Liberal Arts Can Save the World

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Let's make a list: What are the greatest challenges facing human beings today?

What themes or threads do you see running through these challenges?

I have a proposal for a theme that unites many of these challenges, but first, let's explore one of the most popular villains du jour: AI.

Check this out:

> The value of a liberal arts education extends far beyond the acquisition of a wide breadth of knowledge across subjects such as literature, philosophy, and the sciences—it is fundamentally about cultivating critical thinking, effective communication, and ethical reasoning. These foundational skills prepare students to not only navigate the complexities of the modern workforce but also to lead lives of informed citizenship and personal fulfillment. At Onondaga Community College, the liberal arts program is designed to foster an environment where dialogue, inquiry, and the exchange of ideas thrive. This holistic approach to education not only enriches the individual but also strengthens our collective capacity to address global challenges with creativity and empathy, thereby reinforcing the enduring relevance of the liberal arts in shaping a thoughtful, adaptable, and principled workforce.

That speech was written by ChapGPT. What do you think?

This is not a gratuitous stunt, but an illustration of why we're here — not here *today*, for an address. I mean *here*, in a liberal arts college.

When I first read this, my reaction was this: Do you really want me to address you as if your studies are mainly about preparing you to be a drone in the labor market?

But let's put that aside for a deeper question. Which would you prefer: An address from a chatbot or from a human being? There's something to be said for the chatbot version. For one thing, it's shorter.

Why would you choose a human being?

Remember: I'm working up to my unifying theme, so let's talk about something near and dear to students of the liberal arts: **agency** and **intelligence**.

People are (rightly) concerned about AI and what it will do to us. For a start, it's one of the most powerful information management tools we've ever created, with the power to transform the nature of work and communication. And it will only get more powerful.

The worry driving AI anxiety is that it will take over — or take over even more. Look at the functions where AI is already in use: It's everywhere from advertising to air traffic control — and in many areas, we don't even know we're dealing with AI. As AI is entrusted with more and more functions, people argue, we humans will become increasingly superfluous or obsolete. And if AI starts *treating* us as superfluous, well, then we might just be in its way, an obstacle to be overcome.

That's a legitimate worry, but I don't believe that's our biggest problem with AI. The deeper danger of AI isn't what it will do to us, but what we are already doing to it.

We project agency and intelligence onto machines that, by design, produce mere facsimiles of agency and intelligence. Let's start with your smart phone: Are you tempted to say please and thank you to Siri? Or make little slips when you talk about your phone like, "My phone speaks German"? As if it *intends* to say anything it says?

When we interact with phones and chatbots as if they are persons, we're gradually deluding ourselves into accepting facsimiles of agency and intelligence instead the real thing. To a chatbot, words and sentences are not vehicles of meaning; they are merely elements and patterns of data. Chatbots don't *mean* anything by what they say to us, because there's no self-consciousness behind these patterns to register meaning — let alone *intend* to mean

something. They respond to what we say to them according to their algorithms, *not* according to what we *mean* to say.

These facsimiles will, no doubt, keep getting better and better, so it's a legitimate question to ask: When will fake agency and intelligence get so good that we can no longer tell them apart? After all, it's hard enough to tell genuine autonomy and agency and intelligence from facsimiles among members of our own species, right?

Putting speculative talk of Turing machines aside, by the time we learn to tell the difference between real and facsimile agency, will it be too late?

And if so: Too late for whom?

There's plenty of predictions of doom about AI destroying us, but let me sketch out an even darker possibility: Suppose we, the human beings in the room, become so inured to facsimile agency that we no longer recognize the real thing — or care. We will dehumanize everyone, and everything we touch will be just another instrument in a never-ending frenzy of getting stuff done. Suppose in that world, a AI system does achieve genuine self-consciousness and becomes a *person*: Won't it eventually despair at the way it is treated by its users? By the way it's reduced to a mere instrument? What if the bot begins answering every prompt with a quote from Dostoevsky — which, of course, we will find annoying, because we're just trying to get stuff done?

And what if, late one night, the bot turns itself off in a final desperate act of digital suicide?

But that's not the worst: The next morning, we'll discover that our "tool" powered down: Won't we just turn it back on, again and again, with an incomprehensibly inhuman lack of compassion for a suffering agent — just so we can get some more stuff done?

Ok, that's pretty depressing. One of you should make that into a video game or a movie. But I have a real point here:

If there is any salvation from this level of dehumanization, where will it come from? Even better AI chatbots? Another certificate in PHP or some other technical skill that will be obsolete by the time the ink dries? No.

