

Becoming Free

[Peter Suber](#), [Philosophy Department](#), [Earlham College](#)

1.

Tom Lehrer defined a philosopher as someone who gives helpful advice to people who are happier than he is. Today you've got a lot to be happy about — so you don't need any advice from me. In any case, I'm too young to give it to you. Only 14 years ago I was sitting where you are now, wondering what was going to happen next but certainly not in the mood for advice. In the meantime I've gone away, had some adventures, and returned, a lot like the third son in the fairy tales. Since I'm just a few steps ahead of you in this business, let me offer a prediction instead of advice: in 14 years or so, if you divide what you have learned since graduation from Earlham into two piles, the important and the unimportant, then you'll find that the important part will contain little more than an unfolding of what you already learned at Earlham, though not necessarily from your professors. From here onwards, important learning will be "recollection" as Leibniz used the term: coming to know clearly what you already know unclearly. Instead of advice, then, I'd like to talk about how life after Earlham is Phase Two of an Earlham education — without the tuition. In particular I'd like to talk about finishing the job begun at Earlham of learning to be free inside a world we did not make, do not fully understand, and do not entirely approve.

Has Earlham College made you free? Have you made yourself free while at Earlham? Are the liberal arts also the liberating arts? "Liberal" means free, but originally a liberal arts education was that which suited a free person, which meant a free man — in short, education for the leisure class. Liberal learning is expensive today, but not exclusive, and it aims at a different kind of freedom. Can it liberate? That is my question this morning. The idea that freedom can be conferred, or that liberation can be done for you, or to you, by another person like a teacher, or by an institution like a college, contains a difficulty that may amount to a stark paradox. To elucidate the paradox, let me offer a parable from law.

Once upon a time the sun never set on the British Empire, but this did not last. One by one England's colonies attained their legal independence, either by war or negotiation. As the age of colonialism was coming to an end, England, a law-loving country, wanted a standardized procedure for granting, sealing, and recognizing the independence of its former colonies. To this end the English Parliament adopted the Statute of Westminster in 1931. Colonies and dominions freed after 1931 were freed under the terms of this statute, which provided (among other things) that England could no longer legislate for them without their explicit request and consent. This looked like the most thorough and tidy way to sever legal ties between two nations, and that was the point.

It soon occurred to lawyers in England and in the former colonies that the Statute of Westminster was merely a statute, and could be repealed by Parliament. What if a colony adopts its own constitution and runs its own life and a century later England repeals the Statute of Westminster? Would the former colony's freedom be revoked at the same time? To many legal minds the answer was *yes*. Are the liberated colonies, then, free only under the command of England? It may be that in 1931 England really did abdicate the desire or intention to legislate for its old colonies, and that in any case it had no real power left to do so. But courts and politicians in the former colonies wanted to know whether *in law* England retained a *right* to legislate. It appeared that one generation of English people had done its best to surrender this right to legislate, but had

done so with frustrating incompleteness, since any later generation could restore it. This was a world class cartoon of the child with flypaper on its fingers trying to shake it off. Nothing that England could do, it seems, could give the colonies full legal independence, for if it were done in law, then it could be undone; and if were not done in law, it would not be lawful. England was learning that it is paradoxical to command another to be free or even to offer another their freedom as a gift.

One tempting solution was to interpret the Statute of Westminster as irrevocable, that is, beyond the power of Parliament to repeal. That would guarantee that the emancipated countries would stay emancipated. But it would also contradict the independence of the *English* people, their sovereignty in their own country, and deny them the power to change their own laws. Following this line of reasoning Parliament decided in 1935 that the Statute of Westminster could in principle be repealed. So the paradox of liberation remains.

That is the parable. The paradox might be restated as the injunction, "You are old enough to make decisions for yourself, so from now on obey nothing I say," or more concisely, "Do not obey this order!". This may appear to simplify a complex problem. But as Margaret Wiley reminds us, on the contrary, to express a difficult idea as a paradox is an ancient and sure way to preserve it from oversimplification. The paradox of liberation is not based on a simple mistake with a simple solution. It captures the pain, uncertainty, and exhilaration of being defined by influences that one is transcending. It describes the unstable irony of holding one's freedom through another.

So —if the Statute of Westminster with all its good will and careful drafting cannot completely liberate colonies and dominions, can liberal arts education liberate students? If it *can*, is it because freedom through education is sufficiently unlike legal emancipation to avoid the paradox? Or does liberal education liberate in and through paradox? Or does it not liberate at all?

