

**Seven Liberal Arts and Counting  
A Faculty Symposium**

**February 17, 2010**

**Sponsored by**

The Kendall Center for Engaged Learning  
The Hanson-Peterson Chair of Liberal Studies  
The Raymond and Florence Sponberg  
Chair in Ethics

# INTRODUCTIONS

For several years now, I have made of myself a kind of liberal-arts crank around campus. We have amazing service learning, beautiful music, responsible sororities and fraternities, a super-friendly campus. Oh, but did you know we are also a college? I sometimes wonder if our amazing, beautiful, friendly tail is starting to wag the dog. Has our embarrassment of riches become a nightmare of sleep deprivation and twittering chaos?

When all is said and done, our mission here is to wake students up to the joys of wonder, the rigors of thinking, and the responsibilities of integrity. As Hanson-Peterson Chair of Liberal Studies, I have brought to campus an economist from Japan, a Renaissance scholar from Connecticut College, and a physicist from Amherst. But here in Nazareth, we happen to have prophets that are every bit as good as the stars from Jerusalem. This year I wanted to hear what some of our best minds have to say about the liberal arts. On February 17, faculty members gathered to hear five of our most respected colleagues reflect on the liberal arts in the context of “Making”, and “Life,” and “Counting,” words from the college’s new brand. “Make your life count” is a thought-provoking motto, ideally geared to help prospective students understand what a serious place Gustavus is. It also challenges us as faculty to reflect again on our mission as a liberal arts college.

We all know Brian Johnson as a fantastic accordion player, as a scuba diver who has recently wrestled with an octopus, as the author or co-editor of a couple of books, and as one of the finest preachers, on a consistent basis, that any of us have ever heard. Some of us know that he is one of the country’s best liturgists and recently has been revealed as a haunting cantor. He is also a caring and reflective pastor. But the reason I asked Brian to speak for this occasion, is that I know of few people who are more articulate about the arts and their significance and that was the focus of his work at Yale. Brian spoke at the symposium on branding and Brancusi.

Since we had a priest to talk about art instead of theology, I went to a theologian to see what she would talk about. Deborah Goodwin graduated from Smith, and earned a Master of Sacred Theology from Weston Jesuit Theological School and her M.A. and Ph.D. from Notre Dame. Her teaching and research interests include the mediaeval Latin West, especially the history of interpretation and the social history of the Christian tradition. Deborah has published widely in volumes from Oxford and Brill and in several different academic journals. She has also lectured at the University of St Andrews, Scotland, the University of Chicago Divinity School, and the University of Leeds. When not relaxing with single-malt scotch (purely in the interest of preserving her cultural heritage), she unwinds by practicing the bodhran and crafting handmade books. Deborah’s insights into the liberal arts come from thinking about William Morris.

Doug Huff’s first profession was that of a trapper and skinner of minks, which provided him with the skills that would eventually foster his fourth career as a

playwright. Doug he has somehow managed to parley the sinecure he has in the Philosophy Department into successful writing of at least eight plays that I know of. *A FAR SHORE*, won the 2009 Mario Fratti-Fred Newman Political Playwriting Contest, and was given a staged-reading at the Castillo Theatre in New York. He has won two other awards and his work has been performed in India, England, and all over the U.S. The latest revival of his Bonhoeffer play, *Emil's Enemies*, took place in February at Theaterwork in Sante Fe. Doug is also a frequent habitué of India and, in a former incarnation, of Turkey, and despite his jet-setting life, he is a serious philosopher, the author of a steady stream of academic articles and papers, especially on Wittgenstein. Doug won the Edgar M. Carlson Award for Distinguished Teaching in 1992. If there is anyone from whom I would like to learn the Art of Living, it's Doug Huff.

If listening to one philosopher is enriching, I figured two philosophers would be golden. Out of modesty, Lisa refused to feed me any fodder for her introduction, but a short glance at her web profile says it all: "I am still interested in the questions that kept me awake nights when I first began studying philosophy as an undergraduate; questions about the nature of knowing, about certainty and truth, and about reality." Lisa is the author or editor of four books and numerous academic articles, and she can rightly be called the co-creator of the Philosophy of Food. All of her scholarly activity is directly tied to her classes and it has been my feeling for some time, that, more than anyone else, Lisa is the conscience of our community. In 2004, Lisa won the Edgar M. Carlson Award for Distinguished Teaching. In her paper, Lisa conjures up William James to reflect on the "attitude" of the liberal arts.

Max Hailperin is known at Gustavus for unassuming modesty, dry wit, and brilliant flashes of clarifying insight. With degrees from MIT and Stanford, Max is the author or co-author of two textbooks and several academic articles and tons of reviews and papers. His publications also include a scarf photo in *Weavers* magazine and a related article in *Complex Weavers Journal*. Max was the 2002 Recipient of the Edgar M. Carlson Award for Distinguished Teaching. He has enumerated tens of billions of primitive Pythagorean triangles in order of increasing areas, looking for the rare cases where three share an area, and most important of all, he is a serious collector of craft-brewed ales. Max's title may be the most philosophical of all: "What does it mean to Make?"

Though written independently of one another, these five papers speak to one another and provoke us to remember yet again Socrates assertion at his trial that the unexamined life is not livable for a human being.

William K. Freiert

Dorothy Peterson, Mildred Peterson Hanson & Arthur Jennings Hanson Professor  
of Liberal Studies

## “Branding and Brancusi”

### Brian Johnson

Jingles. Mottos. Tag lines.  
They sometimes stick with us  
even though we wished we could let them go.

Help me as you are able or can remember.

Call Rotor Rooter that’s the name  
and away go troubles .....  
.....down the drain.

We’re here today to muse about the liberal arts and counting –  
spurred on by our recent marketing campaign  
and to think about a number of questions.  
I’ll start us off with one.

Do the liberal arts count?

