

## **Believing in the Liberal Arts: Towards a Faithful Model of Higher Education**

Stan D. Gaede

Considering the current place of higher education, one would be hard pressed to find a more contested, devisive issue than ‘the liberal education of students of faith;’ pregnant with implications regardless of one’s stance. Given that, I think it is pretty important that I speak as candidly and forthrightly as possible about this topic. The times demand it, for one thing. But so does the subject matter itself. Let’s face it, this is a topic about which people have very strong convictions. It scares some of us to death to even put the words *faith* and *education* together in the same sentence; conjuring up the most odious images, for what should be the most contradictory of terms. On the other hand, there are others equally frightened by the idea that one could ever keep such things apart. They worry that the pretense of separation leads to deluded thinking, at best; and more than likely, a totalitarianism in sheep’s clothing; promising freedom of religion and granting nothing of the sort to those who truly believe.

So let me begin by laying my cards on the table (even though I grew up Mennonite, and we couldn’t even have cards on the table): I am a fairly convinced advocate for something that has been called an *integrated* model of education. Personally, I prefer to call it a *faithful* model of education, since that just sounds better (and frankly casts me in a better light). But whatever the case, it is a model of education which assumes the benefit—the responsibility, actually—of living one’s life faithfully and authentically; neither denying in deed what one says in word; nor in word that which one assumes in truth. It does not strive for coherence when such is not available. But it is not satisfied with incoherence when such is not necessary. It seeks an education for “the whole,” you might say: the whole person.

This is why I love the liberal arts, by the way. This is why I have spent nearly the entirety of my adult life in a Christian liberal arts college setting. Some people find the combination of Christian and liberal arts confusing or surprising; some think it nearly heretical. But the liberal arts, in its historical context, is about the holistic pursuit of that which is good, and right, and true, and beautiful; a pursuit which is not only consistent with the Christian faith, but (I believe) required by it. Indeed, in my own history, it was my endeavor to be a faithful follower of Christ that led me to the liberal arts arena in the first place, and gave me a deep love for learning in the process. It was an outgrowth of my faith, you might say. Not merely a partner in a common cause. My faith and my education, in other words, aren’t simply on the same track. It’s the same train.

As you can see, this integrated model makes lots of sense to me. I will talk a bit more about why that is the case in a moment. But before that, I need to admit to something right from the start. And that is that this model, though valuable, is not for everyone. For example, I am quite convinced that there are some students (and professors, for that matter), who would be better off elsewhere. This observation, by the way, has less to do with the value of various models of education than the fact that professors and students are human beings, coming to colleges with varied stories, personalities, and histories. For such variety, one size does not fit all.

As President of the Christian College Consortium, for example, I routinely get the question, “What Christian college or university would you recommend for So-and-So?” And So-and-So could be a son or daughter; but also a friend or colleague looking for a job. Of course, I begin by asking a series of questions about the individual they have in mind, and periodically, in the end, encourage them to pursue other options, other colleges and universities. Why? Because given their faith, or personality, or aspirations, other options would make more sense. Same for faculty, by the way. I’m now old enough to have former students teaching all over the place: Virginia, Notre Dame, Dartmouth, Gordon, Westmont... and hundreds of public institutions. And by and large, I think this variety is good, given their varied goals and gifts.

The point: Don’t think that my advocacy for the integrated model brings with it the assumption that this is the only model worth pursuing in higher education. It does not. Nor in saying this am I assuming that the need for variety stems from the fact that not all students are people of faith. Actually—and to further lay my cards on the table—I assume just the opposite. All students (and professors) are people of faith. We do not all affirm historically recognized religious creeds, to be sure. But we all make (or act upon) assumptions about the way things are or should be.

This is one of the more peculiar aspects of the human species, actually. And we in education depend on it. Count on it. Learning can’t happen without a whole panorama of assumptions about who we are, where we’re going, what’s of interest (or importance). Indeed, one of the advantages of the integrated model, as we will see, is that it doesn’t hide or skirt this rather obvious fact. It states upfront what the institution affirms about a range of matters dealing with purpose, and meaning, and ultimate ends, providing epistemological clarity, for one thing, but at its best, being upfront about those things that bear on our learning, and thinking, and doing.

