

BE CLUTCH ON YOUR FALL BREAK

Dazzle them with the Liberal Arts

Introduction (Slide 1)

I bet it happens on most every break from college. Sophomores, Juniors, Seniors—you know it. First years—you are about to find out. Everyone asks—parents, friends, siblings, grandparents, neighbors, people you barely know: ‘So how is Hope College going?’ they say. Some wonder about your social life; others are asking about grades, about your major—about love—my goodness—about your future, about a job.

This time—shock them with your answer. Be clutch! Dazzle them with the Liberal Arts. Let them know why the Liberal Arts are so thoroughly and completely incredible and why these Arts are giving you an edge, a staggering advantage in work and life—and for all of your life.

So the Liberal Arts: let’s work on what you need to be saying and sharing. Of course, you are at a Liberal Arts College. And if you are in your first year or your last at Hope, you are going to be asked to write about the Liberal Arts for First Year and for Senior Seminar. So what can you write about, and what can you say on break?

Today, I'm going to give you some vocabulary to talk about the Liberal Arts—some ways of making these Arts your own. This way you can claim them and use them. And if someone asks in a job or grad school interview, 'So you went to a Liberal Arts College, what was that all about?' Then you can amaze the interviewer with your answer. So, let's get started...

I. The Ancient Path

(Slide 2) When I was in Middle School 'Kung Fu' was one of the popular shows on TV. Every episode follows Kwai Chang Caine, a refugee from China, who wanders the American West in the golden age of cowboys. While barefoot, chill, and humbly dressed, Caine engages strangers, assists the helpless, reconciles enemies, and lays some kick butt martial arts on bad guys with guns. In every episode, Caine faces some decision or crisis. At these moments of decision, he always pauses and then flashes back to his previous life growing up in a Shaolin monastery in China; there he learned Kung Fu and ancient Chinese philosophy from his Masters. In every TV episode, Caine would ponder such wisdom, and then take action; he would calm his enemies either with gentle persuasion or a blow to the head. Then he would wander on to his next American West destination. Caine's ancient philosophy and his martial arts gave him an odd and compelling edge on his Cowboy, farmer, and Native American contemporaries.

When I was a kid I thought Caine's ancient Chinese wisdom was so cool, that arcane wisdom was so mesmerizing and I wanted that kind of difference in my life.

Right now—here at Hope College—you are walking and learning an ancient, revered, well-travelled path. The Ancient path of the Liberal Arts. Now let's put that ancient path and learning to work for you.

(Slide 1—painting at top) Ancient Greeks and Romans first developed these Arts—and thought they should be studied together—as a body of knowledge and a set of skills uniquely suited to a full and robust life. Down through the ages imitators of the Greeks and Romans have agreed. In fact, the Liberal Arts have an unparalleled track record of success—2,500 years and running. Hope College continues on that path of success with good reason and believes it will make all the difference for you.

Now the ancient Greeks and Romans divided their seven chief Arts into two rather dull sounding categories when echoing in our ears. They called them...

--The Trivium—Language, Rhetoric, and Logic. And...

--The Quadrivium—Geometry, Mathematics, Music, and Astronomy

Such Arts were meant to shape the entire person and to guide a life of learning, expressing, creating, and exploring.

(**Slide 3**) Now over the 2,500 years we've added other arts and areas of study to the original seven Liberal Arts at Hope. Today we have over forty different fields of study, centers, and programs. But our General Education program reflects the sort of balance prized by the Greeks and Romans—a blend of courses in the Arts, Humanities, Natural, and Social Sciences. We want you to be well-rounded, to be educated like the Ancient Greeks and Romans and to bring a breadth and depth of skill and knowledge to the work you do and all the ways you live. And we believe these Arts are more useful than ever in our current world and economy.

Tell those people on break, “I’m following the Ancient Path.” They will be blown away and want to know more. So then share with them with some Liberal Arts Kung Fu, some dazzling terminology...

II. The Liberal Arts Educate

Okay—this is the boring term in our list. The Ancient Path—that sounds kind of mysterious, or cool, or maybe even creepy.

The Arts ‘educate?’ Yawn.

Stay with me. Focus—mid-afternoon people. The Liberal Arts do this education thing in particular ways.

