

The following is a sampling of statements and testimonies made by our Great Books Alumni, as recorded in the [Great Books: 100 Years, 100 Stories, 2018](#), Michael Gose.

These reflections represent compelling evidence that our program deeply affects our students beyond the classroom, into their adult lives.

Great Books isn't just a reference to the Western canon and the work of Mortimer Adler, it's a sort of calling to something, well, greater. It's a calling to a life of mind. It's a notion that we build our knowledge of the world up brick-by-brick. It's foundational thinking. Shared inquiry, for sure. But more importantly it levels the playing field for those brave enough to play along with the best thinking and writers ever to live. It took me years and even decades to realize that those two years of the Great Books Colloquium at Pepperdine truly started the development of the internal canon of my lifetime.

The Great Books Colloquium might be better titled "Great Thoughts You Will Need for the Rest of Your Life." For those two years of the Great Books Colloquium back at Seaver College in Malibu, I am most grateful.

Am I glad I had a Great Books undergraduate education? Wholeheartedly. In 1986 we were the inaugural class of Great Books students at Pepperdine. In my remembrance of things past (and here we go – madeleine anyone?), the presentation of a Great Books education was geared toward preparing us to digest the pivotal ideas that have shaped our culture, our political sphere and the way we search for meaning. Yes, we certainly received that education. Perhaps even more significantly, however, is the way I was encouraged to think about ideas, listen to classmates bring to light areas of insight I missed, and realize that the well of thinking and generating ideas is indeed deep. The Great Books approach to ideas has introduced me to the value of source-based learning, the freedom in asking hard questions and the integrity of applying knowledge and wisdom toward living well with others.

The Great Books courses introduced me to the power of Socratic seminars, and it was the first time I was taught *how* to think, not *what* to think. I will forever be grateful for those experiences that shaped my academic trajectory. Those courses, those enlightening and frustrating discussions with my peers and professors, still serve as model for what I believe education can and should be.

I haven't been in a Great Books course in decades, but I hold fast to the image of what the classes were to me. A place where one's opinion had better be supported textually. A place where one was treated in a respectful manner, even if no one agreed with you. A place where common courtesy was a given.

Great Books taught me to listen. Great Books taught me to hold my tongue. Great Books taught me to find proof – textual, historical, and in a pinch, anecdotal – but proof nonetheless, before stating whatever popped into my head.

Perhaps civility isn't the best word for my title. One learns *humility* when one "does" Great Books. Having the shared experience of reading thousands of pages in one course, as well as the experience of not being sure exactly what it was you just read, bonds a group of people together. And when you have that shared humility, you treat others with respect. It is very hard to lash out a person you disagree with, once you remember how long we have all been disagreeing with one another. And that may be the greatest gift Great Books Colloquium gave me.

It has been 25 years since I graduated from Pepperdine. And I still watch a movie and trace the plot to an idea from Aristotle, or read a book and identify the Platonic themes, or see an art gallery's depiction of "hell" and recognize it as Dante, or read about the founding fathers and evaluate Washington's ideas based on Jefferson's writings.

The decision to take Great Books was pivotal. It taught me to love reading. It taught me to be open to new ideas. And it taught me to learn from other people even if, especially if, they see the world differently. Great Books—filled with great ideas, led by great teachers, surrounded by great classmates—expanded my world forever.

And so, Great Books, has helped me thrive in a complex and messy world.

When I reflect on my college years - what I learned, how I was shaped, and how I grew - Great Books is truly the anchor that represents that time. It was the most influential course of my college education. How great it would be to find a place like that today – a group of people to think with, to explore with, to growth with, to be challenged by. Life has so many questions to explore, and the people around me have so many thoughts to discover. Conversations with people that think differently than me are stimulating and necessary – not for the sake of throwing my ideas at them, but to hear their story and their thoughts and to not be stagnant, but continually growing. It's just as important to question my own thoughts and hold them up to "the light" to see if something needs to shift. Great Books has inspired me to listen, to question, to be open minded, to share my thoughts, to shift when needed, and to think deeply.

