and emotionally charged Russian language? In any case, I realized that the lack of hardship in my life in this country stopped my motivation to grow as an intelligent person. The only thing that could “save” me was continuing my education. As I mention in the following chapter on corporatization of education, I have tried going into Business. But even after withdrawing from an Accounting course, I still was thinking about what would be more useful (but not what my heart desired) for me to do. Since my undergraduate degree was in English and Psychology, I decided that Mental Health Counseling program was a way to go. I took a theory course in Mental Health Counseling. I really enjoyed this course, although the laws and limitations of mental health helping professions in this country made the field a bit unattractive to me. Seemed that it was mostly concentrated on how not to screw up and get sued as opposed to the main purpose: helping people help themselves. Nevertheless, I applied for the program and didn’t get in. I suppose this is where I should believe in fate, for I found Interdisciplinary program that gave me flexibility in taking graduate courses. I was free to grow on my own terms; I found what suited me the most.

The classes on education, religion and philosophy taught by Robert Nash gave me exactly what I was looking for: learning about others, their values and beliefs, and what stood behind them. I was challenged and provoked in my thinking. The assigned readings made me want to read and write more. My mind was exercising again, I felt revived and rejuvenated, like I haven’t felt since I left Russia. My brain was challenged and stimulated, and it was not afraid of difficulties it faced. I wouldn’t expect less of a
graduate program in humanities, but what about undergraduate students? What can I, as an educator, do to help them challenge their thinking and stimulate their brains?

1.6. A Fear of Intellectual Difficulty

Without the required “harmonics” mentioned above, and the subjects that will likely challenge the mind of our students, it is no surprise that I find many students who are afraid of the intellectual difficulty these days. Let’s take a look at some courses offered at UVM throughout the academic year and in the summer: *History of Rock and Roll; Murder: Our Killing Culture; Aargh: The Golden Age of Piracy; Films of Stephen King*. How challenging do you think they will be to the students? There’s a reason why the Continuing Education department had to open extra sections of some of these courses, because they keep proving to be popular among students who simply need to fill their credit requirements. When we give them a choice to pick a course, students are more likely to prefer the above-mentioned popular culture courses to something more challenging and stimulating.

I do not want to delve into the cultural differences between the Russian and American students that may have led me to certain beliefs about their educational upbringing, but I would like to quote Ryan who said: “It would be wrong to call the citizens of the present-day United States passive and apathetic; but their concerns are domestic, private, and familial.”

The majority of students I encountered seemed to live in their own small world, not caring much about what’s going on in the rest of the world. That could have been attributed to the political influence of the US government proclaiming this country to be
the world’s leader. Both Ryan and Postman give an example of a Florida school board demanding teachers to teach that “the American social system is the “best in the world.” 7

With that in mind, who would want to study foreign languages, history of civilization, religion and philosophy?

In Soviet Russia, it was impossible for teenagers to find a job. Every position, even a sales assistant or a cashier, required special education or certification. It could be one of the reasons why we had more time to study when in school. Without a job, we had plenty of time to read books and do homework. Even in college, not many of us held a job, with the amount of courses we were taking each semester, it seemed impossible. Could it be that American students don’t have as much time to concentrate on their school work because they have to make money to support themselves, especially in college? Once again, the corporate culture drives the intellect away for the sake of money. Even though I grew up without material comforts or opportunities to earn money while in school, I consider myself lucky to have gotten the education I got in Soviet Russia. During communism, I was able to concentrate on my studies and stimulate my intellect without being absorbed by consumerism.

In my work experience with the undergraduate students and their parents, I was surprised by the expectations some of them put on courses and the professors. Questioning the grades, even demanding that the grade be changed to a higher one made me think that knowledge the students received was viewed as a commodity they paid for. It seemed that it was the professor’s job to “instill” the knowledge in the brain without
much effort from the student. I have also seen the professors “dumbing down” their
classes, to adjust the course material to the students’ level.

In the country where I see ambition, perseverance, and competition to be highly
valued, I am surprised to see those values not being applied to the challenges of the mind.
I agree with Ryan who said that we are protecting our students from intellectual
challenges while giving them physical ones:

“The economy needs very few excellent mathematicians, but a lot of averagely
numerate workers... The experience suggests that this is a sound view: the United States
is the most productive country in the world; its popular culture is as attractive to other
countries as its technical expertise in aeronautical engineering and computer software. It
is neither an intellectually rigorous nor a culturally ambitious society, however; outside
major metropolitan areas, there are few bookshops, the radio plays an unending diet of
gospel or country and western music, and intellectual pretensions are not encouraged.
The nation has prospered without inculcation in its young people the cultural and
intellectual ambitions that French lycees and German gymnasia inculcate in their
students...”

Ryan agrees with Dewey on pursuit of intellectual difficulty. If we push
ourselves, Ryan says, in the athletics, why are students afraid to challenge their minds,
when they are not afraid to challenge their bodies? It’s important to help students find a
way to form “their own intellectual and emotional allegiances, and find a particular
pleasure in the experience of intellectual difficulty.” “We ought to welcome the pursuit
of difficulty,” he says. “Many things in life are wonderful because they are very difficult
as well as being beautiful or interesting and useful, too.”
Many other philosophers and educators stress the intelligence as part of knowledge acquisition as well. Bertrand Russell considered vitality, courage, sensitiveness and intelligence as the most important in education. When Russell speaks of intelligence, he includes both knowledge and receptivity to knowledge. According to him, intelligence demands an alert curiosity, a genuine love of knowledge. Russell believes in the following virtues of education: curiosity, open-mindedness, belief that knowledge is possible through difficult, patience, industry, concentration, and exactness. Students should have the desire to do something difficult, he says. It is our, educators, responsibility, to plant that desire in students to challenge their minds in an intellectual difficulty, and the humanities provide the perfect soil for this growth.

Richard Hofstadter in his book *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* suggests that orientation on business and industrialism of the USA played a part in the unpopularity of intelligence. Inventiveness and skills come before the general power of intellect. The practical and “know-how” culture dominates the intellectual culture. He draws the comparison between Europe with its moralistic and romantic traditions versus the ones of materialistic and industrial nature. This brings us to the next chapter, on the influence of corporate culture of the country on the teaching of humanities.
CHAPTER TWO

HUMANITIES IN THE “CORPORATION” OF EDUCATION

“Property taxes rise relentlessly, but schools get no better; tuition fees rise relentlessly, but college graduates are no more employable… There is a widespread sense, on the one hand, that higher education teaches nothing that will be useful to students in later life, and, on the other, that it is so addicted to teaching useful subjects that liberal education is neglected.”

Alan Ryan, *Liberal Anxieties and Liberal Education*

“The university’s ideological claim is to capitalize the human (faculty and students and their intellectual capital) and to humanize capitalism (to mediate and where possible eradicate its contradictions”

Eric Gould, *The University in The Corporate Culture*

“No doubt there is a certain measure of inherent dissonance between business enterprise and intellectual enterprise: being dedicated to different set of values, they are bound to conflict; and intellect is always potentially threatening to any institutional apparatus or to fixed centers of power.”

Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*

2.1. How did we get here?

The value of a liberal arts education is diminishing day after day in colleges and universities; institutions are increasingly dictated by market forces, globalization, and economy-driven governmental policies. With the growth of industrialization in the beginning of the 19th century, the United States was preoccupied with building a strong
nation. The growth of industrial capitalism greatly influenced the humanities and social studies as well as the government’s effort to build a well-educated, patriotic, and moral society. The elite class of “gentlemen” no longer dominated the university, with the gradual growth in the students from the middle class, and the admission of women. The specialization of education seemed to be inevitable during the great Depression and World War II. The demographic and economic growth of the 1960’s demanded more citizens with higher education. Gradually, over the years, the market has demanded a valuable work force be produced from our universities.

