

# Connections

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**Abstract:** As part of the *National Collegiate Honors Council's* (2022) collection of essays about the value of honors to its graduates (1967–2019), the author reflects on the personal and professional impacts of the honors experience.

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“It is sweet to think I was a companion in an expedition that never ends.”

—Czeslaw Milosz

I went off to college confident that I knew what I needed from higher education and just how I would put it to use. I had not yet learned of *hubris* and was afflicted by the arrogance of youth, born of ignorance. Fortunately for me, grown-ups had designed the required curriculum that, along with a scholarship, was part of my honors program, and I was blessed with the classic liberal core curriculum and the Great Books tradition. Having wiser, better educated minds in control of many of my curricular choices—combined with a requirement to attend all performances of the local symphony, opera, and ballet—transformed me and continues to enrich my life even now, in retirement. The honors curriculum set me on a lifelong course of seeking not just “the best that has been thought and said,” but also the most beautiful that has been created and done. It opened my eyes to treasures I had been blind to, that give me joy to this day.

Learning by the Socratic method taught me how to make a rational argument, how to engage in civil argument without demonizing those I disagree

with, and to honestly face my own errors. It gave me an attitude of toleration and moral humility that our culture desperately needs to regain. It honed my reasoning skills at least as much as designing and analyzing lab research in the field of my major.

Honors taught me of the Great Conversation across the centuries and made me feel an emotional connection to thinkers, writers, and artists long dead and even to those who don't yet exist but will study the same classic works long after I am gone. I learned that the issues I was thinking about as I entered adulthood—questions of suffering, death, justice, meaning, and value—have been universal to human beings since prehistory and have been wrestled with by some of humanity's greatest intellects. Some of the proposed answers to those questions seemed ridiculous and some valuable, but sorting through both good and bad honed my thinking and broadened my horizons. Instead of a cold abstraction, *humanity* became a warm and embracing idea. Instead of a story disconnected from and irrelevant to me, the history of Western civilization became my story. I realized I was part of a much greater whole.

Perhaps most fundamentally, honors gave me a sense of rootedness, a sense of place. A sense of the Earth's place in time and of our species' place in the story of life on Earth. A sense of Western culture's place in the history of humanity and of our nation's place in that culture. A sense of my place as a citizen of our republic, my responsibility to my local community, and my responsibility to my professional community. That sense of place, of connectedness across time and location, is sometimes burdensome but always comforting—and it makes apathy impossible.

Honors did for me what higher education was always intended to do, at least before it became nothing more than the pathway to a good job: it made me a better and more complete human being than I would have been without it.

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