

COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS, THE GRADUATE INSTITUTE AT ST. JOHN'S  
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Congratulations on your successful completion of the Master's Program in Liberal Arts!

Now that you have your M.A., it is a good time to reflect upon what you have learned and the reasons why you began the journey that led you to your degree. What knowledge have you acquired at St. John's College? Have you gained any *practical* skills here? Your employers or potential clients, your friends and your family will certainly ask such questions. What will you say to them? What do you say to yourself?

Before turning to a consideration of possible answers to such questions, consider briefly some of the pre-suppositions that often underlie them. Frequently, the real meaning of, "What did you learn?" is, "In what way has this education contributed to your value as a worker or to your ability to earn a living?"

These questions are not ridiculous. Unless you are lucky enough to be independently wealthy or you have a patron, you have to think about how to support yourself. On the other hand, it is wrong-headed to think of education simply or primarily in these terms, as if employability and income were the highest, most important considerations for a human being.

Friedrich Nietzsche offers a vivid description of this impoverished understanding of education—an understanding that characterizes the modern era. In sum, he argues that an education that looks solely or primarily to the marketplace deforms the souls of its students because it is ignorant of, or denies, the proper fullness and activity of the human soul:

[T]he present age is . . . supposed to be an age, not of whole, mature and harmonious personalities, but of labor of the greatest possible common utility. That means, however, that men have to be adjusted to the purposes of the age so as to be ready for employment as soon as possible: they must labor in the factories of the general good before they are mature, indeed *so that they shall not become mature*—for this would be a luxury which would deprive the 'labor market' of a great deal of its workforce. Some birds are blinded so that they may sing more beautifully; I do not think the men of today sing more beautifully than their grandfathers, but I know they have been blinded. (Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, § 7)

Nietzsche grants that the emphasis on science, and more specifically on science directed by the marketplace, will indeed produce economic success, at least in the short-term. However, he adds that this kind of science is a desiccated version of the comprehensive understanding that is the proper goal of science or higher learning more generally—the goal that the modern world has largely abandoned:

I regret to use the words of the slave-owner and the employer of labor to describe things that in themselves ought to be thought of as free of utility and raised above the necessities of life; but the words “factory”, “labor market”, “supply”, “making profitable”, and whatever auxiliary verbs egoism now employs, come unbidden to the lips when one wishes to describe the most recent generation of men of learning. Sterling mediocrity grows even more mediocre, science ever more profitable in the economic sense. . . . Those who unwearingly repeat the modern call to battle and sacrifice—“Division of labor! Fall in!”—must for once be told in round and plain terms: if you want to push science forward as quickly as possible you will succeed in destroying it as quickly as possible; just as a hen perishes if it is compelled to lay eggs too quickly. (*Ibid*)

If Nietzsche’s account of the trend in modern education aptly describes the kind of education you did *not* receive and to which I think St. John’s is opposed, how might you describe what you *did* learn here?

While denouncing an overly narrow view of education, Nietzsche alludes to the effect of a *complete* education: it would create “whole, mature and harmonious personalities” (*Ibid*). Neither you nor I can honestly claim that you acquired a complete and harmonious soul as a result of several years of education at St. John’s. This is not to say that I abandon the idea that the truly authoritative education aims at, and can produce, a harmonious soul. Rather, I think this education is the ongoing activity of a lifetime. I *do* think that the liberal education you received here can contribute greatly to the attainment of this goal. However, I will put aside these ideas for the moment, and I will turn instead to a more modest articulation of what a liberal education is and what skills may be acquired as a result of it.

To do so, I will replace Nietzsche’s high-flying, though accurate, description of a *complete* education with Aristotle’s sensible, though still ambitious, account of a *liberal* education. In distinguishing a specialist from someone who, like you, has been generally educated, he says:

With regard to every [kind of] contemplation and inquiry, both lowlier and more esteemed, there appear to be two ways of being skilled, one of which it is well to call the science of the thing, and the other . . . a kind of educatedness. For it is characteristic of an educated man to be able to hit the mark and judge appropriately what the speaker sets forth finely and what he does not. For something like this is in fact what we suppose the generally educated man to be, and . . . to be educated is to be capable of doing this very thing—except that we believe this one, the generally educated man, is able to judge about virtually all things, though being one man, whereas the other one [the scientist or specialist] is able to judge [only] about some limited nature. (Aristotle, *On the Parts of Animals*, 639a2 – 15)

I do not recommend launching yourself into this quotation when asked what practical skills you acquired at St. John’s College, though if you decide to do so, take

a deep breath, and deliver it with panache. You can, however, capture the essence of what Aristotle says in your own words.

In *my own words*, I say that, as a result of your liberal education, you are better able to judge when an argument or account is adequate and when it is not. When it is inadequate, you are more capable of seeing how it is deficient and what would need to be addressed to alleviate this shortcoming. Such judgment can be brought to bear on any argument, regardless of the field. If the argument includes technical language, all you need is the time to look up the definitions of these words before you are able to proceed as you would with any other account. At bottom, such an argument is no different from any other.

To Aristotle's description, I would add that, as a result of your education, you are now better able to admit when you do not know something, and to do so without embarrassment. Do not underestimate the value of this intellectual honesty. It will help you to continue to learn. In addition, it will be greatly appreciated by other people, most of whom are anxious about their own ignorance, but are afraid to admit that they do not know. It can be a tremendous relief to encounter someone who can say without shame that he does not know, but that he wants to learn.