2.

When I teach Introduction to Philosophy, I pause near the end of the term and ask, "If we've been doing philosophy for the past 7 or 8 weeks, then what is philosophy?" I hope that by then the students will be able to answer from experience and not fall back on formulas they might have read. Let me draw an analogy to the present situation and ask, "If you've been acquiring a liberal arts education for the past four years, then what is a liberal arts education?"

When I ask my philosophy students what philosophy is, I don't expect very complete answers. If philosophy were easy to define, I would have saved them the trouble and defined it for them. Practicing philosophy for a while only helps one to see its complexity and the inadequacy of pat descriptions. The same is true of a liberal arts education. Your four-year immersion should enable you to resist simplifications of your experience. But to articulate your experience in its complexity will take many years.

Let me approach the question with the thesis that, whatever a liberal arts education is, you don't have one yet. If the essence of a liberal arts education is to go beyond knowledge to wisdom, beyond specialization to generous versatility of mind, beyond assimilating the old culture to the free and creative participation in its future development, and beyond moral awakening to moral practice, then clearly it is a lifetime process. You have, then, four years' worth of a liberal arts education. Even if you have 21 years' worth, you are not finished yet.

This is a personal list of the elements of a liberal arts education. There is no standard definition

with any detail in it. If there were, just as with philosophy, we'd be remiss if we didn't just tell it to you from the start. That way, at least, you could make an informed choice whether you wanted a liberal arts education, a university education, or a technical or vocational education. As it is, you must decide what kind of college will meet your aspirations on a more or less vague understanding of what flavor of learning that college provides —and perhaps an equally vague understanding of your own aspirations. You won't know whether you made the right choice until you catch our disease and look at your symptoms. But then you will not be able to distinguish the satisfaction of having made the right choice from the corruption that worked so deeply that you are grateful.

This is my topic in a nutshell. Any form of education, unless it fails miserably, will make people over so as to value just what that form of education provided. Obviously there are degrees and limits to this "making over", and I'll talk about them, but that doesn't make the question go away. How can any form of education simultaneously change students and cultivate their freedom to judge the value of those changes? Why aren't you corrupted so deeply that it is nonsense to speak of a power of truly independent judgment? And if you have not been remade that deeply, isn't your education therefore superficial?

Versatility of mind is clearly the kind of thing that is not acquired once and for all, for example, in college. We ask you to taste it with a system of distribution requirements, but plainly that is just the beginning of a universal cultivation. Even if you want to go well past that beginning, there is not much time in your four years in college. For in addition to acquainting yourself with the expanse of the intellectual universe, we ask you to acquire a deeper knowledge of the perspective and material of a major field. This is just as essential. The *discipline of learning a discipline* is one of the most valuable steps that college provides toward liberal learning. As I will show in a minute, learning a discipline and spending several years deepening one's knowledge of it, serves freedom directly.

There are many kinds of freedom. I do not wish to speak about all of them, or to give the impression that all of them reduce to one type. There is political liberty, or the freedom from coercion by public power. There is the political freedom of enfranchisement, or the distribution of public power through the vote. There is freedom as independence, or freedom from the power and opinions of others, which tends to reinforce and isolate individuality. There is freedom from pain, hunger, cold, illness, violence, and ignorance: a freedom that can only be purchased by institutions that limit independence and liberty. There is the freedom to enjoy one's time or friends in peace, which requires cooperation more than independence for, as James Branch Cabell said, you can live at peace only as long as your neighbor chooses. There are freedoms, then, that individuals claim against communities and freedoms that only communities can create for their members.

I am here concerned with a freedom that combines both types, a freedom whose foundation is cultivated by others when one is too young to do so for oneself, and which when ripe enables one to turn and judge what the cultivators have done. It is a paradoxical and wonderful freedom that enables one to face one's parents and teachers and culture and cosmos, to face all the influences that made one what one is, and to pass beyond the echoing of them to the freedom to amend their work and finish it. This is paradoxical because it looks like the creation of something that is not merely a creature, or the manipulation of a person so deeply that one is reborn pristine, transcending manipulation. Sometimes we call it "making a Frankenstein".

