Conference Edition: Serving the Youngest: Classical Education in the Early Years

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Book Review: Ten Ways to Destroy the Imagination of Your Child
Nathan Raley reviews Ten Ways to Destroy the Imagination of Your Child by Anthony Esolen.
“Let’s begin at the very beginning, a very good place to start…” Maria von Trapp (or Oscar Hammerstein) gave us this truism which introduces the teaching of the eight notes of a musical scale as the necessary beginning of learning how to sing. As a very old principle of teaching and learning this tautology seems too obvious to need saying. And yet it’s this principle which progressive education has jettisoned in its determination to make learning engaging, relevant, creative, and fun.

“Don’t begin with the memorization of math facts,” says the modern education expert. “Talk about and experiment with how math works in order to keep them engaged.”

“Phonics is artificial and a deadly bore; focusing on word recognition will keep them more interested and get them reading faster.”

One of the distinctives of classical education is that it begins at the beginning. It gives students a solid grounding in the basics of reading, writing, and arithmetic and doesn’t start with higher level thinking activities until this foundation is in place. Jacques Barzun in his book Begin Here: The Forgotten Conditions of Teaching and Learning calls progressive education “preposterous” using this word’s original meaning: “putting the first last and the last first.” He says that before asking young students to analyze, critique, or intelligently comment in any way on a subject, we must teach them the rudiments, the first elements of the subject. Rudiments, says Barzun, are “the portions of a subject torn apart from the rest to serve as points of entry into the field. “Do, re, mi” are the rudiments of singing just as phonics and math facts are the rudiments of reading and writing. Barzun concludes:

Schooling should begin at the beginning and not set out with hopeful endings…it should make use of reasons and ideas, but not neglect memory and practice; it should concentrate on rudiments so as to give a body of knowledge to some and the foundations of higher studies to others.

This edition of The Journal is devoted to helping us think about what should be going on in the earliest grades in our schools. It can be argued that teachers in these grades have the most important job of all. Without their providing the right foundation the rest of us are all too often building on sand.
It is quite remarkable that a potent paradigm gave birth to the classical education movement. Dorothy Sayers, using the word-pictures *poll-parrot*, *pert*, and *poetic*, made the abstract concepts of grammar, logic, and rhetoric concrete and memorable. These three stages have given structure and clarity to the long and somewhat inscrutable process of K-12 education, giving teachers and parents the confidence to start a revolution in education. Ms. Sayers also demonstrated the power of rhetoric: a simple truth expressed in an unforgettable way.

While we are still in the process of figuring out exactly how to implement these three stages, and how to flesh out the true potential of classical education, I would like to suggest we think about the unthinkable: adding another stage to our trivium trinity - the primary stage. The primary stage, K-2, has been traditional in education for many years, but it has not received the attention it deserves by classical educators. It has been more or less subsumed, mistakenly I think, into the grammar stage. We would do well to focus on the primary stage to see how we can improve instruction and build a better foundation for the trivium that follows. Having taught everything from phonics to Caesar, I can affirm that skills acquired in the beginning years are of vital importance to the later years. If you are a high school teacher, you probably experience every day the results of inattention to basic skills in K-2. Our students will not achieve the excellence we desire unless we come to a better appreciation of the primary school and recognize that life-long habits are formed here, good and bad.

I realized from the beginning that the primary school was very important and deserved special attention, so when I started Highlands Latin School I divided it into three levels, not those of the trivium, but rather primary, grammar, and upper schools. The primary school is K-2, the grammar school is 3-6 and the upper school combines the logic and rhetoric stages in grades 7-12. At each level students make an important transition, which at our school is made visible by an eagerly anticipated uniform change.

The classical curriculum begins in earnest in the grammar school, where students memorize the Latin grammar, followed by the logic stage in grades 7-8, where they study syntax and translation, and finally grades 9-12, where students read Latin literature. The trivium is a perfect fit for the study of Latin.

But the primary years don’t fit neatly in the trivium paradigm - and they shouldn’t. At the time of the Renaissance, when classical education as we know it was born, students began their education at what was called a Dame School or Petty School, where students learned the rudiments of English before moving on to the Grammar School and the study of Latin and Greek. I think this is a good model for us today. Historically we have acknowledged the importance of this stage by giving it a name, so let us turn our attention to the content and goals of the primary school.

The first question that faces us in the primary school is what to do about Kindergarten, a transitional stage between preschool and real school. The five-year-old is not quite mature enough to sit still and focus at the level needed for real school. The solution for most schools has been to intersperse academics with lots of play and preschool activities to fill out the day.

But a comment I overheard many years ago has always made this option unacceptable to me. I guess my ears have always been attuned to education, for I cannot account for why I should have noted, nor long remembered, a comment I overheard as a young child. A teacher, who had taught first grade for many years before the introduction of kindergarten in her school, complained to my mother that it was having a negative effect on her first grade class. The ears of this future teacher perked up.

The teacher went on to give the reason: the children who had spent a year in kindergarten enter First Grade thinking that school is play. As a result, teachers had to expend much time and energy in teaching children that school is not play, but serious work. She went on to explain that children used to come to First Grade with realistic expectations that school should be fun and that First Grade is not a big step in
growing up, but just another year of school which happily involves lots of things, only some of which involve work.

Because of that voice of experience so many years ago I have always thought that it is a good thing that young ones be in awe of the big step of going to school. So what to do about Kindergarten? One solution would have been to just eliminate Kindergarten, but I didn’t feel that I could overcome the expectation of this firmly established tradition of modern American education. So I decided to compromise by designing an academics-only kindergarten, but in a reduced two-day schedule. The content is academic and age-appropriate, and the limited number of days makes allowance for the younger age and limited attention span of the five-year-old, who still has plenty of time for play at home.

Kindergarten has introduced into our education culture a profound confusion between preschool methods of learning and formal methods of learning. Play and exploration, are the way the pre-rational child learns. But the methods that are appropriate for the pre-school child, unfortunately, have been introduced up through the grades as if there is a continuum between preschool and school, and no difference in the proper learning activities of the two.

The essence of the preschool learning model is the preschool explorer. The preschool child learns by play and random, non-systematic exploration of his surroundings. The essence of formal education, however, is just the opposite. Once the child is old enough to learn through reason, he is able to acquire the artificial, abstract tools of human learning: letters and numbers. The methods proper to formal education are not play, discovery, and exploration, but rather systematic instruction.

This progressive model of the happy preschool explorer eagerly investigating his surroundings and making discoveries through his own untrammeled curiosity is the rationale for the discovery method of learning. The progressive educator, just like Dorothy Sayers, uses word-pictures and rhetoric to convince the unsuspecting parent that only through continuing with these methods, can the joy of learning be maintained permanently in the education process.

This is the essence of progressive education and is the single most destructive influence in education today. It has become the air we breathe and there are few, even among classical educators, who are immune to it. The romantic notion that the joy of learning characteristic of the preschool child is the model of learning for the formal education of the classroom is the siren song of progressive education. It is sheer nonsense. Until educators and parents realize this, we will never achieve excellence in education.

Think about the piano teacher or the basketball coach. Would any parent pay for lessons in which the teacher allowed the student to discover the principles of his skill on his own, claiming that method to be more fun and effective? What does the coach offer? Blood, sweat, toil and tears; and the kids line up for it. Young people want a challenge; they want to be taught. It is an insult to the child to have adults worried about whether they are having fun.

Instead of the mistaken notion of learning as fun and exploration, we must return gravitas to the classroom. Gravitas is the element most lacking in the K-12 classroom today. American culture today is so shallow and pleasure-sodden that we don’t really know what gravitas is anymore. It is not a word heard often. It is a sense of seriousness about what we are doing. Our work in Christian terms is a high calling from God. There is no better picture of gravitas than the Romans. The Romans had gravitas. As Christians we should have it too, but with the added element of joy.

What does gravitas look like in the primary classroom? Gravitas is not severe or grim, but it is serious. Our K-2 teachers are at the front of the classroom with a podium, like all of our teachers. The podium is not a place to lecture, but rather a place to put curriculum materials so the teacher can be organized and teach effectively. All desks face the front of the classroom, which has an absence of learning centers, since all students, instructed by the teacher, are working on the same skills together. K-2 students do activities and games to practice skills, but the classroom is always quiet and orderly, because all are engaged in purposeful activity that is an efficient use of time.

Our students do have calendar time on the floor, but that is the only activity that takes place on the floor. (Sitting on the floor is the iconic image of the progressive classroom.) We have music, art, recess, and cut, color and paste for those small motor skills. We use materials and methods that are appropriate for the attention span and cognitive skills of the young child. But our Kindergarten is serious grown-up work, which, in fact, motivates the young much more than play. The child wants to do grown-up things; that is his motivation for coming to school. He wants to be like the older kids. He can play at home for free. Awe and wonder are the ideal attitudes for learning and we strive to maintain that awe in every grade, including and especially in the primary school.

It is only with gravitas that we can return awe to
education, and at the same time make our primary years, as well as all of the trivium years, models of true excellence. *Gravitas* is concerned not only with the school culture but also with its content. I believe that *gravitas* in the primary school means that we take very seriously those important foundational skills of reading, writing, and arithmetic, the three R’s. I often tell my primary teachers that they are doing the most important work in our school, and all that we accomplish in the higher grades depends on what they achieve in those first few years.

Those foundational skills have a huge effect on the student’s academic career, and can, if poorly taught, turn into a huge impediment to success. The basics are so important that there is little time for anything else in the primary school, where students need an exclusive and concentrated focus on reading, writing and arithmetic, without the distraction of other “subjects”.

Because we classical educators are always thinking ahead about the high levels of achievement that our students will attain, it is tempting for us to overlook the importance of the basics and how fundamental they are to building the tower of learning. But a weak foundation will eventually crack before attaining that high level of learning we seek. All of the three R’s are equally important, but in the space remaining, I will address only one, the skill of writing.

By the skill of writing, I mean the physical act of writing, not composition. The skill of writing begins with the correct pencil grip and ends in smooth legible manuscript and cursive. Correct pencil grip greatly reduces hand fatigue and resistance to putting words on paper, and greatly increases pleasure in the physical act of writing. It is a huge asset for the student to be able to write rapid, legible cursive, with comfort and enjoyment.

