

Learning is Not Fun: Reflections on the Liberal Arts and Living Your Best Life

by Jim Josefson
Associate Professor
Political Science and History
Bridgewater College

LiberalArtsOnline is a monthly publication that promotes inquiry and reflection on liberal arts education.

Forward

This essay was written for first-year students in a three-credit course introducing the liberal arts and the Personal Development Portfolio program at Bridgewater College in Bridgewater, Virginia. The goal of Bridgewater College's Personal Development Portfolio program is to foster our students' development in four dimensions: intellect, emotional and physical wellness, ethics and spirituality, and citizenship. My goal in this essay is to ground these distinct dimensions in the more general language of classical Greek thought and to translate those dimensions into a language that could connect students to the enterprise of the liberal arts at Bridgewater and beyond. The essay has been used by many Bridgewater College faculty over the past four years. The title of the essay is deliberately provocative, as it invites students to practice the liberal arts as they confront its contents. Colleagues tell me students immediately want to debate the title. "Josefson is wrong," they say. "Learning is fun!" This prompts students to engage just the presuppositions about fun and the purposes of education that are at the heart of the article. Students are then impelled to do a much deeper analysis of the text, as they struggle with why I would want to proclaim such a heterodox view. Finally, the text leads students to reconsider their own actions in the light of its thesis that human freedom requires a broader set of human activities than entertainment: the liberal arts. In short, the essay is a stimulus for reflection, the deep thinking that is the heart of the liberal arts experience. My colleagues tell me that after reading and discussing the essay their students are better able to value the distinct dimensions of human development, to identify and neutralize the entertaining distractions from the liberal arts, and to understand and value the purposes of a liberal arts education.

My hope in publishing it is that my colleagues in the liberal arts and sciences will assign it to their students, not only in similar first-year seminars, but also in any course in which they wish to impress upon their students that intellectual work is a central aspect of the good life, that bodily and mental wellness are necessary but not sufficient for such a

LiberalArtsOnline

good life, that responsible citizenship is central to all truly free activity, and that ethics is both distinct from and integral to intellectual activity. So this isn't a typical journal article, geared to a few specialists or administrators. Its ostensible audience is the thousands of undergraduates who haven't encountered an accessible justification for the liberal arts. But my intent is also to get my academic colleagues to appreciate that their chipper insistence that learning is fun is only a naïve platitude that fails to address adequately a central paradox in our liberal culture. If we insist that the liberal arts are only fun then they will be judged against a standard that they cannot meet, as students will determine the liberal arts have either no value (other things are more fun) or merely instrumental value (as a means to an income that can buy more fun). Such a standard will strangle the liberal arts as students will conclude they only promise the imprisonment of homework. Thus, I insist that we need to recover the classical understanding of freedom if we are to sustain our liberal culture. Relying on the cliché that learning is fun will simply not do.

[Essay begins on Page Three]

Learning is Not Fun:

Reflections on the Liberal Arts and Living Your Best Life

by Jim Josefson
Associate Professor
Political Science and History
Bridgewater College

LiberalArtsOnline is a monthly
publication that promotes inquiry and
reflection on liberal arts education.

Liberal arts education and Oprah are basically on the same page. Oprah's motto is "Live Your Best Life," and I think liberal arts education shares this creed. It's an old idea. The ancient Greeks had a word for it: *arête*. It was the concept at the center of Greek life. All activities in Greek culture had the goal of exhibiting *arête*, which they defined as "the highest" or aiming for the highest expression of humanity. [1]

Now, "living your best life" or *arête* is not about being happy. It's not about having fun. That's the point of this essay. There's a difference between being human, or cultivating your humanity, and being happy. That's not to say that someone who exhibits *arête* isn't happy. Aiming for the highest form of humanity, living your best life, will bring happiness of a sort. The point is, however, that our common sense notions of fun and happiness get in the way of cultivating our humanity since they direct us to activities that are not exactly best for our *arête*.

Let me explain. Let's say you are sitting in your room with the choice of doing your chemistry homework or watching the latest DVD. What are you going to do? Which is more fun, which will make you happier? The answer is obvious if our goal is happiness: someone make the popcorn! Now, in the back of your head you hear your mother or your 8th grade science teacher saying, "No, learning is fun! Do your homework." This advice is obviously idiotic. Learning is not fun.

