

Michael Poliakoff ([00:00](#)):

It's a great pleasure to be here with Professor Roosevelt Montas. I could not think of a greater pleasure in my work at ACTA than the privilege of recording a conversation on the liberal arts with him. It's one of the very sweetest experiences that anyone at ACTA could have and to evoke a point that Dr. Montas makes in his new book, *Rescuing Socrates*, subtitled *How the Great Books Changed My Life and Why They Matter*, this is about the Aristotelian quest to understand eudaimonia, true happiness, human flourishing, and you moved from that to W.E.B. Du Bois in a way that was just breathtaking and indeed urgent. So instead of my inevitably wooden attempt to narrate your extraordinary story, how you came to America, came to Columbia in the great books. I'm going to turn this over to you right now.

Roosevelt Montas ([00:59](#)):

Thank you, Michael. It's a pleasure to be here and thank you for that generous and warm introduction. It's very nice to see you and an honor to be a guest on your podcast. My story kind of forms the backbone of the argument I make in the book, which is about the transformative power and the continuing relevance of liberal education. And in particular, the kind of liberal education that confronts students with the great text debates, issues that are at the base of our culture and our society, the kind of dominant ideas, the ideas that frame are political and cultural order.

Roosevelt Montas ([01:38](#)):

The argument that those ought to be central in the education of an undergraduate because of how they helped shaped my life and how coming from as I was born in the Dominican Republic in a rural village, kind of up in the mountains, in the Dominican Republic, in a town that sometimes has described as immersed in the rhythms of the pre-industrial rhythms of the 19th century.

Roosevelt Montas ([02:08](#)):

I grew up without a telephone, without a TV, without refrigerator or stove, just in a very, very different world. And at age 12, I came to the United States to New York City. When I had gone to the airport a few years before my own, coming to the United States to take my mother to the airport. She proceeded my brother and I to New York by a few years. That was my first, that was the longest trip I had taken away from my town.

Roosevelt Montas ([02:38](#)):

It was the first time seeing an airplane. Certainly the first time being at an airport. The second time was when I was to get on an airplane myself and come to New York, arrived in New York city in May of 1985 to a city that was still kind of reeling from the financial crisis of the seventies, high crime, a lot of kind of urban decrepitude. It was a very, very frightening and difficult experience. And of course we were poor. My mother had a minimum wage job in a factory. She lost a job shortly after my brother and I arrived here. We ended up living for a few years in a basement room in a relative's house, attended the local public schools, et cetera, very difficult material and psychological conditions.

Roosevelt Montas ([03:38](#)):

Then through a series of really fortunate encounters, prominent among which is finding a volume of Plato's dialogues in a heap of trash next to my house. Started reading that book, that book brokered a relationship with a high school teacher who continues to be a close friend and mentor. He encouraged me in this kind of interest in the classics. He encouraged me to apply to Columbia for college in the

winter break, the Christmas break of my senior year. He gave me a copy of the Iliad, the Robert Fitzgerald's translation. Now was it Robert Fagles translation had just been published. He gave me his present copy of the Iliad.

Roosevelt Montas ([04:26](#)):

Ended up at Columbia that following September as a, well in the summer, really, for a summer bridge program. And there encountered its core curriculum. One of the few and the first great books, general education program in the United States, one of the few remaining in major universities, probably the only one remaining in a major research university as a common required set of courses for everyone. And that immersion both into the culture, not just American culture, but the political, intellectual, philosophical culture that is embodied in the core curriculum, really shaped the person that I am, the person that I became, my career and in some important senses, my mission in life which is to try to make this extraordinary education I have available to other people, especially those who have traditionally been denied access to that kind of education.

Michael Poliakoff ([05:30](#)):

You used a phrase in your book that I thought was so powerful that it is an odious tradition to suggest that these riches that belong to all humanity and are captured in the Columbia great books program are only the possessions of the elite. And you've actually put your sweat equity into it with these programs to introduce Socrates to secondary school students who otherwise wouldn't have the opportunity.

Roosevelt Montas ([06:02](#)):

Yeah, there is a long tradition, not just in America, but in many societies of steering working class, the non elite, to an education in obedience and education in following commands. Sometimes we call that a vocational on technical education. Of course, vocational and technical educations are in themselves extraordinarily valuable, but when they are offered instead of, or absent, the other kind of education, the one that taps into our capacities as free individuals, as agents, as thinkers, as rational beings, when education is used as a means to cut off students from those capacities, then it is unconscionable and indeed an audience tradition.