But we are getting ahead of ourselves. What about this relationship between the liberal arts and faith, first of all? I have already said that the two are closely connected for me. But is that the case across the board? And might they not be such good partners in some situations? I have certainly heard people whom we would call religious—fellow Christians, in fact—question the liberal arts; sometimes wondering about its practical value; at other times questioning its propensity to raise questions instead of provide answers. That same critique is there among those who do not consider themselves religious, of course. But more often, what I hear from my colleagues on that side of the equation is the assumption that the liberal arts and religion are mutually exclusive enterprises: the former being open to any possibility in one’s quest for truth, and the latter already closing down any number of options, and closing down, as well, the real possibility of free inquiry. For them, a Christian liberal arts college is an oxymoron, for it cannot possibly foster the free exchange of ideas that is at the heart of a liberal arts college.

So, what about the liberal arts and people of religious faith? What’s going on here, both in the academy at large, as well as in my own experience? Why the worry, on both sides? And why the contrary experience, in my own case; along with places like Westmont and Gordon, which hold these two so tightly together? These are complicated questions, obviously, and for the sake of time, I will need to be a tad more superficial than I would like. But I would say, on the worry side, that the difficulty stems from two things, primarily; first, some legitimate concerns based on experience and the desire for a more hospitable learning environment; and second, some less

admirable concerns, based on a poor understanding of learning at best, and, in some cases, a lack of genuine appreciation for pluralism in higher education.

For starters, then, I think we have to admit that sometimes the particular combination of people and places leads to legitimate concerns about the liberal arts in combination with an explicit expression of religiosity. There are, for example, any number of people who have found themselves at religious colleges, and have concluded that they could not fully pursue their scholarly interests in that environment. Sometimes this happens while one is still at the institution in question. Often, however, it occurs at a later date; perhaps in graduate school, where an entirely new way of looking at something is revealed. And that moment—for the student—feels like a breath of fresh air. On such occasions, it appears quite obvious that the religious institution’s creedal constraints prevented the student from learning precisely what was most needed. Such moments, when they happen, can be life changing, both in terms of one’s view of the topic, at hand; but also one’s view of the religious institution in question. And they can easily lead to the conclusion—both by the person, as well as his or her compatriots at the liberating institution—that such religious schools are antithetical to the free exercise of thought (not to mention the core purposes of the liberal arts).

Such conclusions, I would contend, are no doubt warranted in some cases. What they almost entirely miss, however, is that other students are having precisely the same experience—in reverse—at other schools. One that I remember, for example, occurred in graduate school, where I found myself (as a sociologist) taking a seminar in the department of religion to fulfill some minor requirements. On one occasion, the reading assignment being discussed involved a higher critical assessment of a particular biblical passage. The professor was a big fan of the author, and was waxing on about the profound insights contained in the book. At some point, however, the student next to me raised his voice, and began questioning the conclusions of the author, as well as his approach. I could sense our professor’s nervousness about what the student was saying, but not for long. In due time, the professor raised his hand, glared at the student in question, and said, “Look friend, if you can’t accept a higher critical methodology, then you really don’t belong here.”

This, of course, brought on a certain silence in the room. The student stopped talking, for one thing. But so did the rest of us. Including me, since I was thinking the fellow was making a rather interesting point. Fortunately (for me), I was safe. I was a sociologist, after all; a discipline my professor was rather fond of. But the student beside me was not safe. He was in trouble, actually. Because if he continued to pursue this line of thought, he would not succeed; in that class or in that department. And of course, he transferred. To a university our professor considered “rather narrow.” And found there precisely the freedom—the breath of fresh air—that had so eluded him at the “freer” university.

We all have stories like this, of course. And we lift them up, at the appropriate time, to make the point we wish to make. But what I want you to notice is simply that this whole business of the free exercise of thought depends both upon the journey of the student and the commitments of the institution in question. The same precise place can be liberating for one, and oppressive to the other. I do not mean to suggest, by the way, that “free exercise” is entirely in the eye of the beholder; or that it isn’t practiced better in some institutions than others. I simply want for us to

notice that there are legitimate grievances on both sides of this issue. And if we are genuinely interested in enabling our students to flourish, we need to keep both possibilities in mind.

