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Keynote Address – Courageous Disciplines: Lifting the Language of a Field

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Abstract: Each discipline, including dance, has its own language and purpose; we must resist pressure to describe or evaluate a discipline *primarily* in terms of another. We must “lift the language” of our field—both in the sense of raising it up for others to see, and in the sense of enhancing and enriching it through our work. Translations between fields are inevitable and necessary but require the existence of something to translate. Interdisciplinary studies have tremendous value if the disciplines are intact. The point is not to cling to rigid definitions of fields, but rather to uphold what makes a field uniquely dynamic and beautiful.

In the fall of 1988, I took a course in the history of Russian ballet; at the end of the semester, we made a trip to New York City to see the Joffrey Ballet perform Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring*. The original production, performed by Sergei Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes company and choreographed by Vaslav Nijinsky, had caused an uproar at its premiere in Paris in May 1913; the audience shouted, jeered, and brandished their canes.¹ After years of research, the Joffrey Ballet reconstructed the original choreography, costumes, and set; performed the work in 1987; and then took it on tour. This time, there were no riots; I remember nothing about the audience, because I was absorbed in the syncopations, dissonances, and primal movement. Yet those words are approximations; I was taken in by something that doesn’t translate easily. I believe I wrote a paper about the performance—but knew that the former was a far cry from the latter.

These “far cries”—attempts to translate a work of dance, music, or art into language other than its own—play an essential role in education and culture. Any artistic field involves some translation into words; one must find a way to describe the technique, meanings, forms, gestures, history, and more. The words can serve to illuminate the artistic work, if they contain humility and intimate knowledge of the subject matter. If the translator comes to the task with the necessary qualifications, and acknowledges that the translation is only an approximation of the original, then the distortions and omissions can be put in perspective. The original work remains at the center. But if the translator lacks sufficient knowledge or pushes an agenda, then the work becomes compromised. This happens, for instance, when a critic evaluates a work of art primarily for its utility or social message, or when a school district ranks teachers according to their students’ test score growth. What these two examples have in common is the subordination of a work or practice to external goals. It is a kind of translation that loses the original. A translator with great wealth or power—and without deep knowledge of the field—can set the terms of the discussion.

In education, those engaged in translation often lose sight of the original—or even insist on the supremacy of their own values and knowledge. Much education policy involves subordinating the intellectual or artistic endeavor to an external purpose, such as accountability, funding, or other considerations. Of course, an institution must learn the languages of funding and accountability in order to survive—but must also beware of privileging external goals over its own. Institutions’ annual reports—and those of the schools within them—make frequent reference to enrollment,

tuition, graduation rates, employment statistics, and other data that are tangential (at best) to the substance of the department's work. This is largely a response to external pressure; for example, the U.S. Department of Education seeks to develop a new college ratings system—based on access, affordability, and outcomes—that would be published on its existing “College Scorecard” and tied to federal student aid. According to a White House fact sheet, President Obama seeks to legislate this federal aid allocation system through the Higher Education Act, which is coming up for reauthorization. If the plan were to become law, institutions that showed more “value” would receive more aid; those that fell short of these uniform benchmarks could face great hardship as their federal aid diminished.ⁱⁱ

Whether or not this plan ever materializes, the initiative does damage by affecting the public's conception of educational value and encouraging similar initiatives. For example, the California nonprofit Educate to Career, along with the data company Job Search Intelligence, has created a college rating system based on students' so-called economic growth in college. That is, it considers students' socioeconomic background, their SAT and ACT scores, their tuition and other costs, and their salary when they enter the job market.ⁱⁱⁱ As this kind of ranking system—and the mentality behind it—becomes the norm, institutions will have to go through more contortions to defend their purposes and existence. Because such initiatives carry considerable clout, they change the tenor of the conversation. It becomes increasingly difficult to speak of education except in terms of a dollar figure. Even without realizing it, educators bend their words to match the terms of the discussion.