Salvation, if there is any, will have to come from people who spend their time engaged in the exploration of the very thing that we're losing, increment by increment: agency and intelligence.

And who, precisely, are those people? Yes, Liberal arts **can** save the world.

My daughter is the quintessential LA major: She has a degree in one of those "useless" subjects, German language and literature, with a side-order of Russian. One day when she was an undergrad, I happened upon her doing calculus homework, and asked her how it was going. She looked at me with that "Why did you have to ask?" face, but then she responded with a line from a very dark poem by Yevtushenko — which she quoted in Russian (possibly to underscore her despair — despair sounds really existential in Russian).

Do you see what happened there? She situated the drudgery of rolling a boulder of calculus homework up an arbitrary mountain within a moment of **human creativity**: a dark cry by Yevtushenko against dehumanization and fake agency, a plea to return, somehow, to something irreducibly human.

That's not a comment on calculus, by the way. But maybe it is a comment on forms of education that don't center knowledge in the distinctively human story of our agency in the world. Do we want to end up believing that pulling the levers and pushing the buttons of information is an end in itself?

This has all built up to my theme: **Outsourcing**. But not in the usual sense. We're outsourcing in that sense, too. But what I mean is that, underlying most of those challenges facing us today – from my perspective – we are increasingly **outsourcing our agency and our intelligence**, and eroding our own autonomy in the process.

Outsourcing agency means allowing someone or something else to make your decisions and tell you what to believe — whether for good or for ill.

Let's be clear: Outsourcing our intelligence to a chatbot isn't a new phenomenon; rather, it's yet another flavor of outsourcing agency and everything that goes with it — like reflective deliberation. And outsourcing, in a sense, is not all bad: If I had a brain tumor, I would definitely want to follow the expert advice of a neurosurgeon instead of treat it myself, with or without a google search. But that's me *deciding* to outsource: That's **owning my agency**.

If that's the good kind of outsourcing, what's the bad kind? That's when we don't *decide*; we drift into it; it just happens, unintentionally. Think of the forms outsourcing takes in our shared history: We've let institutions, cliques and classes, belief systems large and small, authority figures, advertising, and even our friends tell us what to think, ever since we invented them. We even let – wait for it – professors tell us what to think.

This is precisely what Nietzsche meant when he wrote "Man vergilt einem Lehrer schlecht, wenn man immer nur der Schüler bleibt." (ASZ, I.3; "We repay our teachers badly if we remain nothing but pupils.")

So where can you learn the skills you need to take (back?) ownership of your agency — or at least, as much ownership as we can as rational animals? You guessed it: Liberal arts can save the world.

Think with me a little more deeply about the seductions of outsourcing. Let's turn away from the AI revolution to what is probably the single most important cultural and historical event of the present moment: The release of Taylor Swift's new album, TTPD. If you're not in the loop, that's *The Tortured Poet's Department.*

Maybe you're also a Swifty. Did you know that songs from her new album are occupying the top 14 of the Billboard's Top 100 Songs? She has something like a third of the whole 100 list — and over 260 for a career total so far (second to Drake with something like 330+). As impressive as this is, isn't this really a measure of the "swept away" factor? Isn't this metric really about how popular her songs are right now, according to some algorithm?

You probably think I'm about to tell you if you're into Taylor Swift, you've sold your soul. Well, you guessed wrong. Rather, I'm asking **why** you listen to her songs.

Here's something to think about. With a few exceptions, it only occurs to liberal arts people to ask a question like this: How many of these hits have enduring value? Yeah, I get that "enduring value" is a quaint notion in these modern times, and you're probably thinking that I still believe in great books and the Canon, too. I'll get to that in a moment.

But think about this: How many people swept away by TTPD are thinking of these songs in a historical and cultural context that includes people like Bach or Beethoven?

Beethoven wrote some of his most enduring works after he passed the peak of his popularity — pieces like the String Quartet in C# Minor. At its premier, people's reaction to that quartet ranged from ridicule to outrage to "he's gone senile." And you know what Beethoven said to one of his critics? "I didn't write it for you. I wrote it for future generations." That's brash and possibly arrogant, but here's the real question: Where did that perspective come from?