There are other concerns, however, that I would deem less legitimate. They sometimes grow out of incidences such as we have just discussed, but wind up imputing to institutions and entire traditions the circumstantial idiosyncrasies of their current inhabitants. In my experience, these tend to be generated by certain types of people more than any particular theoretical framework. Let's face it, there are some of us who "want what we want when we want it." And even more problematically, assume that what "we" want (or approve of) is precisely what everyone should want, as well. Thus, our version of the ideal institution is clearly the ideal for everyone (or should be). End of story. Such folks are not always wrong, by the way. And for that reason, I would contend they are worth listening to. But we should be cautious about their conclusion, given the personality in which it is rooted.

The other argument that is frequently made at this point—and I would deem even more suspect than the one grounded in personality—relates to the relationship between religious faith and education, more broadly; and assumes that a liberal arts education of high quality must be disengaged from faith commitments of any kind (especially religious). You simply aren't going to be a true practitioner of the liberal arts, these folks would contend, if you allow your faith to get entangled with scholarship. We tend to think this is the problem of the "secularists," so called. But it is actually an issue on both sides of the spectrum. Religious dualists affirm a version of this argument, as well. Or so I would contend.

You already know what I think about the assumption that faith can be disentangled from education, or that the liberal arts can be done in a faithless context. The really intriguing thing (to me) is why the assumption persists, in spite of the inability of anyone (that I have met) to make a persuasive argument for it. To some extent, I'm sure this relates to a confusion of words. When someone says that we must keep faith separated from our academic work, they actually mean *religious* faith; and thus their plea is not to let *religion* dictate one's scholarly conclusions. In one sense, this is understandable, especially when one encounters those religious folks who seem to think that all knowledge is deductive in origin, working exclusively on deducing from religious documents the truth of things without paying much attention to the world around them. But most religiously inclined scholars that I know don't do that. Rather, they are simply trying put together a coherent understanding of the subject, given their assumptions, findings, whatever. And frankly, that is something all scholars ought to be doing, regardless of the faith assumptions that guide their work.

So I'm guessing that something else is going on here. And while I suspect that some epistemological ignorance (or arrogance) is to blame, I also think a few other things are in the mix as well. In the world of the natural sciences, for example, the call to keep faith and science at bay is sometimes a call to keep religious assumptions about creation out of the picture (and is usually aimed at the Intelligent Design folks, in one way or another). Personally, I can't take sides on this issue, because I am not intellectually equipped to do so. But I am confident that we would make a lot more progress in this conversation if two things would happen. First, if all of the scholars involved would fess up to the bottom-line assumptions that inform their work. And second, if all of us would pay more attention to how the mix of evidence and assumptions play

into the conclusions reached. Pillaring the “other” for deluded thinking may make us feel better but it is not generally helpful in the ongoing search for wisdom and understanding.

I think this approach would be beneficial for those of us who embrace the liberal arts, as well. The fact is, the history of the liberal arts is one that is deeply embedded in faith assumptions of all kinds, many of them explicitly religious or mythological in some sense. And that is true whether you locate the starting point in Athens or Jerusalem; the Renaissance or the Reformation. And while the modernist period, in its heyday, attempted to jettison religion in its traditional form, we now understand (in retrospect) that it was perhaps one of the most dogmatic of efforts; excluding *ex nihilo* any assumptions other than its own. That such a period in educational history could be considered “faithless” is one of the more comic assertions in the history of epistemology.

And frankly, I don’t think most of the modernists (or at least the positivists’ version of modernism evident in my own discipline) were particularly kind to the liberal arts tradition. They were so convinced that all worthy knowledge would be discovered in the future using their preferred methods, that they were inclined to give short shrift to the worthiness of historical insights (unless one could show how they led to the modernists’ victory, of course). But I am now skewing the argument in my favor. My larger point is simply that the liberal arts tradition is deeply embedded in faith assumptions of all kinds. It would appear odd, therefore, to assume that an explicitly religious grounding of the liberal arts—as one might find at a Christian liberal arts institution, for example—is somehow anathema to the liberal arts tradition.

