

On Life and Meaning

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Episode 85 – Sally Robinson – People and Possibility

Only Connect

And now a personal word,

In 1910, E.M. Forster, a novelist, published ‘Howards End.’ The novel explores what many British novels explore: barriers of class and convention. The story has all the twists of English gentry social conflict: repressed emotions, broken engagements, sibling rivalry, social prejudices, scandal, inheritance, and complex moral resolutions. In Edwardian fashion, it all boils with the lid firmly on top of the pot. But Forster adds something new: an express theme about uniting the elements of our personality and the value of relationship. Forster says this in the voice of the novel’s liberal intellectual heroine, who hopes to help her fiancé become more whole and humane:

Only connect! That was the whole of her sermon. Only connect the prose and the passion, and both will be exalted, and human love will be seen at its height. Live in fragments no longer.

In 1998, William Cronon, a professor of history, published an essay entitled *Only Connect... The Goals of a Liberal Education*. Cronon posed the question: ‘What does it mean to be a liberally educated person?’ He answers his question in three parts: first, noting the semantic roots of the word *liberal*, how it derives from the Latin and Sanskrit words meaning ‘free’ and ‘to grow.’ Cronon writes “Liberal education is built on these values: it aspires to nurture the growth of human talent in the service of human freedom.” Second, Cronon explores how education has lost sight of these values in complex curriculum and credit-hour formulas. Lastly, he offers a list of ten qualities of a person that he would hope a liberal arts education would produce. The last on his list and the ultimate quality reads this way:

10. They follow E.M. Forster’s injunction from Howards End: “*Only connect...*” More than anything else, being an educated person means being able to see connections that allow one to make sense of the world and act within it in creative ways. Every one of the qualities I have described here...is finally about connecting. A liberal education is about gaining the power and the wisdom, the generosity and the freedom to connect.

Cronon ended his essay saying this:

I have said that [the two words “only connect” is] as good an answer as any I know to the question of what it means to be a liberally educated person; but they are also an equally fine description of the most powerful and generous form of human connection we call *love*....Liberal education nurtures human freedom in the service of human community, which is to say that in the end it celebrates love.

In 2019, Sally Robinson, a student of history and community volunteer, referenced E.M. Forster and Cronon’s essay in conversation, and declared “I want to be someone who can connect.” She said it in the present tense, at the age of 85, leaning into the present and into the future. She said it with remarkable humility about the all the connections she has made in a lifetime of civic leadership. She said it revealing without affectation all the hallmarks of a liberally educated person: idealism, curiosity, pursuit of truth, self-criticism, pragmatism, engagement, compassion.

Sally knows that the social circumstances that liberated her also binds her to the communities that gave her freedom in the first place. She exercises that freedom making a difference in the world so that the world might make a difference for others.

Sally is alive with the most powerful and generous form of human connection. Sally is alive with love.

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