1) First, the Liberal Arts engage with a body of Knowledge; you need to know stuff and sometimes master that information. That's the education part we know already. You came to Hope with some of that—reading, writing, arithmetic. You do need more of that.

2) Second, you need skills. The Ancient Arts were meant to be practiced. You get to do that at Hope: collaborative research, internships, in-class conversations, independent studies. Because of Hope's size, you are going to get some serious training.

I'm a Hope College graduate; I will admit to you that I was shocked when I left Hope and went to graduate school at a large university. Tens of thousands of students, classes of 500-600. They learned knowledge; those students rarely got to practice. To do what they were learning.

Yet that's the original meaning of Education in Latin—*Educere*. To lead and to draw something out. We do that—we draw out the learning and skills in practice and draw them out in you.

3) Third, the Liberal Arts Education is interactive: you get mentored in the Liberal Arts. These arts are best learned from people you've met personally—guides who know you by name and make sure the Liberal Arts are coming alive for you—in

thought, writing, speaking, performing. Your professors here at Hope love to learn this way—in community—with each other—and with you.

To put it another way: the Liberal Arts is education in community—personal, interactive, dynamic; the Liberal Arts are meant to draw you out—to mold and shape your mind and your practices with others.

4) Fourth this Education in the Arts is meant to draw out the entire world of knowledge and practice and to help you see its complexity and texture—to really educate you broadly and deeply. So you take courses in the Arts, Humanities, Natural and Social Sciences.

Sometimes there will be so much coming at you all at once. You will have courses seeing the world from so many different perspectives. It will be so much that the world seems like a jumble of information and skills—too much.

The Liberal Arts can be like that—drawing you out, overwhelming you at times—too much all at once—you are just hanging on. The world is like that though—very complex. You must be ready! And gradually, very gradually, you will develop the knowledge and skills to sort everything that is coming at you.

The Liberal Arts Educate—tell your people that and explain how—when they laugh at the Ancient Path.

III. The Liberal Arts Push you to Cogitate

When you are on break, tell your people you are learning how to cogitate. We can be more brief with this term: the Liberal Arts not only teach you how to think, but so many different ways to think, ponder, consider, reflect, examine, measure, analyze, conceive, understand, imagine, estimate, and create. Leon Kass describes this cogitation as ‘thoughtfulness.’ He tell us that such thinking has “its origins in efforts to understand our experience. Its most ordinary beginnings are in wonder and perplexity...We are puzzled; we do not understand. Recognition of ignorance is the beginning of thought” (Kass, *The Aims of Education*, p. 87).

When people ask me, can you get a job with a Liberal Arts degree? I tell them that this sort of cogitation makes you keenly interesting to employers. A Hope grad brings to work multiple ways to approach and analyze and even see a project or problem or multiple ways to engage and communicate with people.

Let’s throw in a real life example: some time ago one of my students got hired straight out of Hope by a very unusual company, a company that sold used wedding dresses. Why did they hire my student? They liked her Religion major—it meant she could relate to people and their dreams and desires. Her Accounting Minor also drew them in; she could think about numbers and keep the books. And they were intrigued by her interest in Computer technology; after all she had one Gen Ed course on Computer Science. They liked the three ways she could

cogitate! Today she works for an on-line news service; that one Gen Ed course turned out to be her future. Thank goodness for her Liberal Arts Education.

A second real life example--mine. A few years ago we faced a real crisis in my family. I have never felt so stressed in my life. My wife and I—both Hope grads—found ourselves scrambling and searching desperate to find answers, solutions, and ways to cope. We turned to medicine, sociology, religion, education, communications, history, physical therapy, cognitive psychology, and neuroscience. We were using so many different ways of cogitating all at once. We survived that time using every possible Liberal Arts knowledge and skill we possessed and we knew about. And I took this Liberal Advantage for granted— isn't this how everyone thinks—in all these different ways? Every so often, though, I would espy another family—very like us. Broken, terrified, hanging on for dear life; parents with the same love and dedication to their families. But I would also notice a huge difference. They were very good people. But they could see very few ways to approach their crisis; they had far fewer resources than I did.

So explain to your people that cogitating is your game.

IV. The Liberal Arts Articulate

The terms are getting cooler—more dynamic—so pay attention.

