

Learning How to Think, Analyze and Ask Questions

By CAITLIN FENNERTY

No textbooks. No lectures. Yet, St. John's College in Annapolis, Maryland, offers the essence of a liberal arts education through its "great books" curriculum.

The words of Aristotle resonate in my mind as I look out at the lush greenery of the front campus at St. John's College (<http://www.sjca.edu/>): "Man is what he continually does; virtue then is not an act but a habit." A copy of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* lies open on my lap, my finger still glued to this line. I am astounded at the eloquence of his thought and somewhere deep down have been profoundly touched; I know these words will continue to echo for many years to come. If we are what we continually do, I am proud to be a Johnnie. Day by day, in this picturesque sea side enclave, my heart and mind are exposed to the thoughts of great writers and thinkers. Engaging in thoughtful discussion over these texts with peers and faculty, I am forced to confront my own unexamined opinions and prejudices. Everyday I find my mind a little freer, my heart more moved, my soul a little more fulfilled.

St. John's is a tiny, four-year, liberal arts college founded in 1696 that is nestled in the heart of Annapolis; a quaint, coastal town that also happens to be the capital of Maryland and home to the U.S. Naval Academy. Johnnies, as St. John's students call themselves, are a geographically diverse bunch, despite there being only about 500 of us on the Annapolis campus. (There is a sister campus in Santa Fe in the southwestern state of New Mexico.) In the parking lot are license plates from all over North America—from Alaska to Texas to Tennessee—indicating the eclectic group of students who have come to study the distinctive "great books" curriculum offered by St. John's.

These great books are the classics of literature, philosophy, theology, psychology, political science, economics, history, mathematics, laboratory sciences and music that have shaped Western civilization and thinking. The books are read in roughly chronological order, beginning with the philosophers, playwrights, historians, and mathematicians of ancient Greece and continuing to the 20th century. No textbooks are used and there are no lectures; all classes

are discussion based. The St. John's graduate institute in Santa Fe offers a similar program, but focuses on the great texts that shaped the thoughts and traditions of the East, particularly those of China, India and



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Japan. Students take language tutorials in Sanskrit in order to translate selected short passages from classic texts such as the *Ramayana*.

St. John's is the true liberal arts experience. The curriculum aims to expose students to the greatest works in the key areas of knowledge in order to cultivate informed thinking that lasts a lifetime. According to the school, these "habits of mind" are "a deepened capacity for reflective thought, an abiding love of serious conversation, and a lasting love of inquiry." Liberal arts colleges in general are sought after by students who desire intimate learning environments where close interaction between faculty and students, and among students themselves, fosters a community of serious discourse. This describes the St. John's learning environment to a tee: small class sizes and a primary emphasis on individualized instruction (there is one teacher for every eight students) forms the basis of the intellectual climate of the college. In classical antiquity, the term liberal arts referred to the proper education to become a free man. (In Latin, *libera* means free.) This is the philosophy behind St. John's: Students are made free through liberal education. The school motto is, *Facio liberos ex liberis libris libraque*, which means, "I make free adults out of children by means of books and a balance."

In my first year at St. John's, I have come to believe in an incredibly liberating conviction; there is nothing I cannot learn, and, therefore, there is no path in life I am not free to pursue. At an earlier point in my educational career, I had concluded that I was neither mathematically nor scientifically inclined. In high school I opted for the easier math courses and, believing my brain wasn't built for physics, switched to environmental science in my senior year. Had I gone to another college that didn't require it, I doubt that I would have challenged myself in mathematics or sciences again. However, the unified, all-required curriculum at St. John's has helped me to discover that these disciplines are not beyond my intellectual grasp. I have been equally competent at discussing and studying the geometrical theorems of Euclid and Ptolemy, and William Harvey's inquiry into the circulation of the blood, as the poetic dialogues of Plato. Through confidence in my own intellectual capacities, I have broadened the horizons of my intellectual freedom. As a result, I am now considering a possible future in medicine, a field that never seemed an option before. At the same time, my St. John's education has enhanced my love for philosophy, poetry and theology.

My St. John's education is an experience that I will carry with me throughout my life, not grounded in textbook technicalities or mathematical formulas that will be forgotten in time, but in something far more enduring—learning how to think, analyze and ask questions. Armed with this knowledge, I feel I can tackle anything. I am a Johnnie. I discuss, I inquire, I think, and most importantly, I trust my own intellect. What does that make me? I'm not sure yet, but I can't wait to find out. Hopefully anything I set my mind to.

Caitlin Fennerty wrote this article while working as a Public Affairs intern at the American Center in New Delhi.



Courtesy St. John's College