

2015 - Issue Four

Inspiring the Imagination with Visions of the True, Good and Beautiful

KATRINA TEN EYCK

Anthony Esolen, *Life Under Compulsion: Ten Ways to Destroy the Humanity of Your Child* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2015).

In a recent conversation over homeschooling, a friend suggested that children ought to go to school to learn to sit at a desk all day, as they will most likely have to do this for most of their working life. I was a bit dumbfounded by the argument. I couldn't understand how a mother could both believe that the large part of public education is to prepare a child to take up the drudgery of sitting at a desk and be willing to hand her own child over to be fashioned into such a cog in the economic machine. Anthony Esolen's book, *Life Under Compulsion: Ten Ways to Destroy the Humanity of Your Child* is an attempt to respond to the widespread conviction that children must be compelled to take up their place within a predetermined economic-social system that chiefly operates via external compulsion. Moreover, it is a defense of true freedom and an attempt restore the image of freedom to our imaginations. For Esolen, and rightly so, seems to labor under the belief that the family home, as the original image of a thriving, full and free human community, has been dimmed, if not extinguished, in our minds.

Esolen has not set out to simply demonstrate that our society has become compulsive in every sense of the word and then to argue for the restoration of family life as a central source for the ordering of common life. Although, it would not be difficult to show that the ever expanding role of government means an ever growing list of compulsory activities for us citizens. Nor would it be difficult to show that much of our "productive time"—work or education—is done simply because we *must*, and to argue that simultaneously we are ever more prone to filling our spare time with sub-human compulsive eating, tweeting, internet surfing, TV-watching, gaming, pornography, exercising, sex, etc...; Esolen trusts the reader to be able to recognize these truths from his or her own experience and foregoes invoking studies and statistics. He is concerned with something more fundamental, namely, the loss of the ability to even think about the situation we find ourselves in. For, as he argues in his book, rational thinking is ever more narrowly defined as scientific thinking. Schools have championed the "hard" sciences, but have failed to develop students' imaginative thinking. By imagination he has much more in mind than fantasy. He is thinking about how a child might react to first hearing the story of Odysseus, how his fertile imagination will grasp ideas of bravery, heroism, cowardice, betrayal, and the home, which will in turn, if nurtured, be the beginnings of a more nuanced understanding of the same ideas. It is also the imagination that is necessary to read history not as a collection of dates and facts, but as a human history revealing timeless truths.

Esolen's methodology mirrors his concerns. He places before his readers scenes of human experiences

culled from Dante and Shakespeare, Milton, Sigrid Undset, Chesterton, C.S. Lewis, George Orwell, and Norman Rockwell, to name a few, as well invoking a variety of historical and fictional anecdotes. He seeks to respond to the arbitrary limitations placed on thinking by engaging his readers' imaginations, placing before us images of beauty, at times tragic, whose meaning points to a freedom that is gained through adherence to the bonds of love. Esolen attempts to defend freedom and humanity by appealing to our humanity, to reawaken our anesthetized sense for the truly human life—one that is free to delight in beauty, to affirm the truth, and heroically offer itself for what is good. To feel the force of his arguments, one must step away from the scientific, economic, utilitarian thinking that commands such widespread adherence, and make room for some human imagination. In the words of Paul Elmer More, whom Esolen quotes, "We win our freedom by using our critical imagination, which makes the past present to us, and makes us the heirs of a prodigious patrimony" (47).

In the introduction to the book, Esolen defines compulsion and freedom. He writes, "The compulsions I am talking about in this book not only make us less than heroes; they also make us less than human. They bind us to automatisms. They give us choice in what is evil or foolish or trivial, just as the keepers of an asylum will let their charges watch television or play poker for pennies" (15). Compulsion is not opposed to having options. "The assumption is now nearly automatic that freedom is without substance. It is an extrinsic condition, and a negative at that. It means that there are no strings upon the autonomous self. It is, as I have suggested above, freedom as license, as a permission slip to do as you please" (17). Esolen points out that such a cry for freedom — "leave me alone! I'll do whatever I want!"—echoes the adolescent brat. And, like the sullen teenager, we are surrounded by voices issuing commands (wear these clothes, do well in school, advance in your career, lose weight, get your child to sleep through the night, see this movie, buy this car) in order to "rule, or make money, or 'perform'" (18). The ability to discern between options is not regarded as significant. Furthermore, exactly *where* all of this leads remains shadowy. The definition of what precise fulfillment follows upon the ever present *must* is defined without reference to truth, goodness, love or beauty; often failing to materialize or disappointing when it does. This is the life under compulsion for Esolen.

