

## **A Liberal Arts Education for “The Great Turning”**

*A talk given at Antioch University for the series “Visions of Education for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century”*

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I am always a bit nervous when speaking in situations like these where I know there is an audience of very smart people out there whose ideological persuasions run in different directions than mine. I notice in myself the urge to read up on all their stuff – Dewey’s Experience and Education, von Glasersfeld’s Radical Constructivism, Huba and Freed’s Learner Centered Assessment on College Campus, to name a few. I wish I knew more about the history of educational theory, about the latest research into adult learning, about learning outcomes and all the rest. In this imagination of inadequacy, I keep thinking that if I knew these patterns of academic discourse, my ideas would be taken more seriously and would therefore have greater effect at this significant moment in the BA program’s history. But in this rush to supplement my knowledge, I realize that I am treating knowledge as a commodity that I have banked in my pocket, not as something I am, something that I already know as a result of my experience as a human being and that I have refined through my reflection upon this experience. Not only that, but the issues we face in trying to re-design this program are so complex, so difficult to grasp, that it is hard to know where to make the first cut. I need to pause and get a grip!

So here is how I would like to proceed. I want to tell you several stories. One is a brief overview of my intellectual journey as a liberal artist in order to introduce you to the community of discourse in which I reside. Then I would like to expand this story to include a brief history of the liberal arts in the Western world so that I can link my personal journey to the historical lineage of liberal artists, to the ancestors of our craft. Then I will conclude by telling a story about this particular BA program in liberal arts as a way to discern the presuppositions of our praxis here at Antioch’s liberal studies program. My job today, as I see it, is to seed discussion. I hope that telling these stories will serve as a stimulus to deeper reflections.

So let me begin by presenting a brief version of my intellectual odyssey. I am, after all, a self-avowed liberal artist with a rare Ph.D. in liberal studies. Surely something can be gained from hearing the story of one who claims to be living the life of a liberal artist. A longer version of this story can be found in the BA faculty lines of inquiry and the really big picture can be found in my book, Nagasaki Spirits, Hiroshima Voices: Making Sense of the Nuclear Age.

I have an undergraduate degree in biology from Whitman College during which I completed a senior thesis on “The Ethics of Ecology: East and West”. After

a time of personal turmoil during the height of the Vietnam war (1972-3), I entered the Institute of Liberal Arts at Emory University in Atlanta. They seemed intrigued by my willingness to move from the sciences to the humanities. The ILA was grounded in a hermeneutical literary critical approach to liberal studies. The goal was to master two or more methods of inquiry from a smorgasbord that included phenomenology, Marxism, structuralism, psychoanalysis, and genetic epistemology, to name a few. I embarked on what amounted to a six year reading program in which I constantly re-designed what I was studying in order to follow the scent of curiosity into what I thought really mattered. I ended up taking doctoral examinations in phenomenological philosophy and developmental psychology. I wrote a dissertation entitled “The Contributions of Jean Piaget and Erik Erikson to a Philosophical Anthropology: A Phenomenological Approach” in which I deconstructed the scientific worldview into which I had been initiated and replaced it with a more humane and compassionate worldview grounded in existential phenomenology. I thought that I had found the Holy Grail of liberal studies, the very subject of its inquiry, namely, the human image. What we think human beings are, limits and conditions what they can become. The images of the human that had sustained our culture up to that time seemed woefully inadequate to the tasks facing us. I wanted to know more about how human beings work, since their choice-making power was destroying the planet. By the time I finished, I had been transformed from a scientist to a humanist, and felt better for the change. During my studies, I sought out the opportunity to work with young children to supplement my theoretical reading. This led to a ten-year study of children in which my goal was to inquire into the developmental dynamics of every age group from pre-schoolers to high school. This project included a three-year stint at an international school in Hiroshima, Japan. While living in Hiroshima I began to turn my attention to matters of depth psychology as a way to account for the intense personal experiences I was having while living in a city in which over 100,000 people were killed in a single act of violence perpetrated by my own government. Only after my return did I find out that, by virtue of being born in Richland, Washington in 1950, I was a down-winder myself and that my thyroid gland was of interest to the federal government as they researched the long term effects of massive radiation leaks from the Hanford Nuclear reservation. This inquiry led to a didactic Jungian analysis that has lasted over twenty years. I have been a registered counselor since 1986 and work with individuals and groups doing Jungian and Archetypal dreamwork. Since 1990, I have been doing initiation work and vision quests as both participant and leader, developing my skills as a ceremonial leader. For the past 18 years I have been teaching liberal studies in this program. When asked what I teach in the program, my short answer is to say “the history of ideas and depth psychology,” a definition based on academic disciplines and

