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Graduation Portfolio

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### A SURPRISINGLY PRACTICAL EDUCATION

Many people would argue that my decision to pursue a humanities education at Briercrest was, in practical terms, not a very wise one. At times, I have been inclined to agree. I have berated myself for not getting a more specifically career-oriented degree, and looked towards the future with despair. In reality, however, no degree is going to guarantee me a career that I love, and my education here at Briercrest has served to enhance my understanding many of the things that were important to me long before I set foot on campus. I am now more sure about my Scriptural beliefs and how those need to apply to my life practically. I am more confident in my reading, writing, and speaking abilities, which are highly marketable skills, and I am more convinced of the importance of stories, which have long been my passion. Perhaps my educational choices have not been entirely impractical after all.

When I came to Briercrest, I knew a lot about what Scripture contained and very little about how to interpret it. The story of Scripture has fascinated me since I was a young child still learning to read, and it did not take me long to fix the narrative as a whole quite firmly in my head. I became intimately familiar with its characters and events, and found myself able to recall all kinds of useless details on demand simply because they belonged to the stories that I was growing up with. As I grew older, however, I often found reading the Bible frustrating because while I knew the stories, I

did not always know what they meant, and I really had no idea how to read the more theological, argument-driven passages. I held a vague hope that coming to Briercrest would help me to gain a firmer grasp on Scriptural interpretation, and while I have probably held on to more questions than I have received answers to, I am confident that this is an area in which I have grown.

One essential interpretive principle that I learned by the example of various professors and chapel speakers is the importance of keeping context in mind. My increasing knowledge of Biblical content and history is helpful here.<sup>1</sup> Interpreting Scripture by asking, “What is this passage saying to me?” is not always wise, because Scripture is not always directed immediately at the individual contemporary believer. By taking the context into consideration, and focusing on the text rather than on oneself, one can ask more helpful questions, such as “What is this passage saying about God?” and “What is this passage saying about humans, or particular groups of humans?” Asking these kinds of questions helps one to establish foundational theological doctrines, and understanding these doctrines helps one to understand how to live life in obedience to God. When writing a paper about the roots of the Trinity in the Old Testament, for example, I found this evidence of God’s constancy so encouraging.<sup>2</sup> It made me want to strive to be constant as He is. While my interpretive methods in this paper are far from perfect,<sup>3</sup> they are certainly improvements on my previous interpretive confusion. I think that what I have learned in my Biblical studies and theology classes will continue to serve

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<sup>1</sup> “Interpreting Scripture: Bible Knowledge Survey Results.”

<sup>2</sup> “Interpreting Scripture: The Old Testament Trinity as Illuminated by the New Testament,” 8-9.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

me well as I study God's Word.

One important theological conclusion that I have come to while at Briercrest is the importance of God's role as the sustainer of the universe.<sup>4</sup> I had always thought of God as the creator of the universe, but until I came to Briercrest, it had not really occurred to me that God must also sustain His creation. When I first heard Dr. Joel From talk about how it is God's grace, not natural laws, that are responsible for the reliable patterns in creation, such as gravity, I realized how much I had allowed the language of modern science to skew my theological perspective. I now believe that understanding God's role as the universe's sustainer is essential to understanding both His grace and His sovereignty.

I also have my Briercrest education to thank for my realization of the importance of baptism for the Christian believer.<sup>5</sup> While I did grow up attending churches that performed believers' baptisms, it was never made clear to me that baptism is essential to Christian obedience until I came to Briercrest and took Foundations of Church Ministry with Dr. Blayne Banting and Spiritual Formation with Dr. Carl Hinderager. It took me awhile to overcome the fear and pride that was preventing me from taking this important step, but I was finally baptized on August 18, 2013.<sup>6</sup> I am so glad that I grew enough in my faith and my theological understanding while at Briercrest that I was able to be baptized.

At this point in my life, I do not have very specific plans for my future in terms of ministry. I am moving back to what is now my hometown after graduation, so I plan to

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<sup>4</sup> "Articulating Theology: Doctrinal Statement," 1-2.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>6</sup> "Disciplinary Expertise: Commonplace Book," 18.

continue to contribute to my church's music ministry by playing piano for the worship team just as I have been during the past summers.<sup>7</sup> Other than that, I hope to gradually discover where I can best serve based on what needs the church has and what gifts I have to offer. I would be open to working with children or in drama production, as those are interests that I have had little opportunity to cultivate over the past few years. I would also be open to the possibility of teaching, as my work as a tutorial leader here at Briercress has helped me to gain greater confidence in my teaching abilities.<sup>8</sup> Regardless of how I am serving, I want to keep in mind the importance of good, loving works in the Christian life,<sup>9</sup> and strive to exemplify that wherever and however I am ministering.

