



Humanum

Issues in Family, Culture & Science

Issue Two

Education Right Side Up

PETER D. CRAWFORD

The contemporary discourse on education is dominated by thoughtlessness. As we argue and debate educational issues on radio, television, internet, and social media, these exchanges rarely consider the essence of education itself. Mainstream discussions have little to do even with pedagogy or curriculum. Insofar as education is held hostage to the struggles that grip the adult world—tied to concerns about money and temptations to power—the horizon of the child is held hostage. All of this is no more than to observe with Chesterton or Pieper that we live in a world that is “upside down.”

The issue of what education is all about is seemingly self-evident, and therefore easily passed over. Conventionally, we recognize the importance of education as an effective way to launch into what we refer to as the “real world.” Education unlocks the door to a prestigious college and eventually a job that is likely to grant stability. This sort of education will grant us technical skills, expertise, and applicable computational ability. In other words, we most easily use the word “education” as if it were merely a tool. Education is about the acquisition of knowledge not for its own sake, but because it opens the door to power.

The result of this conventional notion of education is the industrial model realized in most public schools, with its emphasis on immediate specialization, teaching to the test, an early and stringent concentration on STEM, and greater levels of technological utilization in the classroom. Education in this context is perceived in technological terms. A student’s pursuit of knowledge acquisition is conceived of as a computer uploading data. Without even addressing the philosophical concerns one might have with this mode of education, it so often fails by its own standards. And, not being reflective enough, educators are at a loss to realize the source of its fault.

This mainstream stance has been challenged by the classical education movement, a much-needed new forum for meaningful discussion about education. This movement staunchly adheres to a tradition of education which favors great works of literature and philosophy and a dialectical pedagogy. Without a doubt, when implemented well, these classical programs are superior on every level to the industrial style of schools, often dominating conventional schools

by their own measures. This is because the classical impulse has deeper intuition about what a human person is and how a person learns.

As the term “classical” has grown into a brand, however, it risks being reduced to something secondary, however important that may be. For example, as classical programs continue to spread, they are becoming increasingly guilty of the very utilitarianism they originally mean to oppose. The argument goes something like this: whereas other forms of education rely on the assimilation of data, the classical approach teaches children how to think and speak well. (Very good.) And, why is it important to be able to think well or to speak well? Because our children will be even more competitive when applying to colleges or when entering the job market! This line of thinking, however true, still presupposes that the purpose of education is found in career achievement.

Another reduction that degrades the vitality of classical academies is that of making them the tools of political agendas. Given the violence of social debate there are many who see education as a means to effect change in the world. Whether progressive, neo-conservative, or conservative, these camps identify education as an opportunity to arm the ascending future with weapons and tools needed to push the battle lines in one direction or the other. This impulse also treats education as if it were a tool.

Finally, the modifier “classical” is often just a code word for “safe” and wholesome, with good books and a Latin requirement.

Such reasons for establishing, and sending children to, a classical school are by no means insignificant. The importance of technical ability, dependable work, preparation for taking a courageous stand on the battlefield of our social topography, not to mention safety, are no small matters. That said, it seems obvious that the term “classical” has been watered down. These issues, however important they may be, do not get to the essence and purpose of education.

What is education? In its essence, education is concerned with human formation. While not particularly earth shattering, the importance of this central concern lies in the answer we give to the question about what it means to be human. In his pivotal essay on education, “[Education as an Introduction to Reality](#),” Robert Spaemann answers it when he says that human formation is an “introduction to reality,” which reality is, in the first instance, love, beginning with the love of his mother or father.

That education is an introduction to love implies that the most important aspect of education occurs on the dialectical interpersonal level. The fundamental soil of education is culture and community. The implication is that we must gather tutors who are living lessons of the wisdom, sanctity, and heroism we wish to form in our youth. Our immediate impulse as a society is to focus on models, curricular packages or systems that will fix our educational dilemmas and then hire experts to facilitate these models. In the years that I have worked in schools, both as a teacher and as headmaster of two classical schools, the vast majority of questions I have received from prospective parents revolve around curricular questions and are generally never about the culture of the school. But at the most fundamental level, schools are not models of curricular patterns—they are communities, small *poleis*. These communities require a good curriculum, but the single most important aspect of the school is found in the people, beginning with the teachers.

