

Problem-Solving Through Serendipity

A recent opinion piece published in *The New York Times* called, “How to Cultivate the Art of Serendipity,” explained that at its origin, “serendipity” was defined as a skill that one could acquire, rather than a run of good fortune; indeed, the word had been inspired by a Persian fairy tale in which three travelling princes are constantly making new discoveries, “by accident and sagacity,” of things they are not looking for. Based on this idea, the author poses the question: “how do we cultivate the art of finding what we’re not seeking?”

I would answer that one can develop this serendipity through certain practices: by looking where others have not thought to look; by considering each piece of information, no matter how big or small, as a potential seed for expansion; and by finding parallels between otherwise completely different ideas or things. Though these methods can be applied by any discerning individual, I believe that a liberal arts education facilitates this type of thinking, precisely because it invites serendipity.

Unlike students in math and science, students in the liberal arts take classes across a wide variety of disciplines. These different approaches to thinking and problem-solving pour into each other, forming alloys that not only enrich their critical thinking abilities, but spark completely new ideas for the rest of the world to build upon. While many of these connections are ones they sought to create intentionally, some arise from pure happenstance; in other words, students encounter serendipity. Nonetheless, it is the multidisciplinary and out-of-the-box type of thinking promoted by liberal arts institutions that leads to these serendipitous discoveries. The further in one’s education, the more subjects that can be linked, and the more great ideas one can stumble upon.

The power of serendipity must not be understated; history has been marked by it. From the monumentally important yet accidental discovery of penicillin to the recent finding of the revolutionary gene-editing CRISPR-cas9 molecule, humans have benefited immensely from serendipitous discovery. Yet, even though it has had the most palpable effect in the scientific field, I believe that serendipity can also have a powerful effect when applied to ethical issues and to the conversations surrounding them.

Indeed, a liberal arts education would yield not only an individual who could combine multiple disciplines - the sciences and the humanities - in order to find solutions to the many ethical issues that our country faces today, but also a serendipitous thinker: someone who can stumble onto new ways of thinking about an issue. This is especially important in a country where trenches seem to be dug on two sides of an argument; in short, a serendipitous thinker is able to see what others cannot see, and provide a way out of a deadlock. Many of our country’s ethical issues, such as systemic racism and income inequality, have been raging on for decades, if not centuries. Ultimately, we will need these thinkers, who can generate completely new ideas, in order to solve them.