The Liberal Arts articulate, speak that truth to those pesky questioners on break! The Ancient Greeks and Romans were all about this. The knowledge and skills they sought were primed to make them successful in society—in public—and to make human society flourish.

Hope College actually embodies this ideal right in its mission statement. There is this phrase: we “educate students for lives of leadership and service in a global society.” We educate you with an eye toward a career, but also toward so much more.

You need to be able to develop, deepen, and broaden your ideas. But you also need to be able to express your ideas in vivid and compelling ways. You must be able to persuade!!!

Now I must admit to you that I am in my late 50s. This means I can take the long view of some things. . And some problems and challenges seem timeless: My students come to me with tech problems with their papers—from hard drive crashes, to cloud problems, to jammed printers. We had our problems in my day too. I can remember telling my professor that my paper might be late because my roommate stole my hammer, that I broke my chisel, or that I ran out of the stone tablets on which I was incising my words.

As a historian I am also fascinated by how things change. But I am also dazzled by how things come back into style again. In my student days being able

to write well, get good grades, and score high on tests were the primary skills. But today—more than ever—you all, as students and graduates, need to be able to present yourselves—in person and on screen. And that makes you ancient—and brings us back to the world that gave birth to the Liberal Arts.

In Classical Greece and Rome you could not make a great career or life for yourself without the ability to express your ideas. For a few people this meant being able to write well. But for every significant person it meant the ability to speak well in public, to capture, move, and persuade an audience. Now, being able to write well was the focus back in my day as a student. Writing is still huge—and we work hard on that Liberal Art here at Hope—but more and more you need to be able to speak and present well. Social Media requires it. Skype and Face Time—youtube requires it. I can imagine in a few years that applications and resumes will be sent to grad schools and employers on some sort of youtube or even virtual reality platform. Every day we are more and more like the old Greeks and Romans—you have to be able to present yourself well—for everything.

Students with a Liberal Arts education will have a leg up on the competition in the future! The Liberal Arts are articulating you and empowering you to articulate in multiple ways, to learn to speak, discuss, interact with others. Few things please me more than watching a very quiet first year Hope student grow into a senior student, who is confident in her voice and expresses herself winsomely

and comfortably in front of others. One-on-one conversations with professors and chances to speak up in discussions and present work in small classes serve to prepare you for a dynamic and ever-changing future.

V. The Liberal Arts Liberate

--Now—here's a real puzzler. The Liberal Arts—so what is up with that word 'Liberal'? Perhaps someone you know will be thrilled that you are becoming 'Liberal' at Hope. Or you just might have someone on break ask you why you didn't go to a college where they taught you 'the conservative arts' instead.

This word 'Liberal' is really not meant to out you as a Democrat or complicate your Republican values. In brief—the Liberal Arts are here to set you free, to liberate you!

Here's the shocker: your humanity is not complete; it's not just that you are a human being; you are becoming one—and if you are fortunate—you will become more and more human the rest of your life. To put it another way, parts of your humanity are still undeveloped—and the only way to discover those parts of you is to expose you to a range of Arts, Humanities, Natural and Social Sciences. And you just might find that you possess gifts, abilities, and passions you never knew about! Or that you have yet to develop? Or there might be that subject you hated in high school, but find you love in college.

I was a lucky kid growing up. My parents took our family on trips all over the United States and to many National Parks! They also indulged my love of history with history museums and battlefields; And today I am a professional historian, so thanks Mom and Dad.

But when I came to Hope College in 1978 I had never been to an Art Museum, never attended an orchestra concert. I had never studied a foreign language. I had never eaten a slice of pizza—but that's a story for another time. I also had no idea what really went on at a college. I remember going to every info session at Orientation, because I had little idea of what I was doing or how this place worked. I was scared.

Two years later—I remember it like yesterday—1980—on a Field Trip with Hope College to Chicago; we visited the Art Institute and at lunch we walked the streets of downtown Chicago with Art History Professor, Jack Wilson. He pointed left and right to the Chicago Skyline towering over us and the stunning, myriad architectural patterns and styles. That walk with Jack Wilson changed how I saw urban landscapes and spaces. And seventeen years later it shaped how I would conceive and write my first book on two medieval cities in Germany. In fact, right now I'm finishing another book—and the first few pages are all about a Renaissance painting. The Architecture and Art I did not know as a kid, now shapes my work. The smallest, strangest, most irrelevant thing you learn today in

class might turn up big in your life years from now. What you learn and see now will shape what you create and do tomorrow.