A skill that I have had a great deal of opportunity to practice and improve during my years at Briercress is that of textual analysis. Having come to Briercress straight out of high school, I had never even heard the term textual analysis; most of my writing assignments in high school were based on developing personal opinions rather than comprehending the meaning of other authors' writings. My Briercress professors expected much more, and I have genuinely enjoyed learning how to meet those expectations. I think that my analytical skills have improved significantly over the past few years. I have learned important lessons through writing critical analysis. For example, I learned that speculative arguments are inherently weak and should, if possible, be cast off in favour of

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<sup>7</sup> "Working with Others: Letter of Reference for Church Service Learning."

<sup>8</sup> "Other Learning Experiences: Letter of Reference for Tutorial Leadership."

<sup>9</sup> "Articulating Theology: Doctrinal Statement," 3-4.

stronger arguments if one is to make one's case convincingly.<sup>10</sup> As I began to take more and more upper-level classes, I learned how to enter into academic conversations about issues that are important to me by engaging not only primary texts, but the secondary sources that interpret these texts.<sup>11</sup> In my primary discipline of English literature particularly, I realized that there is a whole body of literature that discusses important texts not only in terms of style, but in terms of more ethical considerations, which seems to me to make textual analysis worth doing. Finally, I think that my work in textual analysis here at Briercrest has taught me how to take various viewpoints into consideration and still, with good reasons behind me, come down on a particular side of an issue.<sup>12</sup>

These textual analysis skills should prove helpful regardless of where I go in life. The kind of thorough reading that is necessary when one is going to write critically about a text has taught me to think more carefully, which can only be a benefit. Reading critically has also helped me to write more carefully, which is important to me because I am very interested in writing and would like to continue to make it an important part of my life. Most specifically, however, I am confident that if I ever choose to pursue graduate-level education, the textual analysis skills I have learned at Briercrest will be absolutely indispensable.

Not only have my textual analysis skills improved over the past few years, but I

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<sup>10</sup> "Analyzing Texts: Empowered Selfishness: The Roots of the Unnatural in Shakespeare's *King Lear*," 7, 9.

<sup>11</sup> "Analyzing Texts: Complementary Characteristics of Manhood and Womanhood in Stoker's *Dracula*," 4-5, 7.

<sup>12</sup> "Analyzing Texts: Ancient Egyptian Culture as a Witness to Exodus' Historicity," 9.

have also gotten better at making reasonable arguments, both verbally and in writing. I think that I have come quite a long way in my ability to communicate verbally, as that is something that I have always struggled with. I have always been shy, which makes speaking up in unfamiliar class settings uncomfortable, and doing class presentations terrifying! I still get nervous when I have to talk in front of large groups of people, but I am not as impaired by fright as I used to be in those kinds of situations. I think that this has a lot to do with the opportunities I have had to talk about things that I am passionate about, because when I care about what is being discussed, that gives me incentive to come out of my shell and voice my thoughts about the issue. For this reason, I am indebted to Dr. Rhoda Cairns and Dr. Elizabeth Dickens, whose largely discussion-based English literature classes tempted me into more regular and well-reasoned class participation. As I got more used to contributing to the conversations in these classes, I also got better at providing reasons for the conclusions I was voicing rather than just expressing baseless opinions. I am further indebted to Dr. Cairns for taking me on as a faculty assistant, which gave me the opportunity to not just contribute to class discussion, but to formulate and implement reasonable, logically ordered lesson plans for tutorial sessions.<sup>13</sup> All of this practice has advanced me to a place where I feel that I am able to make presentations coherently and without being too detrimentally affected by nerves.<sup>14</sup>

My writing skills have always been better developed than my speaking skills, but I think that I have also improved in my ability to write a well-reasoned argument. My

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<sup>13</sup> "Other Learning Experiences: Letter of Reference for Tutorial Leadership."

<sup>14</sup> "Communicating Arguments: Presentation Outline for Stelzig's 'Poetry and/or Truth: An Essay on the Confessional Imagination,'" 3.

introductory English classes provided a very important foundation for learning how to write logically developed papers. I learned how essential it is to have a thesis that your entire paper comes together to prove, and I learned that argument order matters, because in logical arguments each piece of the argument builds off of the previous step. These lessons have served me well in the research papers that I have written for classes in other disciplines such as theology, where the ability to structure an argument logically makes the difficult subject matter more easily navigable.<sup>15</sup>

While I have not gotten very involved in the church during the school year while at Briercrest because of time constraints, being at Briercrest has made me love and appreciate my home church even more, and has stirred up my desire to serve there. One way I have been blessed to serve in my home church is by playing piano for the worship team during the summers.<sup>16</sup> I have enjoyed serving in this way so much because I love playing piano, and since our church congregation is very small and contains few musicians, people genuinely appreciate my playing despite the meagreness of my skill. Playing piano has also given me the opportunity to get to know some of the worship team vocalists better, and it has given my younger brother and I something to work on together, as he sometimes plays drums for the worship team when I am playing piano. I hope that my contribution to my church's musical worship is helpful in unifying and edifying the body. I know that it has improved my relationships with some church members, and with God.

