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Liberal Arts With Fries

Oh, That I had a Hammer!

By Adam Foley

I saw a sign the other day that read: "I got my degree in liberal arts, would you like fries with that?" Implicit in this message is the assumption that a liberal arts education is impractical. Beneath this assumption, moreover, lurks an insidious and corrosive value judgment. This value judgment, being the very gospel of mediocrity, is the prejudice that the value of education is determined by its immediate practical or monetary rewards.

The liberal arts were devised as a curriculum of study fit for *liberi*, free persons. To the authors of the liberal arts curriculum, the assumption that professional or technical training is more valuable because it is more practical would not only have been barbarous, but slavish. Professional education trains one not for life and for the flowering of one's supreme spiritual potential, but rather for a career and for the accumulation of wealth, activities that Greco-Roman pedagogy considered slavish. A professional education is one fit for a slave. Therefore, I exhort everyone who sees education merely as a utensil for obtaining and consuming more goods to purge the universities and flee, as I did from the shackles of obligatory, secondary education.

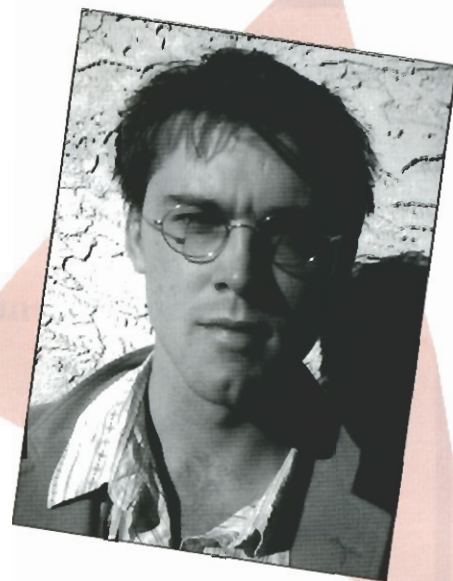
Since I was a high school drop-out, I was at a particular disadvantage applying to colleges. My means and family background are as modest as my ambition is strong. The obstacles that I have faced in putting myself in college were all but insurmountable. Having relied on nothing other than my own commitment and determination, I was awarded the Castellano scholarship, a full-ride to study Greek at John Carroll

University, the Jesuit school of Cleveland. Despite challenges that I have faced, I have never once looked at education as a means to some other end. No, Eruditio, that noble maiden, will not let herself be wooed so easily by the sweaty, groping hands of capitilizers and drones.

Desiring nothing more fervently than a classical education – the core of a liberal arts curriculum – I quickly found myself in the minority, the majority consisting of a mire of mediocrity and conformity: business majors. I cannot count how many times, having told someone that I am a classical languages major, that I have been asked: "But what will you do with that?" as though an education were like a hammer or some strange instrument with which one can obtain some result. Oh, would that I had a hammer to knock some sense into them! Grudgingly they fulfill the core requirements of a Jesuit education: philosophy, religious studies, a foreign language, all the while asking themselves, "But what am I going to do with this?"

As Mark Twain says...

Does it make sense to ask an athlete what she is going to do with her physical training? No, because she will tell you that your question misunderstands the nature of physical well-being as a good unto itself. Does it make sense then, to ask what can be done with an education? Education is a life-long journey that begins in infancy and never quite ends. It is, as Pindar says, the process of "becoming who you are." The university, as an educa-



tional institution, has as much to do with one's education as one permits it – in some cases, nothing. As Mark Twain says: "I never let school get in the way of my education." Admittedly, I will eventually have to submit to the constraints of specialization and of a career, and undoubtedly my education will play no small role in my career. Nevertheless, the relationship between my career choice and my education is incidental, not essential to who I am as a free, educated person.

Formerly, the university stood as the last bastion against an encroaching barbarism. But now that not only the demand for majors in professional and technical disciplines is rising, but also entirely questionable new majors – such as business and communications – have in the last two centuries been invented to meet this demand, the university itself seems the very mouthpiece and guardian of barbarism. Though we speak of the "liberal arts" on the one hand and "professional education" on the other hand, in truth, there are only the liberal arts and the servile arts. Or should I say, there is education proper and then there is apprenticeship. ■

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