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Honors Convocation
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What's So Liberal About Liberal Education?

Thank you Provost Hass. President Helm, members of the Board of Trustees, faculty colleagues, proud parents, but most of all, to you exceptionally talented Muhlenberg students, I am honored to be speaking at this special ceremony where we recognize your accomplishments and achievements.

Given the importance of this occasion, I asked one of my most reliable advisors, my college-aged daughter, for advice about what to say, thinking that she would have a good understanding of what might interest her college peers. Her suggestion came quickly. Mom, she said, just tell your students that they're awesome and that you are very proud of them – and then sit down. Everyone will feel good and your talk will definitely be remembered because it was short and sweet with a clear focus.

Obviously, her advice was given in humor, but it also reflects our desire for a simple, clear, and positive theme. We don't like to work too hard to understand the world. We prefer simple explanations that strip away complexity and context. All too often, people want their leaders, their teachers, their friends and family members to just tell them the right answer.

I would argue that the goals of liberal education directly conflict with that type of "feel good, simplistic message." But I'm not sure that we, those of us who are the liberal education guides and mentors, are always very explicit in communicating this to our students.

For the past few years, I've worked on a project with colleagues at Muhlenberg and several other small colleges to examine how students' educational experiences at our institutions affect their learning. We conducted focus groups and one-on-one interviews with seniors and asked them to tell us what it means to graduate with a liberal arts education. How do they define a liberal education?

Most students told us that to be liberally educated means that you have a broad education. A person with a liberal education knows a lot about many things. Some students listed the skills they acquired as a result of their education - writing, speaking, thinking. My personal favorite is the student who told us that a liberal arts graduate can go to a cocktail party and talk to anyone about anything.

These students have articulated what you might call the “surface outcomes” of a liberal education. And I will be the first to admit that as a 21 year old college graduate, I probably would have described my liberal education as one where I took a lot of different courses in subjects that I didn’t even know I would find interesting. However, the deeper, long-lasting value of a liberal education, plus the responsibilities that come with liberal learning, goes beyond these surface outcomes.

The Association of American Colleges and Universities defines a liberal education as “one that prepares us to live responsible, productive and creative lives in a dramatically changing world. It is an education that fosters a well-grounded intellectual resilience, a disposition toward life-long learning, and an acceptance of responsibilities for the ethical consequences of our ideas and actions.”

It’s interesting that even this influential educational organization articulates surface outcomes in most of the statement. It is only much later in the essay that the key element of liberal education, the fundamental purpose of liberal education, is articulated. “Liberal learning aims to free us from the constraints of ignorance, sectarianism and myopia.”

Individual freedom and growth lie at the very heart, the foundation, of a liberal education. And as William Cronon notes in his article, *Only Connect*, this type of education frees and liberates us. It allows a person to fulfill the promise of his or her own highest abilities. The possibilities are endless. There is no set path. No clear answer.

That’s both an exciting and frightening realization. A liberal education provides you the foundation, but also the responsibility, to achieve your very best. It gives you the freedom so that you can accomplish this. However, exercising that freedom is a much more difficult and complex matter.

Eric Fromm was a practicing psychotherapist and social theorist whose important work, *Escape from Freedom*, was published in 1941 when the world was being threatened by forces of fascism. Fromm grew up in Germany in an Orthodox Jewish family and his writings about human nature and society were influenced by both Freud and Marx. Fromm viewed freedom as the central characteristic of human nature. In some ways, a life devoid of personal freedom, one that is solely determined by biological or by socioeconomic determinism may seem appealing to some.

You have a clear life plan. No need for much soul-searching, no identity crisis. If you grew up in the Middle Ages in a family of royals, you pretty much knew what your fate would be. It's not necessary to make an appointment with Career Services. You are destined for the life of a royal. In terms of biological determinism, we don't see animals thinking much about personal freedom; although, one of my cats does try to escape from the house all the time. However, his everyday behavior is fairly predictable, governed by basic instinct. No need to sign up for the mouse-catching workshop and I don't hear any moral debates between our cats about the ethics of scratching the furniture.

Freedom is one of our most revered democratic values. We talk a lot about our freedom and the importance of spreading freedom around the globe. In fact, many people have given their very lives for freedom. However, freedom can be a difficult yoke to bear. Fromm's central thesis is that we often try to escape from the expression of our individual freedom because that path takes less work and effort.

Our escape from freedom can take one of three forms:

- 1) First, we can align ourselves with powerful others and become part of the authority. In essence, we are giving up control to the authority.
- 2) Second, we can escape from our freedom by attempting to destroy ourselves or others. Fromm sees this route as the cause of much of the aggression, violence and self-destruction in the world.
- 3) And third, we can mindlessly conform to society, showing what Fromm calls automaton conformity to avoid individual decisions and to literally blend into society and lose our personal freedom to think and act.

When you leave these hallowed halls, you may be tempted to escape the intellectual engagement and ethical obligations that freedom requires. But your Muhlenberg education, your liberal education, has equipped you to rise above that temptation. What is it about liberal education that will help you fulfill the destiny of freedom? Your education has taught you three invaluable lessons: 1) to pay attention, 2) to question assumptions, and 3) to take risks.

So, what does it mean to pay attention? It means that you pay attention not only to your own thoughts, ideas and behaviors, but to the ideas and behaviors of those around you. You listen; really listen, closely and critically to what you are saying and to what others are saying. You pay attention to how you view the world and to how others who are different from you understand the world. You collect data and seek out evidence. And you suspend judgment until patterns emerge.

To avoid the escape from freedom, you also question assumptions. You avoid simplified explanations for events and situations. You're not threatened by ambiguity. You actively examine your own biases and perspectives, as well as those of others. One of my Statistics students told me that she can't read about research in a newspaper without critically evaluating the methodology, results and conclusions. She said that it takes her longer to read the article and she now has to think harder about what she is reading. In fact, she complained that she no longer can just read something; she is compelled to analyze the text. I was ecstatic when she told me this. She couldn't stop herself from critically evaluating what she read. Critical analysis had become second nature to her. This act of questioning assumptions is an essential component of liberal education.

Finally, you exercise your freedom in action by taking risks. You don't always take the easy path or the straight path. You deliberately choose the challenging task. Speak out for your beliefs and stand up for justice. Be passionate about what is important to you and don't succumb to Fromm's automaton conformity. Taking risks is scary, it's difficult. But the consequence of not taking risks is not fully achieving your potential. You may fail. But then you evaluate and analyze the situation, by going back and paying attention, collecting evidence, examining the assumptions that guided your decision and taking another risk.

For the seniors here who will be graduating and leaving Muhlenberg very shortly, you may assume that your learning will be completed when you step across the stage and receive your degree. You fulfilled all the requirements. All the paperwork is turned in. Your work is done. But actually the true value of your Muhlenberg experience can only be realized through life-long engagement in liberal learning. You're not finished yet and in fact, you've just begun.

The valuable outcome of a liberal education is that it provides you the capacity to continue to grow, to learn, to nurture your intellect, and it obligates you to use the power of your education in the service of justice and community. That may seem like a daunting task, but I am confident that you are well-equipped to achieve it. Your liberal education gives you the freedom to fulfill this promise. That's what's so liberal about a liberal education!

And by the way, you're all really awesome and we are very proud of you.

Thank you!