Unnecessary hand fatigue and illegible penmanship have a very deleterious effect on academic progress. My public school experience teaching high school math and science many years ago taught me the importance of legible penmanship. Many of my bright, eager students could not read their own writing. They were woefully lacking in the basic humble skills that begin in the primary school. My students also had great resistance to putting anything down on paper. The physical act of writing was a chore they avoided, rather than a skill they could use with pleasure. I saw first hand how serious handicaps in learning resulted from poor instruction in the basics.

I don’t think there is any more visible evidence of the degraded state of education today than students’ handwriting. This struck me one day when a gentleman, seeking affirmation that his money was well spent at a private Christian school, gave me a sample of his granddaughter’s school work for my evaluation. The sample he showed me was one of those mindless online worksheets, filled in with writing that looked like chicken scratching. Not only was it not cursive, it was illegible manuscript. I mumbled some answer, but privately wondered if any of my students had such horrible handwriting.

I had always had my mind firmly fixed on the power and importance of Latin for the development of the mind, but I realized that I would look very foolish, if extolling, on the one hand, the benefit of a classical education, I was, on the other, overlooking the value of the humble basic skill of good handwriting. I vowed then and there to make sure that our students would be taught good cursive penmanship and pencil grip. What is interesting, in retrospect, is the power of the visual; that I made an immediate judgment about this school based on the penmanship of one of its students.

I have come to realize that little ones are growing and changing rapidly in K-2, and instruction that teachers think is solid and sure, is easily forgotten or ignored. Young ones have strong tendencies to experiment and change both pencil grip and letter formation on any given day and for no apparent reason. It takes years and much repetition to insure that good practices in all of our basic skills become firmly imbedded habits.

As classical educators we need to make sure we are not overlooking the primary school and the level of *gravitas* and attention to detail required to develop good habits that will last a life-time and ensure that our students have the foundation they need to be successful in classical education.

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Remembering the Basics: It Begins with the Teacher

by Debra Sugiyama

Those who teach the early grades understand the extreme weight of the responsibility they take on when they agree to teach the very young. Knowing that you are beginning the journey of cultivating virtue in a young one can be ominous and downright petrifying! I well remember the year that the kindergarten teaching position at our school opened and our head of school asked me to take the class. I said, yes, and then, no, to the job numerous times throughout the summer but finally gave in and took on the class. By saying, yes, I learned more about myself and what it takes to be a good teacher than what my students ever learned from me. I guess you could say that as far as my teaching career goes, everything I learned, I learned in kindergarten! (Or at least almost everything)

Lesson one: A successful teacher is a disciplined teacher

Being disciplined meant that I had to commit to putting in the time and effort required to make my lessons. My students and my students’ outcomes had to be my first priority. That may sound obvious, but it has some real-world consequences. It meant things like reading a book cover to cover, annotating it, and writing comprehension questions for it when I would have rather watched my favorite show. It meant going to the community library every week to find books that might instill a sense of wonder in my students or add richness to our lessons. It meant writing postcards to each student three times a summer so that they could feel a connection between their lives and my life and look forward to whatever we were going to learn in the upcoming year. It also meant that I might need to attend a local pee wee baseball game or soccer game so that children might know that I was interested in his whole life and not just his life in my classroom. Discipline for a teacher means that you have to become a voracious learner. Not only must you learn what you must teach presently, you must learn as much as you can about each level of work that your students will encounter as they work through the levels of the trivium. I spent time in visiting and learning in other teachers’ classrooms so that I would have a better idea of what was ahead for my students’ sake.

Lesson two: A teacher must always be prepared

John Milton Gregory (The Seven Laws of Teaching) describes this as “a teacher must be one who knows the lesson or truth or art to be taught.” This means, anything that you are going to teach needs to be thoroughly read, thought out and practiced by you first. Practically that meant that I needed to read every page of every book in advance, I needed to learn every lyric to every song and chant and be the master of any information or fact I was going to teach. As Gregory wrote, “what a man does not know he cannot teach successfully.” You cannot “wing it.” You cannot open a book for the first time in front of your students. You have to think about the questions your students might ask. You have to know the lessons you are going to teach “inside and out” before you enter the classroom. Along with preparing a lesson, in the youngest grades, this also means that you have planned out where in your classroom each lesson will take place (mapped it out) and have thought out and readied all teaching armamentaria there. This allows you to teach and then release without interruption so that discovery and the joy of successful learning becomes internal for each student.

Lesson Three: Teaching must be predictable and offer consistent structure

This lesson was not so difficult for me to grasp. Being the mother of three children, early on in their lives I had learned that the best way to keep a happy home and form good habits in my children was to offer them the structure. This structure took the form of a set of negotiables and non-negotiables in our home, and I was always steady, stable and unwavering in my expectations of their meeting those. This made for an easy transition to the classroom. Beginning lessons for the very young means a lot of practicing procedures and expectations over and over until the desired behavior becomes habit. Practically that might be a young student learning to raise his hand to speak instead of blurting out, or it might be the expectation that
the students will line up quietly and orderly every time they get ready to exit the classroom. For the teacher, this also means practically that a classroom schedule must be fairly regimented so that students can come to depend on “what comes next” or “what they should do next.” The structure must first be set by the teacher, and the structure is then imposed on the student.

Each subsequent year of teaching kindergarten, I gained a deeper understanding of what it meant to be disciplined, prepared, predictable and structured. All three lessons served my classroom well. My students flourished and their parents were appreciative of the changes they were seeing in their children that were spilling over into their homes and lives.

Suggested Reading:
Hicks, David V. Norms & Nobility: A Treatise on Education.

Debra Sugiyama, R.D.H.,B.S., has been an integral part of classical education since 1996 with years of experience as a school board member, teacher, staff bookkeeper, school administrator, classroom consultant, and conference speaker. She served on Michigan’s Governor Engler’s Early Literacy Committee for five years and is experienced in the best practices of helping children discover the English alphabetic code and the love of reading. With two dyslexic children of her own, she is a strong advocate for children of all learning abilities. Deb works for both The CiRCE Institute and The Society for Classical Learning. Debra is a Registered Dental Hygienist and has been married to her favorite dentist, Paul, for the last 30 years. Her three grown children were all classically educated in Grand Rapids, MI and are her greatest joy!
“The Hand Will Teach the Heart”: the Importance of Habit Formation

by Linda Dey

Toward the beginning of The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe Peter, Susan and Lucy make a choice that propels them into the land of Narnia and the events there that will change their lives forever. At the moment it did not announce itself as a crucial decision, a very important choice. It comes just after they’ve all arrived in Narnia and discovered that the faun Lucy had met had been arrested and was accused of treachery against the White Witch. Susan suggests they might as well go home—it’s not very safe and certainly not going to be fun to stay here. Lucy insists that they can’t go home; it was because he was nice to her that the faun is in trouble. “We simply must rescue him,” she says. Hearing it put like this, both Peter and Susan agree immediately that trying to rescue Tumnus is the right thing to do in spite of whatever difficulties or danger it might involve.

This decision begins the whole adventure which ends with their meeting Aslan, defeating the White Witch, and taking their positions as Kings and Queens in Narnia. A decision made in a moment with very little deliberation had momentous consequences. The decision was made so quickly and easily; we might say it was almost an automatic response for Susan and Peter, a duty that had to be done once it was clear that by helping Lucy the faun had gotten in trouble. C. S. Lewis calls responses such as this “stock responses”, and he explains that they don’t happen spontaneously but are the result of deliberate training. A sense of duty to someone in trouble had been instilled in Peter, Susan, and Lucy by a parent or a teacher.

C. S. Lewis says that stock responses can and should be taught. “All that we describe as constancy in love or friendship, as loyalty in political life, or, in general, as perseverance—all solid virtue and stable pleasure—depends on organizing chosen attitudes and maintaining them against the flux…of mere immediate experience.” Lewis is talking about the importance of developing good habits. These “chosen attitudes” are habits, and by maintaining them in the face of our immediate impulses we develop dispositions or inclinations to act or react in certain ways in given situations.

This kind of training can and should begin when children are very young. Their reasoning power does not need to be highly developed for them to be taught how to notice the people around them and respond with certain words and actions—to greet an adult, to offer help to someone who has too much to carry, to offer one’s seat to a senior citizen. Pre-cognitive habit formation of both social and academic behaviors should be a key part of what is happening in K – 2 classrooms.

The common expression “we are creatures of habit” is actually getting at something true and important about how we are made. We fall easily into repeated patterns of behavior. This is a good thing, and an obvious one, when it comes to common physical practices such as walking, driving, or eating. What if driving always involved that intense concentration it took when you first got behind the wheel of a car! Life would be impossibly exhausting if a lot of our oft-repeated actions were not done automatically. It’s important to see that non-physical actions, manners and moral behavior, are also a matter of learning responses that can become “second nature” like the decision Peter and the others made to rescue Mr. Tumnus.

Consider this term “second nature”; it helps us see that the things we do habitually have come to seem natural. But they are not natural in the sense of being something we were born with; they are, rather, learned behaviors which we do without thinking and have come to be part of who we are. This is a topic which James K. A. Smith treats at length in Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works. We are, according to Smith, a “complex of inclinations or dispositions that make us lean with habituated momentum in certain directions.” We have, over time and in a variety of ways, some conscious and many others not conscious, developed certain dispositions that direct our actions. Smith points out the fallacy in modern thinking that sees us as primarily autonomous, rational individuals. He says,

We simply are not autonomous animals who float in the world unencumbered except by our
own freedom. The autonomous ‘rational actor’ is without dispositions or inclinations—without habits—and that is precisely the problem: such a theory of human persons will never truly understand human action because it fails to recognize the ‘inertia’ of habitus... We don’t decide our way into every action.

Smith calls habits “embodied know-how”, things our bodies do without thinking. It’s important to recognize the crucial role the body plays in our developing habits. When our bodies have performed an action in a certain way, we are inclined to repeat that action in the same way the next time. We acquire bodily knowledge. After you’ve learned to type and you’ve practiced this skill for a period of time, you don’t consciously engage your brain to find the letters; your fingers “know” where to go. In little things and in bigger things as well the body often leads the mind and the will rather than vice versa.

