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The Elephant in the Living Room: What Few Are Talking About But What Is Absolutely Necessary for Authentic Educational Reform

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There is a crisis in education

There is a general recognition that we are experiencing a crisis in education, that we are not adequately passing on the riches of an authentic liberal arts education to the next generation, and that this will have dire consequences. While testing results provide a metric of this decline, many of the signs are obvious for anyone carefully observing our culture: the decline in reading substantial texts, especially books; a general lowering of the public level of discourse with more influence carried by emotional appeals and images than by rational arguments; and the general tendency to fill leisure time with entertainment rather than study. While there are several ideas to improve education, some good, currently being debated, there is a need for a more careful analysis of the challenge of education in our culture, with some understanding of a broader perspective as to why we are where we are today. It is crucially important for the prospect of passing on the riches of a liberal arts education that our culture has become dominated by

entertainment. The emergence of an “entertainment culture” needs to be addressed before substantial progress can be made. For the purposes of this article we can understand the entertainment culture as the widespread and fast-paced electronic media: television, movies, video games, aspects of the Internet, cell phones, and types of music. Secondly, and related in a somewhat ironic way, our culture has also been damaged by what some have referred to as workaholism, an inordinate drive to define oneself by commitment to work. I hope to show how both indulgence in entertainment and the “busy-ness” of overworking, on a personal level, stem from a lack of temperance and fortitude, virtues essential to acquiring a liberal education. Likewise, an important part of the solution is to promote a renewed culture of reading, conversation, and attention to others as persons in our families. For this to happen we must embark on a new ascetical path so as to relearn how to cultivate silence.

We live in an entertainment culture

Entertainment is certainly not new to contemporary times. A strong argument can be made that it is simply part of our human condition that people seek pleasure. Aristotle was a bit more sophisticated on this point, noting that all men really seek happiness, which, he admitted, most people confuse with pleasure. For Aristotle, true happiness is found through virtuous action and friendship, and is that which really fulfills a person’s nature. His contempt for the tendency among most people to seek pleasure is powerfully captured in a particularly poignant quote from the *Nicomachean Ethics*: “The utter servility of the masses comes out in their preference for a bovine existence.” [i] Note that Aristotle identifies those who indulge their passions for the sake of pleasure as living a cow-like life (in the sense that a cow is satisfied when fed, with no higher ambition) that is also analogous to the life of a slave. Aristotle correctly realizes that indulgence is a form of slavery; it is becoming a slave to one’s passions. Pleasure seeking, which is closely related to indulgence in entertainment, is clearly not new. Likewise, we need only think of the coliseum in ancient Rome and the masses of people who would flock to the games—gory entertainment in raw form—to see that we are dealing with a perennial human problem.

In our times, entertainments of choice, especially for school-age children and young adults, are primarily electronic: video games, television, movies, music, and certain aspects of the Internet—what we are calling the entertainment culture. And while the rowdy citizens of ancient Rome left the Coliseum to return to their often drab existence, these modern forms of entertainment follow us right into the heart of our homes and indeed, with the proliferation of sophisticated mobile communication devices, almost wherever we go. That the intensity and prevalence of these modern forms of entertainment pose challenges for education is well known by those in the profession. Consider the following observations by an Advanced Placement (AP) English teacher from the suburban Washington, DC, area written in an article for the *Washington Post*:

*I’ve known for a long time that a lot of the boys in my English classes are more interested in connecting with their Xboxes in the evening than with the next three chapters of Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*. But*

ever since I observed their mounting hysteria over last month's "premiere" of Halo 2, the new combat game from Microsoft, I've been trying to find out what's behind the lure of video games. As the boys I teach have endeavored to enlighten me, I haven't known whether to laugh, cry, or go find a new job. What they told me has me wondering how what I teach can possibly compete with the fast-paced razzle-dazzle of this ever-evolving entertainment form and worrying about the younger guys who spend so much time divorced from reality and the life of the mind as they zap away the hours before their video screens...

I'm not the only one to see it happening. T.C. girls have told me that at parties they are often totally ignored as the guys gather around TV screens, entranced by one video game or another. "Girls sit around watching the guys play until they get fed up and drive off looking for something else to do," says junior Sarah Kell, for whom the games range from "stupid and boring" to "disgusting." (Most girls tell me they find the games silly.) "We try to tell them they're wasting their time, but they just keep going. Some guys stay up playing until 3 in the morning on school nights, and then try to do their homework..."