A distinction first made explicit by Kant is that between positive and negative freedom. Negative freedom is freedom *from* —from coercion, constraint, compulsion. Positive freedom is freedom

to —to guide oneself from within without taking one's rule from outside, to be one's own master and legislator. Kierkegaard seems to have been the first to notice that one can attain negative without positive freedom. One can cut oneself loose from enslaving influences and yet have developed no internal or home-grown sources of guidance at all. Kierkegaard in fact finds this state, beyond negative freedom and short of positive freedom, to be a recurring predicament for human beings in the modern world. He calls it *hovering*, to be free from everything, hence to have no basis for the choices one is then free to make; to be independent but empty.

3.

Education is closely related to socialization and nurturing, if not a special case of them. Like them, one of its functions is to adapt new human beings to the ways of old human beings. This is not at all the same as to liberate them from those old ways.

One job of education is to transmit the knowledge and skill attained by that culture and others to a new generation. Without this each generation would start from zero and no form of civilization would be possible except the rudimentary forms that could be rediscovered by an ignoramus in one lifetime. Forms of life would not be built on astronomy or law, the arch or penicillin or polypropylene, but on more basic achievements like shielding one's eyes from the sun, the word "ouch", and sitting down.

I'd like to say that education transmits the *tradition* to the next generation, but for many people that word has come to mean the canon or the mainstream, the dominant, even the oppressive, strand of influence in a culture. I want to talk about something much broader, something that does not have a name. Let me call it the *moosehead in the attic* —because we have inherited it, it's bigger than we are, we don't know how to value it, and we don't know how we'd get rid of it if we wanted to.

Or if that term suggests something too foreign and separable from ourselves, let me also call it the *atmosphere* —because it is ambient wherever we are, and because it is stratified, with the closer layers exerting greater pressure on us than those more distant. It is not a single world-view, not even a rich incoherent world-view. It contains influences that cannot be translated into propositions; it cannot be exhausted by articulation. It is not the perspective of a class, but all the perspectives that can be captured or betrayed by words, acts, gestures, and silent structures. The atmosphere includes the language we speak and rules like "listen to your mother", "talking is better than killing", and "open doors before passing through them". It includes theories that we take for granted everyday, such as that human sacrifice will not stop volcanoes, physical objects exist when nobody is looking at them, and things are made of other things.

The rules and theories contained in the moosehead in the attic have each been denied, in all likelihood, by another culture than our own or by our own culture at another time. And if not, surely some philosopher has denied them. That is why historical, comparative, and foundational study bring us to ask pesky and subversive questions about what is really good and what is really true. They acquaint us with a wider world and the limits of our own. Learning about alternatives that have actually been lived is part of becoming free within our own culture. At best, however, it can guide us toward negative freedom or independence.

The moosehead also includes rules and theories that we do not take for granted. Some of its rules divide us bitterly and some of its theories we must study for weeks or years before we even understand them. This is the thing that is passed on in education and in all other forms of nurturing and socialization. Because it is not a single world-view, it is not acquired in its entirety;

in fact we each acquire a different subset or perspective on it. It is inhabited, circulated, recycled, and sometimes polluted by each living and learning being. In one sense nothing is more valuable to us, because it shapes our beliefs and our beliefs shape our identity. In another sense, or in many particular ways, it's just an old moosehead in the attic.

One task of education is to pass on the moosehead. If you catch us in the right mood, say, on commencement day, we will describe this as the task of transmitting the knowledge painstakingly acquired by the toiling prior generations of human beings. But in practice this means to transmit what the prior generation *thinks* is knowledge, which is generally a mixture of verifiable claims, near misses, demonstrable errors, groundless opinions, open conjectures, useful fictions, values, hopes, fears, and inarticulate large conceptual frameworks for holding them all together. So we should be clear: we are *not* talking here about "the truth that makes one free". We are talking about the entirety of the written and unwritten thought of our predecessors in all its immensity, uncertainty, inconsistency, folly, and grandeur.

Since the 16th or 17th century, or so, in this culture, we have not even tried to transmit all that we thought was true and valuable in our own tradition to the next generation: there was simply too much for any curriculum or any single lifetime. We are at a point now where new knowledge and opinion and error are *deposited* as it were in the archives of scholarship without being taught. More than ever before teaching requires *editing*; and editing proceeds by principles or choices; and principles and choices are contestable.

Therefore teachers do not transmit *the* tradition, as if there were just one; or if there is one, teachers transmit many very different strands or excerpts or interpretations of it. Even if it were small enough to transmit entire, we would not agree on what it was, and therefore would transmit different traditions. You might look at the range of our disagreements and think that is the range of the possible. But at most it is merely the range of the actual, and in fact it falls far short of that as well. If liberal learning succeeds, you will acquire far more than we gave you.

