

Setting Students' Hearts On Flame: How a Humanizing Higher Education Rooted in the Humanities Can Be Beneficial for Justice-Involved People

Dale Brown

Western Michigan University

What seems to you the luxury of endless time is, for . . . students in prison, the essence of their punishment. The absence of a future. Segregated in a space and time where there is no movement . . . one day typically stretches out for decades.

–Dalke and Cohen, *Critical Perspectives on Teaching in Prison*

So far as I could tell, G, an elderly incarcerated student taking my philosophy of education course at the medium-security state correctional facility that fall, had all but given up on himself. This notion was partially confirmed deep into the semester. He caught me off guard mid-lesson when he casually and sincerely let me know how much he appreciated the course, and, crucially, that he had not had the opportunity really to use his mind in “years, maybe decades.” I cry almost every time I think about this. What more could I have done beyond thanking G for his comment? More broadly, what does carceral higher education have to say against the backdrop of dehumanization upon which it unfolds, where people are alive, but time is essentially dead? Any satisfactory answers, if there are any to be found at all, will have something to do with humanization.

In this essay, I endeavor to flesh out a concept of humanization as an essential precondition of carceral higher education. First, I take as a qualitative starting point for a humanities-based education Ralph Waldo Emerson’s claim that colleges and universities are at their best when they aim to set their students’ hearts aflame. Second, I examine this idea in relation to a liberal arts education that is firmly rooted in the humanities. Third, I consider the dialogical nature of the humanities and what this might have to do with affording students the opportunity to understand, expand, and transform, with others, their reality.

Fourth, I engage with critical interlocutors who might object to such a humanities-based education. Finally, I consider the ways in which a humanizing higher education based on the humanities furnishes vital tools one needs to square up to the human condition.

SETTING HEARTS ON FLAME

In “The American Scholar,” Ralph Waldo Emerson explains what he takes to be the highest aim of higher education:

Of course, there is a portion of reading quite indispensable to a wise man. History and exact science he must learn by laborious reading. Colleges, in like manner, have their indispensable office, —to teach elements. *But they can only highly serve us, when they aim not to drill, but to create; when they gather from far every ray of various genius to their hospitable halls, and, by the concentrated fires, set the hearts of their youth on flame.*¹

What I am most interested in exploring here is the sort of quasi-religious, intangible, perhaps even ineffable quality that can and very often does travel with higher education. Emerson’s metaphor of setting hearts on flame suggests an important starting place for this special quality, which I will eventually go on to identify with humanization: it can be profitably thought of as an ignition condition. Many of us working in higher education often pay lip service to this ignition-like quality. At a basic level, we know that the experience of higher education changes students apart from the acquisition of facts and skills and does so in a way that sticks with them long after they “finish” their education. Yet quite often we fail to acknowledge the difficulty in articulating just what this ignition-like quality is. It should be noted that, following Emerson, I do not deny the instrumental value of a higher education. I concur that learning facts and skills are indeed indispensable in the scheme of higher education. What I am calling for is a blatant reprioritization, an unapologetic flip of the now common understanding of the value of higher education—one that gives primacy to its intrinsic goods.

In “The American Scholar” and elsewhere, Emerson writes about the power and beauty of books and literature. A few paragraphs prior to the passage quoted at the top of this section he writes that books “are for nothing but to inspire.”² They should inspire us, that is, to create. This is what the active soul, the most valuable thing in the world, according to Emerson, does—searches for truth or creates³.

Every person, says Emerson, is entitled to seek the value of the active soul, especially since it is something that already exists within each of us, though it is, for the most part, “obstructed, and as yet unborn.”⁴ Creation in this sense is meant to be broad and open-ended. It is expansive and not meant to be something that is able to be mastered. Perhaps more than creation itself it is the desire to create, the impetus for it, that is ignited in the hearts of students. In “Circles” Emerson writes that “the use of literature is to afford us a platform whence we may command a view of our present life, a purchase by which we may move it.”⁵

In like manner, he says, colleges and universities should help individuals become alive to themselves and to the world, to inspire them to become thinking, self-reliant people sensitive to themselves and the culture in which they operate, to ignite in them a never-ending process of apprehending reality. Failing to do so may produce cinder and smoke in the hearts of our students, but not yet flames. Drawing on Emerson reminds us of the weight behind the idea that a more humanistic approach to higher education is warranted—and that the humanities have much to contribute to the task of setting students’ hearts on fire.