Roosevelt Montas ([06:49](#)):

You know, last night you speak of this program in which every summer bring high school students to the Columbia campus to study Socrates, study Aristotle, [inaudible 00:07:01], Hobbes, Locke, Russo, the Constitution, the Declaration, Martin Luther King's letter from the Birmingham jail. Last night, I had a meeting with the cohort that's coming in a few weeks to campus. Their parents were invited to come into the campus, give them kind of general orientation. And at one point, one student raised his hand and asked, we had been describing the dorms and the dining halls, do we have to pay for the food at the dining halls. No, food is free. The food is free, the dorm is free, the professors are free, the textbooks are free. And then we give them a stipend of \$600 at the end of the summer. And the students, it is as if it had begun to dawn on them and there was this sense of like, what's the catch here? Why are you doing this? And the reason we do it is because students deserve this.

Roosevelt Montas ([07:49](#)):

The reason we do it is because when I, when my child grows up to be that age, I hope to have the resources to be able to allow that kind of experience and education for him. And our purpose is, to these students who are low income, who are first generation college bound, to give them access to that

same set of values. See, when we give them this opportunity, we signal a value. The only thing we require from you is hard work and that hard work deserves this kind of acknowledgement and valuing. That sends such a powerful signal. Anyway, I'm sorry to go on about it. I'm just excited about the next round which starts in two weeks with these high school students.

Michael Poliakoff ([08:28](#)):

This is wonderful and every sense, rich and beautiful. It does remind me of an experience I had when I was Associate Dean at Bloomsburg, which is essentially a regional university, many first generation students. And I got a little bit of money to buy a copy of the Apology of Socrates. One of these very inexpensive paperbacks for all of the incoming students and came up with a little study guide and recruited faculty members to take them in small groups right at orientation, so it would be their first experience.

Michael Poliakoff ([09:07](#)):

And one of the student life people came up to me and said, I did a word study of that book and the vocabulary in it is at grade 16 level and you're going to find all those paperbacks, just sitting unopened in the trash cans. And I took such pleasure in being able to say you were totally wrong.

Roosevelt Montas ([09:35](#)):

Yeah.

Michael Poliakoff ([09:35](#)):

And in some ways, outrageously, odiously wrong to do this to these students. To so undervalue them. The reports from all the facilitators were that nobody came unprepared. They'd all struggled with that text. And we moved to Martin Luther King. He's in a jail where he doesn't even have paper and pencil, but he's got in his heart and in his head Plato, Martin Buber, The Bible, a whole range of great books. how could anyone try to take that away?

Roosevelt Montas ([10:14](#)):

Right. He's quoting from memory, all those writers. He had internalized that tradition and found in it a source of clarity, of moral authority, of political power to affect the kinds of changes he sought. If we deny students access to that tradition, we are hampering their capacity to contribute to this ongoing conversation in behalf of justice. You know, we talk about social justice. We talk about the things like police brutality, things like social inequality. Well, if we want to empower our students to solve those problems, to tackle those problems, we need to give them the tools with which to cut through the ideology, with which to cut through the obfuscations and the often ideological blinders through which people tend to interact with those issues. And it is through the study of these fundamental ideas.

Roosevelt Montas ([11:20](#)):

It is through the study of the underlying debates that manifest themselves today in those urgent contemporary issues that we will best equip the students. I can't help but lament the fact that so many, precisely low income students, working class students, students who could most benefit from this kind of education, are denied in the name of social justice.

Michael Poliakoff ([11:48](#)):

Yes.

Roosevelt Montas ([11:48](#)):

Often in the name of identity rights, in the name of the struggle for freedom, they are denied precisely the most powerful tools we know of to bring about that freedom. You know, I think of Jesus's line that you will know the truth and the truth will make you free, right? The truth makes you free. There is an inner transformation that happens as a result of exposure to the truth. It is not that the truth gives you freedom, but that the truth makes you free, right? That work of inner transformation, the work of education. We do our students an unconscionable injustice when we deny them that kind of education.

