Good evening, and welcome to the Aurora Forum at Stanford University. I’m Mark Gonnerman, the Forum’s director, and we’re very pleased you’ve joined us tonight for the fourth installment in our Education for Citizenship series with the McCoy Family Center for Ethics in Society. Tonight’s conversation, entitled “Responsible Freedom: Liberal Arts Education and the College Idea,” is with Martha Nussbaum, a professor of ethics and law at The University of Chicago, Andrew Delbanco, a professor of American Studies at Columbia University, and Debra Satz, a professor of philosophy and director of the Ethics Center at Stanford, who will serve as our moderator this evening.

My thanks to Noa Ronkin, associate director of the Ethics Center, for working with me to create this Education for Citizenship series. Noa is one of the growing number of people at Stanford who are providing leadership for conversation around such questions as: What is education for and what should it consist of? What should today’s students know in preparation for common citizenship in a pluralistic world? What is the role of humanistic reflection in that preparation?

I, too, love these questions and am concerned about the future of a true liberal arts education for I, myself, benefited greatly from this in ways that have informed the shape of the Aurora Forum since its inception. Here, we are interested in making connections between the various domains of knowledge so that we can recognize and work towards solutions to the pressing personal and social issues we all face. In relation to this, I am haunted by the words of the biologist David Orr at Oberlin in his book *Earth in Mind*. “We have,” he says, “fragmented the world into bits and pieces called disciplines and sub-disciplines, hermetically sealed from other such disciplines. As a result, after twelve or sixteen or twenty years of education, most students graduate without any broad, integrated sense of the unity of things. The consequences for their personhood, and for the planet, are large.”

It is hoped that tonight’s conversation will help us recognize what is at stake if we lose track of ways of thinking that keep us in touch with a broad, integrated sense of the unity of things. Our work these days, a friend of mine likes to say, is to put the universe back into the university.
Tonight we will follow our typical Aurora Forum program format of 45 to 50 minutes of on-stage conversation followed by another 45 minutes of audience-inspired discussion. If, when we get to that portion of the evening, you have a question or comment to contribute, please line up behind one of the two aisle microphones, and our moderator will recognize you.

I now turn the floor over to Debra Satz, and please join me in welcoming our guests to the Aurora Forum stage.

Debra Satz: Welcome. We’re privileged tonight to have two scholars of the humanities who address important and enduring questions of the human condition – questions about who we are, what matters, and why it matters. They write about these questions across many contexts, but the one that concerns us here tonight is education.

I thought I would kick off the discussion with a question – first an observation and then a question. The observation is that the liberal arts are in steep decline in American education. By that, I mean not only steep decline in elite universities like Stanford and Chicago and Columbia, where the decline isn’t that marked, but really throughout the whole education system where all students, even the most elite, are subject to a standards movement that means, in most cases, never-ending assessments involving multiple-choice tests. Even when students are lucky enough to have access to a liberal arts education, fewer and fewer are taking advantage of it. Throughout K-12 education and the range of higher education, the liberal arts are playing a fairly marginal role. So my first question to both of you is: Is this something we should be concerned about? What’s lost if the liberal arts play a marginal role in American education?

Delbanco: Thank you, Debra. What’s lost? Well, first of all, let me just express one note of skepticism about the numbers. I’m not sure we’re very good at measuring exactly where the liberal arts stand in our educational context. I’m not even sure we quite know what we mean by liberal arts. We probably mostly mean something we call the humanities, but of course, science ought to be, and properly is, also a part of a liberal education. So I’m not entirely convinced that we’re witnessing a steep decline, but there is certainly a feeling out there on the part of practitioners of humanistic subjects that we’re not getting the respect we deserve and that the students are skeptical of what it is that we have to offer, and that the society at large wants to know exactly what good we are – how to measure the product that we claim to produce. That’s, on the one hand, it seems to me, a legitimate question, which humanists ought to be willing to face, but also the terms of the question are problematic because if you pushed me on it, I would have to say that the only way you can really measure the effect of a humanistic education is by looking to see how the person leads his or her life. And I’m not sure how you would know the answer to such a question for a long time after the college years.

But before I go rambling on about what I think, it does seem to me, and I don’t know if Martha would agree, that there are roughly three answers that are usually given to the question you’ve asked: Why is it important, or, to put it more negatively, what’s lost if
we fail to remember the importance of a liberal arts education? One is an economic
defense, which Martha is very eloquently critical of, that is, that in the global twenty-first
century economy, if there is still such a thing, you need people who have a certain
versatility of mind and creativity and limberness who can get out there into the
marketplace and make good things happen. I’m skeptical of that argument. I don’t think
it’s a very dignified argument. I’m not sure it’s even true that our national welfare
depends on a liberally educated population because there are certainly some powerful
economies that have been operating without a liberally educated population.

The second answer that’s usually given is that if you believe in democracy, if you believe
that an educated citizenry is essential to democracy, as I do, then you would lose
democracy itself if you failed to educate your citizens broadly and humanely, and we can
talk more about what that might mean.

The third answer is one that people sometimes raise their eyebrows at or shrug a little bit,
but I think may be ultimately the most important one, and it was made eloquently to me
when I was talking about these subjects in another context once a few years ago and
giving lots of reasons why I believed in the Columbia core curriculum, the Great Books
curriculum. An elderly alumnus of the college stood up in the question-and-answer
period and said, “Well, professor, the things you’ve said are all very nice and fine, but
you’ve left out the most important reason we want liberal education.” So, with some		
trepidation, I said, “And what might that be?” And he said (and this is not a boosterish
speech on the part of my institution, or it’s not meant to be), “What Columbia finally
really taught me was how to enjoy life.” And it was quite a moment for me. What he
was saying was that his eyes were opened to works of arts, his ears were opened to works
of music, and his experience was enriched and deepened.

I’ll stop there, but those are some answers, I think, to your question.

**Nussbaum:** I want to agree with a lot of what Andrew has said. I think, first, it’s
important to realize that this assault on the humanities and the arts is taking place not just
in this country but all over the world. And, in a way, this country has retained more
commitment to that than many countries have because we do have a liberal arts model of
undergraduate education, whereas most countries in the world just have a single subject
model: when you go to the university, you’re just doing a single thing and you start being
streamed and tracked much earlier. I think we have thought that this is something
precious, and so we’d better think very hard before we weaken our commitment to that.

Now, I agree with Andrew 100 percent that all the three things that he mentioned are
worth talking about. And with him, I think that the second and third are the most
important. But I want to focus on the citizenship part (that is what I’ve focused on),
because I think that people who might think that the humanities and the arts have very
little to offer to their personal lives – I think they would be wrong, but still, it’s important
to say to them, “Look, you are a citizen of a democracy.” Well, why should that matter?
Why should reading these books of literature and philosophy make you a better citizen?
Well, three things, I think. First of all, what Socrates knew way back in Athens is that
democracies are often very bad at reasoning in public. People like to boast; they like to score points for their side; they think that political argument is a way of making boasts and just scoring points. They don’t listen to each other’s arguments, and they don’t make arguments that show the vulnerable spots in their own positions. So Socrates wanted to get them to examine themselves. And his view was that that was going to make democracy much more wide awake. He said he was like a gadfly on the back of a noble but sluggish horse. The sting of argument wakes you up. You have to say why you believe what you believe. And when you do that – and I’ve talked to students all over the country about what their critical thinking and philosophy courses give them – they often say, “When I used to have political arguments, I really just wanted to win, but now I know that there’s a position on the other side and that it has a structure, and that it’s possible for somebody to produce arguments, and then I might be able to see where I agree and where I actually don’t agree, so there becomes a much more respectful style of political interaction.” So that, I think, is the first and most essential contribution of the humanities all the way through, from K-12, where I think children can learn to do this really quite young, but then, in a much more sophisticated way, in college and university courses.

