

# The Lost Idea of a Liberal Art

Daniel Harrell

July 8, 2015\*

## Contents

[Introduction](#)  
[Part One](#)  
[Part Two](#)  
[Part Three](#)  
[Acknowledgment](#)

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## Introduction

The title of my lecture tonight, “The Lost Idea of a Liberal Art,” is meant to express a worry I have about the future of liberal education. This puts me in a sizable club. To have worries at all has become reflexive among those of us in any way devoted to this education. And there is no end these days, it seems, to prophecies, even pronouncements, of death. Type the words “death of liberal education” into Google, and you get back such headlines as

[Why Liberal Arts Education is Dying \(or Already Dead\)](#)  
[Is the Four-Year, Liberal-Arts Education Model Dead?](#)  
[The Death of Liberal Education](#)  
[The Death of Liberal Education](#)  
[Who Killed the Liberal Arts?](#)  
[Liberals are Killing the Liberal Arts](#)  
[Conservatives killed the liberal arts](#)  
[In Our High-Tech World, Are the Liberal Arts Dead?](#)  
[The Liberal Arts Are Dead; Long Live STEM](#)  
[Jobs: The Economy, Killing Liberal Arts Education](#)  
[The Liberal Arts Major: Would you like fries with that?](#)

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\*A lecture given on the Annapolis campus of St. John’s College.

All these headlines, I think, have one thing in common. While they may disagree about the threat to liberal education, they agree in distinguishing liberal education from the threat, as if the threat were external. The headlines make you think something *else* is killing liberal education, whether it be liberals or conservatives or technology or the economy. And it is hard to envision a defense of liberal education without such a distinction, even if headlines draw it simplistically, or even inaccurately. For if liberal education itself were somehow the threat, then death might well be liberal education's best defense, but in defeat. No surprise, then, that those of us devoted to liberal education are wont to conceive its threats as if they came from outside it. For this justifies a defense that succeeds only if liberal education survives.

And there is no shortage of such defenses. Type the words “defense of liberal education” into Google, and you will find one, it seems, for every headline predicting the death of liberal education. And not just in articles. There are books to defend liberal education, most recently [a bestseller](#) by Fareed Zakaria, bearing the title *In Defense of a Liberal Education*.<sup>1</sup> There are blogs to defend liberal education, including [one at St. John's](#) featuring regular posts by Christopher Nelson, the Annapolis president.<sup>2</sup> There are campaigns to defend liberal education, with slogans like *Securing America's Future: The Power of Liberal Arts Education*, to mention just [one initiative](#), launched in 2012 by the Council of Independent Colleges.<sup>3</sup> And behind these campaigns are associations to defend liberal education, like the just-mentioned [Council of Independent Colleges](#), or the [Association of American Colleges and Universities](#), or the [Association for General and Liberal Studies](#), or the [Association for Core Texts and Courses](#), or the [American Academy for Liberal Education](#). There are so many defenders of liberal education, in fact, that you can even find [think-pieces](#) pondering why they seem to have failed, since liberal education remains in peril.

But what if the defenders have succeeded—by putting liberal education in peril? What if the threat to liberal education comes from within? This is my worry. Let the idea of a liberal art, for the moment, simply mean whatever it is that distinguishes a liberal education from any other form of education—a technical education, say. What if our many defenses of liberal education have made us forget this idea? What if the idea of a liberal art is lost?

[Back to top](#)

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<sup>1</sup>Other books include *Beyond the University: Why Liberal Education Matters* by Michael S. Roth; and *College: What It Was, Is, And Should be* by Andrew Delbanco.

<sup>2</sup>Other blogs include “[The LEAP Challenge Blog](#),” sponsored by the Association of American Colleges and Universities; and [The Power of Liberal Arts “Blogs” page](#), sponsored by the Council of Independent Colleges, that gathers blog posts defending liberal education.

<sup>3</sup>Other campaigns include *Liberal Education and America's Promise*, launched in 2005 by the Association of American Colleges and Universities.