For me, obviously, it is not only less than odd. It is an entirely reasonable and, quite frankly, very fruitful approach to that which I am about, both as a Christian as well as a scholar. That is, my very first obligation, as a follower of Christ, is to love the Lord my God with all my heart, mind, soul and strength; and my neighbor as myself. I use the word “obligation” with intention, since this particular statement is one that comes directly from Jesus, and which he said was a summation of the law. It was at the core of his own teaching, in other words. And while I realize that this summation needs to be unpacked (and has been obscured and debauched in all kinds of ways), it nevertheless contains my marching orders as a follower of Christ. In particular, over the years, I have discovered that it is especially helpful in letting me know when I am getting off track.

For example, one of the things I have discovered in my own educational journey is that the way we have institutionalized the learning process has had a number of reductionist tendencies. Think, for example, of what we do (for all kinds of good reasons, I might add) when we send our children off to school, and—by the time they are in junior high, at least—begin going from class to class (from teacher to teacher) to learn different subjects. Each teacher, moreover, gives them these hour-long exams periodically, on which a good portion of their grade is based; a grade almost entirely independent of any number of things, including what they learned in other classes, or what they’re learning on the playground once class is over. In other words, to make education more efficient, we have developed a certain division of labor, which also divides knowledge; separating one kind of knowledge from another, and separating its meaning from its application. Again, this is a useful thing to do, given the resources we have to work with and

what we are trying to teach. But it can easily lead to some erroneous conclusions by those who are participating in it.

Certainly, that was true for me growing up. By the time I was in junior high, education was purely a means to an end; and the end was to successfully complete each class, so that I could advance to the next level, and do the things I really wanted to do. And what was that? Well, my truer ends had something to do with cultivating a successful life with my peers, and I discovered that my love for athletics worked hand-in-hand with that larger objective. And so, like lots of other kids in middle school, I invested myself—personally and intentionally—in these larger objectives. True enough, every once in awhile a particular teacher or subject would grab me for a few minutes, and I would think to myself, “Hum. That’s... interesting.” But that interest would dissipate rather quickly, once recess (or the next class) was upon me. Bottom line, my formal education was a highly utilitarian effort designed to get me successfully from one thing to another. It was valuable, to be sure, in the way the money was valuable, so that I could buy the pizza I wanted for lunch. But it was not lunch. Not by a long shot.

Now, of course, this is only one lad’s experience. And clearly some of my peers found the classroom itself much more interesting, and invested themselves more fruitfully in that part of their lives. But here’s the deal: given the way we’ve set up the educational model, even those who are successful in the classroom are susceptible to a highly pragmatic understanding of knowledge and the learning process. Maybe even more so. Because what they learn is how to milk the system for their own advancement and benefit. What may pass them by, in the process, is the merit—the inherent value—of the thing they are learning in and of itself.

Indeed, I am not one hundred percent convinced that the students who are most successful in the system are the most likely to “get it” relative to the value of what is learned. In fact, at least until last year’s economic collapse, there was very strong evidence that the best students were pursuing the best colleges, so they could get into the best graduate schools, so they had the best change of making a lot of money. The bad news here is that—to the extent this is true—it means “the best and the brightest” were trading the pizza for the money itself. And when the thing we all call “currency” becomes the legitimate end, well... we are in trouble.

Which we are. I had some help in figuring this out, fortunately. Some of it was from a select number of teachers who were able to lift me above the context and see the bigger picture: an English teacher in high school, for example, who was also my football coach. I’m not sure if his coaching role gave him more stature in my eyes, or simply more clout (given that I knew I was going to be running wind sprints that afternoon). But he managed to get me to read my first novel, cover to cover (the “Red Badge of Courage,” by Stephen Crane). And I remember, when putting the book down, that I would never think of war in the same way again. Growing up in a Mennonite family, I had heard many arguments about war; mostly about the merits and demerits of taking up arms. But suddenly I went from theoretical justifications for positions taken, to a life itself, a life in battle, both externally and internally. And, well, I got an education.

