



## College Quarterly

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### Recouping the Value of the Humanities

by *Nirmal Dass*

In an increasingly corporate approach to education, which sees education as the training of future workers, how do we answer this simple question: “Why should I read a story, a poem, or a novel?” Reading and analyzing literature does not train anyone for the job market—therefore we have de-emphasized the role and function of the Humanities. So, an English course now means writing effective memos and letters and making sure one can write a decent enough sentence in order to service the workplace. This has meant that the Humanities have been buffeted, assailed and cut back in order to save money—because they are seen as the least important in the grand scheme of corporate education, or worse as being utterly useless and a complete waste of time. There really is no use reading poetry, if the aim is to produce effective workers. Good workers need to work, not think.

The corporate approach to education is groundless (because a large portion of education in the past, and even still, has always been firmly grounded in the Humanities). So, why this continuous assault on the Humanities? Because educational institutions have bought into the myth that education and the corporate world are hand-in-glove. But by assailing and dismantling the Humanities, have we not also begun the process of removing the very foundation of liberal democracy—it has not been the corporate world that provided us with ideas which we supposedly cherish—ideas, such as, freedom, personal liberty, human dignity, democracy, and equality.

When we say we are training students for the workplace—what is it that we are doing? Are you giving them skills that they can translate into a paycheck? Are we providing them with information that they can manage effectively in order to function smoothly in the corporate world? Or are we churning out products from our schools, colleges and universities, namely, compliant workers who will not have the ability to think clearly, nor will they have the ability to make rational judgments, or discern the difference between what is good and what is bad, nor will they have confidence in their own ideas? And how does education go if students do not acquire confidence of mind?

Should we not think of education, rather than training? That is, providing students with ideas that will make them not good workers, but good human beings, so that they can build and maintain a good society, in which they can live a happy and meaningful life—not merely a productive life?

It used to be that the Humanities were understood to provide

models of goodness, which could be deployed by a new generation of people who would enter society and be fully trained in maintaining society's inherent goodness. Humanities were the handmaid of civilization. Centers of higher learning were precisely that—places where ideas were taught, discussed and found either worthy or useless. This used to be the strength of the Humanities—for the Humanities was the science (by which I mean knowledge) of being a good human being. And this “science” was located in things such as poems, novels, stories, plays, and good films. And it was understood that good human beings ensured a good society.

But because of the corporate approach we have begun to associate goodness with wealth generation. If we look at humanistic education of the past, it was assumed that a liberal education created an individual fully conversant with the values of society who could therefore enter into any work situation and do well—because he/she was firmly grounded in goodness. Now, we train students to be better workers. And what is the result—we are sending into society people that are more often than not barely literate. And worse, people who are so used to Googling for answers that they have thoroughly learned to seek out figures of authority because they have no confidence in their own minds, in their own ability to come up with the “right answer.” In my classes, I always remind my students—that an uneducated mind is a mind that is easily hijacked. And a mind that is only given training to do repetitive work (and let's face it, all labor is repetitive) is usually quite willing to be hijacked. Does not Google hijack our students' minds each time they are asked to write something outside the classroom?

What kind of a society are we creating? Will it be a place that we would want to live in? Where the values of the marketplace alone matter—and nothing else?

It was Plato who best described what a human being was, in *The Republic*. He said that a person is comprised of three aspects. First there is the level of the appetites, where people only worry about sustaining the needs of the body. Second there is the will which are the emotions, which are continually reacting to outside influences. Third and last, there is reason, which is the world of ideas. Plato suggests, rather convincingly, that the first two aspects are a lower way of living where we are driven by blind passions and urges and desires, which we seek to fulfill, come what may. But when we live according to the dictates of reason, we find happiness and by being happy we make those around us happy, which leads to a good society. Or as Plato would put it: “if I am happy, I am just, and if I am just, then I am happy.” This concept of justice, or goodness, is the very ground of a good society. But in order to live according to reason—in order to be just—we must learn how to deal with ideas, and we must learn how to judge between good ideas and bad ideas. Training does not do that—a worker has no need for ideas., because a worker must only be robotic. Training can only address the appetitive and emotional aspects of human beings. Education, on the

other hand, gives us ideas—and it is ideas that make us happy—not things. This used to be what was meant by living a meaningful life.

We must once again begin teaching what it truly means to be fully and happily human. For what is a human being who cannot imagine? What is a human being who cannot understand what makes him/her truly happy? What is a human being who cannot know what his/her role is in society? What is a human being who cannot know how to dream?

For these reasons, we must once more strongly commit ourselves to education, which alone can guarantee the things we value, but which we take for granted. Without the Humanities can we guarantee freedom, equality and democracy? If the corporate model is all we offer at college, what kind of people are we placing in society? If education simply means training to get a job, then do we really understand how the liberal democratic society works—which ensures that there are indeed jobs to be had?

Why are we frittering away the very capital of our good life by blindly declaring the Humanities have no value? Let us not usher in a new Dark Age.

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