## Part One

Now in one sense, I think, the threat to liberal education must always come from within. The fate of liberal education, after all, will not be decided in headlines, but in choices made by each of us about the best education, once education matters. Not the best education, then, in general, as such, *per se*; but the best education for my daughter, or my son, or me. In having to make such choices, those devoted to liberal education are no different from those dismissive of it. And in this respect, the threat to liberal education can never lie outside it. To pursue an education at all, liberal or no, is to have answered a question that a liberal education obliges each of us to ask, and ask on our own behalf: What does it mean to be educated? And we might well answer this question in a choice *against* liberal education, even at the risk of its extinction, if the same choice is made repeatedly. But this is perhaps the best evidence we have that the question is real, and the threat to liberal education therefore intrinsic to it. The death of liberal education, so understood, would similarly come from within, in a proof of its life, and perhaps the only proof of life.

But again, those of us devoted to liberal education are unlikely to want this death, especially just to show we were devoted to something rather than nothing. And while the threat may be internal in this general sense, it is still external, I think, in a specific sense. For if the threat to liberal education does come from within, in a question it would have us ask for ourselves about what it means to be educated, then while we may well answer this question in a choice against liberal education, we may also answer the question otherwise, by choosing liberal education. Liberal education would then be a second answer to the question, opposed to the first. And insofar as one answer opposes the other, the threat to liberal education would be external.

But if the threat *is* external, as one answer opposed to another, then we can infer at least one thing, I think, about any defense of liberal education against this threat. It will have to convince us that liberal education *does* provide an answer, even for those who give a different answer. It will have to show us that something is lost in a choice against liberal education, whatever might be gained; and that the answer we give in such a choice, even if it turns out right, risks being wrong. And showing this much, it seems, means showing there is something learned in liberal education, that would otherwise go unlearned. To show, in short, that liberal education has a subject-matter. Or, in a word: content.

But what, then, *is* this content? What should we say is learned in a liberal education alone? Traditionally, the content of a liberal education was identified with a curriculum of seven liberal arts, a so-called *trivium* of grammar, logic, and rhetoric; and a *quadrivium* of arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy. Each of these arts was thought to wed a skill to a subject. And together, these arts were thought to form a whole. This is why one could say there was *something* to learn in a liberal education, rather than many things, or anything, or nothing.

This is also what I want to say is contained in the idea of a liberal art: a skill wedded to a subject, in a whole of such skills and subjects, that gives a liberal education its content.

But one might also suspect that a liberal education has no content in this sense, and that the liberal arts as traditionally conceived show us why. They were learned, after all, by the few rather than the many—the leisured few, in that sense already free from servitude. Perhaps the education they received was ‘liberal,’ then, not in liberating them, but in shaping them, stamping them, and perpetuating them. And the same might be suspected of any content. For in what sense could we be freed by it, rather than bound to it? What distinguishes content, so-called, from dogma, or doctrine? What keeps it from closing the mind that a truly liberal education is meant to open?

This suspicion of content can also come from the opposite direction, so to speak: by what we take to threaten liberal education, or indeed any form of education. For leaving headlines aside, this threat can seem to reflect a kind of triumph of content over context, from college rankings and scorecards at the start, to tests and grades at the end, making the very meaning of education a matter of data-driven results; and a choice against liberal education the answer to a question never asked. Or we might conceive this threat in economic terms, reducing education to just another a product with a price in the global marketplace. Against all this, the first thing we might think to say in defense of education is that products are not enough, results are not enough, answers are not enough, content is not enough.

Defenses of liberal education, accordingly, have generally made education a matter of context rather than content. And the most common way of doing this is to locate learning not in a set of subjects, but instead in the self. Thus [it is said that](#) “the maturation of the student—not information transfer—is the real purpose of colleges and universities.” Or [that](#) “if we are to navigate skillfully the turbulent changes of the twenty-first century, we must educate students not only to process information effectively, but to think wisely and well.”

And talk of turbulent changes points to another way that defenses of liberal education have made it a matter of context: by locating the self in an ever-changing world. [A good example](#) comes from an address by President Nelson:

With boundaries among the disciplines vanishing, with job requirements and needs changing rapidly, we need citizens prepared for change, prepared to adapt to jobs that do not yet exist, prepared to enter an unknown world with a kind of fearless determination to undertake whatever is required to succeed. We will need skills of inquiry to enter a world we cannot yet even envision.

