

Will My Family Starve If I Major in Literature?

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Of course not!

In part two of this essay I argue the *vocational* value of a literature major: it prepares you for a wide spectrum of useful and interesting jobs.¹ In part three I make specific suggestions as to how to form a concrete and realistic career plan that will lead you from PHC to God's next step for you. But first I want to briefly explain why this essay is necessary in the first place.

I: A Widespread Prejudice

In America today there exists a widespread (and understandable) prejudice against majoring in the humanities. Until quite recently there were no other majors. To attend university or college meant to study the classics, to immerse yourself in the humanities. With the Enlightenment, Deism, and the "shrinking of God" in the eighteenth century, the humanities, and "higher education" as it had existed for many centuries, first began to founder, for obvious reasons.² The humanities have always been about truth, goodness, and beauty. All three of these rest squarely and ultimately on faith in God. With Naturalism, Nihilism, and the "death of God" in the nineteenth century, the humanities also died. Why ask the big questions if there are no answers? The twentieth century fallout of this vast intellectual and cultural movement through modernism to post modernism is the almost complete takeover of the humanities by Marxist, Freudian, feminist, and gay ideologies, and the (not unrelated!) overall shift of emphasis toward science, technology, and business in higher education. The training of the mind and heart, the acquisition of wisdom and spiritual maturity, the classical liberal arts, gave way to various forms of vocational training, sometimes sophisticated, but based on no larger claims as to the meaning of life. If we find ourselves dancing on the edge of the abyss, we can at least make our material lives as comfortable as possible. If our souls are lost, we can at least try to gain the whole world.

For these (weighty) reasons, majoring in the humanities has come to seem rather pointless. But these same reasons make it critically important for us as believers to retake this lost ground. It belongs to us and to our King. Join me in praying for a Christian Renaissance that will lead us out of the dark ages in which we find ourselves. "Shaping the culture" is every bit as important as "leading the nation." We cannot do the latter without also doing the former. We need both men and women actively laboring to do

¹ My argument applies to *any* bona fide major in the humanities, including (gasp!) classics or philosophy.

² An early, and painfully funny, picture of the abuses of higher education is given us by Jonathan Swift in the Grand Academy of Lagado (Part III of *Gulliver's Travels*).

both.³ Having first plunged into Scripture, we must again plunge into the humanities, but we must do so as cultural warriors, wise as serpents, innocent as doves.⁴

II. The Vocational Value of the Humanities

The most valuable commodity we can offer any employer is a heart committed to Jesus Christ and integrity of character deeply rooted in Him. This should be the supreme goal of our lives. The second is the trained mind and heart that should be the goal of genuine education in the liberal arts. This means that we can think, read, reason, imagine, speak, and write. We understand, in some real sense, the nature and value of languages, ancient and modern. We have at least a substantial acquaintance with history, philosophy, literature, art and music, and a desire to deepen and strengthen our knowledge of these things throughout our lives. We love God with our mind in the context of loving Him also with our heart, soul, and strength. We are alive mentally as well as spiritually. These are high goals, and not accomplished in a day. Today even our most prestigious universities scarcely believe in or practice this training of the mind and heart, though this was the very definition of education for hundreds of years and throughout the world. Indeed, this was the purpose for which these universities were founded and what they actually did for ages of time. As Christians we have every reason to believe in, return to, and practice this training. I explore this at greater length in two related essays,⁵ and can only assert it here: *an excellent preparation for leadership and achievement in almost any career, even government, law, or business, is solid undergraduate training in the liberal arts.* Employers will see, value, and pay for this.

This applies with added force to those aiming at higher levels of leadership, management, entrepreneurial and pioneering careers, because of the specific emphasis on creativity, imagination, and vision. If you aspire to be something more than a technician, stretch your mind and heart with this kind of training. It is timeless in value, and needed more today than ever before.

Young people with this kind of trained mind can more easily acquire practical knowledge and skills on their own or “on the job.” The converse is not true. Those that get the “practical knowledge and skills” (i.e. “vocational training”) as undergraduates cannot as easily acquire a genuine liberal arts education “on their own.” Why not? It is a much more difficult thing to do, and is best done surrounded by seasoned guides and others traveling the same road. Granted, families can and should begin this training, as well as the more fundamental training of their children in the Scriptures and godliness, and take it as far as they can. But the guidance of those that have many years of post graduate formal training and have devoted their lives to the study of the humanities must

³ Please see my essay “Who Will Fill the World’s Growing Spiritual Vacuum? The Importance of the Humanities to us as Christians.”

