

Michael Poliakoff (00:00):

Welcome to Higher Ed Now. I'm Michael Poliakoff, the President of the American Council of Trustees and Alumni. And today it is our honor to have John Agresto on Higher Ed Now. You have a long and distinguished record of service to higher education and to the nation. You were 11 years at the helm of St. John's College in Santa Fe. You were Chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities. And you gave long service in rebuilding, or more accurately, I should say reconceptualizing higher education in Iraq following the overthrow of Saddam Hussein. And then you took on the leadership of the American University of Iraq. And I just saw you as a participant in the University of Austin at Texas First Principles Summit. And that's just a short list of the things that you have done.

John Agresto (01:00):

Yeah, I'm a regular busy body. I got to tell you that. Yeah.

Michael Poliakoff (01:07):

[foreign language 00:01:07] as Socrates used to say. But he said it in a way that was disparaging. For you, it really has been serviced. Like Roosevelt Montas, your biography is testimony to the transformative power of the humanities. And it is a total refutation of the idea that the humanities are simply icing and ornaments for the elite. It's what you call in the book, "The alive quality of the liberal arts." I wanted to start by asking you to talk about you, the passion that keeps you still active, the passion that led you to write *The Death of Learning*.

John Agresto (01:52):

More negative than positive, I have to say. I spent my whole life in higher education as a professor, as a college president, as a chancellor and provost in Iraq, as a senior advisor to the Iraqi government and the Ministry of Higher Education. And all I saw were people who, my colleagues who would, a couple of things, colleagues who would say, "Oh, the liberal arts are so important." And they had no idea what they were talking about. They had no idea why they were important. They didn't know what they were teaching or how great the subject was. And then especially when I was at the Humanities Center in Washington, I shut down for the humanities in Washington DC. And even before that at Humanities Center in North Carolina, I saw the couple of things. First, how narrowly conceived humanities could be or the liberal arts could be. How they had no idea. I once edited a book called *The Humanist as Citizen*, and all the humanists wanted to write in the book, but they had no idea what it meant to be a citizen.

(03:11):

Everybody could talk about how humanities can make them or the liberals can make them ever so wise, ever so cultured, ever so moral, ever so, use your word [inaudible 00:03:25]. No idea how it could ever help them be better citizens, better husbands and wives, better family members, better neighbors and better... This came home to me when I was in Iraq. They knew, the students knew that when they learned history, they were learning something that completely overthrew the education they were having. And the world opened up to them. When they learned literature, they had no idea that these things that were written that never happened, that were stories were instructive. And as was said, they could live their lives. I'm just going on too much to walk, but it was fighting against almost the uselessness of the liberal arts that my wonderful colleagues in history and philosophy and literature were spouting.

Michael Poliakoff (04:29):

I want to get back to that. You used the term at one point in the book, "self-inflicted wounds." And that of course is what we're laboring against now, those of us that love the liberal arts and love the humanities. But I've got to pay you two more compliments. As a candidate to be the archivist of the United States, you insisted that you would indeed release the Nixon tapes. It was a position of the highest integrity and courage. And if you'd like, talk about that moment, and perhaps if I'm not being psychologically intrusive, how those principles of the liberal arts that you uphold in your book enabled that moment of such integrity and courage.

John Agresto ([05:27](#)):

That was a difficult time, I must say. And I didn't do it because I had particular courage or I had particular integrity myself. I was up to being archivist and I knew that the Congress had passed and the President had signed the bill that made the release of the Nixon tapes available to the public, available to historians and just generally to the public. I was told by the Justice Department at the time that they really didn't want them released. That may be the law, but that I should balk, that I should... I just want to be a law-abiding citizen. I want to do what the law says. You can't think the law means anything other than the tape should be released. So I said, "I'm sorry if I become the archivist, I will release the tapes. It's what I'm supposed to do. That's my job." Well, one of my 10,000 jobs. And immediately the Justice Department told the White House to pull my nomination.

Michael Poliakoff ([06:39](#)):

Cicero wrote, "We are slaves to the law"-

John Agresto ([06:43](#)):

Well yes.

Michael Poliakoff ([06:44](#)):

That a friend of ours, "We are slaves to the law in order that we can be free." And I couldn't help noticing that you are still a probate judge. You are still doing your citizen's duty to the law. I'm very, very impressed, John.