In working with young children instilling bodily knowing is a major part of what we are doing. We train children to act in a certain way before they have the cognitive ability to understand the goodness of the action and choose it for themselves. When we teach a child good manners, we are often training their bodies. For instance, we train them to look at the face of the person who is speaking to them. We are teaching them to physically acknowledge the presence of another, and in so doing we are shaping not just their actions but their hearts. Good manners shape respectful attitudes. Jewish culture has an expression for this: “the hand will teach the heart.” The body leads and the heart follows. This is what Solomon is talking about in Proverbs 22:6 when he says, “Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it.”

Habit formation always involves repetition; there is no formation without repetition. We live in an age which puts a huge premium on novelty and originality. The new often is preferred over the old just because it’s new. Repetition is seen as a negative thing about which we use such words as “monotonous”, “boring”, “deadening”. This attitude is a denial of the way things are; we’re surrounded by repetition. It is a key feature of the natural world as God made it—day and night; sunrise and sunset; spring, summer, fall, winter, and spring again. There’s repetition in our bodies: breathing, walking, our hearts beating. Poetry and music speak to our souls because of their rhythmic nature and the repetition of words and lines. G. K. Chesterton describes repetition as a positive thing: It is supposed that if a thing goes on repeating itself it is probably dead; a piece of clockwork. People feel that if the universe was personal it would vary; if the sun were alive it would dance. This is a fallacy even in relation to known fact. For the variation in human affairs is generally brought into them, not by life, but by death; by the dying down or breaking off of their strength or desire. A man varies his movements because of some slight element of failure or fatigue...the sun rises every morning. I do not rise every morning; but the variation is due not to my activity, but to my inaction. Now, to put the matter in a popular phrase, it might be true that the sun rises regularly because he never gets tired of rising. His routine might be due, not to a lifelessness, but to a rush of life. The thing I mean can be seen, for instance, in children, when they find some game or joke that they specially enjoy. A child kicks his legs rhythmically through excess, not absence, of life. Because children have abounding vitality, because they are in spirit fierce and free, therefore they want things repeated and unchanged. They always say, “Do it again”; and the grown-up person does it again until he is nearly dead. For grown-up people are not strong enough to exult in monotony. Chesterton understood something significant about repetition and about the nature of children, something that means we are working with their nature and not against it when we strive to instill good habits in them. It is easy for us teachers to grow weary of the need to remind students constantly to do things in a certain way, but it helps to remember that we are instilling habits that will, with enough repetition, become “embodied know-how”; we are forming bodies in order that these little embodied spirits in our care will become the persons—body, mind, heart, and will—that God made them to be.

Another factor to consider in examining habit formation is the important role that community plays in instilling patterns of behavior. We acquire certain ways of relating to the world and to one another from the community we inhabit. We will inevitably acquire habits; it’s not a question of habits versus spontaneity. We are habit-forming creatures; the choice isn’t between developing habits or being “free spirits.” The real issue is whether one develops good habits or bad habits, and this has a lot to do with the community under whose
influence one comes. We in Christian schools have a lot of competition; the surrounding culture has lots of tools and does a very good job of instilling patterns of behavior in our children. (Jamie Smith’s two books on cultural liturgies do a great job of spelling this out, and I commend them to you.) We must come to see ourselves in Christian schools and in the Church as communities charged with shaping the practices and thereby shaping the hearts of our children. We need to help our children see themselves as members of a community with a long history rich in traditions, rituals, and stories. This is how God instructed the children of Israel to teach their children; the annual repetition of festivals, rituals and stories instilled in their children a sense of who they were and to whom they belonged. What kept Daniel and his friends from being assimilated into the Babylonian culture? They knew that they belonged to a different people and were part of a different story. It was a stock response for them to refuse the Babylonian food as well as to refuse to bow down before a Babylonian idol.

The understanding that we are creatures of habit, that much of what we or our students do is not the result of a conscious, considered choice, should impel us as teachers to think carefully and work deliberately to instill patterns of behavior that will enable our children to live as the sons of Adam and the daughters of Eve they were created to be.

Works Cited

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Boys and Classical Christian Education: It Starts Early

by Doreen Howell

“What are little boys made of, made of? What are little boys made of?”¹ This is not only an old nursery rhyme, but also a very current question. Talk with teachers and administrators in all kinds of schools and peruse the internet for countless articles, forums and blogs, and all are bemoaning the state of education for boys and how we are failing to reach them. If you read the statistics, you would have to agree because multiple sources say boys are diagnosed with ADHD and learning disorders seven times more often than girls, the drop-out rate among boys is higher, teachers are more likely to say it’s the boys that can’t sit still or pay attention, boys tend to be more physically aggressive and destructive and, if asked, they will tell you their favorite subjects are PE, recess, and lunch. But what is the best education for boys?

In my personal experience as a female growing up with all male siblings, in a neighborhood where boys outnumbered girls 6:1, I was immersed in the boy culture to the point that my mother, armed with hosiery, high-heels, and a razor, told me I had to stop playing football at age 15. In that environment I observed a few things about boys. For example, pushing someone, hitting, or a playful knock upside the head meant “I like you”. The guys loved competition and could make any experience into a game, the rules of which were dependent on whether or not you or your team, were losing. This competition continued in spite of many injuries. There were declarations of “I’ll show you!” or “If you think that’s bad, try this,” to say nothing of, “I can go twice as fast as you,” as the home-built go-cart went careening down the hill completely out of control. Based on what I have read and observed in the subsequent years, not much has changed.

In 1928, Thomas Maude from Oxford University pondered this question of appropriate education for boys. This opinion piece, “An Apology for the System of Public and Classical Education”, was a defense of classical education as opposed to home education in respect to instructing boys. In the article he says, “I maintain, moreover, the simple plan of education pursued in our great school is more adapted to a boy’s intellectual advancement…I advocate on the main, that system of classical instruction.”² But the classical educational system of today seems to be non-boy friendly, so the focus of the remainder of this article is exploring ways to capture the imagination and intellect of very young boys between 4 and 8 years old so that we give them a strong learning foundation, on which to build a classical education.

A human being is a very intricate and complicated creation. Understanding all of the intricacy is beyond knowing completely. We tend to make little boxes and expect every person to fit neatly in those boxes and most never do. As you read the generalizations of this article, remember to look for the unique ways God put together each boy-child you know. Remember too, “…male and female he (God) created them.”³ but He also made them all individuals.

A Boy’s Brain

In his book Boys and Girls Learn Differently, Michael Gurian takes a very detailed and extensive look at the differences between the male and female brain that is worth the read, but here are a few highlights. The brain has three layers with three different functions that constantly interact. The brain stem is the center of the “flight or fight” response and survival system; it is on the bottom. In the middle of the brain is the limbic system where sensory input and emotions are processed. Thinking occurs at the top of the brain, which is divided into two hemispheres (hence, right-brain, left-brain). The left side is associated with verbal skills and the right is associated with spatial skills.⁴ Blood flow in a boy’s brain runs down the right side of the brain and flows to the brain stem. Gurian says, “When we tell a child to ’think before you act,’ we are actually saying, ‘Redirect your blood flow from the limbic system and even from the brain stem, to the top of the brain before you act.’”⁵ Sounds funny, particularly for boys; because of the way blood flows, action will almost always take place before thinking. Male hormones play into this as well. Serotonin,
which keeps a person calm, is lower in males resulting in more impulsivity and fidgeting behavior. The aggression hormone, testosterone is higher and that is the reason some boys tend to be more aggressive, muscular, and socially ambitious. Those three characteristics are the reasons many little boys will run to the top of the play-scape and before considering how high up he is, he will try to jump off often resulting in broken arms, legs or what have you, but from his perspective it was fun and, yes, he will probably try it again.

Sitting Seems Impossible

Many teachers are frustrated with the activity level of little boys. They want this male-child to sit down and pay attention. But that is a lot harder than it looks. Just the act of sitting in a chair, relays multiple messages from many body systems to the brain all at once. The tactile system seeks stimulation while trying to remain seated, the vestibular system gives messages of balance and position, the proprioceptive system sends messages about muscles and joints, so that the body stays in the chair in the appropriate position, and there are various messages coming from the visual and auditory systems. At the same time these young and immature bodies are being asked to pay attention and perform additional complex skills, like handwriting. The physical and mental are interdependent. You don’t have one without the other. According to Athena Oden P.T., author of Ready Bodies, Learning Minds, “children will continue to develop and grow even if their vestibular or reflex response is inadequate. But with inadequate, faulty backgrounds to build new skills on, their success is limited and their frustration escalates….Pushing children to perform academic tasks, especially pencil and paper tasks, at a young age will increase the likelihood that they will build these skills on immature, faulty backgrounds. Give them time to grow, develop and learn about their bodies. Provide them with experiences to increase the likelihood of their success by developing their sensory and motor systems to their fullest.” Unfortunately for little boys, Kindergarten is no longer preparing them for first grade, giving them time to develop those immature bodies, — Kindergarten is too often the old first grade.

To Move or Not to Move, That is the Question!

It is obvious that little boys need movement and they love it. Recess becomes the punishment target for unacceptable active behavior. In PBS’s article on “Understanding and Raising Boys”, Joseph Tobin states, “Eliminating recess only heightens boys’ active and aggressive impulses. The very boys who tend to be punished are the ones who most need physical release from their tension. If we take away their only opportunity to deal with stress, they may become more tense and then find it even more difficult to sit still and focus.”

Change your mind about the old “learning position” – feet flat on the floor, sitting up straight in your chair, with your eyes to the front of the room and your hands folded on your desk; does that position work for you as a learner? The best learning position for some may be standing, or leaning, or better yet stretched out on the floor. Even as a girl, I had difficulty sitting still in chairs in early grades. I not only wanted but needed to move. I still remember the day I discovered I could move my toes inside my shoes and the teacher never knew.

