In the Spirit of Tocqueville

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is minimally delightful. Given this understanding, the seminar room, the sorority theatre, the basketball court and the soup kitchen are all more likely places to look for happiness than the bar or the beach.

Finally, on the question of the character of the world in which we find ourselves, the book of Genesis can help us see that world anew by raising what is perhaps the most basic question there are: Why does the whole, the universe, exist at all? Why do we experience it as beautiful, and as ordered in a way our minds can, at least partially, understand? Giving full and final answers to such questions is, of course, probably beyond the capacity of the human mind. Nonetheless, by raising those questions, Genesis can allow us to see the world not as a mere collection of natural resources to be exploited for our practical benefit but as an astonishing marvel at whose source we can only wonder.

By opening our eyes to the strangeness of our life and its many gifts, old books can thus help us experience love, family, happiness, and the question of the whole on their own terms. One does not necessarily need to go to college to experience this revelation, but it helps.

The books I’ve drawn on are from distant times and places. They contain strange images, demanding arguments, and paradoxical propositions that are most difficult to understand, particularly on a first reading. To pierce them requires a level of attention almost impossible to give when immersed in the responsibilities of post-collegiate life, when work and children typically demand the best of one’s time and energy. Leisure, guidance from properly trained teachers, and the company of fellow inquirers who share the openness characteristic of the young can be enormously useful in the study of such difficult texts and in understanding them. The university is uniquely suited to provide a home for this impractical yet demanding activity in a relentlessly practical world.

It is a remarkable testament to the unique genius of our country that, in spite of its utilitarian and commercial nature, it has seen fit to make this kind of education, truly liberal education, the payson to its most respected professors and a widely available, if expensive, good. It has perhaps done so because, from our Puritan origins, Americans, who care so much about the goods of the body, are nonetheless keenly aware that we also have souls, and that souls need their own kind of food.

As Peter Lawler of Barry College, who spoke at Furman in 2010 as part of the Tocqueville Program Lecture Series, has pointed out, the Puritans believed that “nobody was above work, and nobody was below leisurely contemplation about our true destiny.” In this sense, while liberal education may seem impractical when considered from the vintage point of the commercial marketplace, it looks distinctly more practical if we ask what is practical for beings who are more than just bodies, and are possessed of more than just bodily needs.

Perhaps Emerson was right to warn the Harvard faculty about the tyranny of old books and the vices of idleness in 1837. Over the long term, however, it seems to me that Tocqueville more deeply understood the relationship between liberty and liberal education in democratic times. For Tocqueville understood that impracticity, not idleness, is the characteristic vice of democratic peoples, and that the present, not the past, is most prone to tyranny over the democratic mind. If liberal education can liberate the mind from that tyranny, one could seriously defend it as practical.

“Prudence,” however, is a vague term, and a liberal education in our time costs an enormous amount of very real money. Can universities justify charging, can families justify paying, all these hard-earned dollars for what liberal education has to offer? That is for administrations, faculties, students and parents to decide. But perhaps we can think more clearly about the proper price of a liberal education if we see it for what it truly is: Liberal education, rightly understood, is the education that liberates the human person from the very real and costly temptation to take one’s whole existence for granted. [1]

The author, an associate professor of political science, joined the Furman faculty in 2005.

February 22, 2012
“Do American Colleges Today Serve Any Public Function?”
John Agresto
Former president, St. John’s College

March 14, 2012
“Science and Liberal Education”
Harvey C. Mansfield
William R. Kenan, Jr., Professor of Government
Harvard University

April 17, 2012
“Liberal Education and Political Liberalism”
Anthony Kronman
Sterling Professor of Law
Yale University

The rigorous education in politics and history Jefferson envisioned, however, has little relation to what is taught in American universities today. In spite of a price tag that strains the limits of middle-class creditability, universities and colleges often offer curricula with little apparent coherence and seem increasingly incapable of articulating the high and noble purpose of liberal education in a democratic society. Thus the effort to answer the question, “What is liberal education?”

Contact benjamin.stoney@furman.edu to learn more about the Tocqueville Program.