We can begin to see from this quote why making liberal education a matter of context rather than content, means forgetting, more or less deliberately, the

idea of a liberal art. For suppose we did live in a world that changes more than it abides, where our freedom, to the extent this depended on skill, were a matter of adaptation more than application. Any art that deserved the name ‘liberal’, in that case, would involve a skill more likely divorced from any subject than wedded to one; which is to say, a skill that can be applied to many subjects, even to every subject. And suppose the number of such subjects to have multiplied past counting, in one way the world indeed seems to have changed, since the advent of modern science. If the liberal arts could still be said to encompass a set of subjects, then it would seem better understood as a diversity than as a totality.

So once defenses of liberal education make it a matter of context, it is unsurprising that they separate its skills from its subjects. The subjects, if they are specified at all, are specified to give an impression of breadth, as if there were many things one might learn in a liberal education rather than just one. The current St. John’s website, for example, [speaks](#) of the college’s “wide-ranging, interdisciplinary curriculum,” where “areas of study include philosophy, literature, history, mathematics, economics, political theory, theology, biology, physics, music, chemistry, and languages.” Other lists of subjects are even more expansive. One from the earlier-mentioned *Power of Liberal Arts* campaign [makes it sound](#) as if you might study anything:

You might be surprised by the kinds of subjects and majors that are included in the liberal arts. They include much more than studio art and English classes (though those are great!)—they range from mathematics to Mandarin, from statistics to sociology. At liberal arts colleges and universities students can study the sciences—such as biology, chemistry, and physics—and social sciences—including economics, political science, and psychology. Students can study newer subjects, such as environmental science and neuroscience, and traditional ones, too.

This same impression of breadth is given in the way defenses of liberal education present its skills apart from subjects. You can indeed learn anything, then, in learning *how* to learn. And this encompasses a range of skills similarly presented apart from subjects: how to read, how to write, how to speak, even how to think.<sup>4</sup> St. John’s current way of putting this is [to claim](#) that its students “learn to speak articulately, read attentively, reason effectively, and think creatively.”

In a similar vein, defenses of liberal education will call the liberal arts “transferable skills,”<sup>5</sup> again against the backdrop of an ever-changing job market. And “usefulness” has become a ubiquitous word to counter the opinion, and

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<sup>4</sup>A good example of this is found in Fareed Zakaria, [“What is the Earthly Use of Liberal Education.”](#)

<sup>5</sup>“Although modern liberal arts curriculums have an updated choice of a larger range of subjects, it still retains the core aims of the liberal arts curricula maintained by the medieval universities: to develop well-rounded individuals with general knowledge of a wide range

the traditional conviction, that the liberal arts are useless. It is more generally the habit in defenses of liberal education to talk of the liberal arts as if they empowered us rather than enlightened us—the aforementioned *Power of Liberal Arts campaign* being the most explicit example.

There are deeper strains in this line of defense, that try to reach beyond a liberal education’s usefulness for any career, to the way it might be useful for life, making the self, in sense, the subject of its skills. A liberal arts education can be “truly, enduringly useful,” so [one recent defense puts it](#), once it is “oriented towards the question of how to live.” Or as President Nelson [has written](#):

The primary purpose of college—contrary to the opinion of hiring managers—is not to provide trained-up workers for business, nor even to provide young people with the skills needed to make a living. The primary purpose is to help young people develop the character and the judgment to shape a life worth living.

