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Lowell Speech

"My friends asked me to join their gang," Brian, an eighth-grader from the South Side of Chicago began his speech. "When I said no, they told me I had two options. I could either shoot and kill someone they didn't like. Or I could get beat up for five minutes." Brian paused. He glanced at his torn notebook paper before looking back up at the class. "Today, I'm here to tell you how gangs hurt our community."

I was sitting in the back of the classroom when Brian said those words, and I dropped my grading rubric and pen. Brian continued to speak about his friends, his family, and how they had suffered from violence. He ended with a call to action. "No matter what, please do not join a gang." His classmates remained silent as he walked back to his seat. Brian had connected with each of them on a problem they experienced.

The Noble Academy is a charter high school in downtown Chicago. Its students mainly come from low-income families. I taught a course on rhetoric there the summer before my freshman year.

As Brian sat back down, I thought back to a line from John Phillips. He's a famous figure in the history of education in America, and he belonged to the same era of some of the men in the portraits on these Lowell walls. He wrote: "Goodness without knowledge is weak and feeble, yet knowledge without goodness is dangerous."

In the ever changing landscape of education in America, we've been veering towards a world in which science, technology, engineering, and math are the hallmark of any curriculum. We live in an age where people look to data and technology as the first option to solve social problems. This thinking has led to the decline of humanities. That bothers me.

As we skip putting serious thought into justice, religion, and more broadly, the people around us, we risk losing one of the most transformative parts of our education. The part of our education that teaches us how to be caring, aware citizens of this world.

Last year, like every other freshman at Harvard, I received a brochure in my mailbox from the arts and humanities division, outlining the practical applications of taking humanities courses. The humanities teach you to think and to write, the packet reads. But I noticed that the authors of the brochure left one piece out: Empathy.

Reading the Bhagavat Gita in Professor Eck's Religion class and discussing free will in Professor Scanlon's philosophy class, forced me to engage with people I didn't understand, with ideas I didn't believe. This is practical — as practical as the ability to code in C++ or calculate correlations.

Beyond transforming how we interact with others, the humanities give us an additional gift. Brian showed me how critical reflection and writing have the power to transform us. In a matter of three weeks, I saw how Brian became comfortable sharing his personal story—a story he never had the ability or venue to share before. He walked in the door an anxious, timid thirteen-year old. Deciding on his topic, preparing for his speech, and finding his voice transformed him into a leader. Brian managed to connect with his audience. His friends trusted him and they believed his message. That's the magic of the humanities.

Now despite how much I love to read, to discuss, to write, I decided to study statistics at Harvard. I still took CS50. I believe we can code our way out of many problems and that we're at an inflection point when it comes to using data to solve problems.

We must also make sure, however, that as we push technology in our schools, we teach students to empathize with the people we aim to help. We must all hold a deep understanding of human needs. Human concerns.

For me, the humanities act as a check, a guard against John Phillips' concern of schools teaching knowledge without goodness. Engaging with texts and our classmates ensures we think long and we think hard about what we value in others and in ourselves.

The humanities help us find our voice, help us understand what we care about—like Brian and his call to action for his classmates. As John Phillips said, only when you have both knowledge and goodness do you "form the noblest character and lay the surest foundation of usefulness to mankind."