Another example: at first Greek language class was terrifying for me as a Hope Student. I had no idea how to study a foreign language when I came to college. But ten years later I was in Germany; reading and speaking German; I was sitting in city archives reading five to seven hundred year old hand written documents scribbled in different dialects of old German. As an undergrad languages terrified me—I struggled and stressed—later languages would become a huge part of my life. The Liberal Arts made me acquire competencies and skills I did not want, but would desperately need in the future and would grow to love.

And the kid who knew nothing of what college is about? He's here before you—a college professor. I never knew how much I loved teaching until I came to Hope College as a student. I discovered I wanted to teach and learn with students—to grow and develop, to liberate our humanity together.

And I had my first slice of Pizza in Kollen Hall, 3rd floor, Fall Semester, 1979.

VI. The Liberal Arts Integrate

The Ancient path—educate, cogitate, articulate, liberate; now let's integrate; let's put things together.

Sometime here at Hope or in the near future—all our learning from these Liberal Arts are supposed to come together for you, to form something of a whole.

Hope College made that coming together easy for me in 1979. I still see it in the printed course schedule; Golden Age of Greece; one single, solitary class worth 18 credits: credit for Foreign Language, History, English, Philosophy, and Art History all in one class—with one vision. This year long class met 2 hours a day, five days a week—it showed me how various disciplines could work together to help you see more, see farther, and see how things fit together. That class laid the foundation for my professional work as a historian.

Moreover, my other Gen Ed classes at Hope, combined with my mind-blowing, soul-nourishing Religion Major—got me started on a project I'm still completing—my Lifeview and Worldview.

I know, it can seem or will seem like your courses are all about utterly different and unrelated things. At times it might feel like nothing quite fits together in Gen Ed or even within your major. But sometimes you have to go wide or deep before things become integrated. That's the theory of the Liberal Arts. If you only become an expert in one thing—one field, one trade, one specialization, then you will have zero chance of seeing the big picture. And your life will be forever a sequence of fragments. Or you will have a very limited, compressed place from which to view the world and a narrow ledge on which to build our work life.

So you go deep in various Gen Ed courses; you go even deeper if you go off campus, if you go overseas for a semester—the world gets huge, but it can get clear too, elemental—what makes us human, what makes the earth and our environment function, what makes society work.

(Slide 3) For quite a few years my wife and I lived in Tucson, Arizona. Whenever people visited us we would head four hours north to see the Grand Canyon. Who has seen it here? I tell you, the Canyon can be hard to grasp. I learned that I needed to prepare our guests before they visited the Canyon. Often when people see the Grand Canyon—stand at the very edge of it—for the first time, they usually can't see it; they can't make sense of it; they have no idea what they are looking at. After all, this Grand Canyon is a mile deep, 277 miles long, and 10 to 16 miles across. So to understand what you are seeing at the Canyon—especially the first time—you need to get inside it: to walk down into the Canyon—or to see the I-Max movie on the big screen before you get to the Canyon. With more intimate exposure to the Canyon, you can begin to see it in its complexity—all the canyons within canyons—all the peaks and valleys and mesas, and buttes and how it all fits together into this one Grand spectacle.

The Liberal Arts exposes you to different fields within the Arts, Humanities, Natural and Social Sciences; what looks like a flat landscape of information at

first, turns out to be full of surprising vistas and hidden depths. For a few years the Liberal Arts might seem chaotic, distinct, and unrelated.

The Liberal Arts will eventually come together and integrate—if you are looking for these things:

First, your vocation—your calling—you’ve tasted of this big world, now what are you supposed to do in it? What’s your purpose? Whom are you supposed to help?

Second, your Lifeview—what kind of life are you called to live?—the where, how and why of your life. My girlfriend and I at Hope figured this out together. She’s been my wife for 33 years. We still share values and faith, and a vision for our money, where and how we live, who and what we support. What a guide that has been for us! And we developed the essentials of that shared Lifeview here at Hope.