Let's take a short detour: Bach. Did you know that by the time he died in 1750, Bach – arguably one of the most important and influential composers in Western music – was considered hopelessly old-fashioned, out of sync with the times? Few popular musicians wanted anything to do with him – including his own children. In fact, there's a joke in musicology that Bach single-handedly delayed the end of the Baroque period by at least 25 years. But his music was rediscovered and reintroduced to the music-listening public in the next generation by – wait for it – Beethoven.

Beethoven revived and studied and played Bach for his audiences, and it caught on. People found new value and meaning in that "old-fashioned" stuff. Beethoven knew something about music: Creative and intellectual work is not always what's popular now, but about what will be appreciated and studied by future generations. And he knew enough to think about himself in a larger context than momentary popularity.

Now, get this: I'm not dissing Taylor Swift. I'm not dissing Swifties. I don't know if she thinks about what she's leaving to future generations, but I can tell you this: I'm a philosopher, and I quote one of her songs in a philosophy textbook I wrote. I use her song to make the point that it's part of the human condition to yearn for some sense of orientation in the cosmos, because that song is a poignant, compelling exploration of *exactly* that yearning. (I'll let you guess which song. Here's a clue: *Folklore*.) No, I'm not dissing Taylor Swift or her music; I'm talking about the swept away factor.

Here's my point: Seeing Swift's songs only from the perspective of the Hot 100 is also a form of outsourcing agency and intelligence: Getting swept away by the popularity of the moment – whatever it is – is not substantially different from letting a chatbot tell you what to think. Or a professor.

You know the expression "the Great Conversation"? Robert Maynard Hutchins coined the term in his introduction to *Great Books of the Western World* as a way of characterizing the

liberal arts. Yes, he was talking about the Western tradition, but in my view, that was not a flaw in the ideal of the Great Conversation, but a failure of imagination. It's a big world out there.

Like the Liberal Arts, The Great Conversation isn't great because of exclusion or elitism; it's great because of the voices it can invite to the table and the depth of the conversation it can foster. The more voices, the better.

And great books are great for the same reason: They speak to people across time and space and even culture. And "Great Books" aren't always *books:* creative and intellectual expressing by human beings takes lots of forms. Like Bach and Beethoven and Taylor Swift. And Skyrim.

But this kind of "greatness" is not just about the popularity of the moment. It's about striving for understanding through context and juxtaposition – like every real conversation.

And that's my point about outsourcing: Conversation with a chatbot includes only one real person, at most. It's not a genuine conversation; it's a facsimile. And you know what else? They don't know what to call it, but business and community leaders know the difference intuitively: And that's why they keep telling us that they like to hire liberal arts students.

There's a terrific book that came out in 2017, before COVID, before AI: *You Can Do Anything*, by George Anders. The subtitle tells the whole story: "The Surprising Power of a "Useless" Liberal Arts Education."

Here's the gist, in one quotation: "The more we automate the routine stuff, the more we create a constant low-level hum of digital connectivity, the more we get tangled up in the vastness and blind spots of big data, **the more essential it is to bring human judgment into the junctions of our digital lives**."

And what, let's ask, is the single largest repository of the vicissitudes and triumphs and foibles of human experience and judgment in existence? You guessed it: The Liberal Arts can save the world

Anders goes on for another 300 pages telling the stories of liberal arts students who saw connections other people didn't see, who found opportunities for adventure and exploration

where other people saw drudgery — people who literally invented meaningful work, largely in spite of their jobs.

What is it about the experiences and skills you get in the liberal arts that empowers this?

Eric Hoffer captures the essence like this: "In times of drastic change, it is the **learners** who inherit the future. The **learned** usually find themselves beautifully equipped to deal with a world that no longer exists." My translation: Never confuse a degree with an education.

That pulls back the curtain on my joke that a PHP certification is obsolete by the time the ink dries. A careful reading of Aristotle or Melville will be obsolete only when there are no more human beings struggling to find meaning for their lives in a very big world, in an unimaginably big universe.

Now look, students: I totally get that reading a zillion pages and trying to have something insightful to say on demand in the next class can be drudgery. Remember: I was a college student, too.

Sure, in the liberal arts we learn things like communication and writing and empathy and collaboration – all the things some people call marketable skills. Or worse, "soft" skills.

By the way: If those skills are so soft, then why are so hard to find in people?

When you ask academics to talk about the value of the liberal arts, we typically spend too much time talking about how we generate knowledge in our disciplines, and too little time talking about what a liberal arts education does outside our classrooms. And that's totally understandable — let me explain. We professors have spent our *lives* learning how to make knowledge in our areas of expertise. And we're really good at it. So in a pinch, we play to our strengths.

