Qualities of the Liberally Educated Person

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So let me close, having said all of this, with the core of my thoughts about what it means to be a liberally educated person. The trouble with universities is that we rarely talk about what that pious phrase “liberal education” really means. We talk instead about requirements. Usually our requirements have almost nothing to do with liberal education in the broad sense I’ve urged of education for human freedom.

To get to this I’ll ask the question: “How would you recognize a liberally educated person if you saw one, if you bumped into one on the street?” I mean a person whose freedom and personal growth have actually been well served by education.

I offer ten qualities. Ask yourself how they relate to the struggle over HIV/AIDS because I think that every single one of them is profoundly important to any successful engagement with this complex biological and cultural phenomenon called AIDS.

So, how would you recognize liberally educated persons?

1. They know how to listen and to hear. This is so simple that it probably doesn’t seem worth saying, but in our distracted, over-busy age I think it’s worth declaring that an educated person knows how to pay attention to people and to the world around him. They work hard to hear what other people are saying. They can follow an argument, track logical reasoning, detect illogic, hear the emotions that lie behind both the logic and the illogic, and ultimately empathize with the person who is feeling those emotions. No debate, no struggle to overcome HIV/AIDS, will happen without having the ability to hear—hear the people who oppose you, hear the people who are your allies, hear the feelings, the arguments, the ideas, the interconnections.

2. They read and they understand. This too is simple to say but very difficult to achieve because there are so many ways of reading in the world. An educated person is literate across a wide range of genres and media. They can enjoy reading popular fiction ranging from the latest bestseller or detective novel or comic book to a work of classic literature, and they are engaged by works of non-fiction ranging from biographies to debates about current policy to the latest discoveries of science. But skilled readers know how to read far more than just words or magazines or books. They know how to enjoy wandering through a great art museum or are moved by what they hear in a concert hall. They recognize the extraordinary human achievements that are represented by contemporary athletes working in fields as diverse as tennis or gymnastics or football. They are engaged by classic and contemporary works of theater and cinema. They are able to see in television a valuable window on the popular culture. They can wander through a prairie or a woodland and recognize the creatures they encounter there, the meaning of the rocks, the lay of the land. They can look across a farmer’s field and know the crops that they see there—recognize that those crops will eventually end up in one form or another on their own dinner table. They can appreciate good food whether they encounter it in a four-star French restaurant or in a local county fair. They recognize fine craftsmanship, whether in carpentry or plumbing or auto mechanics. They can surf the World Wide Web. They can read the Journal of the American Medical Association and they can also watch Angels in America. And they can find, in radically different forms of discourse such as these, crucial and equally valuable insights into the meaning of HIV/AIDS. For an educated person, all of these are special forms of reading, profound ways in which the eyes and the ears, and the other senses become attuned to the infinite wonders and talents that make up the
human and the natural world. As with the other items on this list of mine, none of us can possibly attain full competence in all of these ways of reading. But the mark of an educated person is to be competent in many of them and curious about all of them. Encountering the world as a fascinating and extraordinarily intricate set of texts waiting to be read and understood—surely this is one of the most important marks of an educated person.

3. They can talk with anyone. An educated person knows how to talk. They can give a speech. They can make people laugh. They can ask thoughtful questions and they can hold a conversation with anyone they meet, whether that person is a high school dropout or a Nobel Laureate, a child or a patient in a hospital, a factory worker or a farmer or a corporate CEO, a patient dying of AIDS, an FDA bureaucrat, a scientist reporting on the latest findings concerning protein sheaths. All of these are people one can talk with and understand. Moreover, educated persons participate in such conversations not because they like to talk about themselves, but because they are genuinely interested in the other person. A friend of mine says that one of the most important things his father ever told him was that in having a conversation his job was "to figure out what's so neat about what the other person does." It would be hard to imagine a more succinct description of this key quality of an educated person.

4. They can write clearly and persuasively and movingly. What goes for talking goes for writing as well. An educated person knows the fine craft of putting words on paper. I'm not talking about the ability to parse a sentence or compose a paragraph or write an essay. I mean the ability to express what is in your mind and in your heart so as to get these things across to the person who reads your words so as to teach, persuade, and move that person. I'm talking about writing as a form of touching—akin to the touching that happens in a wonderfully exhilarating conversation.

5. They can solve a wide variety of puzzles and problems. This ability to solve puzzles and problems bespeaks many other skills. These include basic numeracy, an ability to handle numbers and see that many problems which appear to turn on questions of quantity can in fact often be reinterpreted as questions of quality. These days a comparable skill involves the ability to run a computer, whether for word processing, or doing taxes, or playing games. I could go on but the broader and more practical skills I'm describing here are those of the analyst, the manager, the engineer, the critic: the ability to look at a complicated reality, break it into pieces, figure out how it works, with the end result of being able to do practical things in the real world. Part of that challenge, of course, is the ability to put reality back together again after you've broken it down into pieces. This is just as important as the act of breaking the world into pieces, even though we often forget the need to put it back together again. For only by putting the world back together again can we accomplish our practical goals without violating the integrity of the world we're trying to change. In the world of HIV/AIDS, this means remembering that the patient, the medical problem in the bed in front of you, is also a person, a person with a whole life, in which the status of being defined as "patient" is only one tiny subset of the whole.

