



# Re-Humanising Education

Stephen Blackwood and Bernadette Guthrie



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## Introduction

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The past century has seen an explosion of access to formal education at all levels, with more individuals across the globe receiving both basic and advanced education than ever before. One might well expect that this expansion of access would result in a more varied and diverse educational landscape; yet instead, we have witnessed an increasing homogenisation of educational pathways. In short, while education has become more open, it has also become more uniform and—in too many cases—less human. This report seeks to preserve and promote the good of increased educational access, while also ensuring that the formative pathways available are of sufficient range to enable the actualisation of the highly diverse talents, interests, and abilities of any generation.

Increased access to educational institutions cannot fully empower citizens if those institutions lose the unique characteristics that made them worth seeking entry to in the first place. Treating university as the sole route to economic stability or cultural contribution, for example, turns it into an onerous obligation rather than one attractive option among others. Moreover, treating the ultimate goal of primary and secondary education as preparation for university leads to a hyper-standardisation of those environments that is often directly counter to the healthy and holistic development of students.

In our often-single-minded focus on institutionalised modes of education, we also risk forgetting the rich legacy of other forms of educational practice. These forms, some of which were born of necessity due to material deprivation or institutional exclusion, reveal the ingenuity and wisdom of the countless individuals and communities who created and sustained them. Exploring this educational inheritance can help us discern—at a critical moment with much at stake—how best to meet the challenges of our own time. History offers an illuminating and inspiring variety of examples of extraordinary individuals who accomplished great things without a university degree, including—to name only a few—Alexander the Great, John the Apostle, Catherine the Great, Charlemagne, Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, Albrecht Durer, J S Bach, Queen Elizabeth I, Abraham Lincoln, Ada Lovelace, Jane Austen, Alfred Tennyson, Thomas Edison, Coco Chanel, Martha Argerich, and Steve Jobs. The very fact that none of these individuals had anything resembling a contemporary education should radically liberate our thinking about what is possible—and indeed what may be necessary—for the realisation of human potential today.

This report aims, in part, to look at the varied types of formation available beyond university degree programs and even beyond the typical institutional approaches to primary and secondary schooling. While recognising the vital importance of education and development outside of the university, we will also attend to the unique contributions that the university can make—and traditionally has made—in the lives of both individuals and societies. Freeing the university from the demand that it be all things to all people will allow it to once again commit itself to its vital role as a guardian of our shared human inheritance, and as a living affirmation that the pursuit of truth has an importance that exceeds any economic or technological contribution it might produce.

We begin, in the first section of this report, with a consideration of three challenges for education in the present: the ascendance of standardisation, the loss of meaning, and the crisis of attention. The

remainder of the report does not propose a one-size-fits-all solution to these challenges, but instead surveys a wide range of approaches to education, both past and present, and derives from them fundamental principles that might animate and inform a variety of responses. The second section of the report opens with a philosophical reflection on the character of an authentic education, which is then concretely illustrated through a consideration of numerous traditional sites of education—from the ancient Greek gymnasium, to the medieval monastery, to the Renaissance guild—and of some of the extraordinary individuals that have been formed by them. The third section lays out a set of broad principles derived from this historical survey, and offers recommendations for how individuals, institutions, and governments might approach decision-making and reform in light of them. The fourth and final section considers a diverse array of contemporary educational initiatives at the governmental, institutional, and personal levels that seek to put these principles into practice as they revive and reinvent older forms of education to meet the challenges—and opportunities—of the present.

## Challenges

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### The Rise of Standardisation

The top-down approach to education that dominates at present—one that tends to ignore or even actively repress the needs and aspirations of both individuals and communities—has complex and varied historical roots. Strikingly, this change appears across a wide variety of national and ideological contexts and represents a larger shift towards “rational” and standardised practices across all elements of daily life.

The revolutionary French context offers particularly stark examples of top-down practices designed to suppress or co-opt long-established forms of communal life. The most dramatic of these is the suppression of the Gregorian calendar and its replacement by the French Republican calendar, which reset 1792 to “Year 1”. The French Republican calendar was introduced at the same time as the decimal system and, through it, its architects attempted to establish the same level of standard measurement. While there were still 12 months, each month had exactly three weeks consisting of ten days—leftover days were converted into a year-end holiday in celebration of “the revolutionary working class.” The day was also divided “rationally”, “into ten hours each, of 100 minutes each, of 100 seconds each.”<sup>1</sup> While the French Republican calendar ultimately proved a failure—Napoleon reinstated the Gregorian calendar 12 years after the adoption of the French Republican calendar—other revolutionary changes proved more durable.

Christopher Dawson dramatically describes the effect of this revolutionary abstract rationalism on education:

“...when the [French] revolution came, the old educational institutions found no defenders. The twenty-two universities of France, including the University of Paris, the most famous of all the universities of Europe, fell without a struggle. Their privileges were abolished, their endowments were confiscated, and finally by the law of September 1793, they were totally suppressed, together with the colleges and most of the surviving secondary schools... Thus, every obstacle was removed which could stand in the way of a complete reorganization of the whole system of national education.”<sup>2</sup>

In the immediate wake of this destruction, several bureaucratic forms of “rational” education were proposed in swift succession, though they largely “remained paper schemes.”<sup>3</sup> A permanent

replacement for the old system only emerged after Napoleon assumed power. In 1805, he wrote: “Of all political questions, education is perhaps the most important.”<sup>4</sup>

Napoleon devoted substantial resources to developing and maintaining a system that was compulsory, highly standardised, and productive of the type of citizen he desired. The establishment of this new system was accomplished at the highest administrative level, which exerted complete control over local educational institutions. He founded by decree, in 1806, an Imperial University that:

“...covered the whole field of education and the whole territory of the Empire. It was a hierarchical authoritarian organization which possessed a complete educational monopoly, for after 1808 it became illegal to establish any school or any establishment of education whatsoever outside the Imperial University and without the authorization of its head, the Grand Master.”<sup>5</sup>

The system of top-down standardisation that emerged in French education bears a remarkable resemblance to reforms ushered in by a rather different revolution: the Industrial Revolution, which swiftly laid waste to older forms of communal life through economic rather than ideological force. In contrast to agrarian and artisanal economies, which encouraged settled living and mastery, the industrial economy that emerged in Britain in the 19<sup>th</sup> century rewarded movement and interchangeability. Like the machines they operated, the industrial workforce was composed of interchangeable parts; mass production quickly begot both “the masses” and “mass culture”, forces whose power lay in their standardisation and their resultant capability for endless, mechanical repetition.

Unsurprisingly, this approach also led to rapid shifts in education. “Factory schools”, which were first developed in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Prussia, adopted the now-familiar structure of sorting students into grades based upon age, and then annually advancing them based on the achievement of expected levels of curricular mastery. This new education system, like the factories for which it produced workers, was remarkably efficient. It aimed to produce a particular kind of working subject, one suited for the new conditions of labour: “Workers who had always spent their working days in a domestic setting, had to be taught to follow orders, to respect the space and property rights of others, be punctual, docile, and sober.”<sup>6</sup>

Despite their divergent motives, both the French revolutionaries and the British industrialists constructed highly engineered, standardised systems of education to remould the populace efficiently and often brutally for the useful ends of a small elite. These new forms of schooling quickly became compulsory, sweeping aside the structures of education that had previously existed within given communities, and, in many cases, undermining the natural bonds that gave those communities cohesion and purpose. Just as factory work moved production outside of the home, creating a hard divide between a “private” and “unproductive” domestic space and a “public” and “productive” sphere of labour, so also did factory education relocate childhood education from the “private” space of the home or workshop to the “public” space of the classroom.<sup>7</sup> This waning role of domestic spaces occurred alongside a massive movement of individuals and families away from deeply rooted agrarian communities and towards cities, now the ascendent site of productivity.<sup>8</sup>

These dynamics exhibit the qualities that cultural critic Paul Kingsnorth—building on an idea first articulated by Lewis Mumford—refers to as “the Machine”, an animating social dynamic that exerts a deeper and more pervasive influence on cultural change than any particular political ideology could:

“Conquest and expansion are the essence of the Machine. If it could be said to have ideology, it would be the breaking of bounds, the destruction of limits, the homogenisation of everything in its pursuit of its continued growth. The end result of

this is the flattening of the world—cultures, ecosystems, landscapes, traditions: any forms of resistance which limit the scope of its kingdom. The Machine is, to its core, anti-limits and anti-form: which means anti-nature, and thus anti-human.”<sup>9</sup>

While our present educational system appears to be less interested in producing uniform subjects than the earlier French revolutionary or British industrial systems, it has become ever more standardised and technocratic in its approach to testing, curriculum, and pedagogy. Indeed, in many senses it exhibits even more strongly the core elements that Kingsnorth identifies with “the Machine.”

Today, high schools and universities speak enthusiastically about the need to produce adaptable students who have maximal flexibility in both their future careers and their personal identities, an approach that increasingly focuses on “transferable skills” over disciplinary mastery and deep immersion in a subject. School branding materials promise an education that is “boundless” and oriented toward a formless “potential” in its students. If the older systems of totalising education sought to produce students of a uniform and set type, the present system aims at a permanently plastic one. The goal is not to produce a certain kind of person—a given character— but instead what the philosopher Byung-Chul Han refers to as “a human being without character”, one who is “flexible, able to assume any form, play any role, or perform any function.”<sup>10</sup> This newly plastic subject is, if anything, even more uprooted than the children of the revolution or the factory. Hence, we find an increasing focus on “transferable skills”, competencies that can be effortlessly ported from one context to another.

And, once again, one finds strange ideological bedfellows among those who shape these systems. “Disruption” is an ever-present buzzword in university humanities departments, where it signals the critique and deconstruction of “normative” structures, but it is also a beloved catchword in business schools, where it stands for the “creative destruction” of older economic and technological modes. Matthew Crawford has observed that, in the contemporary educational landscape, there is a pervasive fear of anything that feels definitive. He sees the decline in skilled trades training as a direct result of this concern: “Craftsmanship entails learning to do one thing really well, while the ideal of the new economy is to be able to learn new things, celebrating potential rather than achievement.”<sup>11</sup>

Yet it is not only the “new economy” that celebrates permanent potential. The active encouragement of students, especially very young students, to think in “fluid” terms about sex, embodiment, and even one’s own humanity exhibits a remarkably similar renunciation of the definite or the determinate. The cultivation of an indefinite openness in one’s personal identity serves as a cultural corollary to one’s economic identity as a standing reserve of “potential”. When the self has been shaped for shapelessness and fixed forms of communal life have been subsumed by a constant transit of goods, people, identity, and information, it is hardly surprising that individuals increasingly experience their world as one devoid of meaning.

## The Loss of Meaning

Part of what makes the shapeless nature of the present so destructive to our sense of collective meaning is that this fluidity is fundamentally incompatible with an experience of rootedness. Simone Weil observes that, “To be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognised need of the human soul. It is one of the hardest to define. A human being has roots by virtue of his real, active and natural participation in the life of a community which preserves in living shape certain particular treasures of the past and certain particular expectations of the future.”<sup>12</sup> In the absence of such roots and the corresponding sense of community and continuity that they create, it is extremely difficult for individuals to assemble a coherent and stable narrative for their lives.

