

A Word About Knowledge From A Life-Long Educator.

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It has been said by many teachers, educators and parents that one need not concern themselves with topics, subjects or levels beyond those things they will use in life. The artist to paint, the musician to play, the carpenter to cut and hammer, the poet to write, the landscaper to cut grass, the sportsman to run, jump or throw, the preacher to speak the Word, etc. Indeed, many classes are planned to exclusively focus on just those skills and competencies one is expected to acquire with peripheral or ancillary experiences purposely excluded and avoided. This is often viewed as "proper" teaching.

So, what of those so-called sideline experiences? The argument here is not that life leads to unexpected places where artists become surgeons and musicians become engineers however true, valid and common that may be. Consider:

Mathematics is important so the artist can do their taxes and plan their retirement as well as understand the economy of the country and why politicians should not add to the national debt. Simple math can be important for framing a picture, cutting a board, planning a trip. It is a fundamental skill.

Biology is necessary so the vocalist can understand and care for the health of their children. The singer should better understand the condition of their own respiratory or digestive systems or the role and contribution of their pancreas, and other internal organs, etc. This can be especially important in the cases of the illnesses, injuries or surgeries inevitable in the lives of frail humans - even singers.

Chemistry is necessary so the poet can purchase the right cleaners for their kitchen and bath, to manage their own blood sugars, to understand the role and impact of medicines and even something as simple as a balanced diet. Chemistry can help the artist better distinguish useful and necessary substances from the bogus and impotent "snake oil" being sold in the latest scam. Chemistry helps even the flute player care for their lawn. And, of course, there has been the occasional poet and musician who failed to fully appreciate the impact on their bodies of alcohol, drugs and other active chemicals. Make believe includes the Easter Bunny, Unicorns and musicians who reach age 70.

History, a commonly undervalued topic, encompasses everything from the past. One cannot manage nor appreciate the present without sufficient knowledge and understanding of the past. The cliché adage, that one not knowing the past is doomed to repeat it, is very true. History teaches us about the realities of war so we can better manage modern conflict, the failures of ideologies and good intentions so we can be more realistic and practical, the realized dreams of the industrious so we might be inspired. History shows us who we are and provides the necessary framework for values and judgments. History teaches us fortitude and folly, the success and failure of entrepreneurship, the intricacies and subtleties of cooperation and conflict. History gives us the

context, scope and perspective necessary to understand strife, adulation and the nature of challenge on which those depend.

Also, history gives us the shoulders upon which we might climb and the foundations on which we might build. Too many musicians recreate the wheel thinking they've accomplished a new and wonderful thing without realizing the prior generation was already rolling along on those inventions long before. Too many seek the rewards of power and control with little or no awareness of their own Sword of Damocles. Too many citizens agree to war without realizing the realities of inevitable death and destruction - or, conversely, avoid war in their utopian fantasy without ever realizing the realities of the danger, risk and threat and the inevitable obliteration being wrought upon us.

Literature, in its most fundamental sense, communicates the information of the past. The biographies and histories to be documented for the future. But, moreso, literature provides the perspectives, insights and understandings - the knowledge - of those who came before. Where shall we be as people if we wake up anew fresh on this planet with no access to the knowledge of the past? That connection to the ideas, thoughts, feelings and reflections of those who came before are there for all of us. They are not to be placed in the vault accessed only by the curators who keep such works locked away on a hidden shelf for their exclusive benefit. Nor are those curators to become Plato's "Philosopher King" who we may consult on life's decisions. We each are responsible for a greater measure and presence in our own existence. It matters not whether our livelihood amounts to moving the widget from the box to the shelf or in fashioning the next surgical success. An appreciation of and understanding of the virtues of life belong not only to Socrates but are available to us all.

Literature can provide the plumber with a philosophical view of their own existence. One might suggest that a mere plumber or house painter has little or no need for or interest in a *weltanschauung* or deeper understanding of their own existence and place in the world. This paper argues that a "simpleton," regardless of profession, career or avocation, might be content with the daily drudgery of repetitive tasks but this is not the goal of life. Literature provides both a report of those who have travelled in your shoes as well as the imagination of where one might choose to go. It is the documentation of possibility. The fable for imagination. The poem for reflection and appreciation. The tale for understanding and reflection - not to mention the simple value of entertainment.

A modern cartoon-based adult comedy show, available on television for many years at this point, includes within it a poignant lampoon of adolescent humor and primitive comedy showing two simple characters whose entire comedy repertoire is based exclusively on flatulence. It makes no difference whether one's profession is based on art or management, construction or design, planning or labor, base or elite, everyone can benefit from a greater sophistication and maturity in life and literature plays a significant role in that growth.

Some may think virtues are inherent in or intrinsic to the human condition. This paper maintains that a simple review of the nightly news suggests otherwise. People need an education in and a developmental conditioning of important qualities for a better life. From where do people develop

sympathy, consideration, kindness, indulgence, tolerance and more? Obviously, both parents and society as a whole play a part in this growth. So does a study of history and literature.

The study of a foreign language is a common expectation in many if not most educational programs. The most common argument in favor of this expectation is how one might come to need another language to communicate with a different constituency. One might need to speak to someone from another country and mastery of another language enables one to reach out to others. However, there is an inefficiency inherent in the diversity of language where unity, instead, facilitates successful communication. Pilots throughout the world, regardless of their native country of origin, are expected to speak and operate with English. Air traffic controllers speak to pilots in English. Imagine flying into Tokyo from Denver seeking safe movement through heavy air traffic and trying to secure a safe landing strip but not being able to speak and finding only Japanese spoken on the radio.

