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**Transformative Possibilities:
Liberal Education at Grand Valley State University**
Judy D. Whipps

(At GVSU) liberal education begins with encountering the great ideas of diverse traditions in the humanities, the visual and performing arts, the natural and social sciences, and mathematics, and is an essential part of all of our professional programs. GVSU Values Statement, Strategic Plan 2010-2015

The readings in the book *Reflect, Connect, Engage* (2013) offer both an invitation and a challenge as they open the reader to possibilities of transformation. By engaging these voices you are welcomed into a community of learners that includes all of us at Grand Valley, students, faculty and staff, all of us learning from each other as well as from work of great thinkers and activists. GVSU is founded on the practice of liberal education -- an education that holds the possibility of permanently enriching our lives, assisting in the development of the capacities and skills necessary for our vocations, and preparing us for thoughtful participation in our democracy. Like justice, democracy, or freedom, liberal education is one of those concepts that calls us to higher thinking and cannot be defined easily. Yet it must be understood and claimed individually if we are to get the full value from the experience.

Grand Valley has long identified itself as an institution that combines the best of a liberal education with professional programs. When it opened its doors in 1963 to an incoming class of 226 students, Grand Valley's founders were enacting a vision of "reinvigorating undergraduate education and restoring the ideal of liberal arts curriculum, education for its own sake" while also preparing students for professional careers.¹ Historically, there has been a tension between these two goals in higher education, but Grand Valley has embraced the vision of liberal education that is the best foundation for life as well as any profession. This is a vision that hopefully permeates all of our learning. Since we are all called upon to practice liberal education, it's important that as an inclusive community of learners we understand what we mean by this ideal. This volume contains essays that can help us think about liberal education in our own educational experiences, as they point to ways that each of us can claim the full benefit of a liberal education.

As the title of this volume points out, practicing liberal education means practicing a discipline of reflection, making connections and engaging with the larger world. On what do we reflect, and with what do we engage? We practice reflecting by thinking with the great minds of the past, such as with Plato, Aristotle, Lao Tzu, and Chuang Tzu. The discipline of philosophy is centered in careful reading of classical texts, questioning our assumptions and our lives with the ideas that they present. Engaged reading is essential, as Rowe and Anton point out here. We also practice reflection by asking critical questions of our culture and by listening carefully to diverse ideas that may be different than our own. We practice engagement by having dialogue with each other, by participating in campus and community events, by testing out ideas in practice.

Our global society is changing quickly, becoming more interdependent politically and

socially, while the Michigan economy continues to move even more surely away from an industrial economy to a knowledge/creative economy. As a result, community leaders and faculty and students struggle to understand what education is the best preparation for the future. Students and their parents used to expect that a college diploma would provide the entry-document for a well-paid profession. It can still be the path to professional life, but we need to more intentional about how we develop the intellectual skills of creativity, flexibility, critical reasoning, and cultural understanding. As Martha Nussbaum points out in this volume, these intellectual skills intentionally developed in a liberal education are essential for global engagement.

In a 2013 national survey of employers by the Association of American Colleges and Universities the capacity for *innovation* was employers' number one priority when hiring college graduates. In fact, 95% said "they give hiring preference to college graduates with skills that will enable them to contribute to innovation in the workplace."² This new emphasis on innovation is likely in acknowledgement of the complex issues, or as Danielle Lake says, the "wicked problems" facing our contemporary world and workplace. The term "wicked problems" is not used in the moral sense, but rather to describe problems or issues that "are highly resistant to resolution through any of the existing modes of problem-solving."³ There are many of these difficult "wicked" issues in our world today – ones that will require the best innovative thinking from our college graduates. One the ways to develop innovative skills is to practice integrative learning, connecting knowledge and skills from a variety of disciplines and sources, as well as bringing new knowledge to a variety of practical settings. We know that innovation requires being open to diverse and sometime contradictory ideas and college is a good place to begin to practice this.