John Agresto ([07:02](#)):

My term of office has run out recently. They wanted me to stand for office again. I said, "Enough is enough. I'm getting to be 80 years old. I got other things to do like fish and garden." But no, being probate judge was fun. Even more fun was I was allowed to marry people. Nothing could have been more fun than marrying people.

Michael Poliakoff ([07:31](#)):

And your book certainly tells us about how the humanities, that section of the liberal arts, if we properly observe them, will help us in those sorts of key relationships on which society rests. This all has a certain coherence. So not to flatter you, but I have to start on this conversation with yet one more reference to something you did that I found enormously admirable. Going into the Green Zone in 2003, which was an act of physical courage. This was not exactly the Hilton. And it made me think when I read your book, *Mugged by Reality*, of a presentation that I heard you give actually to Jack Miller Center Conference. And in that keynote you talked about the significance of the Good Samaritan, as we know that section from the Bible. And I wanted to invite you to talk a little bit as we explore the importance of the liberal

arts of that kind of, I will call it literature, to make it as broadly non-sectarian as possible. The importance of that kind of literature for building the kind of world that we want to have.

John Agresto ([09:03](#)):

I'm on record as saying, "I think more than the Beatitudes, more than almost anything else that could strike people as how they should live. That story of the Good Samaritan is unbelievable." Notice what goes on in that story. Those people who are part of the group, the tribe, the club, the Pharisees, the other Jewish pastors by, leave the guy to die. And then here's a person who comes and says, "I'll help him. I'll help bind his wounds. I'll help pay for his recovery. I'll see to it that he gets better as best I can. I don't know him." It was not so much a story of charity, but it's a story of what it means to be a neighbor. Because the question Christ asked is, "Who is neighbor to this man?" And don't forget that the 10 Commandments talk about, "Thou shall not covet thy neighbor's goods. Thou shall not covet thy neighbor's wife." A narrow understanding of who's included and who's excluded.

([10:21](#)):

And here's Christ saying, "You ought to be neighbor to everyone." That breaks down all of the identity politics that we have these days, all of the hatred we have for other groups because they're different. Breaks down all thoughts of racism, all sorts of classism. And says the important parable in the New Testament is one of what it means to be a neighbor. And it leads us, I'm not one to always say, "Well, we go directly from the Gospels to the Declaration of Independence." But there is something there about with that understanding, we can talk about all men are created equal endowed then by their Creator with rights. It's once you start studying and looking at these things, you really can learn an incredible amount.

Michael Poliakoff ([11:23](#)):

And enter into that conversation about what it means to be a human being with no particular adjective attached to it. Just human and the value of human. That's the kind of conversation that I appreciated so much in your book, the kind of thing that we want people to take away from the liberal arts. Before we move away from the subject of American University in Iraq, I wanted to ask you to talk a little bit about how, and I realize it's early for impact, but how you see that curriculum that you designed and implemented very reminiscent of a St. John's kind of approach, how that curriculum has changed the way people think and behave in Iraq. I was so impressed to see the strength of the core curriculum at a university that didn't know the concept of that before you came there.

John Agresto ([12:42](#)):

It's not that in Iraq they didn't understand the power of literature, the meaning of what you could learn from history. And in fact, I'm reminded of a story, I don't know if I tell this in that book on Iraq, of going to visit an orphanage back in 2004. And I was so impressed, the kids spoke fairly decent English at the orphanage. And I'm talking about kids who were 8, 10, 12, 14 maybe at most. And they knew English because Saddam wanted everyone to know English. It was the new Latin of the civilized world, and this is how Iraq would get ahead. And they said, "Oh, we read books in English." And I said, "Really? What have you read?" "We have read The Merchant of Venice." I said, "Come on." They said, "Yes. And we have read Oliver Twist." I said, "No."

([13:51](#)):

They said, "Yes. Did you know that man Shylock was a Jew? Did you know that guy Fagan was a Jew?" I said, "Oh my God, this is what they're doing to literature here in this country. This is what they're doing

to books. They are using them as weapons to politicize people and teach them to hate." We know literature can be used that way. And we think it's sometimes used that way even in America. Although generally we say, "Don't read this rather than read the-". And so I said, "Look, what about this passage in the Merchant of Venice?" "Oh, we never read that. We never read that." "Does that you have eyes, if you prick us, do we not bleed? What about the part where Shylock talks about how his daughter stole the turquoise ring his dead wife had given him for a barrel for a monkey? "I would not have given that ring for a wilderness of monkeys."