Pointing to marked increases in depression, anxiety, loneliness, and suicide, cognitive scientist John Vervaeke has argued that our present moment represents a “meaning crisis”, one defined by “an increase of people feeling very disconnected from themselves, from each other, from the world, [and] from a viable and foreseeable future.”<sup>13</sup> This growing sense of disconnection is dramatically illustrated by what some sociologists term the “friendship recession”, one which is occurring alongside ongoing declines in religious practice, marriage, and participation in other institutions that have traditionally enabled people to live meaningfully in concert with others.<sup>14</sup> A 2021 survey of American adults found that 12% reported having no close friends—a four-fold increase from the 1990s, when the number was 3%.<sup>15</sup> A 2021 study in the United Kingdom found an “epidemic of loneliness” among Britons under the age of 35, with 20% reporting that they had one or no close friends.<sup>16</sup>

The breakdown of shared narratives of meaning and the resultant atomisation of individuals has had dire implications for both students and the educational system. Between 2009 and 2021, the number of American high school students who described themselves as having “persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness” increased from 26 to 44%.<sup>17</sup> In a recent survey by Yale researchers, the top three adjectives high school students used to describe “how they felt at school” were “tired,” “stressed,” and “bored.”<sup>18</sup> While a wide variety of factors—including, notably, the COVID-19 pandemic—have contributed to this alarming growth in student apathy and despair, it is clear that our contemporary schooling systems have not provided students with the sense of purpose or of collective identity that they need in order to overcome these feelings of disconnection and hopelessness. As Neil Postman observed several decades ago: “Without a narrative, life has no meaning. Without meaning, learning has no purpose. Without a purpose, schools are houses of detention, not attention.”<sup>19</sup> Writing in 1995, Postman observed that, “[i]n considering how to conduct the schooling of our young adults, there are two problems to solve: one is an engineering problem; the other, a metaphysical one.”<sup>20</sup> Three decades later, we have spent an overwhelming amount of time, money, and resources trying to address the “engineering problem” of education; we have spent precious little addressing the “metaphysical one.”

The technocratic approach to education—one that sees reform principally as an “engineering problem”—is longstanding and is not limited to primary and secondary schooling. Indeed, one of the most striking examples of the “loss of meaning” in education is the transformation of the traditional university into what Clark Kerr, president of the University of California from 1958 to 1967, termed the “multiversity.” One of the chief architects of the modern university system, Kerr wrote in 1963: “The university started as a single community—a community of masters and students. It may even be said to have had a soul in the sense of a central animating principle. Today, the large American university is, rather, a whole series of communities and activities held together by a common name, a common governing board, and related purposes.”<sup>21</sup> In other words, the shared narrative had been replaced by a sort of shared proceduralism. This necessitated a far greater role for administrators: “As the institution becomes larger, administration becomes more formalized and separated as a distinct function; as the institution becomes more complex, the role of administration becomes more central in integrating it; as it becomes more related to the external world, the administration assumes the burdens of these relationships.”<sup>22</sup>

Indeed, university administration has grown at a staggering pace in the decades following Kerr’s announcement of its necessity. At Yale, for instance, between 2003 and 2021, “managerial and professional staff” increased by 44.7%, a growth rate three times faster than that of the undergraduate student body.<sup>23</sup> Large-scale trends in American higher education show a decline in the amount of money spent on actual instruction of students and a corresponding increase in administrative services.<sup>24</sup> One cannot help but wonder if some of the problems that these increased administration and amenities are meant to address—including skyrocketing levels of student disengagement and a growing mental health crisis—might not be due, in part, to the loss of the “central animating principle” that once gave the university its soul.

In short, our lost sense of shared meaning has caused widespread breakdown in our social institutions—from church to school to state—and this institutional breakdown has, in its turn, deepened our sense of meaninglessness. The fragmentation that manifests itself externally in our increased disconnection from one another is also present in our interior lives, where its effects are even more intimately felt. It is to this breakdown of our attention that we now turn.

## The Crisis of Attention

Attention is both a product of and prerequisite for an authentic education; it is also in increasingly short supply. In his book *The Attention Merchants*, Tim Wu traces the origins of the dramatic decline in our collective attention to the rise of modern advertising in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, particularly the appearance of provocative, easily reproducible, large-scale posters in Paris:

“The giant Parisian poster wasn’t the first mass-produced poster; it was, however, a technological and conceptual innovation. For despite being static, the Parisian posters evoked a sense of frantic energy in their bright, contrasting colors, and beautiful, half-dressed women—elements that made them nearly impossible to ignore. There were always, of course, arresting sights to behold in art and nature. But the posters were commercial and scalable.”<sup>25</sup>

A “commercial and scalable” technology that can command attention to a degree previously unattainable by either nature or art. A produced and reproduced spectacle that is “nearly impossible to ignore.” A deliberate sensory overload and erotic provocation. It requires little imagination to draw a line from *fin-de-siècle* Paris to our own age’s enthrallment to the digital distractions and dopamine hits on order in everything from Candy Crush to TikTok to content of a more explicit nature.

Of course, our technologies of distraction are exponentially more pervasive and more sophisticated than their 19<sup>th</sup>-century predecessors—and far more deleterious in their effects on our attention and on our mental, emotional, and moral wellbeing. Researchers have increasingly raised the alarm about these effects. Adam Gazzaley and Larry D Rosen—a neuroscientist and a psychologist—note that we are living with “ancient brains in a high-tech world,” one that involves a constant neurological experience of “goal interference,” which cripples our ability to maintain focus while saddling us with expectations for “immediate responsiveness and continuous productivity.”<sup>26</sup> As Gazzaley and Rosen observe, the great achievements of human civilisation—art, literature, engineering, philosophy, music—emerge from our uniquely human ability to pursue “[c]omplex, interwoven, time-delayed, and often shared goals”, something that we find it increasingly difficult to do.<sup>27</sup>

Our attention spans are dropping at a staggering rate. Research has found that, while workers task-switched roughly every 2.5 minutes in 2012, they now do so every 47 seconds.<sup>28</sup> Multitasking—increasingly the norm for both work and study—is correlated with heightened levels of stress and anxiety and is a contributor to burnout. While all our digital distractions take their toll, some have proven to be especially harmful. Heavy social media use may develop a neural hypersensitivity to social rewards and punishments in adolescents, resulting in yet more compulsive use of that media.<sup>29</sup> Heavy pornography use has both short- and long-term consequences on executive functioning, including an increased inability to delay gratification.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, a large and growing body of research has found that internet pornography addiction produces fundamentally similar neurological changes in the brain as substance dependence.<sup>31,32,33</sup> It is especially concerning that young people, whose brains are in crucial stages of development, are particularly heavy consumers of both social media and pornography.

These combined assaults on our attention and our self-control are so severe that they led one attention researcher to conclude: “There is no way we can have a normal brain today.”<sup>34</sup> But we do ourselves no favours by adopting an attitude of fatalism in the face of this assault on our attention and on our minds. Too often our educational approaches simply take for granted that students are unable to concentrate, offering materials in bite-sized, easily-digestible portions that reinforce—rather than challenge—young people’s consumption habits. This attitude of resignation, and the substance-less content it produces, ultimately denies students the very possibility of serious engagement with a subject.<sup>35</sup>

One proactive response to the attention crisis that has become increasingly popular is the development and promotion of individual techniques for improving one’s focus and workflow. Such “hacks” are an invaluable tool for individuals seeking freedom from the worst effects of our attention drain, but techniques and “survival skills” alone will not fully repair the damage done. Attentiveness is not merely a skill but a virtue—it is a feature of our moral character that must be developed and sheltered.<sup>36</sup> And the process of developing this virtue is, in part, an ascetic one. As the cultural critic Alan Jacobs observes, “[t]he question of what I should give attention to is inseparable from the question of what I should decline to give attention to.”<sup>37</sup>

Simone Weil states that:

“...every time that a human being succeeds in making an effort of attention with the sole idea of increasing his grasp of truth, he acquires a greater aptitude for grasping it, even as his efforts produce no visible fruit... Every effort adds a little gold to a treasure no power on earth can take away.”<sup>38</sup>

An ideal educational space, then, is one that invites the students to “make an effort of attention,” allowing them to develop the active habits of mind that are at once a bulwark against passive distraction and the basis of a self-directed life. There is much on this front that past forms of education have to teach us—and it is notable that many of these were effectively forms of life, an entire ordering of one’s environment and one’s activity toward a particular good that was pursued with concentrated attention. These past forms aimed to produce not merely a set of skills, but a kind of character.

## The Character of Education

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Recent years have witnessed a growing interest in “character education,” a variety of initiatives designed to help students develop characteristics like loyalty, honesty, and resilience in addition to a set of discrete academic skills. Yet our tendency to think of “skills acquisition” as distinct from the more holistic work of self-formation marks a deviation from the traditional view of the end of education: historically understood, education has almost always been, in some sense, “character education.” The “*paideia*” of ancient Greece aimed to form men who were *kalokagathos*, “beautiful and good”; the “*Bildung*” of 19<sup>th</sup>-century Germany sought to shape individuals capable of ongoing self-cultivation; and the university system of Victorian England to produce “gentlemen.” This project of formation was hardly limited to education for the political and economic elite. What we would now term “job skills training” unfolded in the contexts of guilds and apprenticeship systems that aimed to induct young people into a particular community and way of life through mastery of a trade. The rich intellectual and artistic culture that flourished within medieval monasteries—and which laid the initial foundation for the university as we know it—came about not through an interest in culture or learning in the abstract but rather through the monks and nuns’ desire to become saints. And education in the home, the principal way by which most individuals have been educated throughout history, necessarily touched on all aspects of young people’s character and experience as it prepared them for entry into the wider community. While the



character they aimed to produce differed, all these forms of education sought to mould a particular type of person rather than a mere set of competencies.

Before turning to a more detailed account of these older forms of education, we would like first to reflect in broad terms on the character of education and, more specifically, on the particular qualities of character—the virtues—that any truly human education must endeavour to cultivate. Foremost among these are honesty, gratitude, humility, and restraint; an education that lacks these virtues risks becoming a process of deformation rather than one of authentic formation. These qualities should be present at both an individual and a communal level, and the reflections offered here are intended to encourage the individual cultivation of these virtues in educators and students as well as to serve as guiding principles for institutional reform on the part of administrators or policymakers.