Nearly all employers surveyed by AACU (93%) also agreed that "a candidate's demonstrated capacity to think critically, communicate clearly, and solve complex problems is more important than their undergraduate major."⁴ These are skills that are the focus of the GVSU general education program, which means that general education courses may be the most important courses we offer. Hopefully, in the process of engaging in this curriculum, we learn how to learn, have a deeper understanding of our own and other cultures, and perhaps most importantly learn intellectual reflection, critical thinking, and self-examination.

Underlying the readings of this book is the belief that there is a connection between developing the inner life, the reflective life of the mind, and public action. Self-knowledge is at the core of effective action; taking time to examine and to reflect on one's core values builds a foundation for leadership. As Deresiewicz points out in his essay "Solitude and Leadership," leadership requires people who can think for themselves especially in stressful times, and perhaps surprisingly, given his military audience, he recommends literature as a way of developing those reflective capacities.

Liberal arts education has a long history as a transformative path for personal growth, and some of the many forms that this path has take are reflected in readings. We can find the foundations of the liberal arts in Plato's educational system described in *The Republic*, and in the writings of the Stoics, such as Seneca, Epictetus and Cicero.⁵ Other transformative ideals of education were expressed by classical Eastern philosophers such as Confucius and Lao Tzu. We know from

history that the concept and practice of liberal education must be recreated anew in each generation, and in each individual's life. The educational system proposed by Plato was a path of enlightenment out of the cave of ignorance, symbolized in "The Allegory of the Cave." Plato's decades-long program of personal growth was intended as preparation for political leadership. For the term "liberal," as in liberal education, comes from *liberalis*, the Latin for "free," as liberal education has been understood to be an education for freedom. As many can attest, the process of liberal education can be liberating. "Liberal Arts" has also held a different historical definition, as the education of those who were "free" from manual labor, who the leisure to pursue intellectual traditions. In the early to mid-twentieth century liberal education became the gold standard for all American college students, influenced by people such as Robert Hutchins, who claimed that "The best education for the best of us is the best education for all of us."⁶ In the tradition of Hutchins and VanDoren, students were liberally educated by encountering the original texts of thinkers who shaped Western culture, and the curriculum for a liberal education was a careful readings of the "Great Books of Western Civilization."

Students in the mid-to-late twentieth century rightly critiqued the privileged exclusivity of the Great Books canon, and demanded more relevant and inclusive course materials. In the recent decades, feminist and cultural theorists have significantly changed our thinking about liberal education. As a result, we have engaged in the work of decentering Western European knowledge (with its Greek and Latin roots) from a position of power, removing it as the only standard for college learning. The result has been an increasing acknowledgement of the necessarily multiple perspectives for knowing.

It is impossible to be truly educated for contemporary life without a deep understanding of the importance of these diverse perspectives. Diversity means more than representation, more than different types of people being at the table. The multiple perspectives must be heard at the table, they must matter in the decision-making process. As a professor and a learner, the shock of coming to see that some of my ideas are narrow or that I haven't accounted for some important viewpoint is unsettling and can be disorienting. But that's one of the things I appreciate most about being in a community such as this where learning is continual. The unsettlements that occur as a result of differences can be spurs for the creation of something innovative and new. We now know from research evidence that diversity results in better learning, more complex thinking, and better preparation for future vocational work and democratic citizenship.⁷ Understanding American and global cultures requires understanding the ways that multiple categories of privilege act to reinforce traditional hierarchies. As Wildman and Davis point out, privilege is normalized or made invisible in the language that we use, as well as in legal and cultural institutions. Identifying these systems of privilege is a necessary step in any movement toward a more just and inclusive culture, and doing so requires excellent critical thinking skills and the ability of compassionate imagination. Like other aspects of liberal education, understanding diversity also requires intentional openness, careful listening and action, inside and out of the classroom.

