

Humanities Over Data

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I'm Angus Fletcher. As you've heard, I teach English literature at Ohio State, where I specialize in an arcane subfield known as narrative studies.



Figure 1. Lt. Col. Kelly Green jumps from a special forces helicopter. Photo credit: Andrew Fletcher.

This is a special forces helicopter (see Figure 1). It is flying at an undisclosed location, and you can perhaps see, dangling from the helicopter, a tiny figure. That tiny figure is Kelly Green. She was born in a small town not too far from here, just over the Ohio border. She serves now in the Army Nurse Corps, and she is a remarkable person.

She is deploying as I speak to run the largest hospital in Iraq, but in this photo she is training to do her regular job, which is to jump out of helicopters to provide triage care to the wounded: sometimes soldiers, often civilians. That is not the most remarkable part about Lt. Col. Kelly Green. The most remarkable part is that she is afraid of flying. She gets nervous on domestic carrier flights. She would

rather drive all day from North Carolina to Maine than spend a couple of hours on a plane, and yet she jumps out of helicopters in war zones to save lives. Think about the psychological work that requires.



Figure 2. Lt. Col. Green next to the helicopter. Photo credit: Andrew Fletcher.

I met Lt. Col. Green (see Figure 2) while I was working with the US Army, and in particular, while I was *training* the US Army in resilience. I was training special forces operatives who jump out of helicopters to be more resilient. They were not training *me* to be more resilient. I was training them. That might make you think that I have experience jumping out of helicopters or doing special operations. I do not. I do not have any experience in anything like that. I am a literature professor. I trained in Shakespeare. My most recent class, taught on Monday at Ohio State, involved the TV show *Fleabag*. All of that has nothing to do with helicopters or special operations.

So how come I am training the US Army? How come I am training some of the most psychologically resilient people in the world to be more resilient? Well, the answer is that the Army called me because of my work with the University of Chicago Booth School of Business. The Booth School of Business is famous as the smartest business school in the world. It has more Nobel laureates than Wharton or Stanford or Harvard. A professor there who specializes in entrepreneurship invited me to teach his graduate students, his MBAs. After that, I was invited to work with him, training top executives at some of America's biggest companies. Fortune 500 companies. Fortune 50 companies. Companies with many, many billions of dollars of revenue.

Again, how come I am training those business executives? Do I have any business experience? Have I ever handled billions of dollars? No, I have not. I do not handle billions of dollars in my classroom at Ohio State. I have never worked in business at all. In fact, like most literature professors, I view money with a mixture of suspicion and disinterest. I have never picked a stock in my life. My idea of a smart investment is buying a book. What is going on? Why am I, a literature professor, training special forces and Army nurses and top business executives?

You will perhaps think that there is something very special about me. You will perhaps think that I am unusually smart or unusually good at insinuating my way into people's confidence. You will perhaps think that I have some secret, special ability, like one of those ubiquitously indistinguishable superheroes we are bombarded with from movie screens. The truth is that the reason that I am training elite officers and executives does not have to do with what is special about me. It has to do with what is *typical* about them. What is typical about them is that they have—like every organization in this country, from big government to small business—overinvested in data. They have overinvested in metrics and assessments. They have placed too much faith in computers and AI and data-driven decision making, and that is causing them problems, of which I will highlight two.

The first problem is that data is wonderful at helping organizations thrive in a world where nothing changes, but data is not very helpful, and in fact can be an impediment, at helping organizations adapt to a world of change, a world of uncertainty, a world of volatility. It can make your organization brittle. It can make your multibillion-dollar conglomerate more likely to break.

When I say this to people, it often causes a double take because we have all been trained to think the opposite. We have all been trained to think that data is a surefire way to make organizations more agile and adaptable, but it is an epistemological fact that data struggles to cope in the shifting, contested spaces of modern economies and politics. That is because data and AI are synonyms for statistics, and statistics cannot operate on a sample size of one, which is the sample size of fast-changing environments. The environments outside of idealized mathematical landscapes. The environments that all living things inhabit. If you do not believe epistemology, you can believe the big companies and organizations who are hiring me. They are realizing that data is not as useful as they once believed. They have spent years investing in data infrastructure, but that data can only predict yesterday. It cannot help you or me or anyone function in new tomorrows.

The second reason that data, metrics, and assessment are causing problems is that they are producing burnout in human workforces. The people who work in metric-driven companies are being forced to operate like spreadsheet-driven robots, and it is making them exhausted, stressed, anxious, and paranoid. Like the data-powered companies they work for, they are becoming *brittle*, and their brittleness

is making their companies more brittle. Productivity is declining. Employees are getting sick more frequently. Workers are quitting their jobs.

Therefore, the companies need an answer. They need a way to generate sustainable growth. They need to flex to the future, like a special forces operator who adapts to an unknown situation or a nurse who jumps out of a helicopter into a situation unlike any she has seen. They need to be able to nurture resilient, empowered employees who work without metrics and assessment to build dynamic, generative futures. That is where I come in because that is what I teach. I teach the humanities.

