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**A Magical Life in the Liberal Arts, Memories  
of an Academic Private Eye**

*Professor Roderic Ai Camp*

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You are about to continue a challenging intellectual journey that will determine decisively the paths you can choose the rest of your life. I hope to offer you the modest observations of someone who chose academia as a career, founded on scholarly exploration, knowledge, argument, and communication. Rather than approach this theme from a purely theoretical angle, I will paint a brief autobiographical portrait to suggest why the breadth of a liberal arts education provides a superior, permanent foundation for your own career ambitions, whatever they turn out to be.

My place of origin contributed to my personal direction. Growing up in southern California was a determinative influence on my interest in things "Latin" from the history of the Spanish and Mexican cultures, to my first-hand experiences growing up in close physical proximity to El Camino Real, the King's Highway, which led from Mexico City through San Francisco.

I am a product of an undeclared liberal arts philosophy in which classical and popular music could be heard in my home, art books from the public library covered our coffee table, the Saturday matinee was a weekly event, and family trips abounded to museums, parks, deserts, and mountains, bringing California's cultural geography and history alive. My family's liberal arts education also involved values, not just about what should be learned or how it should be learned, but about what governs the application of your intellectual growth. Paramount were:

Expanding your mind; Serving others; Understanding other cultures.

How did these early personal experiences, books and values affect my own choices and my attitude toward learning? Unquestionably, these molded me into what I am today. For example, in the 6th grade, my Mother took my brother and me out of school to attend the trial of a Mexican - American teenager accused of a drive-by shooting. The key question in this case was whether the victim's death was accidental or premeditated. The ultimate decision depended on an interpretation of some Spanish words the defendant uttered before firing his rifle out of the car window. Understanding another language and the cultural context in which Spanish was spoken proved the crux of the trial.

A formative book in my teenage years was T. E. Lawrence's classic autobiography of his experiences in Arabia, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*. I read dozens of books about Lawrence, a role model of prodigious talents in literature, culture, anthropology, military science, and engineering, who received a classic liberal arts education from Oxford University.

Fascinated by foreign cultures, I made a fateful decision to leave my regular college program at the end of my freshman year and travel to Mexico City by bus to study and live with a Mexican family. I decided to pursue Lawrence's intense intellectual philosophy, and making my self at home at the university's library, I established a goal of reading four books a week outside of my regular coursework, which was wide-ranging across disciplines, including art, music, history, literature, economics, and language. It was the highpoint of my liberal arts learning.

In addition to my coursework, I became interested in photography. No course was available, but well versed in my liberal arts approach to learning I perused works on the history of photography, collections of photographic works, and technical manuals on darkroom technique. I avidly pursued it as an avocation, eventually publishing a number of photographs, and teaching creative photography.

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My experiences illustrate the value of learning informally and formally. One way to conceptualize the essence of learning is the discovery of truths. Discovering truths is like being a detective, who solves a series of opaque problems, each contributing to the ultimate solution of a complex puzzle. Each added piece fills a void, a missing piece of a unique intellectual question.

Many definitions of the liberal arts exist, but at a minimum they all involve breadth of knowledge and transcendental values. Yet knowledge is certainly limited if it cannot be conveyed to others; that is why process is essential. You must perfect two processes-- how to learn, which involves the desire for and the technique of exploring fresh ideas; and how to express what you've learned, orally, numerically, visually, physically and in writing. Writing is the traditional approach, but human beings can communicate in the most original and effective ways.

My son, who served as the best man at his college roommate's wedding, instead of expressing his feelings about the bride and groom in typical oral tradition, offered a visual rendition, explaining that they conjured up a specific image—and he then proceeded to dance. I don't remember a word he said, but like several hundred people in that audience, I will never forget his insightful, unorthodox interpretation.

My own career is a bountiful illustration of a liberal arts education's generous benefits. Twentieth century Mexican politics became a special interest in my intellectual exploration. I have learned repeatedly the value of a broad education, to know, to understand and to express many ideas, as I steered my academic journey down one path or another.

Other than suggesting that there is something innately attractive about a broadly educated person, does breadth matter in the everyday life of a professional Latin Americanist? One expectation of an educator's career at an elite liberal arts college is to add knowledge to one's discipline, both for its intellectual value and for improving the caliber of classroom material.

Being a scholar is akin to being a detective. Curiosity snares the political scientist to pursue explanations about what occurs in politics. The interdisciplinary training and writing and communication skills I received as an undergraduate proved essential to my successful exploration of Mexican leadership. Let me illustrate the essential importance of communication skills and breadth of knowledge from personal experience.

To understand Mexico's political behavior, I had to seek out influential actors, and to develop the technique of interviewing prominent political figures. I had no contacts in Mexico when I began; consequently, I chose a number of key actors, and wrote them personal letters in Spanish. My letter-writing campaign produced an extraordinary wealth of information. Many people offered to grant me an interview if I came to Mexico. Their invitation literally led to a lifetime of conversation, during which I have conducted more than 1,000 interviews and made dozens of long-lasting friendships, with renowned artists, generals, presidents, Supreme Court justices, business leaders, ambassadors, archbishops, and literary figures.

