

From Becoming Skilled to Becoming Excellent

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Last week, I began a new semester at the University of Arkansas and, as I do every fall, I lectured on the now 40-year history of the education reform movement to my graduate students in my Issues in Education Policy course. I'm not here to give that exact lecture but would like to make some remarks to situate classical education amidst that history.

I reference 40 years because in 1983, a famous report entitled "A Nation at Risk." This report was crafted by a group named the US National Commission on Excellence in Education to describe the dire need to improve schools.

They did not shy away from using severe language to describe the dire state of education in the US. It begins:

Our Nation is at risk. Our once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation is being overtaken by competitors throughout the world. This report is concerned with only one of the many causes and dimensions of the problem, but it is the one that undergirds American prosperity, security, and civility. We report to the American people that while we can take justifiable pride in what our schools and colleges have historically accomplished and contributed to the United States and the well-being of its people, the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people. What was unimaginable a generation ago has begun to occur-- others are matching and surpassing our educational attainments.

For 40 years, education reform and policies like curriculum standards, testing, school accountability, improving teacher quality have largely been premised on improving achievement in math and reading so that the US can maintain its economic standing among the nations.

On this horizon, education is understood primarily as equipping students with skills—numeracy skills, literacy skills, scientific reasoning skills—all of which they can put to use for their later-life economic productivity. More recently within the past 10 years, additional skills have been added to the list to prepare students not only economically but psychologically. These are so-called social and emotional skills. They include self-management skills, social awareness skills, . They even draw upon the classical tradition of virtues, emphasizing skills related to industriousness and perseverance. But educators don't call it virtue. In their understanding, these are skills; things you instruct students to have so that they know how to do a variety of things that enable them to achieve their individual goals.

Knowing how to do things is important. But allow me to propose that such a goal for education is not enough. Students, more importantly, need to know how to do things *well*. And what I mean by doing things *well* is not doing things efficiently. I mean do things *well* qua do things in an excellent manner, that is, virtuously.

For example, it's one thing to know how to read— to decode letters and be acquainted with vocabulary—and to know how to do it well enough so you can accomplish an assigned task at your place of employment. That's reading with efficiency. It's another thing to be the kind of person that reads with excellence: to read with charity and generosity to the author; to read with attentiveness to each word the author has carefully selected; to read with diligence when a text is difficult to comprehend; to read with intellectual humility and curiosity as one listens to what the author has to say, even if the author challenges one's views; to not merely skim a text just to get it over with but to ponder the words on the page. These are examples of reading with excellence. In fact, reading with excellence also entails recognizing good writing from bad writing, to discern between what one ought to read and what one ought not to read.

But how does one know what excellence looks like? Allow me to bring in some reference to Jerusalem and Athens to explain how this works—after all, we are at a gathering for a classical school. So first from Jerusalem: In the first chapter of his letter to the church in Philippi, the apostle Paul prays:

And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.

Holiness comes from being able to approve the things that are excellent and being able to approve of what is excellent comes from a love that is full of knowledge and discernment. Centuries later, St. Augustine, in his *City of God*, would write that virtue is having a rightly ordered love. That is, being virtuous is loving the right things and loving them the appropriate amount they deserve. Education, then, really is formation of the most foundational kind. Instead of simply equipping students with skills, education should cultivate the affections and loves of students so that become the kind of persons that love what they should.

Just to bring in Athens, it's worth noting that Plato wrote about this kind of education even before Paul and Augustine. In his *Republic*, Plato emphasizes the importance of nurturing young children to have the proper affections:

Due to his having the right kind of dislikes, he would praise the fine things; and, taking pleasure in them and receiving them into his soul, he would be reared on them and become a gentleman. He would blame and hate the ugly in the right way while he's still young, before he's able to grasp reasonable speech. And when reasonable speech comes, the man who's reared in this way would take most delight in it, recognizing it on account of its being akin.

Later, Plato's pupil Aristotle would write something similar in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, emphasizing the need to form habits or habituate young children to like and dislike what they ought to like and dislike. All of this leaves me wondering if many of the common problems we experience today persist not because we lack the skills to engineer and use new technologies to solve them but because we lack the character to know how to respond well to them.

To know what excellence looks like— and if I might add, to love excellence—is the foundation of classical education. Unlike the practical or utilitarian kind of education that most schools offer today, classical education is founded upon cultivating the affections and forming character. It is concerned with not only skill but of character. Skills are something you do. Character is something you are. And the kind of person you are matters in the classical framework.

This philosophy is the crux of Anthem Classical Academy. It's there in the mission statement: Anthem Classical Academy exists to cultivate Christ-centered leaders who know truth, practice goodness, and recognize beauty. We will pursue excellence in character, scholarship, and service out of reverence for God and His glory." And through gatherings like this, it's my hope and prayer that it becomes embodied in the way students learn, in the way teachers teach, in the way administrators lead, and in the way parents participate in the life of our school.

Let me close by sharing a poem with you. It is entitled "Trees" and written by Joyce Kilmer, a late 19th American writer and poet who died in Europe during World War I.

I think that I shall never see
A poem lovely as a tree.
A tree whose hungry mouth is prest
Against the earth's sweet flowing breast;
A tree that looks at God all day,
And lifts her leafy arms to pray;
A tree that may in Summer wear
A nest of robins in her hair;
Upon whose bosom snow has lain;
Who intimately lives with rain.
Poems are made by fools like me,
But only God can make a tree.

You might say Kilmer had adequate reading and writing skills. He did. And we at Anthem want to make sure your children have them too. But Kilmer also had a well-formed heart. He noticed God's fingerprints and the ways the Divine broke into the world around him. He was a kind of person—a character—who was grateful, worshipful, and humble. He knew truth, practiced goodness, and recognized beauty. May God plant and establish your children likewise.