

## ON TEXTBOOKS AND LIVING BOOKS

CHIP DENTON

The easy way to start a school is to buy a curriculum from some publisher and wait for the mail to come. When the box arrives, it will be full of third-grade science texts or fourth grade social studies. You give the student the text, and the teacher the manual, and tell her to go at it by going through it.

The harder way to start a school is to take a lot of time (we've taken three years so far, and we've still got lots to do) finding the kind of books that Charlotte Mason called "living books" and working them into the curriculum as read-alouds, independent reading books, or class sets. This is the way that we have chosen to do school at Trinity.

It's that time of year when we teachers begin thinking about next year and ordering curriculum. It's that time when we might be a little wistful about choosing a set curriculum or a text (so much easier!). It's that time when we could all stand to recall why we have taken this, the harder route.

It's not hard to tell the difference between a living book and a text book, though it's a bit hard to define either one. Here are some of the marks of books living and moribund:

- A living book is written by a particular person, in a particular place, with a particular voice. A textbook is written by a person who tries very hard not to let her own voice be heard. Sometimes this is made even easier by a ghost writer.
- A living book is the sort of book your child would pick up and take on vacation. A text book is the sort of book your child would just as soon not take anywhere unless he has to.
- If you open a box of books from a publisher and exclaim, "I can't wait to get into these" then you've ordered some living books. If you groan and say "Do we have to read all these?" you may well have ordered textbooks.
- If a book answers all your questions and leaves you with the impression that pretty much everything you'd ever need to do is learn it yourself, then you're likely to be reading a textbook. If a book leads you to wonder at what others have learned and to yearn to learn that and more for yourself, then you're reading a living book.
- If a book leaves you with the impression that "these are the facts of the case and this is the way it is" then you're likely to be reading a textbook. If, on the other hand, a book makes you ask "How do we know that this is true?" or "Might something else be true?" then you've got a living book in your hand.

- If a book lectures you, it's a textbook. If it questions you, it's a living book.

- If you can remember what a book is all about a year after reading it, it's alive. If, a year later, you're not quite sure whether you read it, it's dead and it might well have been a textbook.

Take an example. Our fifth graders are reading *The Bronze Bow* by Elizabeth Speare this spring. Ask any of them and they will tell you they've loved it. Ask half their parents and they'll say the same, because the kids have loved the book so much that they've shared it with mom or dad. It's a great story. It's a powerful story with profundities to ponder at and weep over. And you can't read it without learning a good deal about such things as intertestamental Judaism, the Roman military during the early Principate, Palestinian geography, and the daily life of peasants in the Roman Empire. Chances are these kids will want to find another book like this one next, or one that expands the knowledge which this one fashioned.

Living books have the great advantage that they help us to learn for ourselves. The difference between a textbook and a living book is much the same as the difference between being lectured by an expert and being questioned by a master. There is a time and a place for the lecture (we do that some here, and we'll even choose a textbook from time to time); but the learning that lasts a lifetime and that leads us further on and deeper in is the learning that comes when we are forced (by a skillful teacher) to puzzle something out for ourselves. Like Socrates in Athens or Aggasiz at Harvard, a living book leads us, respects us, believes that we have the capacity to learn for ourselves.