## Honesty

Dishonesty will ultimately corrode any form of human community, but it is particularly damaging to those that are united in the shared pursuit of truth. The philosopher Jean-Luc Marion puts this most pointedly when he observes that, “plagiarism and cheating are unpardonable sins at the university, unpardonable because anyone who commits them proves in fact that he never entered into the logic of the university. There is no need to even expel him, since he never entered and does not belong there.”<sup>39</sup>

While emergent Artificial Intelligence technology is making it easier than ever to cheat—and to get away with it—the widespread, dishonest use of these technologies suggests a broader breakdown in our collective understanding of the purpose of education. As Leah Lebresco Sargeant puts it:

“Students cheat because they believe that the grade they receive in their class—and the degree they receive at the end of four years—is more valuable than the material they’re allegedly there to learn... The cheating began with university administrators, when they started to substitute a credentialing process for an actual commitment to the formation of a certain kind of student.”<sup>40</sup>

Indeed, widespread academic dishonesty appears to be, in part, the consequence of a growing cynicism on the part of both educators and students. The situation has grown so dire in higher education that it is being increasingly described as an epidemic of disengagement.<sup>41,42</sup> This attitude is often compounded by a transactional view of education, one where “grades and credentials are equated with currency: students are paid in points... in return for educational goods (assignments) and services (participation).”<sup>43</sup>

How do we combat this corrosive cynicism? We must recommit ourselves, both individually and collectively, to the pursuit of truth. Zena Hitz observes that, “a lie in the service of lower ends denies the dignity of the human capacity for rational belief; by contrast, seeking the truth at all costs recovers that dignity, reminds us of surer footing.”<sup>44</sup> In other words, honesty honours both humanity and reality. While cynicism represents a cowardly flight from our responsibility to boldly engage with reality and with one another, honesty calls us to courageous engagement with the truth of our existence.

## Gratitude

Gratitude begets generosity: if we understand ourselves as heirs of a rich inheritance, then the natural response will be to share what has been given to us. As Cicero writes:

“...there is no quality I would sooner have, and be thought to have, than gratitude. For gratitude not merely stands alone at the head of all the virtues, but is even mother of all the rest... [H]ow can friendship exist at all between those who are devoid of gratitude? Who is there of us that has received an enlightened upbringing who does not constantly ponder with grateful recollection upon those who had the care of him, upon his tutors and teachers, and even upon the inanimate scenes of his rearing and schooling? Who is there, who has there ever been, so rich in material wealth as to be independent of the good offices of many friends?... who ever had such resources in himself as to be able to stand without many acts of kindness on the part of many friends?— and yet no such acts can possibly exist, if you take away memory and gratitude.”<sup>45</sup>

Notably, Cicero’s list of those to whom we must be grateful for our formation encompasses both one’s elders and one’s friends—in other words, he prescribes a gratitude for the gifts of both the past and the present. Unfortunately, so much of our contemporary discourse—which boils with particular violence in debates about education and in many of our educational spaces—seeks to pass off the facile anger of resentment and grievance politics as courageous truth-telling. On the Left, one often finds a stubborn refusal to acknowledge that the past has anything worthy of preservation—it is a thing to be condemned, cancelled, and critiqued. On the Right, one often meets a similar refusal to concede that the present might offer any gains—it is a thing to be rejected, mocked, and undone. We have far more confidence in our hates than in our loves. While we can easily list what was taken from us (or what we were never given in the first place), we struggle to even name what we have.

Authentic formation can hardly take root in such hardened soil; the deliberate and sustained cultivation of gratitude is necessary for us to recover a disposition of receptivity. Indeed, this disposition is at its most necessary when one becomes conscious that something is broken and in need of repair. As Sir Roger Scruton observed, “The person who repairs must love the broken object, and must love also the process of repair and all that pertains to it.”<sup>46</sup> As with the cultivation of honesty, so also will the deliberate practice of gratitude inspire in us an authentic courage that allows us to take the risks necessary to defend, repair, preserve, and build.

Several decades of research on gratitude have consistently found that it has a significant positive impact on individuals and communities—but the deliberate practice of it requires a conscious commitment.<sup>47</sup> As Mark Edmundson, a professor of English at the University of Virginia recently observed, “Disapproval is easy. Contempt, derision, condescension, looking down: they come to us as child’s play. Love’s a lot tougher.”<sup>48</sup> Yet an *ethos* of gratitude can take shape within an educational community simply by individuals’ making the difficult but rewarding decision to teach and learn with gratitude: a professor might devote one of her lectures to a text, or an object, or an experiment that she truly loves and that has been personally meaningful to her, declaring that love and attachment openly and without embarrassment in her lecture; a high schooler, confronted with negative feedback on a project, might embrace the opportunity to improve and refine his work rather than reacting with anger; a graduate student might resolve to listen to his peers with care and attention, seeking what is valuable in their perspectives, rather than viewing them as intellectual opponents to be vanquished or ideological enemies to be “owned.”

## Humility

The openness that fosters a receptive attitude of gratitude is also present in the virtue of humility, in a sense of one’s own limitations and finitude and an appropriate reverence for the vastness of the field of knowledge. No one can begin to be educated until they are willing to admit that there are, in fact,

still things they need to learn—and even great masters of their field can attest to the fact that gains in knowledge are always accompanied by a growing awareness of all that one still does not know. As Jean-Luc Marion puts it, “Students: when you enter university, you will learn many things, but nothing so decisive as the immensity of what you will not know and what your instructors also do not know.”<sup>49</sup>

The cultivation of intellectual humility has both academic and moral benefits. It has been found to correlate with greater levels of effort when studying difficult material and a greater receptivity to feedback.<sup>50</sup> Individuals with high levels of intellectual humility are also less likely to treat those with whom they disagree with derision or contempt.<sup>51</sup> At the same time, recognising one’s own limits should not be confused with a facile open-mindedness that refuses to ever commit itself. For humility also countenances that one submit oneself to truth once it presents itself. As A D Sertillanges observes in his classic treatise on the intellectual life, “submission to truth is the binding condition for communion with it... By thought we *find* things, we do not make them; refusal to submit means missing them; not to meet them in a docile spirit, is to evade the meeting.”<sup>52</sup> Thus humility involves the simultaneous recognition of the limitations of one’s own understanding and the unlimited claim of truth on that understanding.

## Restraint

Restraint—itsself a fruit of humility—recognises that the pursuit of knowledge contributes to our formation and flourishing only when it unfolds within appropriate limits, limits that respect both natural and moral realities. An awareness of the necessity of this virtue permeates Western culture from its beginnings. In Greek mythology, Icarus is destroyed by flying too close to the sun; in Plato’s *Symposium*, Socrates rejects the amorous advances of his student Alcibiades by redirecting his lower, carnal impulses toward a higher desire for knowledge and the good. In both cases, a grasping attitude produced by unchecked passion is seen as inimical to the acquisition of true wisdom—a path to self-destruction or slavery rather than to authentic liberty, a boundary crossing that destroys the possibility of the very knowledge it seeks to gain.

Restraint, on the other hand, is a manifestation of a true love for the object of concern and for wisdom itself; it is a recognition that we can know rightly only by loving rightly. As Simone Weil observes, “to love purely is to consent to distance, it is to adore the distance between ourselves and that which we love.”<sup>53</sup> An awareness of the necessity of respecting natural and ethical limits continues to inform institutional prohibitions on certain forms of research or of intimate relationships between teachers and students. However, there is a danger that—without a clear articulation of *why* these prohibitions exist—these rules will be seen as arbitrary bureaucratic directives rather than as safeguards of human freedom and will consequently be kept, if they are kept at all, only out of a fear of punishment.

Here, as with all the other virtues discussed, institutional structures and policies, while certainly necessary, are not sufficient in themselves to create a flourishing educational space. What is necessary is something more vital and more elusive: a shaping of the fundamental character of the individuals in that space, teachers, and students alike. It is to a more detailed examination of the historical sites in which that shaping has traditionally taken place that we now turn in order to see, through the lives of several extraordinary historical figures, these virtues in practice.

## Forms of Life, Forms of Education

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### The Gymnasium

Alexander the Great (356-323 BC) needs little introduction, as he has been regarded—from his own era up to the present day—as one of the most effective military and political leaders of all time. While he only lived to be 33 years old, he succeeded in building the largest empire in the ancient world, uniting the Greek city states, and forging a panhellenic culture that became the foundation for the subsequent unfolding of Western civilisation. Alexander's education was hardly restricted to military arts, however; he was also well-educated in the liberal arts. At the age of 13, his father—King Philip II of Macedon—arranged for him and a small group of friends to be tutored by Aristotle, who instructed him in literature, science, and philosophy. While we have very few concrete details about what this education entailed, it appears that Alexander was particularly influenced by his exposure to Homer's *Iliad*—he would go so far as to claim to have been a descendent of Achilles on his mother's side.<sup>54</sup> Yet what is most noteworthy for our present purposes is that Alexander's father found it necessary to recruit a great philosopher (Aristotle had been, at the time, associated with Plato's Academy) to instruct his son in such a wide variety of subjects. That such an education was deemed necessary for a man destined for political and military life tells us much about the ancient Greek vision of education, or *paideia*.

The cultural and intellectual depth, richness, and influence of Ancient Greece is, of course, difficult to overstate. It is after all from Greek that we derive not only the categories of thought, and the words we use, for biology, physics, astronomy, mathematics, architecture, music, philosophy, poetry, and theology but also the insight that these both participate in and reveal an underlying and unifying coherence, or *logos*. If the Greek intellectual spirit aims to grasp the whole in each of the parts, then Greek education aims at the same end through the formation of the individual in relation to transcendent principles in the life of virtue.

From the earliest beginnings of Greek education—in the cave of the philosopher Pythagoras—the search for wisdom and understanding was undertaken in small communities devoted to that shared pursuit. That model is in some sense the fundamental paradigm for education for the whole history of Western civilisation: human-scaled communities in which the twin, complementary ends—of seeking truth and of living in relation to what is true—can be pursued in fellowship with others seeking those same ends. Crucially, the philosophical schools of Plato and Aristotle, and the many that precede and follow them, were not subordinated to narrow instrumental ends. Unlike the sophists, whose rhetorical powers were put to self-serving and cynical ends—even by making the weaker argument appear the stronger—the philosophers aimed to discover the fundamental principles, patterns, and nature of reality itself. This radical freedom in the pursuit of truth set in motion the most powerful intellectual-cultural trajectory in human history.

It is in this context that we can understand why King Philip II found it necessary to recruit one of the Academy's brightest stars so that Alexander might be shaped into a worthy leader: it was through Aristotle's teaching that he could gain knowledge of both the nature of the world and of how one might best comport oneself within it. While our knowledge of the character and content of their interactions is limited, if we seek to understand the educational models that have been most influential and effective then there may be no better place to begin than here, with the historic fact that Alexander the Great was tutored by Aristotle. That one of the greatest military generals in history—and indeed the one responsible for the spread of many of the ideas and ideals that remain the source and strength of Western civilisation today—was formed through individual instruction by one of the greatest philosophers in history testifies to the tectonic influence of small communities of learning and to the potency of expansive, deep, and non-instrumental education.



## The Monastery

It is tempting to call Hildegard of Bingen (~1098-1179 AD) a “Renaissance woman” even though she lived in the Middle Ages—in fact, the century whose culture she helped to define is often referred to as the “Twelfth-Century Renaissance.”<sup>55</sup> She became a figure of tremendous political and moral influence, counting among her correspondents popes, kings, and theologians. Her career as a preacher took her across the German Empire on four separate tours, where she called clerics to task for their worldly lives. She was also a prolific composer of liturgical music, which has proven among her most enduring cultural contributions. In addition to having one of the largest extant repertoires of any medieval composer, there are today more recorded performances of her music than of any other composer from the period. She is also among the “first identifiable composers in the history of Western music.”<sup>56</sup> In her own time, she was best known for her several books of mystical theology, which combined narration of complex visions with detailed commentary on those visions.

