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***A TALE OF TWO COLLEGES:
THE LIBERAL ARTS AT REED,
SWARTHMORE, AND BEYOND***

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A decade or so ago, I traveled with my son to the West Coast to look at a small liberal arts college not unlike the one I had attended in the East thirty years earlier. A late-spring snowfall had just coated the nearby mountains, and after several days of powder skiing on Mt. Hood, we arrived at the campus of Reed College. My son liked what he saw, and eventually studied there.

Coincidentally, Reed had been my own second choice thirty-some years earlier; and although my undergraduate experience was memorable and productive, I'm not sure the fir-clad Oregon campus wouldn't have served me just as well as my Quaker arboretum in Swarthmore, Pennsylvania.

What struck me most of all, in perusing Reed's course catalogue, was how much it resembled Swarthmore's – not contemporaneously, but a generation earlier when I had studied there. Whereas Swarthmore had greatly diversified its course offerings (and its student body), Reed was like my alma mater in a time capsule: it had hewn to a narrower and more traditional approach to the "liberal arts."

I use quotation marks here partly to emphasize just how ambiguous and problematic the term is, but also to highlight the fact that it embraces the quite different paths that two otherwise similar institutions have taken over the past generation.

There remain crucial overlaps of course. Swarthmore hasn't abandoned philosophy, literature, or the classics; it has merely added more than a dozen new disciplines, from Arabic and Asian Studies to Gender & Sexuality Studies, Computer Science, Islamic Studies, and Interpretation Theory. Reed's curriculum might seem narrower to students today, but it was more familiar to me as a prospective parent.

Good for Reed, I thought – and good for Swarthmore. Both are avatars of academic excellence and the joy of learning. In 1970, they were lumped with Antioch as a triad of "distinctive colleges" in a book by Burton R. Clark¹; and whatever the problems afflicting the liberal arts, there remain not just two or three but scores of "distinctive" liberal arts colleges and universities, and many of them have gained in distinction.

Recognizing this disparity between two viable models of liberal education, triggered by the sense of déjà vu at Reed, also prompted a series of interlacing questions about liberal education: What do we mean by the "liberal arts"? What is "critical thinking"? And how are they related? I blame it all on my son.

I might have saved myself some trouble had I begun with an essay by Reed's former president, John R. Kroger, titled "What is a Successful College Education?"²

¹ Clark, Burton R., *The Distinctive College: Antioch, Reed, and Swarthmore*. Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1970.

²Kroger, John R., "What is a Successful College Education?" retrieved from: http://www.reed.edu/reed_magazine/march2016/articles/features/what-is-a-successful-college-education/what-is-a-successful-college-education1.html.

Kroger lays out a broad case for liberal learning, citing five basic goals: “learning a set of core intellectual capabilities,” “developing character,” “pursuing rich positive experiences,” “self-definition,” and “preparing for the future.”

All of these are important, but I’ve been focusing on the first part of the liberal arts project: the “core intellectual capabilities” that revolve around the elusive, but not inscrutable, concept of critical thinking. Louis Menand got it right in his book “The Marketplace of Ideas”: “Liberal education is not reducible to a specific body of knowledge. It’s a background mentality, a way of thinking, a kind of intellectual DNA that informs work in every specialized area of inquiry. This DNA is what colleges try to transmit.”

If college only made us better thinkers and nothing else, the experience would be a successful one. It isn’t the only thing they do; but it’s by far the most important thing. And that transformative potential certainly isn’t limited to prototypically small, bucolic, residential liberal arts institutions.

So, after years of reading and reflecting on critical thinking and the liberal arts, searching for that DNA, what hidden secrets have I discovered? None, I suspect, that contradict Kroger’s eloquent manifesto. I’m sketching the wheel of liberal learning, not reinventing it. Here are a few of the organizing ideas that I believe are at its core.

1) Triangular Citizenship

All learning is valuable to the student and to his or her community, whether in the STEM disciplines (science, technology, engineering and math), the traditional liberal arts, or vocational or pre-professional training, because all learning empowers people to be citizens. And by benefiting individuals, education in all its forms also benefits society at large. But citizenship – as the site of interface between individuals and society – is a broad concept, and (simplifying a bit) roughly triangular. Its three main forms are civic, economic, and cultural.

The civic dimension includes voting, serving, volunteering, talking, arguing: everything we normally associate with political participation and community engagement. Economic citizenship is whatever we do in a factory, field, office, boardroom, or garage that contributes both to society and to our own well-being. And cultural citizenship means joining the weave of conversations that connect us to communities through the arts and popular culture. All forms of education promote one or more of these; what is unique about the liberal arts is that they promote all three.

2) The Primacy of Language and Thinking

Liberal learning – or critical inquiry, as it’s sometimes called – begins with language and language-dependent symbolic systems, as the main currency of thought. Add metacognition – the capacity to self-interrogate – and stir. Metacognition involves using language reflexively to examine itself (my words, yours, or someone else’s) and thus to share, extend, criticize, and clarify meaning. This enables us, among other things, to make clear and useful distinctions and connections – the molecular building blocks of thought – and to identify areas of factual agreement and moral consensus, as well as areas of uncertainty or contestability.