Second, we’re in a very complicated world where we need to know something about each other. We need to know how the world works. We need to have some grasp of history. If we’re going to talk across national boundaries and across regional boundaries and across racial boundaries, we have to have some kind of understanding of each other if we’re going to solve our common problems. I actually started writing about education for the first time after I had been at an international United Nations institute that was trying to work on a variety of development problems. And I realized that the people who were there, most of them knew something about Plato and Aristotle, but I had never heard anything about Confucianism and Buddhism. I really was ignorant about the rest of the world outside my narrow borders. So I think we need…. The Greeks, whom I love, said you have to learn to become a citizen of the world, not just of the little place where you grow up, and I think history, reading literature, and reading philosophy give you that kind of broader citizenship.

Finally, there’s imagination. If you come in contact with a person who is from a different background, a different part of the country, a different racial group, a different gender group, you have to have some versatility of mind to try to think: Where is that person coming from? What is it really like to be in that person’s shoes? People are, I think, born with that basic ability, but it needs to be trained. It doesn’t come into existence automatically, and people have to become more and more refined in the way they do that – trying to think hard about how differences of wealth, class, race, and so on make the inner world different and make a person’s emotions and wishes different. And there, I think, literature and the arts are absolutely irreplaceable. You can’t get that just by talking to people, because if you don’t know how to talk to them, how to think about them, then you’re just not going to get past the first word. But in working and grappling with a novel, you’re brought into the inner world of people of many different kinds, and those skills of mind become more sophisticated and more refined. So I think that’s an extremely important contribution of the humanities, and it’s one that we would spurn at
our peril because people who don’t have that, I think, just…. It’s all too easy to view somebody who is different from yourself as just an obstacle to what you want to do, so without that kind of understanding, I think we have a much greater potential for violence, for subordination, and so on.

**Delbanco:** Let me just follow up on that by suggesting that there are a lot of things about this country and its history that we should not be proud of, but there are some things that we should be, I think. If you go back to the discussion around the founding of the nation and you spend some time with Jefferson, everybody has heard that when Jefferson was asked what he wanted to be remembered for, he never mentioned the presidency of the United States, but he mentioned the authorship of the Declaration of Independence, of the religious freedom statutes in Virginia, and the founding of the University of Virginia, which he regarded as his most important accomplishment because he believed so deeply that an educated citizenry was essential for the republic. And, of course, education for him was a much more integrated conception than it is for us. But that’s going back a way.

The glory, I think, of this country was the democratization of liberal education in the twentieth century. That is, we had this essentially English idea of what an elite education might look like, and we made an effort to make it available, in theory, at least, to everyone. It began, really, in the nineteenth century with the creation of the land’s grand universities and accelerated in the twentieth century with the opening of access to colleges and universities to many groups who had never had the opportunity to go to such institutions before. And one of the things that worries me most about where we’ve been headed as a nation in the last 25 or 30 years, really, is my sense that we’ve been reversing this commitment to universal higher education. We had a long way to go to realize the dream of universal higher education, but before we even got halfway there, we began to turn away from that goal. And I hope very much that that’s something we’ll be revisiting with the new president and maybe a wake-up call in the form of an economic disaster. But maybe that’s something we’ll talk about more as the evening goes on.

**Nussbaum:** I think that democratization also means we have to think hard about what it is we want from that liberal education. Jefferson did not want to teach Greek and Latin (to this day, the University of Virginia does not have very much going on in that area) because he thought that that was a kind of badge of elitism for privileged gentlemen, and he wanted a genuinely democratic education. Now, when I grew up as a graduate student in classics in the Ivy League, I did have professors who thought that that’s what the classics were – that it was just a way of displaying your superiority and then you would have these long pontificating lectures about what the gentleman was like. So that’s certainly not what I’m defending and it’s not what Andrew is defending. These books are radical and provocative and they make you think, but you’ll never do that with them if they’re presented merely as a badge of privilege that you get because you went to the right school. So I think that, very rightly, we’ve been rethinking what the liberal education is, and we’ve been placing an emphasis on not just picking off the shelf these books and saying, “Well, if you imbibe these books, then you’re a gentleman.” No, we
have to think how we include a whole range of works that will actually make us all think better about each other.

**Satz:** Let me press you both on that. You’ve talked about the importance of education for citizenship and the idea of important skills that we can develop through the humanities and liberal arts and reading and thinking about things that are different from what one is familiar with. Are there any things that you think every educated college student should know that are from the humanities and, if so, what are those things? Are there books, are there subjects, that everybody should be taught to consider themselves educated?

**Delbanco:** Well, you know, I’m sometimes thought of, I guess, as sort of a traditionalist on these matters, and I don’t really have much right to be because I have only the most rudimentary Latin from my college days, so I’m not in a position, nor would I want, to defend a curriculum that looks like the curriculum that Jefferson was nervous about. And this might surprise some of my interlocutors or others here: I don’t actually spend a lot of time worrying about which books exactly the students should read. I think some books are much more likely to provoke useful discussion and to drive the imagination toward very fundamental questions than other books. But we can argue and debate about which they are, and there are quite a lot of books that would fit that description. What I do think, and we talked about this a little bit earlier today when we were talking about life at Stanford versus life at other institutions, is that it’s very valuable for college students, for at least a small portion of their time in college, to read the same books as one another so that they can talk to each other. That is, the idea of facilitating respectful, critical argument along the lines of what Martha was talking about before – learning how to make an argument, listen to somebody who disagrees, learn how to be persuasive and respectful but nevertheless strong in your point of view, keeping your mind open enough to leave open the possibility that your mind might be changed about something. These are the things that I think should go on in a humanities classroom or, more broadly, in the context of a liberal arts education. And it’s helpful if the students have something in common with one another, particularly as we’re all committed to bringing into our institutions students from many different backgrounds – socio-economic backgrounds (where we’ve been, I think, quite poor about ensuring diversity in that regard), racial and religious backgrounds, and, increasingly, international diversity. So it helps to avoid the sort of self-segregation and segmentation that students are inclined to. We’re all inclined to it. Everybody’s most comfortable with people like themselves, at least initially. It helps to throw them together and say, “OK, here’s this play written in the sixteenth century about an old man whose family is falling apart called *King Lear*. Let’s talk about it together for two hours.” It doesn’t have to be *King Lear*, but that usually generates a pretty good discussion.

**Nussbaum:** I’m suspicious of lists of books because of the thing I said before – because I think it’s too easy for that to turn into a badge of privilege and to suggest that other books are not equally useful if what you want are these habits of mind. So I would like to start from the habits of mind. And I agree with Andrew that there are many, many books you could use to teach some of these things. If you want to teach Socratic argument, I
actually have found through my own experience that the Dialogues of Plato are some of the best ways to teach because they are so wonderfully dramatic and they draw you in to the life of argument. And I think they are that way because Plato was trying to solve this problem about how to get the examined life on the page. He reflects about this and says, “Books can produce a false conceit of wisdom.” I think he chose the dialogue form because he thought it was the most enlivening way to actually put philosophy on the page. But of course the real life of philosophy is between two people or more than two people. So it’s what goes on in the classroom as a result of the book that’s the real activity. And I guess I do think that Plato’s Dialogues can be very important take-off points for that.

