

What Is College For?

Acquiring the ability to read, it transformed me, man. Like we say it in Spanish, la cultura cura. Culture heals. And that's what healed me was culture. It made me positive. One thing for sure it did, it helped me to stop seeing my so-called enemy as my enemy and to start seeing him as my brother.¹

The first encounter between Max Cerda and Raymond Cruz, members of rival gangs in Chicago, was a confrontation, after which Max had sworn “I’m gonna get this punk, whoever he is.” Soon after, however, their respective gangs united, and Max and Raymond began a friendship that grew into brotherhood. Two years older than Max, Raymond eventually left their neighborhood and its gang lifestyle, encouraging Max to do the same. Yet Max resisted, and after several months he convinced Raymond to return to the neighborhood that they had shared, “just to spend some time with me.” On the day that Raymond returned, April 18, 1979, Max and Raymond were ambushed. Max survived the attack unharmed, but Raymond was shot 13 times; he died within minutes, in Max’s arms. The night of Raymond’s funeral, Max set out to resolve his feelings of anger and loss in the only way that he knew:

The night we buried him, it was like five of us walking around, trying to find the enemy. We were hurt. Full of anger. Full of pain. I didn’t worry about getting locked up. I didn’t worry

¹ Max Cerda, “Death Is Contagious,” in *How Long Will I Cry? Voice of Youth Violence*, ed. Miles Harvey (Chicago, IL: Big Shoulders Books, 2013), 91.

about dying. I was looking for death, bro. I was running right into it, head on.²

The next day, Max was arrested, charged with two counts of murder and one count of attempted murder. Although just 16 years old, Max was charged, tried, and convicted as an adult.

Max Cerda spent 18 years in prison, including five and a half years of solitary confinement. Unlike so many others whom the prison system fails to rehabilitate, it not wholly destroys, Max found a path toward growth, change, and redemption:

A lot of people go to the hole and they find the end of the world. For me, I found a new world. I found a world of self. That's where I learned how to think. It's where I learned how to read. It's where I learned how to cry. I needed that so much.³

While in prison, Max met Luis Rosa, a Puerto Rican nationalist who preached Latino awareness and Latino unity to the other inmates. Max also met Jose Pizarro, personal security to the leader of the Folks gang, the principal rival of Max's gang People. Guided in equal measure by the newfound sense of solidarity to which his reading and introspection had led him and the influence of Luis Rosa's doctrines of Latino unity, Max began to work in cooperation with Jose toward an alliance between the two rival gangs. Together Max and Jose co-founded the Latino Cultural Exchange Coalition while in prison, a coalition that, since their release from prison, has given Max and Jose the forum and the authority to discourage local teens from following the path toward violence.

What, if anything, does Max Cerda's story reveal regarding a possible answer to the problem of violence? Without claiming that any elements of Max's story are suggestive of a definitive answer, there are aspects that warrant closer investigation. To begin, in at least two instances Max was able to overcome a fundamental tension with, and propensity for violence toward, another person by recognizing a shared need and a shared experience between the other and himself. Further, as Max explicitly contends, being taught how to read by another inmate had a profound influence on his capacity to recognize, and to value, the growing sense of brotherhood between himself and others. Ultimately, it was this

² *Ibid.*, 89–90.

³ *Ibid.*, 90.

sense of brotherhood, of solidarity, which encouraged and allowed Max to turn away from violence.

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THE PROBLEM OF VIOLENCE TODAY is an incredibly complicated, multi-faceted issue, which comprises the seemingly disparate issues of gun control, health care (particularly, but not exclusively, mental health care), institutional racism, and the “war on drugs,” to name only a few. It would therefore be misguided to attempt to attribute the problem of violence, particularly in its current iterations, to any one cause. At the same time, it would be equally misguided, if not downright destructive, to fail to acknowledge the place of alienation and marginalization at the heart of the problem. Marginalization is itself an act of violence, forcefully exiling an individual or group from the whole and setting them outside as “wrong,” “bad,” “evil,” or “inhuman.” Further, the perpetuation of such conditions, by inflicting the constant pressure of violence, begets more violence as the marginalized and oppressed must rebel against their condition by turning the violence away from themselves and redirecting it outwardly. Maurice Jackson, a professor of history at Georgetown University, contended in 2015 that this trajectory is precisely what was playing out in cities across the United States, including St. Louis, Baltimore, and Washington, DC. Noting the political and social conditions that have created the margins that divide these and other cities into distinct groups that end up at odds with each other, Jackson concluded that there can only be a catastrophic consequence: “Marginalization and alienation are dynamite just waiting for a match. People don’t suffer in silence forever. Their pain always finds a way to express itself. As long as the levels of social and economic inequality exist, no city can absolve itself of the waves of violence, no city can be riot proof.”⁴ Weapons are not the only means by which we are killing each other in America; discrimination, judgment, intolerance, and hate are profoundly destructive components of our contemporary culture. At the same time, and although these forces far too often cause far too much pain on their own, very often they

⁴ Maurice Jackson, “Why Police Can’t Fix Urban America’s Violent Crime Problem,” in *The Washington Post*, September 3, 2015. Available online at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2015/09/03/why-police-cant-fix-urban-americas-violent-crime-problem/>

also lead to the use of physical implements of violence for their ultimate expression. So what is to be done?