Michael Poliakoff ([12:32](#)):

Ironically, another immigrant from the Dominican Republic, [Padilla Paralta 00:12:40] at Princeton has been arguing that the classics are a tool of repression for minorities and has argued that the whole institution of classics has to be deplatformed, has to be taken away. One imagines this would mean that people who do Greek and Latin and ancient history would be absorbed into other departments where they essentially could be monitored to make sure that they were saying the things that would advance, what he thinks will be social justice. Language was very strong that the classics are equal parts vampire and cannibal. And I never found this, of course.

Michael Poliakoff ([13:29](#)):

And it appears to me that you've seen the core as liberating, obviously at times, a more malleable phenomenon. And you argued quite eloquently that it really ought to be embracing more of the East, but that at its core, at the core of the core are these works that speak to the human condition [qua 00:13:55]. Regardless of color, religion, national origin. And I wanted to invite you to comment a bit on this because obviously the whole notion of studying great books is under very serious assault, right?

Roosevelt Montas ([14:12](#)):

It is important that we disentangle a history of racist, imperialist appropriation of the Western tradition of learning, that we disentangle that appropriation from what the works themselves do and what the works themselves say. There is an analogous case in the way that sometimes we argue about American history. American history of course, is riddled with injustices and outrages that we do not tolerate today. It is important, however, that one can disentangle the history of abuses and appropriations of American ideals in the service of immoral, or at least morally dubious ends from the ideals that are articulated in, say, The Declaration of Independence.

Roosevelt Montas ([15:12](#)):

The same happens with the classics. There is no question that there is a tradition of appropriation, a kind of white supremacist Eurocentric appropriation of the classical tradition and using the classical tradition as a justification for imperialist exploitation. We cannot deny that, but nor must we reduce the value of those works to those appropriations. In fact, we find that within those works lie the seeds of overturning those racist exploitative violations of human rights. That is the discourse of equality, the discourse of human rights, even the discourse of gender equality, of democracy, all of those are sewn and developed, worked out in that tradition. In fact, it is in the name of values that have been developed and evolved in that tradition that many people today condemn that tradition. That is, it is in the name of racial justice, in the name of equality, in the name of gender equality, that sometimes that tradition, which itself developed those ideas, is rejected.

Michael Poliakoff ([16:32](#)):

Every once in a while, I find it irresistible to teach a course as an adjunct at George Mason university and of course there, very few of the students have read anything of the Western tradition, including the Bible. I was looking for common ground and there's not much, but as I tell them at the beginning of the semester, if you are the same people at the end of it, as you are now, I will have failed you. And I get an impression from their final papers. These are either they're trying to spare my feelings, or they really have gained things.

Michael Poliakoff ([17:08](#)):

But as you were speaking, I was thinking of the Aeneid, Virgil's Aeneid, which is a quintessential work of the classical canon. And it was badly interpreted in various eras, the [Victor Perschels 00:17:25] line, the perfect god, the perfect emperor, the perfect hero. Well, no. What I try to get my students to focus on is that it's a work of the failure of the hero. In the end he cannot control his own rage, although he was bidden by the ghost of his father to remember that's the Roman mission. What a perfect work of moral therapy for us all. This wonderful man failed. We have to be on our guard. And that's something that makes us civilized as people.

Roosevelt Montas ([18:04](#)):

Yeah. It is the moral complexity and depth of a work that makes it a great work like the Aeneid, and it is simply irreducible to an ideological tagline. It is irreducible to a political orthodoxy, or even to a moral orthodox. It is a multivocal text. It speaks with nuance, with penetration, and it serves us as a mirror. You know, if you look at the history of, say, Soviet realist fiction, kind of a whole school of fiction that was meant to be a kind of moralizing, championing of the values of the working class and demonizing of the capitalist class, it's terrible literature. Literature resists ideological indoctrination. You cannot produce great literature with the goal of moral indoctrination. It just doesn't work. The power of literature comes from its complexity. The power of literature comes from its capacity to illuminate our own complex humanity. It is not to tell you what is right. It is to equip you to engage in that exploration yourself.

Michael Poliakoff ([19:25](#)):

I wanted to give you the opportunity if you'd like to respond to Louis Menand, who reviewed your book, and I won't be disingenuous, I thought in a way that was just quite wrong headed, that he didn't seem to get it, that the notion that we are supposed to take away is that there is a truth. We may never find it. We probably won't, but we are bidden, bidden by everyone from Socrates on, to keep looking for that.

