As academe’s hoped-for recovery from the 2008 financial crisis recedes before it like the shimmer of water on a hot roadway, the problems of its humanities component are up close and all too real. There is no doubt that the United States is now producing an unprecedented number of B.A.s who know little or nothing about humanistic thought — and a growing number of humanities Ph.D.s who cannot find jobs.

As Alexander I. Jacobs noted last year in a Chronicle essay, defenses of the humanities have tended to take two paths. One, the more traditional, points out that life is not simply a matter of careers, and that the humanities address the higher concerns that make it worth living: A person who knows some Shakespeare and Plato, or who has some acquaintance with Bach and Canaletto, will live a happier and more interesting life than someone who does not.
The other response cites the growing evidence that the skills taught in humanities courses — clear and critical thinking, knowledge of different cultures, and so on — are in fact very useful for careers, especially at the higher levels of business and politics. Many people, of course, accept both these arguments, and rightly so. People with humanistic training do tend to succeed both at careers and life.

The arguments may indeed be persuasive, but as Jacobs pointed out, they aren’t working. In a society that has largely dismantled its already feeble safety nets, most people — even many who were once considered well off — are scrambling just to make it through the month, or the next couple of months; they can’t worry about interesting lives or high levels of future achievement. The defenses fail, in short, because it is society itself, not the individuals who live in it, that needs fixing.

So in order to survive, the humanities have to fix the world. Can they? Not on their own, of course. But a recent incident at the University of California at Los Angeles, where I teach, suggests that they can help — and in a crucially important way.

In February of 2015, members of the UCLA student government asked strange questions of a student interviewing for a job. They noted her work for Jewish groups and wondered whether she could be "objective" about Israel. When the faculty representative in attendance pointed out that these questions were anti-Semitic, the questioners immediately turned around and apologized; all of them then voted for her to get the job.

At breakfast shortly after, a friend remarked, "That was classic anti-Semitism." Something hit me in midbite: I realized that I wished it were so. This, however, was ominously different. Those apologies, confirmed by subsequent actions, were clearly sincere. I was forced to confront the possibility that the students who made them — prominent members of a student government, not new kids on campus — genuinely did not know what anti-Semitism is, and they did not know why it is evil.

A few weeks later, my suspicions were confirmed by an incident at the University of Oklahoma, where students were filmed singing a racist song during a bus ride. One of them, Levi Pettit, later said that while he had known that people did not like the racist language he had used on the bus, he had not known why. In other words, he had thought...
anti-racism was merely a personal preference — which means that racism, too, is a mere personal preference and so cannot be truly evil. Once again, a student at a major university had not been taught what something evil actually is, or why it is evil. Or — most important of all — how to avoid it.

Where will they learn this? Not in their marketing, economics, or STEM courses. Highly quantified disciplines like those cannot teach about things like racial or religious prejudice. To learn what anti-Semitism and racism are, students must turn to history and sociology courses. To learn why they are evil and how to avoid them, they must turn to the humanities.

In particular, it is the humanities that teach us how not to be racists, by showing us how to open ourselves up to what is different. Whether a given humanist is a modernist, postmodernist, New Critic, Marxist, or an adherent of any of dozens of other approaches, what she does in the classroom is always the same: She takes some cultural product that seems at first strange and off-putting — a poem by some ancient Greek or Persian poet, a novel by some African or Chinese author, a statue from an indigenous culture whose true name we don’t even know — and, if she is a good teacher, makes it familiar enough to be interesting. Doing that inevitably expands the minds of the students, bringing their horizons just a little closer to the widest horizons of all — those of humanity itself.

Scientists, of course, do this too — when they explain the delicate structure of a trilobite or the chemical reactions driving a star. And when they do this, they are engaging in humanistic thought — not in the sense that it is about a separate group called "humans," but in the sense that it produces individuals to whom, to paraphrase the Roman playwright Terence, nothing human is truly alien. And so produces humanity itself.

For humanity doesn’t just exist; it has to be created, over and over again. If our violent history shows anything, it is that we are not born with an innate sympathy for, or understanding of, all humankind; and without those, "humanity" is just a word. So humanity has to be built, and the only way to build it is to show young people, already rooted in their own birth culture, that they can move beyond that culture without abandoning it — that what is foreign to that culture can remain foreign and still be worthy of thought and respect.
Humanists thus build humanity, one work of art at a time. In this function, the humanities are useful to individuals, to be sure, but indirectly: Rather than helping an individual to a more interesting and prosperous life, they first build a shared and — let’s call it "humane" — world in which such lives can subsequently find a place. It follows that cultures which do not teach the humanities to as many people as possible (or who adopt, for example, a narrowly nationalistic view of them) are inviting serious trouble; for continuation of the current dystopia is not the worst possibility before us.

Consider this: Is it possible to have a society full of young people who are creative, energetic, entrepreneurial, technologically informed — and wholly comfortable with mass slaughter?

I know the answer. I’m in a German department.

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A version of this article appeared in the October 7, 2016 issue.

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