THE USEFULNESS OF USELESSNESS

T. Kaori Kitao, William R. Kenan, Jr., Professor of Art History, Swarthmore College

Keynote Address, The 1999 Institute for the Academic Advancement of Youth's Odyssey at Swarthmore College, 27 March 1999

1.

If I may, I would like to start with one of Aesop's Fables.

Here is a familiar one. A hungry Dog finds a large juicy bone, carries it off in his mouth, and comes to a bridge. He sees in the water his own reflection which he takes for another dog with even a bigger bone. He snarls at it and gives him a bark. But at that moment the bone falls into the water and vanishes, and he goes off hungrier than before. Then, there is the moral. When you grasp at the shadow you lose the substance.

In Aesop's fables there are always the story and the moral. This raises an interesting question. We ponder which is the substance, the story or the moral, and which is the shadow.

It may be tempting to think that the moral is the substance because it is the point of the story, after all. It's the message. It may seem to matter more because it is a lesson and it is good for you. The story is just an embellishment that makes the moral more palatable. A fable is perhaps a moral with frills.

The moral, however, doesn't have a story. The story, on the other hand, contains the moral for those who find it. The moral need not be stated; the fable implies it. The fable is complete without spelling it out. So, the story is the substance, after all, and the moral its shadow. The story is what makes reading the fables worth the trouble. A story well told is always interesting. A collection of morals does not make a good reading.

A fable, in short, is a metaphor. We delight in the animals acting out human foibles.

We like the insight into their characters and their misadventures. It is the story that engages our imagination and feeds our creative mind.

This, I claim, is how college education also works. The studies we study in college courses are of value less for their nominal subject -- physics, Latin, economics, or art history -- but more for the process of learning we experience while studying those subjects. The substance lies more in the studying done than in the lessons the courses teach.

2.

In these decades it has become easy to forget this simple but important fact. Pragmatism prevails today in our notion of college education.

It is often repeated that you need a college education to get a decent job. This is true.

No one denies it. But it is not true that the mission of the college is therefore to prepare young people for a career. Colleges do that anyway but a lot more besides. It is easy to forget that "lot more." Students and parents alike in their anxiety sometimes expect nothing else of the college education.

This bias comes to the fore when it is time for students in their sophomore year to declare their major [-- the body of courses students concentrate on in the last two years of years of college]. When they go home for Christmas preceding that, a domestic tremor often starts around the student's declared major. Here are some examples:

"Philosophy, eh? You gonna be a philosopher?"

"If you are interested in history, why don't you major in political science, instead?"

["What are you going to do with linguistics?"]

"You want to major in Greek? Well, if you want to be a professor."

["So, you are going to do Chinese? You can be a Confucian scholar, I suppose.

Isn't French more useful, though?"]

"Why don't you major in something else and do music on the side?"

Subjects in the humanities in general cause most anxiety. Sciences strike the parents as being somehow more serious and more useful, and they elicit less suspicion. Economics sounds useful enough though not much more so than physics, in fact. Dance and Theater are risky business. But art is the worst of all; it is almost threatening.

Art is a crowning achievement in any civilization. No one denies that art is a noble aspiration, no less than religion and philosophy and statesmanship. Yet parents are often dismayed, if not horrified, when they discover that their child in college is going to study art seriously. [They try frantically to illuminate the child by arguing that art leads to no career, that it makes a good pastime but lands no jobs, that it may be a good thing to pursue as an extracurricular activity, and that there must surely be something more serious she or he might consider. The parents' anxiety is understandable in view of the stupendous cost of education nowadays. With the tuition for four years of college education you can buy a house -- well, a small, a somewhat run-down house, perhaps in a less desirable part of the town.]

So, understandably, parents are concerned that the [stupendous amount of] money spent on college education [is well spent, and that means it] leads to a promise of success in the future of the child.

Now, success is like cleanliness; everyone has a different idea. For some, it means getting rich or famous, or preferably both. This is a comforting idea, and it is privately shared even by those who publicly renounce the idea. For others, success is an accomplishment or mastery. To succeed is to "attain a desired end," as Webster puts it. It is doing a good job of what you set out to do as a lawyer, pilot, carpenter, fashion model, detective, statesman, artist, astrophysicist, or whatever.

Then, there is still another kind of success, success of the third kind. That is the sense of fulfillment. But it is an internal satisfaction rather than an actual accomplishment. It is feeling good about something you do, whether or not you do a good job of it. You just love doing it intensely, unconditionally: a deep satisfaction -- call it happiness, if you will. Ideally, of course, we all want to have, especially for our children, all the three successes in one package: feeling good about being accomplished and acquiring thereby wealth and fame.