Hildegard’s tremendous cultural productivity and her wide-ranging influence was, curiously enough, the fruit of a cloistered, contemplative life, given over almost entirely to prayer and the cultivation of the interior life. Hildegard lived—from the age of 8 to 60—entirely within the walls of a monastery. When she died, at the ripe age of 82, she had spent less than 12 of her years outside of the cloister. Her life demonstrates one of the central paradoxes of monastic life as it was manifested in Europe: its vast contributions to the flourishing of the West came about precisely by its orientation toward something other than—and larger than—mere economic or cultural productivity.

Monastic life was defined by a continuous direction of the mind towards the contemplation of God. It was a life in which all daily activities were explicitly oriented to a single, transcendent purpose. In short, it was a life of concentrated attention. Key to the cultivation of this attention was a structure of constant repetition: one returned over and over to the same prayers, the same texts, and the same schedule of life. This structure allowed monks and nuns to immerse themselves entirely within the culture of the monastery and to engage at a deeply personal and intimate level with texts and ideas. It was a hallmark of medieval monastic writing—including Hildegard’s—that other texts were alluded to almost exclusively by spontaneous recollection rather than by being “looked up” or even directly cited. Jean Leclercq observes that, in these writings, “[r]eminiscences are not quotations, elements of phrases borrowed from another. They are the words of the person using them; they belong to him. Perhaps he is not even conscious of owing them to a source.”<sup>57</sup> The monastic style of reading and meditating on texts, especially the Bible, was often described in terms of rumination—of chewing upon the words—a metaphor that expresses the extent to which reading was understood as a process of incorporation.

In Hildegard’s case, this deep absorption is most powerfully seen in her musical compositions. She claimed to have had no formal musical training and her compositions are, in some sense, highly idiosyncratic. At the same time, however, they are clearly influenced by the liturgical music in which she would have been immersed within the monastery. Indeed, the distinctive quality of her musical work may come from having composed it under the influence of a tradition that she only knew only through direct experience. The music is itself almost entirely liturgical, offering new ways of singing ancient languages, and giving personal voice to texts that would have been an integral part of Hildegard’s daily life.

In short, Hildegard of Bingen’s extraordinary range of contributions illustrates that the cultivation of the individual soul and the cultivation of culture are intimately linked. The richness and variety of her work and the tremendous influence that she exerted over some of the most important public figures of her time testify to the fruitful potential of spaces dedicated to the single-minded development of the interior life. Her extraordinary life illustrates what Jean Leclercq identifies as “the paradox peculiar to the monastic institution;” namely, “that while its members turn their backs on the world they

nevertheless influence it, assisting in its transformation.”<sup>58</sup> Indeed the monastery, as a form of education and a form of life, particularly reveals the power of the virtues of humility and restraint: through a denial of worldly pleasures and a constant orientation toward the transcendent, the monks and nuns of the medieval era proved themselves capable not only of spiritual but also of cultural and intellectual greatness.

## The University

The “Twelfth-Century Renaissance” that witnessed the full flowering of monastic culture was also the occasion of the birth of the university, which evolved from the monastic and cathedral schools. The university’s origins in cathedral schools are of particular note, as the great architectural feat of the Middle Ages—the Gothic cathedral—shares a remarkably similar aim to that of the university: it looks to locate all the particulars of the world within a coherent vision of the whole. As the art historian Erwin Panofsky observes, “Like the High Scholastic *Summa*, the High Gothic cathedral aimed, first of all, at totality.”<sup>59</sup> The university’s fundamental orientation towards a wholeness of vision has long made the Gothic its most fitting architectural form, and it is little surprise that, as universities were first founded in North America, their campuses so enthusiastically embraced the Gothic revival. Notably, the Latin term, “*universitas*”, from which we derive our English word “university”, meant both “whole” and “community.” The medieval university was a “*universitas magistrorum et scholarium*”, a “community of teachers and students”—it was oriented towards a vision of the whole but also towards a corporate existence in which individuals found their place within a larger intellectual community.

While history affords countless examples of exemplary figures who were the product of a university education, the Victorian polymath John Henry Newman (1801-1890 AD) is of particular interest to our present project and its concern with recovery, repair, and reinvention. Newman rose to prominence as a defender and definer of the university at the very moment in which the medieval vision of the university was being supplanted by an increasingly specialised and siloed approach to higher studies. Newman wrote enduringly influential works of theology, philosophy, and church history in addition to poems, two novels, and a voluminous body of letters. His “*corpus*” is itself a testament to what he understood the purpose of the university to be: namely, the “true enlargement of mind which is the power of viewing many things at once as one whole, of referring them severally to their true place in the universal system.”<sup>60</sup>

Newman also clearly recognised a growing danger in the university education of his own day:

“...the error of distracting and enfeebling the mind by an unmeaning profusion of subjects; of implying that a smattering in a dozen branches of study is not shallowness, which it really is, but enlargement, which it is not... All things now are to be learned at once, not first one thing, then another, not one well, but many badly. Learning is to be without exertion, without attention, without toil; without grounding, without advance, without finishing. There is to be nothing individual in it.”<sup>61</sup>

For Newman, the two most essential qualities of the university were its ability to teach students to take a “philosophical or comprehensive view” and its instilling of this quality through personal influence. Indeed, Newman saw personal influence as an indispensable aspect of university study: “An academical system without the personal influence of teachers upon pupils, is an arctic winter; it will create an ice-bound, petrified, cast-iron University, and nothing else.”<sup>62</sup>

The power of Newman’s own personal influence was renowned during his time as a fellow of Oriel College, Oxford. As Newman himself observed, “I had lived with my... pupils, and with the junior fellows

of my College, without form of distance, on a footing of equality. Thus, it was through friends, younger, for the most part, than myself, that my principles were spreading.”<sup>63</sup> This prioritisation of friendship and personal influence would remain a hallmark of Newman’s life even after his conversion to Catholicism required him to resign from his position at Oriel. In 1849, he would found the Birmingham Oratory, a stable community of priests and lay brothers who were bound together not by formal vows, but solely by friendship and charity. And it was as rector of the newly formed Catholic University of Ireland (now University College Dublin) that he would deliver a series of lectures on the nature and purpose of the university that would be collected in his seminal book, *The Idea of a University*, arguably the most important Victorian work on the philosophy of education.

In our own time, the Gothic and neo-Gothic university buildings of yesteryear find themselves increasingly crowded out by a seemingly random hodgepodge of modern buildings, from brutalist concrete libraries to all-glass student centres, a loss of aesthetic coherence that seems to mirror the dissolution of the university’s former wholeness into the disciplinary fragmentation of what Kerr termed the “multiversity.” A place where, too often, the intellectual friendship that once bound together teachers and students seems to have given way to, in Newman’s words, an “ice-bound, petrified, cast-iron University.”<sup>64</sup> As such, those of us who work in the university might well benefit from falling under Newman’s own magnanimous influence and recapturing a vision of the wholeness not only of knowledge but of the community of scholars and teachers.

## The Guild

Like the monastery and the university, the guild was also a product of the Middle Ages; however, it was not until the Renaissance that it fully came into its own as an educational and economic institution. Craft guilds spanned a vast number of industries, from hatters and carpenters to masons and bakers, while merchant guilds regulated the trade of a wide variety of commodities from furs and silks to glass and spices. Indeed, the university itself first emerged from within a guild system. The University of Paris, the University of Bologna, and Oxford all began as *universitas* guilds, “a voluntary association of individual scholars rather than a single educational institution conducted by an organized staff.”<sup>65</sup>

The creative power of guild life is particularly well-illustrated by the Guild of St. Luke as it developed in the Netherlands, where its rise to prominence coincided with the “Dutch Golden Age” of painting, a period of artistic flourishing that produced artists like Johannes Vermeer (1632-1675 AD) and Rembrandt (1606-1669 AD). The St. Luke’s Guild represented artists and artisans, including “fine artists” like painters and sculptors, in addition to craftsmen such as potters and glass makers. As such, it retained a medieval understanding of “fine art” as a form of skilled trade, an enterprise that was essential communal.

Each St. Luke’s Guild was locally organised and operated independently of the guilds in other towns. It took its name from the patron saint of painters, St. Luke, who was popularly believed to have painted the first icon of the Virgin Mary. The adoption of a saint’s name is a nod towards the religious role of guilds in the Middle Ages, where they were often formed as “devotional and mutual aid societies,” in which members supported one another through prayers but also through the pooling of financial resources for funeral costs and other substantial expenses.<sup>66</sup>

While there were significant variations among individual guilds, and oftentimes significant divergences on the ground from the written bylaws of a guild, the standard method of training in a craft guild began with an apprenticeship, typically lasting four to six years, in which the apprentice would serve directly under a master. After successful completion of the apprenticeship, one would be deemed a journeyman, who could hire himself out as an assistant for wages. If accepted by the guild as a master, a member

was permitted to open his own workshop, manufacture and sell goods, and take on apprentices. Becoming a master often involved both the successful completion of an entrance exam and the payment of a fee. In some contexts, this entrance exam would involve the creation of a “master” piece that was judged on its quality and demonstrated one’s mastery of certain subjects or techniques.

Our historical knowledge of the specific operations of many of the guilds—and the particular details of individual artists’ training under the auspices of those guilds—is often limited. We do not, for instance, know with any certainty to whom Vermeer or Rembrandt was apprenticed. However, we have substantial knowledge of both the education and subsequent artistic career of Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640 AD), arguably the finest northern European painter of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, who as both apprentice and master was intimately involved with the Antwerp St. Luke’s Guild. Chartered in 1382, it was among the oldest and most important of the Dutch artists’ guilds.

Rubens’s education offers insight not only into the inner workings of guild life but also the richness and variety of early modern education more broadly. His paintings brilliantly synthesise his many educational influences, drawing together the classicism of the High Italian Renaissance with northern realism and the landscape tradition of figures like Peter Brueghel the Elder. Rubens also worked across an astonishingly wide variety of forms, producing not only paintings but “tapestries, book illustrations, and pageant decorations, as well as his own house and small items of sculpture and metalwork.”<sup>67</sup>

Born in Westphalia (in present-day Germany), Rubens moved to Antwerp with his mother when he was only 11 years old. At his mother’s behest, he received a humanist education in the Renaissance tradition, studying Latin and classical texts, which contributed to his lifelong artistic interest in classical subjects. He was also a court page for a nobleman; the courtly graces he developed proved an asset in his later life, where he regularly fielded commissions from the nobility. Yet it was under the auspices of masters in the St. Luke’s Guild that Rubens received his most influential training. He was apprenticed to a master landscape painter and distant relative, Tobias Verhaegt, for about two years before leaving to complete two four-year apprenticeships with Adam von Noort and Otto van Veen, both principally history painters. Van Veen, a classically educated artist in the humanist tradition, exerted a particularly strong influence on Rubens who—after his completion of his apprenticeship with van Veen—was accepted as a master in the Antwerp guild.

As was typical for many artists of his age, Rubens then spent several years traveling in Italy, where he was employed by the Duke of Mantua. During his time in Italy, Rubens acquainted himself with the work of the finest Italian painters, producing copies of many of the Renaissance paintings held in the Duke’s private collection. While in Rome, Rubens availed himself of the opportunity to visit the great works of Raphael and Michelangelo, often drawing copies of their work. Upon his mother’s death, Rubens returned to Antwerp where he would remain for most of his life, and where he set up a workshop of his own.

