

The Importance of a Liberal Arts Education: Co-creating a Regenerative Future

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What am I supposed to do with a theology major with an emphasis in justice and peace studies?” I asked myself upon graduating from college. As a Catholic male, I figured that I had two realistic choices in how to apply what for me was an intellectually and personally meaningful degree: become a priest, or teach theology. Seeing as I was deeply in love with Andrea, my now-wife of twenty-one years, I decided to start Creighton’s Master of Theology program, assuming I would teach. After the first day of classes, however, I realized my journey with theology as an academic practice was finished and that my heart was actually being called to put into practice all that I had learned. Thus began my first confrontation with the difference between the joy of studying theology and discerning my vocational trajectory.

Still not knowing what to do, I shifted my focus to a more applied graduate program, the Master of Christian Spirituality. It was in this program that I happened upon environmental politics and policy as an elective. This, combined with classes on prayer, meditation, and spirituality, led me to a powerful “aha” moment in which I realized I wanted to devote my life to healing the relationship between people and the planet. Once I understood this desire, I knew I would need to change areas of study once again, so I left my second master’s degree program in the span of two years.

Not fully knowing what would transpire, but still following my heart and leaning on discernment and vocation, I chose to begin working more directly with the earth in order to explore if creation care was a direction I really wanted to go. I became a landscape installer and spent my time tending both plants and soil. After a few seasons of getting my hands dirty, paying close attention to life cycles, and exploring more options of how I could make a living healing the relationship between people and the earth, I entered a master’s program in Community and Regional Planning, where I created my own specialization in energy and sustainability planning. After graduation, I took a job as the Planning Director for a small town in Iowa, diving into what was then a relatively new field—sustainability.

This was the early 2000s, when climate change was a deeply fringe topic that had only recently been introduced into public consciousness by Al Gore's film *An Inconvenient Truth*. Energy was still relatively cheap, and the American economy was firmly in the grip of globalization and the beliefs that economic, societal, and political well-being necessitated that GDPs grow limitlessly and that the planet could continue to absorb the waste products of unchecked economic growth. All of this is to say that sustainability and creation care were still counter-cultural concepts, and one had to be enormously creative and persuasive to find ways to practice sustainability professionally.

As I continued to follow my growing passion for environmental justice, I began to hone in on the ways that environmental degradation breeds environmental injustice, harming vulnerable populations across the world. My educational background in justice and peace studies had opened my eyes to myriad social injustices, and as I dove deeper into the world of sustainability, I became increasingly attuned to the human-environment relationship as something that underlies nearly all other injustices. The more that I focused on this relationship, the more I began to see that healing our relationship with the environment is not solely confined to recycling, saving energy, or conserving water. Rather than a righteous list of activities that needed to be done, healing the relationship between humans and the planet requires us to tend to and detoxify our own hearts. Healing our relationship with the earth recognizes that all pollution comes from pollution of the heart. I began to understand that the work I felt most called to involved finding ways to help others shift into greater eco-consciousness and thus into more ecologically aware daily practices. What that meant, ultimately, is that I saw changing hearts as my work, because only a genuine transformation of heart can make a person care deeply enough about the earth and its inhabitants to live more sustainably on their behalf.

Eventually, though, I began to wonder if there was more. I began to question what exists beyond sustainability; for example, what could take us past simply doing less harm to actively doing more good? This line of inquiry led me to a budding conversation around regeneration, both as a way of thinking and acting that creates more social good, and as a nature-led system that cultivates a thriving environment for planetary and human flourishing.

It was at this juncture that I discovered that my humanities degree offered me a unique-to-the-field understanding of, go figure, *humanity*. As I became more familiar with my own interior stirrings and desires through my meditation practice, I became more comfortable and conversant with stillness, listening, and paying closer attention to the world around me and

the needs of human and nonhuman beings alike that rely on the thriving of this planet. I began to see how much environmental harm is caused by lack of self-awareness and personal discomfort. There is a God-sized hole in each of our hearts that we try to fill in various ways (including consumerism), and committed practice is required to learn how to be comfortable in our state of perpetual discomfort. Consciously cultivating our awareness helps us to identify what is happening when we get off-center and intentionally or unintentionally make choices that are life-harming. Everyone is capable of making life-affirming decisions, and I believe this practice is the true heart of sustainability and the answer that can truly begin healing the fractured relationship between human beings and the earth.

I like to say that I accidentally became a social impact entrepreneur of a nationally recognized climate action business, along with my business partner, Craig Moody. Together, we started Verdis Group (online at <https://verdisgroup.com/>), a sustainability consulting business in the middle of the United States, where the term “climate change” continues to be divisive. We initially focused on helping businesses find ways to save energy (and money), knowing that our community was not yet ready to address climate change and its more challenging potential impacts. So, we met our clients wherever they were and crafted practical solutions for a wide variety of businesses, including zoos, aquariums, healthcare, higher education, airports, insurance, and finance.

As we continued to work with our partners over time, we began to notice real transformation. Through their continued participation and collaboration with our team, we saw organizations begin to shift from an ideology that saw sustainability as a cost-saving tool to mitigate business risk to one that saw sustainability as an opportunity to lead their community toward better ways of relating to the environment, and ultimately to the creation of a better future for everyone. We see Verdis Group’s work as a transformational process, one that evolves based on our close listening and observation of our partners’ experiences and needs—our environmental feedback, if you will—so that we meet the earth and our clients where they are, and walk through a process of evolution and transformation together.

Where I have arrived professionally is Regenerative Entrepreneurialism: how to use business as a force for good. I never imagined myself working for a private business, let alone starting one, as I was once too suspicious of the business world being mindlessly driven by profit—one of the leading causes of ecological illness. Thankfully, my background in theology and social justice gave me the tools I needed to keep wrestling with that suspicion. Fourteen years later, Verdis has become a Certified B Corporation as a for-profit business that is dedicated to using business as a force for

social good, organized around a vision of an inclusive, equitable, and regenerative economic system.

Our dedication to these values means we are committed not only to being a force of good for our customers, but also to our own team members, employing regenerative systems, thinking in novel ways as we grow and develop as a 16-member team. It means we are actively drawing upon one another's strengths and gifts to co-create useful services for our clients that will have a net positive impact on the environment. I fully expect that, as we continue to pose significant questions about the relationship between humans and the environment, our understanding of what sustainability is and can be will continue to evolve. At root, what we do at Verdis is regenerative: we work with our partners to co-create a thriving and resilient world where all beings can thrive; where every organism, every human, and every organization gives more than it takes—socially, financially, and environmentally.

I see my own path as emergent, guided by regenerative qualities: I choose to be hopeful about the human capacity for behavioral change; I relentlessly pose questions and pay attention to environmental feedback of all kinds; and I strive to be courageous in both exploring and being open to the unknown. To be guided by regenerative principles means one must continuously improvise, improve, and persist. My work is a perpetual process of discovery of both myself and the world, and it is a practice of self-alignment and integration with the world.

If, then, you are still wondering what a humanities degree is good for, remember it can deepen your understanding of what it means to be human and provide the skills needed to reflect on how your deeply-held values can make a positive impact on society. My experience has taught me that being comfortable with continuous seeking is a fruitful path. As Frederick Buechner famously wrote, "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."² Trusting your unique journey of discovery—including paths where you ask questions and make connections that it seems others are not considering—will make you a better human, a better friend, partner, colleague, leader, and contributor to the planet. Practice regeneration.

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² Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC* (New York: Harper, 1993), 119.