Freedom, in contrast, is "an intrinsic virtue" (20). Esolen points out that the old meaning of the word *free* was related to "joy and greatness of heart" (20). For Esolen, the substance of freedom consists in the relation of love and community that binds one person to another, that defines humanity. The ultimate freedom is the freedom to love, to give oneself to another, to truth, to beauty and to goodness. A free man is able to discern among the many voices and pressures calling out what he *must* do that thing which he will do because it is the true act, the good act that leads to love and can be realized in beauty. A free woman, when facing danger, has a capacity for courage and even creativity instead of simply fleeing. The free person can profit from silence, can attentively read a book, or even listen to another. Freedom, for Esolen, is tightly bound to developing one's humanity—that is, to be strong in virtue, to have developed one's mind and capacity to think on serious subjects, to have educated one's sense of beauty and goodness. To be free is to flourish, not simply to have the capacity to choose according to caprice.

To bring the entire matter home, Esolen places the issue of compulsion and freedom as a question of what we want for our children. Because, indeed, we might endure much in regards to ourselves, but it is too painful to offer the same pathetic fare to one's own child—would a father give his child a stone when he asked for bread? From here Esolen begins with a chapter that looks at how we are educating children, which then leads him to examine the various ways in which this mis-education plays out in society at large. Present in the school is already a disregard for the humanity of the child when the scientific method becomes the only method. The emphasis on efficiency and provable facts creates a climate in which imagination and the disciplines that require it—such as history, literature, philosophy,

languages—are disregarded or altered to reflect the primacy of scientific thinking. In this way a child's aspirations to what is noble, what is courageous, or his inklings of beauty and tragedy, as well as his spontaneous demand for truth, are denied, declared of no use, and refused the nourishment and training needed to shape an imagination capable of regarding human history and art, and discerning the essential. This, of course, spills over into the work environment, our free time, our ability to discern between what is human and subhuman, and our loss of a sense of history. Most tragically, all of this invades the family and the home. The utilitarian, technocratic education system does not look at the family as the original and best educator, but as something that must be overcome, as an obstacle to education goals.

In his chapter on the home, Esolen strives to articulate something fundamental and great, something for which, as he points out, one does not have words to express, and, yet, is therefore all the more important. If Esolen's first important point is our loss of the ability to think, his second is the loss of our home. It is difficult to know which comes first or how the two reference each other. What is certain is that we hardly know what words to use to argue for the value of the family home in a world of working mothers, six week maternity leave, a 50% divorce rate, feminism, and so on. Esolen has already shown the ways in which school and work divide persons from their homes and that the home has become the place in which to fritter away the few hours at our disposal each day. In this chapter, he seeks to place before us an image of the home in all its richness, as the place where people, more than pursuing private interests, "*dwell with one another and for one another*" (162). He begins the chapter with the evocative image of a mother singing her infant to sleep, assuring him that he is safe in her arms, safe in their home. This assurance can be true only if the home—that is, the bonds of love between husband, wife and child that shape a house from the inside—is the most real thing, more real than any natural disaster, war, bureaucratic injustice, or educational system that might destroy the home. The child is safe not because nothing can break apart this home, but because what is being given in that moment is all that is necessary; it bears the shape of all that is human, it is the child's infinite resource for whatever comes in life; it is the background for all thought and language, although inexpressible in itself. Esolen uses images from his own childhood to remind us that in these early days the loving presence of a mother in the home, and through her the father's care and love also made present, the foundations for a child's sense of himself and the world are silently, imperceptibly laid. Moreover, as the child grows the family continues to provide a space of freedom shaped by love within which one learns to work and play for no other reason than love. At its best, the home is a shelter from extrinsic compulsions where the intrinsic forces are shaped into virtues and capabilities.

Esolen points out that at one time it was clear that all the wars a nation fought, all the commerce of a country, the education system and all else were to ensure that a mother could sit in peace and safety, rocking her child. Now, it would seem that many think the family exists so that we might have soldiers, and bankers, and clients for the schools. In this observation, Esolen has captured the heart of the problem: our inability to understand the family and the family home, and our consequent reordering of the family in the service of the state and the economy. Esolen's book does a fair bit of good in opening up paths for thought on the many issues that are involved in this tragic reversal. It is certainly a book I could share with my friend to help us both think more about what it means to educate our children.

Katrina Ten Eyck is a wife and mother. She lives in Switzerland.

