

Quest for Meaning: Growing Up in a Flattened World

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Thomas Friedman coined the phrase ‘the world is flat’ as the title for his 2005 book on globalization. In that book he argued that the technological revolution was leveling the global economic playing field and enabling many more people around the world to compete, connect, and collaborate. This is the world you have grown up in and it is what distinguishes your generation from any that went before.

Politically in the United States we held the inauguration for the first black president two years ago. Had Barack Obama not defeated Hillary Clinton in the primaries, we could have had the inauguration of our first woman president. Women have been able to vote in the US for only one century and for most blacks it has been only half that length of time.

In your lifetimes, geographically, the vast majority of the countries of Europe, through the EU and Shengen agreement, have virtually eliminated the borders of Europe to travel and movement of people and money.

When you were born, a concrete wall thousands of miles long, barbed wire and other barriers divided Europe into two parts. The barrier separated countries, such as Germany, and families. The iron curtain separated the capitalist from the communist world. Each year people died trying to illegally cross from one side to the other (Actually, I am unaware of anyone killed trying to cross from the capitalist world into the communist, but they died routinely going the other direction). The remnants of that wall are now found in museums.

If the world you have inherited is no longer divided by political ideologies, it is still very much uneven in availability of food and clean drinking water and, urgently, medicines and medical treatment. As we are routinely reminded, tens of thousands of people in the developing world die annually of diseases that are easily prevented or treated here in the West.

Perhaps for your generation, communication is the greatest barrier to fall. Again, when your parents were young, contacting someone by phone required sitting in a location with a phone physically tethered to an outlet in the wall. To call long distance was a financial decision that required some justification and to call overseas was both complex and costly. The Internet for common use did not exist.

In this course, we will try to further examine the reductions and eliminations of borders in many areas. We will attempt to reduce the barriers separating different cultures by exploring the writings from Asia and Africa, Latin America, and Russia to consider what is unique and what is common to humanity. We will examine the ecology, which recognizes no borders and determine how we, individually and collectively, will cope with the challenges ahead. We will look at the primary security challenges of the last century and consider how the ideologies and the weapons created to advance them threatened our very existence. We will look at health care, children and women on a global basis, and examine the work of pioneers who have blazed trails.

In Quest for Meaning (QFM), you are being asked to explore your own theory of the world (if you will): your understanding of meaning, purpose, and values. To what extent is your theory incomplete? Inconsistent? Unexamined? On what assumptions is it based? In the language of higher education, it is a time to further engage in “the big questions”

Study in the arts and sciences should provide students with opportunities to explore the enduring issues, questions, and problems they confront as human beings—questions of meaning, purpose, and moral integrity. These studies should also teach students to look beyond themselves, by considering their obligations to others, and to look beyond the classroom, by applying their analytical skills and learning to significant issues and problems in the world around them.¹

The readings, plenaries, discussions, and service project(s) you will engage in this semester are designed to encourage you to consider these questions.

The course begins with an overview of moral reasoning, with readings from Professor Bruce Foltz and the controversial Peter Singer. To give you a basic framework for ethical discussions, Foltz briefly outlines different ethical approaches. In Singer’s *Practical Ethics*, you will read his attempt to develop a consistent ethical approach to difficult questions. At the most basic level, it is about addressing the “big question” of determining right from wrong. Singer’s approach, a form of utilitarianism, is based on the “equal consideration of the interests of others.” It is up to you to first understand his approach, and then, to evaluate it and in so doing consider how to develop an ethical framework. What does moral integrity mean to you (and the world) and how does it guide the decisions you make?

The course then moves to an exploration of faith with readings from Professor David Bryant and the great novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky. This section of the course is not focused on exploring different faith traditions. It is, instead, about exploring the role of faith in finding meaning, purpose, and values. Bryant addresses the role of faith in the face of human suffering, specifically in response to a natural disaster. Dostoevsky, in the novel *The Brothers Karamazov*, intentionally contrasts the atheist, Ivan, and Ivan’s “Grand Inquisitor” with the life of the Russian monk. While Dostoevsky’s own view on faith gets expressed through the action of the novel, in this reading he challenges us to consider the role of faith in our understanding of meaning and purpose.

The course then moves to perspectives that you have already considered (or will shortly consider) in required courses on global and environmental questions. We revisit both of these perspectives to consider their role in your understanding of the world. How do you respond to the questions raised by poverty, war, injustice, and globalization? How do you respond to the concerns over the use of the world’s natural resources? Here again, although the authors of the texts we read raise these concerns and have a particular point of view, the question for you in this course is how do you respond? How does it impact your world-view? How does it, in turn, impact your daily decisions?

¹ *College Learning for the New Global Century*, A Report from the National Leadership Council for Liberal Education and America’s Promise, Washington, DC: American Association of Colleges & Universities, 2007, p 33.

The final readings are representative of the four area courses also required for graduation: humanities, sciences, arts, and social sciences. These academic areas are interrelated since knowledge is not neatly segmented by disciplines or even academic area, but each area does have its own distinct methodology. A physicist and a poet likely view the stars in the night sky through very different lenses: one uses lenses ground from glass or quartz in her telescope and the other through a metaphoric lens and connected imagery. To what extent does the methodology of your chosen major(s) impact your consideration of enduring questions?

Then, of course, there is the service learning project. This is the “learning laboratory” of QFM: the time to get hands-on experience in an area of need raised in the context of the course. It is the time to apply what you know and see if your “theory of everything” holds true in the world beyond Eckerd. The service learning project is an opportunity to learn about the needs of the St. Petersburg community and/or the world at large. It is an opportunity to see how one organization strives to address a specific concern. As you work for an organization, you will help it, but you may also learn more about yourself: your abilities, your goals, and how your involvement in serving others reinforces or changes your values.

At the end of the course, you will reflect upon the course in your “This I Believe: Its Importance to Me and the World” essay and presentation. It is a time for you to integrate and synthesize the course materials, evaluating them in the context of your developing understanding of the world. Questing for meaning and purpose does not end with this essay, this course or graduation from Eckerd. It is a life-long journey and QFM asks you to consider questions raised by the authors, the lecturers, your classmates, and the organizations you serve as part of a serious reflection on your own quest for meaning. We hope that this course will bring focus to parts of your four years of education and provide common themes upon which you can build your own better future.