Learning is not fun. And it's a pity that somewhere along the way we told you otherwise. I think it's mostly the fault of Sesame Street. Sesame Street promised you that education would be nothing but dancing, singing, cool cartoons, and your furry pal Grover. [2] Well, Grover's promise of learning was the kind of lie we tell to children, like Santa Claus, to get you through the winter of elementary school. Now it's time to grow up.

Of course some of you, the cynics, reading this will say, "If you do the chemistry homework, then you will get an A or a diploma or a job and that will make you happy. So learning *is* about happiness. We do *everything* in order to be happy." This argument has been popularized especially by economists. Economists have a scientific word for happiness. They call it

LiberalArtsOnline

“utility.” What they do is base their discipline on the idea that people will always choose the course of action that maximizes their utility (happiness). Now, I would agree that this is sound practice if we want to understand economic behavior, say, the relationship between interest rates and the yield on 30-year Treasury bills, but it is less sound practice if we want to live our best life. That will take a more subtle calculus.

The Greek notion of *arête* was not a bland invocation of human happiness. It was not a maxim that invited you to pursue your utility. Rather, the Greeks had the idea that human activities were heterogeneous, that they involved distinct and dissimilar modes of human experience, each with its own logic, its own purposes, which could not be collapsed into the same category and the same metric of accomplishment: happiness.

What we usually call happiness, the Greeks would have called private happiness or the satisfaction of appetite. This is the experience of enjoying things like food, sex, and amusement. The Greeks thought indulging such appetites was the lowest form of human experience, of humanity, because it is least free. In contrast, we often associate freedom with the ability to pursue our appetites without constraint. For the Greeks, however, we are compelled to respond to the appetites of our bodies by our natural drives in such a way that can make us slaves to our bodies. Being *necessary* means that the satisfaction of appetite is not true freedom. Indeed, this is an idea shared by the pagan Greek and Christian traditions. Both hold that the desires of the body distract us from higher things. [3]

But to say that the enjoyment of the body is lowest does not mean it isn't important. While the Greeks saw the appetites as the realm of necessity and, therefore, not fully free and human, they clearly saw them as necessary and essential. The trick, as they saw it, was to pursue ways of satisfying the body that are freer than others. The key is to satisfy the appetites in a way that satisfies yet restrains our passions by harnessing them in the pursuit of higher virtues. For instance, you are being more free if you work out so that you can achieve excellence in a sporting event or so that you can meet a goal of climbing a mountain. You are less free if you work out in order to attract a sexual partner. You are being more free if you prepare a sumptuous gourmet meal that you share with friends. You are less free if you eat a TV dinner in front of the TV. The point here is to see satisfying our bodily desires not as the sole purpose of life, but as only a necessary step on the way towards exercising higher virtues.

LiberalArtsOnline

Now we need to get into some of these higher virtues, human activities that are freer than just satisfying our desires. One of these the Greeks called *techne*, what we might call craftsmanship. *Techne* involves a higher expression of humanity because it requires that we take some idea, some creative thought, and bring it into being in the world. For instance, I might learn how to cook the best Southern barbeque and then develop my own special sauces and recipes that express my own creative thoughts about cooking. (Personally, these revolve around garlic and hot peppers.) *Techne* or craftsmanship thus involves both learning the competency required to do a craft like cooking, painting, writing, fishing, carpentry, acting, etc., and then creatively working within that discipline to create something new. This is a higher virtue because it directs us towards *arête*, to be a better craftsman in a particular arena, towards higher expressions of the activity.

Now, when we speak of exercising *techne* we often say it is fun. "Wow, it sure was fun to cook these ribs!" But this common sense sentiment tends to blind us to the character of *techne*. It is simply a very different human experience to sit and watch a car chase on a DVD than to competently perform a craft like fishing or cooking or flying an airplane. When we blur this distinction we begin to lose our appreciation for the more complex and subtle and challenging experience of humanity that is involved in *techne*. Indeed, we may begin to lose our appreciation of *techne* such that we spend ever more time watching TV and less time cultivating the skills and creativity involved in craftsmanship.