In these appeals to the way a life might be shaped, defenses of liberal education might be said to deepen the sense in which liberal education is a matter of context, not content, by locating what is learned in a cultivated readiness for the world, whatever the world may hold. Here is how a recent St. John’s graduate puts it:

After my two-year commitment with Teach For America, I hope to continue my work in the field of education. But really, I can do anything. St. John’s has given me the tools: the ability to listen, to think, to speak, to write, and ultimately, to act. I need only to decide where to direct my passion, and the world is mine, thanks to the incredible education I have had the blessing to receive here. <sup>6</sup>

And there are ways to deepen this context still further; the most common being to take this readiness for the world as an openness to the world, whether the self so opened is described as curious, inquisitive, imaginative, self-critical, or sympathetic. Thus we find Martha Nussbaum, to pick on a famous example, [defending liberal education](#) insofar as it develops

1. The capacity for Socratic self-criticism and critical thought about one’s own traditions.
2. The ability to see oneself as a member of a heterogeneous nation and world.

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of subjects and with mastery of a range of transferable skills. They will become ‘global citizens’, with the capacity to pursue lifelong learning and become valuable members of their communities.” <http://www.topuniversities.com/blog/what-liberal-arts-education>

<sup>6</sup>This comes from Grace Tyson, “‘When You Know Better, You Do Better’: A Senior’s Reflections on St. John’s. Parts of this address are also quoted in Christopher Nelson, *Is It Worth It?*

3. The ability to sympathetically imagine the lives of people different from oneself.

And as suggested by Nussbaum's reference to Socrates, the sense in which a truly liberal education opens minds rather than closes them has particular appeal at St. John's, where it would now sound antiquated to claim, as Scott Buchanan did in the first catalog of the New Program, that the liberal arts put us in possession of the truth.<sup>7</sup> What we say instead is self-consciously Socratic. Thus President Nelson [will say that](#) "liberal education is the best and quickest way to become comfortable not knowing." [Or that](#) "learning is grounded in recognition and acceptance of one's own ignorance." Or as the same St. John's graduate I quoted earlier puts it:

I have learned that great questions lead to more and more questions, not necessarily to answers, and I have learned that the greatness of the human spirit shows itself in just this realization. As Socrates says in Plato's *Meno*: "We shall be better and braver and less helpless if we think that we ought to enquire, than we should have been if we indulged in the idle fancy that there was no knowing and no use in seeking to know what we do not know." We must have intellectual bravery, that is, the courage to push forward, to continue seeking truth even in the face of doubts about its very existence.

It is this same Socratic self-consciousness that explains how St. John's can make even an all-required program of books, which might thought inescapably full of content, into a matter of context. For anything written down, we might claim, is simply doctrine, until a reader puts it into dialogue by questioning it rather than assimilating it. And underlying this shift from doctrine to dialogue is perhaps the deepest belief one can have about a truly liberal education: that we are only able to learn, truly learn, insofar as we do this for ourselves. It would seem to follow directly from this that *what* we learn is found indeed in the self, or even the soul, rather than in a set of subjects. And the more liberal an education becomes, so we could say, the more that *what* we learn is a matter of *how* we learn, and *who* we become in learning it. Which at this college, at least, means the more that any so-called subject is found in a book, which is found in a reader of that book, who is found in a conversation about that book, which brings the book to life, with all it may contain. And this conversation, both with others and with oneself, might then be said to exemplify the sense in which a liberal education is ultimately a matter of context rather than content. For this is an education in selfhood rather than subjects, where the something we finally learn is what it means to learn, and even what it means to love it.

The suspicion that a truly liberal education has no content, then, can be cast in terms that encompass what many of us, I think, might say a liberal education

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<sup>7</sup>"The arts of apprehending, understanding, and knowing the truth are the liberal arts, and they set their own ends." (*Bulletin of St. John's College in Annapolis, 1937-38*).

