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# In Praise of the Humanities: A Convert's Tale

By Mary Pat Campbell

As a child, I did not like English or History—I found them tiresome, and was forced to write papers on specific topics. It looked like a mess to me—no clear order to learning anything, and when there was some kind of order (i.e., chronological with history), we'd be forced to jump all over the place. I never quite got clear if the Vikings or the Romans got to England first (spoiler alert: it was the Romans).

I much preferred math class, where there was a clear order from one topic to the next.

Once I got to college, I avoided these messy topics as much as possible. When forced to take a literature course, I took one on science fiction. When forced to take a history course, I took the “History of Ancient and Medieval Science and Math.”

But something funny happened when I left off being forced to learn the humanities—I started enjoying them. When I went to grad school in math, I had to take nothing but math classes. But then, I got discount tickets to the opera, started reading through the entire Dickens corpus (in order of composition), got student memberships to museums such as MoMA, watched a documentary on the history of New York City (and state), listened to lectures on the Roman Empire ... and started on a lifelong pursuit of the humanities that continues almost 20 years later.

**“The proper study of Mankind is Man.”**  
—Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Man*, 1734

So what exactly happened?

First off, it's not that arts, literature or history started looking more structured to me. While I have gotten chronology more untangled in my mind, with respect to history, I still come across entanglements of interactions I still don't fully grasp. I have no particular plan of action to my explorations in humanities, sometimes jumping between vastly different topics (now, the operas of Mozart; next, an exploration of linguistics) but sometimes delving deeper in a specific direction (reading all Dickens novels leading to reading Dickens criticism leading to looking specifically at business fraud in Dickens<sup>1</sup>).

What really started happening is that the subjects in these works started making more sense to me as I gained more experience. Situations and characters in Dickens that had seemed ludicrous to me as a teenager now were illuminating exemplars of specific traits or social dynamics as I walked around New York in my 20s. Now that I'm a parent living in a small town in Westchester, certain aspects are even more relatable to me.

But when I really started digging into the humanities has been in my post-FSA years, as I've found my most difficult problems involve people and not math.

“Even if mere entertainment were our only objective in the study of literature, you would still, in my opinion, regard this pursuit as the most humanizing and liberating of intellectual activities. For no other pursuit is appropriate to all times, all ages, all situations; but this study nurtures our youth, delights our old age, brightens the good times, and provides a refuge and comfort in bad times; literature brings us pleasure at home, does not hamper us at work, and is the companion of our nights, our travels, our country retreats.”—Cicero, *Pro Archia Poeta*, 62 BC

I have written in earlier pieces for *The Stepping Stone* about works from classical antiquity informing us about leadership issues<sup>2</sup> and Dickens' novels to help us understand the dynamics of massive business fraud. Those had more direct interpretations than what I am arguing here in the more general study of the humanities.

I have found studying the humanities to be entertaining, sure. I like learning stuff, in general—but I am still studying math and other technical subjects. Why not spend all my time on those, as they are more directly applicable to my career? If I want to study the issue of people and behavior with respect to business, why not just read business and psychology books that directly relate to those matters?

As argued in my prior pieces, one reason to read Plutarch's *Lives* as opposed to only profiles of



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Having a broad understanding of history helps one see patterns and be less surprised when what happened before happens again.

current prominent leaders is that one has a great deal of distance between oneself and the subjects. The emotional distance and distance in time means one is less likely to impose preconceived notions to one's study, and therefore, one is more likely to learn something new.

**“Know thyself.”**—Inscription on the Oracle at Delphi

I have found three levels of knowledge from the exploration of the humanities:

1. Learning about human societies.

In studying history, I've learned about a variety of societies, some more or less familiar to our modern world. It's not just a matter of wars and kings, but customs and technology. It can give one an idea of what is common about human societies (such as hierarchies and social competition) and what is not (such as family living arrangements).

As I am writing this, there is turmoil in a variety of countries and active revolts, protests and riots. Within my own country, there are various political movements, some of which directly impinge upon actuarial work—how insurance is perceived, how governmental promises are kept and not kept. One could approach these issues ab initio, but I find it helpful to think about how similar issues worked themselves out in prior history. With respect to entitlements, for example, it's instructive to think about how various Roman emperors essentially bribed the Roman troops to back them by increasing their pay and benefits during a period of great turmoil (from 192 AD to 285 AD, there were about 30 emperors, most of whom were assassinated, and many of whom ruled for less than a year), as well as the bribing of the inhabitants of Rome itself with the proverbial bread and circuses. This managed to work for a while, but did ultimately collapse.

I am less likely to believe “This time it's different!” having seen how many times it really wasn't different before. Having a broad understanding of history helps one see patterns

and be less surprised when what happened before happens again. While Santayana wrote “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it,” it seems to me much of history is going to repeat whether or not you learn it. But one can be less surprised by the outcome. For example, one is less likely to claim that governments don't go out of business, when one considers all the governments that have gone out of business, sometimes due more to financial collapse than military defeat.

2. Learning about other individuals.

As history can teach about societal patterns in large, biography and fiction may give some insight as to how individual people behave. Sure, one can read books on psychology, or just observe the people around you, but profiles of people both real and fictional can give one broader perspective. One comes against characters one may never meet in real life today, and consider how they react to others. I know how I think (more below), but fiction and biography alike help expand my consideration of how other people think. In Dickens, one meets all sorts of characters, from the frauds to the virtuous. Yes, some are barely realistic, and more reflect a societal ideal or a purity of a particular trait beyond what could be encompassed in one person, but it puts human behavior and motivations under a microscope, with all the messiness that entails.