[\(15:03\)](#):

Clip #1

Okay, so you can learn wonderful things by reading. And you can also learn how to think, how to speak, and honestly, how to be more cultured. I don't want to take that too far though, because there are those in humanities who think that people who study other things are not cultured. People who become electricians, "Well, they don't know the fine things we know." It doesn't make us finer. It makes us smarter and more understanding is what these things do. And it heightens our imagination. And I think the important thing is, as I found that out in Iraq, really found that in Iraq, everybody wants to know, all people want to know.

[\(16:04\)](#):

And what people at the age of the adolescent age through into their twenties want to know, they actually want to know that... They don't want to know who the antecedents of Wordsworth were, or the stuff that we got our courses with in terms of psychological musings about the author or influence tracing. They want to know what does it mean to be a friend? What does it mean to be in love? What does it mean to be... Why does Dante put the people who betray their friends at the very bottom of hell? He puts them at the bottom of hell, even below people who kill babies. If you betray your friend, that's the worst you could do. That's what Lucifer did to God. God was his friend, and Lucifer betrayed him. Judas was Christ's friend, and Judas betrayed him. We can learn things by studying these things and thinking about what it means. Why is it that betrayal is worse than stealing or murder? Why am I going down this road? I'm not even sure now. But you can learn an awful lot.

[\(17:26\)](#):

And that's what the kids in Iraq knew, that they could see a whole new world, that they had all these questions. What's justice? What does it mean to be a just person? What do I owe my country? What does my country owe me? To talk about the liberal arts more in generally than just humanities, I wonder what the universe is like. I wonder what my place in it is. I wonder if I should be scared. The way these studies open your eyes to help you wonder about things and become more cognizant of them and more understanding of the issues. I'm not one who thinks that the humanities always teach virtue. They really don't always teach virtue, except for one virtue. They teach you to see all sides. And if they teach see all sides, it teaches the virtue of moderation. I don't know any real serious professor of humanities or the arts who's a fanatic.

Michael Poliakoff ([18:39](#)):

I want to pause on that for a moment. We're using the term liberal arts, and I want to ask you, should we really be saying liberal arts and sciences? When I think about the St. John's curriculum, students read Euclids, they use the same devices that Decart did, they learn calculus. So it seems to me that there's a certain unity there. And I worry a little bit about dropping that part of the term liberal arts and sciences. Do you have a thought about that?

John Agresto ([19:20](#)):

Sure, sure, sure. The liberal arts were the kind of skills, and the skills included the skills of reading, of speaking well, of understanding what's written. But it also understood the skills of mathematics, of science. The liberal arts always really were what you would want to call the liberal arts and sciences. It was just humanities, science, mathematics, humanities, philosophy, literature, languages, history, math, science, astronomy, all were, in fact, when you think of the trivium and the quadrivium that comprised the Artes Liberales, the four, the quadrivium were sciences. And so they've always been connected.

Michael Poliakoff ([20:15](#)):

I just have this feeling, this territorial feeling, let's take back from the stamp media, the fact that the quadrivium has been ours for millennia.

John Agresto ([20:32](#)):

Yeah, yeah, yeah. No, in fact, the interesting thing I said about St. John's is how it really could take kids, young adults who think, "Oh, I'm afraid of mathematics. I can't do that. Or I am literary, I can't relate to science." And show them they're just damn wrong. Mathematics is as beautiful as the finest sonnet ever written. And science can teach you more about wonderful things than maybe even philosophy does often.

Michael Poliakoff ([21:08](#)):

I pause here actually to say a few words in memory of Robert Zimmer, who just passed away. And of course he was an extraordinary world-class mathematician and as an academic leader built centers of science. But he was also the generative force when he was at Brown of the Colgate Humanities Center. And when we gave him the Merrill Award a few years ago, he started by warning people against self-deception, quoted Demosthenes and quoted Feynman. The first principle is that you must not fool yourself. You're the easiest person to fool. And then talked about how the liberal arts provide that kind of training that we need that makes us more aware when we're slipping into that world of self-deception. And as I read your book, all of this sounded very much familiar.

