

# The last line of defense

By [Paul Greenberg](#)

This article was published December 8, 2013 at 12:45 a.m.

Today's column is based on the text of Paul Greenberg's talk at the annual meeting of Arkansas' Independent Colleges and Universities last month in Little Rock.

Thank you for having me. And for being Arkansas' last line of defense against the steady erosion of the ideal of liberal education on college campuses.

It's an erosion that by now has come to resemble a collapse. All across the country. A collapse of the old standards, and of the old idea of a core of indispensable disciplines that all students- indeed, any educated person-should have some familiarity with.

Looking out over this gathering, I know I won't be telling you anything you don't know, and indeed haven't observed first-hand. But I do want to thank you for doing your part-and more-in this fight for what a real education ought to entail. And it can be a fight.

What I have to say today won't be new to any of you M.A.s, Ph.D.s, J.D.s and so impressively on, but maybe I can restate the case for a liberal education from the vantage point of just a newspaperman.

Over the years many of you have spoken up liberal education. If there is a single word that sums up the case for such an education, it's a word you've doubtless heard and may even have used on occasion:

Transferable. As in Transferable Skills.

Transferable may describe not just skills but those ineluctable qualities that can be transferred from a classroom or a lab, a seminar or a reading course, to whatever endeavor we choose to follow when we're through with our formal education, and ready to embark on our real one in life, which will have plenty enough tests and trials.

What are those qualities we would like to think we've planted in the beneficiaries of a good liberal-arts education? I would nominate matching qualities like judgment and good humor, daring and deliberation, confidence and humility, idealism and practical effectiveness, a talent for innovation but also an ability to absorb the old, old lessons of experience. Those qualities aren't easy to define in any detail.

So let's not try to define them.

As the best teachers do, let's cite examples instead. And tell stories with a moral. If the Teacher from Nazareth spoke in parables, it was for a good reason.

When your president, Rex Nelson, asked me to talk to you all, it wasn't very long before I rethought a question that had occurred to me before. A question about the quality of generalship displayed during the mass slaughter known as the First World War. The quality of those commanders generally ranged from the merely disastrous to the utterly catastrophic. Not for nothing was a well-known study of the British generals during that horrendous conflict on the Western front titled *The Donkeys*. Indeed, the description of the contending armies as "lions led by donkeys" was in common currency during the war itself.

But the Western front wasn't the only front in those world wars.

There was also a British commander who showed judgment and good humor, daring and deliberation, confidence and humility, idealism and practical effectiveness, a talent for innovation but also an ability to absorb the old, old lessons of experience. His name was Thomas Edward Lawrence, popularly known as T.E. Lawrence, and better known to the world as Lawrence of Arabia.

Colonel and sheikh Lawrence prefigured our times in his understanding of guerrilla warfare, or what has come to be known in the barbarous lingo of our current military/bureaucratic experts as Asymmetrical Warfare.

Lawrence may have been the only great military leader to come out of that horrendous conflict, yet he was not the product of a military education. Unless you count the English equivalent of an abbreviated ROTC course. He was an honors history student at Oxford who went on to become a practicing archaeologist. He would proceed to spend a good deal of his time in His Majesty's Army scandalizing the professional officers, usually by his successes.

Among his other distinctions, apart from a dry-wry sense of humor that you might have to be English to appreciate, was to have invented the Arab Nation.

Why not? The English pretty much invented the American one, too. Lawrence would spend most of his time in the Army bucking the brass, mainly by being more Arab than the Arabs, and showing what a man with a broad liberal education-and an unlimited capacity for understanding The Other-can accomplish.

The same description might apply to his worthy successor in the Second World War, Orde Wingate, founder of the Chindits in the China-India theater. He spent most of his time in the military defying it. Did I mention that another sure mark of someone with a broad liberal education is having a mind of one's own?

For the record, I mean no disrespect for the military, and certainly not for ROTC by citing Lawrence and Wingate as exemplars. I may not have realized it at the time, but offhand I can't think of a more educational experience, except maybe raising a teenager, than the U.S. Army.

And I hasten to add that I'm a firm believer in compulsory military service-and not just for males.

How has this thing vaguely called a liberal education managed to bring forth such exemplary characters-and exemplary character-over the years?

Matthew Arnold may have provided the best and simplest answer to that question when he defined a liberal education as the study of “the best which has been thought and said” over the years.

An old schoolmaster, he hoped not just to conserve all that, but to pass it on, to extend and expand on it. That’s the project you heads of Arkansas’ independent college and universities are still engaged in-against all current odds. But take heart. You’re not the first generals to be handed a seemingly impossible mission.

To believe in liberal education is to keep the faith that to be educated-not just trained but educated-is to have some acquaintance with the rich heritage that is ours in the great civilizations of the past. In the hope we will be able to continue the great, civilized conversation with those minds.

That means having great teachers able to transmit great ideas.

I’ve found that if you want to get somebody talking, like a colleague you’re taking a long drive with, maybe just to listen to another long-winded guest speaker like me, just ask him who was the best teacher he ever had. He’s likely to go on forever.

Me, when I think of the great teachers I was blessed to be not just exposed to, but taught by, I think of Mary Warters, the legendary biology professor at Centenary College in Louisiana.

I was not a good biology student, especially compared to the bright kids in Dr. Warters’ classes.

In her time, she probably filled half the entering medical school class at Tulane and LSU with her good students and future doctors.

She would spend every summer doing original research in genetics with fruit flies in those Mendelian, pre-double-helix days.

I’m taken with sadness whenever I remember that those great advances came after her time. How she would have delighted in them.

Mary Warters taught me so much more than what little biology I was capable of absorbing in her classes in basic biology, comparative anatomy, and genetics. It was Mary Warters’ piercing look, and most of all her disinterested passion for her subject-do people use the word Disinterested correctly any more?-that stayed with her students. She had no interest in false pride, in making rhetorical points, or pushing any pet theory. She was zealous only for the search for truth, knowing full well, scientist that she was, that no one could ever have a lock on truth.

It was Dr. Warters' attitude that generations of her students would go on to treasure, however little of it I, for one, was worthy of acquiring. That attitude of hers remains the ultimate attainment and ambition of a true education. A liberal education.

To admire Mary Warters' attitude is no guarantee we will acquire it. But this much is certain: If we don't seek to emulate it, if we settle for something called education but that has no core of common shared values and demanding disciplines, today's students will never have any idea of that attitude, the open yet self disciplined approach that a liberal education should inculcate. And we will have failed them.

That's why all of you here and on your campuses are engaged in a noble work, and why I wish you all Godspeed.

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