

The Good Life

by

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Fall 2015.

"To put everything in balance is good; to put everything in harmony is better." Hugo, V. (1874). *Quatrevingt-treize*. Hugo, V., & John Davis Batchelder Collection (Library of Congress). (1877). *Quatrevingt-treize*. Paris: Impr. J. Claye.

"Welcome to Drama 1000!"

Michael cringed. Reluctantly placing his calculus homework back into his neatly arranged backpack, he resigned himself to the fact that this disaster was actually happening to him. Graduating at the end of the semester, and having carelessly ignored his fine arts requirements for the first three-and-a-half years of his bachelor's of science degree, Michael's education was now confined in the dungeons of the theatre. Drama. Of all things drama.

"Class please settle down!"

The professor's voice was far too bubbly. Groaning within, Michael's eyes ventured off his lined scribbler and scanned the diverse crowd before him. The amount of energy in the room reminded him of a group of pre-schoolers on Halloween night: sugar frenzied, excitement ridden, and concerned only by which among them had the best costume. Michael reflected on his recently completed mathematics 3500 course and how calm, reasonable, and focused it had been. Thespians, he concluded, were not his kind of people.

“Now because this is the first day of classes, and I know you are all dying to get started with the course, I’m not going to bore you with any introduction, but rather, I’ve decided to simply start you all off on your first group project!”

Perfect. A group project. No course outline, no grading rubric, no structure, just a project Michael knew he’d have to do most of the work for. What a great way to start off his semester. Clicking the end of his pristine mechanical pencil, he neatly took note of what he was certain would be the contract of his death.

“This project will be worth the majority of your grade for this class. I have already assigned you to groups based on last name, so you will have the opportunity to meet new people and work with different viewpoints. Each group has been assigned a scene from a well-known theatrical piece that they are to study. At the end of the semester, your groups will present an analysis on three characters from your piece who play an integral part in the scene; determine which characters are the heroes, which characters are the villains, why some characters are successful, and why others fail. After which, the group will present a modern practical application of the lessons learned by these characters. The project will also require you to determine some connecting link between all the characters aside from the setting they are in. If that is all clear, I’d like to get you started right away! As I read off your names, please get together in your groups, and I will give you your assigned shows!”

Michael waited in fear as he listened for his name to be called. The names which accompanied his were completely foreign to him, as were the faces that came with them; however, the two boys that made up his group did not look any more pleased than

Michael felt. They definitely weren't theatre people. Perhaps this wasn't going to be quite as bad as Michael had thought.

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"I just don't see where you are coming from with this!"

Ryan's face was beet red with passionate anger. It had been two months since he had been assigned this group project, and his "group" had made next to no progress at all. When Dr. Leavitt had assigned them the battle at the barricades scene from *Les Misérables*, Ryan had the impression that their task was to be an easy one. He, being a social science major, believed that the hero of this scene was obviously the acclaimed character Enjolras, for Enjolras asked crucial questions about how society worked at the time, and what it would be like if it were set up differently. To Ryan, this was indeed the mark of a true hero; however, Michael, the science major, had insisted that Javert—whom Ryan saw to be a cruel, heartless, and blind character—was indeed the hero. As if that conflict wasn't enough, John, majoring in history, took the popular viewpoint that the character Jean Val Jean was indeed the hero of the scene. How these two came up with such wrong perspectives was past Ryan's comprehension, for the answers seemed so logical and obvious to him.

At the moment the three were in the middle of the heated argument about the results of the battle scene. Michael had been preaching his character's defence for a good half hour, and Ryan's annoyance burgeoned into indignation.

"Just because Enjolras died in the barricade scene does not mean he was a failure! He was a hero! He died for change!"

“That’s just it! He died for change. Change was rebellion. The law at the time was clear, and your Enjolras did not follow the law at all. He rebelled. Javert on the other hand fought for what he knew to be right: order. He fought an uncomfortable fight because it was the right thing to do! The law is the law. That makes HIM the hero!”

Ryan could not believe his ears. His mind flashed to a lecture he’d once had in his beloved philosophy class on Plato’s Allegory of the Cave. Michael reminded him of the prisoners in said allegory, for the boy was only seeing what he’d been told all his life. Simply relying on science and law and never questioning the way society worked seemed like a primitive way of thinking to Ryan. Feeling the fury broil within him, Ryan snatched his drawstring bag from the floor and stormed out of the classroom. Leaving like this would only exacerbate the situation, but Ryan could not bear one more moment. Drama was supposed to be his easy class. This was anything but easy.

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John felt a refreshing bead of sweat roll down his face. Thirty minutes complete. A run on the treadmill was to him the only antidote for end-of-semester anxiety, for all the stress facing him in his last two weeks of school seemed suspended for just a moment. As he calmly steadied his breath and wiped the side bars with the cleaning cloth, his mind wandered to the most daunting of all his classes.