Such distortions of language affect discussion of arts education (from kindergarten on up). One often hears arguments that the arts and humanities serve practical purposes; for instance, that those who study music show higher performance in math, that dancing improves mental acuity, or that reading literature increases empathy. Such discoveries are by no means new; even Plato wrote of how musical instruction enhances judgment and taste, as “rhythm and harmony find their way into the inward places of the soul.”^{iv} There is no reason to scoff at these claims; the problem lies in the emphasis. If we grow accustomed to justifying a field of study in terms of its effects on another area of life, we degrade its inherent value. For Plato, physical, musical, and intellectual education all combined to form the education of the soul—so, while each facet of education assisted the others, they served an *internal* end. Today, we hear about how the arts serve *external* ends—in particular, how they affect test scores, the unfortunate lingua franca of education.^v Such arguments, while intended to defend the arts, may in fact distract from their purposes and essence. To resist this, and to maintain their integrity, institutions must honor the language of their fields.

Before exploring what it means to honor the language of a field, I will touch on a few more ways in which the language can be distorted. I speak from my experience as a teacher in New York City public schools—but I recognize that many of these observations apply to higher education as well. For the past few decades, schools have been preoccupied with the problem of “literacy”—teaching students to read and write. The deficits in literacy are so great—and the extent of the problem so vast—that reformers have sought drastic increases in instructional time for reading and writing. Acknowledging that literacy requires knowledge, educators have advocated for extensive reading and writing across the subjects, including mathematics, music, and even physical education. If implemented well, this emphasis could result in strong curricula from the early elementary grades onward.

Unfortunately, the idea has already been corrupted in its implementation. For example, the Common Core State Standards, which call for more “informational text” in the curriculum,

nonetheless state that English class should be devoted primarily to the study of literature and literary nonfiction. Yet districts implementing the Common Core have received word—from various sources—that they need to include more nonfiction, including technical nonfiction, in English class. Curriculum designers have taken care to demonstrate a focus on informational text of various kinds—or, at the very least, to include both fiction and nonfiction in all instructional units. Faced with conflicting messages, policymakers and curriculum developers opt for the course of action that they believe will keep them out of trouble. (I have witnessed principals and other administrators standing up for the school’s curriculum and purposes—an uneasy task. They must fight continually to make themselves heard, not to mention understood.)

Now, if the aforementioned texts were distributed appropriately across the curriculum—that is, if historical texts were read in history class, scientific texts in science class, and so forth—each subject could retain its integrity, assuming the texts were chosen for their quality and importance, not for their short-term relevance to the job market. Even so, an unrelenting emphasis on literacy can distort a subject. There are times when a subject should be understood in nonverbal ways (or ways that are minimally verbal). Take music as an example. When students listen to music, or learn musical notation, they learn the language of music itself rather than a language that describes it. (Granted, musical notation is a kind of description, but it comes far closer to music than a verbal description could.) In the presentation “Assessment on Our Own Terms,” delivered at the 2007 Annual Meeting of the National Association of Schools of Music, the speakers pointed out the difficulty of translating “musical logic” into “speech logic.”^{vi} Something similar can be said about musical language. If one holds the knowledge and has participated in the practice, one can look at a musical score and hear the music in one’s mind; no verbal description of the music could convey the essence nearly as well. Likewise, when one listens to music, one grasps something that translates only approximately into words. One can call a piece “melancholic,” but that does not say much about it; it takes substantial knowledge—of music on its own terms—to describe what one hears, and even then, the description will be an approximation. Thus, if the primary emphasis in music class is on reading and writing—about composers, instruments, musical styles, and so on—the very language of music will be shortchanged.

Similarly, mathematics loses something when confined to words. Today in math education, there is great emphasis on word problems and on explaining every step of a process, proof, or solution. There is justification for this; one comes to understand mathematical concepts better when explaining them verbally. All the same, the words can be overdone. Mathematical language—by which I mean not only the notation, but the manner of using it—has a particular elegance and conciseness. The verbal explanations can delay the ultimate intuition; when one grasps the mathematics itself, in its own language, one sees the abstraction and the application at once. Moreover, there are many students—and scholars—to whom mathematical language makes particular sense. If the instructional emphasis is constantly on the words, then such students and scholars will be placed at a disadvantage; the mathematics itself will become stultified, as there will be no room for it to develop on its own terms.

