

## WHAT ARE WE MAKING? CHIP DENTON

The only job I ever quit was at the end of the bacon line, during the summer between my freshman and sophomore years of college. I am not proud of the fact that after six weeks that seemed like an endless summer of toil, I told my supervisor that I couldn't work another day stacking a dozen packages of bacon in a cardboard box and sending them sailing down the conveyor belt to the loading dock below. The utter monotony was driving me crazy, and I stood in awe of the two women up the line who had been at this for a score of years.

The next summer's job was far and away more strenuous. I was the "go-fur" for a highly skilled and even more highly dysfunctional family of brick masons who paid me cash at the end of each week for hauling bricks, mortar, and water up their scaffolding, where they stood and cursed me as they built, brick by brick, a complex of mini-storage facilities.

Neither of these experiences was particularly pleasurable, but in the latter was a certain satisfaction that was wholly lacking in the former. I have since come to understand the difference between these two jobs as that between doing and making. At the meat packing company I was merely doing something. My work was over-specialized, and although I became quite good at it, my skill was nothing more than dexterity and gave me no real satisfaction. I knew what I was doing, but I had no concern for what I was making. Those six weeks, more than any course I ever took, helped me to understand Marx's idea that industrial society alienates the worker from his work.

In contrast, my stint as a mason's laborer was significantly more engaging, even if also more difficult, as could be seen from the blisters on my hands. While mixing mud and moving scaffolding, I had the chance to watch some masters who had proven themselves by long practice. And, what is more important, I had the chance to watch buildings rise from the footings up to the roof-line. Even today, as I drive down Interstate 40 through West Knoxville, I can show my children the buildings I helped to construct. In that job, I not only did something; I made something.

Here at Trinity School we are quite busy. Anyone who watches for a half hour will see what we are doing, but the really critical question is this: What are we making? Dorothy Sayers has attempted to answer this question in her essay entitled "The Lost Tools of Learning":

We have lost the tools of learning—the axe and the wedge, the hammer and the saw, the chisel and the plane—that were so adaptable to all tasks. Instead of them, we have merely a set of complicated jigs, each of which will do but one task and no more, and in using which eye and hand receive no training, so that no man ever sees the work as a whole or "looks to the end of the work." What use is it to pile task on task and prolong the days

of labour, if at the close the chief object is left unattained? It is not the fault of the teachers—they work only too hard already. The combined folly of a civilization that has forgotten its own roots is forcing them to shore up the tottering weight of an educational structure that is built upon sand. They are doing for their pupils the work which the pupils themselves ought to do. **For the sole end of education is simply this: to teach men how to learn for themselves; and whatever instruction fails to do this is effort spent in vain** (emphasis added).

Ms. Sayers offers the old tradition of grammar, logic, and rhetoric as the tools that teach this art of learning, though she admitted that “it is in the highest degree improbable that the reforms I propose will ever be carried into effect.” Here at Trinity we are trying to beat those odds with a program that is founded on this “Trivium.” We have made much progress in our first three years, and the challenge is for us to go forward by going back, again and again, to this old way of doing school.

As if Ms. Sayers’ challenge were not enough, in itself, we at Trinity have said that we are trying to do more. What we are trying to make is not simply a thinking being, but a human being. This may not be more than Sayers meant, but it is more than she said, and it is part of our mission as a school. At Trinity we have pledged ourselves to education in truth, goodness, and beauty. These three words demarcate a large and expansive vision of education, a huge area, as it were, bounded by the intellectual, the moral and the aesthetic. To leave any of these three out makes education defective; to violate any is to spoil the entire project.

Our teachers at Trinity care about all of these things. They are not specialists who touch-land in the classroom and dispense wisdom on our kids, like some Gnostic redeemers; they are people who know our children and care about them deeply. They wipe their noses, apply band-aids to their cuts, and open their fruit cups. They pray for our children and visit their basketball games. Even as they are busy with the nitty-gritty details of the work of teaching—grading, cutting, pasting, planning, and more grading—even then they are deeply concerned with matters of character and the people our children are becoming. When our teachers approach us parents to discuss the larger issues of character, I hope that we can see them as allies. Dealing with matters of honesty or respect is not a sideline for them, an interruption in their pedagogical project. No, such work is part of the real work, the best work, the work that makes their efforts count.