therefore, in some circles, more “acceptable”. When pressed further, I say that I am teaching adult students how to meet and transform the historical moment in which they find themselves, and that at the heart of what I do is my belief that *the clarification and enactment of personal vocation is the single most important act that one can undertake on behalf of the planet*. A sample of some classes I teach includes Alchemy and Science: Toward the Re-imagination of Nature, Ritual Process and Ceremonial Design, Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Childhood and Adolescence, Dreams and the Earth, The Myth of the Holy Grail, The Spiritual Psychology of the Human Heart, and The Art of Learning, to name a few. Teaching in this program has been one of the great privileges of my life because working here places me on the front lines of the transformation of our culture.

Having given this brief overview, I would like to foreground a few points. First, notice what I have left out. I have not talked of my failures, of those moments in therapy in which my dearest formulations were exposed as infantile grandiosity, of witnessing how my own children can learn just the right psychological buttons to push, of learning how not to blush in front of a class, of enduring student’s projections that have nothing to do with who I am, of being in the presence of human suffering that was beyond my ability to contain. And yet, because these failures have made such huge contributions to my skills as an educator and counselor, they are worth mentioning.

Second, understanding human development and transformation is the heart of liberal education. I chose to study Jean Piaget because he could explain to me how a helpless biological organism such as a new-born child can construct a reality that allows them to navigate the world throughout a lifetime. Not only that, but I learned how every adult was once a child and carries that childhood within them, a fact which can explain a great deal of adult infantile behavior. As students in the ILA we were also much influenced by Levi Strauss, the great French structural anthropologist, and his book, The Savage Mind. He gave us intellectuals a way to be rebellious anti-intellectuals as well. In this book, Levi Strauss said that all humans had been thinking equally well for 50,000 years, and that myth and science were equally valid approaches to the quest to create order out of chaos. Levi Strauss articulated our ideal, which was to live our lives as “bricoleurs”, the French word for ‘handy man’, someone who could make do with what is at hand. In the story we told ourselves, the engineer could design a bridge, order the parts and put it together according to the blueprints, whereas the *bricoleur* would come along and build a bridge out of the left over boxes. Intelligence, then, was the ability to adapt to circumstances improvisationally, and the education of intelligence was the goal of the liberal arts.

Third, this emphasis on seeking one’s own direction in education, what we in this program call “self-directed learning,” led me to move outside of the academy.

When I was learning about Jungian psychology in my graduate classes, I was not learning how to do Jungian psychology. So I sought out a priest that was giving sermons on Jungian approaches to the gospels and asked if he would work with my dreams. When I told him I had no money, he let me work in his yard in exchange for analysis. When I had read all I could stand of Piaget's theory of child development, I knew I had to work with some real, live children. I volunteered at an experimental pre-school, fell in love with the kids, and continued to teach as many different aged children as I could for another ten years. From this I have learned that the liberal artist's training takes place in the dynamic interface between theory and practice.

And finally, my life as a self-identified liberal artist is conditioned by an attitude of tragic optimism. Ever since my studies of population growth in the late 1960's, I have felt that the earth is "going to hell in a handbasket." After studying the problem for over thirty years, I am aware that the pace of this destruction is at such a rate that my own privileged, middle-class, white children will be severely affected by it. Epochal upheavals are coming our way and we need to prepare ourselves for them by resisting a "bunker" mentality, eschewing fundamentalisms of all kinds and working to transform this tragic trajectory into a path of sustainability. I am not sanguine about the prospects, but I do believe it is possible. All of the resources of a liberal arts education should, in my opinion, be bent towards this task.

So allow me to shift stories here. Having introduced you to the domain of my own worldview in order to articulate some of the values of a liberal arts education, allow me to tell the story of the history of the liberal arts as I have come to know them. Where did the image of the liberal arts begin? In what ancestral lineage do we liberal artists belong? Telling this story will locate us in a particular community of discourse about the liberal arts. A different telling of this story might land us somewhere else.

