Why Liberal Arts Matter: On Writing and Reading
By Marianne Gingher

Remarks made for Program in the Humanities and Human Values, Oct 10, 2015

Good morning. Lloyd mentioned that I have recently taken up puppetry. Let me add that one of the things my liberal arts education taught me was that I wanted to learn how to manipulate puppets rather than become one!

I began writing stories when I was six years old and simply couldn't be stopped. Not even the D-minus I made on my first freshman composition paper stopped me. *Something* kept me going, whenever the going got tough, and I suspect that my liberal arts education—with its emphasis on resiliency and flexibility—had something to do with my literary survival. Most of the writers affiliated with this state—many of whom you read—Robert Morgan, Charles Frazier, Russell Banks, Fred Chappell, Reynolds Price, Randall Kenan, Doris Betts, Lee Smith, Jill McCorkle, Clyde Edgerton, Ron Rash—would likely agree that their literary beginnings owe much to the influence of the liberal arts they studied.

In 1995, the Pulitzer Prize winning author of *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, Annie Dillard, visited our campus. Besides telling students that if they were inclined towards any of the arts, it would take them at least ten years beyond college graduation to determine which art they actually belonged to (so they'd better warn their parents), she also gave them a reality check on the state of publishing fiction. Which, I should add, has only gotten worse since her visit. "Publication is not a gauge of excellence," she said. "Faulkner couldn't get published today and publishers acknowledge it. The chances of any manuscript coming into a publishing house and getting published are 1 in 3,000. You need to know these things somewhere in the back of your mind," Dillard told the students, "then you need to forget them and write what you are going to write."

But is the advice Annie Dillard gave students twenty years ago the same advice that I am giving them today? Yes, it is. For in doing so, I am teaching them to think for themselves, to consider deeply the sacrifices they will need to make in order to choose the writing life. Probably no more than 10% will choose a writing-related career, but they will all leave my classes as more thoughtful, capable readers and communicators. And without skills in comprehension and communication we'd all be whistling in the dark.

The truth about writers, is that most of us view time as being far more valuable than money, and we will find a way to scratch it out for ourselves, even as our savings dwindle. Time to think, research, dream, read, dawdle over the details of our observations, and to marvel. It takes a lot of time *to marvel,* and you're usually not paid to do it. To paraphrase Eudora Welty, the serious literary writer is on a quest to discover what "we *don't* know about what we know." This is at the root of all marveling. It's the same process Steve Jobs and his pals followed in that garage where they invented the earliest Mac.

Fareed Zakaria in his remarkably clear and persuasive book IN DEFENSE OF A LIBERAL EDUCATION writes that although most folks will claim that its chief benefit is that it teaches you how to think, he found that its central virtue was in teaching him how to write. "Whatever you do in life," he says, "the ability to write clearly, cleanly, and reasonably quickly will prove to be an invaluable skill." I agree with Zakaria that "being forced to write clearly means, first, that you have to think clearly, and that the two processes are inextricably intertwined."

When the columnist Walter Lippmann was once asked his views on a particular topic, he is said to have replied, "I don't know what I think about that one. I haven't written about that yet." I suspect most writers feel that way.

But I want to talk about reading before I return to writing, because those of us who became writers, did not do so in a vacuum. We read and were inspired by what we read to try writing books ourselves. We tended to immerse ourselves in reading, allowing the rest of the world to fall away. Are today's young people reading this way? My best students are. I find a striking correlation between deep, broadly read

readers and good writers in my classes. According to an on-line article from Marketwatch, Americans spend an average of 23 hours a week using social media, emailing, texting. That doesn't factor in the hours spent watching television. And though research studies at the New School found that reading literary fiction improves "empathy", according to the same survey, 48% of Americans didn't crack open a book of any kind last year—print or digital, fiction or non-fiction.

I am a missionary for close, contemplative reading, the dawdling kind with a cup of tea and a cat on your knee. Recently I asked my advanced fiction students to name a book they had read that brought them to tears, and to speculate why they thought that had happened. I also gave them an "empathy" writing assignment in which they were challenged to write a dramatic scene that would make readers "feel" some emotion. They were not allowed to have a character shed tears, but to reveal whatever emotion they chose to write about in more subtle ways. On their own they were to investigate the difference between pathos and bathos.

Today's students are operating on overload mode. The round-the-clock accessibility that technology has provided makes all of us feel we are being asked to attend to more in a day than was ever before possible. When is there time for reflection, meaningful assessment, self-examination, a soul-searching walk in the Arboretum? Are the liberal arts properly addressing this contemporary and oddly accepted privation? Last year I witnessed the naturalist and writer Terry Tempest Williams, bring a roomful of creative writing students to tears. Why was this happening? Because in her own unguarded remarks she revealed a sensibility that encouraged self-examination. With so many technological distractions, students aren't taking the time to be brave about knowing themselves, to pull themselves away from the buzz of life and take stock of their troubles, anxieties, dreams. Being invited to do so astonished and touched them deeply. In an instant I was reminded how *necessary* the PAUSE is: for gathering oneself, unraveling complexities, and affording the chance to understand whatever you've not made time to understand in as fierce and focused a way as possible.

I tend to agree with Susan Sontag who wrote that art doesn't necessarily *say* something to us, it *does* something to us, that it's an

active visceral experience from which, as a side effect, we might conclude a message, but not as the grand pay-off. As Eudora Welty once wrote: " There is absolutely everything in literature but a clear answer." The writer Clyde Edgerton puts it another way, defining art as being devoted to the "wisdom of uncertainty."