One possible answer was suggested recently by Michael Wood, a former Baltimore City police officer. Wood, whose first assignment with the BPD in 2003 was walking the Western District, worked with the Violent Crime, narcotics, and Major Crimes divisions before leaving the department in 2014. In June of 2015, Wood began to publicize some of his personal experiences of the corruption and abusive policies of the city's police department. There was little in what Wood reported that did not accord with allegations that have been made in the past. Particularly in the wake of Freddie Gray's death in April of 2015, numerous accounts of police brutality in Baltimore have been advanced,⁵ adding to a chorus of the same from Ferguson, St. Louis, New York, Cleveland, Minneapolis, Louisville, and many other cities across America. Yet there was one aspect of Wood's story that was both surprising and remarkably insightful; in an interview with *The Washington Post*, when asked what fostered his own transition from participation in these practices to reporting them, Wood revealed the following:

I got my master's degree. The critical thinking required to earn my degree helped me more fully process those revelations [of the wrongness of the actions by police] I had in 2007. It taught me to think about things differently, to evaluate information in different ways. I started reading news from alternative media, seeking out different perspectives. Then I think the national discussion after Ferguson really drove it all home for me. That whole discussion was so divisive, but it was also instructive. So much of it goes back to a lack empathy. You start to see how neither side is able to see things from the other's perspective.⁶

⁵ For a particularly thorough and alarming history of police violence in Baltimore, see Bill Keller's excellent interview with David Simon for *The Marshall Project*, available here: <https://www.themarshallproject.org/2015/04/29/david-simon-on-baltimore-s-anguish>

⁶ "An Interview with the Baltimore Cop Who's Revealing all the Horrible Things He Saw on the Job," in *The Washington Post*, June 25, 2015. Available online at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the->

Ultimately, Wood posits his newfound “critical thinking” skills as that which not only allowed him to fully understand the horror that he and some of his fellow officers had been perpetrating, but also to take *personal responsibility* for those actions and to report both what he had seen and what he had done. This is the essence of critical thinking, entailing not merely the active acquisition and synthesis of new knowledge, perspectives, experiences, and reasoning (though these are of immense importance), but also necessitating *choice* and *action*; once a new understanding is reached through the acquisition and synthesis of knowledge described above, the critical thinker, to be worthy of that designation, must be compelled to *decide* what she has learned, what she now deems to be the state of things, and *act* in a particular manner guided by that knowledge. In the case of Michael Wood, once he allowed himself to recognize the varying perspectives and positions of those effected by his behavior and that of his fellow officers, he gained a fuller understanding of them as individuals, as *people*, and he was thus able to change his behavior accordingly and report those who would not change their behavior. The point of crisis is, ultimately, a choice; critical thinking is the active openness to all perspectives, experiences, and knowledge, the discipline to synthesize these with one’s own understanding, and the commitment to choose a manner of acting as a result.

Christopher Nelson, former president of St. John’s College, has been a long-time proponent of the importance of critical thinking for the betterment of society and an outspoken champion of the particular manner of education which he believes fosters such thinking. In his essay “Lincoln and Liberal Education,” as in so many other essays and speeches, Nelson champions a liberal education, which he describes as a twofold education in the “political and intellectual foundations, including the economic, scientific, and social traditions and principles that have shaped our nation,” and in the “arts needed to question and examine those very foundations and traditions in the light of reason, so that we may keep them vibrant and alive, and so that we may redefine and improve on them when we discover we have good cause.”⁷ Apart from the obvious dichotomy of the practicality of science and

watch/wp/2015/06/25/an-interview-with-the-baltimore-cop-whos-revealing-all-the-horrible-things-he-saw-on-the-job/

⁷ Christopher B. Nelson, “Lincoln and Liberal Education,” from the *Huffington Post*. Available online at http://www.huffingtonpost.com/christopher-nelson/liberal-arts-education-lincoln_b_2966192.html

abstractness of art, there is a more striking paradox in Nelson's juxtaposition of, and according of equal primacy to, foundational knowledge and the imperative to question. Education must provide a strong, clear, and authoritative foundation on which one can understand oneself, one's world, and the relation between the two, but it must simultaneously equip one with the tools and the courage to constantly question that foundation. Education ought to be a movement toward, and a commitment to, not just knowing and understanding but also re-evaluating and re-relating. It is this kind of education which will foster a recognition and respect for the diversity of human character and experience, which in turn may be the best possible way toward a culture which appropriately values, *and works for*, openness, equality, and justice.