A second common argument in favor of studying a foreign language is the exposure to a foreign culture. There is merit in this point and the broadening of our local view of life to include the appreciation of other peoples, other lifestyles, other histories and anthropologies includes a considerable benefit even for the vocalist, the sculptor, the carpenter who will inevitably make decisions about their choice of leaders, their government, their country's priorities and more.

However, an often overlooked benefit available to all, including musicians, artists, plumbers and landscapers, is how the study of a foreign language teaches one about their own language. Studying Spanish, French, Latin or even Russian or Zulu, informs and expands an understanding of one's own language both in the technical (what is an adjective?) and in the larger task of communication. Every person faces the challenge of not only conveying their own notions and ideas to others but also in both comprehending and appreciating the communication from everyone else. The study of a foreign language has a direct and tangible benefit in expanding our capacity for communication - even if that other language is never used.

Computer Science can help the carpenter appreciate the complexities of and variance in construction. Programming can not only help the painter become a better problem solver, it helps the sculptor communicate and the poet to use language. It can help everyone better distinguish between the mere users of life from the choreographers and planners, to appreciate the difference between those who blindly ride from those who steer and direct life's vessel.

A study of Physics can inform the poet about how a shelf can support weight considering its material, the mount and how it might adhere to a wall. Does not the poet own a book that might find a home on a shelf? What load might be placed on a rope? How might a musician best load equipment in a transport? Everyone, regardless of profession, must deal with the motion and force of moving vehicles, the occasional lever and fulcrum and the facility of containers used to support other things. But, equally as important, how might chemistry inform the poet about why the grass is green? Physics can expand the musician's view of how a sky might be blue. It seems particularly suited to the artist and the poet that a more full and accurate understanding of astronomy expands one's repertoire to the heavenly domain that sits nightly above us. Are stars just pretty lights in the sky? An astronomical understanding of a star does not make it less

beautiful or less profound in the romance of courtship or life's reflection. Indeed, a deeper and more complete understanding of the physical universe provides a more profound, more philosophical and more mature view of who we are as people and where we are in the greater neighborhood above.

Training provides one with skills and competencies for a discrete set of tasks that one can replicate. Of course, any variation in the goal or the challenge can result in the need for new or updated training. Certain motor skills obviously require practice and repetitive conditioning to maintain a state of readiness. Training can achieve this end, clearly.

But, training is not education. *Education* is more than that. Too many educational settings including school classes, testing and assessments, programs, courses of study and more all to focus on the observable, measurable and isolated behaviors and actions for completing tasks. This reduces the broader notion of education to an unfortunate microcosm. Education is about getting smarter and achieving an intellectual growth. This is not a result of training. Education is change not acquisition; it is about becoming something more, something better.

Imagine your own history and what you have now become in your own life at this juncture. But, return to the beginning and remove from your life all of the experiences you've had and retain only those things which directly and specifically impact your current skill set. Aside from the richness, diversity and reward of memories, you cannot possibly be the same person. This argument also suggests that even those specifically known skills cannot function with the same facility and service absent the broader spectrum of the life enrichment now missing. Yet, this is exactly what many if not most educational programs seek to provide.

Studying science is not about the atomic weight of Mercury and especially not about where it falls on the periodic table. Studying science "trains" or conditions your brain to think scientifically so you can distinguish reality and detail from fantasy and superstition. Studying mathematics is not necessarily about learning to work amortization schedules and actuarial tables in your head. Studying mathematics teaches your brain to see relationships and solve problems. Studying computer science and language empowers your brain to communicate. Relating to the growing grass, solving a simple packing problem, explaining an idea to your neighbor, perceiving distances and places and tasks are not automatic sensory experiences natural to or fully developed in the human condition. They require development. Education rather than training is fundamental, if not a priori, to such experience. Appreciating life in the broadest sense and getting the most out of our existence everyday is not about having more TV channels, buying the latest tunes or even getting the bigger piece of chicken. One cannot appreciate the success of a thing constructed or a product designed without a broader knowledge of how such things and such achievements fit into the world around us.

The grandfathers and earlier generations of my life were hardworking laborers, skilled craftsmen, preachers and, until my father's generation, were not professors, doctors and other highly educated connoisseurs of knowledge. They had a practical capacity for survival but were not what one might call "big thinkers." They had a sufficiency for solving problems without knowing more about their larger place in the world. I believe this is partially responsible for why virtually nothing

was passed down through our family to my generation. Nevertheless, they all deserve great respect for their challenges and accomplishments. But, I want more for myself and my children.

Learning is not about the process of acquiring more and more information. It is not about memorizing a greater quantity of facts. Information is already all around us and readily available whether memorized or accessed through the various media of our lives. It makes little difference for the dullard, ignorant or unaware. The world is filled with the uninformed and ignorant yet skilled worker. All around us are those who are unaware and uneducated yet capable laborers. Society has more than its share of would-be poets and musicians who know virtually nothing of our country's time-line, history, past achievements, influences and challenges - yet still protest and vote with opinions readily available and shared in their work and social exchanges.

Avoid the term "know" (what do you know?) as in having lots of information. The goal is not to know more - at least not in that sense. Information is everywhere and having it means little or nothing. Focus, instead, on what you understand, how and to what can you relate. Think in terms of problem solving and perspective. It's not WHAT YEAR was the Declaration of Independence signed, but rather WHY was it signed and what did it mean. It's not in what city it was signed but who supported or opposed it and why. It's not who had the largest signature but what it represented for people in this new country. Forget the year? Forget the city or the name? It makes no difference and is of no consequence if you still have the larger and deeper understanding. What do you "know" about the Dec. of Ind. might prompt the date, the city or the name. But, what do you *understand* about it can yield a fuller more comprehensive scope of knowledge. That is education and that is what learning is really about. Beware those who espouse skills and training and observable outcomes as they're likely to provide you with your own set of the Emperor's New Clothes.

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