I say that if you want to *feel* something most deeply, including your vulnerability as a human being—a requisite for empathy-- you turn to art and the humanities, beginning with reading.

If we value the human imagination that has brought us everything from bifocals to the iPhone, Shakespeare to Jonathan Franzen, we must allow for an educational environment in which it can be nurtured and thrive. We are not mice being trained to run through a maze (although some days, checking email, I feel I *am* the mouse).

There are glimmers of the imaginative spirit in certain primates and even a species of crow who makes tools out of leaves and teaches other crows how to use and make them. And I would argue that dogs have to be able to imagine that we are better people than we are to love us the way that they do. But so far there is no robot that *yearns* or *imagines*— and how is innovation possible without the surprising vicissitudes of both.

Teaching the arts and humanities has had a long, contentious history, but perhaps never been more challenged than in our Information Age when printed books are on the wane—especially books of enduring literary value along with the serious audience who reads them.

According to Joanna Scott's recent sobering article in *The Nation,* "Reading Difficult Fiction," the national educational standards known as Common Core mandate more "informational" reading, reducing the amount of fiction read in the classroom. (Did I recently hear on NPR about a grant going to support 5th grade students learning to read spreadsheets?).

Joanna Scott quotes a public school official as saying " we look at teaching literature as teaching particular concepts and skills. So maybe

we aren't teaching an entire novel, but we're ensuring that we are teaching the concepts that the novel would have gotten across."

Even in college, Scott notes, " educators are scrambling to make the study of literature ever more relevant."

But relevant in what way? What can the study of literature and of writing offer the pragmatist? The job seeker? You get a degree in English and what can you DO with it in the "real" world?

Mitt Romney, English major
Mario Cuomo, English major
Paul Simon, English major
Katie Couric, English major
Toni Morrison, English Major
Clarence Thomas, English Major
Hank Paulson, former Treasure Secretary, English major

Harold Varmus, Nobel Laureate in Medicine, undergrad at Amherst and was an English major. Went to Harvard after Amherst and got a Masters in English before he attended medical school.

And closer to home, John Skipper, English major at UNC, CEO of ESPN.

I doubt any one of these folks would say a major in English was a waste of their precious time. Michael Eisner, former Disney CEO, was a double major in English and Theater. "Literature is unbelievably helpful, because no matter what business you are in, you are dealing with interpersonal relationships. Literature gives you an appreciation of what makes people tick." Eric Fromm, the famous psychologist who wrote Escape from Freedom used to teach psychology by assigning his classes to read the great Russian novels of Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy.

A former student of mine, Charles Hodges, who now works as a creative director at Apple Media Arts Labs and developed the famous "Shot on an iPhone 6" photo ads slathered on the back pages of your *New Yorkers* and elsewhere, wrote to me that his liberal arts education at UNC (economics major/creative writing minor) was crucial in teaching him the importance of divergent thinking. He calls the liberal arts *the power grid of the imagination.*

To get back to writing, let me return to the rather puzzling comment I mentioned earlier by Eudora Welty: "There is absolutely *everything* in literature but a clear answer." What does she mean? Don't we want

clear answers in today's complicated world? Isn't one of the charges leveled at a liberal arts that it's all too loosey goosey with no measurable utility. That discussions and conversations in humanities and arts courses often lead to more questions than answers? How does this help the student, the writer, the human being solve challenges from the personal to the global? What is productive about muddle? Everything. Because muddle provokes the curious mind, the mind that's been trained to think critically, analytically, empathetically, creatively to *unmuddle*. Curiosity, which the liberal arts foster, always leads to the wide open door of possibilities and the panorama of one's imagination.

In his book, *Beyond the University: Why Liberal Arts Matter*, Michael S. Roth, President of Wesleyan University wrote a few years ago: "Education depends fundamentally on our ability to generate optimism and find reasonable (defensible) ways to sustain it. When our faith in the future is shaken, whether it is by technologies we don't understand, economic competition that undermines job security, or cultural forms that challenge our sense of identity, we often criticize education as having failed to prepare us for our current predicaments. And so it has been since the Puritans first set up schools in the New World."

After the twin towers fell, the writer Doris Lessing wrote that what the world needed now, most of all, was "the small personal voice," the lyric poem, the shrewd satire, the reflective essay, the memoir to give shape to our grief, to honor what we'd lost, to give solace, to help us examine and re-examine who we are. "All experience is enrichment rather than impoverishment," Eudora Welty believed. And that's something the liberal arts can teach us. And enrichment is, I think, the beginning of optimism. And it's optimism that brings out the humanity in our humanness.

"For me," Mark Salzman, a writer and cellist, says, "writing and music are alike in that they are about creating dissonance and then feeling compelled from within to resolve it. Bach literally could not leave a dissonant harmony unresolved. In ordinary life we face dissonances every day that we can't resolve…but when we write or listen or read or play music, we relive the experience of making the journey from chaos to order, and that feeds us, reminds us, heartens us, gives us courage to face all the journeys where there is no such promise."

I will close my remarks with quote from former student, Vish Sridharan, who is into his second year of Medical School.

" My time at Harvard Medical School has given me scientific and technical skills. I treat cancer patients, and I know these skills will be crucial in my career. But skills don't offer much solace when your patient is dying. Alleviating suffering requires more than technical ability; it requires humanism. My time at Carolina was spent both in biochemistry labs and in creative writing classrooms. The former taught me about cancer mutations and drug mechanisms. My forays into literature have taught me about cultural competence and about understanding poverty, pain, and suffering. In medical parlance, my liberal arts education has helped me keep the patient in the equation. I cannot imagine one without the other.

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