

FAREED ZAKARIA. *In Defense of a Liberal Education*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company. (2015). 208 pp. \$23.95 (paperback). (ISBN 978-0-393-24768-8)

Fareed Zakaria's *In Defense of a Liberal Education* offers valuable insight into the values of higher education. Zakaria writes of liberal arts to defend the right for thinking: a right at the heart of liberal democracy, pedagogy, and polity. The personal and political aspects of education come under siege when education is approached solely as means to economic ends. As an academic, a student, and a teacher, Zakaria speaks from his life experiences in higher education. From his perspective as a journalist, he also analyzes societal movements in higher education.

The book, which is composed of six chapters, begins with a personal account of Zakaria coming to America to pursue higher education in liberal arts. In this personal account, he highlights how his "parents must have worried about...future prospects. But...they did not project that particular anxiety on us" (p. 27). This helped Fareed Zakaria and his brother approach their studies openly, providing a space for genuine discovery of personal aptitude instead of a specialization based on anxiety. The book then proceeds to provide evidence of the current state of education in America, including Canada, by discussing economic concerns, technology learning, and preoccupation with the workforce. The public and private are interconnected in Zakaria's account of higher education. There is a hint of dissatisfaction with the transitions he has seen in his lifetime when he notes "[r]esearch has trumped teaching in most large universities...the curriculum has also been warped to satisfy research" (p. 63). His critique is not towards research per se but towards a change in institutional directions that impacts students directly by what is being offered in classes.

To show that there is a long history between skill-based and liberal education, in Chapter 2 Zakaria offers "a brief history of liberal education." He notes, "[f]rom the beginning, people disagreed over the purpose of a liberal education" (p. 42). The roots of liberal education can be traced to the democratic formation of government in ancient Greece. From the start, education

philosophy has been influenced by the curricular question of what knowledge is of most value to live a good life. This question cannot be defined by certain criteria or ends but becomes articulated by the ways we, as persons and society, understand the past and present. Concerned with current societal devaluation of liberal education, Zakaria's focus on Chapter 3 shifts to some of the strengths of a liberal arts education.

For Zakaria, liberal arts degrees do more than equipping persons to think. Their first strength is the ability to express oneself in both written and spoken communication. A liberal arts education also provides training in organization and presentation of ideas and thoughts. Zakaria notes "conversation" as a "related method of learning through the ages has been something that is often thought of as a pure pleasure" (p. 77). "Learning" as "pleasure" appears again when Zakaria reflects on the third "strength of a liberal education" as the ability to "learn." For him, "learning was a pleasure – a great adventure of exploration" (p. 78). This passion for learning is accompanied by a pragmatic value: Experimentation. In his view, "liberal education might encourage student interest in scientific subjects for their intellectual value, rather than their value in the marketplace" (p. 89).

These personal benefits of education are connected to public benefits. In Chapter 4, Zakaria reiterates one of the functions of higher education for the public was to disrupt the aristocracy. The present new era of higher education is neglecting this personal and political aspect with its interest in economic returns. "The fact that we now use the language of return on investment to describe the experience of getting educated is revealing" (p. 120). Instead of focusing on whether the increasing cost of higher education is re-establishing an aristocracy, Zakaria mounts a defense by relying on economists, writers, politicians, educators, and philosophers to show that liberal arts are of value in the continuation of democracy. Whether it is Ben Franklin or Thomas Jefferson, Zakaria looks to intellectual history in order to convey the thought that "liberal education ... [can] ensure the survival of democracy" (p. 110).

A century before Zakaria's book, John Dewey (1916/1966) in *Democracy and Education* stated that to keep people away from education was to keep them in poverty. Dewey was in search of "the proper place and function of vocational factors in education" (p. 258). He approached a career as a calling that accompanies other aspects of one's life. Unlike education as "return on investment," Dewey conceptualized the relation between education and employability as following one's "calling." This calling was "determined by its association with other callings" (p. 360). In direct relation to Zakaria's vision for "building a capacity for freedom" (p. 134), Dewey vehemently argued against emphasizing technical skills at the expense of meaning.

Chapter 5 expands on other fruits of the progress we have made historically to improve life through knowledge. For Zakaria, “most people read books, understand science, and experience art not to change the world, but to change themselves” (p. 149). Does not changing oneself contribute to changing the world? Something greater than just a “change” is at stake. Zakaria concludes the chapter by asking, “is our current system of liberal education changing young people for the better?” (p. 149). In Zakaria’s view, a liberal education is associated with progress. However, is not transgression part of the history of such a progress? Would liberal education still be of value should the ability to question examines the economic powers underpinning some of the present progressive economic agendas? And are not systems made and changed by people who actively participate in these systems? One may consider the word “defense,” as appears in the title of the book and in the last chapter, as a noun that provokes us to enter into critical dialogue with Zakaria’s viewpoints.

In the concluding chapter, Zakaria turns to the next generation. “In defense of youth,” Zakaria writes, “they did not devise the intense system of tests that comprise the gateway to” higher education, “nor did they create the highly competitive job market in anxious economic times” (p. 155). Zakaria’s defense helps us evaluate how we arrived at this present. The last pages of the book direct the reader to the generational question of why today’s youth are not as involved with “politics and ethics” as they could be (p. 164). He answers, “[t]heir lives are more involved with these economic and technological forces than with ideology and geopolitics” (p. 165). Zakaria identifies a cultural shift might have contributed to this: The social idols are no longer intellectuals and thinkers but “entrepreneurs, technologist and businesspeople” (p. 165).

The book is more than a defense of a liberal arts education. It defends all education in democratic society concerned with the freedom to learn and think. Providing a historical and cultural context on education, the book sets a stage on which to decide and act. It travels the distance in challenging the current status quo by writing about “the times we live in,” not providing answers, but prompting us to spend more “time and effort thinking about the meaning of life” (p. 169). Written in an accessible language, the book helps us to ponder on the process of educating, obtaining an education, and what education does to us as persons concerned with liberty. A step towards an examined life, the book provides an avenue for needed reflection on the state of higher education in the current political and economic climate.

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#### REFERENCES

- Dewey, J. (1966). *Democracy and education: An introduction to the philosophy of education*. New York, NY: The Free Press. (Original work published 1916)