There was a time when a response to this question  
could have been more directly and easily answered.  
It was a time when education in the west was wedded  
to a meta-narrative that assumed learning’s place in the larger society  
and this notion of education was under-girded by a larger and more systemic  
project.

There existed a cohesion and an integration  
between the university and its location...  
not without fault or blemish, mind you.  
But the question, do the liberal arts count  
would have seemed rather naïve, even perhaps silly...  
Of course the liberal arts count...

They count because by very definition  
that to be a free, critical, thinking individual  
occurred by learning through the liberal arts.  
It was environmental.  
It was the primary breath that sustained the life of the mind.  
There were no tag lines.

But we have passed the days  
when the world had a story that was assumed.  
As we full well know, as a result  
liberal arts study is no longer a primary way of coming to know



it is just one of many schools of learning...  
And in our post-modern milieu  
which ironically was the culmination, in some ways of this very free thinking,  
now, the market has become the definer of what is valued and therefore branded...  
As arbitrator, marketing's branding goal is to simplify  
which unfortunately is the antithesis of what we hope happens in the academy –  
which is to see ideas in all their richness and complexity.

So yes the liberal arts count  
not in the way they 'used to'  
and now in the way that someone else is determining.

Catchy phrases have become a primary means for defining  
the rich, full, and complicated value of a thing  
and as a result of this increasingly competitive higher education market  
and in the desire to become distinctive and acquire a market share.  
liberal arts institutions have been seduced  
into a frenzy of developing brands and phrases.  
What counts is not 'the liberal arts experience'  
but rather the reduced definition of how institutions are described  
and then it follows how these institutions also get defined.

It's a risky and challenging business –  
and the ideas, phrases, strategic directions  
all deserve close scrutiny and questioning.  
We ought to be pretty careful with them.  
Words matter after all. We remember them.

Help me with this one  
In the valley of the jolly --- ho ho ho....  
.....Green Giant.

Let's come a little closer home.

There are at least four ways that colleges and universities  
have responded to this frenzy of definition...

1. The first group of institutions refuses to enter the game.  
One subset of that group believes that their brand identity is their name  
Another subset believes that to reduce all that a college does to a tag line is  
a kind of blasphemy.
2. A second group of institutions goes with a word to describe the context/  
culture, a valued characteristic or even a virtue embedded in a motto  
Veritas or Lux et Veritas...  
Dickinson College's – Distinctive  
Hamline's Re: Invention  
With these brands there remains expansive wiggle room for definition

3. A third group of institutions focus on outcomes  
 In our neighborhood: Education that Lasts Beyond a Lifetime  
 Graduate for the Good Life  
 Or our own: Make your life count, I think, fits here.  
 Weighted not on the virtue or context  
 it's the benefit to a student's future that matters.
4. A fourth group tries to marry some sense of the virtues of learning with the  
 hoped for results...  
 Inspired teaching. Inspiring lives.  
 Ideals to Action...  
 These tag lines hold in tension purposes and outcome.

Gustavus has a history of mottos and taglines.

Early on the college seal proclaimed:

E caelo nobis vires: our help comes from the heavens.

An annual at the turn of the century reminded graduates:

Non scholae sed vitae discimus: we do not learn for the school, but for life.

When the union was built the words on the archway over the door intone

Progress, Patriotism, Education, and Christianity.

In the 1990's it was Extraordinary people. Extraordinary place.

And now in 2010, Make your life count.

Tag lines come and go. Some ought to go quicker than others.

And our current one, while not unredeemable,  
 carries some important risks when it stands alone.

It has a judgmental assertion –

that is weighted toward agency and ignores the context and process of what we  
 are about.

It also sets an agenda for some arbitrary deciding about who's life counts –  
 what is good enough and who is valued.

Think about this example.

After graduation, a student is deciding between the Peace Corps and caring for  
 an ailing parent. What story would we put up on our web page in this instance?

And who will decide?

One more tag... help me with this one if you know it...

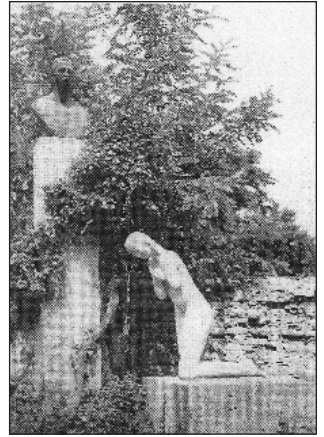
I'm a mac user and when Apple computer was first advertising

Think outside the ----- box,

Let me say what I'm thinking a little outside the box.

You have a photograph before you.

The sculptor Constantin Brancusi, in 1907, was asked by a widow to make a portrait bust of her husband for his grave in Bruzau, a small town northeast of Bucharest. Later, she asked Brancusi, to create another figure for the garden... This second piece marked a turning point in Brancusi's development as an artist. This shift would permanently alter the language and content of Brancusi's work, as he gradually realized that what concerned him was "not the outer form but the idea, the essence of things."



I've chosen this dynamic sculptural encounter because these pieces reminded me of the dilemma that the liberal arts tradition faces as the shared narratives of the modern world give way to the deconstructed, post-modern view of reality and we turn over the defining to someone else.

Of course the liberal arts count and yes the tradition has changed and responded to the times... but it's this notion that it's not the outer form, but the idea, the essence of things... that we are about. And that's what counts.

## **“Do the Liberal Arts Count? For What? Or: My Lost Weekend”**

**Deborah L. Goodwin**



My contribution today stems from an experience I had this summer: a nearly all-expenses paid trip to a seminar on the state of the liberal arts. The seminar’s goal, according to its organizers, was “To clarify the meaning of liberal education for its practitioners and to foster a deeper commitment to its preservation.... The project proceeds from the recognition that liberal education is an ‘essentially contested’ concept deriving from...differing, yet interrelated, intellectual traditions.” The “essential contest” that governed our discussions was the titanic clash between Robert Maynard Hutchins and John Dewey, over the purpose, structure, and fate of higher education in the U.S. You may hear more about this, later, so I won’t detain you now. In any event, I thought the weekend would be worthwhile, given the many challenges that face us as we try to articulate the benefits of liberal education to an increasingly skeptical culture.