The average attention span for a young boy is less than 15 minutes, less than 10 for preschool or kindergarten and the average attention span of that boy’s body is less than 10 minutes. In addition eye fatigue sets in during the same time period. I observed a Kindergarten teacher who must have understood that. The class was reviewing the sounds of the alphabet and playing a game she called “Jump Up”. This game generated anticipation, excitement and movement while learning pre-reading skills. The children sat in assigned spots on the floor. The teacher wrote a letter or phonogram on the board, then said “(Child’s name) jump up, turn around, tell me this letter’s sounds.” She didn’t go in order and might call on a child more than once, so they eagerly waited to take their turns.

What Kind of Lessons Work Best?

Dr. Michael Reichert and Dr. Richard Hawley conducted a study called “Teaching Boys: A Global Study of Effective Practices.” Based on 2,500 responses they grouped the most effective teaching/learning practices into these categories: Lessons 1) with end products, like drawings, poems, personally built projects, 2) constructed as competitive games, 3) requiring motor activity, 4) requiring a response to open-ended questions, 5) that combined competition with teamwork, 6) containing novelty or surprise to gain attention. Keep those in mind while planning lessons.
Give little boys more physical space, opportunities for movement and breaks. They work well with more light and most of the time noise doesn’t bother them. You create the environment for growth and they will bloom.

**Snips and Snails and Puppy Dog Tails**

Curiosity is to be cultivated. This is where the “snips and snails” come in. Young boys are notorious collectors. Their pockets are full of “snips”, little pieces of things and, yes, sometimes they may have snails. These collectibles could be playground pebbles, bark off the trees, playing pieces from games, and sometimes special treasures from home that should have stayed home. Their pockets are great pictures of their curiosity. One teacher saw pocket contents as treasure and provided a little box for each boy to keep his “find”. She said many times contents lead to great conversations with first grade boys. She found that her interest in their collections improved their interest in her lessons. Another teacher made a game of searching for different kinds of pebbles then made pebble hearts on Mother’s Day cards.

Some teachers complain that students, particularly the boys, don’t seem to be curious about anything. Solution—a nature walk with the theme of “I wonder…”, the perfect opportunity to show students how to “wonder”. A nature table in the classroom is a great way to spawn curiosity. Just be prepared to accept things that might make you a little uncomfortable, like the huge hairy tarantula or the green snake that was a part of my nature table, both of which were brought by boys.

Encourage boys’ creativity: don’t feed the “And the answer is….” In the early years when we are using imitation there is the temptation to say that it has to be this way or it is not right. Creativity can be lost when restrictions are too rigid. Allow exploration to take place in their thinking and as John Milton Gregory said, “…and as a rule tell him nothing that he can learn himself.” Encourage them to try their ideas. Maybe the creation doesn’t look like the picture on the box or maybe he solved a math problem in a new way; celebrate creativity. The first grade was learning about Benjamin Franklin and had an invention day; that’s a dream for little boys. One young inventor made a spanking machine, with a plastic spoon connected to a two-direction motor that went in a circle and spanked his little stuffed puppy. I was impressed, but that wasn’t all; he reversed the direction and the spoon fed the puppy instead of spanking it—who would have thought?

It is important to teach little boys about appropriate time and place for ideas, but sometimes the most creative or profound thoughts are blurted out before they think about appropriateness. Correct them, but don’t squelch the exuberance. The teacher was telling the Bible story of Jesus feeding the 5,000. She said, “And Andrew said, ‘But, Jesus, how can we feed so many with just five loaves and two fishes?’” Immediately, without hesitation, a first grade boy, blurs out, “Come on guy, just trust Jesus. He can do it.”

**Making Guns out of Pretzels Does Not Create Serial Killers**

Normal little boys and big boys draw pictures of war, play war games and make weapons out of various things. They express violence in many different ways, and mothers’ shudder. One young boy ate his sandwich in the shape of a gun and was expelled from school. In PBS’s article “Understanding and Raising Boys”, Jane Katch is quoted, “If a boy is playing a game about super heroes, you might see it as violent. But the way he sees it, he’s making the world safe from the bad guys. This is normal and doesn’t indicate that anything is wrong unless he repeatedly hurts or tries to dominate the friends he plays with.” The problem is not the playing, it is our overreaction to the seeming violence. Yes, there are students who are aggressive and violent and they need to be helped, but the majority of our little boys are learning to be strong husbands and fathers. Prohibition often makes the urge to play violently more enticing and it escalates. We must use common sense in working through the issues of war, violence, guns, as well as the themes of war and killing in the Bible. These things can be addressed as we teach children about relationships, friendships, and the harmfulness of bullying. The younger those conversations begin the more impact there is later.

**The Key is Relationships**

A teacher can have the perfect lesson plan with the snazzy attention-getting opener, use every technique that is meant to work with boys, have impeccable classroom management skills, and be the envy of every other teacher in the building but without a solid “I care about you and will still like you, no matter what” attitude, all the other will be for naught. The key to teaching is exactly what Paul said in 1 Corinthians 13:5 (ESV) “…but [if I] have not love, I gain nothing.” This is the kind of love that doesn’t have to control or manipulate in order to reach these future men. This kind of love is honest and says, “This is going to be hard, but I am going through this with you and I
know you can do it.” It is not your personality that makes a difference, it is your love and every boy needs someone to love him to manhood. Let’s start with the youngest among us.

End Notes
5 Gurian, 19.
6 Gurian, 28-29.
7 Oden, P. T., Athena, Ready Bodies Learning Minds: A Key to Academic Success (Spring Branch, TX: David Oden, 2006), p. 9.
9 Gurian, 46.
11 Delamar, Gloria T.

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What is Your Telos?: Auditing a Classical Music Program
by Lilli Benko

For the past eighty years I have started each day in the same manner...I go to the piano, and I play two preludes and fugues of Bach...It is a sort of benediction on the house. But that is not the only meaning for me. It is a rediscovery of the world of which I have the joy of being part. It fills me with awareness of the wonder of life, with a feeling of the incredible marvel of being a human being...Each day [the music] is something new, fantastic and unbelievable.

— Pablo Casals, cellist

“What if education wasn’t first and foremost about what we know, but about what we love?”

— James K.A. Smith, philosopher and professor at Calvin College

Awakening

Three years ago, James K.A. Smith drastically reoriented the heart of my music teaching. Up until then, my chief work was refining a time-tested music pedagogy aimed at knowledge and mastery. As at many growing classical schools, my music colleagues and I poured ourselves into creatively teaching the core elements of music, exposing students to masterworks and great composers, and shepherding them to perform beautiful repertoire to God’s glory. Yet despite all the signature elements of a music program complementing a healthy classical school, I felt that something was lacking in our objective.

How I wept during your hymns and songs! I was deeply moved by the music of the sweet chants of your Church. The sounds flowed into my ears and the truth was distilled into my heart. This caused the feelings of devotion to overflow. Tears ran, and it was good for me to have that experience.

— St. Augustine, Bishop of Hippo (350-430) Confessions - 9.6.14

At the 2012 SCL Conference in Charleston, SC, James K.A. Smith’s fresh words and winsome delivery stirred up a long-lost memory: to be human is to be a lover — and specifically, that humans are designed to be lovers of God and of his Kingdom. The implications for applying this ancient principle to an educational approach are astounding. In his subsequent writings and speeches, Dr. Smith has encouraged educators to take a ‘formation audit’ - an inventory of our telos (Greek for ‘an ultimate object or aim’). This practice has profoundly affected the way I relate to students, steer my school’s music curriculum, and design school concerts. My purpose in writing this article is to stimulate conversation among music teachers and administrators and challenge every classical school across the country to ask:

- What is the true telos of our work?
- Are we training the affections of our students (teaching them to be lovers) or merely delivering good content? How?
- How can we assess if we are hitting the mark?

“The most valuable thing a teacher can impart to children is not knowledge and understanding per se but a longing for knowledge and understanding, and an appreciation for intellectual values, whether they be artistic, scientific, or moral. It is the supreme art of the teacher to awaken joy in creative expression and knowledge.

— Albert Einstein, written for the National Council of Supervisors of Elementary Science, 1934

Awareness

Many voices in the classical education movement have joined a growing chorus singing James K.A. Smith’s tune. One of the most eloquent exhortations to classical educators is Jenny Rallens’ (Teacher at the Ambrose School, Boise, ID) eloquent 2013 Arete Conference speech on “The Liturgical Classroom and Virtue Formation” (https://vimeo.com/83236278). Every K-12 teacher should hear how she clearly spells out principles by which classical education can effectively and elegantly teach truth in a way that shapes a person’s life and loves. The idea that classical Christian education should aim first for the formation of souls rather than function as a mode to communicate truths is exciting to me, especially since the discipline of music possesses a unique ability to tap into human emotion and experiences. We should desire our students to love music such that they hunger for it, not just for leisure, but for the
purposes of glorifying God and enjoying Him through it.

The theory of music is a penetration of the very heart of providence’s ordering of things. It is not a matter of cheerful entertainment or superficial consolation for sad moods, but a central clue to the interpretation of the hidden harmony of God and nature in which the only discordant element is evil in the heart of man.

— Boethius (ca. 480-525) - Henry Chadwick, Boethius: The Consolations of Music, Logic, Theology, and Philosophy, 101

Despite the groundswell of support for heart formation in classical education, the discussion has largely been quiet about the practical translation to music instruction. I would like to offer a challenge to administrators and teachers: can we be more intentional in defining and sharing the key pedagogical elements that encompass a truly classical approach to teaching music? While not exhaustive, I have outlined some assessment questions below to help schools audit their programs and thus more accurately identify their effectiveness in training students’ affections.

Challenge: the Tyranny of Time

In contrast to subjects based in the written word, visual art, and the quantitative nature of math and science, music is set apart due to its temporal qualities. Author and musician Jeremy Begbie expresses it this way:

Music, of course, takes time. To enjoy music is not to experience something in a moment, nor to contemplate a still pattern. It is to be carried along, pulled into movement. The character of a piece of music is not given in an instant, or even a near-instant, but can be discovered only in and through time, and in some pieces only when it reaches a climactic gathering together, the end toward which it travels.


