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Comp 150

Finding Value in Vulnerability

Introduction

A few years ago I was what some people would call a 'lost soul.' Years of partying and drug abuse had landed me with a two year prison sentence. As I was trying to pick up the pieces of what used to be my life and figure out what to do next, I met a man who changed my life forever. He was a prison guard and the crew boss of my work crew. In the world of prison, guards must keep a strict professional distance from the inmates. Too often this leads to a dehumanization of both the inmates and the guards. The man that changed my life and my way of thinking forever refused to treat prisoners as 'just another number.' He was open to us as humans. He treated us with respect and spoke to us with kind words. He listened to us when we spoke and was not above realizing that sometimes he could learn from us. He kept a professional distance yet at the same time he showed himself as being human and therefore vulnerable. Vulnerability often has negative connotations and is associated with weakness. In this situation, vulnerability was strength and through that strength, I grew in knowledge and understanding and became a better person.

This is an example of human vulnerability in an extreme situation between prisoners and a prison guard, but it could be applied to many situations in life including work (between bosses and employees), family (between parents and children), and school (between teachers and students). I am now in school at a liberal arts college and I am constantly growing in knowledge and life experience. Part of my experience has been learning about the liberal arts through the eyes of authors who have contributed to the conversation that argues for a liberal arts education. I discovered that there are certain things within a liberal arts education that are valued and cultivated. The things that are valued are articulated by Linda Wells in "*The Things They Carried*: Character, Narrative and the Liberal Arts," Todd Gitlin in "The Liberal Arts in an Age of Info-Glut," and Joel Jones in "To Dance with Dogs." While all of these authors had many positive arguments for a liberal arts college, they seemed to be missing something. What I began to notice was an unwillingness on the part of the authors to show their own vulnerability. I posit that we learn the most about our own humanity based on others' expression of their humanity. If this is so, then the concept of the vulnerability of professors in relation to students is one that merits further exploration. With this in mind, I am analyzing the concept of vulnerability with respect to teachers and students at a liberal arts college so I can understand

how the idea of vulnerability could grow our understanding of what is valued in a liberal arts college. A close analysis of the articles in the conversation reveals vulnerability as a implied concept that is left largely unexplored. This paper will examine this gap in the conversation and explain how attempting to close this gap could be beneficial to students and professors alike.

What is Valued

After reading the articles written by the authors in the conversation I began to have a deeper understanding of a liberal arts college and environment. I could see that there were specific things that were valued with regard to the liberal arts. Each author articulated different things that they valued, but all of them seemed to value the best education possible for the students. A value that was implied throughout all of the articles was that of vulnerability. When I looked up definitions for the words vulnerable and open, I discovered that they are practically synonymous. Under ‘vulnerable’ I found the words “open to.” When I looked up ‘open,’ under definition nine, the first word was “vulnerable.” Keeping this in mind, let’s move forward to what these authors have to say about what is valued within the liberal arts.

Linda Wells values student narrative and encourages professors to be open to this idea of narrative within their students. She also encourages her students to realize that their narratives are (and should be) subject to change

and growth as they move through their college years and through their lives. When discussing students and their narratives Wells writes, “One hopes they carry with them most particularly an openness to the development of their character and to the possibility for enhancement of the tracings of honesty, responsibility, courage, and honor already etched there by former experiences” (202). This statement shows that Wells values what students bring with them to college. It also shows the values that Wells believes a liberal arts education will strengthen within them. This does not, however, show the way in which these values will be taught by teachers or learned by students. Remembering that to be open is to be vulnerable, we can see that Wells implies vulnerability in her statement and also that she sees it as a positive tool for her students. For Wells, it is important that students be open to (or vulnerable to) new ideas, teachers, and the narratives of others.

Joel Jones believes that a liberal arts college should value openness, individuality, and a sense of community. When discussing dualities such as individuality and community, Jones writes, “Rather than these dualities and dichotomies being in conflict or contradiction, they should, in a liberal arts college, constitute a synergistic dialogue, the basis for both individual growth and community consciousness” (221). Jones’ statement seems to be an open-minded approach to concepts that he feels should be valued within a liberal

arts environment. These things that Jones believes should be valued add to the conversation of what a liberal arts college values and has to offer. By examining what Jones says, we can see that by valuing openness, he is putting value on vulnerability.

Todd Gitlin argues for the value of a ‘grounded’ individual and posits that a liberal arts education is the way to provide students who are bombarded by what he calls “info-glut” with substance and foundation. Gitlin describes “info-glut” as the multitude of mass-media that all humans come in contact with daily. He believes that what is valued in a liberal arts education is stability. He writes, “Faculty members in the liberal arts need to say: ‘We don’t want to add to your information glut, we want to offer some ground from which to perceive the rest of what you will see’” (210). In Gitlin’s view, young adults entering college need the guidance that faculty members can provide in order to know how to deal with the massive amount of ‘information’ they have been subject to in life. Again, if students are to be open to guidance, they must make themselves vulnerable. Like Wells and Jones, Gitlin sees this as a positive tool to enhance learning.