Several of the attendees were from church-related institutions that don’t claim long histories as “liberal arts” colleges: our schools were founded for the honorable purpose of training teachers, pastors, nurses, etc., and only later laid claim to other trappings. Others were from public institutions. A few were from well-endowed private four-year colleges, originally church related, but whose ties to that past are long-severed: classic versions of American liberal arts institutions. With the possible exception of the last group, we came from settings in which the *prima facie* benefit of a liberal arts education is increasingly difficult to assert, much less demonstrate. We often deal with first-generation or non-traditional students who have not been inculcated into the social networking benefits of elite higher ed. Oddly, they believe that they should be able to Do Something with their educations once they graduate.

I can’t say that the ethos of the organizers was that of Hutchins precisely, but I can say it was NOT that of Dewey. The event’s moderator was adamantly opposed to the aims of the American Association of Colleges and Universities. Until this past July, I had not realized that the AAC&U was a tool of capitalist oppression and bourgeois groupthink. It is the spawn of John Dewey, seeking to muddy the high-minded pursuit of liberal learning with crass, marketplace considerations, like, um, citizenship. The principal champion of anti-Deweyism argued vigorously for the benefits of liberal learning as an alternative to the commodification of our young people’s creative capacities. So far, so good. During the seminar, some of us tried to discuss how we might help our students, especially our most vulnerable students worried about debt and jobs, to have the strength and courage to see the world differently. We were told that that very question was central to the



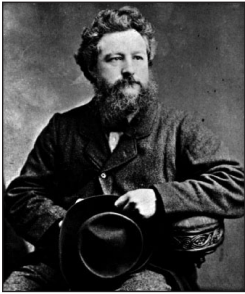
seminar, but any discussion that touched on practical challenges faced by colleges and students like ours was ruled out of bounds. Also foreclosed was discussion of higher education as an opportunity for self-directing self-discovery as promulgated by Dewey. In the end, we understood that an elite education in the liberal arts (whatever they are) would be a tool for cultural transformation, at least for people with the wherewithal to gain access to it.

This experience caused me some perplexity and even lost sleep. More than anything I was troubled by the dichotomous thinking that dominated the seminar. Any concession to the real world was a betrayal of the ideal; trying to articulate the “usefulness” of liberal education was a step down the road to perdition. Where and when, I wondered, did the liberal arts flourish in this reified state? What golden age left my summertime friends swooning in nostalgia? *Où sont les neiges d’antan?* The seminar didn’t engage with questions of historical contingency. If it had, I would have pointed out that at least one Golden Age – the one that gave us academic regalia and a great drinking song (*Vivat academia! Vivant professores!*) – was in fact a time of ruthless competition and all-out careerism. I speak of Paris in the twelfth century. Scholars from all over Europe sat at the feet of Parisian masters in the hopes of networking their ways into good jobs. The situation was so woeful that the scholar Hugh of the Abbey of Saint Victor, wrote a treatise prescribing an ideal course of study in the liberal arts. In it, he castigated those scholars who tried to make their lives count by seeking profit, and not the transformation of the human person.

Hugh shows the liberal arts for what they are: not the cachet of a certain social class, nor the adjuncts to a gentleman’s wardrobe. The *artes liberales* are the arts of freedom -- the skills, the disciplines of a free person. From the seven arts (grammar, rhetoric, logic, music, geometry, astronomy, and philosophy), Hugh elaborated a whole system of human learning. Not for him the dichotomy between head and hand: if we are to be restored to our whole humanity, no skill, no practice is excluded. The life of the mind in his scheme is a life of embodiment, since God gave us our bodies as well as our minds. Both are corrupted by sinful self-seeking, but the remedies are at hand: everything from weaving to theology, theatre to economics, medicine to rhetoric has a place in Hugh’s restorative tree of knowledge.

You may have noticed that I slipped in the G-word. Yes, this is a religiously-oriented scheme. Another irony of the seminar was its insistence that the liberal arts helped people live better lives, without being able to describe how those lives were better (what made them count). I pointed out the vague but insistent gestures to the Transcendent in our seminar readings, noting that the Catholic tradition of liberal education (borrowed by Lutherans) has never had a problem naming it. The fact that our orientation to the Transcendent provides us with a counter-cultural place to stand outside market capitalism didn’t generate much interest in that venue. I see it, nonetheless, as a distinctive gift—to us as practitioners of liberal education,

and central to the education that we provide. We can help our students to say “no” to the increasingly crass, vulgar, exploitative culture in which we live. We can say it with precision and without a coy appeal to “useless knowledge” that somehow makes people—people who can afford it—better.



If the God-word troubles you, fear not. I can suggest an alternative or companion approach. William Morris, the English polymath (poet, artist, linguist, designer of books, buildings and furnishings), made a spectacular public conversion to Socialism in 1883, at the age of 49. A traitor to his leisured class, he predictably decried the human and social ravages of industrialization, its enormous environmental toll, its concentration of productive capacity in the hands of a few. Less predictably, perhaps, he advocated for reorganizing society to ensure for all people the capacity to create, pursue, and surround themselves with ... beauty, the fruit of joy. His slogan? “Art made by the people and for the people, as a joy to the maker and the user.” In his manifesto, “Art under Plutocracy,” Morris argued “... all art, even the highest, is influenced by the conditions of labour of the mass of mankind... [Any] art which professes to be founded on the special education or refinement of a limited body or class must of necessity be unreal and shortlived. Art is man’s expression of his joy in labour.”

Morris gave this talk at Balliol College, Oxford. Next day, the Times reported that Balliol’s Master would have refused the use of the hall had he known ahead of time the contents of the speech, in which Morris also argued for the right of all people to a healthy working life, comprised of “variety, hope of creation, and the self-respect which comes of a sense of usefulness.”