The trend set for education last century seems to be continuing to this day, with the government favoring studies in business, applied science, high technology, and profit-driven research – all at the expense of social studies and the humanities. Globalization and market forces constantly reinforce this tendency. Universities treat students as customers, and faculty as “service providers.” Due to a constant decrease in government funding of education, universities are introducing more a business-oriented curriculum and raising tuition. More and more, universities are relying on private donors and students. Medical and science research is on the rise, which means less funding for the humanities and social studies. This research, sponsored by corporations, is undermining academic freedom and can lead to conflicts in academia.

Despite the variety of educational institutions, the majority of American universities share the same values of promoting services to both individuals and society, and in supporting of the growth of a democratic nation in a market-driven economy. Let’s look at the University of Vermont’s vision, for example: “To be among the nation’s
premier small research universities, preeminent in our comprehensive commitment to liberal education, environment, health, and public service.”\(^{17}\) Even though research was put in first place, I was pleasantly surprised to see the mentioning of a liberal education. Now let’s turn to the mission of the University of Vermont: “To create, evaluate, share, and apply knowledge and to prepare students to be accountable leaders who will bring to their work dedication to the global community, a grasp of complexity, effective problem-solving and communication skills, and an enduring commitment to learning and ethical conduct.”\(^{18}\) As in many other universities’ mission statements, knowledge here is used as something that can be applied primarily for utilitarian purposes.

With the attention on research, money-producing programs and specialized education, universities seem to ignore the intellectual breadth that a liberal education can provide. Many thinkers in academia note the important role a liberal education plays in an individual’s life and society in general. A liberal education encourages the students to think creatively and independently, and to develop their own reasoned inquiry as opposed to simply absorbing knowledge from previous generations as it was done decades ago. Criticism and skepticism, used reasonably, can be valuable in resolving public issues in and outside the university. The university, supported by politicians, tax payers, businesses and tuition-paying parents, is expected to produce intellectual voters and responsible citizens of a democratic society. What, if not a liberal education, can provide that? I agree with many authors (Ryan, Gould, and Axelrod among others) that critical thinking, ethics and social responsibility need to be taught in any discipline in order to have a functioning democratic society.\(^{19}\)
2.2. The “Capitalization” of a Socialist Mind

Ten years ago an American college or university with its high tuition certainly seemed out of reach to a Russian student who received her education for free, thanks to the state policies of the Soviet Union. Today, I am no longer surprised about rising tuition rates across the country. And even though I have tried to preserve my humanistic values gained in my home country and not “sell out” to the consumerism of USA, the market pressures of this country didn’t spare me. I found myself guilty of steering away from the liberal arts.

When I settled down in Vermont, it was very unlikely that I would find a job having a bachelor’s degree from Russia, and with almost no work experience in my field of teaching English as a second language. I couldn’t possibly afford to take classes at UVM to continue my education, when a friend suggested that I apply there for a job with the purpose of going back to school at no cost. After nine months of trying, I finally got a low paying administrative support position. Ironically, it was in the continuing education department, and even more ironically, partly in marketing. I learned that even education in this country had to be marketed and sold, just like any other commodity. I accepted this fact, for this was the land of opportunity and possibilities, and I wanted to take advantage of everything it could offer me. Money was something my family never had, and I thought that a business degree would be a way to get it. Naively, I decided to pursue it, and started taking pre-requisite courses for Master of Business Administration. I spent a year on those classes, and when it came to a graduate course in accounting I found myself sick to my stomach. I realized I was pushing myself to do something that was
completely against my nature. I neither had the desire nor grasp of business. However, I never considered the year I spent on those courses wasted. I really enjoyed basic economics classes, for they gave me the general knowledge and skills that I still find helpful in everyday life.

In the view of the university as a “service provider,” I have learned to treat students as paying customers, and many students see themselves the same way. Education has become just another commodity that needs to be advertised, marketed, and sold. Our department offers many courses and programs which need to be promoted, and so a few years ago we started to outsource our marketing. We signed a contract with a marketing firm, and a few years later hired an outside consultant with an MBA with almost no previous experience in higher education, who tried to instill the word “sales” in the minds of our program developers, focusing more on a “return on investment,” and less about students and their souls. Not a single marketing meeting goes by without me thinking about it. But I have to accept this as normal in US higher education, and since it is my job, I learned to contribute to sales. There is a lot to be said about the cost and value of the services offered and provided, but that is another paper for another time; I am more concerned with the course offerings that are more utilitarian and pragmatic than philosophical and abstract.

2.3. Return on Investment versus Investment in Meaning.

In almost six years of taking classes and working full-time at the university, I came to know that “there’s no such thing as a free lunch,” and that everything can be bought and sold. “What’s in it for me?” is a typical question asked when approaching
something that would require effort. This very question didn’t escape education, and changed the way knowledge is viewed and valued. “If I go to college, and pay all this money, there’d better be something in it for me when I graduate.” Knowledge became a commodity with a face value. No longer is knowledge acquired for its own sake, it is expected to provide something in return. As a liberal arts education is considered more idealistic and not utilitarian in this culture, we have to prove that education carries more than a monetary value. As Gould points, “knowledge is never for its own sake: it is always for someone’s sake; it always has some personal, functional, or pragmatic value.” Liberal education, he says, “is one for a free mind, a mind curious to roam where it will, intent on study for its own sake.”

We certainly can’t convince our students to pay for classes that are beyond their prescribed curriculum just to gain personal value when they can barely pay for the courses required by their major. Four years of courses doesn’t seem enough to give students the skills they need for their future profession, prepare them for the world in general, and make them well-rounded intelligent people and citizens of the world. And so preference is given to what students see as pragmatic value and at the cost of the humanities that would have given them personal value. Gould continues,

…As we fail to give the curriculum integrative power through the arts and sciences, as we resist focusing on the symbolic functions of knowledge – its ability to make meaning in broadly suggestive ways – as we fail to conceptualize a comprehensive democratic education as the main thrust of our social mission, we will increasingly trust in the blind ambition of the market to set our values and curricular emphases.
Axelrod states that a society without liberal education would be poor, not only culturally, but economically. Even business students need knowledge in communication, sociology, and psychology – the subjects provided by a liberal education. Without them, it would be impossible to succeed in the competitive global market of our time. Business continues to be the most popular choice of major among undergraduates in the United States. And although a number of courses in liberal arts are required in any major, there is no connection between those and the ones required by the major.

Gould mentions the work of John Henry Newman who believed that “liberal education lies at the heart of the university’s mission.” Newman distinguished between “learning that is liberal and learning that is useful.” A beautiful, intelligent mind can enhance the lives of those who have to face ordinary mundane but “useful” lives day after day. As Gould puts is,

Newman seems to insist that the pleasure of being in the company of people with splendid minds resides in the aesthetic delight derived from the experience, simply, of thinking something through. Our real admiration of work of art, and its ability to propose that truth and beauty are somehow closely related, lies in the contemplation of the work itself. The aesthetic experience may be moral in linking truth and beauty, but the operations of mind in themselves are primarily aesthetic: “The artist puts before him beauty of feature and form; the poet beauty of mind; the preacher, the beauty of grace: then intellect too, I repeat, has its beauty, and it has those who aim at it.