It was from this workshop that some of his most famous works—such as the Baroque masterpiece “Descent from the Cross” (~1612-1614 AD)—were produced. Just as he had been apprenticed to master painters during his own youth, he now became the teacher of the many pupils and apprentices who assisted him in his workshop. Among them was Anthony van Dyck, who would become the leading court painter in England. As both student and teacher, apprentice and master, Rubens’s life was shaped—artistically, economically, and culturally—by the Antwerp guild of St. Luke. His rich, prolific, and diverse body of work stands as a testament to his individual genius but also to the vibrant milieu in which he studied, created, and taught that located vocational training within a well-defined structure of communal life. The guild system both cultivated and evaluated mastery through field-specific interactions with established experts, avoiding the bureaucratic bloat that too often weighs down our present systems of education and certification.



Recent decades have witnessed a growing desire to revive the older—and often richer—forms of education and community life that flourished during the period of the guild. This impulse is evident in the renewal of interest in older techniques of formation for artists and artisans. For instance, the Grand Central Atelier, founded in Ridgewood, New York in 2014, offers a classical art education with traditional instruction in figural drawing, sculpture, and painting in the realist tradition. The American College of the Building Arts, profiled in greater detail in the closing section of this report, similarly draws upon traditional methods of instruction to form a new generation of blacksmiths, plasterers, and architects. At the governmental level, we have witnessed a revitalised interest in the apprenticeship system in industries ranging from plumbing to medicine, a phenomenon we explore in greater detail in our closing section.<sup>68</sup> While the guild no longer exists as a fully elaborated system of education, regulation, and community, its rich legacy can and should continue to inform our current attempts to create more organic forms of training for a wide variety of professions.

## The Home

The home has been the *“locus”* of education for the vast majority of individuals throughout history. Outside schooling of any type has largely been the exception rather than the rule. The list of individuals who were educated primarily or solely at home is thus tremendously vast. Numerous American presidents—including George Washington, John Quincy Adams, Abraham Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, and Franklin D. Roosevelt—received their primary education at home, as did several American luminaries, including Mark Twain and Thomas Edison.<sup>69</sup> Of course, given that the nature of education in the home varies greatly according to the home, it is difficult to locate a single exemplar of “home schooling”. Nonetheless, a clear sense of the rich (and idiosyncratic) possibilities of education in the home can be glimpsed in the childhood of one of the greatest English novelists, Jane Austen.

The educational influences in the Austen home were many and varied. Jane’s father ran a boarding school—of which he was both the headmaster and the solitary instructor, typically taking on about five students at a time. The family parlour was regularly occupied by his supervision of his pupils’ Greek and Latin studies. Mr. Austen’s son, Frank, would note that his father, “joined to an unusual extent of classical learning and a highly cultivated taste for literature in general, a remarkable suavity of temper and gentleness of manners.”<sup>70</sup> Jane’s mother was the niece of Dr. Theophilus Leigh, the Master of Balliol College, Oxford, and her uncle had encouraged her own literary talents, including her penchant for composing light verse, an avocation she pursued with zest throughout Jane’s childhood in addition to maintaining a lively household composed of her eight children and her husband’s boarding pupils.<sup>71</sup>

Much of Jane’s education came through the perusal of her father’s library, composed of over 500 books. Jane proved an avid reader; one biographer notes that:

“[a]lthough there were ‘Locks to the Book Case,’ no one seems to have stopped her from reading books for grown-ups. ‘At a very early age’ her family remembered, ‘she was enamoured of Gilpin [...her] favorite moral writers were Johnson in prose, and Cowper in verse.’”<sup>72</sup>

Much of her French was learned via her older cousin Eliza de Feuillide, who had married a Frenchman. She was taught the piano forte by an assistant organist of Winchester Cathedral, who offered private lessons. She would routinely play “the family’s large collection of music.” She also played often “from manuscript, copied out by herself.”<sup>73</sup> The practice of hand copying sheet music was a typical one at the time: “Friends would swap tunes, writing them out from each other’s printed sheet music, just as people swap playlists today.”<sup>74</sup>

From the ages of seven to nine, Jane was briefly sent to two girls' boarding schools, neither of which were particularly rigorous, and both of which tended to focus more on the cultivation of ornamental "accomplishments" than serious study. She was unhappy at both and "spoke scathingly of girls' schools and schoolmistresses for the rest of her life."<sup>75</sup> Her formal education thus ended at the age of ten and, of course, no possibility for university study existed for women at the time. Nonetheless, Jane was able to hone her literary skills through a variety of resources that remained available to her in the home.

The family routinely staged short theatrical performances, a relatively common pastime during the period; for these performances, Jane would often compose her own "prologues and epilogues" to be appended to standard works.<sup>76</sup> While at Oxford, Jane's brother James became the editor of *The Loiterer*, a weekly magazine, and the precocious young Jane likely published her first satirical work in this magazine under the pen name of "Sophia Sentiment" when she was only 13 years old. Both parents and siblings helped support her budding literary talents: "She was encouraged, was supplied with precious paper, was listened to and applauded."<sup>77</sup> Her father gifted her with her first three notebooks, which she filled up with her juvenilia. Two of them are now held in the British Library, the other in the Bodleian. Much of her early writings were dedicated to—and concerned with—her family members and some may have even been intended for communal performance. Her first review came from her father, who added this annotation to the front of one of her notebooks: "Effusions of Fancy by a very Young Lady Consisting of Tales in a Style entirely new."<sup>78</sup> While, at first blush, Austen's education may seem unrealistically unsystematic, it is worth remembering that this idiosyncratic education nonetheless produced one of the finest novelists in the English language—and one of the most insightful observers of human affairs.

Indeed, Austen's novels are themselves deeply concerned with the proper formation of young people's judgment and their ability to rightly "read" the world and the people in it. As one critic of her work observes:

"Austen shows over and over in her novels [that] education is not the acquisition of information nor a matter of native talent but the cultivation of the mind, and reading books, like reading people and situations, like conversation and manners, is something one must cultivate and improve, in oneself and others."<sup>79</sup>

And it is almost exclusively within domestic spaces that such cultivation occurs within the world of Austen. Austen's life and work gesture towards the rich possibilities that home education can provide and to the particular ability of domestic spaces to help shape the whole person, with an eye towards moral and psychological as well as intellectual development. Such spaces do not, of course, *guarantee* a positive shaping of those raised within them—many of Austen's novels highlight the diverse differences in moral and intellectual character among siblings raised in the same household—but these environments are consistently shown to possess the possibility of forming those who are willing to give themselves over to the process. As Elizabeth Bennett, the heroine of Austen's novel *Pride and Prejudice*, remarks about her education: "Such of us as wished to learn never wanted the means. We were always encouraged to read, and had all the masters that were necessary. Those who chose to be idle, certainly might."

From Austen's upbringing, we can glimpse some of the distinct affordances of home-schooling. Jane's education was particularly conformed to her talents, needs, and character and directed by those who knew her best: her parents and her siblings. Much of her learning came about informally through self-directed study (perusing her father's bookshelf) or through family leisure activities (the theatrical performances) rather than through direct and formal instruction. Austen's own novels also highlight a key role of education in the home: it aims to shape not only the mind but the moral character of young people, to teach them how to live well with others. The four virtues we identified as particularly

important to education—honesty, generosity, humility, and restraint—are notably also virtues that Austen depicts in her novels, which are pre-eminently concerned with the characteristics most necessary for a successful marriage and family life.

## The Book

The story of Frederick Douglass, famed abolitionist and one of America's greatest orators, illustrates the remarkable liberatory power of self-education, especially when that education is undertaken as a deliberate and courageous act of resistance to institutional and social structures designed to deprive one of the dignity and power that knowledge confers. While the process of self-education is in no way confined to encounters with texts, books nonetheless remain a privileged site for self-education and their power is amply demonstrated in Douglass's own journey to freedom.

Born into slavery in Maryland, Douglass never even knew the year of his birth. Around the age of 12, he was sold off the plantation on which he had been born to a city-dwelling family. His new mistress began to teach him the alphabet, until she was informed by her husband that it was "unlawful, as well as unsafe, to teach a slave to read" for "[h]e would at once become unmanageable, and of no value to his master. As to himself, it could do him no good, but a great deal of harm. It would make him discontented and unhappy." A slave should "know nothing but to obey his master." In his autobiography, Douglass observes that hearing his master say this was a moment of "new and special revelation": "From that moment, I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom."<sup>80</sup>

While Douglass's formal childhood education terminated abruptly with his knowledge of the alphabet, his informal education was just beginning. With extraordinary ingenuity and strength of will, Douglass taught himself to write by befriending poor white boys in the neighbourhood and giving them his own food in exchange for some little instruction until he was able to read. He managed to acquire a copy of *The Columbian Orator* by Caleb Bingham, a primer in rhetoric that included speeches and dialogues—many written by Bingham, but some taken from historical texts—by figures including Socrates, Cato, and George Washington. It also included several pieces arguing against slavery. These readings became his constant companion, though he would often "feel that learning to read had been a curse rather than a blessing. It had given me a view of my wretched condition, without giving me the remedy."<sup>81</sup>

It was in search of that remedy that Douglass embarked on the next stage of his education: learning to write. In the afternoon when his mistress was out, Douglass would take down an old copy-book of her son's that had been put aside and would re-copy the letters. He would ask boys out by the docks to write down letters. The process took years, but Douglass could at last write in a fair hand comparable to that of formally-educated slaveholders. He was thus able to "write his own pass"—and the pass of four other slaves, with whom he escaped to freedom in 1835.<sup>82</sup>

While his literacy served as the literal instrument of his liberty, it also unshackled his mind and set him on the path to becoming one of the most important, influential, and accomplished rhetoricians of his day. Speeches like "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?"—which were widely reproduced and disseminated as pamphlets—played a vital role in the ending of slavery in the United States and made Douglass a major figure in American public life. He travelled across Europe to gain support for the anti-slavery cause and, after the outbreak of the Civil War, he met with Abraham Lincoln on several occasions. After the war, he held several governmental positions, including becoming the first Black American marshal in 1877. Throughout his life, Douglass was a passionate advocate for the power of education. In 1895, at a speech delivered at a vocational institution for African Americans, he declared, "Education ... means light and liberty. It means the uplifting of the soul of man into the glorious light of

truth, the light only by which men can be free. To deny education to any people is one of the greatest crimes against human nature.”<sup>83</sup>

Douglass found freedom from his master in no small part through his own pursuit of mastery—in gaining competence and facility with the tools of language and in learning to navigate the great traditions of philosophy and rhetoric, Douglass lays claim to a dignity that was his by natural right but was denied by unjust laws. The self-directed liberatory education that formed his character contrasts with the brutally imposed “education” of deformation that was perpetuated by a system of violence, coercion, degradation, and deprivation, a system designed to produce compliant subjects who would “know nothing but to obey their master.” Of course, it would be a gross misrepresentation of Douglass’s story to take as its moral that anyone, under any circumstances, can pull themselves out of any condition with a sufficient amount of grit and determination. Douglass himself notes that he was only able to achieve his education—and escape slavery—because of being sold to someone in the city, an event he describes as “a special interposition of divine Providence in my favour.”<sup>84</sup> However, it was Douglass’s deep longing for freedom that gave him the courage to make extraordinary use of the resources he had, chief among which were the books that came to hand. His life serves as a humbling reminder of the power and irreducible necessity of the human person’s own role in the actualisation of his or her own agency.