Third, your Worldview—what do you make of this big wide world, this big wide universe? What do you believe about its meaning, and purpose, its beauty and tragic problems? And how does your vocation and lifeview fit into this world?

If you are in FYS, then you are just beginning this journey. But keep your eye open for clues to your vocation, lifeview, and worldview as you travel the ancient path of the Liberal Arts. Be open to faculty, staff, and students, who can mentor you and direct you on that journey.

And if you are in Senior Seminar—this is the moment—to put some pieces together—to listen to your life and to your world! Ponder this—Senior Seminar will likely be the only time in your entire life that you pause to consider your vocation, Lifeview and Worldview—the only time that you will articulate these things in a long paper. Only once! I hear every year from Hope grads who write to tell me how Senior Seminar and the Lifeview paper changed their lives.

Let me introduce you to some Hope people who put it together at Hope

There's Erica—who caught a vision for her life at Hope. She worked for CNN for years. While at Hope Erica tried to be 1 to 2 weeks ahead on her homework. Why do that? So that she could indulge her love of research and explore her own questions every Friday in the library. CNN snapped up Erica with her Religion, History, Women and Gender Studies Triple Major. As a CNN researcher, Erica was ever on the edge of the action. When a story broke worldwide Erica would gather her team lightening fast—and in minutes to hours generate the research to feed to CNN news and to the CNN website. You know those BREAKING NEWS moments on television. Well, someone has to find the information that the news anchor reports; often that was Erica. And what the information Erica found and CNN didn't use? she'd sell it to other national and international news organizations.

There's Kathleen—a Liberal Arts phenom at Hope—a triple major in French, Dance, and Pre-med: Kathleen was a brilliant student, gifted dancer, a woman of deep faith—and so much fun; her laugh still rings in my ears. She took a semester abroad in France as a Hope student. When Kathleen graduated from Hope Medical schools competed to recruit her. She's an MD today, specializing in treating and rehabilitating the injuries of athletes, especially dancers. The pieces and patterns of her life today—she worked out here on this campus and abroad in Europe. Lifeview, worldview, vocation came together for Kathleen at Hope.

(slide 4) There's Seth and Stephanie—Religion and Social Work majors when at Hope College, but right now co-pastors of a church in New Jersey—near New York City; they started their ministry in the weeks before the Twin Towers crashed down on 9-11. They've been preaching the Gospel and caring for needy, hurting people ever since; their church becomes family to foster kids turning adult, supports military vets struggling to settle back into society, welcomes poor people to their church kitchen for job training, and shelters immigrants fearing deportation. Today Seth is fed up with politics in his state and country—so he's running for Governor of New Jersey. Seth has a slogan for his campaign, echoing his Christian Faith: “The Last are First.” Talk about vocation, Lifeview and Worldview merging...

I have to mention Lori—she caught a vision for her life in her Senior Seminar at Hope—where real life issues, Liberal Arts, and vocation come together. Today she’s an M. D., a Perinatologist or ‘high risk obstetrician.’ She’s a doctor who runs toward the pain, toward couples struggling with miscarriages, babies who might not make it, and mothers facing life-threatening issues. Lori’s pursuing her calling to provide urgent medical care for those facing acute pain and agonizing grief. She has an extraordinary vocation and this world desperately needs more people like Lori.

(Slide 5) Or how about one of Hope’s revered Alumni; you’ve likely seen his face around campus this Fall—A. J. Muste—one of the most influential peace activists of the twentieth century. You might be occupying his seat—or at least where he sat over a century ago—in this auditorium, that was once Hope’s chapel. The Liberal Arts helped give him a voice in the church and world beyond.

And there are many more—and there’s each of you—stories we will tell one day...about the Liberal Arts—your Lifeview and Worldview.

This break tell your people about Erica, Kathleen, Seth and Stephanie, Lori and A. J. Tell them how the Liberal Arts are integrating a vision for you!

VII. The Liberal Arts Illuminate

Maybe you are thinking this by now. Isn’t the speaker a Religion Professor? What a loser! No word about Religion, about God? I got you.