I agree that with Gould and Newman than learning for the sake of learning can be a beautiful thing. I may not acquire practical skills in a specialized vocation while being in college, but I enjoy being in the presence of powerful minds that stimulate my thinking
and feed my soul. A liberal education and the humanities have provided me with just that so far. As I am learning new skills through my job through experience, mentoring, and professional development courses, humanities courses provide me with an outlet to the aesthetic world I would otherwise miss. I hope that as I continue my work in higher education I can convince my American colleagues that taking subjects for the sake of learning more, and in turn feeding one’s soul is not a waste of time just because they won’t lead to a career change. To that extent, Gould continues:

For good reason – and the irrationality of much utopian and neofascist thinking in the twentieth century has served only to support this position – Americans have been less aesthetic and more pragmatic about education as an experience that links the body and mind and does not merely celebrate a powerful intellect. While we retain a necessary affection for phenomenological pleasures of thinking as an end itself, and a great admiration lives on among humanists for Newman’s calm and happily self-composed intellect, the metaphysical inclinations of his theory of liberal education have been nudged by definitions on how the mind explains itself through its working values, the outcomes of its expression, and its call to action. Understandably, Americans find it difficult to separate things from their use, mind from matter, form from function. With its intensely social mandate, American education espouses a pragmatic humanism.²⁵

I can’t argue with the fact that in our tough economic times people go back to school to refine their skills, or to change a career, for it will give them stability and job security. But as we work with students whose minds are still open and malleable, we can try to treat them not as a future labor force, but individuals with meaningful lives and a large intellectual potential.

Securing a literate and numerate population can certainly be justified as an investment in human capital; indeed, every study suggests that education is individually and socially an extremely good investment in the simplest monetary terms. What cannot
be shown is that it is an investment in ethical terms. The only thing Mozart can be
guaranteed to do for those whose souls he touches is to touch their souls.”

The “practical” aspect of preparing our students for real life outweighs the human
aspect of preparing students for an aesthetic and rich intellectual life. Schools are
centered on training problem solving more than the simple acquisition of
information. In doing this we teach students critical thinking and analytical skills, but in
order to do so, we must equip them with the necessary tools that can only be taught
within the subjects found in the humanities. As Ryan suggests, “liberal education ought
to give students some taste for, and understanding of, intellectual inquiry conducted at the
highest possible level.”

Ryan, Gould and Park all mention C.P.Snow’s concept of “two cultures”: scientific and humanistic. According to Ryan, C.P.Snow “believed all his life that spirit
of science and the spirit of poetry were complimentary, not opposed, to each
other…Human beings are not passive recipients of experience but active interpreters;
they make sense of the world they encounter. Poetry is not merely decorative, and not a
piece of pure self-expression; it tells us about the world and ourselves just as science
does, though it evidently does so according to different interpretive principles.” One of
the greatest educational philosophers of this country, John Dewey, also claimed that even
vocational education must be more meaningful than a mere acquisition of technical
skills.
2.4. Preserving the Humanities

As I continue working at the university, some day I hope to convince my colleagues to take on the responsibility to preserve liberal education. Axelrod mentions that faculty needs to know the culture, values and expectations of their students, and change its teaching techniques accordingly.\textsuperscript{32} To help sustain interest in a liberal arts education, he suggests that the academics should: first, learn as much as possible about who their students are, how they learn and what teaching methods would be the most effective with them; and second, provide the teaching of “critical inquiry,” challenge their minds with controversy and encourage debates on ethical, social, philosophical and topical issues.

My concerns lie within the ones mentioned by Gould:

…The market-driven flexibility demanded of the university informed…its ongoing financial concerns and growing costs, its difficulty in diversifying in order to keep up with demographic changes (or its overdiversification into multicultural correctness…), the lack of national standards and a general “dumbing down” of academic expectations, a declining interest in liberal arts degrees, and increasing culture of entitlement among students, the comprehensive spread of corporate culture in managing and generating knowledge, the shrinking job market for specialized PhDs as vocational education takes over, and the slow but steady breakdown of its traditional disciplines. All these issues grow out of a simple, well-known fact of university life in America: universities are of central importance to society because they must reproduce the American way of life for succeeding generations, sustain liberal capitalism with appropriate energy, support research, and do all this within a market-driven culture.\textsuperscript{33}

I know that professors and advisors cannot control the current policies prevalent in education today – those driven by economical concerns – but we can predict that the
change in curriculum will not be beneficial for liberal arts. Corporatization and research continue to drive higher education in this country, but I strongly believe in the importance of teaching the humanities to students regardless of their major concentration, and that despite the utilitarian goals of most modern education, a liberal education still plays an enormous role in shaping the intellect, the university, and the community. I am optimistic about the number of students enrolled in the humanities; it makes me believe that liberal education is not completely lost. As I work with students more closely, and hopefully teaching them in the future, I look forward to igniting interest in the liberal arts by offering a creative and intellectually challenging experience.
CHAPTER THREE

MULTICULTURALISM AND POLITICAL CORRECTENSS AS BARRIERS IN TEACHING HUMANITIES

“There is only one culture, and all of it is “our” culture. It comes in innumerable tongues and styles, attached to innumerable peoples and societies, but in principle it is open to anyone who can acquire the needed language and contextual knowledge”

Alan Ryan, *Liberal Anxieties and Liberal Education*

“In learning about difference, we become less afraid and therefore more courageous. In learning about commonalities, we become more hopeful.”

Neil Postman, *The End of Education*

“One greets according to the looks, and parts according to the mind.”

Russian proverb

3.1. Mind before appearance

Diversity and multiculturalism courses have become a part of the general curriculum in most higher education institutions today. At UVM, for example, students are required to take six credits on the topic of diversity in order to graduate. American society welcomes the multiple ethnic backgrounds and a diversity of expressions in which people choose to identify themselves, and it has become the responsibility of institutions to educate young people on such a variety of representations. Having come from a nationalist and sometimes racist culture, I (commonly identified as a “straight, white woman”), was biased and afraid, yet I was skeptical of these feelings and kept an
open mind. Once I stepped on this continent, I was ready to embrace the unknown, and instead of letting my set concepts of race and ethnicity influence my interactions with people in the US, I accepted things as they were, without giving too much thought to the subject. I have made friends from South America, Western Europe, Asia and Africa. Although I was fascinated with cultural differences, it was more surprising for me to find out how much we were all truly alike.

The next surprise for me came when I found out about the diversity requirements at UVM. My background came up in job interviews, as well as in interviews with some of the coordinators of graduate programs I applied for. When one of them said that “it would be great to have a student of a different background in our program,” I thought: “But what about my credentials and educational background? What about my life experience in the field? Is my being Russian enough to know that I will be a good student?” Learning more about this country’s history and taking classes on religion and multiculturalism, I started to realize where the diversity requirements were coming from, but more importantly, that now I was equipped to look at things from both sides.

A religion and education class I took at UVM opened my eyes. I went from a rigid, opinionated atheist who denied any form of religion to being someone who doesn’t simply tolerate other people’s beliefs, but also tries to understand what is behind those beliefs, how they influence an individual’s life, and how they shape a person. I was fascinated with the stories of my classmates, and realized that I would have missed this incredible experience had I taken classes that are taught at me, the ones that don’t allow for analytical thinking, self-exploration, and meaning-searching. Although subjects
touching the realm of religious, ethnic and cultural differences (among others) belong in the humanities sphere, I believe that multicultural education can also harm the teaching of humanities in the college setting.