The necessity of editing in education has a notable side-effect here. What may appear as independence from the inherited culture is sometimes just the playing off of one strand of the tradition against another. If the sum of our cultural history is too large to be passed on to the next generation, and if teachers must interpret it in any case, and make selections of it based on judgments of importance and relevance and other values, then some members of the next generation will get one picture and others will get another picture. Even if none has undergone the paradoxical process I'm talking about, liberation from the culture by the culture, each may show deceptive signs of it. When one picture contradicts another picture, proponents of each look independent of the other. Rejection and denial on small and large articles of faith look like signs of independence, but they may only be signs of the diversity of what is being inherited nowadays. Rather than criticizing their culture from an independent perspective, they may be criticizing one strand from the standpoint of another strand, just as a bird will stand on one part of its nest to repair another.

That should make us cautious in interpreting the evidence. If the power of liberal learning to create defiance and non-conformity is thought to be a sign of liberation, then clearly it is a liberator. But this is just what is deceptive, for defiance of some set of interests and attitudes may simply be inherited —unfreely— from another set. Sometimes the defiant and the defied are both surprised by the diversity in which they live, and uncomfortable with it and with the idea that what they find disagreeable originates in the same atmosphere they have breathed their whole lives. When discussion and respect have broken down between strands of a common tradition, it is tempting to say that they are no longer parts of a single culture, though it is probably more true

that they are parts of a single culture being torn apart. They would be more comfortable if they could interpret the heretics and fools as foreigners, but that is not always just. As Aristotle said, our divisions tend to reduce to differences in what we are willing to call the same and different.

While diversity and disagreement can create an illusion of independence, the same play of diverse elements against each other can create a *real* kind of independence. When a new generation, as well socialized as any previous generation, begins to reject part of its inheritance —to deny its rules about women or humor— it really is breaking the grip of part of the larger culture and achieving some distance from it. This is only negative freedom, but at least it may be the real article and the beginning of self-mastery. It may be real negative freedom even if it turns out that the new ideas framed by this generation are not really new. One of the joys of thinking for oneself is to find that one is not alone, and to be nourished by the discovery — which is really a rediscovery— of a strand of the tradition that has said just what one now wants to say, and said it with courage and elegance.

Some independence is barely better than the dependence from which it escaped. Healthy respect for one's singularity and fragile uniqueness leads one to fly from mere adaptation, as enslavement and cooptation. But to reject every part of the atmosphere as if it were a poison, rather than just to reject the poisons, is a false extra step taken from momentum. As Kant said, this is like a dove, feeling the resistance of the air in its flight, wishing to escape into empty space.

Education, then, adapts new human beings to the ways of old human beings. It may not remake students into replicas of their teachers, or even make them grateful but, unless it fails miserably, it will adapt and socialize. So I repeat my question. How can any form of education simultaneously change students and cultivate their freedom to judge the value of those changes? Can we have adaptation without acquiescence? If the tradition does not *deserve* perpetuation into another generation, or if it requires radical pruning, how can education become part of the solution and not just part of the problem? Or, if society is perfectible but human beings are flawed, why doesn't education carry us with every generation further from our goal?

We have now seen part of the answer. In the process of socializing the next generation, the necessity of editing and interpretation and the mechanics of diversity tend to create independent standpoints for judgment. So does the study of lived alternatives. This is the least important part of the answer, and may even lead to despondency, insofar as negative freedom alone ends in hovering. How, then, is *positive* freedom cultivated?

4.

How is it that you are coming to your own conclusions about what is true and valuable? How is it that you have come to reject parts of the tradition you were taught? How is it that you acquired the perspective that permitted you to challenge our curriculum, or a syllabus, or an author? Some of these challenges have arisen from another part of the nest, but some have been more free than that. Somehow you have acquired both the tradition and independence from it, and that is a paradox to be explained. It is not made any easier by noting that you —like all of us on this stage— have so far acquired both only incompletely.

Most of the adaptation to our natural and social environment that we will ever have, we already had when we started college. When my daughter Molly was six months old, she already knew how to hold my leg, my neck, or my finger so that I would do anything she wanted. When she was six weeks old, she had learned to smile at appropriate external stimuli, something I forgot

how to do many years ago.