John Agresto ([22:14](#)):

Oh, Michael, it goes beyond that. And sometimes I really do worry, I think the people who deceived themselves easiest, is that a word? But most easily can be the humanists in the liberal arts. Maureen Dowd just had an article in the New York Times, an op-ed of some sort, and she talked about all the things that were killing the liberal arts. She was talking about the humanities in particular, and it was to a degree artificial intelligence and the quest for scientism, the belief in vocationalism, professionalism. And without any thought that really what's killing the liberal arts has been for years is liberal artists.

([23:10](#)):

There's a humanistic understanding, you know as well as I do. [foreign language 00:23:14], look at yourself. You want to know what's killing the liberal arts? Bad teaching, irrelevant teaching, the politicized teaching. These things are, in fact, they ended by saying that the liberal arts being killed, yes, they're being killed by the cost of higher education. But they're being killed by any number of... Don't think that they're being killed just by kids who want to go get a good job, raise money, make money, support their families. That's not what's really killing the liberal arts. What's killing the liberal arts is people don't see the point of them because we've made ourselves silly. We've made ourselves useless. We don't understand what it means to be a humanist and a citizen, for instance. And so I ended it by, I

wrote a little note to The Times, it's not that the liberal arts are being killed. They're dying not so much by murder, but by suicide.

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

Yes, indeed. You had the experience of very, very serious and rigorous training in the liberal arts. As I recall the bio, you were mentored by two of the direct disciples of Leo Strauss, Walter Burns and Werner Dannhauser.

John Agresto ([24:48](#)):

Yes. And I was a student also of Alan Bloom's.

Michael Poliakoff ([24:51](#)):

Yes. Can you talk a little bit about what the liberal arts engagement at its best looked like? Terrifying, I assume at some time, some moments?

John Agresto ([25:08](#)):

Well, I don't know, where do you want me to go with this? Terrifying? It was only terrifying when I was taking courses from Bloom. He had to be the smartest. I always knew everything he was saying, but I didn't understand it. He was so smart. And then I met Werner Dannhauser, who combined smartness and wisdom with a niceness, with a sweetness of soul that I had not met anywhere else. And Walter Burns, I went through a note in a book I gave Walter, that "You've taught me more than constitutional law, but you taught me courage." And he did. He stood up under death threats and everything to talk about why Cornell, for instance, should not be shut down. And they were exemplars of learned men, great teachers and people who, I don't want to say they were friends because friends implies a kind of equality. And I think certainly Bloom was superior to me in almost every way. But Dannhauser was a friend. He was jovial and happy and witty and lovely.

Michael Poliakoff ([26:36](#)):

I remember a conversation I had with Bill Allen, whom I'm sure you know, dear friend, and the subject of Leo Strauss came up. He had been at the table with Strauss, and he indicated a certain kind of disquiet. And I said, "I heard he was always very gentle and very soft-spoken." And what Bill said was, "Yes, but then he'd ask you a question that made you realize that you totally misunderstood everything." And I thought to myself, "What a wonderful teacher to be able to cause people constantly to look into the abyss of the darkness, the opacity that surrounds us in the struggle for finding light." And I kind of think that's what you've been pointing us towards in your writing about the liberal arts, that we're always meant to be uncertain. That we recognize there's a truth out there, but that we're not going to grasp it, at least not very easily. It's going to be a long and hard struggle. Am I representing you reasonably well, John?

John Agresto ([27:53](#)):

I think that's right. Yeah. But don't overlook the fact that it's not a dreary struggle. It's a happy struggle. Reading Shakespeare can make you laugh and cry and worried and excited. Not everything is struggle in the sense of dreariness. It's not. I can't tell you, lots of things give me joy in my life. When I was a kid, flying pigeons gave me joy. Now my own children give me joy. Being married gives me joy. Talking to you

gives me joy. But we should not look on the humanities or the liberal arts as punishing tasks we have to go to to become quote-unquote educated. Nothing's more fun.

Michael Poliakoff ([28:58](#)):

Well said. Joy can encompass intensity, or I should say intensity can encompass joy. I do recall you were once saying to me, and this is the advantage of interviewing somebody that has been a friend for many years, that occasionally you would write letters for graduates of St. John's who wanted to get into graduate school or into a professional school, explaining that St. John's just doesn't give out high grades as readily as other institutions. So you maintained a real sense of academic excellence in what we might call academic rigor.

