

Reflections, Guided by Cicero, on UD's Liberal Education

Cicero¹ was that leader of the ancient Roman Republic who considered his great political accomplishment as defeating Catiline's conspiracy and saving the republic through knowledge and speech, not through war. To do so, he trained himself to be one of the finest orators who ever lived. These professional accomplishments he attributed to his exceptional liberal education rooted, as is ours, in the *unity* of the disciplines and resulting in the best, time-tested preparation for leadership in the professions.

The unity of the disciplines Cicero explained as a "truth expressed by Plato" whereby "the whole of the content of the liberal and humane sciences is comprised within a single bond of union," showing "a marvellous agreement and harmony underl[ying] all branches of knowledge."² In line with this conception of an ordered and unified cosmos, he was the first to translate the genius of Greek education into the Roman *liberales artes* or *studia humanitatis*: that full and complete education, that "wide domain of science" not "split up into separate departments" (*De Oratore* 3.132).³ Cicero was convinced that only with this comprehensive education including science, mathematics, and "all things human and divine," could leaders of the professions be best "equipped" for their tasks (3.136, 139). We at UD show this same conviction by our unified commitment to the Core.

Cicero saw this foundational, comprehensive education as giving a framework for the full scope of learning, freeing the mind and heart to see and respond to this changing and often perilous world. That comprehensive education allows the young to discover their own greatest strengths and **then** to choose those skills most apt for their gifts and circumstances. In one of his most influential books, Cicero humorously, ironically, with penetrating effectiveness, stages a discussion between the best educated leader of his time and a very successful lawyer. The lawyer argues against a unified and comprehensive education because it would actually be detrimental to professional success by eliminating such things as unethical tactics and, besides, the lawyer argues, delivery is much more important than knowledge and legal expertise – so forget wisdom and virtue; become a specialist in giving the public what it wants.⁴

Such criticisms of liberal education are perennial, but so is the vital importance of liberal education to a free and peaceful society. We know and say in our Mission Statement that wisdom, truth, and virtue are the primary and proper **ends** of education, not just values, or commitments. The "end" of something, technically speaking, is its fulfillment or excellence. So just as the end of medicine is health, we know and say that the fulfillment or excellence of the person is wisdom, truth, and virtue. Their "value" is not market-based, nor does their value fluctuate according to supply and demand. Truth, virtue, and wisdom are integral dimensions of a good life, necessary for happiness. So important are these three ends to human and civic flourishing that we are convinced that what we offer at UD will always be in demand to the extent that we live up to our Mission -- **and** explain to our public its importance for true liberty of mind and heart: an education that equips one to be truly free, and to foster true peace and prosperity, by striving for wisdom.

Wisdom requires an accurate framework for judgment that helps us "map out reality," giving us an overall view of the whole and our place and duties within it. Our knowledge of reality will constantly grow, but the lover of wisdom strives to connect the parts, to come to see how those parts fit together into an increasingly more accurate, more subtle perspective. This life-long learning process fosters a greater appreciation for the expertise of others, helps each realize how **limited** one's own knowledge actually is, and therefore invites and builds a

collegiality of mutual respect and appreciation for the vastness of our mutual task, for its intrinsic worth, and for its importance in advancing a way of life guided by truth and virtue in that work and love of wisdom.

Cicero defined wisdom as “knowledge of all things human and divine, which is concerned also with the bonds of union between gods and people and the relations of person to person” (*De Officiis* 1.153). Cicero also taught and showed by his own life that it takes the expertise of the **wise** to bring about peace, harmony, and prosperity,⁵ an expertise rooted in liberal education. Why? Because human nature and society achieve their full flourishing when governed by those guidelines or laws arising from the very structure of our being – just as the arts of farming, doctoring, and navigation flourish through the good work of wise and learned experts in each of those fields.⁶ In this light, Cicero concluded that the “most fruitful of all arts” is the “true and refined” “search for wisdom that teaches the way of good living.”⁷

By his careful observation of human and professional relations and by his deep study of those authors considered most wise, Cicero discovered the importance of **friendship** in that “way of good living.” He recognized the special role it plays as the virtue that best describes the bond that should unite gods and human beings – *all* human beings because *all* human beings share in that divine quality of reason. Not surprisingly, his essay on friendship may be his most famous, most loved, and most influential work – beautiful and apparently simple, but based on immense learning so accurate in its appreciation for concepts like conscience, the soul, essence, *honestas* or moral excellence, and *caritas* or charity that the early Christian thinkers would adopt Cicero’s vocabulary,⁸ continuing to our own times.