You might not think of the humanities as a source of the psychological resilience and practical growth needed by nurses, special operations personnel, corporate executives, and empowered employees, but the US military thinks that way about the humanities. America's top companies do too. Here is why:

To start with, the humanities are a scientifically backed source of mental health and wellbeing. Mental health and mental wellbeing are often conflated, but if we want to be precise about it, they are different. Mental health is achieved by working through negative emotional experiences: trauma, grief, loneliness, anger. Mental wellbeing is achieved by filling the brain with positive emotional experiences: joy, love, hope, gratitude. Together, mental health and mental wellbeing boost emotional resilience. Mental health helps us bounce back from bad things and mental wellbeing helps power us forward with enthusiasm and purpose to create new possibilities for future action. The humanities can boost both mental health and mental wellbeing, so they are potent sources of emotional resilience. I have outlined the scientific basis for this in my book *Wonderworks*, so I will not dwell on it more, but you can check that out at your leisure and read about all the ways that the humanities can boost emotional resilience.

I will pause for a moment to acknowledge that when I refer to the humanities with the word *emotional*, I sometimes make scholars uncomfortable. They worry that emotion is not serious, academic, intellectual stuff. They worry that emotion is not rigorous. They worry that emotion is not critical thinking. Emotion, however, is the foundation of our psychology. It is the most important thing for our mental life, which is why the humanities are so important, too. The humanities can be even more important because they can give us more than emotional resilience. They can give us *intellectual* resilience, or as intellectual resilience is more commonly called, creativity.

Creativity is our ability to bounce back from broken plans to invent new actions, new directions. When your dreams break against reality, when your strategy shipwrecks, creativity can build a new dream that breaks reality and resurrects your shipwreck to sail across the skies, which is why creativity—not reason, not logic—is the highest intellectual capacity of our brain. Reason and logic have practical limits. Creativity does not. It can adapt to anything. It can carry us beyond resilience into antifragility. We can get that antifragility from the humanities because the humanities can nurture creativity.

In research I am doing now with US special operations and some of the top neuroscientists in the world, we are measuring how the humanities can increase creativity in the brain, allowing us not only to remain resilient in confusion and disaster, but to seize the initiative, leveraging chaos into new forms of growth and purpose. This is why the US military is so interested in the humanities, and also why US Fortune 50 companies are interested.

The military knows, and Fortune 50 companies know, that with creativity you can predict the future. The way to predict the future is not with data. The way to predict the future is to create the future. You do not have to take my word for it. I am just a literature professor, after all. You can take the word of top business schools like Chicago Booth.

As you might have noticed, this slide is not formatted like my other slides. That is because it is not my slide. I borrowed it. From where? From an executive MBA course with a price tag of \$45,000 a day. An executive MBA course that incorporates my research on the humanities because that is the kind of value the humanities provide. That knowledge is worth \$45,000 a day. We in the humanities provide that kind of value in our classes, and we can provide more. How can we provide more? There are many ways, but let me walk through three brief examples.

The first example comes from my work with the Army Nurse corps and with medical schools, on building emotional resilience. One very effective way to build emotional resilience is to *fast process grief*. This helps the brain cope with life's inevitable bad moments, and it can also improve self-efficacy, which is a psychological source of personal empowerment. You can fast process grief by taking two steps. First, as quickly as you experience pain or grief, acknowledge the pain. Do not push past it. Do not ignore it and try heroically to soldier on. Allow your brain to replay the event in your mind, feeling the hurt. This helps the deep emotion zones of your brain resolve the grief, and it wards off unhealthy coping mechanisms such as cynicism or anger.

Second, pivot into gratitude. Maybe it's gratitude that you survived the pain, or gratitude for the people who helped you, or gratitude that the experience taught you something about yourself. Gratitude helps the brain rebound faster from psychological hurt, and it also shifts the mind out of judgment. Judgment leads to cynicism and to anger, which are bad for us and for the world around us.

What does this process of fast processing grief have to do with the humanities? Fast processing grief is the psychological origin of literary memoir, and it is also the source of Greek tragedy and *Hamlet* and Virginia Woolf and the modern novel. I have translated this process of fast processing grief into literature classrooms by having students keep journals in which they record and process their psychological challenges and sorrows. Then, students use those journals to author memoirs or short stories. To guide this process of composition, they follow literary models such as Maya Angelou.

This kind of assignment really works, empirically. Work that I am doing now with the Ohio State College of Medicine has associated it with lower rates of burnout in medical students.

The second example of how the humanities can provide value comes from my work with businesses and developing leaders. The most important skill to have as a leader is listening. We all know that leading is listening, but it bears repeating because there are a lot of cultural models out there of leaders who are not-listeners and who instead lead the way by being dogged, confident visionaries. However, to survive in changing markets, you must *listen* to the market. To get the most out of your organization, you must *listen* to the people in it.