THE LIBERAL ARTS AND THE HUMANITIES

Highlighting Thomas Jefferson’s efforts to nationalize higher education, Michael Roth helps us recall the strong strand of liberal higher education that has existed in America since its founding, one that has competed with the instrumental model of learning for the sake of the economy or getting a job or doing research or professional training.⁶

In this section, I will examine a selection of accounts that have carried on Jefferson’s tradition of liberal education: those of Martha Nussbaum, Danielle Allen, and Alan Deresiewicz. In the end, a broad definition from the National Endowment for the Humanities will help us come back to the idea that it is the ignition quality of these accounts that provides the most compelling starting

point, as this definition has the most to say about who gets to benefit from a humanizing higher education.

In *Cultivating Humanity*, Martha Nussbaum says that we ought to aim, as Seneca did, to cultivate our humanity.⁷ One way to cash this out is to have it stand for the weaker claim of cosmopolitanism—the idea that, however we prioritize our values, we must recognize the value of other human beings regardless of their geographic distance. Danielle Allen takes a similar route in her defense of the humanities. For her, being able to participate in democratic world-building (via, for example, the critical thinking and speaking skills one gleans via engagement with the humanities) is important for achieving a “humanistic baseline.”⁸ “The great beauty of language’s power as a catalyst of human capacity,” she says, is that we all have access to self-development, even when we are failed by our education system.⁹ Perhaps an account that aligns more with Emerson’s comes from Alan Deresiewicz, who addresses the instrumental/intrinsic distinction in the realm of a liberal arts education directly.

The humanities . . . are the record of the ways that people have come to terms with being human. They address the questions that are proper to us, not as this or that kind of specialist, this or that kind of professional, but as individuals as such . . . Questions of love, death, family, morality, time, truth, God, and everything else within the wide, starred universe of human experience . . . The humanities are what we have, in a secular society, instead of religion.¹⁰

Here he ties the humanities to a sort of quasi-religious toolkit for navigating the vicissitudinous morass that is the human experience. Deresiewicz’s account of the humanities pairs nicely with the general definition given by the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH). Citing the 1965 National Foundation on the Arts and the Humanities Act, the NEH defines the term “humanities” broadly as including

the study of . . . language, both modern and classical; lin-

guistics; literature; history; jurisprudence; philosophy; archaeology; comparative religion; ethics; the history, criticism and theory of the arts; *those aspects of the social sciences which have humanistic content and employ humanistic methods*; and the study and application of the humanities to the human environment with particular attention to reflecting our diverse heritage, traditions, and history and to the relevance of the humanities to the current conditions of national life.¹¹

The inclusion of those subjects in the social sciences that employ humanistic content and methods is important. I would go even further to include disciplines from the broader category of the liberal arts, so long as they, too, employ such methods.

To my mind, all these accounts point to what might be the most important general argument about the potential of a humanizing higher education: it allows for a more robust navigation of the human condition over the life course. “Liberal education provides the habits of thinking on which a lifetime of learning will be erected.”¹²

More than this, “If you think that the humanities have any value, whether as a doorway to enlightenment or just as cultural capital, then they have value for everyone and should belong to everyone.”¹³

And to take it just one step further, colleges and universities are particularly well-suited to take risks to engage with underserved populations.¹⁴

In my schema of higher education (Figure 1), the outer layers derive their power from the core, which itself is powered by the humanities.