In such ways, Cicero continued and advanced the educational tradition of which we are a part today. He lived in a time of immense cultural change, great violence, bitter civil war, resulting in the collapse of a self-governing nation and the rise of imperial rule. In Cicero’s day, the prevailing concept of leadership had become the *dux* or military commander set on conquest, glory, and wealth. In contrast, Cicero argued for leaders as *princeps*, as “first” or “leading citizen.” The word *princeps* is from *capere*, to capture, and *primus*, first: but first place captured by loyal, expert service, not by compulsion or violence. In this way and others, Cicero helped to reshape the ethical and political imagination of our tradition.

In society – be it civil or professional – the true leaders, Cicero explained, are those who emerge as “first” by the proven quality of their service in bringing about the good of their society as a whole. These are the ones “who excel[] in justice and wisdom,” without which, “existence is impossible for a household, a city, a nation.”⁹ Such leaders arise because they are “first in wisdom and eloquence”¹⁰; they **can** rise “easily” to first place **if** they have not only the natural talent but also the virtues to work hard enough to achieve the mastery of the difficult arts involved.¹¹ Truth without the full range of virtues cannot stand – a truth known “feelingly”¹² by the wise. Cicero learned the importance of virtue as a youth in many ways, from the exceptional teachers and mentors he admired, and from such real-life demands as having a physique and voice so weak that he physically collapsed after the first year in his trade, but then he trained himself with the greatest of effort – guided by truth, striving for new heights of virtue he knew he needed if he were to accomplish his duty with the gifts he had been given.

With the help of these teachers and mentors, Cicero learned as a youth how to grow in virtue through the demands of his work. By eighteen, he published his first book, a book still read today as a classic in rhetoric. As a youth, he mastered the Greek language and until his death he studied its greatest authors to better and better equip himself for the complexities of life by acquiring greater clarity of vision and by forging a richer Latin vocabulary needed to do so.

Cicero described his intellectual approach as a demanding “academic scepticism” learned from Socrates and Aristotle. That meant he constantly asked himself: Is it true? – in what context? under what conditions? to what extent? How well does this theory or measurement or poetic expression correspond to what actually exists in all its subtlety and complexity? This deep care for truth led Cicero to fight prejudice and laziness of thought and action.

In his professional life, although his father was not wealthy or a resident of Rome, Cicero was selected for every office in Rome at the earliest possible age. Cicero’s comprehensive study, his dedicated life in perilous times, and his life-long quest for wisdom led to a remarkable view of human nature: He rose above the prejudices of his age and recognized the humanity of all human beings, slave or free; he argued for equal justice under law not only for Rome but for *all* nations, becoming the best known advocate of international law. He developed most fully in writing, the first we have, the notion of natural law, a concept that exerted immense influence in legal, ethical, religious, and political spheres throughout the early church, the medieval ages, the renaissance, up through the founding of our own country, and beyond.

The dangers of a partial education Cicero showed in the lives of those guided by prejudice and by extremes. In this regard, Cicero courageously gave the following challenge at the end of his life to his contemporaries and to all of us: “Work out your ideas and sift your thoughts to see what conception and idea of a good person they contain”; otherwise you can end up as a “Caesar¹³ [who] overturned all the laws, human and divine, to achieve for himself a leading place fashioned according to his own erroneous opinion.”¹⁴ But Cicero also pointed out examples of prejudice less obvious in his time than Caesar’s ideal of tyranny: He pointed out the deficiencies of the two most influential schools of thought in Rome at that time: the Stoics on one hand, who were “captivated by the ideal of endurance and hardness,” and, on the other, the Epicureans who took “delight rather in ... pleasure” (3.62). A truer ideal of *humanitas* avoids these extremes, these inadequate dogmas of good and just and friendly living.

Ideas **do** have consequences; actions **do follow** ideas.