How do you develop that ability to listen? Well, you develop it by developing empathy, both cognitive empathy and emotional empathy, which we can do through the branch of the humanities known as history. History's own history—as I know because I have a historian for a mother—lies in oral history. Oral history emerged from asking other people about their experience—and listening deeply to the answers they provided. This listening to other voices is what we get in Herodotus, the father of Western history, and in the great Chinese chronicles and the Epic of Sundiata. On this slide, you will see Herodotus, and you will notice that he is not writing or reading. He is pausing, with his ear cocked. Even in stone, he is listening.

After history got its start in listening, history underwent a change in the Renaissance. In the Renaissance, history became about getting to the truth. It became about judging the veracity of primary sources and weighing evidence to see what was right. It became less about listening and more about textual analysis and interpretation. All of this grows critical thinking, but if you want to grow empathy, if you want to develop your brain's ability to open itself to others' hearts and minds, the key is to go back to the origins of history, back to listening, without judgment, to what human voices say about their own experience.

This is something we can do in a college history course. In that course, students can do an oral history project of someone different from them, someone whose perspective they do not understand. Maybe that different person is a family member or a community member. Students can ask that person about their life and their experience. Students can ask that person to narrate their hopes and their regrets, and students can record the answers without judgment. What other paths could that other person imagine their life taking? What other paths can it still take?

This process of listening does not mean that you will ever get to the truth. It does not mean that you will uncover the ultimate facts about the other person's life. Those facts may not be knowable, even to the person them self, but this process of listening will develop empathy in you. If you listen openly and without judgment, it can also help heal and empower the person you are listening to, making you an empathetic person who empowers others. That is to say, listening makes you a leader.

The third and final example comes from my work with the US military's special operations community. This work involves developing the creativity to react to challenges and leverage opportunities, making the future. Creativity requires you to seek the initiative. You have to have courage. You have to embrace failure as a chance to create again. Creativity is also boosted by other skills, including the ability to identify exceptional information.

What is exceptional information? Exceptional information is an anomaly, an exception to a rule. Computers and statistics ignore it, regressing it to the mean, but exceptional information is an environmental sign of emergent threats and opportunities. It is an indication that change is coming. Exceptional information is all around us, and because it is so biologically important for our survival, our brain is naturally good at identifying it.

Unfortunately, that natural ability is trained out of us in school today. In school, children are taught instead to think like computers, so children gradually lose their ability to spot exceptional information. By fourth grade, most children have lost so much of that ability that they have become measurably less creative, and by the time those students graduate from college, they notice less than 1% of the exceptional information in their environment. That leaves students unable to be as creative as they were when they were younger and unable to react as swiftly to change. It makes them less resilient. It makes them more fragile.

How do we reverse this unfortunate trend? How do we nurture students' natural ability to spot exceptional information? One way to nurture that ability is to focus the brain on identifying what is *different* between two similar objects or events, training the brain to notice what separates two apparently identical things. We can all see that one penguin on this slide is different, but can you distinguish the other penguins from one another? Can you see what makes each one special and uniquely itself?

One powerful way to develop this ability to spot the special is through coursework in philosophy. Philosophy is rigor, and rigor is the mental habit of rejecting our initial conclusions. That is all rigor is. Sometimes scholars will say that rigor is more than that, but psychologically, rigor is simply overcoming our early judgments. It is breaking our fixation bias.

This rigor can impede creativity when we are brainstorming ideas because it can lead to emotional negativity, and emotional negativity kills our imaginations before they develop the wings to fly. However, philosophical rigor can powerfully nurture creativity when we mobilize it for the specific task of identifying what is unique or special about an object because the more we reject our first impressions of what is special, the more closely we look, and the more closely we look, the more exceptional information we find.

This is why philosophers go back and forth between being the most skeptical minds in the room—and the most creative minds you will ever meet. Don't believe me? Read Plato. Read Judith Butler. Their imaginative flights are exquisite.

There you have three examples of how the humanities can provide \$45,000 a day value. One example from literature, another from history, and another from philosophy. There are literally hundreds more examples that we could create together, but instead let us end this piece by focusing on Juniata. Juniata is poised to take advantage of giving students the emotional and creative skills that businesses and governments and honestly, all of us, want. Why is Juniata poised to do all that? It is because of Juniata's size and attention to detail. It is because Juniata has the ability to listen to every student, to have empathy for every student, to treat every student like exceptional information.

The trend in higher education right now is the opposite of personal care. The trend right now is scale. It is online, mass produced, digital degrees and certificates. It is to treat education as data that a computer would upload. This computerization of education can seem like the inevitable future, but it is already doomed. Why? Because it does not work. Humans are not computers. Our brains work differently than computers do, which is why we invented computers in the first place: to do things that we cannot. Instead of endangering the emotional resilience and creativity of students by treating them like computers, the future of education lies in small liberal arts institutions that can prepare students as whole individuals, emotional and intellectual, for the challenges of life.

Juniata is already doing that, and by responding to what Army nurses and businesses and students need now, Juniata can be a leader in establishing the more emotionally resilient and more imaginative schools of the future. Schools in which we put a little more of the human back in the humanities—and in ourselves.