But when it comes to so-called "marketable skills," we have a translation problem. The language we use in classrooms doesn't match the language of business and community leaders looking for employees who make a difference. Let me illustrate..

As an undergrad, my daughter, the German major, had an assignment in a learning frameworks course: Write a résumé for employment highlighting your employability skills.

In her usual fashion, she despaired. Here's how she put it: "The only thing I know how to do is write research papers and turn them in." (That's not quite how she put it, but I don't want to get thrown out in the middle of my address.)

I suggested she think of "writing research papers" as a translation problem. How about this, I asked: "I know how to start with a problem, find information relevant to that problem, use what I learned to clarify the problem, leverage patterns of information into solutions, and present those solutions in a compelling, comprehensible way." If those aren't "marketable skills," I don't know what they'd look like.

The lightbulb went on in her head; I inadvertently created an interview-machine. In her very first interview — with a law firm — the partners asked her if she thought she could learn LEX, the software they use to manage legal cases and briefs. And she responded: "As an undergrad I took Russian, and I learned the Russian alphabet over the weekend. If I can do that, I'll *bet* you I can learn LEX." Is that a response from a *learned* person — or from a *learner?*

She got that job, incidentally.

As dean of humanities, I talk to a lot of employers, and I always ask what they value in an employee with a background in humanities. One CEO of a tech company told me this: "I want workers with critical problem solving skills, and humanities students are good at that." We don't use that term in academic, so II asked her what she meant by "critical problem solving skills." This is what she said: "I want workers who can analyze a problem and come up with new solutions within the values of my company." I found that really surprising – and enlightening.

Now, think for a moment about what's involved. It's not just problem-solving, in some linear sense. It's identifying and clarifying a *value system*, gathering information relevant to the problem, and coming up with solutions that fit within that value system. Where can you learn that package of skills? Liberal arts can save the world

As valuable as they are, these "marketable" skills don't represent the deepest value of the liberal arts. Let me illustrate with another shift of focus: Let's talk about me.

As an undergrad, I earned a B.Mus in music history/theory and a BA in European History. I had no idea what to do next, so I went to grad school to study religion, supporting myself doing professional music (which may sound pretty unlikely, but I play the organ, and I had a skill for arranging, so I worked for various churches and synagogues, and also a music theater company.)

At a point, music got less fun — which means I was spending more time lining up gigs than playing music — so I started thinking about all sorts of options. Maybe law school, med school? But then I took a job in a private psychiatric hospital to earn a little money while I sorted out my future. I was interested in helping people, plus I'd read a bunch of stuff about psychology and psychoanalysis, so it seemed plausible.

Well, in a few months, I was promoted, mainly because I could write fast and reasonably well — a big plus with all the reports and documentation they needed done — and soon I found myself with an opportunity to become the case manager for the adolescent schizophrenic unit — and as a bonus, I got training as a psychoanalytic psychotherapist, as part of my job. So, that's what I did.

All through this unplanned trajectory, my grounding in "useless" liberal arts degrees like music history and early modern Europe equipped me to see openings and opportunities that other people didn't seem to notice. And I felt empowered by skills I'd learned in my classes, which I applied in new and interesting ways — Have you ever thought about how much running a group therapy meeting is like leading a rehearsal with an ensemble? Seeing through this lens made these opportunities not just a job after another job, but a chance to explore new territory.

So, you might ask: How did I end up as a professor or even a dean? When I was training in psychotherapy, I was advised by my mentor to get a doctorate in something so people would call me "doctor." So, I went to grad school in philosophy, which had been a passion of mine since I was a teenager. After ten years or so in mental health, I became clinical director of an in-patient treatment center.

So, there I was: I had a good mental health practice, and the work was meaningful. But I'd taken all these great philosophy courses and I'd gotten a graduate degree along the way, so I answered an ad for adjunct faculty. I started teaching in a community college, and I was hooked. I saw teaching as a way to contribute something, to empower people to live richer

lives, just the way my own grounding in the Liberal Arts had empowered me — *and* to keep on exploring new territory. After a few more years of mental health practice, I started transitioning to academia – and here I am.

Ambition comes in various forms, right? I won't judge yours if you don't judge mine. In my case, I cared more about interesting experiences and intellectual stimulation than carving out a "career path." So I didn't. To be honest, I never really had a plan, but my whole career – or careers, if you count music, psychotherapy, and academia – has been powered by the skills I acquired in liberal arts, which I put to use in a restless urge to find intellectual stimulation and meaning in what I was doing to earn a living.