In this manner, the emphasis on “literacy” across the subjects can distract from the subjects themselves, unless it is handled wisely. Another distracting force is the pressure on teachers across the disciplines to adopt a new (or supposedly new) pedagogical model, whether or not it makes sense for their subject. For instance, teachers across the subjects and levels have faced mandates to adopt a “workshop model,” where the students work in groups and the teacher functions mainly as a facilitator. Clearly the appropriateness of a workshop depends on the subject and topic (as well as

the teacher's own style and the exigencies of the class). Certain courses, such as science labs and advanced literature seminars, are inherently suited to a workshop of some kind. But when teachers across the board must follow directives to turn away from lecturing—even dialogical lecturing—they give up opportunities to take students into unfamiliar topics and concepts. Students can teach themselves and each other a great deal, but it is the teacher or professor who can introduce them to works, concepts, and language that they would not have otherwise accessed. The teacher's role in opening doors to understanding—and even wisdom—has been discounted and disparaged in the name of “results” or “engagement.” Also, direct instruction cultivates attention and patience; a student learning from a teacher comes to trust that some understanding and insight awaits, even if it does not come immediately. Even in a language course, where student interaction is essential, the teacher's own knowledge of the language, and willingness to take students into the subtleties, can make the difference between a decent course and an outstanding one.

Another distractor is our modern (and crude) version of materialism: the insistence that intangibles don't exist—or are too vague to consider seriously. In education discussion today, there is much distrust (and even scorn) of the mysterious aspects of a subject—those understandings that we cannot spell out in concrete terms but that nonetheless form part of our learning. This mysterious aspect may be something that intrigues a student but lies beyond his or her grasp. It may be the very quality of students' attention to a subject: for instance, the hush in an art lecture course when the professor is displaying a painting and pointing out some of the details. It may be the works themselves—their effect on our minds and lives. Or it could be a professor's way of speaking: a crispness of reasoning, or a delight in digression, or a combination of the two. All of these qualities—of student, professor, process, and material—have to do with dwelling in the subject itself. Much of it will translate into test performance and other outcomes, but much of it will not; in many cases, the results reveal themselves over time. I have found myself thinking back on the way a professor recited a poem twenty years ago, or the way an insight came to me as a teacher presented a proof. In both cases there was slow revelation and beauty. Yet if one brings up beauty in education discussions, one often meets with a shrug of the shoulders or a rolling of the eyes. Because it does not translate into generic measures, because it cannot be replicated easily, it is deemed irrelevant. Some argue that teachers who focus on the beauty of their subject are shortchanging the students who need desperately to raise their achievement. Yet why bother achieving anything, if not for the sake of beauty of some kind? The student of music or dance practices day after day not for the sake of “achievement” per se, but for the sake of something magnificent within the discipline.

What does it mean, then, to honor the language of a field? I will try to explain this through a work of philosophy—Martin Buber's *I and Thou*—and a work of poetry—James Merrill's “Lost in Translation.” Before doing so, I must emphasize that no field has a single language or goal—that, in fact, today's emphasis on “outcomes” is largely due to disagreement over what else to emphasize. In his new book *Beyond the University: Why Liberal Education Matters* (Yale University Press, 2014), Michael S. Roth discusses three concurrent but not always compatible views of liberal education: first, that it cultivates the intellect and capacity for inquiry; second, that it allows for participation in a common culture; and third, that it serves economic and other practical purposes. While warning of the consequences of the utilitarian outlook, Roth acknowledges that even without it, we have no consensus about what education is for. One can apply his observation to any field—but from field to field these strands of thought play out in different ways and express themselves through different idioms. Thus, while no field has a uniform language, each one has a cluster of languages particular to it. I will illustrate this through two texts.

In his treatise *I and Thou* (*Ich und Du*, 1923), the Jewish philosopher and theologian Martin Buber posits that the first-person singular pronoun “I” is actually twofold, dividing into “I-You” and “I-It.” The I-You realm is the realm of relation; the I-It realm, of appropriation. Most of the time, we exist in the I-It realm; we measure and appropriate the things around us, be they experiences, people, or things. But when one enters into relation with the “You,” one loses all measure, all experience. The true I-You relation is rare and fleeting, according to Buber—but having glimpsed it, one can find it again, because one knows it exists. One can have an I-You relation not only with another person, but with a work of art, a tree, a star.