But then I think we have to ask where our students are coming from, what their particular blind spots are likely to be, what their specific orientation toward the world is, and this will differ in different groups of students and different countries. But one of the things I think we do need to think about is how appallingly ignorant most Americans are of most of the world outside America. I just should not have been able to get to the ripe old age of 38 without having read the Koran and without having known anything about Buddhism or Confucianism. The one thing I do want to say in terms of content is that I think every student in every part of the world should have a basic understanding of the major world religions in a non-stereotypical form. A lot of the fear and suspicion of different religious groups is based on just not knowing anything about that religion. So that’s one thing I would want to put on a required list. But after that, well, if your country is beset by problems of race, then maybe Invisible Man is a novel you want to talk to students about for a while. So you would choose according to, as Ralph Ellison said, the “inner eyes” of your readers – where are their blind spots and how do their eyes need to be cultivated in this particular historical situation.

Delbanco: I don’t think we’re disagreeing. We probably should try to disagree more to make this more entertaining. I think academics waste a lot of time arguing about what books the students should read. I think what’s much more important is actually the dynamics of what happens in the classroom. But no one, I think, would disagree with the proposition that we should open our minds to the multiplicity of experience in the world. Speaking from my own little provincial corner of the academy, I would also venture the proposition that, in a strange kind of way, our students are most ignorant about their own culture. That might sound paradoxical, but there is something, I think, to the notion that if you’re inside something, or very close to something, you have no sense of it – no comparative sense of it, no real intimacy with it. So it bothers me to think that we’re turning out BAs from very distinguished institutions who have, according to some surveys I’ve read, no idea about the branches of government and the checks and balances system or what the rule of law really means.

Satz: Or how much poverty there is in the world.

Delbanco: Well, right.
**Nussbaum:** But often you get that most sharply by contrasting it with something else. I don’t think I knew anything about what conception of family I was brought up in until I was part of a family in India. You felt how different it was. I could have learned that in my liberal education, but I just didn’t. So I think the contrast…. Even with the rule of law, if you study constitutions of South Africa and India along with the U.S., then you see much more clearly what choices we made, how other people decided not to follow us, why, and so on.

**Delbanco:** Fair enough. As I was saying this afternoon, the world that I think my students are most estranged from is the world of the past. That is, there’s a way in which the modern saturation we all have with the media … we’re living in this perpetual present, and we’re living in a kind of international present. It’s a cartoonish, stereotyped vision of the way the world is put together. The television screen takes us around the world in a few milliseconds every morning, but it doesn’t take us into the past. It’s worthwhile to be reminded that people who lived before us had different kinds of experiences, and people who live after us will have different kinds of experiences. Measuring what’s the same and what’s different is a tricky business, so I’m making a pitch for history, I guess.

**Satz:** Let me push, then, to get some friction here. We’re a bunch of educators. We believe in the value of education, obviously. It’s what we do and live and breathe. We believe it’s valuable not only because it leads to the productivity of the nation and has all kinds of public good, but we believe it is good for the life of a person – that a person who is educated has access to a different range of experience than a person who is uneducated. And we believe we can contribute to the education of a person and, in particular, to the education of people who are in the process of becoming citizens. Now there’s a whole range of research and also popular opinion that’s very skeptical that you can actually teach habits of mind, that you can teach tolerance, that you can teach virtue. They’ll point to the fact that philosophy professors who teach ethics are no more ethical than people who have never studied ethics. How do you respond to people who are skeptical that you can actually teach people to be responsible citizens?

**Nussbaum:** Well, you know, the ancient philosophical schools thought you’ve got to get people to spend their whole life in that school. When I ask my students on an exam, if Epicurus or Socrates came to x university, what would they do, the bad answer is, they would teach the following courses. But of course what they wanted was a whole way of life focused on philosophy. And we can’t do that, and we’ve got to be resigned to the fact that we’re just one influence out of very many in our students’ lives, and whatever time of life it is … with college, it’s a time when they’ve recently left their parents’ home, often, and maybe they’re ready to think in a different way or strike out on their own, so that’s a good time, I think. But we still have to resign ourselves to the fact that their peer culture, their extracurricular activities, the world around them – it’s all going to play a big role. So we can’t be everything, but we can just offer one contribution that might make a difference, and people can keep coming back to it in later life and drawing on it. And the hope is that if other things go pretty well, then that might tip the balance in the direction of good and more engaged citizenship. And I think you can’t point to these
things like: Philosophy professors are not really ethical. The thing is that, of course, people can always take any teaching and become cynical about it, and often professionals are the most cynical and the least likely to really love what they do. I’m glad that that’s not true of anyone on this stage. But I do think that it’s endemic to any profession that you might become cynical about doing that. So the fact that there are philosophy professors who do unethical things shows me nothing at all, because it doesn’t show me that they are trying to live by the things that they teach. So I don’t believe the skepticism, and I think that to point to the fact that Nazis read all kinds of great books and they listened to great music, and yet they did the things they did also shows me nothing because, of course, one thing to point out is they did not read books that portrayed Jews in a rich and humane light. Maybe those books might have made a difference to at least some people. So they read these very generalized books. But what I want is for people to read books that confront them with the groups and the problems that they’re likely to deal extremely obtuse with in their daily life and to go head on with those problems.

**Delbanco:** The question you’re asking, I think, is one that every teacher has to grapple with, and it can keep you up at night if you think about it too much, which is to say: What exactly is at stake in the classroom and what do you hope to achieve? I don’t have an answer that’s going to be persuasive to anybody here or even to myself, exactly. But I do make analogies for my students, which I hope are more helpful than obscuring. When I’m talking, for instance, as I do about the Colonial period in our history and I talk about Puritans and their theology and their preachers, I try to get the students to come to terms with the strange paradox that those characters believed in: that the preacher (and I think teacher and preacher are closely related even if we don’t want to admit it all the time) … that the preacher was, in their view, essential to what they called conversion or salvation – transformation. But the preacher could not effect the transformation or conversion. The source of the transformation was what they called God, and they regarded it as a miraculous event. That is, through the voice of the preacher, who would be talking to a congregation of, let’s say, 100 people, and they’re all hearing the same sermon – the words of cognitive experience that they’re hearing are the same, the sound of the words is the same, they’re all sitting pretty close together so it’s not as if some can hear it and others can’t hear it, and most of them maybe left the meeting house unchanged. But sometimes somebody left the meeting house feeling: You know, I have a new insight into myself, or, I have a new understanding of how I should try to live. And that makes a lot of sense to me. I think it’s impossible to explain why it happens for some and not for others. I don’t want to drone on, but I mentioned *King Lear*. The other way I try to analogize this for my students is: imagine two friends who go to see a production of *King Lear*. They’re seeing the same play. They both understand the action. When it’s over, one of them says, “I’ve seen better productions,” or “I thought it was kind of slow in Act Three,” or “Let’s go get a couple of beers.” And the other one has been so overwhelmed by the experience that he doesn’t feel like going and having a couple of beers. He feels differently about his relationship with his father, or he feels differently about sincerity and what it means to say the truth. Who can explain why one of them has that experience and the other doesn’t? All you can do as a teacher who teaches the kind of stuff that we teach, I think, is you can put it out there and you can try to show why it matters to you, and then you hope for the best.
**Nussbaum:** And I think it’s important to say that you don’t always want the person to believe that thing you’ve put out. You want them to go into themselves and maybe come out with some deeper reason why they don’t believe it. I love Cicero, the Roman politician and philosopher, because he was very serious about philosophy. He spent a lot of his time both reading and writing philosophy. But he also didn’t believe it all. And when you read his letters, particularly the philosophers that he admires tell you that you shouldn’t be so attached to anything in the world that you would be deeply upset if some harm befalls it. Then, just before his daughter dies, he’s writing to some friends saying, you know, this is how you should feel about the death of a child. Then his daughter dies in childbirth and he’s absolutely devastated. And he writes these letters back and forth to his best friend trying to grapple with that. And the friend will say, “You know, this is what you always say; this is what you should be doing. You should come back to the world.” Cicero says, “No, because I feel like I’m wandering in a dark forest.” Then finally he says, “You know, I really don’t even think I should be more detached.” But he’s trying to grapple with it and takes it at the very most serious level as a way of just trying to ask questions about his own life. And that, I think, is what we want our students to do.