Consider the liberal arts as a symbol. They are multi-vocal. They say different things to different people and they mean different things in different historical epochs. What should they mean today? The liberal arts are also a uniquely Western notion, so when introducing images of the liberal arts, I like to draw pictures of how different epochs of Western history considered them. Let me apologize in advance for the sweeping generalities I am about to make. As with any story, there are many subplots that can only be mentioned in passing or completely omitted.

Let's begin at the beginning of Western thought, with the Greeks. The idea of the liberal arts is embedded in Western culture's emphasis on the individual that occurred in the shift from an oral culture to a literate culture around the sixth century BCE. This shift is a fascinating story told by many, including Werner Jaeger, Richard Tarnas and Erik Havelock. The capacity for reflection opens the vistas of an inner

world, therefore the Greeks wanted to know how one could educate character in such a way that a harmonious whole could be attained between the inner world of appetites and ideas and the outer world of matter. The quest was for *arete* or “excellence”, understood as a musical harmonium of self and cosmos. The tool was reason, the means by which we control the appetites and shape them into our character. In a very short period of time, two archetypal forms of reason were discovered, two different ways to proceed with the harmonizing of the inner and outer worlds. These two archetypal modes are represented by their first advocates, Plato and Aristotle. As Whitehead has remarked, the history of philosophy is a series of footnotes to Plato and Aristotle.

The liberal arts were formally named as such by the Romans, who transformed the idealism of Greek thought into the practical virtues of maintaining an empire and cultivating a sophisticated citizenry. By the time of the collapse of the Roman empire in the 5<sup>th</sup> century CE, the curriculum of the imperial Roman school had been codified into the seven liberal arts. They consisted of the trivium (grammatica, dialectica, rhetorica), which was designed to teach the skills needed to persuade newly conquered populations, and the quadrivium (musica, arithmetica, geometrica and astronomica), which was designed as instruction for sophisticated urban life. The knowledge of the seven liberal arts was written down by Martianus Capella in nine volumes and survived the destruction of the Roman empire.

The next great revival of the liberal arts took place at the school of Chartres Cathedral in the 12<sup>th</sup> century. Chartres is a very powerful place, having been built on the site of a sacred well dedicated by the Druids to the Great Goddess. At Chartres, the liberal arts were seen as a path of initiation into inner discipline and self-awakening in order to harmonize the self with the divine plan of the cosmos. The recurrent themes of their teaching included a veneration of the feminine (the sacred relic of the cathedral was the veil of the Virgin Mary), a return to the senses as a way to venerate the earth, and the healing of soul, planet, and the social body. I particularly like the way in which they envisioned the teachers of the liberal arts. There was the living master of the discipline who lived at the school, the ancient master of the discipline who lived in the texts, and the spiritual being of the discipline (imagined as a divine feminine presence) who lived in the student’s dreams and intuitions and who visited them with inspirations.

Another transformation of the liberal arts occurred with the triumph of the Newtonian worldview and its new “masculine philosophy” of nature, in which Dame Nature is “vexed” in order to reveal her secrets and humans are seen as machines which are the sum total of their parts. This worldview is dominated by dissection, analysis, and a clockwork universe in which God is distant and humans are left alone with their reason and their new-found appetite to accumulate wealth. The prospects

for this worldview were appealing to the best male minds of the age. Practitioners believed that through the exercise of reason and the scientific method, it would be possible to reveal the natural and social laws that govern nature and the human soul. Once discovered, these laws could be engineered to create a utopian world of abundance and happiness. It was believed that knowledge was fixed and absolute and that through “value free” inquiry, scientists could acquire that knowledge and use it for beneficent ends. With the rise of nation state universities, knowledge was commodified, carved up into its separate disciplines and placed in specific departments. This so-called “positivist agenda” saw knowledge as a pyramid, beginning at the foundation with physics, then chemistry, then biology and on up to the social sciences. Liberal Arts became the task of being educated into these various disciplines. Objectivity was the ideal, while feelings and spiritual yearning were seen as either immature or irrelevant. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, most of the educated elite thought they were very close to achieving absolute knowledge. New knowledge was harder to come by. All that was needed was to refine their measurements, a “science of the fourth decimal place”.

