

JD Van Hook

Dr. Galbraith

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What is an Individual

When thinking about what makes an individual, many people would immediately define it as what characteristics make you different from others. Even the dictionary definition of an individual uses the line, “distinguished in nature or attributes from others.” Although, to me, what would an individual be without seeing their impact on others? In my mind an individual isn’t just about personal characteristics alone, but is also about the bigger picture. It’s about your influence that you make on others and what difference you make for Christ while on this Earth, because that is what makes up an individual. This ties in with the thought of, “what really is the good life?” Is having a good life all about success and being different from others in a perceived higher lifestyle? Or is it making a difference that matters, beyond money, and beyond any type of fame. An individual to me is someone that makes a difference that long outlives yourself.

Throughout the course of this class my understanding of what it means to be an individual has changed tremendously. When I originally signed up for this course I had no idea what the question, “What is an Individual” even meant. I just viewed it as a cliché saying that we were going to discover, and look at, what makes us different from each other. What I have come to realize is learning who you are as an individual is really about growing and learning about your influence on, and impact, on everyone around you. I recently got to hear Coach Swider, former head coach of Wheaton football, and he said a line that has stuck with me when he said, “Never forget who you are.” This plays into what it means to be an individual because if you

constantly remind yourself that you are a loved child of God then it will change how you go about everyday. If you always remind yourself that you were made in the image of God (Genesis 1:27) then you will begin to act differently because you are no longer living for just yourself. You also begin to see how we are relationship beings, created in the image of God, who in himself is one of three, and that we were created to be with people. God even states that it is not good for man to be alone (Genesis 2:18). So, because we were created to be with people, that makes an impact on who we become because a big part of our life is our impact on others.

Not only are we built as relationship beings and defined by who we are to others, but also when we give our lives to Christ we are now defined as a part of a bigger picture. When you live a life after Christ who you are as an individual makes huge changes because now you have a purpose. This is something I noticed in the story of *Rasselas*. Rasselas had everything he could have ever wanted from his parents. He lived in a perceived perfect world. All he knows is a life of leisure. This is what many individuals today strive for; to get to the point in their lives when they don't have to work anymore and worry about anything. However, Rasselas quickly came to the point that there has to be more to live for. He needed to get out of the world he was living in, even if it meant things wouldn't be handed to him anymore, because there was no purpose to the life he was living. This is a great example to think about the good life. To many, the life of Rasselas was perfect because he had all he ever wanted. Although, to Rasselas, he knew there was something more in life. He wanted to find out who he was as a person because there was no one to influence in his home. He knew that to become his own individual he needed to go out and influence others and find his identity with a community.

Being a part of a bigger picture was also the driving factor in the life of Father Rodrigues in the book *Silence*. Father Rodrigues wouldn't be the same person that he was if it was his

choice, but because of wanting to make a difference for Christ and make an impact on others, he went to one of the most dangerous places in the world. This shows the transformation of character and how his decisions in life, who he was, where he lived, all changed because of others. He was living for something bigger than himself so when he saw others suffering he did what he swore, if it was his choice he would never do, when he oppostitized. If being an individual was all about his personality and how he is biologically different from others then you would miss a huge part of his life. Without talking about his impact on others and what he lived for you don't get a good picture of who Father Rodrigues really is.

A big part of discovering who you are as an individual is realizing that for many parts of our lives who we want to be is our choice. Yes, all biological or chemical makeup of each individual is different. Outside of that, we have the choice to be who we want to be and how we want to act. This is why who you are as an individual is bigger than just your own personality, because so much of who we are can change with where our values are in life. If we are living a life after Christ and not always worried about ourselves and start caring about others this will change the character of who we are. David Foster Wallace had a great illustration of this in his Commencement speech, "This Is Water" when he talked about little frustrating times like waiting in line at the grocery store. He said in this story about how much of who you are and your actions change when you go from always thinking in terms of "me" and how everyone else is in my own world, to thinking about others and how they are real people with situations that can be harder than your own. It's all about choosing to decide how you are going to see these different situations in your life. You have a choice to be self centered and frustrated, which in turn, you will be seen as that type of person or individual if you live like that around others. Or you can decide to make the most of every second you get and view even a long checkout line at a grocery

store as a gift and a chance to make a small influence in someone else's life. You have the choice to be the kind of person you want to be.

Being selfish and living your life always in strive of comfort is viewed by former Wheaton graduate John Piper as a, "tragedy." He tells a story about a couple of old ladies that had a terrible car accident when on a mission trip and both passed away on the spot. Many people saw this as a tragedy and while we would all like them to still be living, this wasn't a true tragedy. A true tragedy is wasting your life on yourself, constantly looking for what will next please "me." We are given one life, why give it away to our own desires. A life that is meaningful is truly an individual that makes a difference. The good life is going to God with open hands and telling him that your life is his and you are free to live for him. The good life is making an impact on others so that we can all live a great life with him for eternity.

This is why a liberal arts education is a great tool to living a life for God. There is so much that this education can teach us about ourselves and how we can make an impact on the world around us. An important lesson I have learned through this class is about how the vocation we are currently in can impact us, but it doesn't define who we are. I am a full time student but I am also so much more than just my current job. This is why learning a liberal arts education can be so influential because not only do you pick up skills for certain jobs to prepare you for whatever God calls you to, but you also discover who you are as a person and find what you really want to believe in life. David Foster Wallace also stated in his commencement speech that, "The liberal arts education is not so much about filling you up with knowledge as it is about, 'teaching you how to think.'" You develop patterns of how to work hard, but also how to make an influence on others through this education, that's why it is so much bigger than just the knowledge you are taking in. Talking about vocations' impact on who you are was a big point in

the article from Andy Crouch called, “What I Wish My Pastor Knew About The Life of a Scientist.” Crouch’s main point was saying that our vocation can shape who we are and how we think, but also develops us into how we are being formed. This is why being a full time student at a liberal arts college is important because we are being formed by our vocation but learn were not defined by it. Especially at college where we go to discover what we want to do with the rest of our lives. We realize through this education the choices in life that we have and what kind of individual we want to be.

When you begin to break down an individual in itself you come across the question everyone faces. Why do we do what we do? What’s going on in each person’s head to make that person say or act in the way that they do? This can highly depend on the situation, but one pattern I have come across in so many of the readings we have done in class is that the critical moment almost always comes down to the impact on others from any decision someone makes. A big part of why we do what we do is because of the influence it will have on other people. This is one reason I think social media is so big today. You can put any picture you want in front of others to show the kind of person you want them to think that you are. The whole idea of social media and who you are would be nothing if nobody ever saw it. The pictures that you post, the reason that you post them, is because we are trying to show what kind of person we want to be to others.

An individual can not be defined without taking in consideration of others. Even though we are all different people and have different vocations than others it has been proven that that alone doesn’t define who we are. Through stories like *Rassalas* or *Silence* our lives and what we do is impacted by our desire to make a difference in others lives. To have a healthy life that you can consider a part of the good life you can not neglect community, and your values in life. Both

of these things not only impact how we are viewed by others but also change the course of who we are. Like we learned through studying the liberal arts education even though your vocation doesn't define you, it does foster change to who you become. You have to decide what your definition of the good life is, and through those core values of who you want to be, your impact on others, through community, is how you come across your own individuality.