“The Greatest Way to Connect”

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I hereby affirm that this is an original essay and my own work.
The Greatest Way to Connect

“Ahhh crap!” My coworker slams their hand on the counter in our office. A tense energy fills the room. Eight people are walking towards our dock and have come to see the beauty of the Wisconsin River. As a tour guide of a local boating company, it’s my job to show them that beauty while cracking a cheesy pun or two along the way, namely because we’re in Wisconsin. As they draw closer, I can see they are people of differing ethnicity. It prompts a nasty slur from my coworker. I respond by saying this is an opportunity to practice understanding another culture, but they’re quick to dismiss that suggestion. As I excuse myself from their fuming to greet our incoming passengers, I go into “tour guide” mode, all smiles and good vibrations. I know they probably aren’t going to tip us, but that doesn’t bother me. It’s never personal; their culture just doesn’t practice that social custom.

We explored this clash of traditionally American practices and foreign cultures in my multicultural literature class. During my freshman year our English professor exposed us to a whole host of American subcultures. The books we read gave us insights into their struggles, practices, and an appreciation for our country’s rich diversity. As you can see, I’ve found plenty of application for that literature in the real world. The only funny part about this story is I failed out of that class; miserably.

You see, I didn’t ACTUALLY read those books until I was an ocean away from the classrooms of UW-Baraboo. I was living in a house in the Pardo District of Cebu in the Philippines with my grandfather. This was part of a strange, but important period of my life. I’d save up money over the summer months then blast off towards a new city with the intent of “finding myself.” As to what that actually entailed, well, I hadn’t the faintest idea. Sometimes it
involved playing keyboard for a Grateful Dead cover band. Other times it meant donning the role of a sexually confused Charlie Brown on stage. But, most of the time, it came down to a lot of reading. I voraciously consumed novel after novel, exposing my mind to different philosophies, lifestyles, and plenty of dragons. These adventures were fun, but during the course of those travels and books, I came to two realizations. One, the world was a fascinating, but vast place; if I was to have any hope of thriving as a person in this Digital Age and helping better the global community, I’d need to learn how to navigate the endless sea of information within it. Two, being a broke creative in the city wasn’t nearly as sexy or fulfilling as RENT had made it out to be. These epiphanies lead me back to the halls of UW-Baraboo/Sauk County as a nontraditional returning adult student.

Effective global citizens who can bridge the gap between borders are in high demand. One great tool this requires is empathy, which is, according to UW-Madison Professor William Cronon, one of the core tenets of a liberal arts education (4). Throughout the course of a liberal arts degree, students are exposed to a multitude of different cultures, ideologies, and sciences. This semester alone I’ve been exposed to stoicism, empiricism, determinism, fatalism, and various other -isms that drive students’ mad—mad with caffeine and Ben and Jerry’s ice cream to sustain them through their pages and pages of reading. However, in this reading, the supposed curse of academic toil is actually a blessing in disguise: students get an opportunity to appreciate cultures and worldviews far removed from our own. In seeing other people and philosophies through the refined lens literature provides, students can discover their personal values while developing empathy for other lifestyles along the way. On the importance of reading, Philosopher Martha Nussbaum writes that, “Stories provide us with the opportunity to live more lives than our own and to understand human problems from other people’s points of view” (qtd.
in N. Goldfarb 4). Though this sounds like abstract musings from the proverbial ivory tower, scientific evidence backs these claims as well. Washington University’s psychology department discovered a direct correlation between visualization while reading and increased prosocial behaviors (309). By mentally placing ourselves in another’s shoes, we connect to their struggles and feel their emotions. Connection can lead to cooperation and cooperation on a wide scale leads to a better world.

Reading significantly increased my quality of life. Novels on stoicism and psychology showed me how to weather anxious thoughts and a really depressive disposition. Biographies on actors and musicians gave a glimpse of the future struggles that life might entail. If I hadn’t read those books, maybe I’d still be in Madison, drunk, depressed, and playing music I wasn’t particularly fond of. (Sorry Deadheads, Jerry Garcia’s singing is just not my cup of tea.) That aside, books like *Infinite Jest* which challenged my conception of what a meaningful life entailed lead me back to the halls of higher education.

The liberal arts approach to literature has enriched my reading inside and outside of the classroom. Casual readers never experience the total immersion, dialogues, and deliberate reflection that are cultivated in a classroom. In philosophy, we dive into texts, thoroughly examining arguments and the logic beneath the words of history’s greatest thinkers. It’s hard to imagine Plato from Ancient Greece, a significant intellectual of the Western world, having flawed logic in his arguments, but believe it or not, there are. The majority of my second exam consisted of diligently searching for those flaws. During that process I became intimately familiar with Plato’s views, the logical fallacies within them, and possible rebuttals to my arguments. It drove me temporarily mad, but I walked away from those readings with a profound respect for the examined life. It’s become something of a pop culture meme to scoff at
philosophy, but many of the world’s movers and shakers had a deep love for the study of wisdom. Tech entrepreneur Steve Jobs, postmodern author David Foster Wallace, and renowned jazz pianist Bill Evans all studied philosophical concepts in tandem with their respective crafts allowing them to avoid the narrow trappings of a single focus in favor of the wide mental landscape cultivated by constant exposure to different fields of study.

Spinoza’s Dictum, a concept I learned in my second week of school states, “make ceaseless efforts not to ridicule, [and] not to scorn human actions, but to understand them.” This found immediate application at my workplace. It served as a reminder to extend compassion and understanding to both coworkers and customers. Hate besets only more hate and the only way we’ll ever escape that vicious cycle is to get in touch with the trait that makes us most human; our ability to empathize with and find the good in one another, no matter how small that good may be. With the advent of globalization, I can’t imagine anything more practical than the liberal arts education I’m receiving at UW-Baraboo/Sauk County. The range of ideas it exposes students to helps them navigate a world that is growing increasingly more and more complex. The empathy it fosters leads to nuanced communication and understanding that cannot be found in a technical education. These two essential skills will give us a fighting shot at bridging the gap between borders and differing ideologies. For a world in conflict, something like that is absolutely priceless.
This essay is dedicated to Claire Reinke, Dan Abnett, David Foster Wallace, Kelly Dwyer, Marc Seals, Karen Evenson, Tom Neal, Dale Murray, Lauren Love, the professors at Boo-U, my wonderful father, mother, brother, and all my loving friends, both close, far, and gone. All of these people played an integral part in my development as a writer and person or helped see me through some of the most difficult moments of my life through their love, support, and intelligence. I can’t ever and will never be able to thank all of you enough.

To anyone whom I may have forgotten, just know that I frantically typed this up, and even if your name didn’t appear, that doesn’t mean you are any less close to my heart. I just get really scatter brained sometimes is all.

Like right now.

Works Cited