Another virtue is **friendship**. Friendship involves exercising the virtues of generosity, empathy, magnanimity, and love. Again, these are higher virtues because they demand that we restrain our own desires so that we may meet the needs of our friends. In that friendship demands that we not follow the immediate desires of our bodies, acting as a friend is more free, and thus more human, than using a friend to satisfy our own needs.

The next higher virtues I want to discuss are even freer. These are the virtues required for participation in politics and community, the virtues of **citizenship**. Perhaps these virtues could be seen as extending the virtues of friendship to the whole society. A citizen restrains his or her own desires for the good of the community as a whole. Because the community is less directly or closely connected to satisfying the needs of an individual than friends, the Greeks saw it as more free, more human, than simple friendship. To give you an idea of citizenship, consider the words of Pericles in the most famous speech on Greek citizenship: "We do not say that a

LiberalArtsOnline

man who takes no interest in politics is a man who minds his own business; we say that he has no business here at all. We Athenians, in our own persons take our decisions on policy or submit them to proper discussions: for we do not think that there is an incompatibility between words and deeds; the worst thing is to rush into action before the consequences have been properly debated.” [4] Why is citizenship so important to Pericles? The answer is obvious; it is free. When one is a citizen, one is either restraining his or her own desires to serve the public good, which is free, or one is engaging in discussion to determine what is the public good. That is one of the most free things that human beings can do. When a citizen participates in politics he or she is literally creating a community through speaking, a community dedicated not just to satisfying desires but to creating a place in which human excellence, *arête*, may be cultivated. That is free and freeing, indeed.

Now again the cynic will say that people are just pursuing their desires in politics and are not concerned with the public good. I would grant this is often true, but it is an indictment of our sometime inability to exercise the virtues of citizenship and not an indictment of the idea that citizenship exists as a distinct form of human experience that must be cultivated for its distinctive contribution to our humanity. If we don't appreciate the distinct character and distinctive virtues of citizenship, we are likely to see politics and community just as a means to pursue our private desires, and that view tragically denies to us a crucial set of virtues that reduces our humanity.

So what is the highest form of virtue? To Plato and Aristotle it was the virtue that comes from **intellectual development**, the *vita contemplativa* or the life of the mind. Intellectual activity is the highest form of humanity because it is the freest of all. Intellectual activity is directed towards nothing, no immediately practical purpose, which would satisfy the desires of the body. Rather, the life of the mind aims only towards finding the truth. To search for the truth is to serve an ideal of perfection that does not and cannot ultimately exist in our communities, in our world. It is an effort to transcend our bodies and our world in order that we may participate in the virtues that go along with knowledge and the search for the truth.

We get this notion of virtue from Plato, who, along with his teacher Socrates, developed it in Athens around 400 BCE. You can clearly see it in the *Apology*. In the *Apology*, Plato illustrates both the character of truth and what it means to exercise the virtues of intellectual activity. The trial in the *Apology* is brought on when Socrates is accused of being an atheist and corrupting the youth of Athens, because he taught that people

LiberalArtsOnline

should search for the truth rather than just follow the traditional piety of Athens' city religion. In his defense, Socrates insists that by searching for the truth he is actually being pious, for he associates the truth, knowledge that exists independently of the desires and traditions of men and cities, with god. (Of course Socrates' notion of god is much closer to the Christian notion than the prevailing religion of fourth century Athens, so there was some merit in the charges against Socrates.)

So, in the *Apology*, Plato sets out the ideal of truth that is the touchstone of the virtue of intellect: the search for what is true independent of our desires and tradition. But perhaps more importantly, Plato also demonstrates the practice of intellectual development, how you actually do it. The central principle here is that intellectual development requires a free and open dialogue about the truth. This is why the *Apology* and almost all Platonic writing is organized like a debate or discussion. This was a radical notion for the time, for before Plato, most Greeks thought finding the truth was a matter of consulting the words of the most important poets of the Greek tradition, people like Homer, Hesiod, and Simonides. Rather than grounding the truth on the absolute authority of tradition, Plato says truth comes from disciplined discussion. It's a momentous occasion in the history of our culture.