In one striking passage, Buber describes contemplating a tree: first as a picture, then as movement, then as a species, then as an expression of physical laws, and then as a number. But it can also happen, he writes, “if I have both will and grace, that in considering the tree I become bound up in relation to it. The tree is now no longer *It*. I have been seized by the power of exclusiveness.” He continues, “To effect this it is not necessary for me to give up any of the ways in which I consider the tree. There is nothing from which I would have to turn my eyes away in order to see, and no knowledge that I would have to forget. Rather is everything, picture and movement, species and type, law and number, indivisibly united in this event.”^{vii} Thus the relation with the tree does not conflict with the intellect; rather, the intellect attains its highest consciousness here. The tree no longer has borders; it has become infinite. Of course one cannot take in the whole of a tree indefinitely; eventually the mind will return to its former routines and limitations, and the tree to its own. Nonetheless, after coming into relation with the tree, one sees how different this is from the *I-It* realm.

What does this mean in terms of education? In any field of study, we learn to examine, classify, analyze, and judge things. In doing so, we necessarily exclude a part of the whole. For example, when learning to play a musical composition, one might focus on intonation, on rhythm and tempo, on tone and texture, or on subtleties of phrasing. When practicing, one might be listening for any of these things. But once in a while, all of this comes together in a performance; one is no longer thinking about the intonation or anything else, but instead encountering the piece. This does not mean that the technique has disappeared, or that any aspect of the piece no longer matters. Rather, the technique is present, but it has been transcended. One cannot produce this transcendence predictably—but one can predictably learn the various parts, such as playing in tune and in time. One can be evaluated on the various parts, but not on that elusive wholeness. Yet that wholeness is unmistakable; a musician lives for it and recognizes it. An audience senses it. It is the deepest, most enticing goal of musical study; no resources, no pedagogical methods can guarantee it, but many things can inspire it. One goes to music school (or dance school, or art school) not only to develop one’s technique and sensibility, but to be in the midst of the art, to the point where it could, at any moment, reveal its infinity.

Here is another passage from *I and Thou*—about the difference between the I-It realm and the I-You realm. According to Buber, we could not survive without the I-It; it supplies us with matter and sustenance. But we cannot meet others in it. By contrast, the I-You realm is a place of meeting, but without substance or reliability.^{viii}

Measure and comparison have disappeared; it lies with yourself how much of the immeasurable becomes reality for you. ... It cannot be surveyed, and if you wish to make it capable of survey you lose it. It comes, and comes to bring *you* out; if it does not reach you, meet you, then it vanishes; but it comes back in another form. It is not outside you, it stirs in

the depth of you; if you say “Soul of my soul” you have not said too much. But guard against wishing to remove it into your soul—for then you annihilate it. It is your present; only while you have it do you have the present. You can make it into an object for yourself, to experience and to use; you must continually do this—and as you do it you have no more present. Between you and it there is mutual giving; you say *Thou* to it and give yourself to it, it says *Thou* to you and gives itself to you. You cannot make yourself understood with others concerning it, you are alone with it. But it teaches you to meet others, and to hold your ground when you meet them. Through the graciousness of its comings and the solemn sadness of its goings it leads you away to the Thou in which the parallel lines of relations meet. It does not help to sustain you in life, it only helps you to glimpse eternity.

One could think of this passage in terms of a concert: for a short time, an audience member is with the music and with nothing else; the music exceeds all description and becomes the present. But as soon as the listener tries to possess it—to remember the moment, to describe it in the mind—the music ceases to be everything and drops away from the present. The chatter during intermission—or the fingers typing on the keyboard—signal the swift return from the I-You realm to the familiar and circumscribed It. But the “glimpse of eternity,” or the memory of it, informs one’s movements and thoughts; the student who has encountered the music will write a different paper from the student who has not, even if the paper, in both cases, belongs to the world of It. A teacher cannot take a student to the You—but can bear witness to the possibility, whether overtly or subtly.

