

# The Liberating Arts

*Why We Need  
Liberal Arts  
Education*

Edited by **Jeffrey Bilbro**  
**Jessica Hooten Wilson**  
and **David Henreckson**

“Lively, absorbing,  
and accessible”

Eric Adler, *The Battle  
of the Classics*



# Acclaim

*The Liberating Arts* is a transformative work. Opening with an acknowledgment of the sundry forces arrayed against liberal arts education today, this diverse collection of voices cultivates an expansive imagination for how the liberal arts can mend what is broken and orient us individually and collectively to what is good, true, and beautiful.

**Kristin Kobes Du Mez**, author, *Jesus and John Wayne*

At their best, the humanities are about discerning what kinds of lives we should be living. But humanities education is in crisis today, leaving many without resources to answer this most important question of our lives. The authors of this volume are able contenders for the noble cause of saving and improving the humanities. Read and be inspired!

**Miroslav Volf**, coauthor, *Life Worth Living*

In our era of massive social and technological upheaval, this book offers a robust examination of the liberal arts, and an expansive vision for teaching them. As a scientist who believes that education should shape us for lives of reflection and action, I found the essays riveting, challenging, and inspiring. I picked it up and could not put it down.

**Francis Su**, author, *Mathematics for Human Flourishing*

**This is a preview. Get the entire book here.**

It's a mark of how confused our society has become that anyone needs to "defend" the liberal arts, and yet the task has never been more necessary. Fortunately, in this lucid and inspiring volume, a diverse group of thinkers dispel entrenched falsehoods about the irrelevance, injustice, or uselessness of the liberal arts and remind us that nothing is more fundamental to preparing citizens to live in a pluralistic society attempting to balance the values of justice, equality, and community. They demonstrate that defending the liberal arts is not an ideological or an elitist project but a human one.

**Jon Baskin**, editor, *Harper's Magazine*

In this series of lively, absorbing, and accessible essays, the contributors invoke and dismantle all the chief objections to the study of the liberal arts. The result is a clarion call for an education that enables human and societal flourishing. Everyone concerned about the fate of learning today must read this book.

**Eric Adler**, author, *The Battle of the Classics*

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Plough

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# Contents

<b>1 What Are the Liberating Arts?</b>	
Practical Matters	2
<i>The Editors</i>	
Amid the Ruins	7
<i>David Henreckson</i>	
<b>2 Aren't the Liberal Arts a Waste of Time?</b>	
Practicing the Liberal Arts in Prison	16
<i>Sean Sword</i>	
What Is Time For?	20
<i>Zena Hitz</i>	
On the Road with Marilynne Robinson	34
<i>David Henreckson</i>	
<b>3 Aren't the Liberal Arts Elitist?</b>	
The Odyssey Project	40
<i>Emily Auerbach</i>	
A History of Liberation	44
<i>Brandon McCoy</i>	
The Catherine Project	56
<i>Zena Hitz</i>	
<b>4 Aren't the Liberal Arts Liberal?</b>	
Respecting Reality	60
<i>Anne Snyder</i>	
Truth U, Justice U, Jesus U	63
<i>Joseph Clair</i>	
Elite Education for the Rest of Us	76
<i>John Mark Reynolds</i>	



## 5 Aren't the Liberal Arts Racist?

- Nyansa Classical Community 80  
*Angel Adams Parham*
- An Expansive Collection 84  
*Angel Adams Parham*
- How to Fight Over the Canon 96  
*Jonathan Tran*

## 6 Aren't the Liberal Arts Outdated?

- Tradition Fuels Innovation 102  
*L. Gregory Jones*
- The Liberating Potential of Knowing the Past 105  
*Jeffrey Bilbro*
- Science as a Human Tradition 116  
*Becky L. Eggimann*

## 7 Aren't the Liberal Arts Out of Touch?

- Art Matters 122  
*Steve Prince*
- A Richer Sense of Relevance 127  
*Noah Toly*
- Stories and Severed Selves 133  
*Erin Shaw*