finally is, and where any appeal to a number of liberal arts seems beside the point. St. John's even tried dropping any reference to the liberal arts, along with any mention of liberal education, when it first launched its new website, as if indeed to forget the whole idea. But it did this, I think, to locate the place of a liberal education in the present rather than the past. It was only a matter of months before the college restored these references to its website, since there were prospective students still using such terms to find such things. But St. John's has otherwise remained embarked, like nearly every other liberal arts college in the country, on a communications project carried out in images rather than text, in the attempt not simply to say what a liberal education is, but to show it, and capture something about the *experience* of a liberal education when mere explanations are thought no longer enough. Gone are the days when the college could package its education, as it were, in a brown paper wrapper, as if the education were not only a matter of content, but the kind of content that couldn't be seen from outside. Even the first video St. John's made of itself, back in 1954, was mostly staged and performed in vignettes, retaining at least that much separation from the ongoing world. But it is just this separation that is now deemed better erased than preserved, leading to efforts that range from the Summer Academy to the college's Instagram feed, as if to give the impression that what separates the college from the outside world is only a window, and a window more often open than shut. At its worst, this project might be said to pander or flatter rather than inform or educate; but at its best, it might be said to make St. John's finally look like a college rather than a cult. Or to put the sense of this strategy more generally: it tries to defend liberal education by locating the place of liberal education *within* the world rather than apart from it. —And this is perhaps the most visible way that a liberal education is now being made a matter of context rather than content.

[Back to top](#)

## Part Two

By this point in my lecture, however, I think one could make an objection. For I haven't yet given any grounds for *worrying* about any of this. If we *have* lost the idea of a liberal art, by making liberal education a matter of context rather than content, then at most all I have shown so far is that we have lost this idea deliberately, in what might be called *an act* of forgetting. So let me now explain my worry, which the rest of the lecture will try to justify. My worry is that in losing this idea, more or less deliberately, we risk another loss beyond our control: which is to lose any way of giving a clear and compelling answer to the question of what it means to be educated. —Which is to say, an answer that distinguishes liberal education from any other form of education; and that sheds any light, in turn, on what is lost in a choice against liberal education, whatever might be gained. I worry, then, that once the idea of a liberal art is lost in defense of liberal education, the defense is lost. And once the defense is

lost, liberal education is lost.

To begin to see all this, I want now to revisit the various ways that defenses of liberal education have made it a matter of context. For example: the basic set of skills, again separated from subjects, that defenses of liberal education claim are imparted by it. There is no doubt that learning how to learn, along with how to read, write, speak, and think, are useful skills; and one might even grant their necessity for a life lived in freedom. But it is hard to see how these skills belong to a liberal education rather than to any education. And the more indispensable these skills sound, the harder it is to conceive them as liberal rather than remedial. Shouldn't we already know how to learn, and read, write, speak, and think, before we go to college?

There are, of course, ways to specify such skills, but they reflect another aspect of the problem. To recall St. John's way of doing this, in a liberal education you learn how to speak articulately, read attentively, reason effectively, think creatively. But are we then to believe that you'll be left speaking inarticulately, reading inattentively, reasoning ineffectively, or thinking uncreatively, if you choose another kind of education—say, to pursue a degree in computer programming? This is doubtful. But if so, then what again distinguishes a liberal education from any education?

The same problem emerges from the attempt to distinguish a liberal education on higher-sounding grounds. In [one of his blogposts](#), for example, President Nelson writes: “St. John's College is the right fit for someone who is seeking a special sort of education—an education in the arts of freedom, an education in how to make learning and life their own.” But one could ask how such encompassing terms could distinguish a St. John's education from any education, or even from human experience as such. For isn't the distinction between experience and innocence, or experience and endurance, found in just the kind of learning, and living, that is necessarily one's own? Or suppose we take our bearings from Socrates, and claim that St. John's will teach you intellectual courage: how to persevere in the pursuit of knowledge rather than yield in the face of ignorance. Perhaps St. John's will, but so then will any field of research one might pursue, it could be argued, that relies on science to reach its results rather than superstition. And direct appeals to Socrates, as if the Enlightenment never happened, won't be enough to distinguish St. John's in particular, or liberal education more generally, on the matter of intellectual courage.

But there is a whole other side to this problem. Insofar as it becomes hard to distinguish a liberal education from any education when it is made a matter of context, it becomes easy to make a choice against liberal education merely by wanting an education with content. To consider this problem from one angle, take the penchant in education nowadays for testing and ranking and training and specializing. It may be good and even necessary to speak against all this in defense of liberal education. But this risks the impression that a liberal education is an education for dilettantes, providing an escape from being challenged or judged or driven or dedicated. And what can be said to correct

this impression, if in a liberal education, these virtues are matters of context rather than content? Matters, that is, about which nothing more, really, can be said, but only shown—where you see such students for yourself? Or even be such a student yourself? For as one noted defender of liberal education, Andrew Delbanco, [has put it](#):

One of the difficulties in making the case for liberal education against the rising tide of skepticism is that it is almost impossible to persuade doubters who have not experienced it for themselves. The Puritan founders of our oldest colleges would have called it “such a mystery as none can read but they that know it.”