**Satz:** Let me talk with you about pedagogy, because here’s a dilemma I sometimes face in my own teaching. One of the most powerful things that philosophy has probably bequeathed to the world is the Socratic method – a way of engaging with everyday, common opinion, and yet also of reasoning to reflect and be critical about the everyday things that you take for granted, while doing it in a way that it’s not trivial, that what’s at stake is something really important in the argument. Socrates tells us to figure out, How should I live? And you’re asking deep questions about it. So one of the things as a Socratic teacher you try to do is ask questions. You’re not so much preaching in the sense of trying to get students to agree or arrive at a thesis; you’re trying to get them to look at things in new ways. And so often in teaching an introductory political philosophy course or an introductory moral philosophy course, I will use the Socratic method and I will engage the students critically, and I will find that for some of them it really works and they come out inspired and challenged and believing things very strongly. Other students are very uncomfortable. And of course that’s part of the task, the method, to make students somewhat uncomfortable, but you hope it will be productive discomfort, that they won’t shut down. But some students shut down. Then a certain number of students come out thinking it’s all a game because you can ask questions about any view and so there’s really no point in trying to figure out anything because every view has limits, every view is subject to critical scrutiny, there’s always something that you really can’t explain. And so I found actually in teaching – noticing that quite a few of my students were coming out relativists and skeptics – that I needed to show them that something was at stake for me in this. But in showing them that something is at stake for me, you run the danger of being a preacher and of their thinking that what’s at stake for you is what’s true. So that’s what they’re going to take away.

**Delbanco:** Well, having used the term “preacher,” the adage that sticks with me among preachers I like is: Go home and consider the doctrine for yourself after the sermon is
over. That’s my sense. So the Socratic method, broadly speaking, meaning: Don’t lecture and pronounce and give the impression that I’m the authority and I’m telling you what you should absorb passively; this is the truth because it’s received wisdom and that’s what you’re here to take home with you. But rather, I’m going to ask you questions that have to make you uncomfortable, and I don’t know the answer or where we’re going to get as we go down this chain of questions, but that the process of examination, and self-examination in particular, is critical to living the fulfilled life, if we can imagine such a thing. And I think it’s absolutely crucial that we have to keep that at the center of liberal education. Without it we don’t have liberal education.

And it’s of some interest to me … there are some neuroscientists who have been actually trying to collect empirical data about what kinds of teaching techniques work better than others. And since it’s always nice to have one’s presuppositions confirmed, it was interesting to me to hear the other day from such a person that she’s got lots of data to show that small groups being asked questions learn stuff better than people who go to lectures. One thing I took away from her discussion was: even if you have to lecture because the economics of your institution prescribe (and I like to lecture – it’s nice to perform and please them and so on), but if you have to lecture and you ask a rhetorical question in the course of your lecture, pause for a moment rather than answering it immediately yourself, because in that pause, if the student is paying any attention at all, the brain will be active. They are mapping and taking pictures of the brain, and they can see that when you’re put on the spot and you have to actually generate an answer, something is happening in your brain which is not happening when you’re just writing down what somebody else is saying. So I think the Socratic method is the way to go.

**Nussbaum:**

I think, though, the lecture can be very valuable. Sure, there has to be a Socratic element, like small discussion sections, students writing papers that involve laying out an argument and criticizing it. But I guess one way that a lecture can avoid the problem you’re mentioning, Debra, is by using drama and contrast. One way of teaching the history of philosophy is to see alternative attempts to answer a set of fundamental questions. So if you teach Plato and then Aristotle and then Hellenistic philosophers, you get a rich range of contrast in each case trying to show why these people were dissatisfied with the other answers. Where were they coming from? By now, I’m so used to doing that that when I teach even philosophers that I’m very fond of, if I see they don’t try to put the opposing position in its strongest light and show what motivates it and where it’s coming from, I get very dissatisfied, I have to say. So I think that doesn’t produce skepticism because each one is trying to go somewhere, and then you just have to decide which one you want to go with, but to show that the passion is there in all of them. And if you get a paper where somebody says, Well, this is a bad argument, one, two, three, then typically one will always write, “But how do you think that person would respond to what you’ve just said? What would be the comeback?” And the paper will become richer if they can do that.

**Satz:** The problem is that some students are just uncomfortable and, as I say, I think the point of the humanities, and part of good teaching, in general, is to make students
uncomfortable. If they’re just coming through the same way they were before, you’re not adding anything to who they are, and they’re not getting anything out of an education. But sometimes students can become so uncomfortable that they shut down.

**Nussbaum:** Yes. Well, sometimes that kind of oral grilling is too painful for people. And I don’t think that means they’re bad. The trouble is that sometimes people are brought up to be very reticent, and you can’t get over that in a short time. But then also, I have to say, some teachers are bullies and they do it in a bad way. Certainly the term “Socratic method” inspires horror in me as a law professor because basically in the law schools it’s been the technique of bullying and humiliating, and I think that has no place in the academy anywhere at all.

**Delbanco:** You said a while ago something about not being sure quite what we mean by the liberal arts and that science ought to have a place in our conception of it. I suspect that professors of humanities are a little too quick to assume that they’re the ones who really worry the most productively about these questions. Surely there are science professors who have been more willing to revise their teaching techniques and to think about how better to communicate their own excitement about their subject than humanists have been. That’s a generalization.

**Nussbaum:** But there are lots of different ways of showing how the life of reflection matters to you. Here’s a famous story about Rogers Albritton, who was a philosopher who taught a large humanities course at Harvard. When they were reading Aristotle, he came in one morning, and he was always disheveled. He got up late and he just looked like a mess. But this day he looked particularly agonized, and he said, “You know, I thought I knew what I was going to tell you about Aristotle, but then in the middle of the night, I realized that everything that I had been thinking was entirely wrong.” And then he went through this painful self-laceration in front of 500 students, and the teaching assistants thought, What incredible intellectual courage that he would do that, until the next year, on the same day…. [Laughter]

**Delbanco:** I had an experience like that where I soon discovered that I could take the professor’s book to class and it was like a libretto; all the jokes came at the same place. That’s a little dicey. You want a little more spontaneity than that, ideally.

**Satz:** In a moment, we’ll open it up for discussion, but I wonder if each of you could say something about what made you fall in love with the things that you fell in love with. Was it a book? Was it a teacher? Was it travel?