Given these things that these authors (who are also professors) believe are valued in the liberal arts college, why hasn’t the concept of human vulnerability been discussed? A close look at the things that are valued within

a liberal arts college indicates that a step toward the idea of vulnerability, with regard to both students and teachers, would not be such a stretch. The authors recognize these concepts and values as they pertain to students, but fail to see that they are students as well and that these things that are valued apply just as easily to themselves. When students share their narratives, or open up to new ideas, or seek to become part of an academic community, they are becoming vulnerable. Sometimes, these situations may take students out of their comfort zones. It is this openness (or vulnerability) that professors see as positive and necessary in order for learning to take place. It is likely that if professors could break away from conventional thinking about vulnerability within themselves, and not just with respect to their students, they could achieve greater results in the knowledge making experience that is college.

What is Missing

In her article, Linda Wells attempts to show vulnerability, but does not achieve it as fully as she could have. She seems to open a door that allows us to see her human side, but only a crack. She keeps a professional distance from the students that she writes about instead of allowing herself to be truly open to her students. In her article, Wells writes, “Perhaps, however, my digression only serves to reveal what things I now carry into the classroom, in

the form of the attitude of the curmudgeon, or to be more gender-appropriate, the crone” (202). With this statement, Wells begins to share a part of herself with her audience. She has now entered into a place that allows us to see her as human. Had she continued, her students and her peers might have internalized her message in a more personal and meaningful way. Instead, Wells chooses to remain safe. Her next words are, “I am not such a crone, however, that I am not fascinated by the things they [students] carry” (202). Instead of providing us with any deeper insight into her ethos, Wells immediately shifts the focus back to the students. Wells shies away from showing vulnerability to her audience without considering that by becoming vulnerable she may have added strength to her argument.

Todd Gitlin seems to understand the value of learning from others but a statement he makes regarding this value stops short of its full potential. Gitlin writes, “...the liberal arts tell us that human beings have faced troubles before; they tell us how people have managed, well and badly. Access to a common, full-blooded humanities curriculum will help our students cross social boundaries in their imaginations” (211). I believe that while it is possible to learn from reading about other human beings, we can learn more from the actual people in our lives. Instead of subscribing to a “common, full-blooded humanities curriculum” to teach students, what if we put more value on

common, full-blooded humans? Like Wells, Gitlin takes an approach that is safe. His statement is professional and does not require that he become vulnerable by sharing anything of himself with his students. By saying that the liberal arts tells us about human beings, Gitlin dismisses the personal ways that a teacher could teach a student about being human.

In her article, Wells makes a statement that is a contrast to Gitlin's. She writes, "Too many stories detailing the disparity between intellect and character abound in the world for the modern reader to accept naively the notion that the liberal arts will improve the soul" (204). Wells seems to be moving in a direction that may eventually lead to a more human approach to teaching, but she does not push her statement far enough to get there. While both authors make valid points, they also both leave a gap in their conversation. It seems that this gap may be broached by recognizing vulnerability within themselves and by being open enough to share something more of themselves with their students as well as their peers.

Joel Jones articulates the idea of openness and vulnerability within a liberal arts college when he writes, "That sacred trust of open communication becomes a primary contribution of the liberal arts collegiate tradition to contemporary higher education" (221). This statement seems to bring together the ideas of both Gitlin and Wells in that Jones also sees the idea of openness

as a necessary and positive tool. Communication is key for Jones. He does not address his statement to just students or just professors. His beliefs about the importance of trust and open communication are on a large scale. Jones seems to be inviting everyone involved in the liberal arts environment to become open and vulnerable in order to create a positive learning environment for all.

Conclusion

Conventional thinking has caused most humans to view vulnerability as a weakness. By breaking away from this convention, we are able to see how vulnerability can be a positive tool to help us grow and learn about our own humanity by being able to see the humanity in others. I believe that in a liberal arts environment, the concept of vulnerability between teachers and students is one that needs further exploration. By exploring this idea fully, we may be able to create a more open environment for students. When teachers explore this idea of vulnerability within themselves, they may be surprised at the results. I would like to highlight the results that one prison guard achieved a few years back. I did not just achieve sobriety. I did not just stay out of prison once I was released (though these are ultimately the end goals for a prisoner). Because of one man's willingness to give of himself, I gained so much more from the whole experience. I have since gone on to college to

become an English major and chase dreams that I once never thought were possible. In return, this prison guard gained a success story and a friend for life. Opening up and showing our human side will make us vulnerable, but it will make a difference in the lives of others in a way that nothing else could. I believe that by applying this concept of vulnerability at a liberal arts college, the end result would be a strengthening of the many wonderful things that are valued within the liberal arts environment thus strengthening the argument for a liberal arts education.

Works Cited

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