This means that the first question we should ask is not about book lists, but about how one builds a human community. The classical curriculum has rich, deep wells for students to drink from. The objects of study in a true classical academy are most conducive to a truly human education. Nevertheless, this curriculum alone is not sufficient to address the deepest concerns of education. Where will we find the passionate, dynamic, engaging, and holy faculty members who will serve as the first living lessons for our children? If it is true that our teachers are the most powerful lesson for our students, how can we mentor and challenge our teachers to be better than themselves, always growing, always hungry to be the saints and heroes that our children need to be exposed to? How can we teach these teachers to teach powerfully? If we have well thought out and meaningful answers to these questions and can also expose students to Sophocles, Euclidean Geometry, Latin, and Jane Austen, then we have truly achieved something. How do we, as faculty members, foster a culture that inspires a sense of wonder and holy awe in our young? How do we found traditions? What opportunities are there for rites of passage in a modern school? How can we foster sanctifying habits in the lives of the children we serve?

If the fundamentally communal nature of a school is overlooked—as it often is, the full depth of the human person is forgotten. While lip service is frequently paid to “educating the whole person,” it is clear that the education of the heart has been done little justice. When we see the number of young Catholics leaving the Church, or the tremendous suffering so common in our teenagers, we must ask whether we have given them the “manna” of the heart, so desperately needed, especially now in our current cultural wasteland. We have forgotten to educate the child’s heart, or perhaps thought it someone else’s responsibility, or perhaps just impossible.

What does it mean to educate a child’s heart? To answer this question, we must understand what motivates the heart. On the most rudimentary level, the child’s heart is the throne of spiritedness, or *thumos* as the Greeks called it. This *thumos* must be formed. The risk is that a child’s spiritedness be either suppressed or directed to the bad. How can the teacher direct that spiritedness to the Good? By being invited upon an odyssey, an epic quest filled with wonders and opportunities for feats of courage and daring. This is what inspires the “warrior spirit.” Attached to the physical education that our children require, it falls to us to develop an emotional athleticism in our students. Though we may be tempted to blame emotional imbalances on puberty and fluctuations of hormones, we must help our children develop stalwart hearts that can withstand the attacks that are bound to arise as they reach adulthood.

But to educate the heart means much more than to educate spiritedness. If we are to take seriously this idea of a formation of the heart, then we must ask what a formation of love will provide for our children. Here we must be very specific. A formation of love means at least two things. First, we must attend carefully to the objects of love. What are our children falling in love with? The human heart longs for the depths and hungers for the heights. Our task as educators is to reveal to it that for which it already longs. Second, we must help students in the *action* of love. What is it to love? What response does true love demand of us? Here we can see most clearly the importance of the living, vibrant community that acts as a living lesson of love for our children.

We cannot claim to educate the whole person without a serious consideration of the body. Physical education programs have continued to shut down in schools throughout the country,

including many classical academies. This trend is generally justified insofar as sports are available to students after school. But physical formation cannot be left to sports. While conventional sports develop many important attributes in our children, they are insufficient to the fundamental education of the body. Rather, they develop specialized physical skills that presuppose a more fundamental education of the body, which most children never receive.

True physical education entails the pursuit of embodied excellence. It considers the structure of the human body, comes to understand its nature, and begins with fundamental bodily excellences. In our sedentary culture, basic human movements and postures are challenging for most children, including athletes. Children should be able to squat, roll, crawl, run, sprint, jump, throw, swim, dance, wrestle, lift or carry a load, and climb. These movements should be treated both as skills to be perfected and forums for play. This understanding of physical training is classical going back to Greek athletics which were built upon the proper human movements just described. If every classical school required a gymnastics class each morning, then their educational engagement would be unparalleled. In the English-speaking world, the word “gymnasium” came to mean a physical study. In continental Europe, on the other hand, the word designates a prestigious intellectual academy. The underlying connection goes back to Plato who understood that the physical education of a child was a fundamental need at the heart of education as such.