Now we need to explore in greater depth what is free and open discussion. The free part is easy. A discussion is free when anyone can take part and no one gets hurt or thrown in prison or hushed up because of what they say in the discussion. J. S. Mill most famously made this point in his book *On Liberty*. In the book, Mill argued that no opinions should be suppressed or outlawed because any opinion we might think wrong might in fact turn out to be true or hold a part of the truth that we can't see now. Mill points out this has often turned out to be true in the past. And even if an opinion is in fact wrong, by confronting our established notions with new opponents we come to have a surer and more precise understanding of our established ideas.

[5]

The open part is harder. Openness requires that we go into a discussion with the attitude that our preconceived notions might actually be wrong. This was why Socrates was famous for saying that he knew nothing. [6] For Socrates, recognizing your own ignorance was the first step towards truth, for how can you really search for truth if you think you already know it? Now this is incredibly hard, and it illustrates why intellectual virtue is the highest virtue. In intellectual development we *risk everything*, our established beliefs and opinions and the easy status quo that goes along with them, even possibly

LiberalArtsOnline

the relationships and possessions that allow us to satisfy our pressing desires, in the quest to find the truth. [7] You are thus simply not playing the game right if you think college is about learning a bunch of interesting perspectives and a certain amount of tolerance for the fact that many of these views disagree with your own ideas. Education involves the assumption that you are not right, that you need to know better, and that you must change your own viewpoint in the light of the truth. You simply haven't learned a thing if your preconceived notions are unchanged by the experience of education. To risk who you are in the service of truth and furthering your humanity, that is the highest expression of freedom.

To see another dimension of this virtue, consider how alike intellectual development is to the virtues of friendship. When you are a friend, you serve your friend even though you don't have to. When you engage in open discussion, you accept that you might be wrong and that the people or text that you are engaging with might be right, even though you don't have to. As the twentieth century philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer wrote, "In human relations the important thing is, as we have seen, to experience the Thou truly as a Thou—i.e., not to overlook his claim but to let him really say something to us. Here is where openness belongs . . . Openness to the other, then, involves recognizing that I myself must accept some things that are against me, even though no one else forces me to do so." [8] This insight reveals the unity between intellectual virtues and ethical and spiritual growth in character. To learn is fundamentally a moral as well as an intellectual enterprise.

That doesn't mean it isn't hard to do. If there is a difference between the enjoyment of the virtues of *techne*, friendship, politics, and simple fun, then the gap between intellectual development and fun is a chasm. Simply put, learning is not fun. When you experience it, it should be compelling and valuable to you, but if you expect it to be as easy, seductive, and satisfying as a good movie, you are going to be disappointed. If you cannot appreciate the virtues of the life of the mind as a distinct and unique form of human experience, then you simply will not be able to do well in college. You will not be able to put aside your appetites for the lonely and difficult freedom of doing your homework. More importantly, you are less likely to cultivate the life of the mind, and you are less likely to develop *arête*, the highest forms of humanity, both in college and throughout your life.

The liberal arts are about helping you to cultivate your humanity so that you may live your best life. In this essay I've argued that this requires you to appreciate that humanity isn't

LiberalArtsOnline

just about having fun. It's about cultivating the virtues that are attendant to distinct realms of human experience: techne, friendship, citizenship, and intellectual development. Pursuing development in these four dimensions may not be fun, but that's precisely the point of this essay. In order to become whole persons, wholly human, we need to learn to appreciate and cultivate experiences that aren't just fun but are about, for lack of a better word, *arête*.

Notes:

1. The understanding of Greek thinking in this article and especially the idea of the distinct virtues of work, friendship, citizenship, and the life of the mind come from Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998). Arendt got it mostly from Aristotle's *Nichomachean Ethics*.
2. This point comes from Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, (New York: Viking Press, 1985), p. 143.
3. Indeed it is an interesting mystery how liberal capitalism with its emphasis on unconstrained appetites evolved out of Christian cultures. See Romans 7 and 8 and Galatians 5.
4. Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian Wars*, (New York: Penguin, 1986), p. 147.
5. See J.S. Mill, *On Liberty*, (New York: Penguin, 1985), pp. 76–84.
6. *Apology*, 21d.
7. In the *Apology*, Socrates conveys this notion of risk when he says his search for the truth requires the courage of an Athenian warrior. See *Apology* 28a–d.
8. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, (New York: Continuum, 1984), p. 361.