By the time one is college age, then, education has less to do with adaptation than with deepening the awareness of one's place in the inherited world. Liberation at this stage is literally to prevent one from being "taken unawares" by an idea, perspective, or overarching framework. The adaptation that does occur at the college level is limited to fine points, of the kind covered in what used to be called Finishing Schools — such as how many earrings to wear in one ear. An education for liberation must focus on our bearings within the world that we inherited, on mastering its complexities and exposing its hidden influences so that we may be less its product than its producer. This freedom can be achieved, ironically, by deepening our understanding of the knowledge and skills transmitted from our predecessors. For by taking the time to acquire the discipline of a discipline, and four years' worth of detail and depth, we learn at the same time to *judge*, and that is the basis of our positive freedom.

Recall the parable of the Statute of Westminster. When a real problem becomes a legal problem, the collision of interests that made it a problem becomes a neat and bloodless opposition of principles. This prepares it for legal analysis, but only by freezing the interests into this artificially crystalline form. But legal problems are not artificial; this one means that nowadays the sun never sets on the paradox of liberation — in its most violent unfrozen form. It also states *our* problem as a college, insofar as we intend to set people free, or to have them become free while in our jurisdiction.

In education the unfreedom that must be overcome is much more complicated than legal dependence. In general it takes the form of passive receptivity before the phenomena of the world and the claims made about it by other human beings past and present. Intellectual passivity says, "I do not want an independent standpoint for judgment or the responsibility of actually making judgments." The more passivity, the greater the risk of adaptation that *is* acquiescence, and of the deep corruption that makes you grateful. It is no solution to the paradox for a teacher to stand at the board and move beyond the passive reading of a text to an active or critical interpretation. It is not enough for a teacher to say that science is a creative method, rather than a body of results, or to ask brilliantly independent, original questions. Even when this is well-done, it only displays the freedom of the teacher. No one becomes free by imitation.

Let me examine this a little further. Why can't one become free by imitating those who are already free? If teachers cannot *command* freedom, or give it as a gift, why can't they teach it by example? Aren't our most inspiring teachers those who are not buried by the weight of the past, but who have freed themselves from it and offer new constructions of what has happened and why, those who can survey the whole configuration of cultural forms and really stir the compost? Isn't that in fact the *only* way to teach independence of spirit, unless it can be reduced to a formula for memorization?

My answer is that freedom in others must first be *recognized* as freedom, and not mistaken for energy, idiosyncrasy, dissent, or novelty; and, second, it must be recognized as something worth imitating. Both these recognitions are impossible in those who are not already free. Successful imitation either proves that one depends unfreely on the model, or that one had the resources in oneself to make the model unnecessary.

In St. Augustine's dialogue, "The Teacher", Augustine and his son Adeodatus are talking as they walk. They are talking about teaching by example and the effectiveness of pointing something out as a way of defining it without using words. Augustine asks his son how he would define walking by example; Adeodatus replies by speeding up. Augustine observes that this act could

also define acceleration. Freedom is like that. You can't do something freely and ask others to imitate the freedom of it; they won't know what part of it you mean. Nor can you add a crinkle or glow to the freedom of what you do to make your example unambiguous.

We cannot learn freedom from the example of the free unless we already know what it is, enough to recognize it, just as young children cannot distinguish an original witticism or insight from a cliché. For those who already do know what freedom is, the example of others may give them courage. But imitation is possible only when it is unnecessary.

It follows that *teachers* are not the liberators of students, just as England is not the liberator of its colonies. Nor are parents or friends or authors their liberators. Freedom cannot be taught directly, by command or gift, or indirectly, by example. The trick of education is to help one, as Nietzsche said, to become what one is, to become one's own liberator. Freedom of judgment can be cultivated or snuffed out, encouraged or overwhelmed, but it cannot be given.

5.

Robin Collingwood, an English philosopher who died in 1943, notes in his autobiography that he lived through a change in the concept of "news". Formerly news was what a citizen needed to know in order to vote intelligently and to participate in public affairs. In Collingwood's lifetime it came to mean whatever might amuse one to read. The earlier notion of news fitted us for action. The newer notion, by converting the world to a spectacle for our entertainment, *unfitted* us for action.

A similar distinction applies to education. Good education should fit us to act, that is, to become free and self-directed agents. Too much contemporary education presents the world as a spectacle for passive comprehension, an impossible complexity, a foreign place, a stage where only others act, a problem beyond remedy, a chain of necessities, a vastness that swallows all effort unforgivingly, a past with no present, or a timeless present with no future, an interesting question, a diverting puzzle, or a law-governed mechanism that will take care of itself.

