

Honors Convocation Address

KIMBERLY BLESSING, Ph.D.

Dr. Kimberly Blessing, professor of philosophy, delivered this address at the 60th Annual Buffalo State College Honors Convocation.

April 17, 2017
Performing Arts Center, Rockwell Hall



BUFFALO STATE
The State University of New York

Educating For Humanity

Introduction

Educating for humanity: How should we educate our students for living in the 21st century? The traditional purpose of liberal education – the education a *free* person should have – is to prepare students to exercise the rights and assume the responsibilities of freedom. Liberally educated people are typically broadly educated in the humanities and the sciences, including mathematics. In other words, the humanities and the sciences help prepare you to be a free person. Today I am going to focus attention on the value of the humanities, or human sciences. For it within the humanities that I find my home as a philosopher.

II. Core Human Capacities

When I was coming out of graduate school and just starting my career in philosophy, Professor Martha Nussbaum was a philosophy rock star. Graduated from Harvard, Nussbaum made her name by working on ancient philosophy. Over the years I've heard her speak several times. Once I took a group of students to hear her talk when she was invited to inaugurate the Law School at the University of Toledo. After her talk, a couple of my students asked her to stand for a group photo, and she was more than gracious in granting their multiple requests. I was so happy to find out that not only was she a brilliant philosopher but she was also a kind person. Dr. Nussbaum is currently a distinguished philosophy professor at the University of Chicago. She is also a public intellectual who is a strong advocate for the humanities. Today I'd like to share her ideas about the value of the humanities, which she talks about in terms of core human capacities.¹ I would also like to suggest ways that you apply her ideas to your own education and undergraduate experience.

Nussbaum is worried about education and the future of the humanities. It's not a new worry, and many share her concern that we are increasingly treating education as though its primary goal were to teach students to be economically productive rather than citizens who can think for themselves, criticize tradition and authority, and understand the significance of another person's sufferings and achievements. She argues that these so-called soft-skills, or core human capacities, are essential for maintaining healthy democracies and developing a "decent world culture." It is the humanities that can inculcate three essential core capacities, namely: (i) searching critical thinking, (ii) global citizenship, and (iii) empathy. I'll take them up one by one.

¹ From Nussbaum's *Not For Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (Princeton University Press, 2010).

III. Critical Thinking

First, is searching critical thinking. I've come to dislike the term 'critical thinking' – it's so overused so that it doesn't mean anything anymore. But this idea goes back to Socrates' notion of examined living – of being a thoughtful and reflective person who is not guided by authority and who knows what she stands for. Socrates argued that democracy needs citizens who can think for themselves and reason together about their choices rather than just deferring to authority. We need to hold politicians and global business leaders accountable. But we can only do this if we know how to think critically about what we hear, test logic, and imagine alternatives to bad arguments – and, just as in ancient Athens, there are many bad arguments out there. Liberally educated people don't want to be told what to think about Russia or China, they want to figure this out for themselves. As we live through this so called "post-truth era," we need people who know how to think, and think for themselves, who are doggedly determined to get it right, to get at the truth, and be guided by facts.

Nussbaum argues that starting with young children, we need to teach them how to think critically. In fact, young children are quite adept at recognizing bad arguments from their parents – "because I said so." We need to encourage critical examination and challenging of authority, and continue this in increasingly formal and sophisticated ways as children move through school. Applied to the university, this means that all students should study philosophy. This may sound self-serving coming from a professor of philosophy, but philosophy is the only discipline that formally concerns itself with learning how to think for yourself. One recent study in the UK shows that just one hour of philosophy a week yielded two months of progress in reading and math outcomes for school children. We also know that philosophy majors score the highest on the LSAT, Law School Admissions Test, and the GRE, Graduate Record Exam. In other words, philosophy works!

John Stuart Mill claimed the Scottish educational system was better than the English system because it encouraged all university students to read the dialogues of Plato. Reading the dialogues of Plato helps one learn how to think in a way that nothing else does because it's impossible to remain passive in reading his dialogues. So start reading Plato's dialogues. Form a Socrates Society or a Plato Reading Group. Or ask one of your professors to read with you. Once you get the hang of how to read Plato, you can do it on your own. And you can re-read Plato's dialogues for the rest of your life. Over 25 years of teaching Plato's *Apology* every semester, I never tire of reading it.

This kind of thinking requires introspection and self-examination. For this you are going to need to unplug. You need to find a space that is peaceful and quiet with no distractions

-- an *intimate* space that is all yours. Don't post, tweet, or share your space with anyone else, not even your parents. It should be a beautiful place, because beauty will inspire you and elevate your thinking. This space could be a corner in an art gallery or church, or under a tree in a beautiful park. We are lucky because Buffalo offers an abundance of all three.

Finally, bear in mind that this kind of independent thinking, or thinking for your self, means going against the herd – not being a sheep. Studies show that Millennials are much more deferent to their parents than Baby Boomers were, and perhaps much more deferent to authority in general. Growing up is never easy, but “a child who never rebels remains a child forever.”