This training in judgment—in clear thinking—is an essential part of a liberal education. And it can indeed help you to advance your career. I advise you, therefore, to consider how you can describe this skill to others so that you can represent it with the full strength that it deserves and in a manner that is readily apparent to others. If you do this, you will be well equipped to respond to those who want to know how what you learned can be applied to the workplace.

This account of your education, however, is neither complete nor does it capture the most important part of it. Aristotle would agree that, in order *truly* to judge well, one must have a satisfactory understanding of the ultimate end at which one aims. It is not enough to have an idea of the *proximate* goal that one seeks to fulfill. One must have adequate knowledge of whether and how this *proximate* goal accords with the *highest and most comprehensive goal* at which human beings can and should aim. Without a sufficient account of this authoritative, supreme good—*The Good*—no judgment is adequate, strictly speaking, and one cannot truly be said to know. Thus, *any* education can and *must* be considered in terms of whether and how it can contribute to *The Good*. Regarding questions about whether your education here was practical, therefore, the real issue is not whether this education will contribute to your employment opportunities, but whether it contributes to your knowledge of the good. And the real question about your job is not whether your education has made you suitable for it, but what impact it has on your ability to lead a good life.

No, I will not let go of the highest account of education to which Nietzsche alludes and that I dare say all great thinkers share. Moreover, I expect that you empathize with me in my refusal to forgo these highest goals.

While some of you came to St. John's partly in order to advance your career, I doubt that any of you came here primarily for this reason. You came because you had questions—questions that perhaps you could not quite articulate, even to yourself, but that you could not put aside. As you made your way through the works of the program, I suspect many of you began to recognize your questions reflected

back to you in the Great Books: “What is justice?” “What is love or friendship?” “What kind of beings are we, and what is our place in this world?”

Many and perhaps all of these questions arise from a common origin: the yearning to have a good life, combined with the realization that you do not know clearly enough what this is. I suspect, in other words, that the fundamental reason why you came here was because you thought this education might help you to understand The Good.

Since our human life is limited, and since the clock is already ticking on the time that we have, this question of the good is urgent. No one wants to realize at the end of his life that he misused or wasted his time. And since none of us know how much time we have, it is foolish for any of us to postpone the question of the good indefinitely.

Such talk of mortality and The Good sounds very serious. Well, what did you expect? Has anything valuable that you have read or discussed here been unserious? Thankfully, seriousness does not have to be grave. You need only recall the company you have kept as you have pursued your questions, and you will feel, not weighted down, but elevated by the astounding souls who have walked alongside you.

Here is Plato, on the same journey as you, speaking with a voice as nuanced and relevant as it was some 2,400 years ago. With a touch of mischief, he doubles himself, adopting the voice of Socrates, who recollects taking this same path, just a day earlier: “I went down to the Piraeus yesterday with Glaucon, son of Ariston” (Plato, *The Republic*, 327a).

Another man introduces himself with the words: “Thucydides, an Athenian, wrote the history of the war between the Peloponnesians and the Athenians, beginning at the moment that it broke out, and believing that it would be a great war” (Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, 1.1). He hands you his book, which contains his thoughts about your shared questions, saying as he does so: “I have written my work, not as an essay which is to win the applause of the moment, but as a possession for all time” (Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, 1.22).

Homer turns his blind eyes upon you and points to Achilles and Odysseus, each of whom tackles the questions of the good life and what it means to be a good human being. Shakespeare speaks to you with a profundity that is surely expressed in some of the most beautiful language ever heard. Nietzsche reaffirms life with cry from his electric soul: “We still feel it, the whole need of the spirit and the whole tension of its bow” (Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, “Preface”).

These souls are among the best students and teachers ever to have lived. Their greatness consists largely in the fact that they investigated the most serious eternal questions with unmatched comprehensiveness and depth. What have you learned from them about The Good?

If you have learned anything, it is that, when speaking to one who does not already know the answer, you cannot respond meaningfully to this question in a single sentence or two. You might say, for example, that they taught you that the good life is the philosophic life or the life devoted to the Divine, but then you would have to explain what philosophy or the Divine is and what it would mean to dedicate your life to such things.

While there are answers to these questions, each answer leads to a new question—and this is not the occasion for a long conversation. It *is* the occasion, however, to remind you that all of these great students and teachers spent their lives engaged with such questions. Inquiry is thereby shown to be central to, if not the essence of, a good human life. Furthermore—and this is worth emphasizing, since you are have now exited the Master’s Program—these students were able to learn from virtually everything and everyone, if not directly, then indirectly. Life after your M.A. may not be as leisurely as it was when you were a student, but you can and will find opportunities to learn, if only you come to embrace *life itself* as a learning opportunity.

I hope and expect that something of this way of life has become a part of you and that, if you look around now at the faces of your fellow students, you will see in their eyes something of the souls of those great human beings who are your models.

Continue to be thoughtful. Be open-minded. Retain the flexibility of soul that is necessary for continued learning. In sum, keep the goal of a good life always before you. Use The Good as your North Star to guide every significant action and decision you make. Doing this will not guarantee that you always make the right decision, but it will mean that will have done the best that you could do, and that, whatever contingencies you may face, you will have led the best life that is possible for you.

Let me conclude with one of Plato’s favorite salutations: “Have success in action, and do what is good.”