Belonging, Identity and Purpose in the Liberal Arts

A previous co-worker of mine, Judy, once told me, “Attending university was one of the best things I could have done for myself.” At the time, this statement was profoundly confusing. We were standing in a 60-foot freezer in the back of a big box store, she a year from retirement and I a year after dropping out of high school. I had thought of university as something that was not only unattainable for people like me but as something that people only “got through” to get them to some higher paying career. That we stood together in the same freezer, on opposite sides of our working lives, I wondered how she could still regard her experience at university so highly. Eight years later, as I near the end of my time as an undergraduate student at Augustana, I understand that I severely underestimated the kind of education provided by the liberal arts and how it might change me.

In a course titled *Globalization and Spirituality* at Augustana, we read work by author and alumnus of Augustana, Hans-Dittmar Mündel. The course was about being human in the context of globalization, and it focused on a critical reflection of our own lives and how we have been shaped by globalization. In his book, *Living Human Lives: The Spiritual Dimension of Becoming Fully Human*, Mündel wrote about the “hunger for life,” the idea that humans do not feel their life is complete or full by achieving basic survival needs alone. Instead, because we have an “almost restless drive toward a truly human life,” we seek some greater meaning to answer if our life has been truly worthwhile (Mündel 1987, 1). The author then explores how this
human hunger is filled with three elements: identity, belonging and purpose. I believe these elements offer a framework for the core of what my experience at Augustana has offered.

It would take me some years after leaving high school before I would open myself to the idea of attending university. At eighteen years old, I had moved into a basement suite with my partner in Camrose, Alberta. As Mündel accurately identified, I was stuck in an “aesthetic stage” of life (Mündel 1987, 74-76). My goals were short-term, consisting of survival and leisure; my identity was rooted in what I had, felt or did, and I related to the “human community” as a spectator rather than a participant. It was not until I felt the “melancholy of boredom,” and then frustration for injustices that I saw, that I moved to the “ethical stage” and began to seek something more for my life (Mündel 1987, 77-80). After being involved with supporting a roommate in gaining custody of her four children, I believed this “something more” could come from a career in social work, and I imagined myself one day moving to a large city and becoming a family social worker. At this time, I decided to finish high school and apply for university; as the only one of my siblings to do either at that point, it started as an intimidating feat.

Leading to this point, I had been homeschooled in Ontario’s Huron County with my six siblings until a series of job losses for my Dad, what I now understand as deeply connected to forces of globalization, led my family to Alberta. We would then bounce between the village of Gwynn, a small house in downtown Edmonton, and the suburban city of Camrose, where the University of Alberta Augustana Campus lives. Throughout this time of wandering, my family experienced more than a shift in our socio-economic standing, from a comfortable lower-middle class to markedly low-income; we also moved from a community to a public, as author Wendell Berry describes it (Berry 1993, 161). Our community in Ontario, made up of overlapping family, church and other homeschoolers. It was admittedly isolating, yet offered a kind of freedom and
security. I knew who my people were, where I belonged, and roughly what my life would look like. Moving west, transitioning to the public school system and finding myself to be a queer woman quickly distanced me from the community in Ontario, and the idea of what direction my life might take disappeared with it. In many ways, I am as grateful for that community as I am that my family left it, but I was now decidedly in a public, I did not feel a sense of belonging, and my identity was unclear for the first time.

Living as an open member of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community in Alberta has been an interesting, and sometimes challenging, experience. The culture and political climate of the Canadian prairies, and particularly Alberta, is known for its conservative views and anti-2SLGBTQIA+ legislation (Bellefontaine 2024). My perception of these attitudes has been something I now realize I have allowed to be a significant barrier in my life. I did not express myself in hopes of avoiding conflict, and I never truly explored what it meant to be queer. At Augustana, I have not only been able to express myself without fear, I have been given the opportunity and guidance to explore the history and experience of queer people in the Canadian prairies and beyond. Lesbian feminist philosophers like Marilyn Frye have put words to the experience of being both a woman and a queer person in a context constructed for straight men (Frye 1995); Canadian historians and activists such as Valerie Korinek, Lyle Dick and Tom Warner have revealed the rich history queer people in the Canadian prairies (Korinek 2010; Dick 2009; Warner 2002); and respected Canadian law scholars like Brenda Crossman have done extensive work to examine the systems which have repressed this history and representation (Crossman 2013). These understandings have given me new insights into myself and the responsibility I hold to my community. I feel a real sense of belonging in Alberta, and an understanding that being queer is a complex part of my identity.
Another particularly impactful realization came from a second-year interdisciplinary studies course where we explored how, according to Christian teachings, humans were *bara to bara*, created to create. We learned from local “makers” how to bead and create baskets, dove into the world of written art, and cultivated meaningful connections with our peers by sharing our creations, all while reading works by a wide range of authors about the importance of creating. Two readings especially impacted how I thought of creating: a poem by an Indigenous speaker titled “Tiny Bead Seeds” and Karl Marx’s essay, “Alienated Labour.” The poem illustrates the beauty of a connection to one's creations, history, culture and identity, and Marx’s essay explores how, under the structures of capitalism, humans experience alienation: separation from the products and process of our labour, from others and ourselves, ultimately separating us from our “species-being” (Marx [1844] 1964). The importance of purposefully creating and connecting to our creations is something I now practice in all aspects of my life, and something I will carry with me throughout my future career.

Though Judy had to leave her liberal arts education early, she knew it had changed her and would change me. One essay alone cannot explain how the community, connections with professors and a wide range of academic perspectives have transformed how I view the world and my place in it. Through understanding myself, my context, my history, and my community, I have found direction to bring me closer to those elements of belonging, identity, and purpose, which will lead to a life worth living. I no longer feel like a spectator moving through the human community but someone with agency over my life and responsibility to others. I see what I create as impacting myself and those around me, and creating with purpose gives me meaning, whether it is an essay, a relationship or a woven basket. Wherever life takes me, I see myself returning to Camrose, continuing my education and working to create policy change in Alberta.
Ultimately, the liberal arts and sciences have fostered a recognition that I am hungry for life, and
the tools to think critically and reflectively about what I am filling that hunger with.

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