Great Books has been a catalyst for so many amazing things for me. I truly wish I could be a part of something like this again, particularly in a day and age when we as a society need to be more open minded, more willing to listen to those who think differently than us, more capable of sharing our thoughts graciously, and more willing to shift when needed.

As a student of Pepperdine University's Great Books Colloquium, I experienced a wide ranging spectrum of historical literature from Aristotle to Dante and from philosophical to political contexts. As a young 18 year old freshman studying the "good" of the city-state in Aristotelian ethics and politics, who would have known that twenty years later I would be serving as an elected State Senator in my home state of Arizona and dealing with the everyday reality of ethics and politics in the halls of the State Capitol? Spending all of those hours in the Great Books so many years ago allowed me to experience the foundation of Western civilization through the texts of literary giants. The experience was not just about reading these great works, it was about analyzing and writing about them. Even though I now have staff members and consultants who are hired to write what my office or campaign releases, I still prefer to write the text myself. In recent years, there have been discussions in education policy about replacing treasured classical literature with

informational documents and non-fiction. As a policymaker, I have publicly opposed these recommendations citing the enormous intellectual growth students receive when they are able to experience even just a few of the classics from a Great Books Colloquium, just as I had the wonderful opportunity to experience firsthand.

The format of the Great Books classes taught in the Socratic Method was the ideal preparation for law school, which focuses primarily on teaching students how to think critically. The Great Books tradition readied me for law school study and serious thinking about not only the rule of law but the philosophy of law.

Today I am a prosecutor representing the People of the State of California. A prosecutor holds a great deal of power in the criminal justice system. He or she decides which cases will be filed, what charges will be brought, who will be punished, and how will they be punished for a crime. It is often said that a prosecutor's job is to seek justice. But what is justice and what is "doing the right thing" in the criminal justice system? I think about these philosophical questions often when deciding whether to file charges - how will the community be affected by this case, how can we bring restitution to this victim, and how should a defendant be punished? It is not just a matter of applying the law, but a decision about what is just and equitable for the victims, defendants and the community. The great thinkers considered these same issues of justice, the law and morality, and I know that my early training at Pepperdine in the Great Books tradition taught me how to think deeply about these important questions.

"Justice in the life and conduct of the State is possible only as it first resides in the hearts and souls of the citizens." - Plato

GBC taught me that boxes are meant to be broken down, borders breached, limits expanded, and ultimately was the most influential class I've taken in my life. I know that.

Professionally, I can think of no better preparation or training to a legal career than by having taken the Great Books Colloquium. The analytical skills I learned proved invaluable in Law School and greatly prepared me for a legal career as a criminal prosecutor. I can think of no better training than becoming comfortable with the Socratic method in a classroom setting, the demanding reading load, and the critical writing component expected of Great Books students. Losing the fear of expressing a critical thought, backed up by literary references, to make my point during class was my first experience into oral advocacy. Being able to express my thoughts and arguments in a concise, critical and persuasive way, was truly a great introduction to what I later learned in law school to be as the "IRAC" method of legal writing. (Issue, Rule, Application, Conclusion.)

Being blessed with the knowledge afforded to me from reading all of those great minds has in some ways helped give me a sense of purpose. It is both humbling and encouraging to read from the canon of master works of literature and thought. To do so, while I haven't thought about it all that much until now, has perhaps contributed to a feeling of responsibility. On one hand, I feel a certain responsibility to impart what I have learned to

others. On the other hand, I struggle with how best to do so and whether I am capable of being a good vessel for educating or enlightening. Perhaps, the message contained in this letter is my best opportunity to impart just how important and useful the Great Books tradition was for me and must continue to be for the next student.