Before we can audit how we reach students’ hearts through music instruction, we must acknowledge the raging counter-cultural issue at our classroom doors: the battle for time. This precious commodity in a harried, sound bite, texting world presents a formidable challenge to teaching music and its cultural impact in a heart-affecting way. Sadly, most American families (even those in classical schools) do not have the time, tools, or resources to encourage their students to enjoy music outside of the popular realm (where most songs average 2-3 minutes). There simply cannot be a renaissance in music instruction without contemplative time dedicated to a diet of good, beautiful and true works—both in and out of the classroom. Begbie lays a strong argument for this in relation to the unique liturgical practices and services around Holy Week:

If we allow ourselves to play the events at their original speed—God’s speed, not ours—living in and through the events day by day: the grieving farewells, the betrayal and denial, the shuddering fear in the garden, the stretched-out day of torture and forsakenness, and the daybreak of wonder...By refusing to skip over these days, with all their dark shadows and turns, we allow ourselves to be led far more profoundly into the story’s sense and power. Music is remarkably instructive here, because more than any other art form, it teaches us how not to rush over tension, how to find joy and fulfillment through a temporal movement that includes struggles, clashes and fractures.

— Begbie, Resounding Truth, 279

Audit your Listening

A recording of the first movement of J.S. Bach’s Brandenburg Concerto #5 was cranked up to almost full volume. “Heads up, students,” I alerted, “the mystery instrument is about to take us on a wild roller-coaster ride!” A moment later, an innocent sounding harpsichord stepped into the musical spotlight and then...the moment arrived. Bach’s famous flurry of notes were unleashed, soaring up and down, frantically seeking a harmonic resting place until finally resolving into a satisfyingly full force baroque ‘tutti’ (musical term meaning, ‘all together’). Almost in unison, my 6th grade strings class exploded into an excited chorus of “Wow” and one student joyfully exclaimed, “I’ve never heard anything like that! Can I play that on the violin?”

— Lilli Benko, music teacher (Veritas School - Richmond, VA)

An emphasis on listening could be one of the most radical and invigorating cultural liturgies a school can practice. Think of listening to music as a substantial hiking journey through a scenic land. It is an active pursuit and requires active senses. If you have a good map, you can benefit by knowing where the trail leads and perhaps how long it will take. You can outfit your gear for the specific terrain. But until you experience the pounding of your own feet on the path, you will not know the complete sights, smells, and sounds along the way, nor experience wonder at unplanned
Loving Music

events (e.g. impromptu sunrise, sighting of a bald eagle, sounds of sudden thunderstorm). Listening requires skill and practice to interpret structure and form, musical elements and narrative (the ‘maps’, if you will)...but without the first hand experience of aurally ‘gazing’ at a work of musical art, students will not have the opportunity to glean the harvest for themselves and internalize it in their souls.

All books on understanding music are agreed about one point: You can’t develop a better appreciation of the art merely by reading a book about it. If you want to understand music better, you can do nothing more important than listen to it. Everything that I have to say in this book is said about an experience that you can only get outside this book. Therefore, you will probably be wasting your time in reading it unless you make a firm resolve to hear a great deal more music than you have in the past.

— Aaron Copland, composer, What to Listen for in Music, 3

Questions to consider about your school’s classical music program:

1. Does the general music curriculum allow for at least 10 minutes per class to listen to great works of music (representing Classical, Jazz, or World genres)?

2. Do students in humanities classes regularly hear works of music (whether in class or via at-home listening assignments) that correspond to the literature and historical time frame they are studying and reading?

3. Aside from seasonal school choral or ensemble concerts, do students and teachers regularly perform on instruments (e.g. assemblies, lunches, classrooms)? Is there a culture of ‘sharing’ musical talents in your community?

4. How often does each grade see a live performance given by a professional music ensemble?

5. Do your students have a familiarity with different genres of music? (For example can they identify a great Western composer and masterpiece from the Baroque, Classical, Romantic and 20th Century eras of music?)

6. Does your school have a published listening curriculum or repertoire list (similar to a reading list)?

7. Do ensemble classes (choir, strings, brass/woodwinds, etc.) hear recordings or see great performances of the works they are preparing?

A final observation about the importance of music listening skills: Professors Paul Munson and Joshua Farris Drake of Grove City College have published a useful book which explores the meaning of beauty and the processes by which humans perceive art and music. In their chapter, “How Do We Judge Art and Music”, they identify (with the help of C.S. Lewis from An Experiment in Criticism) how we receive art or in their words, “discover what we cannot anticipate.”

Reception involves, first, “laying aside as completely as we can all our own preconceptions, interests, and associations” to make room for the artist’s message...we must use our eyes. We must look, and go on looking till we have certainly seen exactly what is there.” The receiver is not passive. “His also is an imaginative activity...”

— Paul Munson and Joshua Farris Drake, Art and Music: A Student’s Guide, 50

Audit your Play

While listening, or music hearing, is an imaginative process, making music or ‘playing’ is a hands-on embodied experience. Bodily practices play an important role in cultivating heart change. In the same way that embodied worship liturgies (baptism, communion, congregational singing) are essential to the expression of our praise to God, they are also formative to shaping our telos. It is imperative then that students of music regularly engage in a frequent practice of the principles and techniques they learn through ‘play’.

1. Do your students and faculty sing (hymns, psalms, school song) together on a daily basis?

2. Does your general music curriculum include opportunities for students to clap, dance, play instruments and sing in every class?

3. Does your music faculty regularly follow a systematic pedagogy of ear-training and rhythm drills, especially in ensemble classes (choir, strings, brass/woodwinds, etc.)?

4. Are students regularly encouraged and equipped with tools to improvise and create new music?

5. Is there an opportunity for students to learn to play instruments skillfully and a trajectory for the development of ensembles from the grammar through rhetoric years?

6. Do your students express joy in performances or after experimenting with a new musical concept or idea?
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Audit your Devotion
Pablo Casals’ heartfelt reflection at the beginning of this article reminds us that music can fill us with a refreshed wonder at life and our purpose. It seems fitting that classical schools should regularly engineer into their classrooms meaningful rituals that point to the glorious design of music and students’ roles as praise beings. Our musical instruction — driven by listening and play — should be anchored in practices of praise and devotion. A classical school aimed first at cultivating students’ affections will surely hit the mark when Jesus Christ is preeminent over and through all subjects, and most naturally expressed through music and the arts. In this spirit, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, theologian and anti-Nazi dissident, gives us inspiration for our work. He brilliantly refers to Jesus as the cantus firmus, a musical term for the principal or central theme that finds its way through a piece of polyphony, giving coherence and enabling the other parts to flourish:

I wanted to tell you to have a good, clear, cantus firmus; that is the only way to a full and perfect sound, when the counterpoint has a firm support and can’t come adrift or get out of tune, while remaining a distinct whole in its own right. Only a polyphony of this kind can give life a wholeness and at the same time assure us that nothing calamitous can happen as long as the cantus firmus is kept going.

SDG

A graduate in music and rhetoric studies from the University of Virginia, Lilli Benko is a music teacher and administrator at Veritas School in Richmond, Virginia. She also directs the Veritas Conservatory, an after-school arts enrichment program and plays her violin with many community organizations and in church. Besides making music, she loves having deep conversations about the Gospel and laughing with her husband and two sons.

TWO WEEKS IN

Orvieto, Italy

WITH SCL AND GORDON COLLEGE!

SCL is partnering with Gordon College to offer 20 classical students (who have finished their junior year) two weeks of study in the beautiful medieval city of Orvieto, Italy. Let your juniors know about this great opportunity at a very good price! Here are the details:

- Two Week Program/Seminar in Orvieto for SCL high school students who have just finished their junior year
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- Onsite instruction: Students will live and study in a beautiful, restored monastery in Orvieto, and take some trips to nearby cathedrals and Italian cities to study and reflect.
- Staffing: Gordon provides administrative support and logistics
- Teaching: Gordon provides a professor, SCL may provide teachers who assist the professor
- Cost: Approximately $1400 for two weeks (not including airfare)

See the SCL website for more details!
The Grammar of Integration

by Arla Rosenbaum and Michelle Bowles

Like many Grammar School teachers, we are always looking for ways to design meaningful learning activities that integrate our curriculum across disciplines. We want our students to recognize the interconnectedness between what they are learning in history, literature, art, math, science, Bible, etc. Teaching an integrated curriculum is important for a number of reasons, not least of all because it demonstrates to students in a tangible way that all knowledge should be viewed as a coherent whole. Given that all truth has God as its single source, the study of God and His creation through the different disciplines should be undertaken as a unified enterprise. Thus developing activities that ingrain this unity is important for helping students to learn the nature of truth and its relation to our Creator.

In addition to finding projects that foster cross-disciplinary integration, we also seek to develop activities that are as hands-on as possible. While such activities are particularly helpful for students with certain learning styles, we have found that all Grammar students learn best by doing. Providing students with hands-on kinesthetic activities encourages their active engagement in the learning process and also aids them in practically understanding the implications of abstract ideas. We also have found that through hands-on activities we are able to help students make connections between what they are learning in class and practical aspects of their life outside of school.

Developing activities that meet these dual goals of cross-disciplinary integration and hands-on learning is not particularly difficult, but it does require intentionality and planning. The rest of this article consists of a series of such activities that we have developed and found to be particularly effective. These activities are organized chronologically around various historical themes. For each theme we have listed a short series of activities categorized by the curricular disciplines they represent. Most of these activities can easily be adapted to be age-appropriate for various grade levels as needed. Our ideas certainly are not exhaustive but are rather a springboard for further brainstorming. We hope that what follows provides you with some practical ideas that you can implement, or that it at least gets you thinking about how to develop other activities that encourage hands-on and cross-disciplinary learning.

Creation
Natural History: Grow a garden from seeds either in an outside container or by starting seedlings in egg cartons in the classroom.
Math: Plant and observe the growth of plants by measurement in inches or centimeters from beginning of growth and record data on bar or line graphs.
Art: Journal sketches of plant growth at each stage.
Grammar/Composition: Have students write a paragraph about their observations on the goodness of God through creation with reference to Genesis 1:11.