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<sup>15</sup> "Communicating Arguments: Scriptural Relevance in Pannenberg's Christian Theology," 3-5, 10.

<sup>16</sup> "Working with Others: Letter of Reference for Church Service Learning."

A couple of ways that I have been blessed to serve others while at Briercrest are through volunteering in the Writing Centre and working as a faculty assistant. In both cases, I have been able to use the academic skills that I have been blessed with to help others to develop their thinking, reading, and writing abilities. Dr. Cairns has been good enough to inform me of individual cases in both the Writing Centre<sup>17</sup> and my tutorial work<sup>18</sup> where particular students expressed how helpful they found my guidance in these areas. It has been very encouraging to know that this sort of contribution to the Briercrest community is appreciated. It has also been a blessing to be able to work with and get to know Dr. Cairns and my fellow tutorial leaders.

While I was interested in the humanities disciplines even before I decided to complete a program at Briercrest, that interest has only deepened over the past few years. I have no regrets about choosing to concentrate in English literature, as that continues to be what I am most passionate about. The English classes I have taken while at Briercrest have added important nuances and substance to my simple, lifelong love of stories. I have come to the conclusion that stories have a great deal of moral importance; that is, they help us to understand how we should live and how we should interact with others, particularly those who are very different from us.<sup>19</sup> My English literature classes have given me the opportunity to write about a variety of important social issues including

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<sup>17</sup> “Working with Others: Evidence for Writing Centre Position.”

<sup>18</sup> “Working with Others: Evidence for Tutorial Leadership Position.”

<sup>19</sup> “Disciplinary Expertise: Commonplace Book,” 22.



gender roles,<sup>20</sup> portrayals of love,<sup>21</sup> socioeconomic class conflict,<sup>22</sup> the results of oppression,<sup>23</sup> and changing ideals of leadership.<sup>24</sup> It is my hope that literary discussions about these kinds of issues will be able to move out of the theoretical realm and cause significant real life changes to occur.

I have also developed a greater appreciation of the other humanities disciplines over the past few years. Both history<sup>25</sup> and philosophy<sup>26</sup> are essential to understanding how our society has ended up the way it is, which is important to know if one is trying to change some aspect of society. Perhaps the class that I learned the most about this in, however, was Advanced Studies in Christian World Views. It was very illuminating to study the roots of functionalism and individualism, as it explains so well why so many churches operate the way they do, and why their programs, such as short-term missions trips,<sup>27</sup> are often so unsuccessful. These kinds of classes make me think that the humanities disciplines are perhaps most beneficial when they are studied in an interdisciplinary fashion that allows them to interact with the realities of contemporary society.

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<sup>20</sup> “Analyzing Texts: Complementary Characteristics of Manhood and Womanhood in Stoker’s *Dracula*.”

<sup>21</sup> “Disciplinary Expertise: Commonplace Book,” 19.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>24</sup> “Disciplinary Expertise: Humble Kingship in White’s *The Sword in the Stone*.”

<sup>25</sup> “Disciplinary Expertise: Cultural Contributions of the Jesuits in Latin America.”

<sup>26</sup> “Disciplinary Expertise: Discipline and Freedom in Locke’s *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*.”

<sup>27</sup> “Disciplinary Expertise: Expressive Individualism in Short-Term Missions.”

As previously mentioned, working for Dr. Cairns as a faculty assistant has been a particularly useful opportunity.<sup>28</sup> Not only has it helped me to become a better speaker and allowed me to bless others through the gifts that I have been blessed with, but it has taught me a lot about myself, especially in terms of teaching. I have often been told that I am good at teaching, and my experiences as a tutorial leader have allowed me to confirm that this is to some degree true. I now realize that I particularly enjoy one-on-one teaching experiences, while I often find talking to a group for an extended period of time exhausting. I have no immediate plans that involve any sort of teaching, but I am glad that I am now more aware of the kinds of teaching that I enjoy so that I will be able to make more educated decisions when teaching opportunities arise in the future.

When I leave Briercrest this spring, my next step will be to work as a legal assistant at the same firm that posted the job advertisement that I included in my appendices.<sup>29</sup> While this is not necessarily the expected outcome of my humanities degree, I believe that, as my cover letter<sup>30</sup> and resume<sup>31</sup> indicate, my degree has provided me with very marketable skills that will make me a competent and efficient office worker. My Briercrest education has served to develop my reading, writing, and speaking skills. With God's blessing, these elements of my education should help me to succeed in my next stage of life, and I am hopeful that my time at Briercrest will continue to be beneficial in every stage that follows.

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<sup>28</sup> "Other Learning Experiences: Letter of Reference for Tutorial Leadership."

<sup>29</sup> "Employment Learning: Job Posting."

<sup>30</sup> "Employment Learning: Cover Letter."

<sup>31</sup> "Employment Learning: Resumé."