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The Humanist Vocation

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A half-century ago, 14 percent of college degrees were awarded to people who majored in the humanities. Today, only 7 percent of graduates in the country are humanities majors. Even over the last decade alone, the number of incoming students at Harvard who express interest in becoming humanities majors has dropped by a third.

Most people give an economic explanation for this decline. Accounting majors get jobs. Lit majors don't. And there's obviously some truth to this. But the humanities are not only being bulldozed by an unforgiving job market. They are committing suicide because many humanists have lost faith in their own enterprise.

Back when the humanities were thriving, the leading figures had a clear definition of their mission and a fervent passion for it. The job of the humanities was to cultivate the human core, the part of a person we might call the spirit, the soul, or, in D.H. Lawrence's phrase, "the dark vast forest."

This was the most inward and elemental part of a person. When you go to a funeral and hear a eulogy, this is usually the part they are talking about. Eulogies aren't résumés. They describe the person's care, wisdom, truthfulness and courage. They describe the million little moral judgments that emanate from that inner region.

The humanist's job was to cultivate this ground — imposing intellectual order upon it, educating the emotions with art in order to refine it, offering inspiring exemplars to get it properly oriented.

Somewhere along the way, many people in the humanities lost faith in this uplifting mission. The humanities turned from an inward to an outward focus. They were less about the old notions of truth, beauty and goodness and more about political and social categories like race, class and gender. Liberal arts professors grew more moralistic when talking about politics but more tentative about private morality because they didn't want to offend anybody.

To the earnest 19-year-old with lofty dreams of self-understanding and moral greatness, the humanities in this guise were bound to seem less consequential and more boring.

So now the humanities are in crisis. Rescuers are stepping forth. On Thursday, [the American](#)

[Academy of Arts and Sciences](#) released a report called “The Heart of the Matter,” making the case for the humanities and social sciences. (I was a member of this large commission, though I certainly can’t take any credit for the result.)

The report is important, and you should read it. It focuses not only on the external goods the humanities can produce (creative thinking, good writing), but also the internal transformation (spiritual depth, personal integrity). It does lack some missionary zeal that hit me powerfully as a college freshman when the humanities were in better shape.

One of the great history teachers in those days was a University of Chicago professor named Karl Weintraub. He poured his soul into transforming his students’ lives, but, even then, he sometimes wondered if they were really listening. Late in life, he wrote a note to my classmate Carol Quillen, who now helps carry on this legacy as president of Davidson College.

Teaching Western Civ, Weintraub wrote, “seems to confront me all too often with moments when I feel like screaming suddenly: ‘Oh, God, my dear student, why CANNOT you see that this matter is a real, real matter, often a matter of the very being, for the person, for the historical men and women you are looking at — or are supposed to be looking at!’

“I hear these answers and statements that sound like mere words, mere verbal formulations to me, but that do not have the sense of pain or joy or accomplishment or worry about them that they ought to have if they were TRULY informed by the live problems and situations of the human beings back there for whom these matters were real. The way these disembodied words come forth can make me cry, and the failure of the speaker to probe for the open wounds and such behind the text makes me increasingly furious.

“If I do not come to feel any of the love which Pericles feels for his city, how can I understand the Funeral Oration? If I cannot fathom anything of the power of the drive derived from thinking that he has a special mission, what can I understand of Socrates? ... How can one grasp anything about the problem of the Galatian community without sensing in one’s bones the problem of worrying about God’s acceptance?

“Sometimes when I have spent an hour or more, pouring all my enthusiasm and sensitivities into an effort to tell these stories in the fullness in which I see and experience them, I feel drained and exhausted. I think it works on the student, but I do not really know.”

Teachers like that were zealous for the humanities. A few years in that company leaves a lifelong mark.