Then came a series of blows to the modern ego initiated by Marx, Darwin, Freud, Einstein, and manifested in the carnage of World War I, an event that signaled the end of the Enlightenment ideal of a utopian society based on reason and science. It has taken nearly a hundred years for this “modern” worldview to be replaced by the “Post-modern” world of today. During this time, we have endured massive epidemics of violence in which over a hundred million people died. This is not surprising since there is much at stake in the transformation of worldviews. Some of the characteristics of post-modernism include:

1. a movement to considerations of relations rather than substance (e.g., general systems theory and quantum physics)
2. an awareness that subjectivity is the cornerstone for all forms of objectivity (i.e., all objectivity is "constructed")
3. a relativization of viewpoints through an awareness that some perspectives have been more privileged than others.
4. an emphasis on differences in order to differentiate and empower formerly oppressed viewpoints along with a desire to enlarge the cultural conversation.

You may be able to name others.

In the light of this brief history of the liberal arts, allow me to make a few more points here. First, it can be said that one problem of higher education is that it has been slow to make the transition from a modern to a postmodern world. Entrenched interests make it very difficult to surrender the notion of departments, and the dearth of initiated elders as teachers

make it difficult to speak in anything other than “value free” terms. Page Smith, the founding provost of the University of California at Santa Cruz captures this crisis of higher education in the title of his 1990 book, Killing the Spirit: Higher Education in America. I would say that one of the great strengths of our program is that we are thoroughly post-modern. We do not have departments, we champion the voices of formerly oppressed viewpoints, we cultivate disciplined subjectivity as a valid mode of understanding, we encourage the awareness of each student as an agent in the healing of self, others and the planet. Our core faculty are initiated elders who have the experience and wisdom to move back and forth from the personal to the academic.

Second, there is a recurring motif in the history of the liberal arts that values the idea of harmonizing the inner and the outer worlds. The emphasis is on a dual movement of *waking up to one's destiny and harmonizing that destiny to the divine plan*. This ancestral imagination of the liberal arts requires a spiritual worldview in order to operate. For many contemporary learners, re-awakening to a sacred cosmos is an essential aspect of their education. There are many ways to facilitate this awakening that are fully compatible with the emerging creation story that is coming out of the new sciences. The awareness of a sacred cosmos is not an idea imposed by a teacher, but a natural consequence of asking certain questions in an atmosphere of free inquiry. The BA program, through the maturity and experience of its faculty, fully embraces the spiritual dimensions of a liberal education. Furthermore, this emphasis on harmonizing the inner and outer resolves the tension between an education that is purely theoretical or merely technical, between a liberal arts for the leisure class and professional training. Clearly, harmonizing the job that pays your food and rent with your larger work in the world with an imagination of the world's need is a task that makes preparation for a paying job every bit as significant as an abstract analysis of the economic order or a study of meditation techniques. It invests all forms of work with dignity, transforming mere jobs into “right livelihood”. In a sacred cosmos, everything belongs.

Third, it is useful to note that post-modernism is not the end of the story. Its very name is an indication that we don't really know where we are, only that we are no longer “modern”. The current imagination of post-modernism is woefully inadequate in several ways. For one, it is built upon a language grounded in social constructivism. While this language is very useful for articulating disparities in power and privilege, it is severely limited in its ability to talk about matters of Soul. For example, it does not do a good job of differentiating such categories of human experience as beauty, goodness, forgiveness, empathy or destiny. It tends to be cynical of experiences of the sacred and dismissive of attempts to see commonalities in human experience. And yet the ability even to experience Soul is being eclipsed in the onslaught of contemporary culture, with its manufactured images that manipulate desire, cultural noise that makes it uncomfortable to live in relation to silence (the womb of Soul), and the sheer horizontal speed of things which diminishes the

possibility of moving vertically into the depth of our own soul, much less the *anima mundi*, the soul of the world. When fear shuts down the soul, rage follows. One need only observe the contemporary American political landscape to witness this process at work. I advocate a liberal arts education that returns us to the roots of our lineage, an education that is in service to Soul.

And finally, the post-modern imagination overlooks something that cannot be found in an historical review of the liberal arts. The reason this element is missing from the story is because, while entire civilizations have come and gone, the human species as a whole has never before been threatened with extinction. The current threats to human survival are unprecedented. I appreciate the depth psychologist James Hillman's formulation of this problem when he accepted the Medal of the Presidency of the Italian Republic in 2001:

*"A great consensus of beings, regardless of their deliberative capacities and linguistic abilities, sense in varying styles and degrees that this planet, their home and the home of their ancestors from the beginning, is now so threatened that its viability, and therefore theirs, may not endure into another century.*

*What role has the discipline of psychology in the widest sense played in the progress of this hastening deterioration and what part might it play in slowing this progress, or better, altering its course? I think this is the only important question for psychology today."*

I would ask the same of a liberal arts education: what role has it played in the progress of this hastening deterioration and what role might it play in its alteration? In my opinion, this is the only truly important question for liberal arts education today. It is the elephant in the room who, out of fear, is left unacknowledged.

