

## A parable for the Class of 2011

I recently crossed paths with a Weber State alum who graduated more than three decades ago.

Over the course of an hour, he told me about his career. I want to retell his story because it serves as a parable that provides an important lesson for 2011 high school graduates who will be entering college this fall.

The alum earned his degree in business. He was an excellent student, and he earned good grades.

After graduation, his career took off. He was admired in Utah business circles, and he enjoyed a reputation for being a competent and honest businessman. After several years, he was asked to leave his successful Utah job to head a major government agency on the East Coast.

In his new job, he started to interact with a whole new group of people. He was invited to serve on corporate and nonprofit boards. He interacted with the heads of Fortune 500 companies, philanthropists, senators and members of Congress.

As commonly happens, the people he was interacting with in the workplace wanted to socialize after business hours. He was invited to fund-raising events, golf outings and dinner parties. At these events, he found that his new friends wanted to talk about things other than business and finance.

They discussed books he had not read, and in some cases authors who were unknown to him.

They wanted to discuss music he had never heard and plays he had never seen. At this point in his career, he began to realize that he had short-changed himself while he was attending college.

He had not read unassigned books, attended concerts, or visited the campus art gallery. The general education component of his Weber State education had been viewed as something to get out of the way as quickly as possible. He had considered his education as a means to an end. That end was making money, which he had done quite successfully. At the same time, he had never developed an interest in learning that went beyond his chosen field.

At this point in his career he was regretful. He was also somewhat frightened. He was concerned that as he continued to interact with his new circle of friends and colleagues he would be viewed as a dunce.

He recalled a specific memory of being invited to a dinner party hosted by the

president of a major investment bank. He wondered whether he should go. What would he be asked to discuss? Would he be embarrassed?

At the dinner party someone raised the topic of great 20th-century American novelists. It was a topic he did not want to discuss.

Now, something interesting happens. When the topic turns to great 20th-century

American novelists, his wife begins to speak. She was intimately familiar with all the writers being discussed. She carried the conversation and charmed the people at the dinner table.

Years earlier, when the couple first met at Weber State, she had done all the things her husband never did. By doing so, she had developed a love of learning that spanned

history, literature, philosophy, science, and the visual and performing arts.

In the years in which she was caring for their children, she had continued to pursue her passion for reading and enjoying the arts. From that day forward, he made sure that whenever he attended an important social gathering his wife was never far from his side.

What is the lesson of this parable? One could say that the alum isn't the first man to improve his financial fortunes by marrying well. While true, that is a rather superficial lesson.

A more important lesson may be summarized with a quote from Robert Maynard Hutchins who served as President of the University of Chicago for more than two decades. Interestingly, Hutchins' career contains a fleeting similarity to the parable. Educated as an attorney, Hutchins viewed his own college education as inadequate. He had not read the "Great Books" before he was assigned to teach a college course on the "Great Books." Recognizing the deficiencies in his own education he quickly remedied the deficits through extensive reading.

Writing about the purpose of education, Hutchins contended, "The liberal arts are not merely indispensable; they are unavoidable.

Nobody can decide for himself whether he is going to be a human being.

The only question open to him is whether he will be an ignorant, undeveloped one, or one who has sought to reach the highest point he is capable of attaining. The question, in short, is whether he will be a poor liberal artist or a good one."

### Top of Utah Voices



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### Michael Vaughan

#### Commentary