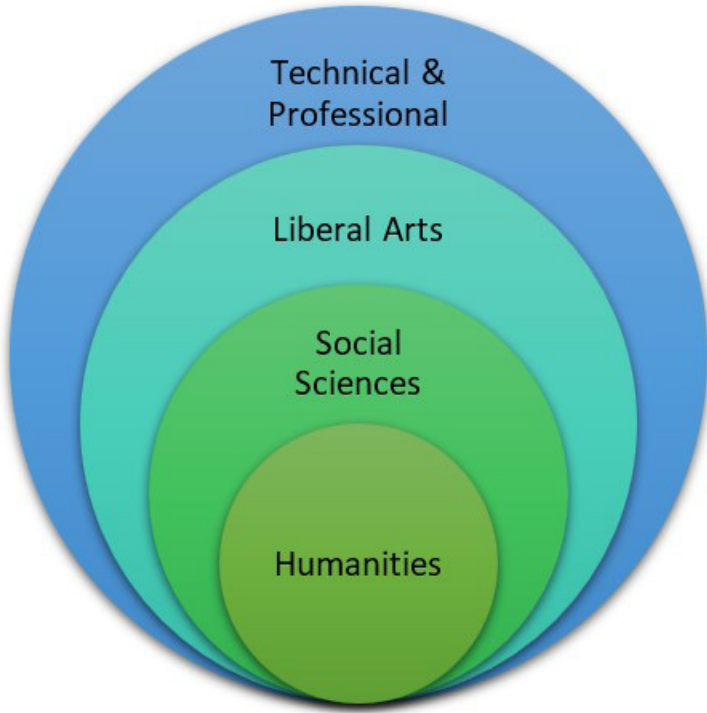


Figure 1. The Humanities as the Core of Higher Education

THE DIALOGICAL NATURE OF THE HUMANITIES

In “Circles,” Emerson writes that “[t]he life of a man [sic] is a self-evolving circle,” which, from the very beginning of our lives, continually pulses outward with each new circle overtaking and expanding beyond the one that came before it—and this in perpetuity:

The extent to which this generation of circles, wheel without wheel, will go, depends on the force or truth of the individual soul. For it is the inert effort of each thought, having formed itself into a circular wave of circumstance . . . to heap itself on that ridge, and to solidify, and hem him in the life . . . But the heart refuses to be imprisoned; in its first and narrowest pulses it already tends outward with a vast force, and to immense and innumerable expansions.¹⁵

If our lives do indeed play out in self-evolving circles, and the extent to which these circles push out in perpetuity depends more on the force or truth of the individual person than the inert effort of thoughts formed by forces outside of ourselves, then we would do well to account properly for these extrinsic circumstances and the limits they might impose on us. Further, we might think that Emerson's focus on the self, or more precisely on self-reliance, is too narrow. In other words, it would be more profitable for us to conceive of this self-linear-environmental model, the ever-expanding self, as something more like an other-reciprocal-environmental model. Here I will call forth two related ideas from within the humanities that help expound on the means by which we might obtain the ignition condition required to propel lifelong learning: overcoming limit-situations and expanding one's horizons. These are the ideas of Paulo Freire and Hans Georg Gadamer, respectively.

For Freire, dialogue is the essence of education as the practice of freedom, "the encounter between men, mediated by the world, in order to name the world."¹⁶ To name the world is to transform it. Freire's ultimate goal is revolution—but let us set that aside for a minute. His revolutionary process begins at the individual level, and this is the part of his work that is most relevant for my purposes here. While Emerson does not say much about the "waves of circumstance" that serve to "hem us in," Freire's concept of limit-situations helps us fill this gap. People come to see their "limit-situations" when they are able to begin investigating their objective reality.

Humans . . . because they are aware of themselves and thus of the world—because they are *conscious beings*—exist in a dialectical relationship between the determination of limits and their own freedom. As they separate themselves from the world, which they objectify, as they separate themselves from their own activity, as they locate the seat of their decisions in themselves and in their relations with the world and others, people overcome the situations which limit them: the limit-situations.¹⁷

The limitation, in other words, is the extent to which one can understand one's own reality. It is not so much that there are options one cannot attain;

rather, there appear to be no options at all. You exist as you are, and you bear whatever that is because there is seemingly no alternative. We might say that there are frontiers between being and nothingness. When we start to engage with live options, “untested feasibilities,” we begin to overcome our limit situations.