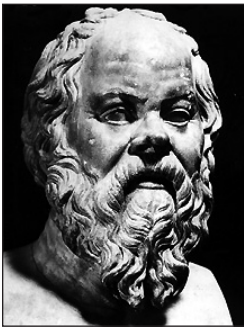
None of this came to pass, of course: if anything, popular culture in the U.K. is more vulgar and crass than our own – although they have some nice wallpaper. I’m reminded of the American labor movement: workers, by hard battles, won limited rights to determine their working conditions. Offered the choice of controlling the flow of work and design of products, or wage and hour guarantees, most unions chose the latter. So much for “variety and hope of creation.” Part of the problem, I think, is that we don’t have much confidence in our ability to know beauty, much less create it. Morris would argue that cheap manufactured goods, produced by equal measures of cynicism and profiteering, have dimmed our eyes. He offers, then, what could be a fruitful alternative to the non-religious among us, a way to resist the process[es] that empty life of happiness, that drain the world of aesthetic value: to make, teach and share beauty, knowing these are revolutionary acts. It’s another way to assert the transformative power of liberal education, one that holds usefulness and idealism together, as crafts and arts of life.

## “The Art of Living”

### Douglas Huff



There has been some discomfort and unease on campus about Gustavus’ latest mantra – Make Your Life Count. Some people are uncomfortable with this counting business. After all, doesn’t everyone’s life count? Isn’t all human life sacred? Are we trying to say that some lives count more than others? Are we saying that some people are better than other people? Is our holy principle of human equality being undermined? What are we trying to say when we say, Make Your Life Count?



Socrates, of course, would not have been troubled by this sound bite—nor would Plato or Aristotle. There was no moral egalitarianism in their world. Some people were obviously better morally than other people. Of course it is the same in our world. If you doubt this, then I suggest that the next time you have a serious moral concern and are not certain what you should do, just ask the first person you meet what you should do. No you wouldn’t do that. In fact, you won’t even ask friends indiscriminately. You will choose to ask some friends and not others. Lots of things may go into choosing one advisor over another,

but who seems to have wisdom and who doesn’t is certainly one of them. Nor are we any better off if we just take a survey of what the majority feels is the best course of action. In no other human endeavor, such as medicine or dog training, would we take the opinion of the many over the opinion of the one who seems to know what he or she is doing. These observations and references to Greek moral authorities won’t persuade anyone away from moral egalitarianism, but perhaps they will make one or two people pause, and that, of course, is the beginning of everything.

Socrates, however, goes further when it comes to lives counting when he states in the Apology that “The unexamined life is not worth living.”<sup>1</sup> The life that is not worth living certainly is not going to count for much. For Socrates, some lives are clearly meaningless and count for nothing.

The temptation here is quickly to identify what makes a life not count and then do whatever we can to avoid doing that. Now in Socrates’ case what makes a life not count is relatively straightforward. If, as he argues repeatedly, your actions and ideas do not accord with reality, if your life is based on falsehoods, then your life is obviously meaningless, worthless, and doesn’t count for anything in any context

or in any environment where truth still remains a value. Socrates spends a life time demonstrating to people that their most cherished beliefs and opinions were logically incoherent and thus could never be true.

Furthermore, if our notions and actions are unfounded, we owe anyone who corrects us and points out that we have no idea of what we are talking about a great debt of gratitude. This is not the typical response, of course. The executions of Socrates and Jesus are closer to the norm than heartfelt gratitude for correcting nonsensical beliefs.

Although Socrates' way of approaching the problem is extremely valuable - if we realize we don't know what we thought we knew, we at least can begin to search for the truth, we can begin to purify our souls of falsehoods. Still, there is another way. The art of living well may also require us to change our attitude toward life. Rather than thinking that life is something to be used up and grabbed with gusto, as when we say "he lived his life to the fullest, or "she got the most out of life", or when failure and disappointment strike, "I have nothing to expect from life anymore," we should instead think of existence as expecting something from us. Perhaps we should think we owe something to life. As Victor Frankl stresses, "...it (does) not matter what we expect from life, but rather what life expects from us."<sup>2</sup>

In short, if we as human beings have obligations to life itself, there are some things we must do if our life is to have meaning, if our life is to count. Well whatever they are, they surely come after personal and familial obligations of survival and well-being are met. Yes, the harvest is in, the barns are full, there's money in the bank, everything is covered by insurance, family trips are taken, gifts are given, the children are educated and married if they want to be married. And to top it off you've stopped drinking and smoking, and run three miles a day.

Now is there something else you were supposed to do to make your life count? Well yes, there is. If you owe something to the miracle of existence, then you'd better respond or you're just another person who managed to grab as much pleasure, power, and fame as he or she could every time the brass ring came around. Now, however audacious it may seem of me to tell you what those things are - there are only three, by the way - I would nevertheless like to tell you what they are. But I see I'm out of time.

The three things you must do to make your life count are: 1) you must help the poor, 2) you must build a great civilization, and 3) you must search for God.

Number two is the one that preoccupies many of us here today, and is the place where we may fulfill our obligation to life most completely. Of course, a great civilization requires a high culture - great art, great science, and great philosophy. The deterioration of American culture can frightens us. There are moments when it doesn't seem possible to escape all the vulgarity that surrounds us, corroding our

institutions and undermining our noblest aspirations. I'm starting to sound like Cicero. But this is the main tragedy of American life: people's colossal disrespect for truth, along with an utter contempt for facts, and finally a cavalier contempt for each other. We are surrounded by barbarians, and like the medieval monks before us, our job is to huddle together in cloisters, keeping the remnants of civilization alive while we pass the torch to each succeeding generation and await a better day. This we must do.

<sup>1</sup> Plato, APOLOGY, 38a.