Liberal education is and has always been preparation for community engagement. Earl Shorris talks about liberal education as the process of "coming into possession of the faculty of reflection and the skills of politics."⁸ He interprets politics broadly, as including all aspects of our public life, the lives we share together. Reasoning together about a text in a classroom is

preparation for democratic citizenship, a pathway into the public dialogue that is so important to our common lives. As Elizabeth Minnich has said, liberal education institutions need to "continue to live up to our claim that liberal education has as one of its fundamental purposes preparing students for lives as active citizens in a country still aspiring to democracy within an increasingly interdependent but hardly yet equitable world."⁹ While it has certainly not been fully upheld in our history, the grand experiment of American democracy – that of freedom and equality for all citizens – remains the premise that should ground our public lives. Without critical and reflective citizens, our democracy has no hope of continuing. This is one of the reasons that our government pays a portion of the costs of education at a state university such as ours. Yet how often in our courses do we consider how we will repay those obligations?

A quote attributed to Mohandas Gandhi lists the "The Seven Blunders of the World that Lead to Violence" as:

Wealth without work
Pleasure without conscience
Knowledge without character
Commerce without morality
Science without humanity
Worship without sacrifice
Politics without principle

His grandson, Arun, added another: Rights without responsibility.¹⁰

As the above list so clearly points out, virtues require something from us. Many of us take liberal education for granted; I've often heard Grand Valley students complain about required general education courses, eager as they are to get on to their more specialized professional coursework. Growing up in a country where obtaining a liberal education is often seen as a right instead of a privilege, we sometimes can't see the unique possibilities it offers. It's helpful sometimes to listen to others who had to fight for this privilege. Many of those students understood the transformation that is inherent in the tradition, and realized that it contained a call for active community involvement. One example can be seen in the life of Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh, who left his Buddhist college after the staff rejected his suggestions that more liberal arts (philosophy, literature and language) be included in their education. He later founded the Engaged Buddhist movement committed to social justice activism.¹¹ Jane Addams is another example, as one of the first generation of women able to attend college in nineteenth-century America. She said that as a result of encountering subjects such as philosophy and literature, she and other young women came "to recognize a stress of social obligation which her family did not in the least anticipate" after which the young woman often felt "under an impulse to act her part as a citizen of the world."¹² Addams, like others in her generation, knew that these ideas held a challenge to action.

Liberal education cannot be done to someone; certainly not everyone who gets a degree at GVSU will actually be liberally educated. In Paulo Freire's terms, authentic liberation cannot be merely deposited into anyone's life -- it cannot even be given as a gift. Each of us

must undertake to find it ourselves, in our own way. Likewise, there is no method of teaching that can foster individual growth without our engagement in the process. Unless we chose to be engaged in the process, and unless we bring ourselves into the questioning process, the facts and methods learned will remain external to who we are, and much of the potential of a college education will be missed. This means that a liberal education is an individual responsibility.

My yoga teacher talked about having the "beginner's mind" when it comes to learning yoga. A "beginner's mind" means approaching the learning with humility, realizing how much we don't know, and with openness and intention to learn, engaging in the practice with full attention, body and mind. In the same way, it takes a certain attitude to really get the most out of a liberal education. Each of us must come with questions, being open to new ideas and skeptical of easy answers; we must test and investigate ideas, and most of all test oneself. As a learner, I must be willing to be changed by encountering great ideas -- not by merely accumulating facts from them, but by testing my own ideas and beliefs in light of those ideas. As a community, we must come into full conversation with these thinkers and what they have to tell us about the human condition. These ideas, taken seriously, enable us to draw closer to who we are at our very core.