Great Books allows us to engage in the conversation which has been ongoing for centuries. More importantly it gives perspective on the depth and direction of the conversation as it has changed over the years. It allows one to approach a conversation as a non-anxious presence. Regardless of the choices and decisions made in this single conversation, by this generation, or even in this country, the dialogue will continue. There is no reason to approach life in crisis mode: civilizations rise and fall, yet these great books themes continue. I approach each day with the hope to make the world a better place, but my Great Books curriculum allows me to see a long term trajectory and seek a bigger picture of justice, truth, peace, purpose, and love.

More than any other college class, Great Books was a turning point for me. A catapult. A sling-shot from one level of awareness to another. It created a synthesis of ideas that made me a better communicator. And of all the skills I learned in college, the ability to communicate is the one I value and enjoy the most. Even in Finance, I believe that my writing skills set me apart from my peers. The ability to communicate complex ideas in a clear and simple way is a competitive advantage. This web of ideas, known as Great Books, has enriched my life, and will always be one of my fondest college memories.

If anything, Great Books has been the spark of my intellectual thoughts, and my times at Pepperdine in the Honors Program were the most intellectually challenging years of my life. Great Books was the vehicle for challenging thoughts and ideas and helped me develop an ability to have mutual discourse with peers without making it personal.

Now that I am a father, I find myself asking my sons questions instead of providing the quick and easy answer when they ask questions. Regardless of their ages, it has been tremendously effective in boosting their critical thinking skills. Seeing their faces light up when they make a connection between something they've learned and something new fills me with joy as their dad.

If there are any wounds from wrestling with the texts, they are proud battle wounds. Wounds from which one has learned. They are up-building. They make us better in the long run. When one reaches the end of the course, one realizes that the struggles with the texts have been worth it. A curriculum based on the classics certainly gives us a broader picture of how education can be fulfilling and historically informed. Just like Aeneas' journey, it shows us that the struggles have been worth it for the foundation of something greater.

Being a part of the Great Books tradition at Pepperdine was more than impactful, it was life altering. It sparked a deep interest in understanding the Lord, His creation, and great ideas. A resulting quest for lifelong learning has been a blessing in my and my children's lives.

My time in the Great Books program laid the foundation of my understanding of Medicine and more importantly, my practice of Medicine. As I think back over the last 15+ years of my medical career, I can see how Great Books shaped me as a physician as well as how it has directed my career. I continually find myself telling residents and fellows in training that the entire patient, including the family, is our true calling. Although we combat a multitude of disease processes and must learn intricate physiology, in order to truly understand Medicine, we must treat the entire patient. In my line of work, this includes the parents, siblings, and extended family. Only by incorporating ourselves as physicians into our patient's lives do we truly understand how best to "treat" the disease. Whether this is getting on the floor to play with the toddler siblings of the baby in front of me, or holding them as they pass to the next world when there is nobody else around, do we practice Medicine instead of medicine. Without Great Books, it is doubtful that I would have this greater appreciation.

My knee-jerk response, selfishly, is to characterize my greatest appreciation for my Great Books experience as that it was the first time that I felt that I was allowed to speak and be heard in a classroom. So as not to appear that I am indicting the sum of my undergraduate experience I should clarify that I have communicated verbally in other classes. That being said, when I think back on GB I recall the sheer joy of discourse. Unlike the requisite espousing of opinion, exhibiting that I had read a book, or regurgitating what the professor delivered, I had the opportunity to share my understanding of text, feelings about that understanding, and apply this understanding to my life and environment. I can't think of any prior experience in any other academic setting including my post graduate studies.

To go beyond the nostalgic but meaningful recollection above I would say the element of Great Books that has provided the greatest impact is how it altered my personal and professional life in regard to the notion of introspection or self-appraisal. The canon stands proudly on my office shelf and has for decades. I will still pull one out to find an underlined section that might shed light on a given situation. This is not necessarily to provide a solution or answer a question but more often to assist me in understanding my own decisions or actions. I find I can often reconcile my feelings or emotions around something as momentous as life's meaning to something as mundane as why a book or movie makes me sad or happy.