But my immediate concern is how to get books back on the playing field. I became an English teacher because I love literature... we enter an imaginative world slowly, through the written word... whatever vicarious experience a novel or even a movie can offer, "gamers" say it can't approach a video game's intensity of experience...

Old Dominion University freshman Nick Pratt said that as soon as Halo 2 came out, some guys skipped classes for three straight days to play the game in the dorms. Duke freshman Sarah Ball told me she can walk down the hall of a male-only floor in her dorm and hear video games going in every room... [ii]

Young teachers at the all-boys school at which I teach assure me that this is what actually happens on a wide scale: many male college students are choosing video games over not only

their studies, but even over interest in young women.

Toward a deeper analysis: entertainment as a waste of time vs. entertainment as a dissipation of one's interior faculties and humanity

It is interesting to think a bit more deeply about the educational problems posed by living in an entertainment culture. It is not just a problem because of the amount of time wasted, time spent in front of various screens. The **Kaiser Family Foundation** estimates this to average over 7 hours per day. Certainly this is a great deal of time, some of which could be more profitably spent studying or reading. But I think that the crux of the problem is much deeper. Roald Dahl hints at this in his novel *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. The basics of the story are familiar: a poor and very unspoiled child, Charlie, wins a once-in-a-lifetime chance to see the inner workings of the famous chocolate factory with a group of other children that, one by one, get into trouble with their various vices. The last to go is Mike Teavee who is undone by his fascination with television. The Oompa-Loompas give Roald Dahl's commentary on the situation:

*The most important thing we've learned,
So far as children are concerned,
Is never, NEVER, NEVER let
Them near your television set—
Or better still, just don't install
The idiotic thing at all.
In almost every house we've been,
We've watched them gaping at the screen.
They loll and slop and lounge about,
And stare until their eyes pop out.
(Last week in someone's place we saw
A dozen eyeballs on the floor.)
They sit and stare and stare and sit
Until they're hypnotized by it,
Until they're absolutely drunk
With all that shocking ghastly junk.
Oh yes, we know it keeps them still,
They don't climb out the window sill,
They never fight or kick or punch,
They leave you free to cook the lunch*

*And wash the dishes in the sink—
But did you ever stop to think,
To wonder just exactly what
This does to your beloved tot?
IT ROTTS THE SENSES IN THE HEAD!
IT KILLS IMAGINATION DEAD!
IT CLOGS AND CLUTTERS UP THE MIND!
IT MAKES A CHILD SO DULL AND BLIND
HE CAN NO LONGER UNDERSTAND
A FANTASY, A FAIRYLAND!
HIS BRAIN BECOMES AS SOFT AS CHEESE!
HIS POWERS OF THINKING RUST AND FREEZE!
HE CANNOT THINK – HE ONLY SEES!
“All right!” you’ll cry. “All right!” you’ll say,
“But if we take the set away,
What shall we do to entertain
Our darling children? Please explain!”
We’ll answer this by asking you,
“What used the darling ones to do?
How used they keep themselves contented
Before this monster was invented?”
Have you forgotten? Don’t you know?
We’ll say it very loud and slow:
THEY... USED... TO... READ! They’d READ and READ,
AND READ and READ, and then proceed
To READ some more... [iii]*

Dahl recognizes that there is a deeper problem. Television and, we can add, the rest of the entertainment culture, can be quite destructive, rotting interior senses, destroying imagination, cluttering the mind, and dulling and weakening the intellect.

To understand this better it is helpful to reflect on the activity referred to as “studying.” Studying is a type of human work aimed at gaining knowledge and understanding that requires disciplined use of the mind over a period of time. That studying necessarily requires a sustained effort is clear when we consider some examples of studying: engaging a great work of literature, learning about a complex biological system (such as respiration), or understanding

the intricacies of a certain historical period. The fortitude to maintain one's concentration and focus is necessary, not only to avoid quitting, on the one hand, by either simply giving up or by wasting time through daydreaming, but also to keep on task, to resist giving in to curiosity so as not to be led away from the task at hand on a tangent. A classical understanding of this process highlights the active role of the person's interior faculties in studying: the necessity of one's imagination producing the images that the intellect uses to understand and analyze. The images generated by one's imagination and presented to the intellect have been called, in certain philosophical schools, the phantasm. The intellect with its rational powers acts upon the *phantasm*. Reading requires that the mind work to transform the written word to something that one can ponder. In study and reading it is the interior intellectual faculties (imagination and intellect) that are necessarily operating in an independent, self-directed, and active manner.