## Guiding Principles

The extraordinary lives of Alexander the Great, Hildegard of Bingen, John Henry Newman, Peter Paul Rubens, Jane Austen, and Frederick Douglass offer a glimpse into the rich cultural and intellectual possibilities of the historical sites of education, both formal and informal, that we have surveyed. We can now reflect on some of the broader principles that might be drawn from these examples.

## An Authentic Education Centres the Human Being and the Freedoms Proper to Human Life

Each of the educational sites we have surveyed has, in some way, acknowledged and centred the dignity of the human being, and avoided reducing persons to their mere utility. There are two freedoms that we believe are especially important to preserving human dignity in education: the freedom *for* thought provided by leisure, and the freedom *of* thought secured by an open dialogue motivated by a shared dedication to truth.

### *Leisure: Freedom for Thought*

We derive our English word “school” from the Ancient Greek “*skole*” (σχολή), the word for “leisure” or “rest”—but also for those activities that occur in and through leisure. It was a term that could be used to indicate the practice of philosophy or the building in which lectures occurred. As Josef Pieper observed in his seminal work on the topic: “one of the foundations of Western culture is leisure.”<sup>85</sup>

As we saw in our brief historical survey, Plato’s Academy, Aristotle’s Lyceum, and the other ancient schools that followed them located the process of *paideia*—of forming the person in their full humanity—away from day-to-day life within the city and its consuming preoccupations and practical concerns. These schools recognised that the highest goods were those that existed *for themselves* rather than for some other end. To be a philosopher, a lover of wisdom, was to prioritise wisdom above all other things. Paradoxically, it was precisely by focusing on those things which were *not* immediately



useful that one produced the leaders who were most helpful to society. Indeed, to stop short of educating *for* the human—for that within us that transcends any particular competency—will ultimately produce citizens incapable of governance of themselves or of others.

Similarly, “*otium*”—the Latin term for “leisure”—was the governing condition for monastic life in the Middle Ages. Like the ancient sages, the monks desired to orient themselves to the highest good, a commitment most evident in the religious vows of poverty and chastity. The radical renunciation of both economic and biological productivity and exchange signalled the monk’s all-consuming desire for God and his commitment to pursuing that desire in a state of total freedom from possessions and attachments. As Jean Leclercq comments, “the whole organization of monastic life is dominated by the solicitude for safeguarding a certain spiritual leisure, a certain freedom in the interests of prayer in all its forms and, above all, authentic contemplative practice.”<sup>86</sup> And yet the monastery, much like the ancient school, paradoxically proved productive precisely through its *un*productivity.

The monastery became an important site of cultural production and preservation not through any particular concern for culture *as such* but rather from a desire to pursue only the greatest and most fundamental good. As the late Pope Benedict XVI observed:

“[I]t was not their intention to create a culture, or even to preserve a culture from the past. Their motivation was much more basic. Their goal was *quaerere Deum* [to seek God]. Amid the confusion of the times, in which nothing seemed permanent, they wanted to do the essential—to make an effort to find what was perennially valid and lasting—life itself... They wanted to go from the inessential to the essential.”<sup>87</sup>

Yet this concern with the essential proved productive of tremendous cultural goods: the preservation and production of manuscripts; the development and refinement of processes of horticulture, viticulture, and brewing; and the creation of music, art, and architecture. But the goods provided by the monastery were not solely cultural goods.

While the Middle Ages understood a clear division in the lives of individuals living the active life versus the contemplative one, these modes of living—and the institutions that supported them—were seen in terms of complementarity rather than opposition. Monasteries were financially supported by the villages or towns which surrounded them. Those active in the world provided the material conditions necessary for the monastics to pursue a contemplative life. Conversely, it was understood that the monastery played a vital role within society not only because the monks offered prayers on behalf of members of the larger community, but also because the monastery’s presence offered a living testament to the ultimate ordering of their society: at the heart of the bustling life of the town lay the silence of the cloister, itself understood as a foretaste of heaven. As Leclercq puts it, by keeping their eyes solely turned towards God, the monks’ “testimony before the world will be to show, by their existence alone, the direction in which one must look.”<sup>88</sup>

Traditionally, the university’s role has been conceived as fundamentally similar to that of the ancient school or the medieval monastery. Set apart from the world, the university exists as a reminder that there are goods that exceed the merely economic, utilitarian, or biological and that the uniqueness of human beings—that which makes us fundamentally different from other creatures—is our capacity for contemplation and our longing for the true, the good, and the beautiful. As John Henry Newman would write in *The Idea of a University*, a university is fundamentally a testament that “[k]nowledge is capable of being its own end... that it is an object, in its own nature so really and undeniably good, that as to be the compensation of a great deal of thought in the compassing, and a great deal of trouble in the attaining.”<sup>89</sup> The university—and the contemplative life it enabled for its members—was worthy of the financial support of those immersed in active economic life because of the unique role it played in

safeguarding the human. Like the ancient school and the medieval monastery, by its very existence it bid all members of the society in which it existed to lift up their eyes to higher things.

It is notable that the collapse of the traditional liberal arts university, and its replacement by the sprawling, technocratic, siloed, and specialised “multiversity,” coincided with a large-scale collapse of vowed religious life in the West. The monastery and the university—both of which are institutions that date back to the Middle Ages, and are both deeply and consciously indebted to the ancient Greek concept of *skole*—wither before what Pieper terms the advent of “planned diligence and ‘total labour;’” a new social understanding in which productivity as such becomes the highest good and leisure is just another term for the vice of idleness. Pieper comments that our contemporary understanding of work and rest is “so very different that the men of the past would have been incapable of understanding the modern conception of work, just as we are unable to understand their notion of leisure simply and directly, without an effort of thought.”<sup>90</sup> In our world, free time—if one is to have it at all—must be oriented toward “recharging” for productive work, a telling metaphor that imagines the human person fundamentally as a machine rather than a living being with “*capax universi*”, a capability for the universe and a longing for the whole.

Yet, as the forward march of automation demonstrates, machines are ultimately better at being machines than human beings ever will be. As it becomes less and less clear what long-term economic utility human beings will have, it is vitally important that we recover an understanding of the human being that locates our value not in our mere utility, but rather in a robust understanding of the transcendent value of human life and its orientation towards those things that are greatest precisely because they are their own ends. As Newman reminds us, the *liberal arts* were so named precisely because they represented the knowledge appropriate to—indeed necessary for—a free person. At an historical moment in which we have been liberated from technological, biological, and even economic constraints only to find ourselves bound by mounting feelings of meaninglessness and despair, it is vitally important that we—like the medieval monks—commit ourselves anew to “going from the inessential to the essential.”

### *Dialogue: Freedom of Thought*

In distinct but nonetheless related ways, the freedom from the world of work that defined the gymnasium, the monastery, and the university was intimately tied to another freedom: the freedom to think in an ongoing dialogue with others, a dialogue that both formed and sustained the community through deliberative fellowship. Pierre Hadot observes that the “choice of life”—one made by entering Plato’s Academy—was one that “consisted, first, in adhering to the ethics of dialogue.”<sup>91</sup> The monastery significantly reimagined and expanded this ancient concept of “living dialogue” through a uniquely vibrant culture of reading. While the Bible was the most important text in the monastery, medieval monks and nuns’ reading was wide-ranging and intensely idiosyncratic: it encompassed the writings of the pagans, of the Church fathers, and of their own contemporaries. Far from threatening to draw the monk or nun away from his or her holy pursuits, all things were thus drawn into and sanctified by the search for God. As a result, the monastic became “a sort of living concordance, a living library.”<sup>92</sup> At the same time that monastic culture was exploring the potential for internalising the “living dialogue” of ancient philosophy, the medieval university was seeking to revive and refine the older arts of philosophical argumentation. Central to medieval university culture was the practice of “*disputatio*”, a formalised approach to debate that sought to comprehensively acknowledge and address all aspects of a given question.

There is no doubt that the freedom of inquiry embodied by these practices is increasingly under threat. It is vitally important that the university remains a space where all sides of a question can be explored, where objections can be freely stated and addressed, and where reasoned debate rather than

emotional appeals ultimately determines which ideas prove triumphant in any given scholarly space. This freedom is incompatible with the idea that university students must be protected from material or ideas that they perceive to be offensive. It has become more and more routine for students—and even outside interest groups—to demand that professors be prohibited, implicitly or explicitly, from broaching particular topics, opinions, texts, or worldviews in the classroom. The American watchdog group, the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression (“FIRE”), has documented many such cases across a wide range of institutions in the United States, cases that demonstrate that this impulse is not confined to a single side of the political spectrum but rather represents a growing illiberalism across the board.<sup>93</sup> Moreover, attempts to protect students from “dangerous ideas” can often exacerbate the very issues they are meant to address. Studies have shown that protective measures like trigger warnings more often intensify rather than allay students’ emotional difficulties and inhibit the development of emotional resilience, an important quality for both intellectual development and mature adulthood.<sup>94</sup>

Yet, as important as it is to preserve the university’s vital role as a space where ideas can be openly aired, true intellectual inquiry is about more than just open debate. Scholastic *disputatio* was agonistic and rationalistic, a sort of intellectual combat; but the “living dialogue” that characterised both the ancient gymnasium and the medieval monastery make it clear that the pursuit of truth requires not only reason but also love and fellowship. If one solely pursues intellectual jousting out of a taste for battle, one cares only for one’s own victory and not for the triumph of truth. While censorship is a very real and present danger in the modern university, so is the reduction of intellectual inquiry to a game that rewards sophistic cleverness and makes its participants vicious rather than virtuous.

This assault on truth takes multiple forms. It can be found in the cynical pursuit of professional success in a “publish or perish” environment that rewards fashionable thinking and cleverness devoid of real commitment over earnest, serious, and sustained engagement with questions of enduring significance. Moreover, the ascendance within the humanities and social sciences of ideologies that reject any transcendent notion of truth, let alone of beauty or goodness—reducing all metaphysical realities to the mere play of language and power—only increase this tendency to treat the intellectual life as a game with no real stakes beyond acquisition of institutional and cultural prestige. Moreover, such an approach encourages a relentlessly critical and suspicious attitude towards the subject matter of one’s own discipline, prohibiting a truly loving—and therefore meaningfully transformative—engagement with the material. As the literary critic Jon Baskin powerfully observes, such an attitude ultimately dehumanises our experience of the humanities themselves: “within the profession the highest status went to those for whom admiration and attachment had most fully morphed into their opposites.”<sup>95</sup> This inability to love authentically the objects of our study—and the truth to which they point—undermines the foundation of true intellectual fellowship. Like the ancient philosophers in Plato’s Academy, we must rediscover the classical “ethics of dialogue” that allow us to transcend ourselves—and our narrow egos—through a shared desire for the truth. As the lives of the medieval monks show us, love also allows us to encounter not only one another but also our shared cultural inheritance in such a way that we can make the past, and the great texts, traditions, and cultural forms that it has bequeathed us, into our own.

