

THE END OF EDUCATION CHIP DENTON

Neil Postman has written a trenchant and eminently readable book called The End of Education. I mention it here not because I intend to say anything that he has said there so effectively, but because I want to abscond with his title and I ought to give him credit.

It is a marvelously ambiguous title, so that one does not know at the outset whether the book is about the termination (end) of education as we know it or about the purpose (end) of education. Both ideas are well worth exploring, and both are integrally connected. For the more we ask ourselves "What is the purpose of education?" the less likely we are to carry on automatically the traditions of our mothers and fathers. For instance, many of us have grown up in schools where the implicit assumption was that the more subjects one could study, the better. Then along comes Dorothy Sayers who writes a penetrating essay called "The Lost Tools of Learning" and concludes that "the sole end of education is simply this: to teach men how to learn for themselves." That being the case, the acquisition of certain intellectual tools is far more important than the mastery of myriad subjects. Thus it happens that a discussion of the end of education leads us to a practice that ends the education we have inherited.

It is not, however, only the old that is corrected by this fundamental question. The healthy habit of asking "Why?" will guard us against stodgy and unfounded traditions; it will also protect us from frantic attempts to keep up with the Joneses in our own educational neighborhood. This is probably the greater temptation. Just as we Americans have a knack for bucking tradition, we have a weakness for following the latest fad, for choosing the pragmatic over the prudent, for chasing after more and more and more without asking why. Asking about the purpose of education has led Trinity to adopt some unique approaches: in the selection of our math curriculum; in the development of our technology program; and in our emerging thinking about the way we go about raising money to build the school.

We are often asked why we call ourselves a classical Christian school. One good answer to that question is that both the classical and the Christian traditions are fundamentally committed to asking this question about ends or purposes. The Greek word for "end" is telos, and it is from the Greeks that we have learned to ask "Why?" The unexamined education is not worth learning. Before you begin school, you must ask, "What is the telos (or ideal end) of this thing called a human being?" Trinity's motto is taken from a succinct classical answer to this question: Human beings have the unique capacity to grow and be perfected in their apprehension of truth, in their practice of goodness, and in their appreciation for and reflection of beauty. No other organism under the sun has these capacities, and education (in Greek, paideia) must be crafted in such a way as to help human beings perfect these capacities.

You have to love the Greeks--when they got it wrong, they got it wrong in such a wonderful way. We Christians have learned (principally through the medium of Greek culture) that this ideal human being is simply not a possibility in the world as we know it. Plato's best hope for an enlightened philosopher king, Dion of Syracuse, let his master down in the end. And the Bible's number one draft pick went to bed with Bathsheba. But the Greek ideal, the telos of humanity, is more than a pipe dream: There was once a man and a woman whose humanness was more perfect and moving than the Venus de Milo, and when they fell from grace God sent the Second Man who "learned obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him" (Hebrews 5:8,9).

Schools are built on dreams, and great schools are built on dreams that have inspired humanity for centuries and millennia, such as the Greek ideal of the wise and virtuous person. And a great Christian school is built on a dream-come-true, the incarnation. The end of all our learning is that we would bear the likeness of the One who became for us a life-giving Spirit.