The entire mental state changes when someone receives images from a screen. Dahl's line, "HE CANNOT THINK – HE ONLY SEES," is quite insightful. Rather than consciously directing its attention and producing the images necessary for thought by itself, the mind is semi-hypnotized—it lazily absorbs and follows the images that are presented to it on the screen. Whereas normally the imagination must work to produce the phantasm, an audio-visual image, for the most part, supplies the phantasm to the person absorbed in watching it. Even if the mind does filter and modify the film images in some way this is slight and done in a passive matter rather than actively by the person. It is a common experience for someone's own image of a literary character or scene in a novel to be changed once a movie version has been viewed. I know Tolkien fans who have expressed frustration at how the recent *Lord of the Rings* movies have supplanted their original interior visions of the characters and landscape.

Though the imagination can still function to some extent when watching a video, especially if the video is displaying material at a slower, more human pace, the very nature of the medium requires some surrender of control over the thought process. This surrender becomes more pronounced when the video images are intense, fast-paced, and engineered with sounds so as to engage the emotions as well. In such cases, though the reasoning powers of the intellect are not directly violated (it is not as if the screen image forces the intellect to reason in a certain way), the intellect is manipulated by not being allowed the time to reflect in accord with its normal pace of operating. The attention span shrinks. There is no time to ponder the images. As Dahl notes, one result is an artificial calm; the interior senses are sedated, even deadened. Dahl is not exaggerating when he says television "ROTS THE SENSES IN THE HEAD."

Perhaps some clarification is in order here. First, based on what we have said thus far, it is interesting to note that the more fast-paced, engaging, loud, and emotionally or violently charged a film is, the less active the thought process of the one watching it necessarily becomes. If a film powerfully engages the senses and emotions through its rapidly changing scenes, carefully engineered sound track, and fast-paced action or emotive plot, then the effect on the person watching it is to make his thought process very passive. The person watching such a film is absorbed in it, swept away, giving over the control of his or her imagination and surrendering his mind to the phantasm of images and emotions presented to it. He may feel

strong emotions which give him the impression of being excited, but the more his passions are aroused by the audio-visual images he absorbs, the less his intellect functions in a self-directed manner. On the other hand, a film that is slow-paced, full of long scenes with significant and sophisticated dialogue, is received in a manner much closer to that of reading a book, a manner much more in accord with a normal human mode of operation. The mind has time to consider the information presented to it and, though the images do certainly have an impact on the imagination, the person is left freer to ponder what he or she is receiving. Many such films can be of benefit to the humanity of those who watch and reflect on them.

At the extreme other end of the spectrum are video games and, even further, pornography. In the virtual world of video games the person not only is engrossed and swept away by the images and sounds, but he even becomes an actor of sorts in this virtual world. The person viewing pornography acts even further against his intellect. In viewing pornography the person is choosing to embrace a fantasy, a falsehood. The pornography is a lie: no one is really there. In reality, persons are not mere objects of pleasure but have a unique dignity that cannot be separated from their relationships to others. Implicit in each false pornographic image is the lie that this person is not really fully human with all the relationships this entails: with a father and mother who cared for her as a child, with siblings, friends, grandparents; that she was once a helpless baby and will perhaps one day be helpless near the end of her life. Just as a film can produce a strong emotive response while manipulating the intellect so that it is passive, so in pornography the arousal of the passions happens in contradistinction to the proper functioning, indeed the human functioning, of the intellect. In such cases the person chooses against his intellect—chooses the lie—to give free reign to his passions. In these instances the dehumanization is expressed through the excited passions in a manner detached from right reason. If Aristotle is able to note the slavery associated with becoming a servant of one's passions, of living the life of a cow, how much more so the case if the passions, once aroused, turn back on the person to engulf his personality ever more completely in their grasp. Pornography does this much more powerfully than a typical video game does, but the active engagement in the virtual world created by a video game is not unrelated from a phenomenological perspective.

Regardless of whether we are considering the audio-visual images of television and film or video games Dahl has an additional point to make: the person who indulges in the entertainment culture not only suffers some destruction of his humanity, some loss of his personal integrity, but his relationship with reality also suffers. Entertainment overload dulls the proper sense of intellectual wonder that should exist whenever anyone devotes his efforts to learning about reality. In Dahl's words, "IT MAKES A CHILD SO DULL AND BLIND, HE CAN NO LONGER UNDERSTAND A FANTASY, A FAIRYLAND." Contact with reality has been replaced with captivation by "virtual reality." And in the process, perceptions of the real world change. Modern man looks at reality and is too often bored; what should invoke wonder is seen as dull. The beauty of nature, a tree or a sunset, is a subtle beauty, a beauty that must be seen with a contemplative eye to be appreciated. There is a human pace to friendship, to appreciating another person for who he or she is and can be. Someone who lives at the pace of a video game, who is engulfed in "entertainment-driven virtual reality," has a much more difficult time

developing strong friendships.