The most concise formulation of the precarious historical moment in which we live is given by the Buddhist scholar and social activist Joanna Macy, who says that we live in the time of the "Great Turning" between an industrial growth model of the past and the sustainable culture of the future. All of my teaching, and, I believe, all of Antioch's education, should be harnessed to this task. I used to call my pedagogy "education for apocalypse", not in the literal sense of the end of the world, but in the sense of the end of one age, the death of its gods, and the rebirth of a new age. But the word "apocalypse" turns out to be too hot to handle, too psychoactive. Not only that, but as Bill Moyers points out in a recent speech, so many Americans are devoted to a literal apocalypse that it is impossible to enlarge their imagination of it. That is why I am now calling my pedagogy, "Education for the Great Turning." I am proud to align myself with the ideas of Joanna Macy, who I consider to be one of the great prophetic voices of our generation.

You might be asking who would come to a school that is organized around a Liberal Arts for the Great Turning. Fortunately, a great deal of our market research has already been done by Paul Ray and Sherry Anderson in their book [The Cultural Creatives](#). They tell us that there are 50 million Americans (26% of the adult population) who share the values of this program. Cultural creatives are people who love nature and are deeply concerned about

its destruction, who care intensely about psychological and spiritual development, who are concerned about violence and the abuse of women and children around the world, who want to be involved in creating a new and better way of life in our country. The Puget Sound region has some of the largest concentration of these “cultural creatives” in the world. If more potential students knew that this is what we were teaching, if we could find a way to articulate what we are doing in a language that they could understand, I believe our enrollment numbers would be in great shape.

Time now for a third story. This one I tell in order to open our imaginations beyond my personal vision to include the work of this program as it has been developed over the past 20 years or so, during which time this core group of faculty have been together. In the Fall of 2002, the BA faculty noticed that we were at a certain stage in the maturation process of the BA program (namely, that we were all getting older!) such that we wanted to consolidate our collective wisdom. So we set about to write a book about our teaching philosophy and methods. A tentative title emerged, Adult Education for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: A Vision for the Future. We had several retreats, spoke with a consultant, worked on a tentative list of wishes and proposals. Our thesis was a response to the question we have used as our mission statement, “What kind of education do adult students need in order to best respond to the historical situation in which they find themselves?”

We agreed that this book had three premises:

1. We practice transformative education in a liberal studies program for adults. This style of education has a specific history and purpose in the context of progressive education
2. We came to this way of thinking via a lineage of ideas and a specific social history that is worth knowing.
3. We continue to practice this kind of education and want to tell stories about how we do it and what makes it work.

We talked about our audience, who would buy it, what the market was. We pooled our knowledge of adult education theory to find at least three books that we all agreed to read because they were in the same domain of discourse as our practice. By reading these books we could begin to harmonize our communal discourse about the liberal arts. We chose three books and a journal:

1. Larry Dalo, Mentor: Guiding the Journey of Adult Learners 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (San Francisco: Jossey Bass), 1999.
2. Jack Mezirow, ed., Learning as Transformation: Critical Perspectives on a Theory in Progress (San Francisco: Jossey Bass) 2000.

3. Edmund V. O'Sullivan, Amish Morrell, Mary Ann O'Conner, eds. Expanding the Boundaries of Transformative Learning: Essays on Theory and Praxis, (New York: Paul Graves), 2002.
4. The Journal of Transformative Education

We then tried to surface a model of transformative adult education that lay beneath our rhetoric and actions. By July of 2003 we had developed a formulation which claimed that our version of progressive, transformative education had four elements:

1. Clarity (how do students come to a clear picture of the situation in which they find themselves)
2. Wholeness (how do students achieve harmony between the inner and outer worlds?)
3. Service (how do students bring all of who they are to meet the world's need?)
4. Love (how do students transform in the presence of unconditional positive regard?)