If it wasn't for Great Books I don't know what I would be doing right now, maybe I would have found my way to teaching anyway, but I know for sure having the choice to take those four courses added to my college experience in a way that allowed me to figure things out

Great Books taught me to look at the whole picture. It taught me to listen, not just hear. It taught me to take a good, hard look at myself. It taught me thinking critically has nothing to do with being critical. But most importantly, it taught me that if you read the

wisdom of thousands of years and don't walk away with a better understanding of yourself and your fellow man--and a little compassion for both--you missed the point.

I still have those books and they stand proudly on my shelf as a reminder of my journey. I will reference them from time to time to remind myself of an important point or to teach my children about the power of words and thought. As the world becomes more technologically advanced, I pray that Great works literature do not get lost and that we find a way to create more beautiful words that will be forever intertwined in the human legacy. The wisdom and history of those works are the very catalyst of human advancement. I preach less screen time and more reading in my house and will continue to do so because I want my children to travel through the pages of Great Books and find their own destinies.

I am eternally grateful to be a GBC alum and for the community of professors and students who will always be a part of me.

When I was an incoming freshman, I chose Great Books because of the intellectual challenge. I didn't realize that it would lead to a lifelong pursuit of wisdom – wisdom of the head *and* of the heart. I also gained tools to grow in wisdom by being curious, doing my homework, searching for understanding, seeking multiple perspectives, and remaining respectful during debate. I hope that these tools have helped me to be a better wife, mother, friend, consultant, and follower of God. I am so grateful for the Great Books curriculum and those who teach the classes, for my life is better because of the experience.

The invitation of the Great Books thus remains: an invitation to join the most pressing, most difficult, most important conversations ever had by humans on this planet. (Indeed, it encompasses the questions of what are humans, and what is this planet. Why take them as givens?) It takes a gesture of real faith in a student as young as we were when we embarked on the Great Books Colloquium to imagine that we would be able to rise to the loftiness of that opportunity. Indeed, I think much of the value of it wasn't that some of us did rise, but that we also learned the value of trying, of leaping, of failing. That's pretty much what life on this planet seems like to me:

I am grateful for my classmates and professors who challenged me and molded me wittingly and unwittingly into a person who thinks about Great Ideas and who is willing to let them affect the ways I live my life and serve others.

Great Books gave me the mental tools to not only question my perspective, but to stand and defend it.

Great Books has made me a better attorney. Understanding and listening, making connections, seeing issues as they are, could be, might be, through a lens called the polyfocal conspectus. Ding, ding, ding! Read a Great Book, read a client. Hear a client. Serve a client. Be good. Repeat. Ibid, your honor.

And it's not just my career, but so much more! I watch movies better. I enjoy food and drink better. I'm a better father because of Great Books (ask my eight year old; after all, she is smarter than you, asks better questions than you, and just watched her first Monty Python movie). But you don't even know what 'good' means yet....Maybe I'm a better husband because of Great Books? My wife says so; I'm still not convinced. Point of information: Great Books—if you let it—should utterly change how you approach everything in your life.

Ultimately, the great books tradition is about learning to live well. To be fair, it is not the only place in my life where I have been exposed to models of a life well lived, but studying the great ideas has also been far more than an intellectual exercise. Kierkegaard's paradox of faith is just one example of the many ideas I have encountered in the great books canon that has had very tangible implications for the ordering of my life. The great ideas, like the universal ethical rules of Kierkegaard's paradox, are not to be held up as an absolute good to be pursued in and of themselves. They are, nevertheless, worth submitting to through serious study because this work ultimately points to something greater than the individual works themselves, the absolute that Kierkegaard speaks of in *Fear and Trembling*. In my life, the greatest legacy of critically engaging with the canon of great books is the affirmation of the centrality of this absolute relation to the absolute—above all other systems that have sought to define my life otherwise. For this, I am grateful.

