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**A model for the kind of intellectual life universities
have forgotten.**

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Recently, I returned from Munich, Germany, which was still in the last pale grip of the season, with the linden trees not quite sure of themselves yet and the hotel lobby smelling of coffee and cleaning product. I was there for one of those Liberty Fund colloquia that I have come, over the years, to regard as among the supreme experiences available to a person of my particular enthusiasms.

I say this without a tremor of exaggeration. I have been known to claim, at dinner parties where such declarations land with the most satisfying effect, that a Liberty Fund colloquium represents something close to the pinnacle of human pleasure. There is, I concede, one serious competitor for the title, but even that contest is comically unfair. Colloquia last considerably longer, provoke almost no regrets whatsoever, and involve partners—namely, ideas—that never storm out or file for separation.

When I returned home, unpacked my bags, and resumed that dull administration of life, I updated my curriculum vitae to include Munich, and then, out of nothing more than idle curiosity, went looking through the document to see how many of these gatherings I had attended over the years. The answer was 13. A few were co-sponsored by partner institutions, and I have participated in at least a score of other programs modeled on the Liberty Fund format.

Which raised a question worth asking: why does that format work so extraordinarily well?

Let me tell you, because I have thought about it.

First, and perhaps most importantly, all conversation at a Liberty Fund colloquium is confidential: off the record, fully and without exception. This single condition is the key that unlocks everything

else. People speak freely. They say the thing they actually believe rather than what they have press-released themselves into believing. Because of this, I cannot and will not relay a single word of what has been discussed in any of the colloquia I have attended. But the *format*—the architecture of it, the machinery—I am entirely free to describe.

Imagine approximately 15 people arranged in a square, facing one another across a table. Everyone has read the same texts beforehand. There are designated readings for each session. The number of sessions varies with the length of the colloquium; some run longer than others, like symphonies.

A discussion leader opens each session by posing a handful of questions, provocative or inspiring or both, lodging in the mind like a splinter you keep touching. Then—and here's the beautiful part—the discussion leader says almost nothing for the remainder of the session. Instead, a queue is kept. Names, in order. Participants wait for their turn.

This single practice, the queue, is more civilized than most of what passes for civilization. It prevents interruption. It prevents the overheated back-and-forth that turns genuine inquiry into mere combat. By the time your turn arrives, whatever hot response you might have given to the previous speaker has been tempered by the contributions of three or four other people. What emerges instead is something more considered, more generous, more genuinely *thought*. The delay is the gift.

It also helps that the participants are, by and large, serious people: respected intellectuals, scholars, thinkers who have spent careers caring about the life of the mind. This creates a particular pressure, the good kind, the kind that produces diamonds rather than only heat. Everyone has done the readings carefully. Everyone wants to say something worth hearing. Vanity, in such company, is recruited into the service of rigor.

And then, each evening, the group dines together. Long tables, fine food, and wine that someone has clearly chosen with attention. The conversation broadens and softens and wanders into other territories entirely, away from the texts and formal questions and into the pleasanter regions of ordinary life. People discover one another's families, their histories, the small private facts that make a stranger into a person you actually know. There's laughter. There's the kind of disclosure that only happens when people have spent a day thinking seriously together and earned, as it were, the right to be frivolous.

The whole enterprise was the vision of Pierre F. Goodrich, an Indianapolis businessman and autodidact who founded Liberty Fund in 1960. Goodrich was an unusual man, a reader of almost compulsive range who believed with genuine fervor that the ideas contained in certain books could enlarge a life, and that the proper study of liberty was not merely useful but *urgent*. He left behind an institution devoted to exploring those ideas through exactly the kind of unhurried, serious, wide-ranging conversation he valued above almost anything. The colloquia are his enduring invention.

I will add, because it is true and because one should say true things, that it does not hurt that these events take place in beautiful rooms, in beautiful hotels, in cities worth being in—like Munich. There is something in the combination of lovely surroundings and serious thought that produces a special quality of attention, as though the mind, finding itself comfortable and well-fed and somewhere worth looking at, decides it can afford to be generous.

What I have come to understand, across 13 of these gatherings and however many more years remain to me to attend them, is that genuine conversation—the kind where people actually *listen*, where responses are formed rather than assembled, where the goal is understanding rather than victory—is among the rarest things on earth and among the most necessary.

We have built a civilization of extraordinary technical accomplishment and very nearly abolished the conditions under which such conversation can occur. The Liberty Fund colloquium is, among other things, a deliberate act of preservation: proof that when you put the right people in a room, give them something serious to read, protect their privacy, and hand the floor to each of them in turn, something close to wisdom becomes possible.

I have sat in those rooms and felt it. And there's nothing quite like it.

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