But as tempting as it is to compare Martin Buber’s *I-You* realm to the inherent language of a field of study, the analogy remains imperfect and incomplete. If one were to dedicate one’s life to finding the You, one would fail, because it cannot be sought out or kept. It appears in infinitesimal instants—but artistic practice fills out time and space. Something beyond the transcendent relation defines the language of each discipline (though the transcendent relation is essential to each); something more constitutes what we call dance, music, art, poetry, mathematics, or history. Once again, a field has not a single language, but a cluster or skein of languages. Even within the “language” of choreography, there are many idioms; not only that, but choreography intertwines with narrative, history, geometry, music, and art. Although one must beware of subordinating the language of a field to an external language, the internal and external are continually influencing each other, translating each other, mixing with each other, creating new languages as they go. The true language of a field consists of continual translation, in which some kind of “original” is conveyed and renewed. Here I turn to James Merrill’s “Lost in Translation,” a narrative poem published in 1974.^{ix} Consisting mostly of iambic pentameter, with a section in Rubaiyat quatrain stanzas, it plays with puzzles of various kinds.

The poem begins with an unattributed epigraph in German—more about that later—and proceeds to tell a layered story of history, jigsaw puzzles, and Merrill’s own childhood. It tells of the maid, Mademoiselle, who speaks both German and French to the child but otherwise hides her German origins, as World War II is about to break, and she is afraid to break her own peace, which she keeps “a shameful secret to the end.” Her nighttime words to him, “Schlaf wohl, chéri” (in German and French) present a puzzle with a missing piece; there are many more missing pieces throughout the poem. The boy and the maid work on a jigsaw puzzle together; it has a witch on a broomstick, an ostrich, an hourglass—then, later, the missing feet of a boy, whose own history has been lost. Mademoiselle thinks he is the son of the woman he is helping down from a camel, but she is mistaken; the boy is a page or slave. At last his feet are found under the table, and the puzzle is complete. Yet once assembled, it collapses like the world itself: “Irresistibly a populace / Unstitched

of its attachments, rattled down.” Looking back on these events years later, the speaker says that before the puzzle was boxed up and sent to the puzzle-shop, “Something tells me that one piece contrived / To stay in the boy’s pocket”; he knows this because “so many later puzzles / Had missing pieces”—in particular, he can’t track down Rilke’s translation of Valéry’s “Palme,” although he remembers it, knows its relation to the original, the German against the French—and asks, “Lost is it, buried? One more missing piece?” (In fact, it is the epigraph at the beginning of the poem, which now reveals itself as a puzzle.) The poem concludes with an eight-line rhymed stanza:

But nothing’s lost. Or else: all is translation
And every bit of us is lost in it
(Or found—I wander through the ruin of S
Now and then, wondering at the peacefulness)
And in that loss a self-effacing tree,
Color of context, imperceptibly
Rustling with its angel, turns the waste
To shade and fiber, milk and memory.

It would be crude to translate this poem too glibly into another context—but its puzzles within puzzles, its lost and found translations, pertain in some way to the question of the language of a field. To reconstruct Nijinsky’s choreography of *The Rite of Spring* is to assemble a puzzle; to recall the Joffrey Ballet’s performance is to assemble yet another, related one—with side memories of lunch at a New York diner where a shrill waitress told us in thick local accent to hurry up and make up our minds. How shrill and rude the choreography of *The Rite of Spring* must have seemed to the first audience; how beautiful it seemed now, but not only because time had passed. The very reconstruction, however faithful to the original, must have changed it through the attention and dedication to the work, and the sense of history and time elapsed.

But if a field contains a multiplicity of languages, it also has integrity; there is something that makes it unlike any other field. It is the thing that stands alone after everything else has had its say. History and music can comment on dance and intertwine with dance—but dance is neither history nor music. A historian and a dancer can both study the history of dance, but then they part ways. The musician and dancer may rehearse together, but only under rare circumstances will the dancer enter the pit or the musician ascend the stage. (Of course there are exceptions; when watching Carlos Saura’s film *Blood Wedding*, one recognizes it as dance, emphatically dance—but also as poetry, drama, music, narrative, and, of course, film. Interdisciplinary study is rich and complex; one must take care not to embrace it carelessly, but instead to examine closely how one field relates to another. For interdisciplinary work to exist, there must be disciplines.