Reign of Tutankhamen
Literature: Read and research Howard Carter and his discovery of King Tut's tomb as well as King Tut himself; look at Stanton and Hyma's Streams of Civilization to study the discovery of beans buried with King Tut that were planted and harvested even to this day.
Natural History: Read about mummification in Aliki's Mummies Made in Egypt and identify the various stages of mummification; take this a step further by mummifying chickens or hot dogs in class. (Consult an Egyptologist or Google for the steps for mummifying.)
Art: Draw a pyramid on manila paper or sculpt out of clay; make copies of different types of hieroglyphics, allowing students to create messages or name plates, etc.; students also can create cartouches of their names using hieroglyphics.
Bible – Help students make connections between this period in Egyptian history and biblical events happening at the same time such as Joseph being sold into slavery; discuss how through God’s plan He saved the people of Israel from starvation when the famines came.

Greece Colonized, Democracy Begins
History: Have students work in groups and research the beginnings of Greek government using Stanton and Hyma’s Streams of Civilization chapter 6 or Bauer’s Story of the World
chapter 22; then study the foundations of elections and voting worldwide, assigning each group a different section of government and allowing them to demonstrate the process by holding a mock election.

Natural History: Study how overpopulation and the need for new food sources led the Greeks to turn to the sea for food; discuss food cycles and methods for increasing crop production.

Art: Use real (dead) fish to dip in paint and make fish paintings; discuss how the Greeks turned to the sea as a source of food because of growth and overpopulation.

**Reign of Caesar Augustus**

Literature: Have students read about Octavian & Mark Antony; read about and discuss the officials who served under Caesar Augustus as explained in Haaren and Poland's *Famous Men of Rome*.

Natural History: Study and grow grains used during this period such as corn and wheat in a galvanized container inside the classroom.

Math: Record data observations on the growth of the grains in inches or centimeters and create bar or line graphs with the results.

Art: Bring in examples of fully grown grains (wheat, corn, rice, barley, oats, etc.) and create a mosaic.

Bible: Help students make connections between this period in Roman history and biblical events happening at the same time such as the birth of Christ.

**Marco Polo**

Geography: Draw or create maps depicting the Silk Road from China to Imperial Rome and identifying trade routes through the Holy Land, Persia, and eventually to China.

Literature: Read together The *Travels of Marco Polo* and then have students journal their own journey through the school year (the first day of school, field trips, vacation, special events, etc.).

Natural History: Bring in examples of the different kinds of spices from home, the grocery store, or a spice shop; bring in ginger root and grow it in the classroom by putting it in water until roots appear and then planting it in dirt much like a sweet potato plant.

Bible: Research the missionaries who went to influence the Eastern religions of the time, some of whom are mentioned in *The Travels of Marco Polo*.

**The Renaissance**

Literature: Read about and research Leonardo DaVinci from Stanton and Hyma's *Streams of Civilization*, chapter 16, Hillyer's *A Child's History of the World*, chapter 66, or internet sources; identify his birth place, his educational experience, his inventions, and his monumental influence on today's society.

Art: Have students observe and create sculptures, architecture, and paintings (for example, *The Mona Lisa* or *The Lord's Supper*) of the time by copying the works as best as they are able or by applying the artistic principles from the Renaissance to create their own original works.

Natural History: Study and research inventions made during this time period (printing press, the flying machine by DaVinci, the bicycle, etc.) and create new inventions; study the human body by having students research and then sketch or create models of the heart, eye, and other major organs of the body.

Bible: Help students make connections between this period in European history and the Protestant Reformation; have students read and discuss Martin Luther's “Ninety-five Theses”; another good reference is Hillyer's *A Child's History of the World*, chapter 67.

**Colonial Trading with England**

History: Assign each student a colony from the original thirteen colonies; they should research the area where it was located, what crops were grown, what groups of people lived there, etc.; learn about mercantilism between England and the colonies; assign the leader of each colony to individual students and have them write a report and then give an oral presentation to the class.

Natural History: Discuss and bring examples of the types of crops grown during this time period (examples: tobacco, cotton, indigo, and wood products).

Grammar/Composition: After discussion, have students write a comparison paper on the use of various crops in commerce in that time period and how they are used today.

**Parliament Acts Unjustly**

History: Research the Boston Tea Party, identifying the source of the trouble, how the colonists handled the conflict, etc. Some resources include *Johnny Tremain* and Bauer's *The Story of the World*.

Natural History: Study sugar, bring in examples of sugar cane, and discuss the importance of sugar to the colonies; discuss and bring in examples of different types of tea; grow your own tea plants in the classroom. (This can be done by going to your local nursery to buy Chamomile or other types of plants.)
Drama: Act out the story of the Boston Tea Party, incorporating various elements of the story that have been studied.

**Black Leadership Emerges in the South**

Literature: Read and discuss biographies of Booker T. Washington and George Washington Carver.
Natural History: Study, illustrate, and identify the parts of the peanut and peanut plant; grow peanuts and research all the uses of peanuts; make peanut butter from peanuts and then use it to bake peanut butter cookies.
Natural History: Research Carver’s findings on crop rotation and their economic significance; name the uses of peanuts; have students dissect a peanut and show visuals of the stages of growth of the peanut.
Art: Have students make drawings of the various stages of growth of the peanut.

**World War II**

Literature: Read and discuss the events leading up to and during this war time with highlights on Adolf Hitler; America entering the war; and the persecution of the Jewish people (novel suggestions: *Diary of Anne Frank, The Hiding Place, Number the Stars, The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*); research accounts of Pearl Harbor, identifying why and when the US entered the war.
Natural History: Study and research Victory Gardens and their purpose during war time; plant your own Victory Garden in a plot of land on your campus, in a public park (with permission from your local authorities), or in a window box garden; identify the various styles of airplanes used by the Allies as well as their enemies using pictures of the planes.
Composition and Grammar: Have students write a paper on what they would do if there was a surprise attack on America today and how it would change their lives.

**Modern America**

Economics: Research our standards of living compared to other countries; study our greatest exports and what imports we are dependent upon; after identifying our strengths as a nation, take time to identify the weakness of America and discuss how we need a Savior who forgives and is gracious to us. (For example, the passage in Matthew 6 about storing up treasures on earth could be studied in conjunction with what Americans (or other countries) most value. How do the strengths/weaknesses of our country relate to what God considers a strength/weakness?)
Natural History: As a leader in today’s world of medicine, research plants used for medicinal purposes and investigate which ones would grow in your classroom; have students grow these plants and observe the growth.
Math: Record and journal the growth of the plants in inches or centimeters and create bar or line graphs using the data.
Art: Make scientific sketches of the plants and label the parts used for medicine.

We hope these few examples will be a helpful resource for you as you plan projects for your class. All of them can be modified or expanded in order to meet the needs of your students as you bring your curriculum alive and seek to integrate it in meaningful ways.

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Covenant epistemology offers a multifaceted vision of knowing that pertains to knowing ventures in every corner of our lives. Its central claim is that our paradigm of knowing should be, not the widely held view of knowledge as impersonal information impersonally amassed, but rather a vision of knowing as love-drawn, covenantally forged, dynamically unfolding, interpersonal relationship. I believe that shifting from the more pervasive paradigm to this vision of knowing makes a radical difference to learning and teaching. It makes sense of what we already know is important. It suggests ways we may be even better at it. And it offers fresh encouragement to us in our mission. Covenant epistemology makes delightful sense of knowing, restoring, among many other things, the adventure to our knowing ventures.

In this two-part essay, we explore this alternative vision of covenant epistemology, and the difference it makes to learners and teachers. Part 1 (last issue) invited you to ponder some of the mysteries of knowing, and it also sketched covenant epistemology’s understanding of both knowing and being as interpersonal. Part 2 (this issue) introduces you to a key component of covenant epistemology: Michael Polanyi’s innovative account of the two-level structure of knowing.

Part 2: The Two-Level Structure of All Knowing, and the Difference it Makes

Covenant epistemology casts all knowing as a love-drawn, covenantally forged, dynamically unfolding, interpersonal relationship. In doing so, it endeavors to unseat the deeply seated, widespread, presumptive ideal of knowledge as impersonal information impersonally amassed. But we are so inured in the modern Western mindset of knowledge as information that we can hear the injunctions of covenant epistemology as metaphorical platitudes, at best add-ons to knowledge, not knowledge itself. That is why covenant epistemology, as I have developed it, retains as its anchor Michael Polanyi’s unique epistemic insight, that all knowing has a mutually integrated two-level structure: all knowing is subsidiary focal integration. Polanyi’s account also makes sense of covenant epistemology’s vision of knowing as coming to know, and as attaining insight in a breakthrough that not so much informs but rather transforms.

Polanyian epistemology: knowing as subsidiary-focal integration (SFI)

Polanyi, a premier scientist in the early part of the 20th century in Europe, rightly sensed that if the prevailing ideal of knowledge as information were true—if we had to restrict ourselves to explicit information we already possess—no scientific discovery could ever happen. Left without challenge, that prevailing ideal would jeopardize science and Western culture. Polanyi felt this so strongly that he actually left science to devote the remainder of his career to developing an alternative epistemology. His account of knowing as subsidiary-focal integration directly challenges the damaging false ideal of modernist epistemology; learning to see knowing this way frees us from the knowledge-as-information mindset like no other philosophy, or technique, I know.

According to Polanyi, all knowing has a two-level structure: the subsidiary and the focal. In all our knowing, we indwell and rely on subsidiaries to integrate to a focal pattern. We attend from subsidiary clues and attend to a focal pattern. The process of knowing involves a responsible and sometimes risky personal investment to shape, recognize, and submit to a coherent pattern. The pattern is not derived in a linear way by focusing on explicitly identified particulars. Instead, accessing it involves indwelling—seeking to “get inside,” or take inside yourself, the particulars you are trying to understand, so as to be able to attend from them as subsidiaries, to seek the transformative, meaning-giving, focal pattern.