**Delbanco:** Well, how do we become the people we are? A lot of things happen to us, right? A lot has to do with family. Sometimes we want to emulate our parents. Sometimes we want to rebel against them. And I suppose it’s a mixture of both for all of us. But speaking more narrowly about my vocation as a teacher, I had some great teachers, and I found that they were doing things to me that I found interesting. And it had to do with this discomfort that you’re talking about. I became excited about following a problem or seeing something in a text that I had found boring and then
suddenly the teacher would ask a question, and it would light up and it would matter. And also, I have to say, and this is a delicate path that I think all teachers have to walk carefully: there was always a certain “presentist” element; that is, respect for the “pastness” of the past, but also a willingness to say, How and why does this matter to you now? I very vividly remember when I was first studying the theology of Jonathan Edwards. I’m not a Christian by derivation or conviction, and I was reading these hellfire sermons and all this stuff about religious emotions, and so on, and I was very resistant to it all. And the teacher in question (it was a small class) looked at me and said, “What is it that bothers you about Edwards, Mr. Delbanco? Is it possibly because he’s so hard on self-deception?” [Laughter] I don’t think a teacher had ever said anything like that to me before. That gave me pause and maybe accounts for why I do what I do. I don’t know.

Nussbaum: Well, I had this great high school. It was an all-women’s school, and the teachers were probably people who now would have been college professors, but they couldn’t get jobs in universities so they were teaching in this girls’ school. They were wonderful, and I just remember thinking about some of the same things I write about now. I wasn’t sure … I certainly didn’t know the word “philosophy.” It was literary works that I was reading, and as I read Dostoevsky or whatever, I would think about some of the same issues that I later wrote about. But I also loved theater, and I think that’s not irrelevant because I both read the Greek works and I acted in them. And for a long time, I wanted to be an actress. I actually was a professional actress for a few years. And then I realized being outside the university in the world of professional theater – that that wasn’t what I wanted; that I wanted to think about the plays and not only act in them. I still do some acting from time to time and I enjoy acting and singing. But anyway, I came back to school, finished my college degree, and went to graduate school. And it was really only in graduate school that I started doing mainly philosophy. It was totally accidental. It was because I thought I was going to write about the Greek tragedies, but the people who were teaching Greek tragedy were these old gentlemen types that I’ve been describing who said, “Oh, gentlemen should read Euripides like this,” and I just didn’t like them. So what was really exciting to me was what was going on in the philosophy department, so I just migrated over there and never looked back. And I’ve been lucky all the way through to have had philosophy people – older people in the profession – who wanted to broaden the field. The field was rather narrow when I started and there wasn’t even much ethics being done, not much political philosophy. But I was very, very lucky to have encouragement from a range of wonderful people: Stanley Cavell, who was one of those who worked on the relationship between philosophy and literature; Bernard Williams, who wrote about the emotions; and then John Rawls, the great political philosopher. So I was very lucky to have those figures who stood for the kind of breadth and humanism in the discipline. That was very big.

Satz: It’s interesting that you both mentioned examples of teachers.

Delbanco: Well, I think everybody needs examples, right? Whatever you choose to do, you don’t want to replicate them, but if there’s something exciting that you see happening, you want to find out what that’s about and see if it works for you.
**Satz:** We’ll open it up to questions. There are mikes, and please feel absolutely welcome. I think the way that it works here is that we’ll alternate questions with the different mikes, and I’ll start on my left.

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**Question from the Audience:** I would be interested to hear your ideas on the role of religion in liberal education. You’ve mentioned this interesting story about Jonathan Edwards and the idea of taking, say, a religious thinker seriously on his own terms. We’ve heard a lot about the canons of liberal education in terms of the Greeks, but there’s a whole other strand of thought that deals with perennial human questions and the human condition that, in the modern world, has been – perhaps unfairly – criticized for not having sufficient depth. So I would like to hear your thoughts on the role of studying religion, and particularly its implications, within a system of liberal education, for citizenship in a pluralistic world.

**Delbanco:** Well, I think the problem of condescension toward religion in our (properly, from my point of view) non-sectarian secular institutions is a real problem. I don’t think I, or we, should be in the proselytizing business. Some institutions are open about their religious commitments, and students who come there share those commitments, and that’s fine. But institutions like this one are meant to be pluralistic and so they ought to be. But that doesn’t mean that religious thinkers shouldn’t be taken seriously rather than be dismissed. I think religions of all sorts, including Christianity, have very deep insights into human experience and human responsibility. And I have no problem talking about them in those terms. Whether that makes me highly unusual or not in my context, I’m not sure; possibly so. Religion does seem to be a kind of a secret thing in an institution like mine. I was mentioning to a couple of people earlier that I was invited to be at an occasion not totally different from this one with your former colleague from Chicago, Mark Lilla, and it was something called the Veritas Forum. They asked us to talk about moral issues. And I walked into a room and it was as if I saw a Columbia University I’d never seen before. There were about 500 people in the room. A great many of them were what my colleagues would call Asian American. But most of the people in the room … their self-identification was as Christians. There were students who took their Christian commitments seriously and they felt most comfortable together, perhaps because they didn’t feel so comfortable in the larger environment. I don’t mean to ramble, but I don’t think religion should be read out of this story at all.

**Nussbaum:** No, I don’t either. And I’ve already said that I think it’s one of the core things – that everyone should have an understanding of the central texts of the major world religions. But I also have to say about myself that I’m well known as somebody who plays an active part in my temple. I give sermons, I’m a kind of assistant cantor, I had an adult bat mitzvah last summer. So I don’t try to conceal that part of my life. And it really is, to me, quite consistent with the rest of the philosophical life because it’s a kind of Kantian Rationalist form of Reform Judaism, so in a way, it’s not a sense of two identities. But anyway, I just don’t have any embarrassment about saying I think it’s a very serious part of my life and you can read my sermons in the *Boston Review*, and so
forth. But in teaching, of course, I would lay the accent on learning about religions you don’t belong to.

**Question from the Audience:** The theme of this forum is education and what happens when the student encounters the teacher in the institutional setting, but education consists of much more than what happens during school. What school does is start the process of self-education. You have to set them off in such a way that they can continue. Could you talk about how the university as well as the culture at large can support that process, because I think that’s where most of the learning takes place – after you’re out of school. But perhaps the decisive learning takes place in school.

**Delbanco:** Well, I think it’s a mistake that universities have allowed themselves to be perceived of recently so much as career preparation. They should be life preparation. And life, as you say, has to be all about continuing self-education. And I think universities should be doing a better job of that in all kinds of ways. I think the boundaries of the formal classroom should be broken down. Although I’m, again, rather a traditionalist in the classroom, I think universities have an obligation to connect their students more directly to the larger community. I myself have become increasingly interested in the efficacy of service learning, not as a substitute for traditional academic study, but as a complement and supplement to it. And I think what we want is to send students out into the world who are more aware of their ignorance than when they came in so they’ll have some humility and also some confidence about their abilities, we hope, and go out there and try to develop themselves for the rest of their lives. That’s the goal.

**Nussbaum:** Yes, I agree with that. And one of the things I’m glad to see is the increase in really high-quality programs of study abroad. Now, the usual study abroad in my day was: you go to Paris and you hang out with other Americans and you just enjoy the high life. But now there are much more intelligently designed programs that bring you into contact with the ways that people in those countries make a living, their whole life struggle, differences of class, differences of region – and those programs are really invaluable. Because you can get a certain amount out of books about what it’s like to be in China or what it’s like to be in Africa, but really there is no substitute for actually having the immersion of grappling with daily life yourself. So I think that’s one thing that definitely can help show you how narrow you are.