## 8 Aren't Liberal Arts Degrees Unmarketable?

- Why Engineers Need the Liberal Arts 138  
*David Hsu*
- Forming Better Professionals and Leaders 142  
*Rachel B. Griffiths*
- Why Liberal Arts Matter in Hiring 154  
*Don Eben*



<b>9 Aren't the Liberal Arts a Luxury?</b>	
Remembering a Mentor	158
<i>Margarita Mooney Clayton</i>	
Liberating the Least of These	162
<i>Brad East</i>	
Liberation from Lonely Suffering and Death	175
<i>Lydia S. Dugdale</i>	
<b>10 Aren't the Liberal Arts Just for Smart People?</b>	
Lyceums: Places to Think with Neighbors	180
<i>Nathan Beacom</i>	
Liberal Learning for All	184
<i>Jessica Hooten Wilson</i>	
Small Magazines as Educational Communities	192
<i>Peter Mommsen</i>	
<i>Contributors</i>	198
<i>Notes</i>	202
<i>Bibliography</i>	214

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## What Are the Liberating Arts?

# Practical Matters

*The Editors*

THE BOOK YOU ARE HOLDING is the fruit of a truly collaborative process. Our aim is not merely to mount an argument for the enduring relevance of the liberal arts; it is also to model the kind of conversation and friendship that liberal arts formation makes possible. The Covid pandemic that started in 2020 and the subsequent social unrest and economic disruption liberated us from the status quo of institutional life and provoked us to rethink the purpose of the educational vision that many of us have long touted.

Liberated from complacency and from the confines of our respective disciplines and specializations, we were liberated for friendship and the possibilities of intellectual community. Given that the words “free” and “friend” come from the same root, this is only appropriate. If we shift to the Latinate word “liberal,” we recognize that these arts aim to foster liberality or generosity, the dispositions that make friendship possible. The purpose of freedom is not to pursue some kind of narcissistic self-fulfillment but to cultivate friendship with others. Hence the liberal arts aim to form us to use our freedom for these proper ends rather than squander it on lesser goods.

This book is a collaborative project and follows an admittedly unusual structure. Each of the following

chapters responds to one widely held perspective that we hear in today's culture, questioning the value of the liberal arts. After briefly voicing the concerns behind each question, we offer a set of three responses to it. The first and the last we call "interludes," and they briefly offer a practical example – an organization, an experience, a practice – that implicitly responds to the question at hand. These interludes don't prescribe scalable "best practices"; rather, they intend to inspire by example and prompt readers to imagine analogous possibilities in their own lives. Between these interludes is a more discursive essay that provides a formal response to the question stated in the chapter's title. The effect we're aiming at is a kind of orchestral whole, where different voices and approaches harmonize to provide a fuller vision of what a liberal arts education might look like today.

You'll discover productive disagreements in the following pages, but this is part of modeling a good-faith conversation rather than retreating into narrow ideological groups and throwing rhetorical grenades at other camps. Some essays ground their claims in Christian texts; others begin with Aristotle or other sources. You'll even discover substantively different definitions of the liberal arts themselves: a canon of great texts; a curriculum of perennial human questions; the seven classical arts of the trivium and quadrivium; a formation in virtue and wisdom rather than a training in practical skills. Different contributors draw on these various facets of the liberal arts tradition, but we can discern a beautiful harmony among these voices.

As David Henreckson describes in the second part of this introductory chapter, the origins of this book lie in some videoconference conversations that took place in the spring of 2020. That summer, as protests against racial injustice took place across the country and the economic consequences of Covid came into focus, we decided to formalize our group and make our dialogue more public. In such an apocalyptic moment, we wanted to contemplate together what was being revealed and how we might respond. The Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU) awarded us a three-year networking grant, and this enabled us to launch a website – [theliberatingarts.org](http://theliberatingarts.org) – and publish a series of video and audio conversations with interlocutors from many different backgrounds about the current state and future prospects of liberal arts education.

