

WHAT GOOD IS AN EDUCATION? CHIP DENTON

My father loves to pass on the joke that Mr. Neely would tell about his son Jack. Jack was a high school classmate of mine who went off to Millsaps College to major in history. Somewhere close to the end of his undergraduate career, Jack's father is supposed to have asked Jack, in a slightly sarcastic tone, "What will you do when you graduate—work for one of those history companies?"

The joke has been passed around by two very different groups of people. To Jack's father, to many fathers, perhaps to all fathers who have footed the bill for college education, the joke is on Jack and his ilk, who think that anything good can come from something as impractical as a history degree. To Jack's defenders the joke exposes the philistine prejudices of people who have never imagined that an education might be good for something other than its earning power. For all of us, Mr. Neely's joke prompts a profound question: What good is an education?

A school ought to have an answer to such a question. It is incumbent on those who are running a school that they be able to explain not only what they are doing but also why. The unexamined school is not worth operating. In truth, this is the kind of question that takes a lifetime to answer, but at the beginning of another school year it is good for us to tackle it again, as simply as we can, and to say why we are doing what we are doing. Let us set forth three related propositions:

- ❖ ***Education is a great good, in fact one of the greatest goods under the sun.***
- ❖ ***Measured against eternity, however, education is far from the greatest good.***
- ❖ ***Moreover, the greatest good that an education can be is as a help toward that greater good.***

Let's think about these together.

Education is a great good, in fact one of the greatest goods under the sun.

Measured by the hours invested in founding and running this school, or by the tuition dollars dearly paid, or by the zeal of students and teachers, it is clear that people at Trinity believe in the value of a good education. Furthermore, though we are certainly mindful of the usefulness of an education (to help our children get jobs, for example), we have also been moved by the vision of an education that is a joy in and of itself. We speak of the love of learning around here because we know that the experience of reading a book for the sheer pleasure of it is one of the most "human" activities we can engage in.

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As important as we think education is, most of us would assent to this qualification. We know that knowledge can be used or misused, and that knowledge puffs up while

love builds up. We all know people whose education is first-class but whose lives are hardly to be envied or imitated. And we know, maybe, a few salt-of-the-earth people, whose ignorance or naiveté is so far overshadowed by their huge hearts that it may give us pause to be getting and spending so much on our education.

Measured against eternity, against the immortality of our own souls, and, most importantly, against the God whom to see is either sheer hell or perfect blessedness, education can hardly be considered as the summum bonum, the greatest good of our lives. As a Christian school, we regard the goal of our lives this way: to give glory to God by enjoying him forever. And this we believe to be made possible and real to us through Jesus Christ and by the work of the Holy Spirit.

Long ago Augustine used an analogy to teach us this same point. Suppose, he says, that we were wanderers, far from our native country, who could not live in blessedness except at our home. We would need vehicles for land and sea, which could be used to help us reach our homeland, where we would find our true joy. But suppose that the amenities of the journey, the beauty of the scenery, and the marvelous vehicles themselves so delighted us that we should forget about our country and become “entangled in a perverse sweetness.” By misusing a good vehicle, by treating a means as an end, we might miss our destination. Now our destination is not a place, but a person, waiting like the prodigal's father to embrace us. In truth, three persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, one God forever blessed. The greatest good that Trinity students can ever hope for is to find their way to this, their home.

The greatest good that an education can be is as a help toward that greatest good.

As Christians, we do not believe, as Plato seems to have thought, that education can “save” us. It may save us from ignorance, but it cannot save us from selfishness and sin. In this sense, to continue with Augustine's analogy, Christ is the vehicle on which we sail home to the Father. But the things of this world, education included, can be like the sails, the rudder or even the scenery—they play a part in our journey. I can think of several important ways that schooling can help us along the way. Some of these ways are simple, some are profound:

- Through a good liberal arts education, we learn to speak and listen, to read and write—the basic skills of communication, apart from which we cannot enter into relationship.
- At a school like Trinity, we will be teaching the students to read the Bible and to listen to God attentively.
- Through an education students acquire the tools of learning that will enable them to tackle any subject that they encounter in life—in this way they are being equipped to fulfill their vocations in God's world, where they are called to live.
- Teachers at Trinity will model the faith, hope, and love that we want to cultivate in our children.

- Finally, in a good school children will enjoy learning in a way that trains them, prepares them, practices them for the enjoyment of heaven. To be sure, delight in E.B. White's prose is a far cry from eternal blessedness, but one has to start somewhere and to the one who has (such joy) more will be given.

I'm hoping that we and our children have a great voyage this year, that we take much joy in the journey, and that we never forget where we are going.