<sup>2</sup> Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1962), p. 77

“2 + 3 = 5”

## Lisa Heldke



The chapel homilists among my fellow panelists have schooled me to understand that, in eight minutes, you can say three things—or maybe it was Hegel who taught me this. At any rate, here are my three: Number 2 We’re *going* to have a tagline. Not only is “Make your life count” more tolerable than our last tagline—“spectacular, spectacular,”—but the exhortation is actually pedagogically useful. Number 3: When it comes to making lives count, the question of what counts as counting is what William James would have called a genuine question. In being such, it is one that the liberal arts are particularly well suited to explore. Number 5: If we want to figure out how to make our lives to count, and if, as part of that endeavor, we need to figure out what counts as counting, then we are best served by a conception of the liberal arts that understands them not as a body of subjects, but as an approach—an attitude, really—to the world.

**2. We’re going to have a tagline:** In his invitation to participate in this event, Will explained why each of us had been so honored. “Lisa,” he noted, “knows about reality.” Such an ascription would be taken by many philosophers to constitute fighting words—implying as it does that, in promulgating arguments, I engage in such crude and distasteful practices as appealing to empirical evidence. But, as it turns out, Will is right; I’m consumed, above all, with the stuff of everyday reality. “Which way to the quotidian?” reads the banner under which I march. I am—at least by comparison to other philosophers—a pragmatist (with a small p).

So, as a purely pragmatic matter, I have decided to stop kicking against the particular prick of contemporary academic culture that is the college tagline. And I’ve decided to go on record as saying that, as taglines go, this one isn’t all bad. Admittedly, I’m still reeling from the fumes of our last stinker, but I’ll go out on a limb and say this tagline is pedagogically useful. Or, to put it more clearly, I’m willing to try to make “make your life count” count. The fact that it is an exhortation fraught with ambiguity and tension is, I submit, one of its strengths.

Exhibit A among the ambiguities and tensions coiled inside this four-word command is the question “what does it *mean* for a life to count?” For me, the power of the tagline lies in the fact that, even as it gives the appearance of flat-footedly telling students what to do, it flings them into the deep end of one of the most important and open-ended questions they will likely encounter. Despite the firm convictions of the just-graduated high schoolers who show up in our classes each fall, there’s nothing at all obvious or simple about the question “what sorts

of lives should count?” Rather than simply handing us an identity already formed (“spectacular!”), the call to “Make your life count” invites them—invites us—to ruminate about just what is demanded of us.

**3. “What counts as counting?” is a Jamesian genuine question, and the liberal arts can help us to answer it:** If this tagline is to dangle from our students’ graduation gowns—and if, therefore, we faculty are here in part to help them learn how to make their lives count—then surely one of the most important (dare I say useful?) things we can do (for them and for ourselves) is to explore the question “what counts as counting?” I say this not to be cute, or arch, or annoyingly G.E. Moore-ish. The question is one halfway decent formulation of just the kind of question that faculty at liberal arts colleges have historically thought students of the liberal arts ought to ask. In asking “what does it mean for a life to count?” one plunges headlong into the kind of meaning-of-life investigation in which, oh, I don’t know, Socrates engaged. William James would call it a *genuine* question, by which he means three things: first, when confronted with it, we find we must answer it (it is “forced,” in James’s terms); second, we find that the question and answer matter to us a great deal (it is “momentous”); and third, we realize that the question admits of more than one *good* answer (it is “living”).

Buried in our snappy tagline, then, is a genuine question worthy of our serious attention, a question related to other, more familiar, Big Questions like “what is the meaning of life?” and “what is the relationship between the good, the true, and the beautiful?” It goes without saying that the multiform variations of such B.Q.s are the stock in trade of the liberal arts. This particular variation—what does it mean to count?—just might emit a ringtone that *just might* catch the ears of students who have grown up working their way down the requirement lists of whatever school or organization or social networking website in which they are presently enrolled; students who acknowledge they choose to do things because they will “look good” on some other list they will have to compile later. *That* list they will compile (on high quality bond in 11-point type) in the somewhat-desperate hope that ticking off the items on it will guarantee them a job—a good job, hopefully, but failing that, a job that pays money. To this student, the idea that there might actually *be* a list of things labeled “Things That Make a Life Count,” and the idea that she could accomplish the items on that list and thus know her life counted—to such a student, such an idea might understandably be very appealing. (Some days I’d give my eye teeth for such a list.)

Faculty, on the other hand, find it irritating that many students come to Gustavus carrying Franklin Planners stuffed with achievements they hope to inventory: clubs to have joined, good works to have done, internships to have been *awesome*. Their tendency may irritate us, and we may justify our irritation with high-minded arguments. But our irritation with them will not make them arrive here as different people. And giving rein to that irritation will squander an important opportunity—to help students deepen, clarify, transform, *move* the questions most urgent to them. Perhaps, rather than wishing that our irritation would have the power to send us different students, we could rejoice in the clarity and importance

of that opportunity. Conveniently (and profoundly) enough, the question “what counts as counting?” connects to a set of questions that matter enormously to students: “what am I going to do with it?” and its cousin “will it help me get a job?”

**5. A liberal arts education is an attitude thing:** I’m a fearful flyer. In the days before I succumbed to the siren song of Ativan (back when I was still lashing myself to the plane’s mast and pouring wax in my ears), I used to cope with my fear by striking up an animated conversation with the person sitting next to me. I’d start out with a winsome opener, something along the lines of “I’m petrified, and I may grab your leg during the flight. Don’t take it personally,” then move on to some more inviting topic—themselves. Before long, we’d be deep in conversation about their life, their job, their family.

I remember a number of these impromptu interviews with surprising vividness, given that, during them, most of my attention was occupied with keeping the plane aloft. One day I talked with a man who worked in a large industrial shop that repaired hydraulic equipment. The shop had recently undergone a reorganization and the guy was still reeling from the changes, which included bumping him upstairs to management. I had just that morning forgotten everything I ever knew about how hydraulic equipment works, but despite my comprehensive ignorance, I found my legs and asked the man about his work, and the impact of the changes he’d experienced. And you know what? It was really *interesting*. Before long, I was so engrossed, I could almost breathe! At the end of our two hour flight, he paid me the ultimate compliment. “Thanks for asking me about my work; I’ve never thought about it in these ways before.”