Roosevelt Montas ([19:59](#)):

Yeah.

Michael Poliakoff ([19:59](#)):

As one of my dear friends, one of on our board of directors said, spend your life looking for the truth and run as fast as you can from anybody who claims to have found it. And as I read Manand's review, growing a little hot under the collar, I thought of the moment when Robert Kennedy got the news that Martin Luther King had been assassinated.

Michael Poliakoff ([20:28](#)):

And as I understand that he got on the back of a pickup truck and from memory quoted from Aeschylus' Oresteis those incredible lines, "they're drips before my heart, the memory of the labor of remembered pain, strangely violent is the grace of the gods that sit at the awesome helm and even the unwilling learn moderation." And from that talked about the kind of society that America had to work to be. Well, Aeschylus didn't pretend that he had the truth. It was a process, when the Furies become the Eumenides. And he's pushing us in that direction, never to give up. So at any rate, I'm rambling on here.

Roosevelt Montas ([21:21](#)):

Yeah, no, no, no. That's beautiful. The good at which the intellect aims is truth. You cannot pursue rational inquiry, absent in notion of truth. And if you try, what you end up is, instead of truth, is the pursuit of power. That is, if you remove truth from the goal at which the intellect aims and the goal at which especially the university aims, what you end up with in its stead is power and Louis Manand articulates a really dominant vision in today's academy that tends to look at humanistic development as a kind of fiction, as a kind of cover, for power agendas at the bottom. What you have is not truth, is not virtue, is not human excellence. What you have at the bottom is a quest for power. And there is a very real difference between Manand's view of what a liberal education in our university should do and my view of what it should do.

Roosevelt Montas ([22:30](#)):

Manand has cast his lot with seeing the role of the liberal arts in the university as being in what he called the knowledge business, in the production of knowledge. And that is a kind of professionalized pursuit that subordinates human development to actually a technical and professional pursuit. That is, my view of liberal education is about cultivating individuals, not about the production of knowledge. If you want to be an academic, if you want to be a scholar, then yes, production of knowledge. But if you want to cultivate an undergraduate student who might be a doctor, or a businessman, or a lawyer, or an artist, if you want to cultivate the general student population, then your object here is not the generation of knowledge. Your object is really the cultivation of human beings. And those two aims often live together in universities, but they are quite distinct.

Roosevelt Montas ([23:33](#)):

And what has happened at the contemporary university is that the research paradigm, this paradigm of the university being focused on the generation of knowledge, has subsumed and denatured the other aim, which is that knowledge is a place in which human beings are cultivated, in which human capacities are deepened and brought to fruition. Those capacities are goal free. Those capacities are not subordinated to any particular goal, to any particular end, that's what makes them liberal.

Roosevelt Montas ([24:09](#)):

So it's not surprising to me that Louis Manand, who stands in some sense, one of the pinnacles of the academic humanist profession, would be A, irritated by the vision of liberal education that I proposed and B, be brought by that irritation to articulate a vision that is actually profoundly anti-liberal, liberal in the sense of liberal education.

Michael Poliakoff ([24:36](#)):

Beautifully put. And of course, coming from ACTA where we really do take the core curriculum very seriously, we see the fragmentation that's taken place in the undergraduate curriculum. That some strange study of Lady Gaga or Harry Potter, I'm not making this up, is every bit as important as doing

that rich exploration of world civilization, to say nothing of the civilization in which we live, which is largely a Western civilization that we need to understand, and people write their dissertations now on things that seem to be so trivial. And it's at the expense of the very reason for studying literature, which to me always meant the crystallization of human experience in a way that we really can respond to and engage, argue against.

Michael Poliakoff ([25:48](#)):

And of course, I think we share a certain respectful skepticism about what postmodernism has brought. For me, the quintessential moment was when the New York Times was, some years back, trying to respond to the revelation that Paul De Man had published some 70 antisemitic articles during the Third Reich for a Belgian newspaper. And it was as if the author had gotten infected by postmodernism because at the end he says, "well, was it really all that bad?" Yes! Everything that the tradition is teaching us is that this was evil.