The greatest help I received in learning-about-learning, however, came not in class, but on the road of life. And I will keep this account brief, since I have written about it before and some have heard the thing multiple times. But the short version is that I was in an automobile accident

at the age of 19, which put me in a hospital bed for 5 months and left me fairly scarred, both physically and psychologically. The emotional damage resulted from the fact that my passenger—who was my cousin and friend—was killed in the accident. The physical damage meant that I was out of commission for an entire year, waiting to heal so I could return to college my junior year. It was painful, to say the least. But healing occurred. My body slowly responded to the therapy I was given. And my spirit was restored, in large part because my passenger's parents—my aunt and uncle—redeemed my life; not only taking me in, but showing me that their love was not contingent on their loss. In other words, they practiced an amazing grace, right before my eyes. And it not only gave me an existential reminder of the grace I had received in Christ, but changed entirely my perspective on this thing we call education.

In particular, when I returned to college the year after the accident—transferring to Westmont, actually, for reasons I can't explain—I suddenly loved my classes. I don't mean I loved everything I was learning in the "happiness" sense of the term. I continued to argue and wrestle with the content, depending on its perceived merits. But I was deeply engaged in a way I had never been before. "Thirsty" is another way of saying it. And it put me on a trajectory, from that time forth, entirely different from the one I had been on prior to the accident. I was, finally, a student. Not just in terms of achieving good grades, but in the sense of craving a better understanding of that which was before me.

And why was that? Well, I was grateful. Grateful to be back in college, for one thing. But grateful for the opportunity to learn, as well. Grace does that, by the way. To know (really know) that you have what you don't deserve changes your perspective on what you have. Loving the Lord with all my heart, mind, soul and strength was transformed from an obligation to a privilege; from what I had to do, to the very least I could do. And that love, so transformed, wound up changing a great deal about the way I approached the entirety of my life, and most especially this thing we call education.

It meant paying attention to—and appreciating—those around me, for one thing; investing at least as much time in others as I was investing in myself. But it also meant paying attention to "the whole," as well. The whole story, you might say, whether one was listening to a roommate, or a professor, or even a perceived enemy. That is, if the whole universe is a gift of God, and if I am a highly undeserving recipient of that gift, then am I not obligated to appreciate the whole of that gift? Indeed, isn't such appreciation not only an obligation, but a great, great privilege? And does not that privilege entail not only the responsibility, but the great joy of learning all one can learn about this gift that one has been given?

And, of course, I said, "Yes!" Absolutely. And that conclusion led me not only to an existential appreciation of what I was learning in college, but also to a stark realization of why the liberal arts fit so wonderfully with what I believed; the "ground of my being," you might say. I was not a student to "get ahead" anymore; I was a student simply to learn. I was not studying history or literature or biology to get a better job; but to get a better understanding of who I was, and the world in which I was placed. In other words, I was suddenly freed up to appreciate *the good, the right, the true, and the beautiful* precisely because "the self" was no longer at the center of the project.

I don't mean that I became entirely selfless, by the way. I remained (and remain, sadly) compelled to self-satisfaction and preoccupation. I'm a dolt, just like you. But that is a failing, not an ambition. The better way, I discovered, is a life of gratitude, which takes learning seriously precisely because it is such a gift, a gift given not so that one can do something else with the gift, but so that one can better appreciate the Giver. It's Christmas at its best, you might say. Where the joy comes not only in unwrapping the present and seeing the gift, but appreciating—at that moment—the intention of the heart behind it. True, in our excitement, we may still grab the gift, run outside, and “shoot our eye out” (to quote The Christmas Story). But the liberal arts intentionally and deliberately pull us back. Back into the house. Back to the gift itself. To see it anew. To understand better both the gift and the Giver. An understanding that, I would contend, was the objective all along.

And so, now you know why the liberal arts make sense to me, and why a Christian liberal arts college provides such a wonderful context for me to do my work. Again, I do not assume that everyone will agree with me. Others will start from different assumptions and pursue a different course. I understand that. Indeed, I think it is their responsibility to pursue that course as coherently and faithfully as they can; that's my reason for affirming the integrated model of higher education. But you'll forgive me for adding one small caveat: I do think I'm right. I believe that learning is a privilege. Moreover, I am convinced that pursuing “the good” (in the larger sense) is not only in our best interest as human beings, but it is the only way to find the joy that was intended for us in the first place. College can be like Christmas, in other words. But it will require giving up the assumption that the party is all about... me.