Yet Cicero fell short when measured by his own criteria: he studied nature and all things human and divine; he knew history; he fostered friendship; he valued peace of soul and detachment from passing goods, including his honor and glory; he agreed that all human things pass away. Yet at distinct periods of his life, he found himself unable to govern his own emotions and his drive for glory.¹⁵ When, for example, the republic fell and he no longer had a place, he wrote to his best friend that he had “lost all joy forever,” although not his “constancy et steadfastness.”¹⁶ Living up to the demands of truth and duty would seem to be the highest expression of *humanitas* for Cicero, but he did so, forcefully battling emotions that often prevailed, ending his life without joy, with a soul of unsteady peace.

Cicero’s falling short was discreetly indicated by one of his greatest students in the Renaissance who had reflected deeply upon the classical and Christian tradition, including the biblical injunction that “God loves a joyful giver,”¹⁷ even in the midst of great suffering. In reflecting upon “all things human and divine,” that student of Cicero, enlightened by revelation, discovered that full *humanitas* was best lived with joy, a joy rooted in the cross, in deep and abiding faith in a provident and loving God, and in humility dependent upon a grace always present even in the worst of storms.¹⁸

May we continue striving together in the greatness of our Mission: striving for truth, laboring for virtue, aspiring for wisdom – in a friendship and joy that alone can bring harmony, prosperity, and peace. Thank you, fellow lovers of wisdom.

Gerard Wegemer
 King/Hagggar Ceremony
 19 January 2016

Notes

¹ Cicero is someone not currently in our Core, but perhaps should be, model as he is and guide as he has been for now two millennia of the liberal education we give at UD.

² *De Oratore* 3.21-22; also *Pro Archia* 2.

³ In *De Oratore*, see Cicero's own comments in the Prefaces to each day of his Crassus dialogues, esp. 1.5 & 16, 2.5-6, and 3.15. See also Cicero's statements that youth are to be "educated with a view to *humanitas*" (*Pro Archia* 4) and that "the [liberal] arts were devised for the purpose of fashioning [*fingerentur*] the minds of the young according to *humanitas* and virtue" (Cicero, *De Oratore* 3.58).

⁴ *De Oratore* 1.227-8, 239, 260-62.

⁵ *De Inventione* 1.2; *De Oratore* 1.30.

⁶ *De Finibus* 4.16-17.

⁷ *Tusculan Disputations* 4.5-6.

⁸ See, for example, Thomas Aquinas' frequent citation of Cicero, esp. in his treatment of *honestas* and of the four cardinal virtues (*Summa Theologica*, 2-2.145, 1-2.61).

⁹ *De Legibus* 3.3-4.

¹⁰ *De Oratore* 3.63.

¹¹ *Pro Sestio* 139; that the *princeps* must be properly trained and adequately proved, see *De Legibus* 3.29-32 and throughout *De Oratore*.

¹² Consider Shakespeare's *King Lear* 4.6.149, 4.6. 221-23, 4.1.68-9, and 3.4.34-36.

¹³ Julius Caesar, himself a brilliant person and gifted speaker, praised Cicero's achievements by saying, "It is more important to have greatly extended the frontiers of the Roman spirit than the frontiers of the Roman Empire" (Pliny, *Natural History* 7.117).

¹⁴ *De Officiis* 3.81; 1.26

¹⁵ See Elizabeth Rawson's *Cicero: A Portrait* (NY: Cornell UP, 1975) and Anthony Everitt's *Cicero: The Life and Times of Rome's Greatest Politician* (NY: Random House, 2001).

¹⁶ See *Ep* 9.11.1 and *Att.* 12.40.3, both written in late spring 45 BC. Cicero clearly recognizes the attractiveness of joy – and the need for the orator to be able to elicit such a spirit in his audience (*De Oratore* 2.236, 290, 340; 3.30, 219); *Brutus* 197 says it is "one of the three things an orator does." He even reports the extraordinary examples of people (including Socrates) able to go to their death in such a spirit (*Tusc.* 1.100, 1.95-99).

¹⁷ 2 Cor 9:7.

¹⁸ Quite distinctive about Thomas More's life are the good humor and peace of soul he maintained, even throughout his imprisonment and on the scaffold before his death.