The intellect, erudition, and integrity of a person stand before physical appearance to me. As in the Russian saying I provided above, I may scan a person that I just met and quickly and inadvertently make assumptions about him or her. Unfortunately, I had to learn the hard way when my assumptions proved me wrong. As I go through life’s tough lessons, I start thinking about how I can translate these experiences in the future, and how the humanities can change our general approach to teaching multiculturalism. What matters most is how much knowledge I can acquire to help small groups to learn to relate and belong to one large group. And so through studying the humanities, students can relate to the masterpieces of history, art and literature as members of the world, and not just parts of it.

After all, we are the citizens of one planet, and in the larger scheme of things, our small differences don’t matter. Relating (but not conforming) to a larger group of people is to me more important than protecting my self-identity, and that is something that I would like to bring up in my future discussions with American students. I agree with Postman who said that “one of the main purposes of public education – it is at the core of a common culture – is the idea that students must esteem something other than self.”\textsuperscript{34}

The more a classroom resembles a gathering of delegates speaking in behalf of the groups they represent, the less congenial a place it becomes in which to explore questions of a personally meaningful kind, including, above all, the questions of what ultimately matters in life and why.”\textsuperscript{35}
Sexual and racial minorities have existed in a constant fear of humiliation which made educators and students sensitive to that fear, and in order not to offend someone, they have avoided discussing certain issues. To some extent, those who have been humiliated or “oppressed” started to dictate not only the policies of campus life, but also the discussions that take place in classes. I remember a black woman in one of my classes who used the word “canon” when describing Western European values and their influence on literature and philosophy as we know it today. Her argument was against a canon that prohibited us from studying other cultures’ literature and poetry. I wanted to argue that Confucius, Frida Khalo, or Pablo Neruda did not come from Europe, and that we would have undoubtedly been introduced to the works of other “smaller” cultures had their contribution to the world been significant. However, being a white European woman from the land of Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy, I didn’t want to seem insensitive and rude. Besides, silenced by those policies I mentioned above, not many of my classmates would dare to speak to that topic. So what about free speech and academic freedom? Being in a writing course that is part of my liberal education, I wasn’t “liberated” to express my opinion.

3.2. Citizens of the Planet Earth

Multiculturalism is one of the sources of the culture of political correctness that has taken over the humanities for the past forty years. Words like “discrimination”, “oppression”, and “humiliation” can often be found in the studies of multiculturalism. The “oppressors” are bad and the “oppressed” are good. So those who relate to the “oppressed” may not want to study the history and culture of the “oppressors”, and find
such reasoning fairly justified. In my opinion, the exclusion of particular academics – “dead white males” – from the humanities curriculum does not make education liberal and equal. We do not look at subjects like biology, physics, or chemistry as being biased, then why do we look at literature, art and history in such a different way? Are we forgetting that algebra was created by Arabs? So should I stop studying math altogether because it was created by a nation that bred Islamic extremists? I do not disagree with certain claims about discrimination and oppression, but I would like to see students equipped with the knowledge (that would be likely provided by “dead white male” philosophers) to stand behind those arguments as not simply representatives of certain groups, but as intellectual human beings. As Webster puts it,

In neglecting philosophy, social science departments rob their graduate students of the intellectual tools necessary to resolve the logical and epistemological issues raised in social studies. These students grow into scholars more prone to present the negative descriptions of arguments than analyze them within specific intellectual standards.

It seems that “European”, or “Western” values are being questioned against something that’s not quite there. The humanities have been criticized for some time now as subjects that teach what “dead white European males” created. If we want to question the “high” culture of the Western society, we need an alternative to compare it with. But what would that “non-Western” culture be? Ryan states: “The unhappy fact remains that we cannot study what has not been created. Historical and literary disciplines must concentrate their attention on work that actually exists.” Webster brings up the same
point adding that excluding “dead white males” from a multicultural curriculum is a contradiction to the teaching of multiculturalism.\textsuperscript{40} I believe that our jobs as educators are not to simply accept our students’ opinions on the issues of cultural differences from a historical perspective, but make them critically approach each subject from their own “micro-world” of background and experiences, and also from the point of view of humanity. As Ryan puts it, no matter where it came from, “music is everyone’s music; philosophy is everyone’s truth.”\textsuperscript{41} He continues:

…Where there is more or less objective truth to be had, it is not “Western” or “European” or “American” science that prevails, but good science over less good. Where there is not, there is no reason of principle why Western composers can’t embrace Balinese music, why Japanese students cannot enjoy Shakespeare, why British political theorists cannot appreciate Chinese political thinkers of two and a half millennia ago. Time, familiarity, linguistic competence, and a whole lot else make it hard to multiply fluent. One reason for hope is that so many young people do a rather good job of becoming so. \textit{Nihil humanum nihi alienum puto} has always been a good liberal motto: intellectual freedom is the freedom that comes of the sense that we are possessed of all human nature.\textsuperscript{42}

From my own micro-world of being born in Russia and speaking the Russian language, it would seem that I would be more familiar with the literary works of Russian writers and poets. But my favorite writer happens to be German, and my favorite poet is Chilean. To me, it doesn’t matter where the works came from, who wrote them and when, and what their political views were. What matters is how I connect to a piece of writing, how it inspires me, how it enriches my imagination and gives me food for thought. That is exactly the kind of appreciation the humanities can bring to students.
3.3. Please, don’t label me

Webster brings up the issue of our society being stratified and people being assigned labels. He proposes teaching students not from the standpoint of diversity, but rather from the view of humanity as a whole. He brings up a question whether students should be taught about different cultures “neutrally or evaluatively”, and whether multicultural education is an affirmative action in itself. To Webster, pluralism involves a principle of equality. I wholeheartedly agree with the author that basic human values and intelligence do not relate to ethnicity or skin color, and thus segregation of schools can be racist and stereotyping. Common values, principles, equal rights and opportunities are what define pluralism in this country, not segregating people into “domineering” and “dominated”, “ruling” and “oppressed”, “white” and “people of color.”

I agree with Webster when he brings up the point that when we divide people into men, women, whites, and people of color, we strip them of humanity and individuality. There are similarities between men and women, and whites and people of color: we are all human. To say that one group is oppressing the other is to say that men have power over women, and whites have power over people of color, which is a weak thesis with no supporting facts. In so many classes I have come across students who took pride in being a part of an ethnic minority and built their lives around it. Of course, our educational system encourages such a representation, but what if the students did not know where they came from and couldn’t tell what the color of their skin was? Strip me of my identity of “white Russian female”, and who am I but a thoughtful human being? And that’s how
the humanities should treat people – not ignoring their background and base of knowledge completely, but presenting them as citizens of the world.

Webster proposes teaching the students of the U.S. not about the history of racism and injustice brought by one group of people to another, but rather the history of the whole world, its geography and cultures. He quotes the authors of the humanistic approach to learning who find the notions of gender, race, ethnicity and class as social constructs, intended for political but not human purposes. The teaching of common human values and reasoning is more important in understanding cultures than focusing on teaching within a monoethnic curriculum.45

4.4. Diversity of Thought

As an alternative to teaching multiculturalism, Webster proposes teaching critical thinking: “The core purpose of education must be the perfecting of the human capacity to be rational, for reasoning processes defines the conscious actions of human beings.”46 Critical thinking, he mentions, is thinking done within universal intellectual standards. Teaching our students humility, empathy, integrity, and fair-mindedness is of the utmost importance. He says that knowledge based on those skills will help students acquire perspectives on social relations between people as humans, and not as perspectives of representatives based on race, gender, an ethnic group, or class.