From the first, however, our group was roiled by upheaval. Jeffrey Bilbro lost his tenured faculty position the day before the CCCU awarded us this grant, and as his institution was to be the fiduciary agent, we had to scramble to find another home institution.<sup>1</sup> Wheaton College agreed to serve in this role, but then a year later Noah Toly, our project member at Wheaton, left to serve as the provost of Calvin University. We had to quickly find someone else at Wheaton to join our group, and Becky Eggimann graciously and capably volunteered. This story gives just a glimpse into the personal and professional transitions many have gone through since beginning this project. In 2020, all three of us editors were committed to the institutions where we worked; now, all three of us serve at different institutions. Many of the other contributors

have likewise shifted jobs and institutions. This is a season of political and institutional upheaval, but that only makes this conversation about the nature and value of the liberal arts more essential. This is a time to build; may we build on the right foundation and aim at the right ends.

Many of the contributors to this volume write as Christians, from within the tradition of Christian humanism that has long been part of the liberal arts story. It goes without saying that the liberal arts are equally for those with other faiths, or none. But in editing this collection we concluded that it is appropriate for practitioners to speak from their own particular religious and philosophical traditions, not from a standpoint of artificial neutrality. Readers are encouraged to apply the insights they find useful to their own contexts and traditions.

We are grateful to all those who have contributed along the way, particularly those who agreed to record interviews with us and think in public during these fraught months. Anne Snyder and Breaking Ground, another project launched during the pandemic to think carefully about the implications of this season, supported us from the first and were delightful to partner with as we launched our website. We're particularly grateful to two students who played key roles in our endeavor: Seth Gorveatte brilliantly edited our amateur video recordings, and Sarah Soltis copyedited this book manuscript and double-checked citations.

Due to the support of the CCCU and Plough Publishing House, we are able to donate the proceeds from this book to four organizations that are doing inspiring and important

work: the Catherine Project, the Clemente Course in the Humanities, Nyansa Classical Community, and the Odyssey Project. May creative and courageous institutions such as these continue to thrive, and may this book inspire others to go and do likewise.



# Amid the Ruins

*David Henreckson*

WHEN I WAS YOUNG my family attended the church of a small congregation of Scottish Covenanters. Historically, the Covenanters were a zealous people, not shy about fighting theological battles with non-theological weapons. Their militancy mellowed out in modern times, although their doctrinal ferocity remained. Covenanters love the psalms of the Hebrew Bible—so much so, they sing them exclusively and with no musical accompaniment. In my memory, the a cappella singing in our own church may have sounded spare and raw and unforgiving, yet I came to love it: four-part harmonies plus the unpredictable fifth part contributed by the tone-deaf elder with the five daughters in calico dresses.

During these years, my family also picked up the habit of practicing Sabbath. Sundays among the Covenanters had an austere and rigorous beauty. No commerce, no dining out, and ideally no recreational sports.

I didn't do Sabbath particularly well. The coerced time of self-reflection was often uncomfortable. There was nothing else to do but, well, *contemplate* – which the ancients alleged was the pinnacle of human activity, and which I would have spurned for a mundane outing to the suburban mall.

My Sabbath practice predictably withered away during adulthood. But when a global pandemic struck and sent us all into isolation, I had occasion to read the Jewish theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel's 1951 book, *The Sabbath*. Heschel's meditations are famously and cryptically metaphysical, but his book also contains prisms of insight that stuck with me in quarantine. One particular line resonated: "Sabbath is not an occasion for diversion or frivolity; not a day to shoot fireworks or to turn somersaults, but an opportunity to mend our tattered lives; to collect rather than to dissipate time."<sup>2</sup>

This seems a healthy way to think about the Sabbath, somewhat more humane and certainly more intentional than the way I tried to practice it in my youth. But what would it actually mean to mend tattered lives, to collect rather than dissipate time? What *use* would that be?