This is not to suggest that the hopes for an end to violence and the equality of all hinge on a formalized, advanced education of a particular kind; at the same time, the founding and guiding principles of the kind of education alluded to by Michael Wood and described by Christopher Nelson can be extremely instructive to a society that wishes to properly *care* for itself and its people. One very simple and accessible manner in which this can be achieved is through reading—not just as a means of acquiring knowledge per se, but also as a means to engage new perspectives and experiences. In a 2016 study published in *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts*, Eva Maria Koopman, of Erasmus University Rotterdam, investigated the effects of the foregrounding of particular emotional states/responses while reading on the affective response of the reader, particularly as that response is manifested in empathy. Guided in part by Susan Sontag's contention that “[l]iterature can train, and exercise, our ability to weep for those who are not us or ours,”⁸ Koopman uses both quantitative and qualitative measures to demonstrate that what we read can actually affect not only how we feel but also how we then relate to others. In her study, Koopman presented readers an extract from the Dutch novel *Contrapunt* (*Counterpoint*, Anna Enquist, 2010), either in its original form or modified to remove all emotionally foregrounding elements, and found that “readers who had read the ‘original’ version scored higher on empathy after reading than those who had read the version

⁸ From Sontag's “Literature as Freedom,” quoted in Koopman's article.

‘without foregrounding.’”⁹ By actively engaging the context and perspective of the text, reading allows one to immerse oneself in a new position, new characters, and a new world, which in the best of circumstances may allow one to feel ‘other than’ oneself, to feel like someone else who has undergone different experiences, and to understand both the good and the bad that is attendant to those experiences.

Baltimore writer and educator D. Watkins has similarly suggested reading as a primary way in which the propensity toward marginalization and violence in our cities may be quelled. In his essay “My Neighborhood Revolution,” Watkins offers the following:

I once heard Sherman Alexie say, “Rich people who don’t read are assholes and poor people who don’t read are fucked!” He’s right. So if we can help create readers and writers, thinkers will be birthed, people will be better communicators, social relations will enhance drastically, and our city will be a less violent place.¹⁰

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THE SPECIFIC EXAMPLES FROM Christopher Nelson and Michael Wood notwithstanding, the preceding presents a compelling case for a kind of human education that can occur wholly independently of any kind of “formal” education. And yet, the forum for the present discussion is a journal for readers associated in some way with graduate liberal studies—as faculty, students, administrators, and/or long-time fans. And although I’d wager that most of us would readily acknowledge that formal programs of education have *not* cornered the market on intellectual life and learning, most of us are guided, professionally if not also personally, by the conviction that college *can*, and *should*, be the place that guarantees these things. Writing for *The Point*, Jon Baskin recently noted the fact that, for good or ill, “college” remains the primary place in America where “intellectual life takes place.” As he explains:

⁹ Eva Maria Koopman, “Effects of ‘Literariness’ on Emotions and on Empathy and Reflection After Reading,” in *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts* (Vol. 10, 2016), p. 82.

¹⁰ D. Watkins, *The Beast Side: Living and Dying While Black in America* (New York, NY: Skyhorse, 2015), 79.

That we consider the life of the mind to extend beyond the walls of any campus does not diminish our interest in life on campus; in fact, it only raises the stakes of ongoing conversations about the role and function of higher education. For many of us, early experiences in humanities courses as undergraduates set the pattern for what it means to think critically, self-reflectively, creatively, or aspirationally about the choices we face both alone and with our friends, colleagues, and community members.¹¹

Although college does not have the *exclusive* responsibility to educate citizens in empathy, critical thinking, and intentionality in thought and action, college explicitly *must* bear this responsibility.

For me, the Fall 2021 semester brought an unexpected return to the classroom. To honor this new beginning, I did something I've never done before—I explicitly asked my students to think about, to write down, and to turn in their own answer to the question posed at the beginning of this essay: *What is college for?* The answers were thoughtful, interesting, and all over the place. They reminded me that each class I teach is not a homogenous “student-being” who arrives each day with the same unified purpose; rather, every single class meeting brings a group of individuals into the room, each with specific, and often unique, reasons and purposes for being there. What's more, sometimes even within the same individual those reasons and purposes evolve, changing from one day to the next. Yet what was strikingly *absent* from their answers was any mention of the empathy, critical thinking, or intentionality in thought and action which I believe to be so fundamental to the purpose of college. Does this mean that these things which I seem to value so highly are actually not that important, and that what actually matters are the myriad goals and values that my students identified? Hopefully not. Which isn't to say that what my students identified is unimportant, because each value and goal that they listed is of tremendous importance; if college fails to provide each of these things for its students, then it has indeed failed its cultural/societal purpose. What it *does* mean, however, is that in pursuing their own individual and unique goals,

¹¹ John Baskin, “On College,” in *The Point* (No. 25, 2021). Retrieved from <https://thepointmag.com/examined-life/on-college/>.

most student are not looking for a wholly different, but equally important, set of skills and values that college is, perhaps especially and uniquely, qualified to impart.

I like to occasionally reread my students' thoughts on the meaning and purpose of college, not just as a way to remember to always question my own motives and purposes to be sure that I'm doing the best I can to meet all of their individual needs, but also to remind me to work even harder to provide the things that they're *not* explicitly seeking. Here's hoping that I, that *college*, can do both, effectively and meaningfully.