IV. Global Citizenship

The second core capacity we need for living in the 21st century is global citizenship. Under the old Enlightenment we embraced the notion of Empire. Now we need to focus on the notion of equality – the idea that *all* human beings have equal human dignity. This means that we need to become really curious about all humans, instead of purveying false ideas or stereotypes. Nussbaum argues that genuine curiosity about humans would force us to think courageously and address glaring inequalities among countries. Income inequality is one of the great moral issues of our day – it affects human rights, women's rights, and minority rights. As nationalist populist sentiment sweeps across our nation and Europe, we need to be educated for global citizenship more than ever. Now is not the time to shut ourselves off to others, but to openly embrace learning about people all over the world.

To be a global citizens university students need to acquire knowledge of world history, global economy, and major world religions. Instead of parroting narratives you've learned from your professors, you need to study these disciplines in critical ways, assessing historic, statistical evidence, and belief systems. Former Secretary of State Madeline Albright suggests that the failure of Americans to understand world religious traditions “poses one of the great challenges to our public diplomacy.” History programs and anthropology departments can help educate you about religion. But religious claims also need to be assessed in terms of their truth. This can only be taught by theologians or scholars of religion and philosophy, in programs that are dedicated to religious studies.

Global citizens would also benefit from knowing a foreign language. The best way to learn a foreign language and understand a different culture, is to travel to another country. By having a country of comparison, you'll better understand your own language and culture. When you can read literature in another language you gain a deeper insight into that people and culture. And there is nothing like the exhilarating challenge of trying to

communicate with foreign speakers on *their* soil, not just ours. Not only will it make you a better communicator in your own language, it will humble you. Globalism, as opposed to nationalism, encourages humility, a virtue in short supply these days.

As an undergraduate, I spent a year in France, which was hands down, the single best decision I ever made during my college years. Putting out that money, which I didn't really have, has paid dividends in terms of experiences and friendship. I discovered new worlds I would have never known. To this day it continues to enrich my life in immeasurable ways. Studying abroad might mean tacking on another year of college. That is okay. It took me five years to graduate and I turned out reasonably well. There are also added expenses. But one advantage of attending a non-elite public college is that these expenses need not be insurmountable. If you are close to graduation, travel after graduation. Join the Peace Corps, take a job as an *au pair* or go teach English in another country. Get out of Dodge. Go and explore the globe.

Finally, the third core capacity that humans need for living in the 21st century is empathy. I find this one of the most enlightening aspects of Nussbaum's argument. The capacity for empathy requires you to *really* think what it might be like to be in the shoes of someone who is different from yourself, whether it is by race, or gender, or sexuality or distance in culture or religion. This also requires that we really know ourselves, for we can't fully hope to understand others if we don't fully understand ourselves. Nussbaum calls for a "humble and very genuinely curious" attempt at empathy, which requires training and refining "the sympathetic imagination."

Mill also recommended this for university students, what he called aesthetic education. While philosophy teaches you how to think *critically*, the creative arts develop your capacity for thinking *sympathetically* about the lives of fellow citizens. At any given time, there are always going to be groups that are rendered invisible – say, Muslims, or Mexicans, or Asians. Sympathetic thinking encourages us to see invisible groups, by cultivating "the inner eye." We all have blind spots, but aesthetic education helps us to *see* people more clearly. Read books, attend poetry readings, visit museums, attend a symphony or play. It is through these activities that you will develop your moral imagination and become more empathetic.

V. Science

Finally, although I've spent my time talking about the humanities, one of my favorite undergraduate classes was Physics for Poets. I had to work hard to earn a B. But for one sublime moment, I grasped Einstein's notion of curved space-time and theory of relativity. It was exhilarating. Too often it is thought that the humanities can do fine, even hope to flourish, without the sciences. Post-modernists, with their rejection of truth

and objectivity, have contributed to this isolation by completely disengaging from science and mathematics. To be well-educated and responsible citizens, however, we all need at least basic literacy in the sciences and mathematics. How else can we think deeply or speak intelligently about some of the most pressing moral issues of our day: AI, or artificial intelligence, climate change, abortion, stem cell therapy, end-of-life decisions. Historically, the sciences and humanities have depended on each other. We need to return to this notion, and insist that a liberally educated person has at least a basic literacy in the sciences and mathematics, as well as in the humanities.

VI. Conclusion

Let me conclude, by summarizing my main points. Liberal education is the only education for free persons. Liberal education will prepare you for assuming the rights and responsibilities of freedom, the kind of freedom that is necessary for healthy democracies and a decent world culture. Educate yourself broadly in the humanities and the sciences, including mathematics. Regarding the humanities, or human sciences, study philosophy because it teaches you how to think for yourself so that you are not guided by authority and tradition. Study world religions, economics, history, and foreign languages because you'll be able to approach global issues as a world citizen. Finally, pursue study and practice in the creative arts for it will foster a capacity for empathy. You are a free person faced with a choice. Choose to educate yourself for humanity – your own and the collective human race.