## An Authentic Education Recognises the Value of Tradition and Its Transmission

The fellowship that defines an authentic education draws us beyond ourselves not only through an ongoing process of communication and intellectual exchange with other living human beings, but also by liberating us from the narrow confines of the present and allowing us to—in a very real sense—communicate with generations long since dead. Establishing a living contact with the past is one of the most important ways that education, at all levels, can help address the modern crisis of rootlessness.

The humanities have an especially important role to play in this regard. As the poet W.H. Auden observed, “one of the greatest blessings conferred on our lives by the Arts is that they are our chief means of breaking bread with the dead, and I think that, without communication with the dead, a fully human life is not possible.”<sup>96</sup>

With the advent of the internet, the great works of culture can easily be called up. However, availability is not the same thing as accessibility; truly being able to engage with the past in a deep and authentic way requires more than the mere presence of books or works of art. One needs guidance and direction, a sense of how to actually *find one’s way* into the past and to bring it into conversation with the present. One needs not just a pile of texts and artefacts but an understanding of how they relate to one another, a unifying story in which they participate and to which we are invited to contribute.

Historically, a key way in which that story has been articulated is through the recognition of canons—that is to say, through a collective understanding that certain works from the past were of particular influence and importance to a given community. That community might be quite large—when we speak of the “Western Canon” we are speaking of a community that stretches over many centuries and many nations—or somewhat smaller. It is possible to recognise national canons, religious canons, or canons for a given academic discipline or subdiscipline. In all cases, however, the canon gives a sense of the “key players” and establishes a shared starting point for anyone who wishes to further the conversation of which these pivotal figures are a part.

To engage with a canon is not to merely direct one’s gaze to a dead past. As A.D. Sertillanges observes, “A book is a cradle, not a tomb”—we return to the cultural products of the past not to gaze upon them in blank admiration but to enter into a tradition that is still living, still unfolding, and to which we can contribute.<sup>97</sup> While a focus on canons and traditions is sometimes associated with elitism and exclusion—and has at times indeed been instrumentalised to achieve such ignoble ends—access to the great works of the past has a deeply liberatory potential. It has, time and again, provided a means by which those excluded from the public conversations of the present have nonetheless found a deeply authentic way to engage in the “ethics of dialogue” that has so long characterised not only Western education but the substance of Western civilisation itself.

Earlier in this report, we discussed Frederick Douglass’s engagement with the tradition of classic rhetoric and political philosophy, a tradition on which he drew with great grace and power in his own sustained battle against the grave injustices of his time. This ennobling power of engagement with the great texts of the past is given particularly eloquent expression by W.E.B. DuBois in his influential 1903 book *The Souls of Black Folks*, where he contrasts the dignifying experience of engaging with the literary and philosophical tradition of the West to the sustained indignities he suffered in the present because of racism:

“I sit with Shakespeare, and he winces not. Across the color line I move arm and arm with Balzac and Dumas, where smiling men and welcoming women glide in gilded halls. From out of the caves of evening that swing between the strong-limbed Earth and the tracery of stars, I summon Aristotle and Aurelius and what soul I will, and they come all graciously with no scorn nor condescension. So, wed with Truth, I dwell above the veil. Is this the life you grudge us, O knightly America? Is this the life you long to change into the dull red hideousness of Georgia? Are you so afraid lest peering from this high Pisgah, between Philistine and Amalekite, we sight the Promised Land?”<sup>98</sup>

In recognising the importance of canons and their ongoing presence within academic settings, we do not mean to suggest that they are static. To the contrary, it is natural that—at different historical periods and in different circumstances—certain texts will take on a position of particular importance while



others will be less highly regarded. However, acknowledging that canons will always be in a certain state of flux is not to diminish their value as a shared map of culture and thought.

One of the greatest threats, at present, to the preservation and transmission of tradition is the shift across all levels of education toward prioritising skills over content. In the humanities, in particular, the focus has shifted increasingly to the development of abstract competencies like “reading comprehension” or “critical thinking” rather than engagement with specific material; ironically, this change has failed to produce the very results it promised. The increasing presence of “informational texts” (versus literary texts) in language classrooms has produced students who are too often unable to read carefully, write clearly, or think deeply and who struggle to locate themselves meaningfully in either time or place.

A curriculum that focuses on competencies to the exclusion of cultural content ultimately produces what Michel Henry has described as a “technical teaching [that is] defined by the putting out of play of the transcendental life that constitutes the humanity of the human being.”<sup>99</sup> By contrast, a curriculum designed to give students meaningful access to a robust tradition gives them the freedom to root themselves and their labour within a larger narrative of self-understanding. To deprive our students—who feel increasingly lost and adrift—from access to the rich cultural traditions in which generations have anchored themselves is to do them a profound disservice, no matter how many useful competencies and transferable skills with which they graduate.

Of course, preserving a sense of tradition within education is not solely about the prioritisation of canonical content within the curriculum. For engagement with the tradition to be a living and fruitful one, we must also preserve (and, in some cases, recover) the habits and practices that enable cultural transmission. A fully realised cultural education occurs through a life lived in common with others. It is sustained by friendship, by sharing meals and ideas, and by striving together for excellence as teachers and students. As such, study of the tradition must be embedded within a larger milieu that allows for authentic and sustained interactions between individuals, and for close collaboration between masters of a field and those who are still at the beginning of their journey.

## **An Authentic Education Recognises the Unique Needs and Potential of Men and Women and Creates Environments in Which They Can Flourish**

The general segregation of education by sex evidenced in most of the historical sites of education we have reviewed was, in large part, a result of the highly differentiated spheres of men’s and women’s labour that characterised societies across the globe prior to the advent of the Industrial Revolution. Over the past two centuries, however, massive technological strides have increasingly reduced the need for workers to perform the very physically demanding tasks that were once mainly the purview of men, and the need for much of the domestic labour of textile production, food processing, and materials repair that was traditionally managed by women.

In a world where the sexes regularly and robustly collaborate in the workplace, the laboratory, and the arts, it is particularly important that young people are equipped with skills that allow that work to be as fruitful and mutually enriching as possible. It is unsurprising, under these circumstances, that the norm is quickly becoming one where young men and women are educated together in their formative years.

One of the great goods of the present is the increased opportunities it affords for fruitful collaboration between men and women. Yet if we lose a sense of the distinctive natures of men and women—and of

the complementarity of their differences—we risk suppressing the creative possibilities present in the increased interaction of the sexes in public life. An authentic education will reject a sterile standardisation that seeks to deny or repress the differences between men and women. While men and women are increasingly performing similar types of jobs, they still—in aggregate—learn, develop, and work in distinct ways. This difference is especially true in adolescence, where emotional and behavioural differences between men and women are most apparent and where individuals first develop an understanding of what it means to be a man or woman in the world.

For nearly three decades, educational leaders in secondary and post-secondary contexts have noted with growing alarm that young men are trailing significantly behind their female peers in educational attainment. In 2019 in the United States, the gap between women and men receiving bachelor's degrees was 14% (in 1972, the gap—with the genders reversed—was actually smaller, at 12%).<sup>100</sup> In 2020, a pandemic year that saw dramatic declines in college enrolment across the board, enrolment fell among American men at seven times the rate as it did among women. Women now outnumber men in the number of degrees conferred from the associate's level up to the doctorate level, and they are more likely to graduate from high school. Similar trends can be observed across the globe.<sup>101</sup> Admissions officers in private high schools and colleges report significant gaps in commitment, enthusiasm, preparation, and proactive behaviours between women and men, with men lagging significantly behind their female peers on all fronts.<sup>102</sup>

A variety of metrics suggest a sustained and indeed growing crisis in our society's ability to form young men who are able to contribute meaningfully to their communities, to form and sustain intimate relationships, or to raise children. This lack of mature young men not only has significant negative effects on the men themselves—effects seen most dramatically in spiking rates of friendlessness,<sup>103</sup> addiction, and suicide<sup>104</sup>—but also on young women, who often struggle to find men with whom they can form stable relationships and families. The loss of meaning, while evident throughout society, nonetheless seems to have hit young men particularly hard, perhaps because there is a stark lack of shared cultural narratives for what it would mean to live a meaningful, praiseworthy, and fulfilling life as a man.

There is much to suggest that secondary schooling may be a particularly important time to help give young people the meaningful narratives they so desperately need—and that men seem to stand in particular need of at present. Research shows that this is a time when it is especially valuable for young men to have male teachers and mentors in their lives, an increasingly rare occurrence in a female-dominated field. Studies also suggest that the current environment of secondary education—long sedentary periods of intense concentration with constant expectations for quiet and decorum—is uniquely unsuited to the emotional and mental development of adolescent boys, who are often far less able to perform such tasks than girls of the same age.<sup>105</sup>

While education experts continue to debate—and study—whether there is any intrinsic academic value to single-sex versus co-educational settings at the primary and secondary levels, it stands to reason that a single-sex environment would be uniquely well-suited to educational interventions targeted to a given sex and, perhaps more importantly, that such spaces could allow students and teachers to more fully and richly explore questions about how to navigate the world as a man or as a woman. It is not enough to merely have a single-sex environment; steps must also be taken to ensure that this environment is truly meeting the needs of the young people it serves. While such spaces are certainly not the only ones in which young men and women can thrive, they should remain an option for parents and children.

The revitalisation of apprenticeships, trade schools, and other forms of training would also do much to provide direction and purpose to young men who may be unsuited for or uninterested in pursuing university study, or the careers in knowledge work towards which such studies tend. Ultimately, regardless of whether an educational environment is single-sex or co-educational, it should be constructed in such a way that the unique needs of men and women are acknowledged and met—

where all students are offered not only a set of particular skills, but also a larger vision of how they can live with character, purpose, and dignity.

## The Revival and Reinvention of Educational Forms in the Present

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We now turn to a survey of several exciting educational initiatives that concretely realise some of the animating principles that we outline above. As illustrations of the creative ways in which past forms of education have been reimagined to meet the needs of the present, they can serve as inspiration for further initiatives in the future.

### Reviving and Reinventing Vocational Education

Over the past century, increased enrolment in colleges and universities—and increased expectations, on the part of both employers and parents, that young people will pursue postsecondary degrees—has led to a diminishment in the social value of training in a trade. Traditionally, this training took the form of extended apprenticeships, often conducted under the auspices of guilds, that aimed to induct the apprentice into a larger way of life and community of practice. In many countries, the apprenticeship system effectively disappeared in the wake of industrialisation and the increasing academisation of middle-class life. Yet, a hunger remains for the restoration of older modes of training and, simultaneously, for a renewed recognition of the dignity of manual work, especially that of artisans and craftsmen. In this section, we briefly survey ways that this challenge has been met at governmental, institutional, and personal levels.