But if you can't have all, fulfillment counts the most in the long run because it rewards our life

rather than just providing us with a career and a status.

There are enlightened parents, of course, who might enthusiastically tell their child:

"You're going to major in art? That's great; go for it. If that makes you happy, we are happy." Many parents

are nevertheless convinced that studying art in no way prepares a young person for success of *any* kind and they are almost as dubious about philosophy, literatures, music, dance, and classics -- the course in the Humanities.

3.

College education, in the Humanities and Sciences alike, does well in preparing students for their chosen careers. The roster of alumni is our evidence. They go into a wide variety of fields. Many are accomplished. Some of them are even rich and famous and happy, too. But there is something very interesting in their preparations. Contrary to the prevalent assumption that students who major in a particular subject, go into that field, well-prepared, a good number of them don't. A philosophy major doesn't necessarily become philosophers; he may end up being a great circus clown. An art major becomes an investment banker -- successfully. A linguistics major becomes a film producer. There are, in fact, as many who go into the fields they didn't major in as there are those who go into the fields of their major.

One explanation for this is perhaps that the major consists, normally, only of 8 courses

out of 32 courses a students need to graduate. Students spend most of their college education doing courses outside the major -- at least twenty -- courses other than those directed toward their possible career. This is a paradox. It is as though college education successfully prepares students for their chosen careers in spite of the majors they select, not because of them.

So, it makes us wonder. Those elective courses that populate their curriculum have obviously a lot to contribute, even those Humanities courses, like those in art, literatures, music, dance, classics, and religion, which seem to have little values in career preparation.

Diversification, obviously, are doing a lot of good for the students. The question, then, is what is it that students learn in these courses non-career-oriented courses.

We can argue, of course, that reading Shakespeare is good in itself. Everybody should know Shakespeare. Everybody should know something about Nietzsche -- more than just spell such a name right. But how about Hesiod and Dante, the Upanishads, Chaucer in Middle English and Borges in Spanish? What do students learn in a course in which they study a hundred paintings by thirty painters from 17th century Holland? [What do they learn listening to Mozart's Operas a semester long? Trying to write verses in the poetry workshop?] What is the value of stretching their limbs and jumping up and down in the Dance Studio? [Daubing paint all over the place?]

This is education in culture, some would say. It is good to be culturally educated. But why? How does it help a student achieve success? To pursue this line of thought further , we must try to see what exactly happens in these courses.

If I may generalize, what students learn in these courses -- and in any college course, in fact -- is to some extent the subject in itself. But, much more importantly, [indeed most importantly,] they learn how to think through the specialized subject.

It is a truism [in teaching of art], for example, that art cannot be taught. [It is] only technique [that] can be taught. The teacher may demonstrate and offer correctives. But she cannot instill creativity in the student. A good teacher can inspire the student to bring it out and develop it. More familiarly, a piano teacher can show you how to play but cannot make you play the way a piece should or might be played. "No, not that way, this way. Try again." And, you try and try, and the teacher at some point, hopefully, says: "That's it. That's beautiful."

That art cannot be taught is not a very promising proposition. But in the process of trial and error, something is passed on from the teacher to the student; and that is a particular way of thinking -- thinking with the eye in the case of art, the way of thinking unique to each discipline whatever that may be. In this process of

teaching, there is a meeting of the minds. The student assimilates -- almost unawares -- the way the mind of the teacher works. Talented students often produce good products on their own with little help from us -- be it a painting or an academic thesis. But all students, talented or untalented, learn the way the teacher's mind works, and when they internalize it, they make it their own, and when it becomes their own,

they curiously forget that it had to be learned. A philosophy teacher was asked what is the value of taking a philosophy course, and the student was told he'll know it later when he talks with someone who hadn't taken it. This is true not only of the courses in art, music, theater, and dance. It holds true of the courses in literatures, history, religion, *and* even the sciences.]

Years after graduation, students may forget the subject -- the facts and details they studied so hard for their exams unless they continue refreshing them by having gone into that field. But the way of thinking they assimilated stays. It is not surprising, therefore, that astute students often take a course venturing into a subject unfamiliar to them only because of the reputation of the professor who teaches it. Then, they discover to their own surprise that they came to love the subject in which they had previously had little interest. When the students have successfully assimilated a certain way of thinking, they also discover that they have learned how to learn, and suddenly learning more becomes much less taxing, much easier, even very satisfying.

The knowledge you learn about the subject of the course is its nominal benefit. It is like the stated moral at the end of a fable. The real substance of learning is something more subtle and complex and profound, which cannot be easily summarized -- like the story itself. It has to be experienced, and it is as an experience that becomes an integral part of the person.

4.