For example: as you read these sentences, you are relying on and attending from the marks on the page to focus on what I am saying. There was a time when someone taught you to make and sound letters focally. But you began reading only when you were able to shift from attending to letters to attending from them. Even now, you
could stop thinking about what I am saying and focus on my spelling, or grammar, the font I am using, or the caliber of my writerly craftsmanship. This assuredly is a helpful exercise from time to time. But you can’t simultaneously focus on and also rely on the same particulars. The two kinds of awareness are mutually exclusive. Focusing on the particulars actually prevents your achieving the focal pattern. You can’t get from the level of the particulars to the level of the pattern in any linear (or random), merely focal way. Instead, you must seek to indwell, or “get inside,” and subsidiarily attend from the particulars to discern the pattern that makes sense of them. It’s going to take, not deduction, but integration—a creative, synthetic leap to a transformative pattern. The achievement of such a pattern can never itself be a linear, step-by-step procedure, although it can be prompted by one. Rather, it takes a creative breakthrough of insight in which you make sense of things in a fresh way.

Achieving insight does not mean that you leave the subsidiary level behind. In fact, it is only in the insight that the subsidiary becomes subsidiary—that is, you are able to move from attending to particulars focally to growing in indwelling them as pregnant clues, to subsidiarily attending from them to their transformative sense-making pattern. In the successful integration, subsidiary and focal dynamically interconnect and amplify each other, as transformed part to transforming whole.

Whatever is subsidiary in the act of knowing is, in that act, not focal, and thus not something we can articulate as information. Much of what we indwell, in fact, we never know focally—such as the workings of our central nervous system. But even if we did, in the act of knowing we are relying on it, indwelling it, as subsidiary, rather than attending to it focally. The human mind is only known by way of subsidiarily indwelling the body—one’s own or another’s.

The subsidiary level of any knowing event includes three sectors of clues: our felt body sense, the surrounding situation (the place of our puzzlement), and any normative words of authoritative guides and interpretive frameworks. We subsidiarily indwell all these dimensions in making sense of things. Focally naming or identifying them, while this can be helpful, does not anchor our knowing; subsidiarily indwelling them does. The foundations of our knowledge, therefore, must not be explicit certainties. The foundations of our knowledge must be an embodied giving of ourselves in tacit trust to indwell that which we understand only in what they achieve.

Coming to know, therefore, involves a creative scrabbling to find our way toward making sense of puzzling particulars. But even to have deemed the particulars “puzzling” is to be half-way to making sense of them. And in the process, we actually need to be guided by clues, pregnant with meaning, which we do not yet understand. Then, it turns out, we can scrabble imaginatively, creatively, subsidiarily, toward a focal that we cannot yet identify or articulate, and we can have—we must rely on—a sense that we are getting closer to it. We must find a way to shift from looking at to looking from; we must actively shape a creative pattern that makes sense of the clues. Then, when we achieve the pattern, it comes to us as an epiphany, a break-through insight. We simultaneously recognize it and are surprised by it.

And now here’s my favorite part: that freshly discovered pattern has about it hints of future possibilities that are at this moment unspecifiable but nevertheless felt. Polanyi said that scientific discoverers know that they have made contact with reality when they have a sense of the possibility of indeterminate future manifestations. In fact, the profounder the insight, the greater the sense that you have only laid hold of an aspect of reality, and that there are more horizons that beckon you to explore. It’s more what we don’t know of something that testifies to its reality and draws us, than what we do know. This is how it is that a breakthrough is both an end and a beginning in a knowing venture. So knowing involves in equal measures active personal responsibility to shape a pattern and submission to that pattern as a token of reality. It is these tantalizing “ifms”—indeterminate future manifestations—which have suggested to me that the yet-to-be-known is personlike: it graciously self-discloses; it contacts back. For me this shows that we may augment Polanyian epistemology to covenant epistemology.

Knowing works this way whether those involved are Christian believers or not. But Christian believers can see that the paradigm of all coming to know is the redemptive encounter—knowing and finding oneself graciously, transformatively, known by the Lord Christ. Every tiny moment of insight or breakthrough signposts redemptive encounter; it is a wooing of the Lord himself. Conversely, celebrating the Eucharist, I believe, becomes additionally a “best epistemic practice”: it makes us better as knowers in our inviting the real. Our already transformative adventure of knowing, no matter how lowly,
with this realization, is transformed afresh, infused from on high with the fragrant presence of the Lord. All knowing becomes delighted communion with Him.

**SFI subverts the information mindset, and reorients our epistemic default**

Polanyi’s account reveals the problem with the knowledge-as-information epistemology: the Western tradition of ideas and culture, specifically in modernity, installed focal, explicit knowledge as the ideal form of knowledge. In doing so it has eclipsed and hampered true knowing. There is nothing at all wrong with information, or with amassing it. The problem is with making it function as the epistemic ideal. What you want to do with information is subsidiarily indwell it to seek a transformative pattern.

Subsidiary focal integration shows how knowing is, at heart, not a merely passive amassing of information but a responsible personal investment seeking transformative insight. Significant dimensions of knowing are unspecifiable focally as information, and only thereby are they integral and palpably operative in our knowing. The roots of knowledge do not consist of lucid certainties. Nor does its goal. Knowing roots in commitments and clues we understand only in indwelling them, and involves giving ourselves in trust, in advance, to a significance that resonates well beyond what we can codify. And this structure represents no defect or inadequacy, nor sin or even finitude in our knowing. Rather, it is the glory of human knowing, its strength, its care for the world; it is our humanness. Knowing thus understood, roots the knower profoundly in his/her body, in the world, and in a dynamically, transformatively, ever-unfolding reality.

**Covenant-epistemological pedagogy**

To learn and to teach is to undertake and attend to knowing (ad)ventures. And to recognize this is to make delightful sense of what learners and teachers love to do. Here are only a few implications of covenant epistemology for pedagogy. No doubt you can easily think of others.

Savvy, caring teachers are already attuned to the critical keys of teaching: love and delight—in your students, and in your subject. What covenant epistemology reveals is that these are epistemic—something that a knowledge-as-information epistemology radically disavows. Conferring dignity, noticing regard, creating a space that welcomes student and subject and their unfolding communion, that models covenant pledge to the yet-to-be-known, as well as to classmates—these efforts form the posture that invites the real. The goal of teaching is to cultivate lovers. And the goal of knowing is inviting the real into shalom. Plus, in teaching, you are inviting the real in your students.

Second, seeing the act of coming to know as the main act of knowing (as opposed to information-amassing), and seeing that this venture unfolds, not linearly but transformatively, helps teachers to expect and accredit some things that the information mindset cannot even recognize. All knowing is knowing on the way—half-understanding. It’s possible to be clueless and close. It’s possible to be knowledgeable and really far from the truth. It’s always the case that we get part of it right and part of it wrong at any point in time. There is anticipative knowledge. Teachers can see and accredit and encourage a student who is on the verge of a breakthrough but not there yet—especially since this can be a most distressing period of conflict. Teachers can exercise and encourage patience. We need to teach that knowledge unfolds in grace-filled lurches forward, and enjoin students themselves to develop and navigate that awareness.

Third, if knowing involves creative effort to integrate hitherto disconnected and meaningless particulars into a transformative pattern, then our approach can be seen to involve something like throwing a catalyst into a solution (or throwing the yeast into the flour and water mixture as we make bread.) Already in the solution must be love. We cultivate a hospitable space of welcome and noticing regard. We insist that delight invites the real. Love is “non-possessive delight in the particularity of the other,” according to James Loder. We may model and cultivate and ensure this in the classroom.

Then we encourage students to take to themselves the responsibility of pledge to the yet-to-be-known. One could even render this a ceremony! Help them see that this responsible buy-in on their part, both individually and together as a class, is critical to inviting the real.

Also already in the solution must be the currently disconnected particulars that we need to seek to have linked and transformed in inbreaking insight—these math problems, these historical figures and events, these trivium skills, these scales or warm-up exercises.

Then, it seems to me, that skilled teachers are skilled because they have some reliable sparks or catalysts—things they know to say or do or model that can prompt a learner’s integration. For example: when I was a not-so-young young mom, a girlfriend talked me
into taking a ballet class. For me, that was a first-ever such experience. I “learned” all those positions and movements that make up barre work. Every such session ends with the summons to let go of the barre and balance on your toes with your hands over your head (and look beautiful! Hah!). I was entirely unable to hold that pose—until the day that the wise teacher said, “Pretend you are sucking yourself up through a straw.” From that moment, even to this day decades later, I can balance on my toes! That sentence sparked my body to feel integratively what it was to do.

Fourth, you should expect that understanding involves existential change. After all, the knower’s felt body sense constitutes one of the three sectors of clues. Knowing changes the knower. And you should expect that reality will change for the knower. The directions change in this sense: they have become meaningful and fraught with future possibilities. Transformed learners themselves become semper transformanda—always transforming.

Finally, realize that what is at stake is not just learning and pedagogy. What is at stake is nothing short of redemptive healing and cultural change. The knowledge-as-information mindset is the pawn and hit-man of a Western modernist cultural milieu of power, mastery, control, over nature and over others. It depersonalizes and reduces to manageable bits to leverage its domination. It seeks each one of us for subservience to a machine. It seeks robots to rule the world. I state this starkly and offer no justification here at the end of this essay. But even if this aggressive spirit of the times only partially pertains, cultivating knowers as lovers is one key way we may healingly subvert it, by reinstating humans as lovers who are semper transformanda, to “look the world back to grace.”

Knowing is always a knowing venture in which we do best to seek the real in love, pledge, invitation, and indwelling. In gracious, generous, surprising response, reality reveals itself to be more than I could have anticipated. It is the whole tenor of this dynamic that has led me to cast it as persons covenantally forming relationship, to the end of communion. Knowing is more of an adventure than the reigning modern epistemic paradigm has entitled us to acknowledge. And perhaps like the hobbits in J. R. R. Tolkien’s The Lord of the Rings, we find, once embarked, that the adventure is bigger than we ever could have imagined.

Esther lives in Aliquippa, near Pittsburgh, PA. She has three daughters, Starr, Anastasia and Stephanie, three sons-in-law, Alex, Evan and Garrett, and two grandchildren, August and Joanna.

