



WHAT IS EDUCATION?

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The Greek poet Pindar, who lived around 500 B.C., writes that our most important duty in life consists in becoming who we are, a profound wisdom also reflected throughout the Christian educational tradition. It is in this light that I have dedicated the past 25 years of my life to education: my own continuing education and – together with my wife – that of our five children; in my professional career serving in and leading various educational institutions internationally. Education has thus become a life vocation. The most important truth that I have come to discover and understand where it regards the education towards becoming who we are is best expressed through the powerful yet simple words 500 years ago of St. Thomas More, father and educator of his four children and Lord Chancellor of the British Realm who was martyred for the refusal to negate his conscience:

“Education is a making visible what is hidden as a seed.”

Indeed, it is this hidden seed of being and knowing that we as parents and educators are called to make visible in those whom we have been entrusted with, resisting the permanent temptation of merely projecting on those in our care expectations that we have of them and missed chances in our own lives that we would like to redeem. Making visible what lies hidden as a seed means first that we truly want to know and love those we educate for who they are. This puts us in the right disposition that allows us to help them find in freedom their unique calling in life and to guide them in planting that seed in the world where it can grow and bear fruit. In his book “Education at the Crossroads”, the French philosopher Jacques Maritain reminds us that “the education of man is a human awakening” and that education aims at “the conquest of internal and spiritual freedom” by the individual person so that he or she shapes himself as a human person.

You might think now that this all sounds very lofty and noble, but how to put it in practice? What I have come to discover over the years working with students and learners of all ages and backgrounds – from



school pupils to political leaders - is that atmosphere, the culture of the learning environment, is the key to unlocking each person's ability, with the help of peers and teachers, to embark upon the path of seeking out and then planting and watering that seed, making full use of his or her talents and gifts. The first focus of our endeavors should thus be to select the right people and the right setting for our educational purposes. This must start with truthfulness and beauty as two sides of the same coin.

To live what we teach

Concerning truthfulness, the men and women that we engage in our educational efforts should only be people who strive in earnest to live what we teach from an inner conviction and a willingness never to stop learning and growing themselves.

Educating others is only possible when we are educated ourselves, and this becomes possible when we live an authentic life that shows a unity of word and deed. It is the attitude of life that counts. There are few things more destructive in education and upbringing than when those that teach and instruct do not live their word. In the profound words of Michael D. O'Brien:

“A messenger is in his words, if the messenger is truly himself. His life is his primary word, and his spoken words bear his life. He learns to be this when he has discovered that a man can give to others only what he truly is.”

Concerning beauty, we also have to create a physical environment for the learning endeavor that uplifts the soul. This means that the school building, the university campus or the conference venue should always be a place that is ordered, aesthetic and pleasing to the eye and senses where it regards architecture, furnishings and the natural environment. This is by no means a luxury and yet should also not be luxurious; it is a real need

that is to be met with simplicity. I have seen beautiful yet very simple school buildings in Africa that were far better suited for this purpose than most of the bland modern European or American educational buildings and conference venues I have passed through. Ugliness and noisiness, so omnipresent in our functionality-driven societies, only distract us and cause anxiety and therefore they can never be a suitable environment for true learning and growing. Beauty invites the human spirit to quietly observe, to contemplate and as a result to rise up to higher degrees of knowing and understanding. We have all experienced what a beautiful landscape, harmonious music or the paintings of the great masters do to our souls.

Truthfulness and beauty

Once we have firmly established truthfulness and beauty as the foundations of our educational efforts, we can start with undertaking the first and most difficult task in the educational adventure to make visible the hidden seed: character formation. There is a good reason why this comes before intellectual formation in importance. As James V. Schall explains when he speaks about liberal education:

“There is an intimate connection between our moral life and our intellectual life. Sometimes I think the history of our times can be described as an argument whether or not this connection is true. Self-discipline is the beginning of wisdom, not its end.”

Our moral life, which is what character formation in education seeks to address, is not an individualistic effort. Education is relational, or it is not education. We learn through and with people and our relationships with them, a truth we have been painfully reminded of during the extended school and university closures as a result of the corona crisis. No matter how technologically advanced we have become in enabling distance learning conducted through live video platforms, it cannot and will not ever replace human interaction and personal relationships.