Originally based on the classical Trivium (grammar, rhetoric and logic) and the medieval Quadrivium (music, astronomy, arithmetic, and geometry), liberal education has greatly increased its scope since then, as fruitful new areas of inquiry have emerged both beyond and between the traditional disciplines. But as William Deresiewicz succinctly remarks: “The first thing that college is for is to teach you to think.” And that means thinking at a higher level: thinking more clearly, flexibly, broadly, and deeply.

One can learn to do this while studying ancient scrolls, demand curves, fruit flies, or queer theory. It can happen at Reed, Swarthmore, the Ivies, or at any state college or university – or the nearest public library. Whatever the locale, we become engaged citizens by improving our cognitive maps based on the panoramic view from the ivory tower – and the common mental exercise of climbing the tower. (And it never hurts to get off campus once in a while). When done with economy and rigor, we can call this reasoning process critical thinking. The bottom line: *How* we know is more important than *what* we know.

3) *The Partial Debt to Philosophy*

The main wellspring of the liberal arts is philosophy, the first Western attempt at systematic thinking. It begins not with the Trivium but with the Greeks. Philosophy is mainly thinking about thinking, and it therefore involves such basic concepts as knowledge, meaning, truth, causality, reason, and value. Thus, thinking rigorously and critically in any discipline means returning to the source and thinking more philosophically.

But not to worry: it doesn't have to be Euro-centric, and we don't have to become philosophers to be rigorous thinkers. For one thing, philosophers deal with a range of questions that don't particularly concern most of the rest of us. And conversely, philosophy isn't a substitute for understanding the world in more concrete terms: learning, for example, how to look at works of art, read the night sky, understand the genome or biodiversity, grapple with the uncertainties of history, or assess the structures and needs of individuals or communities.

But there's a more basic reason why we can be critical thinkers without studying philosophy: we're already philosophers, simply because we think with language. Whenever we communicate we use abstractions, commute between generalities and particulars, negotiate definitions and broader meanings, make distinctions and connections, and (at a higher level of critical inquiry) look for the connections that our distinctions obscure, and vice versa. These are quintessential philosophic tasks.

That's why the basic concepts of classical philosophy animate all the disciplines. Critical thinking is essentially philosophical, and it's all the philosophy one needs. By training us to be more sophisticated thinkers, liberal education makes us better philosophers.

4) *The Varieties of Critical Thinking*

Defining critical thinking isn't easy, however. Like the "liberal arts", "citizenship", and not a few other big concepts, critical thinking is important but vague and hard to pin down. In fact, it's a cluster of ideas that share what Ludwig Wittgenstein called a "family resemblance." They aren't reducible to a single essence but reflect in different ways a set of common attributes.

Systematic thinking begins with formal logic; but for most of us, logic is a wide safety net for avoiding contradictions in propositions and arguments. Critical thinking is more commonly associated with "informal logic," which is based not on a finite set of deductive rules, but on looser guidelines for making sound arguments and assertions, and for generating inductive knowledge (generalizations, probabilities, predictions, hypotheses). Informal logic thus involves types of rigor that go beyond formal logic, including attention to the myriad ways we fall short as thinkers because of our inherent susceptibility to biases, blind spots, delusions, and fallacies.

Mastery of formal and informal logic still isn't enough, however. In fact, most of us intuitively learn to stay within these guiderails of thought, much as we assimilate the rules of grammar, not through memorization or catechisms but by practice as we speak, read, write, and learn.

What remains to be learned – and lies at the heart of college-level critical inquiry – is rigorous analytic thinking: how to make those reciprocal distinctions and connections that fully excavate the meanings of things (words, objects, processes, relationships, systems, events, institutions, communities, etc.), and establish their environment or context. It's the philosophical toolkit that helps us become truly critical thinkers, regardless of what we study, and well-rounded "triangular" citizens.

Analytic thinking thus involves two related techniques (among others). One is thinking *systematically*, i.e., according to the formal rules and informal guidelines that make individual and shared understanding possible. The other is thinking *systemically*: seeing how different things are both distinct and related, whether as parts and wholes, causes and effects, or by sharing attributes within natural, social, linguistic, or conceptual ecologies.

Analytic thinking is both systematic and systemic. It's the bridge between more basic forms of critical thinking and philosophy – and the apex of liberal learning. College is about getting to and across that bridge.

I realize that, in focusing on the intellectual side, I haven't begun to exhaust the meaning or importance of liberal education. Breadth of knowledge and a degree of specialization are also important – as is becoming more well-rounded and engaged. Maybe Swarthmore did more to develop my thinking, such as it is, than my character or life plan. But John Kroger comes as close as anyone to filling out the “family resemblance” picture of the liberal arts.

Had I managed to shed my East Coast roots and attend Reed, like my son, I might have discovered “positive experiences” and “self-definition” in Oregon instead of Pennsylvania – and gotten a lot more skiing in. It might even have improved my character. But then, I got all the education I could handle. Besides, what did I know when I made the choice? I was not yet a critical thinker.

Jeffrey Scheuer is the author of two books on media and politics, and the forthcoming work Inside the Liberal Arts: Critical Thinking and Citizenship (Rowman and Littlefield, 2023). His website is at www.jeffreyscheuer.com.