**Question from the Audience:** Humanists like to pat themselves on the back for standing at the linchpin of liberal education, but it seems that they all too easily ignore the role of the natural and social sciences in what was considered a liberal arts education at least until a hundred years ago. The natural sciences have seen the same sort of decline, at least in the number of Americans studying them. In many ways, when studied properly, you have the same sort of emphasis on forms of intellectual engagement and inquiry, and you even have the same sort of value of the common knowledge of developing a shared vocabulary about methodology and knowledge. So I wonder why it’s so easy for us really to focus purely on the role of the humanities and have this tendency to lump, in particular, the natural sciences into an extension of technical education and the social sciences into perhaps a slightly more refined and ivory tower form of business school?
Delbanco: That’s a great question, and there’s a gentle rebuke in your question, which I think is, at least in my case, well deserved. I’m a very vivid example of the failure (and it’s my failure, but I like to blame it on the institution). Nobody asked me to learn anything about science or to fight against my own incompetence in that area. And I think it’s one of the great failings of our educational system that we make this separation and that we don’t compel everybody to study some aspect of the sciences. It does need to be said. I said some nice things about scientists before and, of course, all generalizations about scientists vs. humanists are false. But, alas, much of the undergraduate science teaching, and I’m sure that’s true here at Stanford, if I dare say, is also career-oriented, is also: “You’ve got to learn this stuff to go to medical school,” or wherever you want to go. So there’s a lot of work to be done in both areas. And I think one of the important things that university administrators should be trying to figure out is how to make this dialogue happen. Again, it’s odd, because when I’m back home in New York, all I do is complain about my own university. But when I travel, I say these nice things about it. The faculty of my university actually introduced into the required core curriculum a required science class that there’s been a lot of grumbling about, but it’s working. It’s an experiment, it’s working, it’s starting to…. I don’t think most institutions would dare to do that because if they suddenly announced a rigorous science requirement, their application numbers would drop off and then they would sink a little in the U.S. News rankings. So there are all these extraneous factors that are not so extraneous to this conversation.

Nussbaum: I focus on the humanities just because that’s what I know about and what I’m involved in defending right now, but that doesn’t mean that I think that’s a complete account of a liberal education. If you just focus on citizenship, then you really have to think: What from the social sciences and the natural sciences should a good citizen know? Now, I definitely think a basic knowledge of economics, including an understanding of the global economy, should be part of that, and that would not necessarily be the same.

Delbanco: From whom would you obtain this understanding? [Laughter]

Nussbaum: Right. And it wouldn’t be the same as the basic introductory economics course because that’s too technical and it’s not critical. Sciences have done, I think, better on the whole in coming up with courses that prepare you to be a good juror, for example. For democracy to work, we need people who can sit on juries involving scientific evidence: statistics, DNA, and all these things. So I think those are the questions that some people have asked and answered quite well.

Question from the Audience: I am interested in your response to the fact that today Stanford terminated its Program in Interdisciplinary Studies in the Humanities, and in your suggestion as of how we as students of the humanities who are facing an assault on the humanities in universities could stand to regain our lost ground.

Nussbaum: Say more about the program and why it was terminated.
Audience Member (continued): They’ve told us it was terminated due to the budget cuts.

Nussbaum: And what was it? It was an undergraduate interdisciplinary major?

Audience Member (continued): It was an undergraduate and a graduate program that was focused on interdisciplinary studies of the humanities. You could focus on various areas. Mine was modern thought and literature. The program has now been terminated, as of today.

Delbanco: As of today?

Audience Member (continued): Yes, it was announced today.

Nussbaum: Well, you know, it seems very shortsighted to me because one thing that is sure is that all the disciplines are becoming much more conversant with one another and they need to do that more and more. Even in the scientific disciplines this is true. The hard and fast distinction between chemistry and biology has broken down long since. So any kind of cutting-edge work is interdisciplinary almost by definition in the sciences now. But it’s certainly also true in the humanities. Well, I’m a pretty funny example because I have a Ph.D. in classics, and then I taught in the philosophy department. I’ve been partly in a Comp. Lit. department at one time. Now, what am I? I’m in seven different departments that include the three that you heard, but then there’s also political science, classics, the human rights program. So you know, it’s not because I’m seven different people; it’s because the way that the disciplines carve these things up is artificial, so you have to have a leg in several different places if you’re going to just do the coherent set of things that you do. So I think it’s very unfortunate.

Delbanco: I don’t mean to give a glib answer, and I don’t know anything about the local Stanford politics, but I guess my off-the-cuff advice, if that’s what you’re asking, is to try to separate your (I think probably justified) outrage at this, which you could act on and you could respond to in some articulate way in some appropriate form, but in terms of your own education, I bet it’s possible to put it together for yourself. If you know that that’s what you want, you’ve got the resources here in terms of the faculty brainpower, and presumably other students who feel as you do, so go make it happen. Organize some independent study groups. That would be the best way to show that they’ve made a mistake.

Question from the Audience: Thank you both very much for coming and for sharing your thoughts with us. Both of you pointed to a social or political justification of a liberal education, and I think most of us here would agree with that. But I wanted to play devil’s advocate and maybe push in the opposite direction. There are some who might say that, with respect to cultivating human values in an individual, subjecting their beliefs to rational inquiry is actually corrosive and undermines those values. This goes back to Professor Satz’s point about the effects on one’s psychology, I suppose, of the Socratic
method. And it seems that there are two different risks here: one is skepticism and one is sophistry. I wanted to hear your thoughts on the risks posed by critical, rational inquiry.

In particular, I wanted to ask Professor Delbanco to comment on the opposition from religious, insular communities to being forced to enter into the public education system, all the way back to the Amish – on the account that it would undermine their community values to have to participate in a public education system that would expose them to different points of view and different ways of life.

Professor Nussbaum, I’d like to hear your thoughts on Sparta’s educational regime as advanced by Lykurgos, and how he argues that they should also be prevented from being exposed to other ways of life and other ways of thinking, though there was room for rational inquiry.

Delbanco: Well, I’m a coercive nationalist. I guess I should explain that statement. [Laughter] I’ve never called myself that before. Weren’t there a few years ago some Orthodox Jewish students who were upset that they were being required by Yale … men living in close proximity to women, and so on? My reaction to that is that they should go somewhere else.

Audience Member (Continued): Another country?

Delbanco: No, they don’t have to go to another country. They could go to Yeshiva or they could go to another institution where they would feel that their commitments were less…. It’s not that their commitments were under assault or disrespected, but by entering into a pluralistic community, you assume certain responsibilities. If you’re very much defensive of your community of belief, then you’d better not venture out into this open public sphere, or whatever we want to call it. You can still hold onto those beliefs; you’re just going to have to defend them.