These considerations seem remote from typical education discussion—a shame, considering how they would lift the conversation and the practice. When listening to (or trying to take part in) discussions of education policy, I am often puzzled by the lack of attention to the subject matter itself. It is as though the subject matter were irrelevant, as long as students made visible progress in it. There are exceptions—books that closely examine classroom activity, including the subject matter taught—but even there, the subject matter tends to serve a discussion of pedagogy, social justice, and other concerns. It is rarely considered on its own terms. As a teacher of philosophy, I must often make extra efforts to convey the intellectual substance of my lessons—to explain why, for instance, I have my students read Plato and John Stuart Mill (among many others). These particulars do matter—because in all the clamor about strengthening literacy instruction and focusing more on

“complex texts,” we may be ignoring the very meaning of these texts and this literacy. To speak the language (or languages) of a field is to bring out its meanings.

What can be done to strengthen the languages of the disciplines? To preserve a language, one must know it, first of all; to know it, one must be immersed in it. Thus the first step is to pursue one’s work boldly, even when it does not translate easily into terms that others approve and understand. A scholar of Chaucer knows the value of studying Chaucer—but also knows that this will be a blank to those who have never read Chaucer. So it is with each field; one must persist with the supposed obscurities, with the things that do not win immediate recognition or cause enrollment to spike. Of course enrollment matters; to perpetuate a discipline, one must have students. Thus, to maintain its integrity, an institution needs a mix of practicality and freedom from practical constraints.

One should also invite others to immerse themselves, even for a short time, in one’s work. One can offer workshops, seminars, and courses to the general public and to colleagues in other departments, who may welcome the opportunity to explore the subject at no risk. Sometimes this immersion can transform a person’s outlook. In the summers, the Dallas Institute of Humanities and Culture offers a three-week intensive literature course to teachers of all grades and subjects in the Dallas area and beyond. (I am on the summer institute’s faculty.) In the even-numbered years, they study epic; in the odd-numbered years, tragedy and comedy. The point is not to inform literature instruction per se but to enhance all instruction and the very teaching profession. When given room to devote themselves to works such as the *Iliad* and *Moby-Dick*, teachers encounter the things that education should really be about—the pursuit of understanding, the grappling with poetry. Sometimes this comes as a shock, since it differs so markedly from what they usually encounter in “professional development” sessions. The teaching profession—and even the teaching day—is typically filled with jargon; teachers hear far more about “differentiated instruction” and “graphic organizers” than they hear about Dante. But which has the greater capacity to enrich education: a professional development workshop on how to differentiate instruction with graphic organizers, or a lecture and seminar on Dante? The graphic organizers may be easier to grasp, and more generically applicable—but are we to settle for what is easier and more generic? Wouldn’t teachers benefit from subject matter that inspired and challenged them, rather than a series of pedagogical tools and techniques? These oppositions may seem silly at first glance, since clearly a teacher needs both subject matter and technique. But in the vast majority of teacher training sessions, especially in English, subject matter has been pushed to the side or treated superficially. By making room for the subject matter, and by inviting others to spend time in it, we can sustain intellectual, artistic, and spiritual life in schools. By spiritual I mean that which recognizes something transcendent. This is not just an extra; it allows us to perceive something beyond ourselves; this in turn allows us not only to imagine and invent new things, but to find common ground with others and to distinguish between the important and unimportant, the lasting and ephemeral, in our studies and lives.

It is also important to establish a clear and limited relation to accountability demands. When setting goals for a school, department, or course, one must not confine oneself to the typical language of accountability, even though such language comes into play. One must insist on articulating other goals, even those that are difficult to articulate. It is easy to slip into compromise—to try to meet outside evaluators on their terms, even when those terms are alien to one’s discipline. Such compromises may make things easier in the short term, but they ultimately require too great a sacrifice. To uphold the language of a field is to maintain the field’s integrity and assert its ongoing importance. In addition, the language of a field confronts those who do not understand it; such confrontation is essential. The fresher and more vivid the language, the more startling the

confrontation; instead of speaking in terms of “case-based learning,” “collaborative environments,” “student engagement,” and other buzzwords, one can describe vividly what goes on in a student’s day or what a particular aspect of the curriculum has done for the students and for the overall life of the school. For example, when describing my work as a philosophy teacher, I avoid phrases like “critical thinking,” which mean everything and nothing. Instead, I might describe how my students responded to a lesson on John Stuart Mill’s intellectual crisis, or describe the evolution of the philosophy journal they put together and published. These details awaken others’ interest in a course, program, or institution.

