

Perspective: a museum that gives meaning to liberal arts

By William F. Felice, special to the Times

Thursday, August 7, 2014 7:12pm

Every fall semester, as a professor at Eckerd College, I face the prodigious task of challenging 18-year-old students to open themselves up to new ways of looking at the world and, perhaps for the first time in their lives, learn how to learn.

I struggle with what teaching strategies will help these students become spot-on critical thinkers. I toil with how to communicate to this computer savvy generation that the knowledge most worth attaining may not be found on the internet or in data collection but in some of the great works of culture and in the inherited history of the collective human experience.

The challenge is also to get students to focus on the "big questions" in life surrounding justice, power, freedom and the sacred. The primary goal is to help students embark on a vital (and joyous) intellectual journey in the liberal arts that has the potential to immeasurably enrich their lives.

Drawing on the experiments, innovations and creations of public intellectuals and creative artists can be an instructive path forward. For example, this fall I will introduce students to Nobel Prize laureate Orhan Pamuk's Museum of Innocence, which I recently visited in Istanbul.

This museum is an extraordinary attempt to preserve his childhood memories of the city through the everyday objects that adhere to every life. The museum is an astonishing, original cultural project that took Pamuk decades to complete. The particular objects in the museum are linked to Pamuk's novel of lost love, also titled



The Museum of Innocence. Pamuk notes: "Just as in Aristotle's *Physics*, Time merges when individual moments shrink into themselves, so when objects do the same, they lose their stories. It is at this point that the innocence of objects becomes apparent. Our museum has been built on the contradictory desires to tell the stories of objects and to demonstrate their timeless innocence."

Pamuk reminds us that Aristotle makes a distinction between Time and the "single moments" that he describes as "the present." "Single moments are — like Aristotle's atoms — indivisible, unbreakable things. But Time is the line that links them."

Pamuk continues: "My life has taught me that remembering Time — the line connecting all the moments that Aristotle called the present — is for most of us a rather painful business." To overcome this pain, Pamuk calls on us to "treasure" our time for its deepest moments and preserve these memories for posterity.

The Museum of Innocence is not a typical "museum." It is small and focuses on the human dimensions of modern life by drawing out "the significance of humble and familiar objects with sharply observed stories of daily life." The museum's vitrines (boxes) are art objects in themselves, drawing the observer into Istanbul's history through an examination of the "moments" and objects of daily life.

Pamuk believes that we don't need more museums that construct historical narratives of a community or nation, but rather ones that focus on the everyday stories of individuals, which are "richer, more humane and much more joyful." His hope is that the museum would have the "capacity to reveal the humanity of individuals." The museum succeeds beautifully. Through these remarkable displays of everyday objects, the "single moments" of individual lives of Istanbul bring a reality of life not available in a traditional museum.

This "reality of life" carefully presented in the museum cannot be learned in a textbook or comprehended by only studying the history, politics, science, religion or art of Turkey. This understanding comes about due to Pamuk's integration of knowledge and willingness to experiment with new forms of cultural and artistic expression. Pamuk thus represents the best of the liberal arts scholar — seeking the truth, reflecting on the human condition, reading and understanding, writing clearly and persuasively, working on solving major problems, and applying his "liberal education" for the benefit of humanity.

In 1921 Albert Einstein wrote: "The value of an education in a liberal arts college is not the learning of many facts but the training of the mind to think something that cannot be learned from textbooks."

To be a liberally educated person means that you open yourself up to new cultures, new ways of interpreting reality, new ways of seeing the world, and a new appreciation for history.

To become a liberally educated person means that you embrace the ethnic and cultural diversity of our small planet and work to understand and empathize with other ethnicities, cultures and religions. Human creativity, human invention, and values identification are of central importance to an understanding of the human experience, and who we are as human beings, how we see ourselves, and where we fit into the cosmos.

A central goal of a liberal arts education is to appreciate the "integration of knowledge" and a modesty about ever achieving true "wisdom." Pamuk's Museum of Innocence gives us an exuberant, effective and dramatic representation of this liberal arts approach to knowledge and understanding.

William F. Felice, associate dean of general education and professor of political science at Eckerd College in St. Petersburg, can be reached via his website: williamfelice.com. He wrote this exclusively for the Tampa Bay Times.

Information on the Museum of Innocence available at: <http://www.masumiyetmuzesi.org/?Language=ENG>.

Perspective: a museum that gives meaning to liberal arts 08/07/14

© 2014 Tampa Bay Times



[Commenting Guidelines](#)



[Abuse Policy](#)

ADVERTISEMENT

Articles and offers from around the Web