However, full attention to learning can be challenging. Many GVSU students face the challenge of not enough time, often working full or part-time jobs in addition to heavy course loads. And the demands of digital media can easily fill up any possible spare moments. As one of my students once wrote earnestly in a paper, "students at GVSU don't have time to think." Unfortunately, she may have been right, if she meant that our students often don't have time for a reflective life. Knowing yourself, in Socratic terms, or developing what Shorris calls the "faculty of reflection" is one of the most valuable gifts we can give ourselves. With self-knowledge comes the ability to make better decisions about all aspects of our lives – such as who our friends and partners will be, what vocations will bring us joy, and what activities will deepen our spiritual and intellectual senses. So part of the choice that we have in college is to take the time to reflect, to allow time for self-knowing. GVSU offers an opportunity to experience ideas, to allow them to permeate who we are, to savor and reflect, to adopt new ideas and to discard those that don't work. We learn about ourselves by choosing to be in new and potentially disorienting situations – experiencing new ideas, new cultures, or traveling abroad. One of the goals of this volume is to make these choices more visible. If we don't know to expect this type of growth from education, it can only happen by chance discovery or personal insight.

Liberal education calls each of us into question. Not always directly, not necessarily by one's teachers, rather we are questioned by the text, by our culture with its persistent injustices, by current events, and by ideas past and present. Liberal education can change and enrich us. But we cannot stop at personal transformation. In the push and pull between self and world, we must prepare ourselves to look outward to affect our social and political worlds. This is the acknowledged value of liberal arts education that prepares us for a fully awake and vital life, as well as citizenship in a democracy and in a quickly changing world that needs liberally educated and caring leaders.

¹Anthony Travis, "Clash of Educational Philosophies" <http://www.gvsu.edu/gvhistory/> (Accessed 2009). This web address is no longer available. Similar statements can be found at the current site <http://gvsu.edu/anniversary/history-colleges-history-1958-1963-13.htm>. Note that in 1961 one of the planning groups for the new college formulated ten foundational principles for Grand Valley, the first of which was liberal education.

² For a detailed report on the employer survey see:

http://www.aacu.org/leap/documents/2013_EmployerSurvey.pdf

³ Valerie Brown, et al. *Tackling Wicked Problems: Through the Transdisciplinary Imagination* (Routledge, 2010), 62. As Danielle Lake has written, "Wicked problems confront us with high levels of uncertainty in situations where both action and inaction carry high-stakes. They are thus not amenable to final resolutions but cannot simply be ignored." In "Confronting Wicked Problems" *Integrative Pathways* (March 2013). Note also the Liberal Studies course on "Wicked Problems."

⁴ http://www.aacu.org/leap/documents/2013_EmployerSurvey.pdf

⁵ See Martha Nussbaum's *Cultivating Humanity* for a more thorough discussion of Stoic philosophy and liberal education. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).

⁶ This quotation comes from Hutchins' close friend Mortimer J. Adler, who attributes the quote to Hutchins. Mortimer Adler, *The Paideia Proposal: An Educational Manifesto*. (New York: Macmillan, 1982), 6.

⁷ For example, see Chapter Two, "Research Synthesis" in *Making Diversity Work on Campus: A Research-Based Perspectives*. Jeffery F. Milem, et al. (Washington D.C.: AAC&U, 2005).

⁸ Earl Shorris "On the Uses of a Liberal Education: As a Weapon in the Hands of the Restless Poor" originally published in *Harpers Magazine*, (September, 1997), 59. Essay reprinted in this text.

⁹ Elizabeth Kamarck Minnich. *Liberal Learning and the Arts of Connection for the New Academy* (Washington D.C.: AAC&U, 1995).

¹⁰ This oft-cited quote does not appear in any of Gandhi's writings, and there is no verification that he wrote it. The list first appeared in 1995 in an article about Gandhi's grandson, Arun, who lived with Mohandas Gandhi for eighteen months. According to this article, Gandhi gave this list to Arun the last time he saw him. *Christian Science Monitor*. (2/1/95).

¹¹ Marjorie Hope and James Young, ed. *The Struggle for Humanity: Agents of Non-Violent Change in a Violent World*. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1977), 193-94.

¹² Jane Addams. *Democracy and Social Ethics*, Edited with introduction by Charlene Haddock Seigfried. (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 40. Original publication by Macmillan in 1902.