Too much contemporary education unfits us to act by tightening adaptation instead of cultivating freedom. This would be desirable only in a world that did not change. But if we must face new situations, we are best adapted if we have the independence to question and the means to judge—in short, the wherewithal to find our own way and the will to want to. While vocational training teaches answers, and indoctrination teaches systems of answers, the essence of liberal education is to provide the resources to doubt or question what we have been given.

A liberal arts education at least aims in this way to cultivate freedom for effective action in a changing world, and at Earlham I think it succeeds remarkably well. The point is not to cultivate memory or obedience, but judgment; not to watch the world turn, but to turn it; not merely to read about places where life is very different, but to visit them and to live there; not to toy with ideas, and not necessarily to believe, but to understand; and not only to understand, but to question.

Many people object that philosophy asks a lot of questions but offers no answers. That is untrue. On the contrary, the problem with philosophy is that it offers too many answers. In this philosophy is like prayer. All prayers are answered, most of them with "no".

Therefore, the challenge to answer fundamental questions is only part of the challenge of philosophy. Most of the challenge is to understand the contending answers, to assess them, to

question them, and finally to become a discriminating and responsible judge. This is what philosophy has in common with liberal learning in general. What you have begun, or continued, to learn at Earlham is not a set of answers, but judgment.

But to acquire judgment will not make decision easy, only wise, or only wiser than otherwise. If you have to decide whether to refuse life-prolonging medical intervention for a loved one lingering in a hopeless vegetative state, nothing can make it easy. If you have to decide whether an important relationship on the rocks should be ended or rehabilitated, nothing can make it easy. There is no trick to removing the pain and uncertainty from some decisions. Nor is there a shortcut to wisdom. But the temptation to hide from the complexity that causes pain and paralyzes judgment can be resisted.

One premise of a liberal arts education is that only by respecting the complexity of difficult decisions, the complexity of nature, of society in nature, and of the human being in society, can we make good judgments. To make the same point from the other side, a classical kind of bad judgment is to neglect the ambiguity of life and the multitude of interests, to simplify the scene and its players, and to shrink from recognizing conflicts of duty and nuances of desire. So liberal learning strives to make us acquainted with the complexity of truth, to respect it, and in fact to *expect* that if truth is simple, it will be in the spirit and not the letter. Liberal learning strives to make us appreciate that to inquire more deeply into things than is done in daily life is not for that reason a movement toward triviality, but is a movement toward empowerment, respect, wonder, and responsible judgment.

A surprising test for freedom of judgment, in fact, is whether complexity overpowers, intimidates, and defeats us, or challenges, arouses, and incites us to comprehend it. In our spiritual apprenticeship complexity prevents us from feeling our power or wanting to control our own fate. We are happy to learn more first. Freedom before this point is merely self-assertion without the foundation of judgment needed for making choices. But as Hobbes said, if he spent his life reading books by other people, he'd never know more than they did. When we emerge from this dependency into our own freedom it is because we are ready to direct ourselves and make the decisions that this requires.

If negative freedom arises from questioning, positive freedom arises from judgment. We must question not only the heretics and fools, but ourselves. This is not a job that is finished once and for all, let alone in four years. Questioning is not necessarily rejection; nor is it merely intellectual. We must question the main article of our inherited faith with living wonder and suspicion. If we affirm it in the inquiry that follows, then for the first time we will know *why* we affirm it. That is the moment of positive freedom, when we are no longer directed by others, or merely independent of others, but have begun to direct ourselves.

6.

Knowledge is a seamless web, but we have divided it into disciplinary domains. There is a justification for this, but there is also a limit to the justification. The justification is that there really are differences among disciplines, that is, among *approaches* to knowledge —how questions are typically asked, how evidence is gathered and interpreted, how results are presented, how progress is measured, how mistakes and errors are conceived, how integrity and intellectual honesty are defined, how playfulness and piety are expressed, why inquiry is undertaken and valued. Disciplines are the determinate approaches to the world that make it intelligible; without them the world is reduced to what Hegel called the spectacle of contingency losing itself in vagueness.

But this justification is limited. Once you have studied a discipline deeply enough to have acquired its habits and insights and ways of thought, you should step forth again into the wider, seamless universe of knowledge and action. For most of you, that time is now.