I offer to you the moral I offer to students when I tell them this story: to be educated in the liberal arts is to be educated in the capacity to ask good questions, where by “good” I mean something like “can’t be answered yes or no, or even a, b or c; questions that transform the terms of a discussion by shifting the vantage point or revealing a previously-unquestioned assumption; questions that lead us to ask more and different questions than we’d been able to ask; “why” questions, asked a third time and not just a second.” Understood thus, there are not seven—or twelve, or even a thousand—liberal arts, because the liberal arts are not particular subjects that one studies. Instead, they constitute a spirit, an attitude, an approach *to* subject matter—any subject matter whatsoever. Including hydraulics repair.

I think our tagline can best be understood using such a conception of the liberal arts. Furthermore, I think this conception speaks most clearly to our students, and of the sort of institution Gustavus has always been. I’ll conclude with a word of explanation about each of these claims. First, given our times, exploring what makes a life count will best be done if we understand the liberal arts as an attitude, not as some set of pre-cut portals (call them subjects or disciplines) through which we must pass. We will be best served, as a civilization, if we cultivate our capacity to ask those perspective-shifting questions in all sorts of contexts, about all sorts of subjects. The liberal arts are better honored by a conception that finds their potential everywhere.



Second, With respect to our students, we will be (ahem) countably farther ahead in the project of liberally educating them, if we take seriously the questions they actually have. A conception of the liberal arts that stresses attitude or approach will not regard students' present interests and obsessions as limitations, but simply as the starting points from which they can launch critical, reflective inquiry. Once they launch it, we can be around to point out that the problems they've been encountering in the electronic world of social networking are not all that different from the kinds of problems explored by Anthony Trollope or Jane Austen or Yasunari Kawabata. We can, in other words, help them to locate other, often richer, sources of inquiry—sources that will help them to deepen their own questions and link them to other times and places. So, for instance, the question “how can this class matter to my future career as a (fill in the blank)?” not only has the virtue of being a pressing—a burning—question for students, but also (as I've already noted) connects profoundly with the question “what does it mean for a life to count?”

Finally, conceiving the liberal arts as an attitude or approach does not just best address our tagline and our students, but also best honors the history of this institution, an institution in which the department formerly known as business has a much longer history than the department currently known as philosophy, and in which departments of nursing and education possess similarly long and honorable pasts. Gustavus has always already been showing that the liberal arts are a matter of approach, not subject matter. “Liberal arts” isn't some property that a discipline has, or doesn't have, by nature. It is an approach to a subject matter; a way of thinking that *liberates*. I submit that Gustavus is a liberal arts college not because it has departments of classics and philosophy and literature, but because it teaches those subjects—and *also* subjects such as communication studies, nursing, and health fitness—in *ways* that encourage students to understand themselves as interpreters of, and transformers of, the world in which they find themselves.

<sup>1</sup> I loved that book, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night*. Remember how he numbered his chapters with prime numbers? I've always wanted to do that.

<sup>2</sup> Show tune scholars will immediately recognize that this is actually not our former tagline, but is in fact the title of a song from the musical *Moulin Rouge*. Here's the chorus:

Spectacular, Spectacular  
No words in the vernacular  
Can describe this great event  
You'll be dumb with wonderment  
Returns are fixed at ten percent  
You must agree, that's excellent  
And on top of your fee  
You'll be involved artistic'ly.

(<http://www.stlyrics.com/songs/m/moulinrouge9394/spectacularspectacular314064.html>) For the movie version, complete with Spanish subtitles see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N8AX2CKbPIU>

<sup>3</sup> He's right in another sense as well; my earliest serious philosophical work, and an area of ongoing interest for me, is actually philosophical realism, a highly esoteric field where, in point of fact, appeals to empirical evidence count for exactly nothing.

<sup>4</sup> More on the capital-p pragmatists later. Check out endnote 9.

<sup>5</sup> "Kick not against the pricks": I first learned this quotation from Aeschylus in just the *right sort* of pointy-headed liberal arts context—my philosophical Greek textbook. Last night (January 31, 2010), I heard it on the radio, in a song by Johnny Cash. So, there you go.

<sup>6</sup> I am going to pass over in silence the choice to render the phrase in some Helvetica-clone typeface on our website, and to use **bold face**, just in **case** we are not **attentive** enough to **notice the most important word in the phrase**.

<sup>7</sup> The crystal clarity of this phrase relies upon what philosophers call the use/mention distinction—a distinction one of our former presidents used—or did he mention it?—to great effect at a faculty meeting once. About the same great effect it probably just got from you. That's a philosophical distinction for you; always helpful in a difficult situation for clarifying something you hadn't even realized was at issue.

<sup>8</sup> After all, what great work of literature is not so fraught?

<sup>9</sup> Our tagline invites students to inquire on two levels. There's the invitation to try out various endeavors and evaluate them to see if they meet the criteria for "countiness," but there is also an invitation to continually investigate, evaluate and, yes, even reconstitute those criteria.

With respect to the latter, I am lined up on the side of those who say that the notion of what counts as counting is evolving, even as are the opportunities for making our particular lives count. (We're shooting, if you will, at a moving target.) In saying this, I acknowledge my debt to John Dewey, the capital-P Pragmatist philosopher, who not only thought that we should endeavor to create good lives, but also thought that the matter of what counts as good is itself a contingent matter, subject to emendation and reconstruction. For Dewey, it's experimentalism all the way down. Or up.

<sup>10</sup> Thus making our own lives count—once-removed, I guess. Perhaps the faculty tagline could be “Make your life meta-count.”