John Agresto ([29:36](#)):

Yeah. And I had to do that because no one on the outside world, few on the outside world understand that if you got a B that was really, really, really good. And that because it's an all required curriculum, no one is going to graduate with an A average. You can't be good at everything all the time. And if you really are that good all the time, you're probably a bore.

Michael Poliakoff ([30:07](#)):

Very nicely put. I want to come back to one of the things you talked about in the book, which is the trap that people fall into so much, I should say, advocates of the liberal arts themselves fall into by trying to present this as a recipe for professional success. But that's a kind of nuanced argument, at least it seems to me, because there are elements of it that are quite transferable. John Henry Newman was telling us that in the idea of the university. I wanted to get your thoughts on how we present the liberal arts in such a way that we don't sell their advantages short, but we don't try to make them into something that they're not.

John Agresto ([31:04](#)):

I understand the impetus, and I even support the desire to, as one person once told me, "Who doesn't want to be an expert in something? Wouldn't that be wonderful?" And I support the idea that there are people who are expert electricians, expert doctors, expert lawyers, even expert baggers at the grocery store. These are important things. But I do think that, and I also want to say that studying the liberal arts do not disable anyone from future employment. There may be some things that you have to go learn and more about, like being a doctor. But always Anthony Fauci went to Holy Cross and majored in Latin and Greek, then he went to medical school, became famous and important doctor, and saved, I can't tell you how many lives regarding what he did with AIDS and then what he did with COVID and with Zika and other viruses. So I have no problem with... Those humanists or those liberal artists who say, "Oh, you want to go to school for employment purposes." You just want to take them and shake them, maybe throw them against the wall.

([32:40](#)):

There's nothing wrong with wanting to be a guy who fixes cars or air conditioners or television repairman, when they used to be such things. What you want to be careful of, and I want to tell this to every person who says, "Oh, I want to go into computers. I want to go into computer science or computer technology." Don't forget the idea of the television repairman. It was a great job while it lasted. If you can speak well, if you can think well, if you have imagination, if you can learn, if you know how to have a conversation with someone at a high level, if you learn how to listen, if you learn how to



read and I mean really read, if you learn how to talk, you may not become a chief trader on Wall Street in the bond market, at least not right away. But soon you may.

[\(33:45\)](#):

I can think of nothing more frightening, a kid comes to me and says, "I know exactly what I want to be for the rest of my life, and that's where I'm going to aim." For the rest of your life? I'm sorry. Broaden your education. Don't narrow it. Find out as much about important things as possible, and then go on from there. Your future is rosier if you have a good, broad liberal education.

Michael Poliakoff [\(34:21\)](#):

Makes me want to respond to that sort of person like Diane Isis does to Pentheus in the back eye. You don't know what your life is, you don't know who you are. That, of course, is that other part of the liberal arts that it forces us, if it's done with any reasonable kind of competence, pedagogical competence, it forces us back to that question, how do human beings interact with one another? And there is no profession that does not ultimately depend on understanding who the users will be. I guess AI may force me to eat those words someday, but probably not.

John Agresto [\(35:12\)](#):

Probably not, yeah. And I'm certainly not going after AI right now. I know too little about it to be upset one way or happy the other. I'm sure they write better papers than most undergraduates, but be more pleased to read them. And I think there are... If you think your students have not written the paper, tell them ahead of time, "Everyone in this class has to write a paper and then after the paper we will talk about your paper in my office."

Michael Poliakoff [\(35:51\)](#):

Yes.

John Agresto [\(35:52\)](#):

Yes. Accomplishes a lot. Accomplishes a lot by doing that. I want to know what you know, and I'm going to ask you probing questions about what you wrote, supposedly wrote. We have lost our imagination in teaching. When I was in Iraq, everybody was worried that students were cheating because they all could work on their cell phones quietly in their pockets and call their cousins and find out the answer. And I said, "If you have trouble with cheating in your class, proctor the exam from the back of the room where they can't see you. You could see everything." Nobody thinks of these things. So there are ways around problems if we have imagination.