Drama 1000 was not going well at all. No lab assignment, no research paper, and no final exam could be as formidable to him at this point as his dreaded group project. Their group had spent more hours arguing over menial details than most groups had spent reading their material. John could quote the scene over a month ago just from hearing Michael and Ryan bicker about calculus versus sociology and how they related

to the barricade building. John had remained relatively quiet during most of the meetings; he believed that the best way to keep the peace in this situation was simply to refrain from talking at all. After almost three months of silent submission, John decided he would just start the analysis on his own. He had it nearly complete now, but he faced one major problem: John needed his group members to consent to presenting his work in class; thus, they needed to at least pretend to agree with what his perspectives were. Feeling a wave of stress wash over him, John slowly sunk to the ground beside the water fountain.

“I’m sorry, but could I get some water?”

The voice was polite. John sheepishly slid aside so as to not barricade the fountain. After about thirty seconds, John glanced up at the man filling his water bottle.

Taylor Wilson, the head of the department of drama, looked much less intimidating in sweats. The calmness in those happy eyes seemed to poke John’s pride until he was too ashamed of himself to keep watching the esteemed professor. As soon as he left, John would again be able to forget his terrible predicament, yet, while he remained, the project was all he could think of. A bottle of water could not possibly take burdensome amounts of time to fill.

Once the water stopped flowing, however, the shoes did not move. Feeling Taylor’s eyes peering into his very soul, John slowly looked up. With all the seriousness of a supreme judge, Dr. Wilson held out his hand, helped John to his feet, and began walking towards the door, gesturing him to follow. Once in the professor’s office, Dr. Wilson finally spoke.

“I saw emptiness in your eyes today, young man. I want to help you get rid of it.”

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Dr. Leavitt smiled as she looked over her class final project evaluations. Of all the groups, this had to be her favourite. The final paragraphs of their analysis spoke true to her heart:

In the end, our group concluded that there was not one hero in our scene, nor was there one villain. There were in fact people, all working towards one common goal: the “good” life. To Enjolras, the best life could only be achieved by defying the current way of government and socially moving the people to new levels. Javert saw the world in a linear sense; to him, the laws were correct, and living a life of law abiding was living the “good” life. Contrastingly, Jean Val Jean felt the better life could only be found in living a religious life of forgiveness and learning from the history of the past. For a long while, our group debated which was right and which was wrong. We found, however, that due to their common goal and their ways of obtaining answers, they were in fact all right and all wrong.

All three students in our group all came from completely different fields of study. Michael has a deep affinity for science. Science uses logic, reasoning, experiments, and critical thinking to come up with concrete explanations for the natural world. The purpose behind this process is to find the “good” life through scientific development. Comparatively, Ryan studies the social sciences. Social sciences search for the “good” life by questioning the way society works today and how it could be bettered in the future. Lastly, John is a history major. The humanities look for the “good” life by searching through works of the past. By studying these works, the humanities come up with an ideal formula for how the present could be. Each of us were very different in our perspectives, but it was

not until we realized the importance of all branches of our knowledge that we could truly progress.

Dr. Taylor Wilson describes this perfectly: "The main lesson of the fine arts is that knowledge and the "good" life cannot be found by looking at life from one perspective alone. In order for a piece of theatre to be entertaining and moving, it must evoke emotions from a wide range of perspectives. Actors must work together to not only balance their differing opinions and lifestyles, but also to mash them into beautiful harmonies that tell a story virtually everyone can relate to. If all three disciplines of theatre (dance, music, and acting) come together perfectly, the result is a magnificent masterpiece capable of changing hearts. If only one or two of these disciplines are used, the result is not as complete." The same can be said for knowledge. Gaining knowledge only from a specific discipline is a hinderance to the potential masterpiece of knowledge one's brain could produce; therefore, it is vital that one receive breadth in their education.

Once one obtains that breadth, it is then one's duty to become an engaged citizen and act, just as these three characters did. We feel each character succeeded when it came to being engaged in events around them, and each was very educated in their specific field, yet we feel their failures came by wings of ignorance in regards to others' perspectives.

All in all, education is the driving force of society today. Ultimately, whether one's education is one-sided or liberal determines how magnificent one's magnum opus of knowledge is. Educated people can change their circumstances, but well-educated people can change the world.

Smiling, Dr. Leavitt looked out her office door. As she contemplated the ideas explored in the paper, she noticed one single beam of light sneak in just through the corner of her door's window and reflect off of a small plaque on her desk. Knowing her task to be complete, she packed her evaluations into her hand-woven bag whispered the words the beam had kissed.

"Fiat lux."

References: Schönberg, Claude-Michel, Herbert Kretzmer, Charles Hart, and Webber Andrew Lloyd. (1986). *Les Miserables*. New York, NY: MMO Music Group, CD.