<sup>11</sup> Moore is the twentieth century philosopher who is perhaps most rightly criticized—er, praised—for seeking to reduce philosophy to the narrow, rigorous analysis of the meaning of words. On Moore’s watch, the study of ethics, for instance, became the study of what the word “good” can mean. But I may be in a minority, in thinking he’s part of the problem, not part of the solution.

<sup>12</sup> I’m bringing up William James here to throw Will Freiert off the scent; I told him I was going to talk about John Dewey, who is Will’s sworn enemy. William—James, that is—is Henry’s brother, and is an American Pragmatist philosopher and psychologist from the turn of the last century.

<sup>13</sup> See James’s essay “The Will to Believe,” found in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays* (London: Longman’s, Green, 1921) 1-31.

<sup>14</sup> “What part of ‘liberal arts’ did you not understand?” we might want to shriek. “All of it,” they might well want to respond. I certainly had no idea what it meant when I arrived here—as a student, I rush to add.

<sup>15</sup> Nor will having a tagline that calls attention to the tendency somehow “make it worse.” It’s a tagline; it’s not a magical device for luring students to the college. *Hamline* has the piper.

<sup>16</sup> Look where our students go professionally once they graduate; everywhere from bakeries and brew pubs to Michele Obama’s office, with healthy concentrations in service occupations, management, and industry. Our roles as their teachers give us important—albeit incremental and indirect—influence on those students’ professions. I don’t just mean we influence individual students; I mean that we (and our colleagues at other small liberal arts colleges), indirectly and in small ways influence the very shape of these professions. This is not trivial, nor is it something we should eschew. Do we think the liberal arts are important? Should we not want the fields of personal financial management and web design and chemical engineering to be shaped by liberal artistry? (Brew pubbery is already pretty well taken care of in this regard. So is coffee shopperry.)

<sup>17</sup> Concerning the value of the persistent “why” question, a philosophy colleague once described the good philosopher as being a kind of grown-up two year old who continues to ask “why” even when all possible “because” seem to have been offered.

<sup>18</sup> Obligatory reference to *Shop Class as Soulcraft* has now been inserted. Matthew B. Crawford (New York: Penguin, 2009).

<sup>19</sup> Of course the seven liberal arts are stuffed with tools, ideas and other resources for developing this capacity to ask questions. I’m not suggesting that we not draw upon them in every way that we can. But I prefer that we not think of the liberal arts as *consisting* of this set of subjects, as if they somehow own the rights to these ways of thinking, or as if only these subjects can foster such thinking.

## “Making Your Life”

### Max Hailperin

February 17, 2010



My colleagues have shown how a life can count. I will therefore turn to the remaining word in our tagline: the verb *make*. How can we hear this command to “make your life count” as different from the simpler alternative, to *live* in a way that counts? What might it mean to treat your life as an object that you make?

I want to focus on one answer that came to the fore in the 1950s through 1980s, largely thanks to a conversation between computer science and psychology. This theory of agency, which posits deliberate planning followed by plan-driven behavior, fell into academic disrepute starting in the 1980s, partly through continued progress within computer science and psychology and partly through contact with other disciplines, notably anthropology. However, theories that have passed out of academic respectability still exert a strong influence on everyday thought. Therefore, after I sketch the history of the idea, I will touch on its relevance for advising our students to make their lives count.

Computer science studies plan-driven behavior, so it was only natural at the dawn of Artificial Intelligence to see human behavior in those terms. In a seminal 1955 grant proposal, Marvin Minsky postulated that an artificial agent would think through its actions before carrying them out. This same idea made its way into the work of Allen Newell and Herbert Simon, who viewed their computer programs as simulations of the way human agency worked.

Newell and Simon’s work in turn inspired the psychologists George A. Miller, Eugene Galanter, and Karl Pribram, who wanted to break free from the behaviorist orthodoxy of stimulus-response reflexes. In 1960, they published the bold hypothesis that “A Plan is, for an organism, essentially the same as a program for a computer,…”

In the space of a few years, a loop had been closed: programmed computers were to simulate humans, which were to be understood as fundamentally like programmed computers. Being a loop, these ideas possessed a natural stability and persisted for several decades. Mounting evidence of their inadequacy was marginalized, treated as details the theory didn’t yet cover rather than core challenges.

The most influential embodiment of the planning model was the robot Shakey, built in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Shakey had two separate modules, one for planning and one for plan execution. When Shakey was given a goal, the planning module would use an abstract model of the environment to construct an entire sequence of action descriptions which, if all went well, would achieve the goal. This formal plan of action went to the plan execution module, which carried out the actions. Plan execution was not blind, however; each step in the

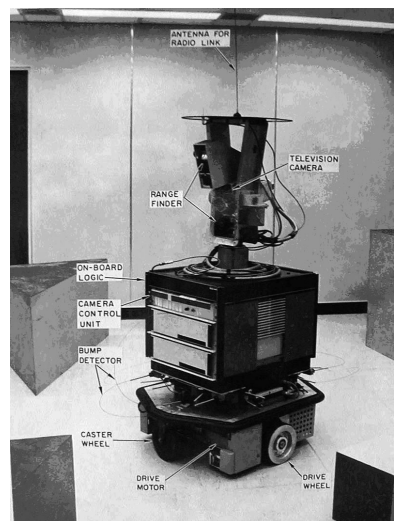
plan was accompanied by tests for the plan execution module to carry out. If the tests showed any significant deviation from expectations, the execution module would return control to the planning module, which would develop a new plan. This alternation between planning in a fantasy world and being surprised by the real world manifestly did not work well, but AI researchers throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s continued refining it.

This fog began to lift in the 1980s, principally through the work of Lucy Suchman at Xerox PARC and Phil Agre at MIT. Suchman was a Berkeley PhD student in anthropology who embedded herself in a group at Xerox studying Human-Computer Interaction, or HCI. The HCI researchers were concerned with human activity, such as photocopying, and assumed this activity consisted of the execution of a plan. This plan-execution model served them about as well as it served Shakey's designers.

