

Free Minds Keynote, May 24, 2016

Good evening. My name is Sylvia Gale and I had the honor of being the first director of the Free Minds Project. I now live in Richmond, Virginia, where I direct the Center for Civic Engagement at the University of Richmond.

In your program there is a reflection written by Dr. Evan Carton, who was the founding director of the UT Humanities Institute, Free Minds' original home. Evan recalls the cold call I made to him from California in 2002, when I was considering coming to UT for graduate school, and wanted to know, would he be interested in starting a program that exploded traditional ideas about adult education? He was, and we did.

But long before I made that call, I had been inspired by the bold vision of a journalist and social critic named Earl Shorris, who founded the Clemente Course in the Humanities on Manhattan's Lower East Side. The Clemente Course, like Free Minds was intended to expand access to the humanities—subjects like literature, philosophy, history, art, ways that we express and reflect on what it means to be human.

I first learned of Shorris's program in an essay he wrote for *Harper's* magazine in 1997. I found the essay in a stack of dusty magazines in a friend's house in Colorado, where I was living the year after I graduated from college. I would learn later that, at almost the same time, Vivé Griffith was discovering Shorris' essay while teaching composition to freshmen at the University of Cincinnati, where she was a graduate student. For both of us, Shorris' vision was electrifying because we recognized that Shorris and his students had traveled across a tremendous and troubling divide.

You see, in this country we have long had two distinct educational tracks—one for people who are invited to use their education as a chance to explore and grow, and another for people who, the thinking goes, really need to use their education to get a skill and a job as quickly as possible. Most often, the study of the humanities is reserved for that first track, for students who go to college knowing that finding passions and interests is part of the goal. Or, as Earl

Shorris bluntly told his first class in the Clemente Course, “rich people learn the humanities; you didn’t.”

But actually, even those “rich” students in elite colleges suffer from this divide. At the University of Richmond, for example, I see many students fall in love with learning through literature, or history, or art—and then wrestle with the haunting question, but shouldn’t I do something more *practical*?

Aha. Here is what those students don’t know—but every Free Minds graduate does. The humanities as you have studied them over this past year are indeed practical, are in fact a lifelong *practice*.

It isn’t that having read Plato’s *Republic* in itself makes you smarter or better or more capable. But the *practice* of being called into a relationship with Plato’s ideas, the *practice* of looking carefully at language, the *practice* of reflecting on your own beliefs and reflecting just as thoroughly on what others believe—these are experiences that help us understand and discover the possibilities of being human.

Don’t take my word for it. Listen to what Free Minds graduates have had to say about this over the years.

Here is Maryann Ramos, Class of 2007, a Free Minds pioneer:

*“When I read the hand-outs and go over the syllabus, I feel **alive and very proud**...Feeling this freshness gives me a lot of hope for the educational opportunity my daughter has.”*

And Amanda Jacobs, Class of 2011:

*“The past few months that I have been involved with Free Minds I have noticed a change within myself. I have noticed that I have become **more vocal and more willing to express my personal opinions** in discussions.”*

And from this year’s class, Racquel Halverson reflects:

*“I have fallen in love with reading all over again...I am able to train my brain to analyze texts so I can organize my thoughts and have a **deep conversation** on the subject at hand. I am able to find **confidence in my intelligence** that grows with every paper I write and every book I read.”*

Alive. Proud. Vocal. Confident.

The real question is not, *what can you do with the humanities?* But rather, what *can't* you do with a mind practiced in the art of forming questions, accustomed to careful thinking and rethinking, open to multiple perspectives, and confident in its abilities?

Much has changed since those earliest days of the Free Minds Project 10 years ago, and all of it for the better. Now, instead of po-boys or pizza brought to class each night in the trailer of my bike, there is a healthy catered dinner. Instead of haphazard babysitting in the next room, there is a full-fledged and creative program for kids of Free Minds students, nurturing their learning alongside their parents. Instead of the *hope* that students would be able to finish the class in the midst of life's necessities, there is a robust support system, helping students clear barriers as they arise.

But what hasn't changed is what the program stands for, and what it prizes.

Practicing the humanities matters because discovering ourselves and our own capacities is a human right. It is a right that often gets shunted for what are perceived to be more urgent concerns. Yet it is perhaps the most fundamental right—the right to become a fully expressed human being, the right to understand ourselves, each other, and our world.

[To class of 2016]: You haven't ended that journey of understanding tonight. But you have, over this year of great effort and accomplishment, embraced it. You know already that there is no manual, no textbook, no single class or even degree that can teach you everything you desire to know. And you know that it is actually the love of ideas and learning itself that will propel you forward into whatever practical pursuits you choose.

Free Minds is far more than a college access program. It is about access to *life*. It is about recognizing what the poet Wallace Stevens wrote: “It can never be satisfied, the mind, never.”¹

Class of 2016, I congratulate you for your progress in this insatiable journey. And I acknowledge everyone here—alumni, professors, program staff, friends, family, supporters—whose efforts continue to give this necessary and radical idea a life.

Thank you.

[End with what’s next in program: Since the first class, Free Minds students have been voting on a class speaker to represent their class at graduation. Tonight, we are going to honor each class of Free Minds graduates by asking these students—or others if those original speakers were not available—to come forward to the podium and introduce their class. Now I’d like to invite these representatives to come forward. And please, if you are a graduate here tonight and are able to do so, please stand as your class is introduced and stay standing until we have introduced all alumni classes.]

¹ From “The Well Dressed Man with a Beard.”