6. Educated people respect rigor, not so much for its own sake, but as a way of seeking truth. This is to say, truly educated people love learning, but they love wisdom more. They can appreciate a closely reasoned argument without being unduly impressed by mere logic. They understand that knowledge always serves values and they strive to put these two, knowledge and values, into constant dialogue with each other. The ability to recognize true rigor is one of the most important achievements in any education, but it is worthless, even dangerous, if it is not placed also in the service of some larger vision that renders it also humane. Medicine without a vision of health, and knowledge of disease without attention to wellness, all too easily become destructive of the very ends that they seek to serve.

7. They practice respect and humility, tolerance, and self-criticism. This is another way of saying that they can feel and understand the power of other people's dreams and nightmares as well as their own. They have the intellectual range and the emotional generosity to step outside their own experiences and prejudices to recognize the parochialism of their own viewpoints, thereby opening themselves to perspectives very different from their own. This quality of intellectual openness and tolerance is among the most important values we associate with liberal education. It is impossible to imagine the struggle against HIV/AIDS without that commitment to tolerance. It's hard to imagine a more important core value that needs reinforcing if the struggle is to succeed. From this commitment to tolerance, flow all those aspects of liberal learning that celebrate the value of learning foreign languages, exposing oneself to cultures far distant from one's own, learning the history of long-ago times, and encountering the many ways
in which men and women have known the sacred and given names to their gods. From a deep
encounter with history and geography and culture comes a rich sense of how very different
people are from each other and how much they also share in common.

8. They understand how to get things done in the world. In describing the goals of his
Rhodes scholarship, Cecil Rhodes spoke of trying to identify young people who would spend
their lives engaged in what he called "the world's fight," by which he meant the struggle to leave
the world a better place than one finds it. Learning how to get things done in the world in an
effort to leave it a better place is surely one of the most practical and important lessons we can
take from any education. It is fraught with peril because the power to act in the world can so
easily be abused. But we fool ourselves if we think we can avoid acting, avoid exercising power,
avoid joining the world's fight. Not to act is to abandon to others our own responsibility to try to
make the world a better place even in the face of what we know to be injustice. And so we study
power and ask ourselves what it means to act rightly and wrongly in our use of power. We
struggle to try to know how we can do good and avoid doing wrong. We deploy our power to
defeat a virus and defeat too the ways our own culture adds to the burdens of those who carry it.

9. They nurture and empower the people around them. One of the most important things that
temper the exercise of power and shapes right action is surely the recognition that no one ever acts alone. A liberally educated person understands that they belong to a community whose
prosperity and well-being are crucial to their own and they help that community flourish by giving
of themselves to make the success of others possible. If we speak of education for freedom,
then one of the crucial insights of a liberal education must be that the freedom of the individual is
only possible in a free community, and vice versa. It is the community that empowers the free
individual just as it is free individuals who lead and empower the community. Individuals have
made great contributions to the fight against HIV/AIDS, but any progress they have made has
inevitably taken place in the context of a much larger culture and community that empowered the
work they did. The fulfillment of high talent, the just exercise of power, the celebration of human
diversity. Nothing so redeems these things as the recognition that what seem like personal
triumphs are in fact the achievements of our common humanity.

10. They follow E.M. Forster's injunction in the novel Howard's End: "Only connect." More
than anything else, being an educated person means being able to see connections so as to be
able to make sense of the world and act within it in creative ways. All of the other qualities that
I've just described—listening, reading, writing, talking, puzzle-solving, seeing the world through
others' eyes, empowering others, leading—every last one of these things is finally about
connecting. A liberal education is about gaining the power and the insight and the generosity
and finally the freedom and the wisdom to connect. If one could pick just one phrase that would
answer the question of what it means to be a liberally educated person surely this would be it:
Only connect. And I would also argue I can imagine no better way of fighting HIV/AIDS than the
same phrase: Only connect. It's the core project. Without it, all else fails.

Education for human freedom also means education for human community. The two cannot exist without each
other. Every one of the ten qualities I have just described is a craft or skill or way of being in the world that frees
us to act with greater knowledge, greater power. But each of these ten qualities also makes us ever more
aware of the connections we have with other people and with the rest of the planet. So they remind us of the
obligations we have to use our knowledge and our power responsibly, generously, caringly.

If I'm right that all of these qualities are finally about connecting, then we need to confront one last paradox
about liberal education. In the act of making us free, it also binds us to the communities that gave us our
freedom in the first place. It makes us responsible to those communities in a way that limits our freedom. In the
end, it turns out that liberty is not about thinking or saying or doing whatever we want. It is about exercising our
freedom in such a way as to make the world a better place, not just for ourselves, but for everyone and
everything around us.

So we remember these two words of E.M. Forster's, "Only connect." I've said that they are as good an answer
as any I know to what it means to be a liberally educated person. But they are also as good a description as
any I know for the most powerful and generous form of human connection that we call love. The love I mean
here is not romantic or passionate love, but the love that lies at the heart of all the great human religious
traditions. Liberal education nurtures human freedom in the service of human community, which is to say that,
in the end, it nurtures and celebrates love. Whether we speak of our schools or our universities or ourselves,
whether we speak of education or the fight against HIV/AIDS, I hope we will hold fast to this as our constant
practice in the full depth of its richness and many meanings. I hope we will nurture and celebrate love. I hope
we will "only connect."