

How much is your Education worth?

Commencement Presentation, TDCJ, May 14, 2001

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Have you ever wondered how much your education is really worth? I would like to introduce this topic by telling you an ancient “teaching story,” a story that is designed to stimulate your thinking. The story is about a poor man who was walking along a road when he saw something sparkling in the weeds. He picked it up. It was a beautiful golden ring encrusted with diamonds, rubies, and emeralds, evidently lost by a passerby. “Surely,” he thought, “this is a valuable piece of jewelry.” He took it to the local authorities to see if anyone had reported the loss of the ring. No loss had been reported and, as was the custom in that land, the ring was his to do with as he pleased. Needing money more than jewels, he ran to the marketplace. “Who will give me 100 silver coins for this beautiful ring,” he shouted. A wealthy merchant who knew the worth of jewelry quickly gave the man 100 coins in exchange for the ring. The man was delighted, because he had never had that much money before. A woman who was standing nearby had recognized that the ring was worth much more than 100 coins. After the merchant left with the ring, she asked the man, “Why did you ask only 100 coins for such a fine ring?” The man did not

understand her question. "What do you mean?" he asked. "Is there any number larger than 100?"

Does this happen to us? Like the man in the story, do we happily accept much less than the full worth of something we have because we don't know its actual value? How does this story apply to our view of education? Do we sometimes discount the worth of education because we don't see its greater value? For example, we often say that higher education can help us to earn a living. But is that the entire value of education? Is there a value greater than that? The Indian teacher Krishnamurti (1964) spoke on this topic, and asked the following questions about the value of education:

Why do we go to school, why do we learn various subjects, why do we pass examinations and compete with each other for better grades? What does this so-called education mean, and what is it all about? This is really a very important question, not only for the students, but also for the parents, for the teachers, and for everyone who loves this earth. Why do we go through the struggle to be educated? Is it merely in order to pass some examinations and get a job? Or is it the function of education to prepare us ... to understand the whole process of life? Having a job and earning one's livelihood is necessary-but is that all? Are we being educated only for that? Surely, life is not merely a job, an occupation; life

is something extraordinarily wide and profound, it is a great mystery, a vast realm in which we function as human beings. If we merely prepare ourselves to earn a livelihood, we shall miss the whole point of life, and to understand life is much more important than merely to prepare for examinations and become very proficient in mathematics, physics, or what you will (p. 9).

We know that some kinds of professional education and training can help us to "make a living." What about the liberal arts type of education in the humanities and social sciences that we offer here? I believe that a liberal arts education can also help us "make a life." The experience of a truly fulfilling, meaningful, and satisfying life is potentially available to us, and a good education can help us achieve it. I would like to talk about four ways that a liberal arts education can influence our lives in a positive way: enhancing our personal development, developing our sense of connection and giving meaning to knowledge, developing enthusiasm and passion for learning, and helping us make a living.

Personal Development

First, education can assist us with personal development. Human evolution is a lifelong process that never reaches a conclusion. As we proceed through our lives we must address a variety of life issues. How do I relate to

authority? Can I develop a consistent sense of my own identity? Can I learn to cooperate with others? Can I achieve self-esteem? How do I develop intimate relationships? Can I identify and fulfill my unique individual potential? Can I experience connection with all of life (Kegan, 1982)? In order for us to function at our fullest potential, we must remain open to change. Higher education can help us accept new ideas and transform our understanding of our self and our relationship to the universe. This process requires willingness to examine and question our assumptions and beliefs and to see old “truths” from new perspectives.

Seeing Patterns and Connections

Second, academic study provides a special opportunity to see the principles and patterns that lie behind our particular knowledge and the specific daily events of our lives. A liberal arts education can also help us develop a more comprehensive understanding of the universe and ourselves. It gives us a chance to cultivate a personal appreciation not only for our precious lives as humans but also for the splendor and the mystery of the entire universe. The fundamental purpose of all academic study is to help us to understand the nature of our human existence by reaching out beyond what is immediate and obvious to contact the most permanent and eternal principles of life, despite the changing appearances (Bakan, 1967).

