



Liberal Education: A Forge

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In this bold opinion piece, Kitty Lancaster likens liberal education to a forge, or a furnace used to sharpen the weapons of communication and critical thought against outside manipulation. This essay was written for Rhetoric & Critical Thinking with Dr. Jennifer Long.

I USED TO ASK MY HUSBAND what he was thinking. He almost always replied with, “Nothing.” This would lead to arguments. I thought he was avoiding conversing with me about whatever was on his mind, because I couldn’t fathom the possibility that someone could actually be thinking about nothing. What does that even feel like? My brain is always thinking—thinking about anything and everything all at the same time. It can be difficult to narrow my focus down to one specific subject, to communicate my point.

I have always found that putting my ideas on paper helps me to gain some control over my thoughts. Fareed Zakaria states in *In Defense of a Liberal Education*, “The central virtue of a liberal education is that it teaches you how to write, and writing makes you think” (72). However, my mind is already thinking long before the writing process begins. Writing helps me organize my thoughts so that I can see them in all their details and fully understand what it is that I

think. Writing leads to understanding. It's about making the connection between thoughts and words. It forces us to make choices and bring clarity and order to our ideas. The thoughts are there first, but we can't see them clearly, so we put them into a language and suddenly we have a full thought with verbs and nouns and punctuation. A liberal education gives us the tools to unscramble these thoughts.

But why is understanding these jumbled thoughts important? We need to know our own minds. We need to be able to speak our own opinions and express ourselves in a logical, filtered way. A liberal education teaches us to speak, and speech is important. If we don't know our minds, if we can't clarify our thoughts and articulate them, we are subject to being manipulated by someone else. Empowering our voices to be able to express our thoughts clearly is a shield that others cannot break through. When we know what we are saying, we don't hesitate, and people who don't hesitate are not easily swayed.

So now we have organized logical thought, which we can put on paper, and we can speak our minds in a sharp, straight line resembling a katana. So then what do we do with this sword? We sharpen it. The most important aspect of a liberal education is that it teaches us to strengthen our thoughts. It teaches us to seek out knowledge for ourselves, to practice learning. It is a tremendous advantage to be able to acquire knowledge on our own. A liberal education shows us how to look at every side of a situation, analyze all possible outcomes, decide the path that seems optimal, and move past any hindrances, forcing our way to that desired position or outcome. It breeds individuals. It encourages asking questions in a society that was raised on "because I said so."

The world is ever-changing, and society is by no means at a standstill. Therefore, learning a targeted set of skills that will eventually be irrelevant is a waste of time and money. What will never change are the skills that we acquire and learn over time because of our experiences as human beings. The most valuable skills are the

ones that are uniquely human: creativity, problem solving, decision making, persuasive arguing, management skills, emotional intelligence, value judgements, curiosity, a sense of adventure, and ambition. These are the muscles that a liberal education will exercise. These are the weapons that will carry us to freedom and liberty. So, let's write our thoughts and speak our minds and discuss our feelings. Let's remember iron sharpens iron.

Our sharpened thoughts and feelings could save our world. A liberal education would ensure the survival of democracy. Learning in the style of a liberal education leads citizens to think for themselves, therefore protecting themselves from governmental overreach. Being willing to constantly ask questions leaves no room for deceit from others. A liberal education is our protection. A liberal education shows us how to marshal our thoughts, strengthen our minds, solidify our words, nurture our talents, and forges each of us into a weapon that can be used to free our world. ►►

►► WORK CITED

ZAKARIA, FAREED. *In Defense of a Liberal Education*. Norton, 2016.