A list of possible titles for chapters included the following:

A Social History of Antioch University/Seattle  
Transformative Learning and Progressive Education  
Education for Apocalypse: A Depth Psychological Approach  
Whole Person Learning  
Love and Transformative Learning  
Transforming with the Earth in Mind  
Education for Social Action  
Transformation through the Literary Arts  
Spiritual Autobiographies  
Designing Learning Contracts  
The Art of Learning

Unfortunately, by the Fall of 2003 we had to turn our attention to various other initiatives, including the program review, and never returned to this project.

In reflecting on this now dormant project, I would like to drop a few more images into the discussion that will follow these remarks. First, Edith Kusnic and Mary Lou Finley gave a paper many years ago that used a model to describe the different kinds of students that we encounter in this program. I have found this model useful, and would like to present it now. (see addendum).

Second, Edith and Mary Lou also developed a model of learning out of a book that has been very influential in our program, Belenky, et. al., Women's Ways of Knowing. This book is popular with us because it seems to capture the essence of our commitment to educationally disadvantaged students as well as to those students whose learning styles have not found favor with traditional education. Personally, I find this model useful for bringing the philosophical language of "harmonizing inner and outer worlds" into the more concrete and popular educational language of subjective and objective knowing. (see addendum)

Third, our choice of books reveals a commitment to a kind of personalized education that seems to take place best in mentoring relationships. Further reflection on the nature of mentoring is needed, as is a more refined and practical theory of transformational learning as it takes place in this program.

Let me conclude this talk with an image that comes out of the work of Joanna Macy. Her Buddhist teacher told her the story of the Shambhala prophecy when she was living in India. There will come a time, the monk said, when great barbarian powers will be at each other's throats, vying for dominance and using weapons of unfathomable power. At this time, when all of sentient life hangs by a thin thread, the kingdom of Shambhala will appear. Individuals are called to this place from the four corners of the earth where they undergo training in two weapons, compassion and insight. Compassion gives the juice, the power to move. It recognizes the pain of the world in its ten thousand forms. Compassion is balanced by insight into the radical interdependence of all phenomena, insight that requires considerable study and reflection on the historical moment in which we live. When their training is complete, the warriors leave the kingdom dressed in ordinary clothes. Great courage is asked of these warriors, because their mission is to go into the corridors of power where the decisions are being made to unravel the fabric of life on this planet. Their job is to un-make those destructive decisions. Made by the human mind, they can be un-made by the human mind. How else can the tragic trajectory of these times be changed, and a sustainable world achieved?

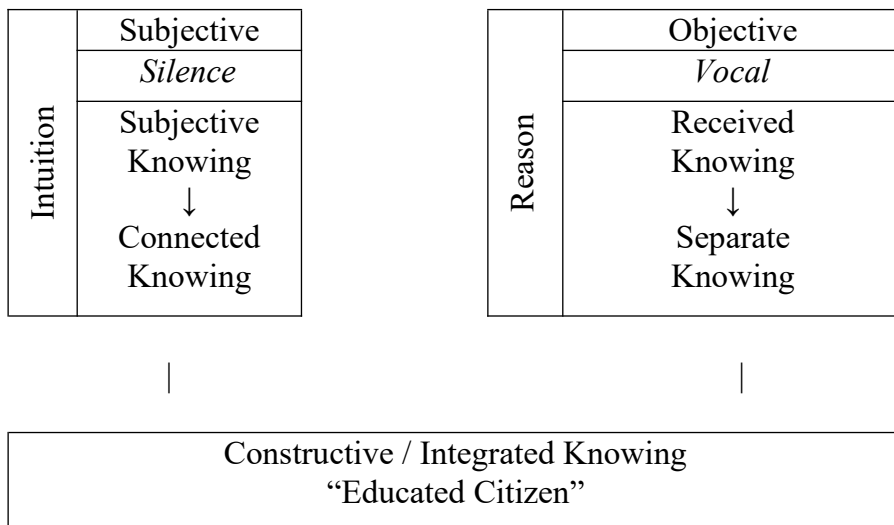
The kingdom of Shambhala exists in every human heart, though it is not always visible there. I like to think that the BA program at Antioch University/Seattle, is a place where the kingdom of Shambhala can be awakened. Consider the possibility that this program is a training ground for Shambhala warriors and that what we do here is a liberal arts education for the Great Turning. I cannot imagine more important work to be doing than this.

## Addendum #1

### Kinds of Students in the BA Program

		Academic “Success”	
		-	+
Self-directedness	-	“Recoverers”	“Operations Manual”
	+	Bootstrap	Independent Scholars

From Belenky, et. al., Women's Ways of Knowing



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