

What Big Hopes I Have *(all the better to wander with)*

It all began for me, I think, with Little Red Riding Hood. It is appropriate that my story, my journey, began with a story about another's journey, about strange travails and lurking dangers, about youth and idealism superseding the advice of experience. Little Red Riding Hood's impetuosity nearly doomed her grandmother along with herself; though my own errors have not had such grave consequences there is a universal kinship between our stories. Joseph Campbell, in *Hero With a Thousand Faces* wrote about what he called the monomyth, the idea that all myths share a common formula, telling the same story. Whatever differences the details may have the hero's journey is a common story to every person. I took the first step of my journey upon learning to read. My first book? Little Red Riding Hood.

Gaining literacy, however faltering, set me on a path toward liberal arts from a young age. Truthfully, books were my companionship moreso than any individuals apart from my family. Books imparted lessons to me, described worthy endeavors along with the disappointments engendered by low-minded exploits, and imbued me with a love for language that has persisted ever since. Learning, for me, has been tied up to language for as long as I can remember. Whenever a new subject was introduced to me my first response was to read what I could find on the subject. New terms, and new styles of diction, were my initial lessons, invariably. I would study any new topic with intensity, but not with persistence. The panoply of available reading materials was always so vast that lingering too long with a particular genre seemed wasteful when there were unexplored realms waiting for me in other volumes. So books, imparting a zeal for knowledge, also guided me away from specialization.

Inevitably my indiscreet studies were supplemented by public school, and reading no longer claimed all of my time. Hands on activity entered my consciousness, and in science particularly I realized that everything I had been reading about had a real-life analogue. Every fact or figure represented something in the world around me. I remember asking my mom how she made cookies (adult actions existed apart from me, mysterious). She had me help her mix the batter, making my forearm sore from beating the obstinate mixture with my giant spoon, while she prepared the oven. Yet I still didn't understand *how* she'd accomplished the feat, and my own cookies came out partly raw, or worse, missing vital ingredients. Then I discovered her secret; my mom had a recipe book. With the help of the cookbook I made cookies, and then graduated to tortillas and banana bread. The instructions in the book made the difference. Books were instruction as well as entertainment, and whatever I learned from them could literally change my life.

Before you accuse me of belaboring the point, I'll say right now that my journey did not always center around books, though they were the main engine of my education. Farther on in school I became much more interested in the people around me. The books I had loved had authors, after all, so the wonderful things present between pages all derived in the end from other people. Now, up until early high school I interacted with my peers very little. Introversion was the name of my game. I'd, perhaps, been so much concerned with books that I'd paid no attention at all to society, but by this point I felt I needed to participate. My friends, all local teenagers who appreciated the abstract, did a thorough job impressing upon me the importance of social graces such as swearing, idling my way down sidewalks, and cutting class. For several months in my freshman year I met with two of my best friends after school hours, ostensibly to

rehearse our assigned reinterpretation of *Julius Caesar*. Instead, we ate pizza, played pool, and only got to the play on the day before we were expected to present it. We decided to make our version a comedy. The production went off with some success, enough to earn an A. This turned out to be a significant misstep for me on my journey in liberal arts, because it convinced me that proper time management was not always necessary for a good performance.

Little changed from high school to college, and armed with a lackadaisical outlook on life, my grade point average promptly plummeted. I liked to learn, but I wasn't necessarily interested in what my professors wanted to teach me, or if I was, my mastery of procrastination resulted in late assignments. Sometimes I didn't bother to do my assignments at all. It took academic probation before I discovered why I wanted to be in college in the first place, and why I had chosen liberal arts. I wanted the authority to study what interested me, no matter whether it was a scientific question or one of literary style. I wanted to earn respect for my opinions, based on a familiarity with a broad range of topics. Being ignorant chafed at me, and so, it turned out, did being lazy.

Liberal arts, in my mind, is the path of the self starter. It teaches its students to have a firm footing, grounding them in multiple fields so that they can navigate any obstacle. Liberal arts does not present a well laid trail, with posted warning signs about wolfs, or kindly woodcutters to rescue impetuous travelers. It is a discipline for people who prefer to stride directly into the forest, heedless of grandmother's advice, to find what nobody else is looking for. That is the sort of life which I want to lead. Only Liberal Arts gives me the wit to wander in competence.