In the initial phases of higher education, we learn many individual pieces of information and skills. Knowledge of this sort may prove very useful, but it could be worth much more. The more significant meaning of knowledge comes when we see how these fragments of information fit together. When we see recurrent themes and patterns in events, we develop a notion of how things work together. Comprehending the larger view helps give more meaning to our experiences and observations. It also helps us deal with new experiences and anticipate the future more effectively.

Learning greater truths requires comprehensive understanding that incorporates particular pieces of knowledge into a greater whole. Buckminster Fuller, the inventor of the geodesic dome, was an active, excited, and stimulating lifelong learner who always looked for the most comprehensive ways of understanding the world. An example of such global, comprehensive understanding can be seen in his response to a child who, pointing to the logs in the fireplace, asked him, "What is fire?" He said,

Fire is the Sun unwinding from the tree's log. The Earth . . . and the trees revolve as the radiation from the Sun reaches the revolving planet Earth. By photosynthesis the green ... leaves of the tree convert that Sun radiation into hydrocarbon molecules, which form into the ... outer ... layer of the tree. The tree ... makes a cone as it revolves. The tree's ...

roots spread out into the ground to anchor the tree and get water. Each year the new, outer-layer, green-tree cone revolves 364 turns, and every year the tree grows its new ... cone layer just under the bark and over the accumulating cones of the previous years. Each ring of the many rings of the saw cut is one year's sun-energy impoundment. So the fire is the many years of Sun flame winding now unwinding from the tree. (Fuller, 1981, p. 63-64).

Compared to the ways that most of us would answer that question we can recognize the value of a comprehensive understanding.

The Pleasure of Learning

Third, we might look at why we choose to study. There are a variety of motives for learning. We may learn out of necessity or so that we can achieve something or acquire something we want. However, the worthiest motive for learning is curiosity. Curiosity drives us to study for the pleasure of learning, and in its purest form helps us sustain our efforts and explore to the fullest the subjects that interest us. Richard Feynman, the late Nobel Prize winning physicist, worried early in his career about whether he would ever do anything of importance. He noticed that this desire for achievement had destroyed some of the pleasure of learning. "I used to enjoy physics and mathematical things.... I used to play with it, it was never very important, but I used to do

things for the fun of it. So I decided I'm going to do things only for the fun of it (Feynman, 1983, p. 7)."

That same day, during a "food fight" in the dining hall, a student threw a plate. Feynman noticed that as the plate wobbled the college medallion printed on the plate seemed to revolve faster than the wobble. He wondered about the relationship between the two, and, just "having fun" with it, he "played around!" with the equations of rotation. One of his colleagues criticized him for studying such a useless question, but his boss said that it was the university's problem whether he accomplished anything and he should do whatever he wanted, should amuse himself. With that encouragement he relaxed and continued playing with the equations on rotation and this led to a similar problem with the spin of the electron. In very short order he worked out the problems for which he won the Nobel Prize. But when Feynman was asked about the Nobel Prize, he said,

I don't see that it makes any point that someone in the Swedish Academy decides that (my) work is noble enough to receive a prize. I've already got the prize. The prize is the pleasure of finding the thing out, the kick in the discovery, the observation of other people using it. Those are the real things (Feynman, 1983, p. 9).

Making a Living

In addition to helping us to make a life, a liberal arts education can also enhance our ability to make a living. Making a living over the next ten or twenty years may present some interesting challenges. Here are two of the most common expectations about the future of work. First, many of the jobs that people currently have, and are now preparing for, did not exist ten years ago (e.g., web site developer) and likewise many of them won't exist ten years from now. Second, most people will change the kind of job or career they have several times in their lives. What sort of education will best prepare someone for this future world of work? Employers in our rapidly changing world want employees who can solve problems by gathering information, analyzing the situation, seeing the larger context, and coming up with new creative solutions. They want employees who are enthusiastic, flexible and open-minded, can listen to what others say and communicate their own views effectively. They want people who can work together with others, take responsibility for their work and see a project through. These are the very abilities that a liberal arts education helps us to develop.

Now that you have some ideas about the meaning and value of a liberal arts education, what do you think your education is worth? Is it worth more

than 100? As you continue to benefit from your education you may find that it is worth more than the biggest number you can imagine.