Michael Poliakoff [\(36:48\)](#):

I want to take up another topic that you brought up. This is part of the self-inflicted wounds. You used a very telling phrase, "The difference between freeing minds and capturing minds." And what we're seeing so much of in the American university now is the capturing of the mind. I always thought that being identified as an activist professor was a kind of contradiction in terms. And the idea that the classroom would become a place for capturing minds was a breach of professional ethics. But here we are.

John Agresto [\(37:36\)](#):

Yeah, no, I actually got that phrase from Ed De Latta of Happy Memory. He once used that about of real professor, a real teacher of the liberal arts isn't out to capture your mind. It's to free your mind. And



even when we used to have at St. John's, college president's, provosts and deans come, and they were supposedly from liberal arts colleges. We say, "Well, we would never let our kids read Marx." I said, "Well, then they're missing trying to understand one of the great forces that moves the world today. And it's not passe. You have to read Marx." You should of course read from Adam Smith to Milton Friedman. But if you don't read Marx, you don't know why you believe what you believe. And you know what? There's great wisdom in reading Marx, and he was no dummy. He was a classically trained classicist for God's sakes.

[\(38:44\)](#):

So now where were we going with this? Yeah, it's to open minds rather than to shut them down. And this is the horror of modern cancel culture and is that we don't want people to read X or Y or Z. And it happens on the left and it happens on the right. I was just thinking before, why is it that they say you shouldn't read these books if they're going to signal their virtue about how good they are, that you shouldn't read *To Kill a Mockingbird*, for instance, because it's patronizing. Or you shouldn't read or whatever on this book because it has a person in it who may have been homosexual. Instead of saying that, just take the book out in public burn it, and then everybody will see exactly where you stand. So I'm all in favor public burning of books because then there's no hiding your idiocy

Michael Poliakoff [\(39:51\)](#):

Nicely put John.

John Agresto [\(39:54\)](#):

Yeah.

Michael Poliakoff [\(39:55\)](#):

I want to move in the time we have remaining to hope, the title of the book, the *Death of Learning*, has a certain elegiac air about it. But that's not you. You've been a person of joy and optimism throughout your whole life. So are signs of hope, University of Austin, variable tuition rates targeted giving that that's one that act really likes through our fund for academic renewal. Send your dollars to the programs and make sure that gift agreement is really tightly written to those programs that will actually advance the things that are so close to your heart. So I wanted to get your thoughts on the way we can move forward in difficult circumstances. And Lord knows we're in difficult circumstances. I was just musing, as you talked about classics. Princeton now has a classics major track that doesn't require Greek or Latin.

John Agresto [\(41:07\)](#):

That can't be.

Michael Poliakoff [\(41:09\)](#):

I'm not exaggerating. They want to make sure that it's open to people who will bring progressive ideas to decolonize classical studies. And I just think back to one of my mentors, Sir Kenneth Dover, who politically was really quite liberal. And he once just laid it out so very clearly, "No one who doesn't know the Greek language well is ever likely to make a significant contribution to classics." And I dare say that's true. It's a complex literature that depends on one, knowing the nuances. You can get a lot out of Plato in translation, but if you don't know how conditional sentences work, you're going to be missing some really important caveats. So at any rate, I'm rambling on. We're seeing some self-inflicted wounds,

trivialization, we're seeing politicization, we're seeing careerism. All those things are deeply worrying. What are the signs of hope?

John Agresto ([42:16](#)):

Well, you forgot one. The other thing to add to your list of the horribles is specialization in graduate school. You want to know what's killing the humanities, is that we teach what we've been taught. We teach what we know. And what we know is the narrowness of graduate school. I always thought that St. John's should have a PhD program so that you could actually become smarter by getting a PhD rather than sillier. But okay, we're very bad in humanities or even in the liberal arts in general in knowing who our friends are. We go after the business schools and schools of engineering and professional training. And those people there are not our enemies. There's not a person in any engineering school who thinks that Shakespeare was a sexist and therefore you shouldn't be taught, not a one. You have allies there, okay? You really have allies in professional, technical, vocational schools. Make friends with them for heaven's sake. And they're your friends. They want to be your friends. We always say, why don't they have courses and humanities in these technical schools?