Nussbaum: I think a lot depends on what time of life you’re talking about. Now, the Amish were asking only to have their children miss 15 and 16, and they didn’t do it. As I read the case, it’s not about not wanting to be exposed to other views of life; it’s rather about needing, at that crucial time, to learn the communal skills of communal farming, and so on, or the community itself would be likely to fall apart. Now, I think it was a very hard case, but it’s clear that they were not saying, “We don’t want to go to first grade and learn about other ways of life.” Now, there were people who did that, and then the case of Mozert vs. Hawkins, I think, is the one you really want for your point, which is the Baptist mother in Tennessee who said that her children shouldn’t read the books that presented other ways of life – that they should be exempt from that reading class. Now in a way, the case is moot because you can get home schooling at the drop of a hat in almost every state and you can avoid it, and I think it’s much too easy to get that kind of home schooling. But what the court said – the Sixth Circuit said – in the case of Mozert vs. Hawkins was, I think, very good, which was that even though there was some burden applied to her free exercise of religion, there was a compelling state interest in producing the kind of citizen who did have an understanding of different ways of life –
that that is essential for our democracy. So I think that was the right analysis: that one should grant that, in that case, religious freedom bears a burden, and if there were no compelling state interests on the other side (as in the case of the Amish – they thought there wasn’t, rightly or wrongly), then fine, they could have that dispensation. But in this case, there was that interest.

**Audience Member (continued):** And Sparta?

**Nussbaum:** Well, I don’t think we know very much about Sparta because we know it only through representations by hostile people. So I think it probably was a lot more complicated society than those representations suggest. For example, we do know that women had more nearly equal property rights in Sparta, so women were much more empowered as agents in the community and in the political process. So I think if we knew a lot more about Sparta, then we could start to say how uniform that education was. But we only know it because Athenians say, “Oh, well, in Sparta they told them never to think and never to question.” So it’s like our 1950s Americans representing Soviet education, and how trustworthy is that representation?

**Question from the Audience:** People associated with elite universities, and probably most people in this audience, are, to a large degree, part of a very self-selecting group. And it seems to me that a wonderful text like Plato’s *Symposium*, for instance, would be more likely to speak to someone in that group than just any random person that you might pick. And I think of someone who’s very close to me in my family. She had to read books like *Moby Dick* in high school, which I love and she absolutely hated. To this day, she still doesn’t really like to read books very much. I guess my question would be: Is there a danger in pushing some really difficult or canonical books on people too young in high school? And also, what should be the societal role of liberal arts for non-elites?

**Nussbaum:** I think students across this country vary a lot more by preparation than by ability, and it would be too condescending to think that there are people for whom these books are not made. I just think that sells people short. One of the things I love about one of my favorite arts institutions in Chicago, The Chicago Children’s Choir, is they take kids, 80 percent of whom are from below the poverty line, and within a few months they’re singing Bach. But nothing is closed to them, and no one tells them that anything is closed to them. And I don’t think we should ever tell kids, “These books are not for you.” And one good thing about required courses, which I don’t always support, is that they make people do something that at first they would have thought of as not for you, and then they see that they can do it. But then, to make that work, you have to figure out which ones to lead with. I actually think one of the great things about the Greeks is you’re not reading them in their original language, and therefore you can translate it fresh in every generation. The language is always accessible. It’s much harder for young philosophy students to read Locke or Hume than it is for them to read Plato because Plato is in twenty-first century English, right out there. The obstacle to reading *Symposium* is much more likely to be cultural hang-ups about homosexuality than it is the language of the text. On the other hand, if you wanted them to read Hume’s *Treatise,*
well, I think you would probably leave that for much later because the language is much harder.

**Satz:** I just want to chime in on the point that you shouldn’t think that these books are only for elites. I’ve been involved in a program here where Plato and Aristotle are taught to women who have just gotten out of prison, who are addicts, and most of whom have never gone to high school. And the connection they draw to these books and the inspiration they find in them is just mind-boggling and blows away all your expectations about who these books are written for. And I think one of the unfortunate things is that we think of these texts as for an elite and not, as Earl Shorris has put it, “riches for the poor.” There are things that everybody can benefit from by engaging with. Now, it’s true that some people will not engage with them, but I don’t think you should have any preconceptions about who can engage with them.

**Nussbaum:** And these Greek philosophers that are thought now to be the capstone of an elite education: what were they doing educationally? They were doing something quite radical: they were rebelling against the idea that you should become a nicely brought up young gentleman. They were really radical figures in their society—almost all of them. And of course, Socrates lost his life for that. But then, much later in time, Epictetus was a former slave, and he wrote a lot about that position and said that this kind of critical thinking is something that everyone should do.

**Delbanco:** I agree with everything that’s just been said. You might want to look at this week’s *New Republic*, which has an article by Leon Botstein about the Bard program of teaching in a maximum security prison in upstate New York. But I wouldn’t teach *Moby Dick* to high school students unless you had a whole year for it and had a really excited teacher.

**Question from the Audience:** My question concerns the extreme case of people with mental disabilities: where do they fit in the education system of a democratic, egalitarian society?

**Nussbaum:** I’ve written a fair amount about disability and justice for people with disabilities. And I think one of the things I learned in that process is how individual a disability is and how little you know about it until you try. Down Syndrome is a good example, because what you find out as you read about it is that a lot of the things that were thought to be unchangeable intellectual limitations are actually the result of physical limitations, such as the weakness of the neck muscles and the weakness of the tongue muscles not properly treated physically at the right time. So crucial interventions at crucial times make a tremendous difference in what you can do. So the right approach, it seems to me, if it were fully funded, is the one we have in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, which says that for each child with a disability, there shall be an individual education plan that’s drawn up in consultation with the parents and the children. And the Supreme Court has just said that parents now have rights under that law so that they can represent themselves without hiring a lawyer. This is very important because then poorer parents can go to court to contest that plan without hiring a lawyer. I
have experience with this in my own family because my nephew has Asperger Syndrome, about which nothing was known when he was born, but now through the patient networking of the parents and then working with the school boards, this kid is in college, and that would not have been so twenty years ago.

I don’t think there should be mandatory higher education, but we must not think that children with intellectual disabilities would never be able to engage in rigorous education. Michael Bérubé wrote a wonderful book about his son with Down Syndrome called *Life as We Know It*. I met Jamie, the hero of the book, at a conference on cognitive disability this past year, and Jamie is a very active citizen, very articulate, very verbal, and he’s writing stuff. I don’t think he’s probably going to go to college, but he’s very out there in the world doing a lot of valuable stuff.

**Delbanco**: All true, I think, and I don’t think mandatory higher education was really the proposition here. We also don’t want to confuse a certain attainment of a certain intellectual facility with human dignity or insight or creativity or any of the other very important things that in fact we pay too little attention to in higher education. So that’s the gist of what I would want to say about that.

**Question from the Audience**: Professor Delbanco, Professor Nussbaum, thank you so much for spending the evening with us tonight. I guess I was wondering about what education for citizenship would look like when you are preparing citizens for a rapidly changing world and to meet the challenges facing a global society.

**Nussbaum**: It’s one of the things, and you have to grapple with the fact, first of all, that the conversations that will be needed to solve any major human problem have got to be cross-cultural and cross-national. I think that’s the reason I started writing about this because I sort of saw: here I was sitting in this institute and we were having these conversations about the environment, about conflict resolution, but we weren’t equipped to have the conversations because we had such a bad understanding of each other. And so in thinking about what it would take to put you in a position where you can sit down at a table with somebody and hammer out an agreement on some crucial issue, that’s maybe a good place to start, anyway.