For both Freire and Hans Georg Gadamer, dialogue has to do with self-transcendence. Yet where it might be said that Freire’s emphasis, short of revolution, is on building critical consciousness, on recognizing and overcoming the ways in which our understanding of ourselves and our world is limited, Gadamer’s emphasis is on the conditions of understanding and how it might be achieved. Gadamer insists that life itself is a dialogical enterprise.¹⁸ To challenge and understand ourselves and our place in the world, we take up the universal human task of engaging in dialogue with unfamiliar traditions, literature, art, philosophy, cultures, and so on across space and time.¹⁹ Gadamer’s theory can be broken down into four parts as follows. First, our understanding is mediated by history and language. We can only view the world from inside our own traditions, experiences, and prejudices. Second, our understanding is circular—or spiral—in nature. We understand by constantly comparing the current experience (the trees) with the entirety of our worldview (the forest) and revising our understanding of ourselves and our past experiences accordingly. Third, we understand ourselves to the extent that we understand the world, and vice versa. Who we are and what we believe we are capable of is conditioned by what and how we understand. Finally, our understanding is never complete—unless, that is, we are dead. Thus, for Gadamer, understanding is a dialogic and intersubjective process that unfolds between ourselves and others as well as between ourselves and our world.²⁰ All of this is in service of expanding our horizons of understanding, of learning to put things into perspective.²¹

The concept of “horizon” suggests itself because it expresses the superior breadth of vision that the person who is trying to understand must have. To acquire a horizon means that one learns to look beyond what is close at hand—not in order to look away from it but to see it better, within a larger whole and in truer proportion.²²

In this way, these aspects of Freire's and Gadamer's work—overcoming limit situations and expanding horizons—give us a way to make better sense of Emerson's claim that an active, truth-seeking soul casts itself out in self-evolving circles in perpetuity.

If a fire is to be lit in an educational setting between the student, the instructor, and the rays of various genius (as distilled into disciplines), it will likely come about via a dialogue between these actors. But what do the humanities have to offer, one might ask, that vocational education or talk therapy or hip hop or acting in a dramatic play (and so on) do not? Admittedly, part of the answer is that these other methods *do* help to humanize individuals. And they should be pursued simultaneously where possible. But the humanities, I argue, can offer something more fundamental. I have focused on a characteristic *process* of learning in the humanities and less on any specific *content* because it is in the process of dialogue with one another and the academic content that both the teacher and the student create the very possibility of transforming themselves and their situation. To put it another way, dialogue is precisely what the humanities trade in.

CRITICS OF THE HUMANITIES

The humanities—in whatever form, not only in the sense just mentioned—have certainly been dealt a great deal of criticism in recent decades. For my purposes, Lee Trepanier helpfully calls attention to three main flavors of critique leveled against the humanities: the liberal, the conservative, and the professional.²³ The liberal critique is that, due to the dominance of capitalist values in society, students and the public alike see value in college only insofar as it helps them secure material well-being. Those that level the conservative critique insist that faculty are preoccupied with postmodern theory and pushing anti-capitalist social justice agendas. The professional critique is like the liberal critique but applies directly to the university: capitalist values have led to underfunded humanities departments, overspecialization, overproduction, and too little teaching. On Trepanier's view, all the common responses to these objections—appealing to tradition, citing the power of critical thinking, modernizing the curriculum—inevitably fail to be convincing.²⁴

Another important critique to consider is Stanley Fish's deflationary account. Whereas Trepanier tries to solve the problem, Fish tries to dis-solve it. Fish is not as much a critic of the humanities as he is a critic of any over-inflated sense of what higher education can or ought to do. In *Save the World on Your Own Time*, Fish argues that places of higher learning ought to focus on two things: transmitting knowledge and conferring analytic skill.²⁵ That's it. Anything else is, *ex hypothesi*, beyond the scope of the institution and beyond the job description of any educator hired by that institution. It is not the place of higher education, for example, to offer moral education or to promote citizenship or to advocate for certain issues of social justice. Political issues are to be taken as the object of evaluation rather than the object of adoption or advocacy or affection (for example, "Am I asking my students to produce or assess an account of a vexed political issue, or am I asking my students to pronounce on the issue?").²⁶