Roosevelt Montas ([26:34](#)):

Yeah. And Jacques Derrida, the kind of godfather or the father of deconstruction and the school of theoretical inquiry that Paul De Man advanced, I think made a grave, a grave mistake in equivocating, in his judgment of Paul De Man's background and kind of putting it all under the kind of obfuscatory narrative, you know, what in the end is history, what in the end is truth. And I think it showed kind of the problematic, perilous moral territory in which the radical questioning that deconstruction and postmodernism brought us can put us. It doesn't need to put us there. I think deconstruction and postmodernism made some really fundamental and important advances and insights. I sometimes think of the common phrase, "throwing out the baby with the bathwater," because what has happened with the set of tools that thinkers like Foucault, and Derrida, and even Heidegger and Nietzsche put at our disposal, is that people have used it not merely to dismantle ideological power constructions that have been veiled in the name of truth.

Roosevelt Montas ([28:05](#)):

They have used it to deny the possibility of truth. They have used it to deny this orientation to truth in the intellect words, as I suggested before, it works more like a direction than a destination. It's not that you will get there, but that you will be oriented in a particular direction. And when you give up that north star, when you give up that as the metaphysical anchor of your rational activity, you do end up in a moral morass. You do end up in a kind of post-truth world. We are today in our society, seeing the kind of cultural manifestation, the cultural, political manifestation of an epistemological crisis, a crisis of truth. Sad to say that crisis of truth begins in the university. The crisis of truth is theorized and advanced and takes hold in the university before it goes out to popular culture. But I think that those two phenomena are actually profoundly linked.

Michael Poliakoff ([29:07](#)):

And remarkably, I think back to the irony that one of Paul De Man's teaching techniques was to say, "okay, we've heard the beauty. Now let's have the truth." As if this dismantling of the power, and innate beauty, which is something that once again, the Columbia core really does explore in music and in art. And it's important, right? Because we're not on this earth simply to move through socialist realism buildings, devoid of the things that make us deeply human, but that there was a truth that presumably was the nothingness, the hollowness at the core. A very frightening world.



Roosevelt Montas ([30:01](#)):

Yeah. Yeah. It's one of the reasons why we're restoring, in our undergraduate education, a sense of the knowledge foundations, that the foundations of knowledge, the building blocks that allow for rational discourse and investigation of subjects, even as elusive as beauty. There's no question of beauty is utterly elusive. There's no question that there has not yet been formulated and adequate theory of beauty. That does not mean that every day we are not capable of experiencing this profound thing. That for some of us, we can't imagine life without, right? We don't need to arrive at the theory of beauty in order to accept its phenomenological fact.

Michael Poliakoff ([30:56](#)):

Yeah. And that, I think Nietzsche actually had some really good things to say.

Roosevelt Montas ([31:00](#)):

Yeah, yeah.

Michael Poliakoff ([31:00](#)):

As well as many other things that are highly problematic.

Roosevelt Montas ([31:03](#)):

Nietzsche's much smarter than his followers.

Michael Poliakoff ([31:08](#)):

I want to move to another topic you wrote in your book: "to this day, democracies depend on a citizenry capable of discharging duties for which a liberal education prepared Athenian citizens, the possibility of democracy hinges on the success or failure of liberal education," to which I certainly say amen and interestingly enough, Ron Daniel's new book, what Universities Owed Democracy, is really pointing us towards that same end. And I wanted to invite you to talk a little bit more about that phenomenon, which now is of the highest urgency.

Roosevelt Montas ([31:51](#)):

That's right. It is critically important in our society right now because we are experiencing a breakdown of our discursive capacity to live in a democracy. That is, democracy requires of its participants a certain deliberative capacity, which means a discursive capacity, a capacity to listen, a capacity to absorb information, a capacity to persuade, and to argue. A capacity to weigh conflicting values and put them in some kind of hierarchical order that approximates some sense of the good of the whole.

Roosevelt Montas ([32:31](#)):

We have lost largely that capacity. The media environment in which we live, the advent of the internet, the advent of social media, the advent of algorithmically driven social media and information flows has presented a challenge to our society that we are not meeting and the place in which we can most directly encounter, most directly counter those forces is in the classroom. It's by equipping our students with the discursive sophistication to navigate that environment. We have failed, and we're failing to do that. There may be things that we need to do legislatively with regulation of information and kind of the new digital environment in which we live for sure. But I think the primary work is cultural and educational, and it is equipping people with this capacity to exercise freedom, to live the free life.