3. Learning about myself.

I claimed above that I know how I think, but that's incomplete. I know my opinions on various issues and how I have behaved in the past, but I do not know how I may react to specific situations in the future. Fiction and philosophy may help one explore these concepts. What is my concept of virtue? What would I do in a situation like that of Sydney Carton in *A Tale of Two Cities*? What do I think of the concept of pride of work being a sin in Dante's *Purgatorio* as characterized by Oderisi da Gubbio?

A comment on all these. Some have argued that the study of the humanities improves character of those who do it. In *The Defense of Poesy* (1595), Sir Philip Sydney wrote “Truly, I have known men, that even with reading Amadis de Gaule, which, God knoweth, wanteth much of a perfect poesy, have found their hearts moved to the exercise of courtesy, liberality, and especially courage. Who readeth Æneas carrying old Anchises on his back, that wisheth not it were his fortune to perform so excellent an act?” He was not the only one making such an argument.

While some are thus inspired, it’s not universal. The issue is the distinction between thought and action. And even the thought and knowledge are hard-won.

The study of the humanities can inform one’s thought on some of the issues I mention above, but it does require active reflection. I didn’t get much out of my study of humanities as an adolescent other than wondering why we were given such depressing works. None of it was real to me. It was just a bunch of dead white men who had nothing to say to me, at that age. Science fiction spoke to me, but not Dickens, when I was 15.

To get something out of studying the humanities, one cannot be a passive consumer of the material. One must join the “Great Conversation,” as the editors of the Great Books series term it, even if it’s sitting in one’s own armchair, holding a Kindle.

“What say you, Mary? for you are a young lady of deep reflection I know, and read great books, and make extracts.”

“Mary wished to say something very sensible, but knew not how.”

—Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 1813

So how to get started?

The beauty of the humanities is that due to its lack of structure, one can start almost anywhere. Also,

there is an embarrassment of (free) riches to be had on the Internet. But one wants to start somewhere, and here are some ideas.

#### 1. Audio lectures on the humanities.

I have had a very long commute since the start of my actuarial career, and when not filling that time with exam-studying, I have listened to podcasts and CDs of lectures from a variety of sources. I highly recommend the lectures from the Great Courses (which used to be called The Teaching Company), which cover a variety of topics. Through them, I have learned about the operas of Mozart, Chinese history, history of the (western) Roman Empire, Herodotus, linguistics, Shakespeare, and much more. As well, I recommend lectures from Modern Scholar from Recorded Books, which has a series of lectures called *Odyssey of the West* that takes one from the ancient Hebrews and Greeks through modern times in terms of history, art, philosophy and literature.

These lectures provide context for further study. While reading original texts provides a different experience than these derivative and summary works, it helps knowing what you’re actually going to read before you do, like reading the libretto before going to an opera. I found it helpful listening to lectures on Herodotus or *The Divine Comedy* before reading the works themselves. While I have bought many of these lecture sets (because I listen to them so often), libraries often have a wide selection of these works.

There are also lots of podcasts and online courses on these topics as well. Check out the humanities-related sections of *Coursera.org* for free classes on all sorts of topics. Just last year, I listened to a set of lectures on Beethoven’s piano sonatas specifically, conducted by a concert pianist.

#### 2. Book lists.

I do not want to get into an argument as to what “The Canon” is, or what “The Great Books” are.

**To get something out of studying the humanities, one cannot be a passive consumer of the material.**

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Suffice to say that various groups of people have made their own lists of essential books, and one can pick the list one wants to. The granddaddy of this project is *Great Books of the Western World*, a series of books that comprises over 50 volumes, originally published in 1952. It covers millennia of works, most of which should be familiar to humanities scholars of the West. The first volume, titled *The Great Conversation*, makes many of the same arguments I do for studying the humanities. What's helpful is that this first volume contains a reading plan that covers a decade (though, of course, one could read it faster or slower). For those who like a preset plan of study, this would be a good place to start.

Another work to consider is *The Well-Educated Mind* by Susan Wise Bauer. She creates lists of types of works in categories such as drama and fiction, and includes more recent works.

You can also check out the site/app Goodreads, where people keep track of what they're reading, have read, and want to read. People make lists there in the section called "listopia"—one of the top current lists is "100 Books to Read in a Lifetime," which is based off a similar list at *Amazon.com* (booksellers always have lists of books for you to read). These tend to be more recent books, from the last few centuries, as opposed to the millennia-long Great Books.

Finally, St. John's College of Annapolis has a liberal arts curriculum based around original texts, and has its reading list (by year) posted here: <http://www.sjca.edu/academic/readlist.shtml>. This list intersects a great deal with the other ones.

"It's technology married with liberal arts, humanities, that yields us the result that makes our heart sing. And nowhere is that more true than in these post-PC devices."  
—**Steve Jobs** on the iPad2, 2011

I happen to prefer random wandering through topics I find of interest, and am an inveterate browser at my local library. Now that I am no longer required to, I write and think more about the humanities than ever before, surprised by what I find in a way I am less likely to in my technical explorations. Join me in the Great Conversation in your own armchair. ●

#### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> See the author's article on this in the February 2014 issue of *The Stepping Stone*.

<sup>2</sup> See the author's two-part series in the August and November 2012 issues of *The Stepping Stone*.