Endnotes
1 Epistemology is the philosophical study of what and how we know. I develop covenant epistemology in Loving to Know: Introducing Covenant Epistemology (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2011). A Little Manual for Knowing (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2014) draws on covenant epistemology to offer a how-to for knowing ventures of any sort. My earlier book, Longing to Know: The Philosophy of Knowledge for Ordinary People (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2003) explicates Polanyi’s subsidiary-focal integration to offer epistemic help to people considering Christianity.
2 Discovery, just like learning, is the studied endeavor to come to know what we do not yet know. It is a knowing venture. An epistemic paradigm that offers no account of coming to know is useless to both, and prohibitive of both.
3 It may be helpful to know that in developing this epistemology, Polanyi drew on the idea of Gestalt in psychology. See especially his account in the first lecture of The Tacit Dimension (Foreword by Amartya Sen. Chicago: University Press, 2009). See also Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy (Corrected ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962) esp. 55-57. Additionally, see any exposition of this by philosopher Marjorie Grene, such as her Introduction to her collection of Polanyi’s essays, Knowing and Being (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969).
4 I taught all three of my children to read. I taught them their letters and the sounds they make. At the point I deemed them ready for it, I handed them a little book. Then I photographed them at the moment their faces registered astounded surprise—the magical moment of insight, when they began to read.
5 It’s not as if we shouldn’t ever revert to focus on subsidiaries— as we do in studying grammar or penmanship. But Polanyi called this temporary analysis, or destructive analysis, because it temporarily destroys the focal pattern. He did not mean that it is bad. It is a necessary and valuable part of developing a skill. But only a part.
6 See the work of Bruce Vojak, an engineer helping corporate engineers be better at “serial innovation,” utilizing the dynamics of subsidiary-focal integration: Abbie Griffin, Raymond Price and Bruce Vojak, Serial Innovators: How Individuals Create and Deliver Breakthrough Innovations in Mature Firms (Stanford Business Books, 2012). See also www.epistemology_of_innovation.org.
7 Meek, Contact with Reality: An Examination of Realism in the Thought of Michael Polanyi (Ph.D. diss., Temple University, 1983). My current book project is updating and revising this dissertation for publication.
8 Polanyi loved Martin Luther’s ringing claim: “Here I stand; I cannot do otherwise.” It represents both the active personal responsibility and the simultaneous submission to an independent reality typical of all acts of coming to know.
9 SFI in no way guarantees that sin does not affect it adversely. It in no way guarantees that either subsidiaries or patterns are exhaustively correct. In fact, in contrast to the knowledge-as-information paradigm, it is superior precisely by showing how knowing can be adversely affected by these things—and showing also how, even if an act of knowing is well-done, it still takes the gracious gift of the Lord for us to understand. In fact, it shows how not even a defective epistemology can stand in the way of the gracious coming of the Lord in Wright.
11 You could talk over with them the many components of “epistemological etiquette” listed in chap 15 of Loving to Know.
Book Review: Ten Ways to Destroy the Imagination of Your Child by Anthony Esolen

Review by Nathan Raley

Recently, a colleague of mine—whose first child was born just weeks ago—noticed my copy of Anthony Esolen’s Ten Ways to Destroy the Imagination of Your Child. “You know,” he said, “a friend of mine told me that parenting is the most guilt-inducing profession there is. That’s why when I saw the title of that book you’re reading, I decided I will never read it.”

As a soon-to-be father myself, I understand his sentiment. There are so many ways that we fall short in raising our children; why read a book that outlines ten more so that we can feel even worse than we already do? And yet, Esolen’s book is worth reading, and not just for the concerned parent or early childhood educator. I will admit that as a warning about what not to do with children, Ten Ways can at times be overwhelming and even heavy-handed. But read as a broader critique of our system of education and culture, it offers a creative and poignant reminder not only of what a good childhood used to—and might still—be, but also of what it means to be fully alive.

The introduction to Ten Ways is worth the price of the book. In it, Esolen adroitly establishes the conceit that holds the book together: His narrator, a sort of twenty-first century Screwtape, is fed up with children. He has opened his essay decrying the dangers and inconveniences of classic books, but now he turns to children, who are, he writes, “worse than books.” For “a book makes you see the world again, and so ruins your calm and efficient day. But a child does not need to see the world again. He is seeing it for the first time.” The curiosity and wonder that come from seeing the world afresh make children unpredictable and unmanageable. Turning the cliché that “children are our greatest resource” on its head, the smug narrator argues that if we do indeed see children in this way, then we should treat them as we would any other resource: standardize them, warehouse them efficiently, prepare them to fit neatly into their proper place in the commercial juggernaut that we call culture. And to accomplish this we must kill their imagination. “If we can but deaden the imagination,” he says in his eminently practical way, “we can settle the child down, and make of him that solid, dependable, and inert space-filler in school, and, later, a block of the great state pyramid.” This deadening is critical, because even a single act of imagination is a threat, as this hilarious analogy makes clear:

A vast enterprise like McDonald’s can only function by ensuring that no employee, anywhere, will do anything sprightly and childlike in the way of cooking. I sometimes think that if a single boy at the grill tossed paprika into the french fries, the whole colossal pasteboard enterprise would come crashing down. Barbarians everywhere would be grilling the onions, or leaving the ketchup out, or commandeering the Swiss to take the place of the...
High School Students Learn to Loathe Literature,” which Know Why the Caged Bird Cannot Read: How American Francine Prose’s scathing and controversial 1999 essay “I Such an argument has been made before; for example, see of learning, and the mediocrity they breed in literature. and political correctness, the violence they do to the love Clichés and Fads,” is a diatribe against Deconstructionism Method 4, “Replace the Fairy Tale with Political Prestigious Work, followed by retirement and death.”

This is the focus of Method 2: “Never Leave Children to Themselves,” in which Esolen looks back wistfully to a time when children were allowed to organize games and adventures through their own initiative. He praises pick-up baseball and spontaneously formed clubs devoted to the love of singing or stamp collecting or chess, while he critiques what he sees as the largely utilitarian motives behind the zealous involvement of parents and organizations in children’s activities. “Everything you do as a child,” counsels the narrator, “must be geared—I use the word “geared” deliberately—toward the resume which will gain you admission to Higher Blunting, followed by Prestigious Work, followed by retirement and death.”

Method 4, “Replace the Fairy Tale with Political Clichés and Fads,” is a diatribe against Deconstructionism and political correctness, the violence they do to the love of learning, and the mediocrity they breed in literature. Such an argument has been made before; for example, see Francine Prose’s scathing and controversial 1999 essay “I Know Why the Caged Bird Cannot Read: How American High School Students Learn to Loathe Literature,” which begins in this way:

Like most parents who have, against all odds, preserved a lively and still evolving passion for good books, I find myself, each September, increasingly appalled by the dismal lists of texts that my sons are doomed to waste a school year reading. What I get as compensation is a measure of insight into why our society has come to admire Montel Williams and Ricki Lake so much more than Dante and Homer.1

Both Ms. Prose and Esolen make the point that growing up on drivel stunts young people so that when they face more challenging and potentially rewarding literature, they don’t stand a chance of understanding it or appreciating it. Why the drivel? Both authors maintain it is because the childrens’ overseers are less concerned with stretching the imagination or presenting the real complexity of human relationships than they are with keeping things “relevant” and socializing children well. Now, the problem is not that literature is used to teach deep moral truths to the young. That must happen. As G.K. Chesterton wrote, “unless civilization is built upon truisms, it is not built at all.”2 The problem is that the books that high schoolers read, many of them of dubious literary merit to begin with, are presented solely as a pretext for facile discussions of values that are in vogue. As Esolen’s subversive narrator concludes, “Reading is all about the adopting of the correct position.” Of course, the correct position—and Prose and Esolen agree in this critique—is always some modern piety along the lines of a predictable and very limited set of socially acceptable morals.

Esolen does offer an alternative, though, and that is where this chapter is of most use to the parents of young children. He praises folk tales, fairy tales, and fables for their potential to stir up in young readers a love of virtue and justice and to help them recognize, and believe in, love and beauty.3 Because folk tales present a moral universe where right is right and wrong is wrong, they are dangerous. When learned in childhood, these stories—and Esolen provides a number of specific examples—make it possible for young people later to appreciate Shakespeare, and Dostoyevski, and even Puccini. Therefore, says our narrator, the stories must be suppressed: “If you do not want a child to paint, you take away his palette. If you do not want him to use his imagination to conceive of archetypal stories, you take away his narrative palette.”

Ten Ways to Destroy the Imagination of Your Child makes a lot of other good points as well. There is no space here to outline, for example, the book’s insights into how a
child’s belief in heroes, his love for his country, his openness to learning from the past, and his respect for the mystery of the opposite sex all help to nurture his moral imagination. The book is a valuable contribution to the conservative corpus on education and virtue that should provoke good discussions among educators and parents. Where others have laid out in a more analytical way the reasons for the decline in moral education, such as empirical psychology, logical positivism, and general moral relativism, Esolen’s contribution is to make us understand these causes through laughter and then mourn their effects. His writing is elegant and vigorous and his love for the classics infectious. Readers who want to follow up on any of the dozens of books, folk tales, and children’s stories he draws from can consult the detailed bibliography he provides. There is some repetition between chapters, but this makes it possible for sections of the book to be read independently by those who are not ready to attack the whole. I might even suggest that parents consider forming a group to discuss sections of the book together, perhaps along with a teacher or school administrator, as has been done with success at the school where I teach. Not everyone will love the book: the author’s strong opinions (on everything from day care to pop culture to true manhood and womanhood) and his tone (at a few moments almost belligerently pedantic) may be off-putting to some, and others may feel crushed by the sense that modern life, or their particular situation, makes many of his ideals difficult to realize. But I think that most readers will be grateful for this inspiring charge to foster and protect our most human resource.

Endnotes
4 These are some of the reasons identified in chapter 1 of Thomas Lickona’s Educating for Character: How Our Schools Can Teach Respect and Responsibility, Bantam, 1991.

Nathan Raley spent about half his childhood overseas as a missionary kid (in Cambodia, Singapore, France, and the Philippines). He began teaching French and debate at Houston Christian High School and went on to teach AP English, Rhetoric, and Bible at South Shore Christian Academy in Weymouth, MA, and at the Geneva School in Winter Park, FL. Nathan and his wife Gretchen live in Austin, Texas, where Nathan teaches literature at Regents.
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