

The Language of Intelligence: How the Humanities Transformed My Relationship with Higher Education

I grew up dumb.

Or at least that is how I understood myself throughout my childhood. Intelligence seemed to be its own language, not one that I believed I had the privilege of learning. It was not spoken with words, but with numbers and one correct answer. It was a language no matter how hard I tried, I could not become fluent in. In school, I was constantly surrounded by the idea that science, technology, and mathematics were the only paths to a successful future. Those subjects never came naturally to me, and because I struggled to excel in them, I was made to feel I was simply not smart. The questions that excited me were different. I was curious about the *whys* and the *hows* of the world. Yet those interests were rarely spoken about with the same prestige or certainty. Come to find out, those subjects I was drawn to had a name: the Humanities. Their meaning is in the name itself. The Humanities are the study of humans: the way we live, the societies we cultivate, the questions we ask. If we all share the human experience, why are the disciplines devoted to understanding it overlooked? For me, the Humanities have profoundly shaped not only my path into higher education but also changed the way I understand myself, my people, and the world.

First and foremost, I owe my very ability to pursue higher education to the Humanities. Being a daughter of Punjabi immigrants who arrived in Canada with nothing but the clothes on their back, I grew up understanding that while money may not buy happiness, it certainly cultivated comfort. Watching my parents gain premature wrinkles on their face instilled in me a deep desire to succeed and provide. In a way, their sacrifices made pursuing higher education feel less like a choice and more like a responsibility. Unfortunately, I also grew up believing

there was only one way to honour that responsibility. I internalized the idea that success meant pursuing a career with a clear cut path and a salary that promised financial security, a future that was often linked with studying STEM. I found myself caught between the life I hoped to build for my family and the unsettling realization that the path I was expected to follow inspired no sense of purpose for me. I mistook this disconnect for a lack of ability, believing I simply did not belong in higher education. In reality, I simply had not yet encountered a discipline that valued the questions I was asking. Once I began studying the Humanities in university, for the first time, I no longer questioned whether I belonged in higher education. I knew I did.

Beyond altering my definition of intelligence, the Humanities legitimized experiences I had been carrying my entire life. Frankly, the questions I had asked myself about identity, belonging, and existing between cultures were no longer solely personal thoughts. Instead, they became subjects worthy of serious academic inquiry. Through history, sociology, and justice studies, I realized that my experiences as a member of a diasporic community were shaped by the legacies of colonialism and migration. Understanding the deeply interconnected and structural nature of my lived experiences showed me that I was never alone. To someone who has always seen their experiences reflected between the pages of the books we read in class, this may seem ordinary. However, for me seeing the lives of people like me examined with the same intellectual curiosity and seriousness as any other subject fundamentally changed how I valued myself. Higher education was no longer a place where I passively absorbed information being thrown at me. Instead, the Humanities exposed me to an environment where my own experiences could contribute to intellectual conversations. When such a sense of belonging is shared, it has the power to make academia as a whole more inclusive. This realization was profoundly

validating, and without the Humanities, I do not believe I would have the opportunity to experience higher education in the same way.

That realization extended far beyond my own story, the Humanities taught me to understand others. They encouraged me to look beyond individual circumstances and ask broader questions. Rather than asking why someone was struggling, I began asking what historical, political, and economic systems had created the conditions in which they existed. When I say the Humanities are the study of humans, I mean the human experience: one we are all victims, creators, and celebrators of, shaped by the critical questions the Humanities compel us to consider. Studying the Humanities cultivates empathy and humility by reminding us that no person's story exists in a silo. Like a plant that requires care and attention to grow, our understanding of others must also be nurtured. The mindset that can be cultivated through the study of the Humanities helps people lead with compassion rather than judgement, and care rather than avoidance. Such humility is priceless, especially in our world that is becoming increasingly preoccupied with what artificial intelligence can do. The Humanities reminded me of what only humans are capable of; empathizing and making genuine meaning of one another's experiences.

The Humanities did not simply teach me new information; they challenged the narrow definition of intelligence I had internalized and legitimized the questions that had long occupied my mind. They displayed that education and learning is not about finding the one correct answer, but about having the courage to ask better questions. For me, it is no longer about learning the language of intelligence that I once believed I could not speak, but recognizing that the very desire to *know* is a form of intelligence itself. Turns out, I had always spoken this language; I just had not been in a place where it could be heard. In recognizing this, the Humanities made higher education feel

like a place where I belonged and transformed the way I understand myself, my community, and the world.