So it's Fall of 1978 and I'm in my room—Zweemer Hall—yeah, you never heard of it. Well they tore down my dorm later that year, but that's another story. I'm in my Freshman room—and I'm writing really primitive but very earnest poetry—and it's all about how I'm going to keep my simple Christian faith—how I'm not going to let all this academic college stuff mess with my love for Jesus. You see, I had grown up in a marvelous public school system—but in my school I had to keep my faith in God to myself. I admired my teachers, but I also heard them teach in a way that was unkind or uninterested in my faith. So I spent most of grades 7 to 12, trying to keep my education from polluting and warping my faith. I loved to learn, but I did not trust human learning. I wanted to keep that secular, godless poison out of my faith.

So I wrote a poem; Hope College was not going to ruin me; that's what I versed and rhymed. My simple faith would rule and keep me safe. But little did I know, I was already changing in my first months at Hope. The Liberal Arts were going to get me.

You see that change in me had already occurred nearly 2,000 years ago. Early Christians came to believe that the Liberal Arts are God's great gifts to humanity—delivered through the Greeks and Romans. They also believed that Christian faith could infuse with light, energize, and unfold the Liberal Arts and bring them to their glorious maturation and fulfillment.

That's part of our project here at Hope. Christian faith can illuminate and bedazzle your exploration of the Arts, Humanities, and Sciences. In fact, the Ancient Christian Theologian, Justin the Martyr, proclaimed that Christ is the very Word—the very pattern and matrix at the heart of every form of science, performance, and knowledge. Where truth is found, Christ is there. But there is more, Justin said—we know this Word beneath and within all things. This Jesus the Christ is God in the flesh, come to bring this world salvation. That Word is Jesus the Christ made personal to us.

When Christian faith illuminates the Liberal Arts all things become new and the human quest for knowledge and discovery can accelerate. That's the truth I discovered at Hope College. And that truth healed my soul. I came to Hope with a ravenous mind at war with itself. Desperate to preserve faith, I was suspicious of learning. Hope taught me how to bring faith and learning together. And that discovery has filled my life with wonder and joy. The Liberal Arts educate, cogitate, liberate, and integrate to their fullest when the divine light of grace illuminates learning, research, and performance. Most colleges and universities have forgotten this. Still most undergrads nationwide come to college yearning to grow spiritually.

Another early Christian theologian, Augustine, also points out that in a way the Liberal Arts illuminate Christianity. In fact, Augustine argues that you can't

really understand the Bible without proper training in the Liberal Arts. Those ancient arts, though born of people not Christian, give Christians the knowledge, and skill to express and unfold their faith, their love of God, their scriptures, and their lives.

I don't want to sugar coat this though. Illumination—God's great dazzling light pouring around and through all things—is not all bliss and brightness. Bringing Christian faith together with the Arts, Humanities, and Sciences can be inspiring, but it can also be hard and exhausting work. And there are always new challenges—new ideas, new questions, new problems.

That's why we need you. My generation of Christian Liberal Artists—illuminated by the grace of Christ—is entering its last lap of work. Some of you need to rise up and take our places in colleges, companies, industries, neighborhoods, and churches. The Illumination of the Liberal Arts and the Christian faith needs to happen in and through you—right here and right now—while at Hope College. And when it happens, that divine luminescence will light your path the rest of your life. And will light paths throughout the world.

Do you have one of those lifeview/worldview, vocation type slogans to inspire you?

I do: Philippians 1:9-11—this is my desire for students: the ancient Christian, the Apostle Paul writes, “It is my prayer that your love may abound

more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruits of righteousness which come through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.”

This is my desire for my students—a Liberal Arts education illuminated with the grace and glory of God.

CONCLUSION:

The Liberal Arts these days are your job. But someday they will help you get a job. Mark Roche, in his book, *Why Choose the Liberal Arts*, puts it this way: “the record is clear. In pursuing the liberal arts, students develop capacities that allow them to excel in any endeavor. The best firms know of these capacities, and they value them.” As Roche notes, the liberal arts prepare you for positions available now and “for those that have yet to be invented or discovered.” (p. 99)

So when they ask you—on Fall Break--what’s going on at Hope College? Be clutch. Tell them. Tell them about the Ancient path; tell them what the Liberal Arts do: how they educate, cogitate, articulate, liberate, integrate, and illuminate. Tell them there is no better education for your career, your life, and your very soul.

Tell them.

And thanks for listening and for coming to Hope College.