Speaking Spanish fluently enough to conduct those interviews was crucial to their success and it established a greater sense of intimacy with the interviewees. I will never forget my initial conversation with President Miguel de la Madrid in Los Pinos, the presidential residence. He abruptly dismissed his

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official translator after recognizing I would conduct the interview in Spanish, leaving the two of us alone for the next 45 minutes. He has remained a valuable source and friend for twenty years.

A breadth of knowledge proved to be equally invaluable in my conversations with prominent figures. Mexicans would assume knowledge on my part and allude to specific historical events. People, events, places, all are critical building blocks in an interviewee's conversation. Sixty-four references to such non-Mexican subjects ranging from Alexander Hamilton to John Maynard Keynes and the Napoleonic Code to the Peloponnesian Wars came up in my initial twenty interviews.

After accepting my first position, I was drafted during the highpoint of the Vietnam War, and I ended up in the Marine Reserves. I was a lowly sergeant in the Des Moines, Iowa unit when I wrote a letter to the editor in the Marine Corps Gazette on reserve training. The commanding general of the Marine Corps Reserve read it, and offered me an opportunity to serve at Naval Headquarters in Washington, D. C.

Their staff asked me to write a position paper on the strategic importance of the Panama Canal to the USMC. The colonel reacted positively to the 20 page report and asked me to summarize my conclusions into 3 brief paragraphs. In forty years of writing, I never spent so much time on 250 words. The endless drafts and revisions I had labored over in freshman composition helped hone those paragraphs, which ultimately became the Marine Corps' policy statement to the Joint Chiefs of Staff. My position coincided with the other services' opinions, which together determined the security basis of a new Panama Canal agreement. The following year, I crafted a position paper on the International Law of the Sea, relying heavily on the international law courses I completed as an undergraduate.

A number of years ago, Earthwatch Foundation, noted for its scientific explorations, decided to organize its first humanities expedition to Cuzco, Peru. They offered a single fellowship to an individual who knew something about Latin America, who could speak Spanish, who could demonstrate extensive interview experience, and who had an understanding of photographic technique and history. They hoped to restore and preserve the life work of a famous photographer.

You can guess the result-- I received the scholarship and spent a memorable three weeks meeting a special Peruvian family. Ten years earlier, I had no idea I would ever bring these four skills together, or make that experience possible through a serendipitous confluence of my liberal arts background. The expedition produced a Museum of Modern Art traveling show of this photographer's work; a series of illustrated popular and scholarly articles; the establishment of a museum in Peru, and best of all, some life-long, matchless friendships.

A grasp of history, another basic liberal arts discipline, has rescued me time and time again. A few years ago, a close friend of mine introduced me to a Mexican cabinet member, a leading contender for his party's presidential nomination. This politician, Alfredo del Mazo, invited me to visit his mother's home in a small town called Atlacomulco. Atlacomulco, to politicians from that part of Mexico, is known as a community which produced successive generations of important politicians.

I knew this little known fact because I had read a biography of an international jurist who grew up there. When Mr. del Mazo mentioned the town's name, I rattled off their names and political history--- you can imagine his reaction to a North American knowing the history of this obscure, tiny community. This fortuitous tidbit of historical information so impressed Mr. del Mazo that for the next three years I was

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given an insider's view into Mexican politics, traveling with him on working trips throughout Mexico, observing first-hand the inner-workings of national politics. Those observations enriched my classes and research and later contributed to imaginative scenarios, taken from real-life experiences, in a political thriller I authored.

In the course of my career, I've also applied my liberal arts philosophy to Mexico, reading a broad range of books, including history, art, architecture, music, medicine, religion, culture, fiction, biography, science, economics and photography. This reading provided me with sufficient confidence to seek out an interview on Mexican intellectual life with Nobel Prize winner Octavio Paz, who resisted granting me an initial audience. Over the phone, he bluntly asked me, "What is an intellectual?" Apparently, he found my definition, based on this wide-ranging reading, satisfactory. We discussed American and European writers and poets who deeply influenced his work, the Spanish Civil War, and the impact of literature on politics generally. During that interview, he revealed his role, for the first time publicly, in the 1968 student movement.

As a culmination of my scholarly career, and the many contacts I made in Mexico, I was asked to address 225 of the incoming members of the present Mexican congress, about what it means to be a legislator in a democratic federal system. Much of my talk relied on my undergraduate liberal arts knowledge of American politics and political behavior, and how it might apply to Mexico's democratic transformation. Of course, they ignored my advice, and the reformists were forced out within six months of my talk.

You may think today that you know exactly the career you will pursue, and therefore, the specific courses you should complete. But studies repeatedly demonstrate that most of you will have a job description entirely different from your expectations. Indeed, 68 percent of Americans express the desire to change their profession. I thought I would become a career foreign service officer, but the closest I came was teaching future career diplomats at the FSI. Improving your thinking, speaking, writing and language skills, and seeking out a vast array of knowledge within and outside your own culture, will prepare you for the vagaries of any professional career in a global world. You have the opportunity now to acquire the tools to accomplish goals you never expected or thought possible. I urge you to relish the breadth of possibilities as you seek your own liberal arts trail along life's intriguing but unpredictable path.