We shouldn’t make judgments or presumptions that certain people carry out certain actions based on their cultural heritage. In order to avoid making such judgments in our students, we should go deeper than simply learning about cultural differences and discover “why” people do the things they do, and not base it on their background, or at
least explore the possibilities that go beyond ethnic and cultural upbringing. “So long as we simply argue about conflicting values and ignore the nature of value, we will spin our academic wheels,” states Gould. He continues:

It is not enough to teach cultural differences, not enough to simply accept the differences, to tolerate the other. Civility goes a long way, but we need to teach, too, how cultures and their values work, something that can be done only in universities with the close cooperation of political scientists, sociologists, anthropologists, philosophers, and semioticians.

Critical thinking, analytical and interpretive skills are vital in helping students make sense of a diverse world.

It is impossible to live in complete isolation from people of different backgrounds these days, especially in a country that hosts so many nationalities. And it’s impossible not to encounter diversity and multiculturalism in schools and colleges. The UVM class brought back the memory of Bennett’s model and where, as an immigrant, I saw myself: going from acceptance and minimization into full integration in American culture during the last 10 years.

Courses on multiculturalism have helped me acquire the necessary notions and skills required to interact with people from different cultures, backgrounds, social classes and ethnic groups. They have also helped me realize that simple observation and absorption can teach me so much. Not only has it taught me things to consider while looking at other cultures, gender identities, and people from different social classes but to also look at my own identity from a different perspective. I also learned to step away from my own narrative, so that it would not cloud my vision of others, and look at things
from the point of view of the whole of humanity, its history and development. Religion and philosophy courses have provided me with the necessary critical and analytical skills to do just that, and I hope to transfer that knowledge to my students some day.

I do take pride in being a self-made “Russian American”, for it makes me stand out a little, especially in the state of Vermont. But looking at myself from space, I am only a part of a small group, and I can bring up my ethnic background only so many times until it loses its significance, especially when it comes to education.
CHAPTER FOUR

HUMANITIES AS A WAY TO FIND MEANING

“Without a narrative, life has no meaning. Without meaning, learning has no purpose. Without a purpose, schools are houses of detention, not attention.”

Neil Postman, The End of Education

“The mind is not a vessel to be filled but a dire to be kindled”.

Plutarch

“One of the central purposes of education is to overcome the sense of being “thrown” into the meaningless world.”

Alan Ryan, Liberal Anxieties and Liberal Education

4.1. What meaning means to me

When I first started working at the University of Vermont, as I already mentioned, I knew I wanted to go back to school, but I didn’t know what to study. I wanted to do something with my life, to enhance it by taking classes because I knew that my brain was “drying out” without the stimulus of the mental activities in school.

My life seemed to be planned out at the moment; I had a husband, a house, and a job. In the pursuit of what’s popular and what would be “good” for me, I forgot about what was important to me. I forgot to listen to my heart. As I mentioned above, I have tried business and mental health counseling, but luckily, I found a program that suits me, and I had a chance to take Philosophy and Education courses. Through readings and discussions
in those courses I was able to look inside myself and ask myself questions. I realized how important it is not to overlook these questions that students might have regardless of their major. And if they don’t ask questions, we need to teach them how to.

Everything, Postman notes, has its origin in questions. Questions, he says, are the principal intellectual instruments available to human beings.\(^{50}\) If we ask the students about what’s on their mind, how would we find their answers? I bet they would be so different yet universal. The “subjects of the heart” can ask student the following questions and provoke thinking around what really gives their lives meaning: What is living for? Why are you here? Do you know what motivates you, what makes you get up every morning? Do you know where you are going? Are you happy? What makes you happy? Are you in the right place? What is important to you? Who is important to you? Why?

Christopher Phillips says that “contrary to the popular belief, the more questions you have the firmer footing you are on. The more you know yourself. The more you can map out and set a meaningful path for your future.”\(^{51}\) Science gives us set and firm answers, and we have to accept them. Literature and philosophy, however, leave all the vital questions open for discussion. Many times they are inviting more questions, or suggesting that we come up with our own conclusion. Why should we ask questions? Dewey said that we have no choice. It’s human to search out the reasons why things work in certain way.\(^{52}\) It’s dangerous not to ask questions. For when we stop questioning, we shut down our minds to the knowledge we already have, and set ourselves within certain limits.
For many centuries, people turned to Philosophy to find answers. To me, the word “Philosophy” automatically rings “think”, “analyze”. My own thinking began in middle school, with reading and discussions of classical Russian writers. The works of Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Turgenev, Gogol and Chekhov always provoked thinking. Russians are not quite a happy nation. Life is tough, and that’s the fact. Carrie Bradshaw in “Sex and the City” described her Russian lover as a man “who kills mice and optimism.” We don’t sugarcoat things, we love drama, and we love to philosophize. To me, it meant never reading a book without a pencil in my hand; having discussions in Literature and Philosophy classes; philosophizing in the kitchen with my friends until sunrise. And realizing, that no matter how much we think and talk about it, there is always more. There is no end to gaining knowledge and wisdom.

In my different stages of life, I always had a goal. I had a goal, my life had a meaning. After having achieved one goal, I would come up with another. It felt like I had time to do it all, that I am still young and can let myself try new things. Now I am at the stage of my life when I think “What’s next?” What is the point of what I am doing? What happens next? I don’t have time to experiment with my life anymore; I have to start living it. I need to stop pretending that I am still writing a draft of my life, and that I have plenty of time to submit a final copy. College could be the time to realize that life doesn’t happen in the future, but what we do here and now, and we, educators, need to help them have a mental ground for life when they leave college.

To my mind, our main role as educators is to bring up if not a generation, but at least a few thinking individuals who can those “why” questions, even though they won’t
find answers immediately. As an educator, I want to push them to become individuals who can think for themselves, and have their own opinion on life and their surroundings. Our role is to make them aware about this enormous world with its uncertainties and endless questions. We have to show them that they are not alone in their quest for meaning. And that’s when we can turn to literature and philosophy, to realize that we are not alone.

4.2. Meaning versus purpose.

If we ask any student “What are you going to school for?”, we are very unlikely to hear that they are in college in search for the meaning of their lives. Of course, some might say that acquiring a degree and a job would make their lives meaningful, but is a good paying job really what living is for? The students are “thrown” into the real world after they leave high school, and the university is their chance to learn about themselves as human beings, and realize what’s really important in their lives besides simply “going to college” and pursuing a degree.

Many students may have difficulty distinguishing between meaning and purpose of doing something. They may think that learning basic skills and getting a job after college will bring meaning to their lives, or they simply don’t ask themselves that question. But there’s always “What’s then?” After you have graduated and gotten a job, your life has been accomplished, and everything makes sense now? I am afraid that it won’t be the case for most of them. Goal-achievement may constitute meaning-making for some, but once the goals have been accomplished, some are left with certain emptiness, because there is nothing left to provide meaning. It may seem easy for many students to simply “float” through the college years, thinking that they are achieving something, working towards the
future where they will have it all, but it’s only an illusion. Life happens here and now, and we, educators, have to show young people that there are things that they can work on right now. Baggini illustrates how a common mistake is made when we are working towards the future not paying full attention to the present: “The person who sacrifices too much enjoyment of life to serve the purpose of future wealth and security is thus making the mistake of overestimating the extent to which his future life will be better than the one he could have now.” We can’t postpone our life’s meaning to some future aim or goal, he says, given the evidence of our own mortality. Kronman also points out finitude as one of the characteristics of life as a whole: “My life as a whole includes everything within it and nothing beyond it. However much it contains, however many and varied its parts, my life has a limit.”

