



Coffee Klatsch; or, How I Learned to Drink Deeply

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Up until a few months ago, if you had asked me if I liked coffee, I would have said yes—as long as it was doctored up with a generous pour of milk, a packet or three of sugar, and maybe a shot of vanilla flavoring to within an inch of its little latte life. I was quite secure in my knowledge of my own tastes; I had, after all, tried Turkish coffee in Germany as well as Folgers in the States; sipped from bone china in an upscale restaurant as well as from Styrofoam while on a plane. And no matter where I found myself with cup in hand, whenever I had attempted to drink my coffee black, I'd inevitably found it bitter, watery, a touch metallic.

So when a new friend recently suggested I try his coffee—Colombian, fresh ground from whole beans and brewed in his kitchen—black, I resisted. I knew what I knew, after all, and what I did (or didn't) need to learn. After several invitations, though, I finally set aside the milk and sugar. To my surprise, I loved the coffee. Even sans embellishments, it was rich, a little sweet, not at all bitter. I finished the first cup and drank a second.

Now, most students are far more accomplished caffeine connoisseurs than I could ever hope to be. But this story isn't really about the coffee. The experience reminded me that, even when it comes to the one thing I ought to be an expert on—myself—I didn't know as much as I'd thought. No matter the years behind me, I still had, and have, much to discover—and what's more, I realized that I will rarely, if ever, be able to anticipate the lessons. In truth, whenever we believe and act as if we already know what it is we need to learn, we're likely to shortchange ourselves and our educations. Not to mention our taste buds.

When I was in college, I might never have been convinced to try that most recent cup of black coffee. From my youngest years, I was an exceedingly focused student. By the age of six, I had decided that I wanted to be a writer, so somewhere around the age of, oh, seven or so, I determined that when I went to college, I would major in English and focus on creative writing. I never wavered. Even after I discovered a love of theatre, I stayed my course; after all, I could take literature courses in Shakespeare and drama. A year spent in Germany during high school led me to consider a double major, but ultimately I minored in German so I could focus my energies on writing. And of course I knew all along I would have to take core courses: math, science, history. But I figured I would just “get those courses out of the way” and then go on to the really important stuff. I tried all those subjects in high school, after all. I knew what they had to teach me, and I knew it wasn't what I needed to learn to fashion the life and career I foresaw.

Or (she writes as she takes another sip of coffee, black) so I thought.

Full disclosure: I don't remember a lot of the *specific* content of the core courses I took in college. I can, for example, no longer explicate from memory the causes of the English Civil War, which I once had to discuss in a European History essay exam, or name all the geologic

periods in order, even though I was named Outstanding Geology Student my freshman year (yes, I was surprised, too). And while basic principles of calculation have come in handy for completing various household tasks as well as in managing our college writing center's budget, I have not been called upon to cipher sines or cosines or practice any number of other related functions since my freshman Trigonometry course. If, then, I were to limit my definition of what I "needed" to learn to only those facts and skills I've found an immediate practical application for in my daily life, much of what I learned, content-wise, in my undergraduate core courses hasn't proven particularly useful.

But I'm troubled by that rather narrow definition of "useful," because my core classes taught me much of use. I learned a great deal more in Trig, for example, than how to figure ratios. I'd never really liked math, but a math course was required, so I enrolled in Trig during my first quarter of college; I had just completed a high school Trig class and figured it would be an easy ride. I gave my notes only a cursory glance before the first test—and promptly earned a big red 64. I learned fast that if I wanted to do well, I would need to work harder than I had in high school. I was studying the same material but in a new environment, and even the slightest change in context requires a shift in awareness and response. I can't say I never overestimated my abilities again, but the experience taught me that solid preparation tempered by a little humility is a pretty reliable formula for success. Ultimately I pulled an A in that class.

European History was another course I would not have taken had it not fulfilled a requirement. Class didn't begin until 8:25 am, but Dr. Brown expected us to be in our seats by 8:15, attentively taking note of the day's lecture outline as he wrote it on the board. Latecomers got locked out and missed the daily reading quiz. Dr. Brown demanded focus, discipline, and care, and showed me what it meant to genuinely respect learning and the environment in which it takes place.

And even though I don't, for the most part, remember precise facts or figures I learned in my core classes, the broad content-knowledge they provided has proven invaluable. I can think of no vocation other than writing—unless it is my second love, acting—that is better served by, and indeed requires that its most successful practitioners possess a wide range of content knowledge across an array of disciplines. The art of effective communication, according to Aristotle, *is* the art of invention, the ability to see, find, and create the materials out of which one might fashion a story, essay, or argument. Obviously, the wider one's knowledge, the more material one has to draw from to imagine a character, develop an idea, forge a new or surprising angle on a familiar topic. My fiction students and I recently read a short story—penned by a contemporary writer—set in New York City at the close of World War I. To make the story work, the writer needed not only the ability to craft metaphor and compose realistic dialogue, but also knowledge of the war, the influenza epidemic, daily life in early 1900s New York, and Olympic swimming. Indeed, a writer needs a voracious appetite for knowledge of all kinds. And the same is true of the actor, who never knows what character he or she will be asked to bring to life: I've played, among others, a Donne scholar dying from ovarian cancer, a regal queen of the fairy kingdom, a ditzy nightclub singer in love with a cowboy, and a Norwegian aristocrat miserable in the confines of her late nineteenth-century life.

In a sense, then, every course I ever took is directly applicable to my chosen path. The only classes I regret are the ones I *didn't* take. Though I liked science, I avoided biology in college because I could not bear to dissect a cat. The thought still makes me cringe, but I now crave deeper access to the world of metaphor scientific knowledge offers the essayist, and as my interest in nature writing grows, I wish I knew more about plants, rivers, oceans. When I conduct research in the writing center or write my annual reports, I long for a stronger background in statistics; had I had an economics course, I would feel better able to evaluate news reports about the current recession. And I could just kick myself for missing out on art classes, all because I was reluctant to invest one semester in the time-intensive studio course that required a four-credit-hour commitment instead of the usual three. These days I can only dream of dedicating eight-plus hours a week to studying and creating art.

Now, I confess: I don't get up every morning and grind my own coffee beans to brew myself a cup of joe. I am still just as likely to enjoy a sweet vanilla latte or a cup of green tea as I am a steaming mug of black coffee. But there are days I want, need the jolt that rich, dark joe provides, and since it's now part of my repertoire of experiences, I have access to its rewards.

Likewise, taking a required course in a subject you would otherwise not explore may not fundamentally change your life or alter who you are or wish to become—but then again, it might. We never know what we will need to learn. Perhaps the most important lesson a liberal arts education teaches is that it is the willingness itself, the eagerness to drink from that cup of black coffee in the first place, that is life-changing. Some cups will be bitter, others rich and warm. For most of us it takes a lifetime to find the perfect cup. When you do, drink it deeply, but don't stop there. Taste the next cup, too. And the next.

Time now for a refill. Drink up.