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Liberal Arts

It is difficult to ponder the benefits of a liberal arts education under the ever growing shadow of college debt. I could never have anticipated that the choice to continue my education would lead to a place of financial uncertainty, but neither was I seduced by some illusion of future wealth. I suppose that among those of us who have elected to be liberally educated, monetary gain is seldom *the* deciding factor. My own decision to pursue a liberal arts education was both a consequence of valuing more than economic success as well as an affirmation of humanizing choice.

From my parents I inherited a value system that placed relationships above all else. They worked hard to pay bills and provide necessities but money was never treated as an end in itself. All things were for the sake of God and family, and everybody who came through our door was considered family.

Likewise, choosing to pursue the liberal arts is at its basis a choice to pursue and enrich relationships. There exists a prevalent misconception (prejudice?) which identifies the liberal arts with luxurious self-indulgence, but this is far from the truth. Philosophy begins with the injunction, "know thyself," but then we move on to anthropology, to sociology, to archeology; the endless quest to know the other. A liberal arts education, in this way, creates the possibility for meaningful, fulfilling relationships with family and with neighbors, in local community as well as foreign policy.

Soon after high school, I found myself working full-time in a warehouse, making a competitive wage, earning more money than I knew how to spend. I had always assumed I would eventually find my way to college, but after a few years and several failed attempts at community college, it became increasingly clear that a decision needed to be made. Weighing my options, I began to take interest in how my coworkers made their decisions to stay at the warehouse despite having had similar educational goals. The responses I received terrified me. Most of my coworkers had taken the job expecting it to be temporary but, after various life events, felt trapped; they became dependent on the money and unable to make time for education. In various ways they had all surrendered their capacity for decision to the economic forces of a market economy.

I had to quit. Every day spent in the warehouse seemed to diminish that which made me human: my ability and right to determine my own destiny. My decision to pursue education rather than a paycheck was suddenly an existential one. I enrolled in a liberal arts college because I value myself, those around me, and the relationships we share, but in doing so I also found myself standing against the dehumanizing influence of economic forces. Though the mountain of my debt be great and fearful, may it stand forever as a testament to humanity and human dignity.