Michael Poliakoff ([33:39](#)):

I hear a little bit of the voice of Pericles as you're speaking, that the Athenians all equipped to judge in the assembly, even if they're not originating ideas. And the importance of the nature of their lives that makes them so capable, so agile in their ways. And I'm going to be a little mischievous, after all, being from ACTA and always wanting to see schools move towards an A core curriculum. Do, do you think that the future of the core might actually be enhanced by a greater inclusion of the texts that really govern the workings of American free institutions? Some of them are already there and indeed their roots are there, but I've often wondered whether if I may be so absolutely outrageous as to offer a suggestion.

Roosevelt Montas ([34:47](#)):

Absolutely.

Michael Poliakoff ([34:47](#)):

Whether that would be a good thing.

Roosevelt Montas ([34:49](#)):

I think it would be. One of the debates in the Columbia core that's constantly balanced is how American should it be? The core was organized in the early 20th century. It's now over a hundred years old. And when it was first organized, it was with the idea of a kind of Western writ large without having the American case dominate. It was easier to do in literature. So in the early iterations of the core curriculum, we didn't have any American literature at all in the text. In the political kind of track, America figures much more largely because in some ways it has been the culmination of debates that have been going on for hundreds of years in the Antiquity and the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. I do think that today, greater emphasis on this American instantiation of the ideals that we spent most of the year in the political thought course examining, I do think that more attention to that would be appropriate, whether it's in the case of the Constitution, on the Federalist papers, or even more contemporary civil rights, yet the core curriculum always embodies a consensus.

Roosevelt Montas ([36:31](#)):

It is like those documents that are written by committee that seem to satisfy no one fully, but it certainly one of the ongoing discussions. One of the, every time, every three years when we revise this syllabus, one of the debates inevitably that we're going to have is how much American concerns are going to be included.

Roosevelt Montas ([36:55](#)):

And of course, sometimes people take American concerns to be very, very present as concerns. So for example, the concerns about race, which are of course decisive in our cultural conversation, but are very, very distinctly American. The problems of race in America are not the same problems of race in England or in France or the Dominican Republic for that matter, in Latin America. They have a particular bent. So I'm always on the other side of the "let's put America prominently". On the other side of that argument, I'm also questioning against letting the curriculum be hijacked by very presentist American cultural hot button issues.

Michael Poliakoff ([37:36](#)):

Yes. And that's a hard circle to square, of course.

Roosevelt Montas ([37:43](#)):

Yeah.

Michael Poliakoff ([37:43](#)):

You know, going from the more foundational documents that really are part of the human experience to those that are extremely important, extremely urgent. And in many ways, those concerns depend on the foundational documents. But I do see the conundrum. I wanted, if I'm not taking out too much of your time, you've been extraordinarily generous, to move to another issue that you address. The, as it were, pragmatism, or the pragmatist argument, about the liberal arts and coming from say the standpoint of, say, Cardinal John Henry Newman, there's a strong case about the pragmatism of the liberal arts. As he says that a person who only knows one discipline doesn't even have command of that, whereas the liberally educated person has command of everything. And I wonder if there's a way that the integrity and the passion of the core can be maintained while still putting to rest some of those really quite fallacious arguments that this isn't really something that advances a person in a career.

Roosevelt Montas ([39:11](#)):

Yeah. Yeah. I find that one has to make a distinction between a liberal education and a major in the liberal arts. And those are pervasively conflated in public conversation. So when somebody wants to, say, attack a liberal education, they will often point to the unemployed art historian or something, or to what kind of job is a philosophy major going to allow you to do. And of course that has an especially asymmetrical resonance along the socioeconomic scale because the low income college aspirant who is seeing college primarily as a tool to get out of poverty is going to hear that argument and say, yeah, there's no way that philosophy is for me or art history is for me.

Roosevelt Montas ([40:05](#)):

So in part, we have created that problem by removing liberal education from general education. That is by not enthroning, not enshrining, a common liberal education regardless of your specialization. That is, if you want to be a businessperson focused on making profit, you still need a liberal education. We're going to make sure you get a liberal education and you need not eschew a liberal education in order to pursue your economic advancement. So we have to eliminate the opportunity cost of a liberal education. This is especially relevant again for our low income students.