This way of putting the problem captures what is potentially self-defeating in defenses of liberal education that make it a matter of context. For if the point of any defense is *to persuade* people to experience liberal education for themselves, then how can there be a defense that depends on such an experience to be persuasive?

There are, of course, ways of trying to capture this experience in images, as I earlier discussed in the case of St. John’s. But this same case reflects the problem. If we make its education a matter of context, by showing a student playing croquet, or reading a book on a bench near a tree, or even speaking with passion and eloquence about how much her education means, we haven’t yet distinguished St. John’s from any other college where such things might be said or done—even though St. John’s is unique, in having renounced the elective system and established an all-required curriculum. But St. John’s is unique, then, as a matter of content, not context. And something similar by way of distinction-erasing might be said of the defenses of liberal education more generally. For if these defenses were products of a liberal education, one might have expected them to reflect a diversity of views, or an originality of thought. But so far as these defenses make liberal education a matter of context, and speak of the kind of skills one needs to flourish in life, it becomes hard not to speak in platitudes or commonplaces. And indeed these defenses more or less follow a script: In an ever-changing world, now more than ever, we need the truly useful arts of a liberal education. Even President Nelson hasn’t quite managed to liberate himself from this script, even though I regard him as a gifted writer, who is making the most of the script.

Still, I suspect that those of us devoted to liberal education will need more than a script to survive. And if my lecture so far is right, this means finding what we have lost, or recollecting what we have forgotten. So in the time I have left, I want to sketch one way back to the idea of a liberal art.

[Back to top](#)

## Part Three

To take the first step back, I want you to imagine that we have shut every window at St. John's College, and drawn every curtain; as if St. John's were indeed a cult. Or to put this more generously: as if the place of liberal education were not within the world but apart from it. But why would we believe this? We would believe it, I think, because of something we believed about the freedom promised by a liberal education. We would take this freedom to be important enough, yet fragile enough, to protect its pursuit. We would regard this freedom as invaluable, then, but not indispensable. A life could be lived, and even lived well, without it. And this would be why its pursuit would need protection from the outside world. For it would be a freedom that might well be forgotten in the living of life; or even dismissed, or denied—for example, in the choice of another form of education. Or in the quest for power, or the drive to succeed. The kind of freedom that someone like Meno might not want, but that his slave-boy might need, to be free at all. The kind of freedom, then, that might be possessed even by those in chains, or in prison, or in poverty. The kind of freedom we can still possess at the moment of death, when there is no life left to live. The kind of freedom you can count on, then, not when you might do anything, but when you can do nothing. At moments of life when you might be said to need a useless skill, not a useful one.

But what kind of freedom could this be? The answer takes us a second step back. For this would be a freedom, I think, that transcends the horizons of life, and indeed be the freedom it is—perhaps the highest kind there is—in having no horizons. But what does having no horizons mean? Here is one answer, and to my mind the best answer: having no horizons means having the truth. And a liberal education, then, would promise you the truth.

If this promise sounds ridiculous, then good. For if what I have so far argued is right, then we are better off saying ridiculous things than obvious things in defense of liberal education. But this promise, you'll also have to admit, is one way, and perhaps the simplest way, to claim that a liberal education has content. And truth might be the only way to understand a content that frees us rather than binds us. The promise of truth should also sound attractive, at least if there is any chance to keep the promise. But perhaps you think no liberal arts college these days would dare to make the promise. Well, you would be wrong. At the time I write this sentence (which was yesterday), the college whose curriculum most resembles St. John's had the slogan "Truth Matters" emblazoned across [its home page](#). And this same college began [its own defense](#) of liberal education by claiming that "to learn is to discover and grow in the truth about reality. It is the truth, and nothing less, that sets men free."