I think I entered college expecting to come out smarter and more knowledgeable, but I did not anticipate that sitting in a circle and talking about books that might change my life entirely and free me from fear. I am forever grateful for those four semesters and to my professors for believing in me and gently pushing me. The books are great, but the people and experiences have been and continue to be invaluable.

Great Books taught me to challenge the world around me. I used history to shape my voice vs. renting my parents' voice. Great Books allowed me to read books that I would have never read as a Black girl from the south side of Chicago. To this day, I tell the teachers I coach to find the "ha" in their readings and in their classroom. I think of how Great Books taught me to critically think and analyze text for the deeper meaning. I learned I didn't have to agree with an author but I could find another author who I did agree with to justify why I didn't agree with the first author. Does that make sense?
ha

I can't really put into words all the feeling and appreciation I have for Great Books. However, I know God blessed me with having to change my freshman schedule because I wouldn't be the spunky and critical thinking woman that lies before you without this foundation.

Great Books is all things education should be. It epitomizes the soul of the university as a place to raise up people that can fully engage with reality by virtue of their ability to see it and

themselves. And does this kind of education ever stop? Does it terminate with the end of the class? It hasn't ended yet for me, which is why it's a paradigm.

It has been a decade since I enrolled in Great Books to find answers. I would not have embraced then what I know now: some questions without clear answers are worth thousands of years of thought and art. For the joy of it, I took philosophy classes during my geophysics doctorate, and reread Sartre to my wife on vacation. Studying humanity's great conversation has enriched day to day conversations with colleagues and friends.

It is safe to say my standards are higher, my faith is deeper, and (with risk of sounding vain) I am smarter due to studying the Great Books. In my current work as a therapist, I help others to understand and deepen their values, and I think I was led to my career because of how much Great Books influenced me in my undergraduate education. I am so thankful I took the risk and enrolled in the course as that naïve 18-year-old... If I knew now how much it would challenge me, mold me, and force me to grow out of my comfort zone, I probably would have avoided it.

In college, Great Books looked like students sitting around talking about literature and philosophy in the abstract, but the applications from these stories have stayed with me through the years and become part of my own. This class, more than many, continues to teach and my life is greater for it.

, in all seriousness, the greatest tool that Great Books has given me: independent, critical thinking. The skills of reason and dialogue that the Great Books Colloquium fosters allow us all to elevate our conversations and debates to a higher level. Through methodical analysis and detailed inquiry, we practice the invaluable art of sorting out the competing assumptions and values in any given scenario. Through such an exercise we invariably find differences in our underlying worldview, but we at least achieve a better understanding of those differences. Great Books gave me the place to take on this challenge of examining the world around me from different perspectives. I saw new angles and heard new arguments as we sought to disentangle some of the most lasting questions of history

Great Books is not an ideological factory, in which students are forced to conform to a certain set of values or ideas. Rather, it is a large, multinational symposium in which students are equipped with the tools to better understand the historical source of various viewpoints...

When I finished the Great Books program, I had a codex of ideas, a head full of quotes, and a stack of books. I wish I could say it was only after the ordeal that I realized what I had learned, but sometime in the middle, I had found that my very perception of ideas had changed. I no longer read any literature, watched any movies, or saw any plays without apply a devastating barrage of analysis

and criticism to which nothing could withstand. Great Books changes the way you interface with the world, but it creates a lens that pulls away the curtain and shows you the truth.

Great Books gives you a way to make sense of the world, a way to ask better questions. How could you not when you are backed by 3000 years of history? Texts that once seemed intimidating are now old friends. My collection of books from all four semesters offers a physical reminder of the perspectives I carry with me all the time.

I'm a journalist by trade, and I think about *I and Thou* almost every day. I've found myself giving the distilled version of Buber's idea of mutual giving to high school and middle school students when I teach them about journalism and how to interact with sources. Milton's view of "Truth" in *Areopagitica* — "let her and Falsehood grapple; who ever knew Truth put to the worse, in a free and open encounter?" — has become foundational for my understanding of the role of free speech.