[\(43:49\)](#):

Why don't you invite some people from technical schools to talk in your history classes or your philosophy classes? Someone might want to talk about the morality of capitalism in your philosophy, in your ethics class. Someone may want to talk about the history of law from the law schools in your history class. We're talking about multiculturalism. There's a whole culture out there called professions, trades, technology that we should have greater contact with. Not to go there and preach to them about what we know and they don't. But to have them come and teach us what we don't know that might be of valuable for what we're interested in, number one. Number two, the rich are not our enemies. I'm sorry. Every time we needed to raise money, who did we go to raise money for teacher salaries or for scholarships or to expand programs in the humanities? We go to rich people.

[\(44:54\)](#):

The greatest transfer of wealth, I thought it had already happened. It's about to happen now. And people will give money to things that they know are valuable. They give it to hospitals, they give it to their churches. Sometimes they give it to their alma mater just because it's their alma mater and they don't care. And sometimes they want to give it to people who are going to keep up traditional education. Don't insult them, don't make them enemies. We have more friends than we know. See, I am a happy person, even though I call it the Death of Learning.

[\(45:30\)](#):

In fact, I said to my friend, Bill McLay, we should do a team together and go visit places. My book is the Death of Learning and is on American history called The Land of Hope. I said, we got hope and death. We put ourselves together. We cover the waterfront. But we have to reform ourselves to make... Nobody's going to give us money because we are super serious or because we're narrow and pedantic. No one cares that honestly, you and I, no one cares that we could speak Latin. Who cares? What they want to know is what if we learn from it that's of use to the country or of use to the society or to the culture.

[\(46:21\)](#):

I love Cardinal Newman. Everybody says, "Oh, he's all for knowledge for its own sake." I don't know what sake knowledge has. What he says is, "These things make us smarter about things that matter." These things teach us how to read, how to write, how to communicate, how to understand, how to sympathize. These are social, if not political virtues. These are at least social virtues that come. Not the

virtue of pedantry, not the virtue of, "Oh gee, I can read old church Slovanik." But I'm not even sure that's a written language. But it's certainly a spoken language. It's that what we do, it's not an adornment, but a help. It's a support.

[\(47:21\)](#):

The arts don't have trouble with this, the fine arts. Everybody understands that a person may want to be a great pianist because it gives him an understanding of something valuable to him. You know what? He also plays wonderful music that other people can listen to and enjoy and learn from. The humanities have to understand how it could be of interest and value to us and have also worth to others. And I don't think we're winning that argument.

Michael Poliakoff [\(47:50\)](#):

That's a lovely place, I think to conclude. To use that Greek term [foreign language 00:47:57], it's giving us really, really good advice to move forward. There are a couple of books that popped into my mind as you were talking. One of them is a book by, I think the man's name was Robert Hagstrom, called Investing: The Last Liberal Art. And it actually has a chapter on St. John's as the ideal preparation for someone who's going into the world of investment because that graduate will understand people. And then there was another one that came to mind by David Epstein called Range, and it's subtitled was something to the effect of how generalists succeed in a world of specialists or how they triumph over specialists. And it gives many examples of the way in which the ability to see the whole is far more powerful than the hyper specialization. I know now I'm falling into that usefulness of the liberal arts, but it's usefulness that goes beyond just the career. It's the usefulness of understanding how we interact, how we make our lives meaningful and rich.

[\(49:22\)](#):

So John, we all owe you thanks. You've given us a lot of light, and we've got obviously a huge task in front of us. This is not a happy time for colleges and universities. Many of them have fallen off the path.

John Agresto [\(49:43\)](#):

As I once read and I gather it's from some Jewish book of wisdom, "It's not for us to finish the task. We just may not put it down."

Michael Poliakoff [\(49:57\)](#):

Yes, Rabbi Tarfon.

John Agresto [\(49:59\)](#):

Yeah. Okay. Thank you. Yes, yes, yes.

Michael Poliakoff [\(50:02\)](#):

Rabbi Tarfon is a great place to conclude because on the one hand he said something to the effect of, "The task is great. The workers are lazy, the hour is late. And the master of the universe is demanding." But then he adds just what you said, that we're not commanded to bring everything to perfection, but we can't give up. I like that sense of resoluteness, John, that's characterized your work.

John Agresto [\(50:41\)](#):

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You are far too kind to me. You should have a more, as we say in the trade, you should have a more critical mind.

Michael Poliakoff ([50:49](#)):

I'm okay in a context like this not being critical. John, thank you so much. It's been a wonderful-

John Agresto ([50:55](#)):

Oh, thank you, Michael. Thank you so much.