Now, I have to admit that the college in question is Thomas Aquinas. And perhaps you would tell me their belief in truth is based on their belief in Christ. I would agree, but hasten to add that St. John's has a source of its own for a belief in truth. Which takes us a third step back. For though we may not

have to believe in Christ to believe in truth, perhaps we do have to believe in Ptolemy.

But what do I mean by a belief in Ptolemy? To explain what I mean, and to take yet another step back to the idea of a liberal art, I'm going to turn now *not* to Ptolemy, but instead to Socrates; and indeed, a Socrates we are all familiar with, from Plato's *Meno*. I do this because if St. John's can already be said to believe in anything, it believes in this: you can only learn, truly learn, insofar as you do this for yourself. But if Socrates's myth of recollection to Meno can be believed, then learning for yourself would be impossible, unless you somehow already possessed whatever you might learn. Which is all but to say: unless you somehow already had the truth. Of course, we might take this myth to be merely myth; and one sign of its doubtfulness even at St. John's can be glimpsed in what I earlier quoted from a St. John's graduate, when she claimed that "We must have intellectual bravery, that is, the courage to push forward, to continue seeking truth even in the face of doubts about its very existence." I think Socrates's myth is meant to suggest, to the contrary, that all doubts about truth's existence are put to rest, as soon as we start to learn.

But I call this a suggestion, because the proof, I suspect, actually lies in Socrates's dramatic turn to the slave-boy, and a shift from myth to mathematics. Which brings me to my final step back. For it is in Socrates's encounter with the slave-boy, I think, that we can find the lost idea of a liberal art. And to recover it, I now offer what I call a loose reading of this encounter.

The central question of this episode is: how long, exactly, is the side of an eight-foot square? (*Meno* 82e) Now, as you no doubt know, because the line in question is irrational, there is no answer to the question in terms of feet. But I prefer to put this a different way. There *is* an answer, but only insofar as the answer is made into a matter of research, with a divide-and-conquer approach. And this is one way to describe the slave-boy's initial stab at the question, when he finds that the line in question is between 2 feet and 3 feet in length, before giving up. (84a) But under one idea of intellectual courage, we could say, we should not give up. And we could forge ahead, on the slave-boy's behalf, in further research, by dividing the 3 foot line even more. And putting the results in suitably modern terms, we learn that the line in question is between 2.8 and 2.9 feet; then we learn it is between 2.82 and 2.83 feet; then we learn it is between 2.828 and 2.829 feet. Or to put what we learn still more exactly: the first number in the length of the line is 2; and the next is 8; and the next is 2; then 8; then 4; then 2; then 7; and so on. There would be no pattern in the numbers thereby found, but this is what would make every number found a genuine discovery, which carried us ever farther in truth, leading us from one learned thing to the next. We could even say we were learning for ourselves, and persevering in the pursuit of knowledge rather than yielding in the face of ignorance. And I think this more or less captures the meaning of learning in what I will call the *idea* of a field of research, which we have inherited from modern science.

But again, the slave-boy gives up on this approach at the very first number 2. And Socrates doesn't exhort him to keep at it, or show him how to divide the 3 foot line any further. Instead, Socrates says to the slave-boy: if you don't want to count the line out, then just show it to me. (84a) —It's as if Socrates had a different idea of intellectual courage, a different idea of learning, and a different idea of how the question should be approached, forming a different discipline from a field of research. And I think we can already say why. For while you can certainly make the line in question a matter of research, you thereby put it out of reach—as a matter of recognition. For there is no end to the numbers you will find in the divide-and-conquer approach to the line in question. So you are learning more and more about an object that you will never get to see, and in that sense, never get to know. We will always be left, as it were, at the first number we find, with an ever-expanding but never-vanishing horizon at the latest number we find. Or more simply put, we will be seeking the truth, and even advancing the truth, but never possessing the truth.