If we are willing to admit that the body and heart must also be included, are we confident that we have done justice to the intellectual sphere? Conventionally, schools tend to reduce intellectual formation to an encyclopedic dimension. Classes focus primarily on factoids and computation. While the memorization of facts is important, it is also essential that students be brought into the narrative level of understanding. To know that the Battle of Hastings occurred in 1066 is good, but primarily for the sake of telling a better story. These facts are important because they draw the students into the drama of Harold Godwinson’s defense of the Anglo-Saxon crown against a new order of power represented by the Norman Conquest of William. While it is significant for students to memorize the fact that one adds the numerators and not the denominators of like fractions, they should come to understand why: because a fraction represents the relation between a part and a whole. This fundamental ripple of understanding gives rise to larger circles of inquiry. How does the Norman Invasion alter the English institution of kingship? How is a denominator different from any number we have seen in arithmetic up to this point? Ultimately, philosophical questions are raised: What is the purpose of political power? What is a number? Listening to the smallest whispers can lead us to ask the most majestic questions. This is the cradle of wonder.

Classical academies provide richer courses of study than their conventional counterparts. Their students read better literature, study classical languages, and, if they are fortunate, many even develop as mathematical thinkers rather than mere computational experts. In the very best schools, these intellectual virtues are explicitly fostered. Here we begin to see the glimmer of formation—not just knowledge acquisition, but the cultivation of understanding—that is possible with a deep curriculum. Still, too frequently the intellectual formation provided here is restricted to *ratio* and all too rarely fosters *intellectus*, thereby leaving behind the higher portion of reason.

All this begs the question—could one have a great education without the classics? I believe a good deal could be accomplished with humble children, a good faculty, and no other curriculum or classroom than a healthy garden. Anyone who doubts this has overlooked the epic battles of insects, the flaming fire of the sun illuminating a pool, the language of earth and roots. He has not met the summer swallow, witnessed a dragonfly draw flame, known the wisdom of dirty hands, or uttered a prayer of thanks for the gift of a light breeze. The light of truth illuminates the world. Add to this encounter the study of Latin, astronomy, and the writings of Homer, Sophocles, Aquinas, and Dante, and what is possible is something to be marveled at. But take away the vibrant community, the virtue of humility, or the love of the teacher, and the classics alone may be insufficient to form the minds, hearts and bodies of our young. It is true that Plato or Aquinas or Dostoyevsky plumb the depths of humanity, but it is also the case that reading their works will only truly form our children in the context of a holy culture.

What we study—whether a star, a beetle, a poem, an angle, or a philosophical treatise—should cause us to be filled with wonder. We must ask not only what will my child know but also, what will my child marvel at? What will my child grow to love? What will inspire her hopes and her fears? Here we see the intricate crossroads of the full human dimension, the stage for a right side up education. Education is a formation in reality. This means that it introduces our children to the “right side up” world. To study a reality is to learn that this thing is a gift, that we are blessed insofar as this gift calls us by name and asks us to enter into the posture of the fiat before the generosity of the Creator, Christ. This is the world that is illuminated in the truth. As Dante wrote: “All things created have an order in themselves, and this begets the form that lets the universe resemble God” (*Paradiso* I, 103–105). It is within this culture of love that, as if by accident, the student begins to softly discern that sacramental structure of his or her own being. “I am *imago dei*.” At the heart of a true education is the introduction to this sacramental structure.

Peter Crawford is the headmaster of the [Saint Jerome Institute](#), a liberal arts high school in Washington, D.C. He lives in Hyattsville, Maryland with his wife and five children.

Keep reading! The next article is [Christine Myers' "Crisis and Opportunity: The Drama of Growing Faithful"](#), a must for all those who interested in the work of Fr. Romano Guardini.