Learning how to learn by learning how to think makes a well-educated person. If that is all it does, it still is of value. But learning how to learn not only expands the mind. It also gives you a lifelong asset. Once you have it, like it or not, it stays with you for the rest of your life. That's the true value and reward that the college courses have to offer, even though sometimes, perhaps most of the time, they may appear to be lacking in practicability, in usefulness.

The humanities is in crisis today, however. It is the economic pressure that makes colleges sensitive to competition among themselves in order to draw potential applicants. With more students more anxious about their careers, colleges are sometimes succumbing to the marketing pressure much too easily. Sensitive to class enrollment figures, professors and administrators alike are constantly tempted to neglect courses in the peripheries of current student interests in favor of more [fashionable or] fashionably relevant courses [on the one hand, and on the other] or more seemingly useful courses.

Swarthmore is a Liberal Arts college. By definition, however, liberal arts education is impractical. The notion was developed in the Middle Ages, which had trivium and quadrivium that constituted *artes liberales.* These were the subjects of learning for free men, and they were opposed to a*rtes mechanicae,* which had to do with vocation in trades and crafts. The trivium were grammar, logic, and rhetoric -- all serving the thinking mind, and the quadrivium, pursued after completing the trivium, were arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music, all concerned with numbers and abstract thinking.

Liberal Arts had to do with the general discipline of the mind and had no immediate useful application. Colleges that specialize in training for a career are vocational colleges and technical schools, where courses focus on the proficiency in the paticular work you are trained for whatever that may be: carpentry, nursing, accounting, stenography, design, karate, etc. Or, on the other end of the totem pole, graduate schools are also career-directed -- those in medicine, law, architecture, engineering, journalism, social work, business, criminology, etc.

It is not, then, only the subject in the Humanities but also those in Sciences, that are non-utilitarian in character in these Liberal Arts colleges. Students who major in physics don't necessarily become physicists;

only some do. Only some who major in sociology become sociologists. Those who go into Economics are told that they are not going to be trained to be economists here but to learn to think like economists.

As our students near graduation and start being interviewed for a job after four years of college, many discover in dismay that they have no skill to sell. After all, the major consists of only eight courses. Eight courses in English literature only scratch the surface of the field. Eight courses in chemistry hardly make a chemist; eight courses in a foreign language are far from adequate to make you an interpreter, unless you were brought up bilingually before coming to college. To get into the profession, the students have to go to a graduate school,

and expend more of their parents' diminishing fund or get a fat loan.

But graduating students are often unaware, until much later, of the valuable skill they made their own, a thinking mind, their inexhaustible capacity to think on their own feet -- to invent ideas, organize them, draw deductions, and make articulate proposals -- in short, to engage their imagination and feed their creativity. In this way they are more resourceful than her or his rivals without Liberal Arts education. It gives them an edge, and that edge is the ability to think well. So, they advance more quickly in their chosen career, whatever it is; they succeed better.

And, believe it or not, all this comes from having learned to learn well in those courses which may have seemed and probably were rather useless. Professionalism in graduate education is achieved by channeling efforts into one special field at the exclusion of others, by which high proficiency is assured, and it makes sense that this takes place only after having learned to think well.

Liberal arts education forces students to diversify their efforts and inculcates in them a feeling for a broad horizon and a panoramic view. For this reason, they not only learn to think well but gain confidence that they can learn whatever there is to learn whenever a need arises. So, they can quickly adapt to changing situations, learn to adopt new jobs, and maneuver through life inventively.

Professionalism may prepare us for a career but Liberal Arts education prepares us for a resourceful life. In short, Liberal Arts education liberates us.

I don't just mean that it makes a knowledgeable person, a person who can recite a Shakespeare sonnet, a person who, watching a ballet, can recognize a grand jetée pas de chat,

or a person who can debate medieval thinkers, Boethius vs. Anselm. I mean much deeper than that. I mean a certain predisposition that urges a person to be inquisitive, widely interested in a variety of subjects, old and new, those in fashion and out of fashion, those of different cultures, including your own. I mean developing a multi-layered personality, a person who is infinitely interesting.

You can still worry about a career if you must. But ultimately the most profound reward of Liberal Arts education is four years of free inquiry, the privilege and joy of learning

by being expansive, venturesome, inquisitive and inventive, and even a little irresponsible in a positive way without worrying about a career.

And the experience of learning joyfully becomes ingrained in the person so that learning becomes a habit that not only continues but deepens through our lifetime, whatever career we choose to be in, and with each learning our life becomes richer and more fulfilled. Thus we achieve success of the third kind. That's the true gift of a good humanistic college education.

But if you chase the shadow, you lose sight of the substance. Thank you.

03.27.99; rev. 05.10.99
©Kitao 1999