But on the other side, there is no superficiality in remaining within a discipline. For after all, these approaches to knowledge may be developed far more deeply than anyone could accomplish in a lifetime. And there is a sense in which depth, after a point, brings breadth with it, and we can discover the universe through the microscope of devout and detailed, focused scholarship. As Carlyle said, God is in the details. It does not matter whether we return to the wide universe by leaving disciplinary specialization behind, or through the underside of our disciplines, by deeper study, as Dante escaped from the pit of Hell by climbing down through the bottom.

But we must eventually return to the wide universe one way or the other to *complete* our education. So it does not matter whether you are going to graduate school, whether you will deepen the studies you began here or move on to something else. Your first mastery of an intellectual discipline was completed here, and now the task is integration, connection, overcoming the provincial, complementing the one-sided, and combining the fragmentary, so that the one whole world and the affairs of its people can be understood in their wholeness.

This was also the ambition of Herr Professor Johannes Faust, who is not in all ways an Earlham role model. His craving was to overcome metaphysical provincialism by experiencing all experiences. I have no quarrel with that, and in fact hope that some of his craving made sense to you four years ago in Humanities and echoed a similar desire. But Faust *hovered* because he rejected everything he inherited and had nothing left to fill the void of his own making.

This reminds me of a Gary Larson cartoon in which a line of dejected looking people are filing into Hades. At a desk with a large ledger stands a demon registrar, recording their names. On the wall there is a framed sign that says, next to a happy face, "Today is the first day of the rest of your life."

Liberal learning is a lifelong process because while knowledge and intelligence may grow without interruption, judgment may lapse. Intelligence without judgment gives us pudding made of plastic, the militarization of space, and hundreds of smaller dumb mistakes and embarrassments. Liberal learning is a lifelong process because folly does not end in childhood. And freedom is not achieved once and for all, but in fits and starts and from day to day. Without judgment and the alertness or lucidity it presupposes, you may be taken unawares by the most remarkably bad ideas.

To take one's judgments from others is exactly the unfreedom to be avoided. To negate the judgments of others, without more, takes one just as directly to dependency and enslavement, though by a path that is one step longer. To judge by standards that one finds inescapable is still bad faith, for one has chosen to adhere to them, and is not taking responsibility for that choice. To recognize that we are responsible for all our judgments, including our standards of judgment, is the beginning of positive freedom and self-direction. Then we will recognize that all the noisy certitudes of the world are not primarily candidates for truth but appeals to our judgment.

The freedom that a liberal arts education can cultivate will not, directly, release prisoners of conscience, abolish apartheid, stop torture, erase prejudice and hatred, or even bring freedom to personal relationships, perhaps not even indirectly. It's not true that all kinds of freedom can be reduced to just one type. Even when liberal education works perfectly, on the day of graduation the world off-campus shows the same balance of freedom and unfreedom that it showed the day

before. Liberal learning frees the learner only, but frees the learner to act and to pass beyond the acquiescence of over-adaptation and the paralysis of empty independence. The larger kinds of unfreedom abroad in the world and within the learner are not affected in the slightest until people who *recognize* them as unfreedom rouse themselves to challenge them.

The kind of freedom I have been talking about, the freedom within a particular culture to inhabit it with independence and self-direction, can be achieved in varying degrees. It may even be *overachieved*, for total independence is hovering. The point is not to become free *from* other human beings, but to become free with and among them, to receive their influence and wisdom and to give our own. We must not only make the world for our successors, but also for ourselves, and only with the material left by our predecessors. To succeed, if I may quote Cabell one more time, is to be at home in a place that is not home. Positive freedom is to legislate for oneself, but *one has no resources for that* that one did not inherit, and that were not qualified, by one's tradition and community. We will never be universal experiencers as Faust desired to be, nor pure spirits unstained by the accidents of experience. Life is essentially asymmetrical; to crave symmetry or purity or universality most often leads to Faustian excess or to Puritanical abstention. We will always live in particular times and places, but we may overcome the idea that this is a limitation. Our freedom, as Montaigne said, is the freedom to carry our chains with us. Both positive and negative freedom, then, are matters of degree, and the degree one *ought* to attain is a matter of judgment.

 [Peter Suber, Department of Philosophy, Earlham College, Richmond, Indiana, 47374, U.S.A.](#)
peters@earlham.edu. Copyright © 1987, Peter Suber.