**Delbanco**: You said “rapidly changing.” One thing that’s remarkable: we’ve been here for almost an hour and a half and nobody has (well, maybe implicitly) made any direct reference to the fact that we’re in the middle of a huge global economic collapse, which is going to affect everything that we’re talking about. The young man a few minutes ago said that a program at Stanford was cut off today. That’s just the beginning. And we can at this moment see a lot of the bad consequences that are very obvious. But I would like to believe, actually, that there might also be some good ones. I’ve noticed, for instance, that the volume of e-mail I’m getting from students asking for recommendations to go into Teach for America and other public service activities has gone up a lot. Some of it may be due to the fact that job opportunities are not there. Some of it, I think, has to do with our new president who has been taken seriously by young people in his call for a return to a spirit of national service. I made a little flippant remark earlier about
economists. There is surely a declining confidence level in economic science, at least as a science, since all the smartest economists are arguing with each other over what to do about this situation and nobody really has any idea. So maybe the claims of liberal education in terms of developing some fluency and imaginative reach and versatility – those qualities that we began by talking about – will get a new hearing under these circumstances, and people will be aware that they can’t expect an easy career path and they’ve got to be ready to improvise and reinvent themselves from time to time. So maybe a good day is coming. I don’t know. I’d like to believe that.

**Audience Member (continued):** I guess what I was asking was: Is there a set of values that can be taught universally – that all citizens of the world should be taught these things?

**Nussbaum:** Well, I’m sort of famous or infamous for saying that there are certain opportunities that all citizens all over the world should have and that we can teach people what those are. I think there are certain goals we should have for all people all over the world: that they should be able to have decent health care, protect their bodily integrity, and we can go on down that list. The class I visited this afternoon decided the one they liked best on my list was leisure time and play, and so they made me a shirt with that one on the back of it. That’s important, too, because women all over the world are typically doing what they call the “double day.” They’ll do a job and then they’ll also do all the housework and child care. And that’s something that doesn’t make for the greatest human life, if you have no time to play around and enjoy life, so I think those are common values.

**Delbanco:** Not to close myself out on a light note, but you were asking about exemplary teachers, and I made a prognostication. I vividly recall my fifth grade social studies teacher, who I thought was a really terrific teacher, and she taught us (I won’t say when) … she taught us that the big problem that our generation would be facing in the future was what to do with our leisure time. Anybody here think that that’s a big problem?

[Laughter]

**Gonnerman:** We’re coming close to the end of our time, so if we could just take the last questioners and if you could quickly state your question, we’ll collect them all and see if there’s a response to any particular question or in general.

**Question from the Audience:** It seems to me that there’s a paradoxical situation where our love for learning is determined by economics, when really the relation should be vice versa. I wonder how we, as humanists and as human beings, can affirm the cultivation of compassionate curiosity – curiosity tempered with compassion.

**Question from the Audience:** I wanted to push back on the two purposes of humanistic education that you offered: education for citizenship and for the good life. Aren’t these two purposes somewhat questionable given the fact that there are still many Americans who don’t have access to higher education of the sort you’ve been talking about? We should probably be looking more at the role of humanistic education in the K-12 system,
but even there, as mentioned before, the liberal arts are playing a fairly marginal role. So who actually benefits from a liberal arts education?

**Question from the Audience:** With regard to Professor Nussbaum’s early point that one importance of a liberal arts education is to instill the capacity for intelligent and critical dialogue among citizens, my impression is, evermore in our age, that the problem is not the capacity present in the citizenry, but the refusal – the effort – on the part of virtually every platform of communication that is controlled by the media to trivialize all manner of intelligent dialogue about virtually every important issue that we face today.

**Question from the Audience:** I wanted to bring up the notion of global citizenship. We’re privileged to live in a developed country where we have the luxury of sitting in forums like this and engaging in such a conversation, whereas most of humanity lives in poverty with little or no access to the basic safety needs of food, shelter, and health care. How can you even talk about global citizenship and values when most people don’t have the very basics?

**Gonnerman:** A summary of your remarks.

**Delbanco:** I think, actually, that the experience we’ve just had for the last ten minutes is a pretty good advertisement for the virtues of liberal education; that is, everybody speaking their mind openly and freely. There’s been some disagreement, nothing very harsh here, but even if there had been, I don’t see any impulse toward physical restraint. I don’t think anybody here has to worry about going home and having the cops show up in the middle of the night and take you away because you said something unpopular or disruptive. You know what? That’s a very valuable thing to be able to count on, and it’s an example of what I mean when I say that our students don’t necessarily know very much about their own culture and actually how it got to be this way.

**Nussbaum:** I just want to say one thing about liberal education in other settings, and then one thing about compassionate curiosity. I’ve spent a lot of time with women’s development groups in India, and these are often nongovernmental organizations that organize basic literacy programs for women who are working and they’re very, very poor. But some of the best liberal education I’ve ever seen goes on in those settings. Women who often can’t read and write yet are using dance, music, quilting, and other forms of expression to tell their stories and to express themselves and to debate what their culture’s values are. They will draw a map of the power relations in their village, they will draw pictures of child temple prostitutes with a big red X across, so they are not shy on expression. And I think the idea that this kind of exchange can only go on in a privileged setting is not one that I’ve seen confirmed from my experience. In fact, last year I took a very eminent federal judge, who’s on the short list for the next Supreme Court appointment under Obama, on her first trip to India. We met with 100 women who were heads of village panchayats, and Diane was absolutely blown away by the articulateness and the force and the power of these women (most of whom couldn’t read or write) and by their ability to express, debate, and so on. So that can happen, and I
think it’s a lesson to us all that real education isn’t about fancy buildings or fancy settings, but it really is about the passion of the people who are involved.

With regards to the first question about compassion and curiosity: of course there are so many ways that you can cultivate that by just being a certain kind of person to your friends, to your children, by teaching, but I just want to mention one. The question referred to the economics profession and its indifference to some of these liberal values. Well, for many years I’ve been part of a movement within or sort of between economics and philosophy that’s called the Human Development Movement. This is an attempt to infuse, in a way, the liberal arts into economics by saying you have to consider not just economic growth but also the quality of human life and the various arguments about what that consists of, and so on. And this is a movement that’s growing. If you just Google Human Development and Capability Association, you will see that there is an association that I co-founded with my collaborator Amartya Sen, who won the Nobel Prize in Economics in 1998 and who studied the liberal arts with Rabindranath Tagore in his school, and so on. So he comes out of this deep humanistic liberal arts tradition of India. And he brought that into the economics profession, and that’s part of what he won the Nobel Prize for. So anyway, we’ve got 700 members in 70 countries. We have meetings and so on. And I think we’re making inroads, anyway, in trying to get that profession to think about what makes a difference to human beings and how human beings are really enabled to lead productive lives. So I think that’s an example of what you can do to change even something that seems so impenetrable as the forward march of the economics profession, which shapes all of our lives every day.

Gonnerman: On that very inspiring note, thank you, Martha Nussbaum, Andrew Delbanco, and Debra Satz for being here with us tonight. Good night. [Applause]

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Winner of the 2006 Great Teacher Award from the Society of Columbia Graduates, Andrew Delbanco is author of many highly acclaimed books, including *Melville: His World and Work* (2005), *The Real American Dream: A Meditation on Hope* (1999), and *Required Reading: Why Our American Classics Matter Now* (1997). His essays appear regularly in *The New York Review of Books*, *The New Republic*, *Raritan*, and other journals on topics ranging from American literary and religious history to contemporary issues in higher education. In 2001, he was elected a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and named by *Time* magazine as “America's Best Social Critic.”
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