Since my focus is on the entertainment culture and the intellectual life, I would like to conclude this section by pointing out an interesting paradox. Traditionally curiosity has been classified as an intellectual vice, because the curious person is one who cannot focus long enough on something to build up knowledge that approaches mastery. The curious person is too easily distracted. In the modern context, however, the overly entertained person is so distracted that he is no longer “curious” about reality in a healthy sense connoted by the word in contemporary parlance, as in taking a healthy interest in reality. In this sense some curiosity is a step in the right direction for many and it can lead, with proper training, to the healthy sense of wonder that is necessary for contemplation. For this reason curiosity is spoken about today as being a type of intellectual virtue, which it is to the extent that the curious person is not so intellectually and spiritually dull as to be uninterested in reality. In other words, if traditionally curiosity has been the chief obstacle to becoming truly studious, in contemporary times a dull boredom in the face of reality has overtaken this dubious honor, so much so that the chief vice of past ages seems almost refreshing by comparison.

Indulging in entertainment, indulging in work?

The second cultural challenge that I would like to address is the problem that many have referred to as “workaholism.” Admittedly, at first glance it is rather odd that a culture that struggles with the problem of overindulging in entertainment would also have a problem with an inordinate attachment to work. Nonetheless it is clear that this is part of the struggle of our culture: many professionals are pressured to work over sixty hours per week to succeed in their respective fields. I see this tendency in some students who try to take the most AP courses they can fit in to their schedules and who also become involved in many extracurricular activities. In some cases their lives are literally planned down to the last detail, so that they rush from one activity to another with study and homework filling up all of their free time. Organized sports, perhaps even over-organized sports, have replaced the neighborhood pickup ball game. Gone are the days of the sandlot and children taking the initiative in their play. The role of a young child in an adult-organized sports league is analogous to a low-level employee in a large corporation: someone who shows up simply to do their task and take directions from those in charge. This may be an exaggeration, but we do have to admit that the children who had to organize and manage the pickup ball game at the sandlot were learning a great deal about how to get along with others and even leadership.

In any case, is it really surprising that someone who grows up indulging in entertainment can end up as an adult who indulges in work, losing himself in busy-ness? This outcome is generally considered a “success” by many high achieving adults today, especially since the most common alternative is that one never leaves the stage of the perpetually indulgent adolescent, shifting from one job to another with free time spent playing video games and such. In the former case, the person has simply shifted his indulgence from entertainment to work and entertainment (let’s face it, intense entertainment is likely to still be here); in the latter, there is little shift at all. Workaholism is every bit as much of a lack of temperance as indulging in entertainment is; and

it leads to the same dullness and boredom. The ironic aspect of workaholism looked at this way is that it's not really hard work at all; rather, it is simply another form of laziness. In 1908, G. K. Chesterton recognized this problem and described it in a wonderful book of his called *Orthodoxy*. He writes:

It is customary to complain of the bustle and strenuousness of our epoch. But in truth the chief mark of our epoch is a profound laziness and fatigue; and the fact is that the real laziness is the cause of the apparent bustle. Take one quite external case; the streets are noisy with taxicabs and motorcars; but this is not due to human activity but to human repose. There would be less bustle if there were more activity... Our world would be more silent if it were more strenuous. [iv]

So much of workaholism is the result of unnecessary bustle. One clear example is the way email is sometimes used in the workplace: in large organizations people are often flooded with meaningless email information, or an online “conversation” is taking place to determine the next course of action based on the most current data. If people approached work with more of the strenuous silence of which Chesterton speaks and which is really a hallmark of a solid liberal education, then real work would get done and bustle would decrease. Once I found myself in the position of having to discipline a student of mine for some minor infraction. I very much like this young man but being around him for any length of time certainly gives the impression that there is a great lack of inner silence or strength. I instructed him to simply go into a quiet room for ten minutes and that would be it. He came out looking for me after about three minutes and said, “Mr. Moynihan, I couldn’t do it. You don’t understand, sir! The quiet was starting to really get to me...” I have noticed that some students who approach their studies with diligence, and even with a certain amount of busy effort, often are held back from doing great work by the laziness of too much activity and not enough contemplation. As a math teacher, I can tell you that diligence and hard work will only take one part of the way to success; it is also necessary for there to be a certain inner calm and order that makes a student appreciate the principles at work with a healthy spirit of wonder. This is the type of student who will be able to make the necessary connections.