The objection I often encounter (when I put forth suggestions like these) is that I am speaking naively—that we no longer live in a rosy realm of liberal learning, but must instead fortify ourselves against economic collapse. Today’s students, people say, do not have the same luxury of choice and time that students had thirty years ago. They cannot afford to study something simply because they love it; they must prepare themselves for demanding careers that require specific competencies and skills. Even the academic profession as we know it may soon be a thing of the past, as professorships are replaced by adjunct positions and more and more schools turn toward online learning. In addition, as economies become globalized, job-seekers must compete with qualified people from China, India, and other countries, who will do more work for lower wages. We are facing unprecedented and momentous change, some say, and if we do not respond swiftly and urgently, we will be trampled. Instead of defending “the language of a field,” we should all become fluent in the language of the job market, even if it isn’t pretty. Unemployment is a lot uglier than, say, data analysis skills.

There is some truth to this objection—but just some. It is not the whole truth. Indeed, the job market is changing rapidly, but it is easy, when perceiving some change afoot, to mistake it for all-encompassing, unidirectional change. Many jobs are becoming obsolete, but others remain remarkably stable, or aspects of them do. While it is difficult to find employment in the arts, the arts will not go away, and a resourceful person can still find many opportunities. While colleges and universities are indeed changing, they are not throwing away all of their former studies and positions. An increase in online courses may help those who cannot afford college tuition—but online courses will not replace the ones held in person, on campus; or, if they do, it will not be for long. Good pedagogical and curricular judgment is more durable than any trend; such judgment comes from a keen sense of the subject matter and how to bring it to the students. Fads that pretend to supersede judgment will only last so long; education may be changing rapidly, but eventually much of it will turn back to the familiar, not because people are fearful of change, as is often alleged, but because education has durable truths.

Some may object that it’s all very well to think in terms of the “language of the field” if one’s students are already performing well. But the vast majority of students entering college today lack fundamentals in reading or mathematics; there can be no “language of the field” for these students until they learn the basics. The problem with such an argument is twofold. First, part of the reason that students lack “the basics” is that the schools have confined themselves to these basics; their solution has become a problem. The time devoted to test preparation and generic “strategies” takes from the time available for valuable work. Second, this claim contains the insinuation that liberal education (or arts education) is inherently elitist—that those who pursue it belong to a privileged class and are thus out of touch with the needs of the many. This, too, becomes a self-fulfilling claim.

I have seen many schools focus on “reading strategies” in order to help the struggling student. These strategies tend to hover around the text; students learn to look at the cover, the blurbs, the pictures, and so forth, and make preliminary connections with their own lives. But such hovering is in vain; to read well, one must plunge in. One must learn to bear with what one does not understand right away. If it is difficult, let it be difficult; it will get easier over time. In Canto IV of Dante’s *Purgatorio*, Virgil advises Dante on how to think of the ardors of the climb:^x

And he to me: “This mountain’s of such sort
that climbing it is hardest at the start;
but as we rise, the slope grows less unkind.
Therefore, when this slope seems to you so gentle
that climbing farther up will be as restful
as traveling downstream by boat, you will
be where this pathway ends, and there you can
expect to put your weariness to rest.
I say no more, and this I know as truth.”

What this passage brings out is not only the difficulty of learning, but also the ease and delight of the pursuit and outcome. After a certain point, the cause of strain becomes a source of rest; upstream becomes downstream.