⁴ As believers, we should value the classical liberal arts for their own sake, but also pursue them with the urgency and circumspection of cultural warriors. The Cultural Mandate and Great Commission encompass both.

⁵ “The Shape of ‘Shaping the Culture’ in Literary Studies Today” and “Writing at Patrick Henry College: The Literature Major.”

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count for something. C. S. Lewis describes such guides as “ripe.” Lewis himself was a prime example of this ripeness, this deep knowledge and mellow wisdom. If we are to enter the “great conversation” it is helpful to have other people around us and not simply lots of books. The study of the classical liberal arts is in the “important, but not urgent” category (like doing aerobics or having our devotions). It is easily squeezed out of our lives by “pressing, practical matters.” Let us do the big, basic, and important thing first and well. The other will follow. Giving vocational training prior to, and instead of, thorough training of the mind and heart may give a young person an immediate sense of accomplishment and preparedness. The really important question is how we evaluate our undergraduate training when we are in middle life. I am urging something that wears well.

This is an appropriate point to insert a brief aside. As Americans we are intensely practical, and that is not necessarily bad. But we must remember that life is much bigger than any career, and one classic definition of a liberal arts education is training us to make creative and fruitful use of leisure time. One of the greatest problems faced by our culture is our mental poverty and mindless waste of huge quantities of leisure time. We are addicted to the trivial and literally “amusing ourselves to death.” We must live on a higher plain spiritually, but also intellectually and culturally. Training in the humanities, if done well, will enrich our minds to pursue fruitful and worthwhile avocational and leisure time interests as well as open career doors.

An undergraduate degree in the humanities opens immediate doors to teaching, writing, and publishing jobs on all levels.⁶ These make up a vast sector of our economy, which wields enormous cultural influence. There are many important jobs waiting for us here.

Finally, graduate and professional schools welcome those with this kind of undergraduate training, those who have been trained to think, read, write, discriminate, who have been introduced to the great conversation of western civilization. This is true of medical schools, law schools, and seminaries. Many of these institutions actually say to prospective students, “Don’t major in pre-law or pre-sem. We’ll teach you that. ***Come to us with an education, with a trained, well-read, alert, inquiring mind.***”⁷ Joel Belz urges young people thinking of careers in journalism to major in the humanities for the same reason. Knox Theological Seminary in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, has launched an innovative master’s degree in Christianity and culture. Their thinking is that our pastors and spiritual leaders have got to know the culture and the world as well as the Scriptures if they are going to preach with power to the church today and again attain the kind of community credibility and influence they historically enjoyed.

⁶ Those who want to teach at the college or graduate level should plan on a Ph.D.

⁷ If you have a particular school or program in mind, you might check to see if they have any specific undergraduate requirements, but you will not find any that discourage or disallow undergraduates who major in the humanities.

III. A Concrete and Realistic Career Plan

I hope I have persuaded you that four years of vigorous training in the liberal arts is a wise use of time and money that will lead to a lifetime of more fruitful service to God. Neither Moses, Daniel, nor Paul expressed regret over the years they devoted to this kind of training. But we all need to be hard-headed and give careful thought to our career plan. This will require some deliberate effort on your part, which is good. It is a great opportunity to exercise pro-activity muscles, to seek God's direction for your life. The very exercising of these muscles has great value in itself. It is my hope that *every* student at PHC do this, and I will *specifically encourage* every literature major to do so. I want to introduce you to two excellent books (and mention two others) that can help you develop a much deeper sense of life purpose, of God's call on your life, of the ways in which God has gifted you to serve Him. This will also enable you to make the most of PHC's nine practicum credits, which may well serve as important door-openers through mentorships or apprenticeships to the next stage of your life. I often talk to students who are very uncertain about where their life is going. What follows is for them.

Don't be timid. God is a big God and He is a good God. Put Him first, put Him at the center, seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and watch Him put things together for you. God can open doors and help you make connections: step out confidently in Him!

What we might call "systematic career and life planning" is not only for pagan yuppies, but even more important for Christian men and women, regardless of what God is calling you to be and do for Him. This does not violate Proverbs 31 or Titus 2 if you understand "career and life planning" Biblically to include the raising and discipling of children. All of you, men and women, are called first to serve God with your lives. After that, if He calls you to marriage and blesses you with children, your first responsibility is to your family, men as head and women as helper. All of you, men and women, should be concerned to develop and use your gifts to the glory of God, to fulfill your ministry—in the home, in the church and in the world. It is said of the Proverbs 31 woman not only that her husband and children rose up and blessed her, but also (verse 31) that her works brought her praise at the city gate (i.e. in the world or the public arena, the place where her husband sat as an elder and leader, verse 23).