Toward a solution: A call for a new asceticism and the recovery of silence

Part of the solution becomes apparent from the diagnosis of the problem: if the most significant reason behind the current crisis in education and our overly busy, less-productive marriage to our work is over stimulation from indulgence in entertainment, then it is clear that the entertainment (or most of it) must go. Though this renunciation will be difficult, I do think that very little progress in addressing the current crisis in education can occur until this generation becomes “unplugged.” What is needed is a broad cultural awakening to the need for a new

asceticism which makes room for the cultivation of silence.

It is essential for a vibrant intellectual life that a person focuses on a text in silence. This silence is not just the absence of noise. It is the strenuous silence of one who has the studious fortitude to engage a difficult text, to memorize what needs to be memorized, to analyze, and finally to contemplate. The key here is building up virtue, understood particularly as the fortitude to persevere in the difficult task of study and the temperance to ponder matters throughout the day. This will require ascetical struggle: the effort to forgo distracting entertainment to preserve the silence necessary to really learn. In this context, real educational reform must begin in the home. Parents really are the primary educators of their children. Any attempt to ignore this by exclusively focusing on schools is doomed to fail. How can it be possible for any school, even the best possible school, to accomplish the noble goal of educating students in approximately six hours per day for roughly half of the calendar days of the year if these same students live in family environments dominated by electronic entertainment?

Parents first of all need to be convinced that they have the authority and the responsibility to appropriately govern their homes and guide their children. This governance must actively extend to all electronic media and entertainment. Parents would be exercising their authority well by only allowing the family to view films or television programs selected ahead of time. It would be reasonable to watch these select programs only when they fit well into the family schedule and perhaps only as frequently as once per week or a few times per month. It would also be reasonable to not allow any video games in the home.

Appropriate governance, however, extends far beyond what is forbidden. Parents must control the schedule for the family. Perhaps at dinner a discussion can be held about the following day. At this time the children can be allowed to give input but the final schedule for the day will be the decision of the parents. Most days will include scheduled time for reading and study as well as chore time. This schedule should be posted in a public place, perhaps on the refrigerator. Many good things will happen once the schedule of a family comes under rational parental control: meals together, family trips and excursions, division of the work to be done, quiet time devoted to reading and study, some free time bound by a definite beginning and a definite ending, sports and activities (though these have to be limited), and time for friends and relatives. It has been our experience that as long as the children are given an appropriate amount of input, planning the day helps them to be happier; in general, they follow the family plan joyfully. This works best if husband and wife periodically meet privately to discuss upcoming events, decisions that need to be made, and the development and needs of each member of the family.

Likewise, real educational reform will include training teachers to successfully coach their students in acquiring the intellectual virtues. As in athletics, an intellectual coach will know how to foster periods of intense study, periods where the student enters into the difficult but rewarding task of grappling with challenging texts or ideas. There is a wonderful philosophical maxim that notes that the spirit is where it acts. True education must include an element of focusing one's mental faculties on the material, countering the dissipation of scattered

attention.

A good teacher, someone who knows that part of his role must be as an academic coach dedicated to forming virtues in his students, especially fortitude and temperance, also knows that the full sense of a liberal arts education does not stop here. More than just a training of the mind, it is a liberating of the mind. Indeed, the word “liberal” comes from the Latin root word liber meaning “free.” The person is freed not only from being governed by his passions and affections but, over time, even from the opinions that he has picked up from the culture in which he lives. He can enter into a great human dialogue on matters of fundamental importance: the meaning of our common humanity, the possibility of genuine self-sacrificing love, human suffering and death, in short, all the primordial human experiences that have inspired the greatest works of art, literature, and philosophy throughout the centuries. There is a specific content, part of a great human dialogue, which forms the material of a complete liberal arts education.

[i] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. J.A.K. Thomson (New York: Penguin, 1976), 68.

[ii] Patrick Welsh, “It’s no contest: Boys will be men and they’ll still choose video games,” *Washington Post*, 5 December 2004.

[iii] Roald Dahl, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (New York: Penguin, 2008), 171-73.

[iv] G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 124.

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