Nash and Murray provide a clear distinction between meaning and purpose:

For us, meaning is all about those interpretations, narrative frameworks, philosophical rationales and perspectives, and faith/belief systems that each of us brings to the various worlds in which we live, love, learn, work, and worship. Purpose has to do with pursuing certain goals, reaching resolutions, seeking results, and realizing particular objectives and ends in those worlds. Thus, what makes our purposes worthwhile or justifiable (or both) depends on those meanings that we attach to them and that drive our behaviors. Unfortunately, too often in the academy, we insist that our students pursue and achieve a whole host of academic and career purposes without first helping them to formulate systems of meanings to inform these purposes.

I agree with Marinoff who says that “we are much happier if we believe that we have a purpose, independent of knowing what that purpose is or may be. But we are happier still if we know what that purpose is, for that helps us find meaning. Many
meaningful things are not part of our purpose, though that makes them no less meaningful. We can also find meaning all around us without knowing what our purpose is (and so not knowing what fits into our purpose). So purpose has no guarantee for feeling your life is meaningful, in case you were thinking of simply signing on with someone offering you a ready-made purpose.\textsuperscript{60}

That is why we, educators, have to step in to help our young people to realize that being a part of labor force with a college degree is completely different from being a human being full of emotions and feelings. If we don’t make that distinction while they’re in college, they may find themselves at a loss after graduating, faced with harsh reality of crushed dreams and unfulfilled expectations. Kronman believes that college years are the high time to make meaning:

…College is a time to explore the meaning of life with an openness that becomes harder to preserve the further one enters into the responsibilities of adulthood, with their many entanglements. College is a time for other things too, but it is also time to survey, with an open mind as one can manage, the horizons of the stirring and mysterious venture in which, by the age of eighteen or twenty, an attentive young person will have begun to grasp that he or she, like every human being, is fatefully engaged. …A college education affords an opportunity that may not come again.\textsuperscript{61}

What subjects, if not humanities, are best equipped to help students prepare for this job of “living”? The authority of the humanities, he points out, is “to serve as guides in the exploration of the question of the meaning of life depended on their willingness to ask this questions when other disciplines had ceased to do so. The question has simply been forced out of school. Disciplines other than humanities no longer pretend to address it, and the
humanities themselves have lost their willingness to do so – first, by subscribing to the modern research ideal, and then, in a failed effort to reestablish some sense of distinctive purpose, by embracing a set of ideas that have made the question even more remote that it was before.”

He continues to speak about the importance of liberal arts education in finding meaning, as the students find themselves exploring the horizons of adult life:

> It is the goal of every undergraduate liberal arts program to provide students with an opportunity of this kind. Every college and university that has such a program describes it in essentially similar terms – as it means to acquaint its students with a wide range of human pursuits and to equip them with a general knowledge of themselves and of the world that will prepare them to meet the personal, ethical, and social challenges of life, regardless of the career they eventually choose… It’s not a preparation for this job or that, for one career rather than another. It is a preparation for the job of “living”…

### 4.3. Exercise for the brain and food for the soul

I believe that sciences may help us make sense of how the world operates, but the humanities help us decorate it. I look at science and business courses as subjects for the head, athletics – for the body, and the humanities – subjects of heart and soul. Many times our colleges and universities overlook the importance of teaching something that would “feed the soul”. Course in art, music and literature are the only subjects that deal with the matters of soul, and they are not even required in some classes. Why not make them compulsory, evoke thinking in students, and make them reach deep down within their souls in search of new questions and answers?
Blaise Pascal said: “The heart has its reasons of which reason knows nothing”. What subjects if not English, Arts and Literature would touch our hearts and provided us with the connection to the aesthetic world that makes our lives so much more pleasurable.

Ryan mentions C.P. Snow’s concept of “two cultures”, who believed that “the spirit of science and the spirit of poetry were complimentary, not opposed, to each other.”64 He continues:

Human beings are not passive recipients of experience but active interpreters; they make sense of the world they encounter. Poetry is not merely decorative, and not a piece of pure self-expression; it tells us about the world and ourselves just as science does, though it evidently does so according to different interpretive principles.65

While science feeds our bodies and heads, Arts and humanities can nourish our souls. “Art is the language of the heart, and if we teach about music, painting, architecture and literature in schools, we ought to be doing it to help our youth understand that language so that it may penetrate to their hearts.”66 The arts and humanities, Postman thinks, are there to answer a fundamental question: What does it mean to be a human being?67

4.4. The beautiful world of literature

“The arts have the potential to provide rich interpretations and inventive transformations of experience and that the role of education ought to be to help everyone realize such possibilities”

Craig Howley, Aimee Howley, Edwina Pendarvis, Out of our minds

I started reading when I was four, thanks to my grandmother, a retired principle, who basically raised me while my mother had to work full time. After reading each book,
she would ask me questions, to make sure I grasped on the story and ideas presented in it. Later in my childhood, starting in 4th grade, the love for literature was brought to me by our new teacher of Russian language and Literature, as I mentioned in Chapter One. She was young and humble, just out of college, and it was hard to believe she was going to introduce us to the endless sea of famous Russian thinkers. My thinking was challenged because of her classes. She told us to never read a book without a pencil in our hand. She challenged our thinking by leading class discussions based on the books we read, and by choosing topics for compositions and essays that would certainly bring us to a different level of appreciating the writers and poets, and the times they lived in. I never had trouble writing about the books I enjoyed, they always seemed to bring new thoughts and ideas.

In the effort to teach students problem solving and critical thinking, most educators do not see history, literature and poetry as the subjects capable of helping students acquire those skills. Meanwhile, so many great literary pieces can bring up life questions in students, make them think and analyze, and even come up with their own conclusion. Every time I reread my favorite novel, or a poem, I find something different in it, I discover something new. As my life unfolds with new experiences almost each day, I interpret a literary piece differently, in connection with my current situation, with my past, with my mistakes and gained knowledge. For the students who are just embarking on the new chapter in their lives, discovering truths and finding connections to their own lives in literature and poetry, can be a life-changing experience as well as finding meaning. Teaching them to find their own truths in reading will help them
become analytical thinkers. I like the way Rick Moody, a writer of short stories, describes his experience with reading:

I believe there is not now and never will be an authority who can tell me how to interpret, how to read, how to find the pearl of literary meaning in all cases. Nietzsche says, “Supposing that truth is a woman – what then?” Supposing the truth is not hard, fast, masculine, simple, direct? You could spend a lifetime thinking about this sentence, and making it your own. In just this way, I believe in the freedom to see literature, history, truth, unfolding ahead of me like a book whose spine has just now been cracked.  