## The Moment of Crisis

A few weeks after my university sent me to finish the semester online in March of 2020, with the threat of furlough and possible unemployment looming on the horizon, I wrote to a group of academic friends – many of whom are contributors to this volume in one way or another. With Heschel in the back of my mind, I referred to the quarantine as a "time of enforced Sabbath."

How might we convert this period of isolation into an opportunity to reflect on our respective vocations in the troubled world of higher education?

For years those of us working in educational institutions, particularly ones with liberal arts missions, have felt the cultural and political fractures that threaten these institutions. Even so, I did not fully grasp in that moment just how unsteady these institutions were, and how under fire the practices of liberal learning they serve. Few of us did. The pandemic brought this reality into stark relief.

Within a matter of weeks, some members of the group had lost their tenured or tenure-track jobs. I was furloughed. Others, given occasion to reflect on the unstable state of higher education, voluntarily left their traditional academic positions.

These sorts of vocational crises are challenging enough in normal times. In isolation, they can feel debilitating. What this gathering of friends provided was a community in which to express frustration, dread, and occasionally hope for the future. An enforced Sabbath may not be an occasion for diversion or frivolity, but it was certainly an opportunity for communal self-reflection. The moment of crisis in early 2020 forced many of us to rethink what matters most—both personally and professionally. The pandemic sent many of us home for months. Emerging social protest movements focused our attention on systemic injustices and political divisions that threaten the order of things. Drastic economic shifts called into question the monetary value of a college degree and heightened pre-existing inequalities. Many colleges and universities

“discontinued” (what a euphemism) entire departments and in some cases shuttered the entire institution.

All my friends in that initial group, and the others who have joined us along the way, have asked ourselves at one point or another: Amid the ruins, is teaching and practicing the liberal arts worth doing in such a time as this?

## Facing the Challenges

In my decade of teaching, I’ve noticed a steadily increasing level of anxiety among my students about the purpose of their college education. A college degree no longer ensures a good job and a stable middle-class existence. Student debt has climbed so high so fast that we now commonly call it a national crisis. The pressure to perform, to succeed, to excel is more intense than ever, even as the markers for success are harder to measure and harder to attain.

Not long ago, one of my best students came to my office after class and asked me a question that has stuck with me. She said that as she was nearing graduation, after two surreal years of virtual education, everyone was asking her what she was going to *do* after college. What they were asking her, in fact, was whether she had a job lined up yet – whether her professional and financial prospects were bright. This student is exceptionally smart, and I knew she had several excellent opportunities in front of her. But she confessed that her anxiety was less about the question, “What am I supposed to *do* after college?” and more about the question: “*Who* am I supposed to *be*?”

I remember thinking, *if only more faculty and administrators were asking the same question.*

Many recent studies have looked at the complications of post-college life: five years after college, approximately three-quarters of college graduates are working in a field different from their undergraduate major.<sup>3</sup> And yet how many strategic plans assembled by higher education consultants take account of this variability and contingency? How many of us, including faculty in traditional liberal arts fields, equip our students with the intellectual, moral, and even spiritual virtues to weather such unpredictable futures?

When my student told me she was concerned about *who* she was supposed to *be*, she shifted the focus from career to character, and from marketability (a fuzzy concept itself) to vocation. It strikes me now that this shift in focus is precisely what is needed when the world of higher education is itself in something of a state of emergency, as so many colleges and universities (particularly small liberal arts institutions) are wondering not just how to thrive but, increasingly, how to survive declining enrollment, political conflicts, and financial uncertainty.

Yet the silver lining in all this is that in anxious times we are driven back to first principles: What really matters? What sort of person should I be, in order to do justice to my neighbor? What sorts of love should I cultivate, even when everything seems unstable? What am I called to do, personally and professionally, when things beyond my control have placed a giant question mark on the structures we once took for granted?