Character formation happens where people meet and grow together in wisdom and experience. Students learn not only from what the teacher passes on about a certain subject, but more importantly the students learn from who the teacher is and how that person of authority lives, acts and leads by example and instruction. We also learn continuously through our fellow learners, including as a result of disagreement or conflict. Character formation teaches us to become ever more consistent in discerning between good and evil and to act accordingly, also in situations of great difficulty. We advance this life-long cause through learning and teaching the virtues, both the classical and the Christian virtues. The virtues, which Josef Pieper in his well-known work on the same topic calls “the tools of life”, can be instilled and strengthened in many different daily ways: through reading, writing, discussion, theater, sports and social and community service – but also simply by living, working and holding out with others, also those whom we do not like or understand. One of the most formative experiences in my years at university was living with other students and all that comes with it. The most important is that we realize and teach that the virtuous life requires constant humble work to direct our own characters and those whose education is entrusted to us ever closer to becoming persons that live purposefully, act justly and are a blessing for those around them.

Virtue and character

This brings me to a point that is especially relevant today when we speak about character formation in education. Already C.S. Lewis noted 80 years ago that *“[w]e make men without chests and expect of them virtue and enterprise. We laugh at honor and are shocked to find traitors in our midst. We castrate and bid the geldings be fruitful.”*

Even more so than in the mid-twentieth century when he wrote these words, our education and instruction in the 21st century has largely been marked by a culture of weakness and entitlement, leading to spineless and all too delicate people who cannot deal with other opinions and who bail out on commitments the moment an obstacle arises. They will always look



for the cause of all their problems outside of themselves, not able to take personal responsibility. We thus need to rediscover and encourage anew in our educational work the character trait of heroism, described in so many great works of world literature and philosophy. Why is heroism important? Because this fundamental attitude of life directs us to apply consistently the virtues of perseverance, self-mastery, self-sacrifice and courage as an urgently needed alternative in a society that is so obsessed with invented rights and perceived victimhood, whilst mostly rejecting duty and service.

The character formation now defined, we come to the intellectual life itself and here again there is a priority to pursue in education: learning how to think. If there is something our modern world has completely forgotten how to do, it is the ability to think with clarity. We live in a society of permanent distraction where fleeting feelings, opinion polls and the latest social media hypes are the ever-changing norm, usually not hindered by any deliberate process of careful reflection and ordered spoken or written public discourse. As the bestselling personal development author Robin Sharma puts it so well: *“The majority is stuck in vague, imprecise thinking. And vague, imprecise thinking yields vague, imprecise results.”*

How to think

Superficiality of thought and its resulting destructive action seems to be the norm today where basic science, logical argumentation and a healthy debate is routinely rejected in favor of whatever the new orthodoxy of groupthink claims is now to be the valid norm, and where any deviation is



harshly punished with “social death” through de-platforming, ostracization and censorship.

An education – and for that matter society as a whole -, however, that seeks to make visible what lies hidden as a seed in the individual person wants to form a new generation of thinkers: people that are not afraid to address the great and oftentimes controversial questions of life and society with profundity and a truly open heart and mind, and who are not afraid of inconvenient truths and facts, even if they contradict the shrill mainstream narrative of vague and imprecise thinking. Here there are no taboos or thoughtcrimes and here there is no blanket rejection of tradition and religion, or a one-sided moralizing reading of history. Instead, we learn and teach how to read thoroughly an ageless work of literature or philosophy and to carefully analyze its purpose and meaning. Here we learn and practice how to conduct an ordered intellectual discourse and exchange of ideas where not our opinions, feelings and sensitivities are on the foreground, but rather a common effort to know, to understand and to grow into more mature human beings with a more informed conscience. We also learn that truth is a goal to attain, not an object to claim, since, in the wise words of Jacques Maritain, “truth does not depend on us but on what is.”

Learning how to think requires true humility and the willingness to fully engage with oneself, with the other – a culture of encounter as Pope Francis would call it - and with the topic at hand. This is an exercise not suited for the faint-hearted, the entitled and the ideologized. It can only be undertaken by those who know that they do not know and thus desire to continue learning.

To live in accordance with God's plan for humanity

We now return to the title of this contribution, “What is education?“. In summary and based on the privilege of many years of experience in the field, I can answer this question as follows: Education is the seeking out, planting and caring for the seed that lies hidden in the heart and mind of every human being young and old. Doing so requires an atmosphere of truthfulness and beauty in which, through acquiring knowledge and the heroic practice of the virtues, the character of the individual person is continually shaped, strengthened and inspired by uplifting human interactions, profound friendships and a community where charity reigns supreme. Here he or she is then enabled, with the help of the great minds of human history, to learn how to think, thus allowing for a life lived with a listening heart that sets its sights on the pursuit of the true, the good and the beautiful. Education, therefore, is the art of learning how to live in accordance with the Creator God's plan for humanity.



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