For the young people “thrown into the world”, books can be a way to start thinking about what’s important in their lives, what can enrich their existence, and how to find meaning. Good books tell good stories; in connecting with the characters and their circumstances, students can realize that they are not alone in this world and that there are people who have gone through the same turmoil of a life to guide them. Through good books we realize that our own narratives may have a common thread, becoming universal. Howleys and Pendarvis say that great books are the ones capable of grasping worldwide approaches, are “those that have withstood the test of time.” As does Moody, they agree that there is no end to interpreting a classical piece of literature, given the fact of a human condition. On this topic, they continue:

Our responsibility now and in the future is to widen the conversation that constitutes intellect, to make it more thoughtful and aware of itself, and to reclaim it from distortions – in the past and in the present. This is a project that is never finished. At no point will one be entitled to say, “It is done.”…We suspect that the goodness of any text, by which we mean its ability to assist people in understanding their experiences in particular and the human condition in general, depends principally on its transformative value for readers. Consequently, texts can be considered “good” only in reference to how
well they help us make sense of the world, the degree to which a text reveals or clarifies meaning.  

Through reading, students can learn to reflect on themselves and the world that surrounds them, more intelligently and wholly. Pieces of literature enable young people not only to look inside of ourselves, but also look at the world “outward, each time seeing himself or herself and the world in new, richer ways.” The books they read do not have to be the Western classical canons of literature that have definitely been tested by time. As long as a story or a novel or a poem touches the students, ignites their imagination, makes them ask questions, and come up with their own conclusion, the reading has served its purpose. We want students to like reading a book because they can connect to it, not because it’s simply required. Reading is very individual, letting each person relate to it in his or her own way, bringing out the personal and universal, and maybe even filling in the blanks. I agree with an English professor Bruce Fleming, who defies literature as a separate discipline and says that “books are meant to be read. Reading is the point of a book, not integrating it into a discipline.” He says that books can change not only our students’ lives, but our lives, as well, although we never know exactly why and how. The magnificence of the books, Fleming thinks, is in the fact that we never know what to expect from them. However mysterious and unpredictable reading may be, Fleming believes in guiding students through the world of literature:

We professors just have to remember that books are the point, not us…We’re not scientists, we’re coaches. We’re not transmitting information, at least not in the sense of teaching a discipline. But we do get to see our students react, question, develop, and grow. If you like life, that’s satisfaction enough.
In our corporate culture of the university, where even the literature may be viewed as useless unless having some utilitarian purposes, it’s important to show our students that reading is beautiful on its own. As Rita Felski puts it, “To explore the uses of literature is to open up for investigation a vast terrain of expectations, emotions, beliefs, dreams, and interpretations.”

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CHAPTER FIVE
CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1. How the humanities helped me in graduate school

As I have mentioned above, I have taken many UVM courses that were far away from the humanities. The first humanities course that I took in the Interdisciplinary program was Religion, Spirituality and Education. I am not afraid to say that this course has changed my life, my outlook on the world and people around me. Having grown up in a country where atheism was state policy, and in my own, personal beliefs, I was very rigid in my opinions on faith and religion. What it took to break from this rigidity was a class full of amazing people with different backgrounds who shared their stories about where their religion or spirituality comes from. It opened my eyes.

The principles of moral conversation helped me learn to put aside my opinions and judgments and simply listen. I realized that I had to look past the religion, and into the person’s heart and soul. I found that the secular humanist narrative personally resonated with me. The professor, Robert Nash, said that our beliefs are all God-based, for believers or non-believers alike. I am firm in my religious beliefs, but spiritually, I am always seeking. I want to know if this is true for me, I want to doubt myself; I want to be an intelligent person, trying to hold two opposing views in my mind. I realized that it wasn’t religion itself that I opposed, rather what others have done with it and the extremes it had been taken to. It’s the hypocrisy and lies it produces. Religion sometimes leads to fanaticism, and fanaticism can lead to war.
I felt that I could adopt all the principles of a humanistic worldview, and it was comforting to recognize the feeling of belonging to some group of like-minded thinkers. How could I have not inquired into what else is out there, of what I could do besides simply denying the existence of God? It never occurred to me to think that humanism is not apathetic atheism.

In our chaotic world full of confusion, sometimes unstable and misleading, with so many possibilities and opportunities, it’s no wonder people want something firm they can hold on to. I can understand why people turn to traditional morality and values as long as they truly believe in them. If you have faith in a higher power, shouldn’t you be able to explain why? To me, humanism can bring as much fulfillment and purpose in life as religion would for others. Perhaps the danger is in making it just another cult or religion, blindly followed. It also makes sense that humanism is not strictly based on reason, as reason alone cannot bring fulfillment and meaning of life. We need feelings and emotions to make us complete human beings.

From the first class I took in this program, the question “what is the meaning of my life?” became a common thread in my studies. Although I am not quite sure what the answer is today, I think, “Would I know the answer when I am on my deathbed?” That’s when we’re able to look back and say, “That is why I lived!” I have always envied those who knew that their lives were pre-determined. Some people know they were born with a purpose: to serve God, to serve people and make a difference in the world, to have a family and raise children. As they say, “to each, his own.”
I never spent much time thinking about it. Does it mean that I am simply wasting our planet’s resources? Maybe I am, but I have a right to live and my meaning is found in the search for meaning, to never stop asking questions – especially the “whys.” *Why do I live the way I do when I have other choices? Why do I have no patience for ignorance while I am not the world’s greatest intellectual? Why do I not feel close to my relatives?* The list goes on. To me, if I find the answers to all these questions, I may find meaning. But I am afraid that as I get closer to the answers, more questions will arise. So the meaning of my existence is in the constant search for truths.

In his book “Liberating Scholarly Writing,” Robert Nash mentions that our meanings and stories can change and, though there are plenty of external factors, it is our choice whether to change them or not: “Each of us will live out our stories until our dying days within the universal plot line of contingency, choice, and chance.” Recognizing contingencies, making choices, and taking chances can bring a separate meaning. Searching for our personal truths, making choices, going back, changing direction, or simply giving up is all a part of looking for answers to the “whys”. And that is what makes up our lives.

As we go on with our lives, it’s also important to ask the “why” questions. Half the time, we already know the answer. How can we put a question in such a way that it will bring a deeper meaning, will reveal something about ourselves, and enrich our future experiences? But in examining our lives, and continuing to ask questions, we don’t want to miss out on life itself. The characters in the movie “Before Sunrise” explore this topic: “Who’s to say what’s really living? – Well, I wonder. That’s a big question. I think it’s
either a life experienced or a life examined. But life examined is life experienced. What’s that Thomas Mann quote: "I would rather participate in life than write a hundred stories." That is exactly how I feel. I want to participate in each moment, examining as I go along.

At the end of my journey as a future educator, I am not going to sit around thinking what my meaning or my biggest truth is. I am going to hurry up and live, and try to help people I will be working with to do the same. Doing everything possible to examine life and take every chance it gives us. No matter what happens, we will have learned something. What doesn’t kill us makes us stronger - I just have to remember to ask the right “why” questions along the way. As Nietzsche said: “He who has a why to live, can bear with almost any how.”

5.2. Recommendations to educators

Barbara Walvoord in her commentary “How to help students confront life’s Big Questions” in the Chronicle of Higher Education provides us with the following information:

According to a 2004 study of more than 112,000 first-year students at 236 institutions by the Higher Education Research Institute, incoming freshmen “place great value on their college enhancing their self-understanding, helping them develop personal values, and encouraging their expression of spirituality.” Yet when the researchers queried a sample of college juniors, 62 percent reported that their professors never encouraged discussions of spirituality or religion, and more than half said their professors never provided opportunities to discuss the meaning of life.
As we can see by the data provided, most professors in the academia would regard questions of life meaning as something personal, a touchy subject that does not belong in the academia. But the students find such matter important to them when they enter college.