I have found two books particularly helpful in charting a course for my own life. They complement each other and together make a complete whole. Both are very well written and lots of fun to use. I guarantee the following will be neither dry nor boring! An important side benefit: you will have confidence in guiding friends, your own children or students, and others down this same path in the future.

The first is *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* by Stephen R. Covey. Covey can help you see the big picture: the importance of living deliberately, having a "personal constitution" and putting feet on it. You don't just *read* this book, you *do* it. If done prayerfully before the Lord, I guarantee the time you invest will yield rich

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dividends. Covey, though not a Christian, has a remarkable ability to help people develop a sense of life purpose at the most basic levels.

The second is *What Color is Your Parachute?* by Richard Nelson Bolles. Bolles, complementing and completing Covey, can help you discover that “mix” of gifts, abilities and interests that is uniquely you, and in what context that mix can best make a really worthwhile contribution. Again, you don’t *read* it, you *do* it. Bolles leads you through ten different ways to look carefully at yourself—lots of fun, and maybe some surprises. I discovered Bolles as a young missionary in Taiwan looking to move into some form of tentmaking. As I worked patiently through his ten exercises, I kept coming up against my strong desire to fathom the depths of literature: I hadn’t faced that squarely before! God used that to fundamentally redirect my life at a critical point. Recently, I told a student about these two books, and later received a very excited email from her saying that God used them to give her a very concrete and satisfying sense of direction.

An important side note for writers: we have located materials both fascinating and helpful that explore the business aspects of this vocation. I strongly recommend that at some point you spend a whole day perusing these. Some you may want to look at in greater depth, perhaps even buy for your own library.

God can use Covey and Bolles to give you a concrete vision for what He wants you to aim at, which can in turn serve as a powerful rocket booster, launching you into “life beyond.” If you know well what you want to do, maybe where you want to do it or with whom, you may be able to approach individuals or organizations to explore mentorship or apprenticeship opportunities. When you graduate, you may already have a network of contacts and experiences that will make the next step a very small one.⁸

Another excellent resource is *As Iron Sharpens Iron: Building Character in a Mentoring Relationship* by Howard and William Hendricks. This book can give you a much more specific vision as to what mentoring can be and how to move into it. Our son wanted to study the cello, so we located and approached a man in Nashville, Tennessee, who is perhaps the premier Christian cellist in the country. I confess that I had little faith that he would even talk to us. Not only did he do so, but he was both interested and willing to take Kevin on. God is a big God: if He wants it to happen, He will make it happen!⁹ Still another book that has helped me a lot is *de Bono’s Thinking Course* by Edward de Bono. He emphasizes creativity and thoroughness, and gives you practical tools to move you in these directions.

If God has not already given you a clear direction and opened specific doors, and you are confused, I strongly suggest that sometime during your junior year, perhaps during Christmas break or during the spring semester, or the summer before your senior

⁸ Here is a site that might be of great interest to writers: www.gospelcom.net/epa/epa_internships.html
They can line you up with writing internships that may well prove to be extremely helpful.

⁹ *Connecting* (Stanley and Clinton, Nav Press, 1992) discusses seven different types of mentors. A mentor doesn’t have to be just one person.

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year, you invest whatever time it takes to really *do* Covey and Bolles.¹⁰ Climb the mountain like Moses and ask God to show you the lay of the land and the road ahead. This will ensure that your own experience is the best it can be, and it will be a great example and inspiration to those that come after you. They will see the great things God has done for and through you and be encouraged to seek such things for themselves as well. We stand ready to help and guide, but only God can give you the lofty, yet concrete vision that exactly suits His gifts and call on your life. It doesn't get any better than that!

¹⁰ I don't want to be obnoxious, but I do want to be helpful. In an effort to walk this line, I will ask lit majors the following questions: 1. Are you satisfied with your career plan? Is it realistic? Specific? Do you know yourself? The world of work? 2. If you are interested specifically in writing, are you familiar with the business aspects of this vocation? 3. What are your thoughts re a possible mentor or mentors? 4. Have you considered any possible internships?