Finally, some individuals go so far as to claim that there is no case to be made for the humanities at all. In an article for the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Justin Stover writes:

The reality is that the humanities have always been about *courtoisie*, a constellation of interests, tastes, and prejudices that marks one as a member of a particular class. That class does not have to be imagined solely in economic terms. Indeed, the humanities have sometimes done a good job of producing a class with some socioeconomic diversity. But it is a class nonetheless.²⁷

"Deep down," he goes on to say, "what most humanists value about the humanities is that they offer participation in a community in which they can share similar tastes in reading, art, food, travel, music, media, and yes, politics. We might talk about academic diversity, but the academy is a tribe, and one with relatively predictable tastes."²⁸

HOW A HUMANIZING HIGHER EDUCATION BASED ON THE HUMANITIES CAN BE BENEFICIAL TO JUSTICE-INVOLVED PEOPLE

I think that these critics get a lot right, and I am especially inclined to take Fish seriously on one level: to navigate between the liberal critique, the conservative critique, and the professional critique as we eschew instrumental justifications for higher education. But is all that is left for the liberal arts and the humanities just the transference of knowledge and skills? Not to my mind. As shown by Emerson and others above, what is left is the deeply personal experience of a humanizing higher education that sets the hearts and souls of students on flame. I am also inclined to take Stover seriously on another level: to deal with class and culture. Yes, the humanities are for acculturation into a certain class. But that culture is *the culture of being human*. From the Gadamerian perspective, cultivated consciousness gives us a “sense” of other viewpoints outside of our own, which is what is transmitted and learned through education.²⁹ And this is in the name of lifelong learning, of perpetual self-improvement, moving toward some version of flourishing, whatever that may be. This is what it means to provide a humanizing higher education.

Historically, the study of the humanities has been reserved for elites.³⁰ And this still may be the case today. College itself is still inaccessible for many poor and marginalized individuals. Deresiewicz remarks that “the SAT is supposed to measure aptitude; what it actually measures is parental income, with which it tracks quite closely, and even more, parental wealth, with which it tracks more closely still . . . Less than half of high-scoring students from low-income families even *enroll* at four-year schools.”³¹ Even beyond income and wealth inequality, the opportunity for those kids whose parents have only a high school education to move up the social hierarchy is vanishingly small.³² To be sure, some kids with high school-educated parents “make it out,” so to speak. But this is the exception, not the rule. In this sense, we might say that the humanities have been wasted on elite students, who are far more likely to be born into a culture and class in which perpetual self-improvement is the rule rather than the exception. We might also say, then, that non-elites are actually the prime recipients of a liberal

arts education firmly rooted in the humanities.³³

Here is one place where considering the situation of incarcerated people might provide clarity: incarcerated people's lives play out in total institutions that are often violent, unsanitary, unsafe, and plainly antithetical to that which is conducive to human well-being.³⁴ Instead of warehousing, we might think of time in confinement as hyper-concentrating what I call *DeadTime*, which I understand to mean a dehumanizing, deteriorative force that acts upon human life—a pernicious denial of the opportunity for self-improvement over time. Here I take self-improvement to mean the process of understanding, expanding, and transforming one's reality. The concept of *DeadTime* is intended to make clear that the *experience* of dehumanization is a process that unfolds over time. I think of it as militating against something like John Keats' *Vale-of-Soul-Making*-conception of the human condition:

The common cognomen of this world among the misguided and superstitious is “a vale of tears” from which we are to be redeemed by a certain arbitrary interposition of God and taken to Heaven . . . Call the world if you Please “The Vale of Soul-making” . . . Do you not see how necessary a World of Pains and troubles is to school an Intelligence and make it a soul? A Place where the heart must feel and suffer in a thousand diverse ways.³⁵

The act of introspection makes it possible to filter experiences into that which makes one a unique individual, one who is better suited to take on the task of addressing and perhaps overcoming the inevitable hardships we face as human beings. But *DeadTime* operates so as to stunt the schooling of the intelligence; it does not allow us to square up against our human condition in any constructive manner.