As I embark on my new journey of an educator, I would recommend to my colleagues to remember that everyone is a special individual, and should not be treated as simply a student body who is in your class or office for strictly educational purposes. Most of the life’s questions are not brought up in classrooms unless it’s a specific course mostly offered by a Philosophy and Religion departments. Being in college is a life changing experience for them, and they most likely place high expectations on what they get out of 4 years at a university or college. They have to make choices that will likely impact their lives for many years to come. They are faced with uncertainty, fear, hopes for the future; some are searching for meaning of life. Those are the questions that are not brought up among business or engineering students, and so encouraging them to take classes in liberal arts could enhance their college experience and help them find or develop personal values, broaden their horizons and find meaning in life.

Richard Hersh and Richard Keeling reflect on the goals of liberal arts education in connection to teaching which could be applicable to students of any majors. They say that the goals of liberal education are “not limited to an intellectual understanding of the world; they include the ability to make meaning in the chaos of available information, ethical reasoning and behavior, a concern for others as persons of equal value (and the
ability to take the perspective of the other), and the capacity and commitment to engage in civic questions and participate in our democracy.”

No matter the major or concentration, the student never separates head from the heart, so to speak. There will be always emotional engagement in the process of learning. Thus in any subject we teach, we must remember that learning is not just about the head and the brain of the student, it’s about a person as a whole. In mixing business or science courses with humanities, we would engage students to look at themselves and their environment as a collection of emotions and feelings that cannot be separated from the specialization we choose. Hersh continues on the subject:

…”Learning… is never strictly cognitive; …it engages emotions as well as ideas….Learning engages the whole person. Learning is about being able to link thought and emotion, and all with action, in ways that are humane, caring, and responsible…Thinking, emotional competence, and appropriate behavior are inextricably linked, and it all, as a whole, must be learned – not by chance, not simply by peer affiliation, not primarily from the Internet and television, but with the intentional intervention of caring and demanding adults – parents, teachers, student-affairs professionals, and yes, professors, among others.

When the institution and curriculum do not support the idea of treating and teaching students as whole human beings, then it is our role as educators, to help our students engage in the learning process that will enhance their experience to the most. This means engaging their emotions and feelings in addition to using their analytical thinking and logic.

For those educators who already teach humanities, I would recommend to follow Hersh’s advice and provide students with the learning experience as a whole,
keeping in mind that their feelings and emotions are included in the process of learning along with their thoughts. It is also imperative to encourage students to ask themselves important questions about what gives their lives meaning, what is important to them, and try to steer them away from the minute, trivial aspects of everyday life and make them look at the big picture.

Those who teach in the fields of science and business should not discard or ignore liberal education when advising their students, for it contributes to the students’ learning experience as a whole. James Freedman, a former president of Dartmouth College, considers liberal education “an important advantage”. He says: “A liberal education is what teaches people how to write and how to think and makes them much more valuable in the job market over a 40-year career than graduates of a preprofessional program.”

In my interview with our marketing consultant, Robin Gronlund, she underlined the importance of critical and analytical thinking in any business. She provided me with examples of her corporate trainings on site and said that decision-making in business would be impossible without the flexibility of the minds of those people whose job training is very specialized. That flexibility of minds is impossible without taking classes in humanities.

Michael Gurdon, the coordinator of the Master of Business Administration at UVM, incorporates Philosophy in teaching his Organizational Behavior course. He asks each student to pick a philosopher, study his works, and apply those values and beliefs to
their current or future organization. One of his former student, Galen Dow, the director of New Breed Marketing, reflects on his experience:

While going for an MBA I was fortunate to take an organizational dynamics course with Michael Gurdon. Coming into the MBA program I was working for an engineered products company and had my engineering degree and had a pretty narrow world-view. The engineering department at the time I was there encouraged this narrow view with remarks like ‘the other side of campus’ and ‘if you design something and it doesn’t work it’s art’. So, I was really after the ‘hard’ business content, finance, marketing, strategy. In Professor Gurdon’s class one assignment was to select a philosopher from a list that was provided research the relevant school of thought and comment as to its bearing on business. I chose Jurgen Habermas because I’d never heard of him and honestly wanted to get the whole stupid thing over with. This was a long time ago, but what I recall is that Jurgen was a German philosopher after WWII when they were coming to grips with the Holocaust. He created something that I recall was the “theory of truth through consensus.” The idea was that a social system needed to have certain rules in order for the ‘truth’ to come out (as opposed to the Hitler regime). There had to be enough time allowed to discuss an issue, there could not be a power hierarchy etc. and that if these rules were followed that a group of people could uncover the “truth.” This one experience completely changed how I interact with and “manage” people. You’ll notice that at my company I barely have a desk, much less an office. People are encouraged to speak their minds even if they disagree with me and we allow time to talk about major changes before we implement them. I believe this is a fundamental reason why New Breed continues to grow as it has from its start; that everyone is engaged and feels like they are part of the leadership of the company in some way shape or form. It’s a lot more work than just telling people what to do, but if you just tell people what to do, they often won’t do it when you are not around.83

I am grateful to my mentor, advisor and friend, Robert Nash, for providing me with an opportunity to co-teach the very same course (Religion, Spirituality and Education) with him in the fall. I am sure it will put me to the test once again; it will
challenge my views and assumptions. I am looking forward to hearing students’ stories and bringing them a step closer to mutual understanding and acceptance. I have observed myself make progress with people I used to argue with all the time on the basis of religion and politics. Sometimes it’s not easy to forget your own principles and look at people as human beings with beliefs as opposed to looking at beliefs attached to human beings. As in my own experience, I would like to help them see that allowing ourselves to be vulnerable can teach us a great deal about ourselves and others and realize that despite our differences, we all have something in common – we are human beings who inhabit the same house and in the larger scheme of things, our religious differences do not matter.

Through the readings and experiential learning, I would like to push students out of their comfort zones, make them experience things that they wouldn’t do of their own will. Immersing oneself into something that can seem scary, alien and uncomfortable at first, can teach them about the great possibilities of a human being. One thing I would like to try in our future class is to have students “accept” a religion they’re only familiar with from the books, and try to find truth in it through moral conversations. I have said many times in class how taking this course has changed me as a person. I have learned a lot and am now motivated to learn more. Learning doesn’t stop when we exit the classroom. Both Robert and my classmates helped me realize that. This was the first class that made me aware not only of my own personal attributes, thoughts and beliefs, but those of others as well. I remember the phrase from my counseling courses “help yourself before you can help others.” Now that I know exactly where I stand and how I relate to
other people, it will help me in my future work with students of different backgrounds. I will no longer dismiss their religious backgrounds as something unimportant when it comes to education, and I will not allow for extremes either.

In my role as an educator, I will do my best to help students realize what is most important to them right here, right now. I want to help them distinguish between the purpose of life and the meaning of life. I want to teach them to ask the right questions. As they begin their adult lives, I am sure they will have many questions, so different yet universal. In my mind, our main role as educators is to bring up if not generations of thinkers, at least a few thoughtful individuals – those who can think for themselves, have their own opinion on life and question their surroundings. Our role is to make them aware of this enormous world with its uncertainties and endless questions. We have to show them that they are not alone in their quest for meaning. And in leading them in this search, I hope I will find meaning in my own life.

These are only a few examples on how the humanities can be incorporated into any field of study, and I would recommend that educators use their own judgments and common sense in trying to find out their own specific approaches to teaching that would help students walk out of the university having learned something new about themselves as thoughtful human beings – those who are now prepared to face life with its never-ending questions.
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