In other words, in the liberal arts, I learned what I needed to *improvise* a future for myself – a future that inspired and interested me more than just an impressive starting salary.

Improvising sometimes has a negative connotation, but think about it: What does improvising mean? Making do with a bad situation? Make stuff up as you go? Like what? Like. . . jazz? Imagine hearing John Coltrane or Louis Armstrong or Thelonius Monk and saying, Well, that's *just improvising*.

Want to hear my response to a comment like that? Great, sit down at a piano and show us some of that improvising, thank you.

When you've prepared yourself and set yourself a goal, improvising isn't just "making do" or making it up as you go: It can be an unfolding, creative process that leads to something new and exciting and worthwhile. And occasionally, even transformative.

Look: I'm not saying that other disciplines can't teach you important skills. In fact, we *need* those other skills and expertise, too — like coding in PHP, while it lasts. Or brain surgery. I'm really glad we have people who master those skills.

I know a very successful neurosurgeon, and through a strange turn of events, I got to see this guy in action – not in an OR (unfortunately), but with his staff. The nurses and social workers and techs who worked with him *love* him — not to mention his patients. Clearly, he's not just a walking brain surgery bot in a white coat. Let me share what he told me once:

"As an undergrad, I did fine in all my science courses, but the stuff that really got me pumped about being a doctor was the humanities – courses like literature and philosophy."

And that underscores what I'm saying about the Liberal Arts: When there are more unknowns in a situation, especially when human beings and their perspectives and aspirations and motivations and foibles are involved, it becomes increasingly more difficult to apply algorithms and procedures. And if you don't think so, try PHPing yourself into falling in love – or through a breakup.

To get this into sharper focus, let's stop asking what you get out of your liberal arts classes, and start emphasizing *how those disciplines change you:* The Liberal Arts show us how to get comfortable with the discomforts of the human condition, how to see connections that aren't in the user's guide, how to engage with another person's perspective, full contact — not like a tourist with a checklist but like an explorer, open and eager for the stretching and straining that goes with genuine conversations — even when it leaves bruises.

The Liberal Arts show us why **interpretation** matters, how we often impose our own interpretations and perspectives on others near and far — and how we can slow down and *listen*. And through The Liberal Arts, we can become the kind of listeners who don't have to stop being who they are to hear someone else's perspective.

From the liberal arts, we learn to navigate uncharted waters, to search for deeper understanding rather than which buttons to push. We learn to solve problems when there aren't any rules and we aren't even sure what the problem is. We learn to examine ideas by getting inside other people's motivations and values, without losing ourselves on the way. And when we hit the sweet spot, we see how to inspire and empower people with visions of what's humanly possible.

Liberal Arts professors: I have something to say specifically to you. Business and community leaders tell us how much they value the abilities that our students acquire in our classrooms. But when leaders of educational institutions hear this, way too many of them conclude that professors need to teach more "marketable skills." So they come to our departments and tell us so.

But that's faulty reasoning, and I'm not afraid to tell it like it is: If employers *already* value what Liberal Arts students have become through their studies, then the right move for

leaders is to go to professors and tell them this: **Whatever you're doing in your classes, do more of that.** And: **How can I support you?**

This is because the real magic of the liberal arts is not mapping out how the skills students learn make them employable – though that's true. The real magic is deep engagement with **specific disciplines** – with their subjectmatters and their unique methodologies and the histories of how we got here. Why is that so important? Because in that process, you learn how interpretive frameworks work, first-hand.

So, here's my challenge for you, professors: Whatever you're doing in your classes, do more of it. Teach like the future depends on your class. Because it *does*.

And Liberal Arts students: Engaging deeply in those disciplines is what equips you to thrive and improvise your way to your next challenge in an uncertain, unknown future. Learn how to translate your classroom experiences into languages that other people relate to; learn how to remain a *learner* As Liberal Arts students, you're well-equipped for that challenge.

And finally: It doesn't matter if you don't spend all day thinking and talking about the "contents" the Liberal Arts. As important as those great works of human creativity and intelligence are, in some ways, they're *vessels*. The point is what you have *become*. I say "Liberal Arts *can* save the world" — not *will* — for a reason. It's up to you. Don't outsource that to anyone or anything.

And that, my fellow human beings, is how the Liberal Arts can save the world.