Roosevelt Montas ([40:48](#)):

So that's one issue there, that we have to say part of your college education is going to be liberal and that's not going to be instead of specialization, but as the foundation for specialization. Then there is the next dimension of the argument, which is to say and show that you will in fact be a better businessman by being grounded in the values, complexities, traditions, histories, that frame your actual occupation. You are going to be a better engineer, you're going to be a better software designer, you are going to be a better lawyer, you're going to be a better physician if you practice all of those crafts as humanist endeavors. So that liberal education not only must not come at the expense of specialization, but we must emphasize their value even within the specialization.

Michael Poliakoff ([41:42](#)):

And when we look at the university, that just seems so eminently possible but yet, with the exception of a handful of places, nobody does it. They get the worst of both worlds because they put out this vast cafeteria line of choices, call them distribution. And some of them are really quite nugatory.

Roosevelt Montas ([42:07](#)):

Yes.

Michael Poliakoff ([42:07](#)):

And also it's quite expensive because there'll typically be a lot of underfilled sections, right?

Roosevelt Montas ([42:13](#)):

It's the Menand fallacy.

Michael Poliakoff ([42:14](#)):

Yeah.

Roosevelt Montas ([42:15](#)):

It's the fallacy that your job as an academic specialist is to offer specialized courses to your students so that they can study, the fourth book of the Inferno. Yeah. The first three lines of this or that, right, the opening passage of the Iliad. It is that fallacy that stems from the dominance of disciplinary specialization in the academic profession and in the university. So that true general education has in fact been squeezed out of the curriculum by disciplinary specialization.

Roosevelt Montas ([42:47](#)):

So we're not going to ask our professors to teach broadly humanistic tradition. We're going to ask them to teach their little tiny square of expertise. And we're going to then allow students to choose from 50 of these tiny little squares of expertise and put together an education that we're going to call general and liberal. But which in fact is neither general nor liberal. It is, in fact, an often incoherent assemblage of narrow specialized presentations by faculty whose whole professional identity is tied to their particular expertise. The Manand fallacy, we're now going to coin that.

Michael Poliakoff ([43:26](#)):

I think that's entirely appropriate. And it also leads to this tragedy of the commons that departments compete for enrollments. And they often do it in the most disreputable ways.

Roosevelt Montas ([43:41](#)):

Yeah.

Michael Poliakoff ([43:41](#)):

Entertainment and easy grades, rather than the kind of intellectual nourishment that is really unavoidable when a student has to be in a discussion about a Greek tragedy or a Shakespeare play.

Roosevelt Montas ([44:01](#)):

Yeah. I've done a lot of traveling in the last six months at different schools and one of the messages that I have brought, which in some places I see resonating, is that the humanities, which are shriveling institutionally, floundering, that their revival, their reinvigoration, it's going to come from general education. That is, that to the extent that humanists realize that as humanities scholars realize that their job ought to be teaching non-majors. That is, general education, not teaching their little specialty to the general student body, but a broad humanistic education to the general student body. That in that shift from a focus and specialty to a focus in general education lies their institutional future.

Michael Poliakoff ([44:55](#)):

And that feeling, I would hope, of integrity that when they see students receive a diploma, they know that those students are educated. Not that they're great classics majors or great biologists, but they're educated human beings who are ready for not just their careers, although they will be ready for their careers in the way that John Henry Newman told us, but also for living for the challenges of being citizens of a free society.

Roosevelt Montas ([45:30](#)):

Right, right. And ultimately, that is what true education is about. True education is not training, is not outfitting a student with skills, true education is drawing from within the student those inner capacities that make them human beings.

Michael Poliakoff ([45:50](#)):

Well, that might be a wonderful place at which to end, although I would invite you to bring up any other nugget of wisdom that you have. I think we've just begun to tap the treasures of your heart and mind, but we're all enormously grateful. I speak for all of the active staff and for our audience, for the things that you've shared with us. You are helping not just higher education, but helping the nation in what you do.

Roosevelt Montas ([46:20](#)):

Thank you, Michael. It's my great privilege to be here with you.