CONCLUSION

At their best colleges and universities can be Trojan horses for humanistic content. A humanizing carceral higher education that is based on the humanities is very well-suited to help students navigate the pains and troubles they encounter

in the Vale of Soul-making, especially as they combat the inherent DeadTime of the carceral context. There is a great need for those who come out of the horse to do so bearing torches—those various rays of genius—with which they may touch the hearts of the students they encounter and ignite in them the desire for perpetual self-improvement as they seek to apprehend their own reality.

It is possible—indeed, likely—that we will never know the extent to which the work that we do in the higher education classroom will set the hearts of our students aflame as they traverse the Vale of Soul-making. And yet we must press on anyway, for many of those that we serve face odds far worse than most of us are able to imagine. There are those who question the risks of pursuing types of education that we might call “transformative.”³⁶ My question for these individuals is this: What are the risks of *not* pursuing a transformative education? I can only gesture at an answer. For incarcerated students like G, the risk is enormous, on a scale that can be measured in years, perhaps even decades.

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2 Emerson, *The Essential Writings*, 47.

3 Emerson, *The Essential Writings*, 47.

4 Emerson, *The Essential Writings*, 47.

5 Richard Whelan, *Self-Reliance: The Wisdom of Ralph Waldo Emerson as Inspiration for Daily Living* (New York: Harmony, 2012), 140.

6 Michael Roth, *Beyond the University: Why Liberal Education Matters* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015).

7 Martha Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).

8 Danielle Allen, *Education and Equality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 17.

- 9 Allen, *Education and Equality*, 46-47.
- 10 Alan Deresiewicz, *Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite and the Way to a Meaningful Life* (New York: Free Press, 2014), 156.
- 11 <https://www.neh.gov/about> (emphasis added).
- 12 Roth, *Beyond the University*, 105.
- 13 Deresiewicz, *Excellent Sheep*, 166.
- 14 See Daniel Karpowitz, *College in Prison: Reading in the Age of Mass Incarceration* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2017); Ellen Lagemann, *Liberating Minds: The Case for College In Prison* (The New Press, 2017); Debra Satz and Rob Reich, "The Liberal Reach: Teaching Humanities to the Poor," *Dissent*, Winter, 2003; Earl Shorris, *The Art of Freedom: Teaching the Humanities to the Poor* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2013).
- 15 Emerson, "Circles," 136-137.
- 16 Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (London: Bloomsbury Press, 2013), 88.
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- 22 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 316.
- 23 Lee Trepanier, "Introduction: Why the Humanities Matter," in *Why the Humanities Matter Today: In Defense of Liberal Education*, ed. Lee Trepanier (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2017), x.
- 24 Trepanier, "Why the Humanities Matter Today," x-xi.
- 25 Stanley Fish, *Save the World on Your Own Time* (Oxford: Oxford University Press,

2008).

26 Fish, *Save the World on Your Own Time*, 30.

27 Justin Stover, "There is No Case for the Humanities," *Chronicle of Higher Education* (2018), 11. <https://www.chronicle.com/article/there-is-no-case-for-the-humanities/>.

28 Stover, "There is No Case for the Humanities," 12.

29 Grondin, "Gadamer's Experience and Theory of Education." 11, 16.

30 See Roth, *Beyond the University*; Deresiewicz, *Excellent Sheep*.

31 Deresiewicz, *Excellent Sheep*, 206. Compare with Robert Putnam, *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016).

32 Putnam, *Our Kids*.

33 Credit for this point goes to Dini Metro-Roland.

34 Erving Goffman, *Asylums* (New York: Anchor Books, 1961).

35 John Keats, *The Letters of John Keats, 1814-1821*, ed. Hyder Edward Rollins (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958), 100-104.

36 See Doug Yacek, "Should Education be Transformative?" *Journal of Moral Education* 49, no. 2 (2019): 257-274.