Suchman brought in a radically different set of ideas, drawn from Garfinkel's ethnomethodology. In her own words,

The alternative view is that plans are resources for situated action but do not in any strong sense determine its course. . . . So, for example, in planning to run a series of rapids in a canoe, one is very likely to sit for a while above the falls and plan one's descent. The plan might go something like "I'll get as far over to the left as possible, try to make it between those two large rocks, then backferry hard to the right to make it around that next bunch." A great deal of deliberation, discussion, simulation, and reconstruction may go into such a plan. But however detailed, the plan stops short of the actual business of getting your canoe through the falls. When it really comes down to the details of responding to currents and handling a canoe, you effectively abandon the plan and fall back on whatever embodied skills are available to you. The purpose of the plan in this case is not to get your canoe through the rapids, but rather to orient you in such a way that you can obtain the best possible position from which to use those embodied skills on which, in the final analysis, your success depends.

Meanwhile at the MIT AI lab, Phil Agre came to the same conclusion. In his words, "Action is not realized fantasy but engagement with reality. In particular, thought and action are not alternated in great dollops as on the planning view but are



bound into a single, continuous, phenomenon.”<sup>9</sup> Agre was heavily influenced by philosophy, literary criticism, anthropology, and other disciplines. But he insisted that AI had something to give back, namely experience from building agents, leading to his conclusion that “mentalism is not simply an inadequate description of people, but an untenable way of life for any creature in a world of complexity.”

So what is the moral of this story? When we tell a student, “Make your life count,” there is a risk we will be misheard as suggesting that the student form a clear picture of a life that counts, reason out a chain of steps that would lead to that life, and then start executing those steps. But life doesn’t work that way; we don’t program ourselves like computers. Life is fundamentally improvisational. So should the student turn away from planning? Not at all; going into the rapids with no plan is as foolish as going in with no paddle. We just need to convey our understanding that the plan cannot be expected to determine what follows any more than the paddle does.

When we listen to stories of real lives, we recognize that life can be wholly unexpected, bringing us not merely to unexpected forks in the road, but to areas with no tracks at all. And yet we can do better than wander aimlessly. I was most recently reminded of this in a memoir by Karen Armstrong, who wrote:

I too was “unaware” of what was happening to me. There was no sudden road-to-Damascus illumination, and it was only in retrospect that I realized that the decision to write about God had been a defining moment. With no clear understanding of what I was about, I had taken the first step down a path that would lead me in a wholly unexpected direction.

And yet, though Armstrong was unaware, she was not unguided; forty pages later, she writes that

In the words of the late Joseph Campbell, we have to “follow our bliss,” find something that wholly involves and enthralls us, even if it seems hopelessly unfashionable and unproductive, and throw ourselves into this, heart and soul. As the foundress of my religious order used to say: “*Do* what you are doing!” My “bliss” has been the study of theology. For other people it may be a career in law or politics, a marriage, a love affair, or the raising of children. But that bliss provides us with a clue: if we follow it to the end, it will take us to the heart of life.

And so, in summary, that is what we have to follow to make our lives count: not a plan, but a clue.

<sup>1</sup>“The important result that would be looked for would be that the machine would tend to build up within itself an abstract model of the environment in which it is placed. If it were given a problem, it could first explore solutions within the internal abstract model of the environment and then attempt external experiments.” (from Marvin L. Minsky’s portion of “A Proposal for the Dartmouth Summer Research Project on Artificial Intelligence,” August 31, 1955)

<sup>2</sup>“Construction and investigation of this program is part of a research effort by the authors to understand the information processes that underlie human intellectual, adaptive, and creative abilities.” (A. Newell, J. C. Shaw, and H. A. Simon, “Report on a General Problem-Solving Program,” *Proceedings of the International Conference on Information Processing*, Paris, France, June 13–23, 1959, p. 256. Available as RAND Report P-1584, December 30, 1958 (revised February 9, 1959).)

<sup>3</sup>George A. Miller, Eugene Galanter, and Karl H. Pribram, *Plans and the Structure of Behavior*, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1960, p. 16.

<sup>4</sup>“Although the strengths and weaknesses of the mentalist framework manifested themselves in their attempt to build things, these authors exhibited only a partial understanding of the problems they encountered and did not manage to transcend the intellectual framework within which these problems arose.” Philip E. Agre, *Computation and Human Experience*, Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 150.

Richard E. Fikes, “Monitored Execution of Robot Plans Produced by STRIPS,” Proceedings of IFIP Congress ’71, Ljubljana, Yugoslavia, August 23-28, 1971. Available as SRI Artificial Intelligence Group Technical Note 55, April, 1971.

<sup>6</sup>The phrase “alternation between fantasy and surprise” (p. 30) and the critique of the various refinements of this approach come from Philip E. Agre and David Chapman, “What Are Plans For?,” in Pattie Maes (ed.), *Designing Autonomous Agents: Theory and Practice from Biology to Engineering and Back*, MIT Press, 1990, pp. 17–34. Available as MIT AI Memo 1050a, October, 1989.

<sup>7</sup>Lucy A. Suchman, *Human Machine Reconfigurations: Plans and Situated Actions*, 2nd Edition, Cambridge University Press, 2007.

<sup>8</sup>Suchman (2007), p. 72 (= p. 52 of the 1987 edition).

<sup>9</sup>Philip E. Agre (1997), p. 161.

<sup>10</sup>Philip E. Agre (1997), p. 151. By contrast, more recent robots (and artificial agents generally) with designs centered on engagement as part of a dynamic world have been far more successful. See, for example, Sebastian Thrun *et al.*, “Stanley: The Robot that Won the DARPA Grand Challenge,” *Journal of Field Robotics* 23(9), 2006, pp. 661-692.

<sup>11</sup>Karen Armstrong, *The Spiral Staircase: My Climb Out of Darkness*, First Anchor Books Edition, 2005, p. 265.

<sup>12</sup>Karen Armstrong (2005), p. 305.

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