This is where I suspect that institutions devoted to the liberal arts, and particularly those with Christian

commitments, have a unique vocation or even charism, to borrow a theological term. We have a deep moral vocabulary to draw on for moments like the present. We have a tradition of inquiry, oriented toward the pursuit of truth and beauty and goodness. We have centuries of wisdom to draw on, with voices from Confucius, Plato, and Aquinas to Mary Wollstonecraft, Frederick Douglass, Gustavo Gutiérrez, Marilynne Robinson, and Nicholas Wolterstorff.

If this is to be a time of Sabbath, we should make good use of it to mend what has long been tattered.

## Visions for Hope

And yet it is hard to pursue such fundamental questions in a time of crisis and instability. With livelihoods and institutional survival at stake, it seems a luxury to talk about a liberal arts education, or the old trifecta of truth, beauty, and goodness. In these days of austerity, is there still a central place for intellectual and moral formation in the university?

These are questions that the liberal arts are supposed to help us answer. And yet, ironically, it is liberal arts education that seems most imperiled in the wake of pandemic and protest and scarcity. Under duress, it is natural to lead pragmatic lives determined by economic needs or personal preferences. It is no surprise that, in these conditions, many of us struggle to find ultimate meaning in our lives and vocations.

What kind of moral or spiritual awakening do we need in these anxious times?

In one of my favorite books on higher education, *Exiles from Eden*, Mark Schwehn writes that “academies at their best can and should become communities where the pleasures of friendship and the rigors of work are united.”<sup>4</sup> Of course, in the midst of the pandemic, both these pleasures were quite remote. Or so it seemed at first.

The gathering of friends that constitutes this project, which we eventually named “The Liberating Arts,” sustained hope for many of us when it seemed like our own academic institutions were falling apart. And in truth, this sort of community, where the pleasures of friendship and the rigors of work were united, is both the grounds for renewal of our scholarly labors and their culmination. The liberal arts themselves are not mere skills or techniques to be mastered and passed along to the young adults we happen to teach. Rather, they are a way of life, the crafts or practices by which we live out the freedom that makes us flourish as human beings. This way of life ought to cultivate in us a spirit of liberality and a communal desire to mend a tattered world, to seek justice for our neighbor, and to heal social divisions. In short, the liberal arts must liberate or they are mere semblances of wisdom masquerading as the real thing. And this liberation is most likely to happen in the company of good friends.

And so, this book is the result of many intersecting friendships, often formed amid shared anxiety and loss and shaped by sustained debate as much as by agreement. You, the reader, will encounter multiple visions for the future of liberal arts education in what follows. There will be much agreement about fundamentals, but also divergence about



how to achieve the goods promised by the practice of the liberal arts. What counts as the liberal arts? What vision of human flourishing should shape our pedagogy? What are the demands of justice – with respect to gender, race, sexuality, and economic privilege – that ought to inform our educational institutions? Is the tradition hopelessly elitist? Is it too conservative? Too “woke” and progressive? How can we ensure that the errors of the past do not shape the future of the liberal arts tradition? Do we need new institutions to carry this tradition forward or can the institutions of yesterday revive and sustain this vision of educational formation? These are among the questions addressed in the following chapters.

Yet these remain live questions, and this book cannot promise a unified answer, much less one that will satisfy everyone. Nevertheless, we hope that this book offers its readers an opportunity to listen in on an ongoing public conversation. We hope this is an occasion for individuals who care deeply about intellectual and spiritual formation to pause and reflect on our calling and character in an anxious age.

Amid all the uncertainties and emergency measures and predictions of the liberal arts’ demise, this book invites you to stand still and contemplate for just a few moments: What makes for a life worth living? What do we owe to each other and to the young adults who are about to venture into an unpredictable future? How might we encourage one another to mend our tattered lives, and collect the time that has been given to us?