In my first few years of public school teaching, when I taught English as a second language, I found that my students thrived when presented with actual literature. I had them read *Antigone*; they quickly grasped the essential conflict and had lively discussions about Creon, Haimon, and Antigone herself. I asked them to memorize Shakespeare sonnets; some were so proud of their accomplishment that they would recite them at every possible opportunity. Currently, as a philosophy teacher at the high school level, I assign Plato, Aristotle, Machiavelli, and others, and we discuss these texts and their ideas in depth. I do not claim to be a great teacher; I have probably been better for some students than for others. My point here is that my students made progress when given something substantial and interesting to learn. What has been most surprising to me is the interest students have taken in philosophy over time. Some students who did not initially seem interested in the subject eventually became some of the most thoughtful writers and contributors to class discussion. This suggests to me that a subject works on each of us profoundly; for every effect that we see, there are many more that go unseen for long stretches of time, but that reveal themselves powerfully later. It would be a shame to deprive students of such transformation.

Indeed, it is a privilege to study literature, history, music, art, dance, and, for that matter, mathematics—but it is a privilege that any willing person can seize, given the necessary knowledge and tools. The great liberty of intellectual life consists in our ability to make room and time for it, even in a busy work day, even with multiple demands on our time. Part of the point of education is to open up a way of life—one that depends not on social status or income, but on quality of thought. There are security guards and truck drivers who enjoy the stretches of time for thinking; the security guard may read philosophy while sitting at the desk, and the truck driver may listen to books on tape. In any walk of life, one can choose to do and think about interesting things—if one is aware of such choices. There is joy in being an audience member; there are people who devote themselves to attending concerts, dance performances, and plays. A field is not only for those who excel at it, but also for those who come to it with genuine appreciation. A liberal education or an arts education is never wasted; it opens up possibilities within any life.

In short, there is every reason to stay courageous, to lift up one's field, to let its languages be heard, to welcome others into it, and to translate it as well as one can without flattening it. Sometimes education discussion, with its clamor and many crises, can leave one feeling outshouted, but there is no need to shout. The importance of your own work—in schools and departments of dance—needs no proof. Dance is one of the oldest disciplines in human history, and it will never become obsolete; its conventions may change, its traditions may undergo ruptures, but those who study it, and those who witness it, will be moved, inspired, or even outraged by it, and will not want it to end. Yes, one has to work hard to defend the discipline—but focus is itself a great defense. When everyone seems to be rushing headlong into the jargon-pit, there is splendor in saying “this is what we do” and carrying on.

ⁱ Ivan Hewett, “The Rite of Spring of 1913: Why Did It Provoke a Riot?” *The Telegraph*, May 16, 2013, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/music/classicalmusic/10061574/The-Rite-of-Spring-1913-Why-did-it-provoke-a-riot.html>.

ⁱⁱ The White House, “Fact Sheet on the President’s Plan to Make College More Affordable: A Better Bargain for the Middle Class,” August 22, 2013, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/08/22/fact-sheet-president-s-plan-make-college-more-affordable-better-bargain->; The White House, “College Ratings and Paying for Performance,” <http://www.ed.gov/college-affordability/college-ratings-and-paying-performance>; The White House, “College Scorecard,” <http://www.whitehouse.gov/issues/education/higher-education/college-score-card>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Caralee Adams, “New College Ranking Designed to Show Economic Value Added with a Degree,” *Education Week*, July 21, 2014.

^{iv} Plato, *Republic*, iii, trans. Benjamin Jowett, <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/republic.4.iii.html>.

^v See, for instance, Pat Flynn, “School Arts = Higher Scores,” *U-T San Diego*, February 10, 2012, <http://www.utsandiego.com/news/2012/Feb/10/student-scores-improve-with-unique-arts-program/>.

^{vi} Mark Wait and Samuel Hope, “Assessment on Our Own Terms,” policy brief, NASM Annual Meeting (November 2007), http://nasm.arts-accredit.org/site/docs/ANNUAL%20MEETING%20PAPERS/NASM_Assessment%20On%20Our%20Own%20Terms-Plain%20Text.pdf.

^{vii} Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (New York, Scribner Classics, 1986), 22–23.

^{viii} Buber, 42–43.

^{ix} James Merrill, “Lost in Translation,” *Selected Poems, 1946–1985* (New York: Knopf, 1997), 278–284.

^x Dante Alighieri, *Purgatorio* 4:88-95, trans. Allen Mandelbaum (New York, Knopf, 1995), 232.