So what idea of approach does Socrates have in mind instead? We can see it coming-to-be in the very next thing he does with the slave-boy. For the slave-boy is truly stumped, and can't even show the line in question. For of course it is not in front of the slave-boy yet; and in his mind, we might say, it is not yet a matter of recognition, but still a matter of research, even though he's given the project up. So in perhaps his one outright act of teaching, giving birth, we might say, to the very idea of a liberal art, Socrates simply draws the line in question—erasing at once any remaining horizon of discovery, and showing we are already in possession of the truth. (85a) And what he does in drawing this line radically changes what it means for the slave-boy to learn. For this is no longer to discover any more about the line in question, but instead to recognize the line in question. Or perhaps I should say recollect the line in question. But in either formulation, this means seeing that the line Socrates has drawn is indeed the line in question. And the slave boy does this in yet another act of recognition, when he sees that the figure Socrates draws, upon the line that he draws, is indeed the eight-foot square in question.

But let me try to clarify this by generalizing it. Let us suppose that Socrates has asked the slave-boy a more encompassing question. Such as: "Why do the heavens move as they do?" One way to answer this question is again to make it a matter of research, producing fields and even sub-fields of research, in a divide-and-conquer approach to the question. But this risks putting the matter beyond the reach of recognition. True, we will learn more and more about heavenly motions in this approach; but there is no promise that we will ever learn enough to finally answer the question. And this reflects one way to understand learning, leading to one interpretation of "astronomy," that we have inherited from modern science. But there is still another way to understand learning, leading to another interpretation of "astronomy," that we have inherited from ancient science, and that promises us an answer, in promising us the truth. And a college like ours is committed to it, I think, if we believe that learning is a finally a matter of recognition.

So another way of answering the question “Why do the heavens move as they do?” that we can still call “astronomy,” produces a liberal art. And in this approach, strange as it may sound, we can simply answer the question, in already possessing the truth. We don’t even have to stop at one answer: Ptolemy, as I recall, gives us two—suggesting that the truth is more generous than frugal. And we don’t even need any telescopes. All we have to do is draw lines just like Socrates did, that allow us to see, or more exactly see again, the object in question. Which in this more encompassing case is the motion of the heavens; hence we have to draw the lines—circles, basically—that allow us to see again, and in that sense to recognize, the very motions of the heavens we were asking about. And in this way we can give a true account of these motions, since this account allows us not simply to explain what we see, as if to move past it, but to recognize what we see, in a recovery of it.

But now suppose we made the question Socrates asks the slave-boy *all-encompassing*—something like: “Why is the world the way it is?” In one approach—let us call this a technical education—we would be led into ever-more numerous fields of research to answer the question, with no promise that we will ever recover the world by the end, in an act of recognition. But in another approach—let us call this a liberal education—we would be led to seven liberal arts to answer the question, where this recovery of the world in an act of recognition is precisely the point. And this is why, I think, these antique seven arts might still be said to form a whole, that gives a truly liberal education its content.

But let me say one final thing in this spirit of recollection on behalf of St. John’s College. Let us suppose that the truth is very generous. So generous, that when we ask the question “Why is the world the way it is?” there is not just one answer, or two answers, or seven answers, but something closer to a hundred. And let us suppose that the lines that might be drawn to produce this hundred are drawn, not to form squares, or circles, but letters; and that the letters are suitably arranged in words, sentences, paragraphs, to compose what we might call “books.” Any of the hundred so-called books, in that case, would allow us to recover the world in an act of recognition. And we could recognize the world in such a book, by reading it with the same generosity possessed by the truth. The book would be inescapably full of content, in being inescapably full of truth. These are the books I think we read at the college, and believe in. And in being full of truth, they give, to any conversation at the college that brings them to life, a purpose, and a point, beyond that life; proving there is more, even to life, than life. Truth.

## **Acknowledgment**

Much of the thinking in this lecture is indebted to Barbara McClay. So I wanted to thank her for that, and dedicate the lecture to her. For more on her own defense of liberal education, which is much better than the defenses I discuss here, see:

[“In Defense of Liberal Arts”](#)

[“‘What is Liberal Education For?’: A Preview”](#)

[“We’re All Pinmakers Now: Liberal Education in a Specialized Age”](#)

[“With Friends Like These”](#)

[Back to top](#)