The most successful attempt to sustain a viable apprenticeship system in an industrialised society is the Germanic system, versions of which are present in Switzerland, Austria, Denmark, and the Netherlands (in addition to Germany).<sup>106</sup> The “dual apprenticeship system” that forms the core of the German approach was the brainchild of the educational theorist George Kerschensteiner (1854-1932), who developed Germany’s first part-time vocational schools, and was a firm believer that, “education for the ordinary man and woman must be woven into the practical work of life.”<sup>107</sup> This approach supplemented traditional apprenticeships with schooling, all centred around the concept of “*Beruf*” (“vocation” or “occupation”).<sup>108</sup> The specific requirements that must be met to receive a qualification, as well as the examinations for those qualifications, are conducted by the chambers of crafts, the “direct successors of the guilds.”<sup>109</sup> Indeed, the “principle of self-government” represented by the chambers’ control of the examination process, “goes back to the ancient guild system.”<sup>110</sup>

In 2018, 1.4 million young Germans were enrolled in this dual system of apprenticeship and vocational education, while another 1.25 million attended vocational schools without apprenticeships.<sup>111</sup> In Switzerland, apprenticeships are even more widely used: in 2022, 62.8% of young people took on a dual apprenticeship after finishing their compulsory schooling.<sup>112</sup> The success of the Swiss system may be due, in part, to its “permeability,” which allows students to transition back and forth between vocational and academic routes with relative ease.<sup>113</sup> Of particular importance in this regard was the development of the Federal Vocational Baccalaureate, which “has become accepted by young people and their parents as a course of education which offers continuative options.”<sup>114</sup>

Key to the success of the German model of apprenticeships is an understanding that *Beruf* (vocation or occupation) and *Bildung* (education of the individual) are “congruent, not rivalling concepts,” allowing

for the development of a robust “*Berufsbildung*”—a vocational education aimed at developing the whole person rather than simply equipping them with discrete skills.<sup>115</sup> This focus on forming an individual for a particular occupation is often absent from governmental attempts, outside of the German model, to expand apprenticeships. While the “new apprenticeships” of Australia and the “modern apprenticeships” of the United Kingdom have shown some promise in increasing the number of young people involved in apprenticeships, they lack the holistic view of the Germanic system. The United Kingdom, for instance, tends towards a “modular” approach that focuses more heavily on the acquisition of individual skills than on the development of a well-formed member of an occupational community.<sup>116</sup> Such an approach often overlooks the fact that “[t]o choose to work in the trades is to choose a particular way of life that is devoted to creating things, restoring things, maintaining things. It is work that involves purposeful activity; it is not merely the conglomeration of technical skills.”<sup>117</sup>

A focus on the “purposeful activity” of trade work is a hallmark of innovative approaches to vocational training at an institutional level. For instance, the American College of the Building Arts (“ACBA”) in Charleston, South Carolina was formed in 1999 in response to a growing lack of trained artisans capable of preserving the United States’ many historic buildings.<sup>118</sup> While much of the recent popular focus on vocational education has emphasised retraining workers for new jobs in technological fields, the ACBA recognised the vital need to train new workers for *old* skilled jobs that, far from being automated out of existence, instead required a distinctively human approach. Because restoration work involves not only technical expertise in the fields of stonemasonry, plastering, timber framing, and other trades, but also a rich historical knowledge, the ACBA combines hands-on training in these trades—their students graduate from the four-year program with the industry designation of “journeyman-level craftsman”—with a core curriculum in the liberal arts that emphasises architectural history, material science, and the arts.

Graduates are therefore inducted into both a longstanding tradition of labour in community and a living, national tradition whose concrete preservation they participate in by virtue of that labour. Christina Rae Butler, a Professor of Historic Preservation at the College, observes that—in combining academic historical study with direct trade instruction—the school “marries two fields that have been separated.”<sup>119</sup> The school reports that, at present, 89% of alumni are employed within their field of study, and the demand for trained artisans is growing as the previous generation retires with fewer and fewer newly trained craftsmen available to take their place.<sup>120</sup> Indeed, “leaders in the historic preservation community are sounding the alarm that the construction industry is in dire need of workers with historic trades training. Recent studies suggest that thousands of trade people with training in historic trades—such as masons, plasterers, and carpenters—will need to enter the workforce each year to keep up with demand.”<sup>121</sup>

While the Germanic “dual system” offers a national model for trade revitalisation, and the American College of Building Arts an institutional one, there are also a growing number of individuals who have charted their own path toward a more traditional education in older trades. The sociologist Richard E. Ocejo explores this phenomenon in his book *Masters of Craft: Old Jobs in the New Urban Economy*, where he documents the growing phenomenon of the “reskilling” of many older trades—including butchering, bartending, distilling, and barbering—that had been progressively “deskilled” over the past several decades.<sup>122</sup> This “reskilling” resulted in the emergence of high-end, “artisanal” versions of these jobs—jobs that often attracted middle class young people who had found the more typical career path of “knowledge work” to be unfulfilling. For many young workers, developing their skills in these traditional industries was “the result of a search for meaning in work, to get recognized... for what they do, and for an occupation to anchor their lives and provide them with purpose.”<sup>123</sup> Breaking into these fields is rarely achieved through formal education or official apprenticeship—rather, career success is found through a combination of self-study, informal apprenticeships, and the development of an entrepreneurially fashioned identity.

In short, the most innovative and effective approaches to reinventing and reviving the trades for the 21<sup>st</sup> century have sought to draw on the most important aspect of traditional training—developing a professional profile as a tradesman through initiation into a community of practitioners—while also responding to current economic trends and providing more flexible pathways for young people.

## Reviving and Reinventing University Education

The transformation of university education into “job training” has not only posed challenges for traditional vocational education—it has also fundamentally shifted the nature of the university itself. While college and university enrolments have dramatically increased over the past century, the university system that students encounter often bears precious little resemblance to the university of old. The hallmarks of the traditional university system—an orientation towards transcendent goods as well as a focus on the contemplative life of the mind and on the formation of individuals within human-scaled colleges—have increasingly been swept aside in favour of a technocratic vision of the university as a space whose value solely lies in its economic, technological, or political utility. As a result, we risk losing one of our most important social spaces for the safeguarding of truly human values. But there is no reason to believe that we must continue on this downward path—even now, a diverse set of initiatives are finding creative and effective ways to restore the university’s soul. Some represent reforms from within, others offer support from without, and still others seek to build afresh.

One particularly rich example of creative reform is the Great Questions Foundation, a non-profit dedicated to making high-quality, seminar-based engagement with great texts available to community college students through small first-year seminars. At present, board members have launched seminars at community colleges in Austin, New York City, Chicago, and the Annapolis, Maryland area—and the Foundation also offers free training and curricular support for community college faculty across the United States who wish to integrate great texts into their general education courses. The Foundation’s approach demonstrates that humanistic inquiry, and the creation of the space necessary to pursue that inquiry, need not be a luxury only available to students in four-year colleges and universities. As such, it values one of the great goods of the present day—the increased openness and accessibility of higher education—while drawing on the best elements of the traditional university to ensure that education remains meaningfully human even when it is occurring at a greater scale. Ted Hadzi-Antich Jr., a graduate of St. John’s College in Annapolis who brought the Great Questions Program to Austin Community College (“ACC”), speaks to the particular promise of this approach:

“Despite the dire reports of the state of the humanities, there is a humanistic revival in higher education underway—it’s just happening where few commentators think to look. Community colleges might very well be the best place for this revival. Almost half of undergraduates in the U.S. attend community colleges, and over half of all B.A. recipients start out at one... Increasingly, community college is where most students will gain the benefits of a liberal education, especially those who will pursue STEM or preprofessional majors at the universities to which they transfer, where their coursework is not likely to include classes in the humanities... Higher education needs liberal education, because the good life requires freedom, and we are not born with the knowledge of how to be free. The fact that community college students may have greater access to that education than their peers at elite universities is perhaps an example of a cosmic justice, in which the first shall be last and the last shall be first.”<sup>124</sup>

Notably, in community colleges that offer programs similar to ACC’s Great Questions seminars, “those who enrol in courses organised around common readings persist [in enrolment] at significantly higher



rates than the student body at large,” a finding that suggests that students are eager for a more integrative education attuned to the depth and breadth of the human experience.<sup>125</sup>

While curricular reforms offer one route to helping the university rediscover its humanistic potential, external academic institutes that sit beside—rather than within—elite universities offer another promising approach. Institutes allow both students and faculty a space for intellectual friendship beyond the institutional confines of the university, one which offers greater space for reflection on foundational questions, many of which cut across individual disciplines. As such, institutes are fertile ground for the rediscovery of the “universal” within a university setting that is increasingly siloed into discrete, specialised fields of research. While many of the institutes in the United States and the United Kingdom exist beneath the umbrella of the non-profit Foundation for Excellence in Higher Education (“FEHE”), each reflects the particular character and concerns of the community it serves.

Some institutes—such as the Beatrice Institute at the University of Pittsburgh and the Collegium Institute at the University of Pennsylvania—have a religious identity, while many others do not. Some have a target subject focus or a largely shared ideological vision, while others pursue a wider variety of intellectual questions and draw from a more politically diverse constituency of faculty and students. The self-description of the Berkeley Institute gives a rich example of how one institute conceptualises its community and purpose:

“The Berkeley Institute provides a space outside the university to think about what we do in the university — a space for students to value their own intellectual life beyond coursework and professionalization, to take seriously both religious and intellectual commitments and questions, and to harness the possibilities of the community we create together.”

As this description suggests, the academic-adjacent space created by institutes allows both students and faculty to collaboratively actualise their intellectual agency in fruitful ways that are often not possible within the university system itself.

While the approaches we have considered thus far involve working within or beside existing colleges and universities, the drive to revive and reinvent the university is realised most completely in the founding of new institutions—and, indeed, the energy and enthusiasm of our present moment recalls in many ways the creativity and initiative that have historically characterised periods of great educational rebirth. At the close of the 18th century, there were only 18 functioning colleges in the United States; by the end of the 19th century, there were over 450.<sup>126</sup> The 30-year window from the 1860s to the 1890s was something of a renaissance for higher education in the United States, witnessing the founding of Cornell (1865), Howard (1867), Smith (1875), Stanford (1885), Barnard (1889), and the University of Chicago (1891), among many others. These institutions arose because of a robust collaboration between philanthropists and educators who recognised the vital importance of higher education to a flourishing human culture.

We are now once again witnessing extraordinary energy and enthusiasm on the part of both donors and scholars towards the creation of new institutions of higher education that seek to provide a thoughtful and rigorous education to young people, one that will allow them in turn to contribute to—and one should remember that this is a perennial necessity—the animation and transmission of culture itself. In many cases, these new institutions are especially attuned to the importance of building a rich communal life among teachers and students that will enable and sustain serious study, intellectual fellowship, and moral growth.

For instance, Wyoming Catholic College (“WCC”)—which welcomed its first students in 2011—implemented a campus policy that prohibits the presence of mobile phones or televisions on campus, and each incoming student begins his or her education with a 21-day wilderness expedition in the Rocky Mountains. These practices are designed to help students cultivate the interior silence and discipline necessary to meaningfully immerse themselves in the study of the Western tradition that constitutes the core of the College’s curriculum. While WCC seeks to produce a culture of contemplation informed by shared religious commitments, the nascent University of Austin (“UATX”) aims to foster the conditions necessary to sustain a culture of productive debate among students and faculty with diverse and often competing ideological and religious commitments. Through their “Forbidden Courses Summer Program”, they have provided a place both for scholars who have faced cancellation and censorship, and for undergraduate students who seek an environment in which ideas can be openly aired and interrogated. UATX plans to offer an undergraduate degree program that will combine study of the liberal arts with training in practical entrepreneurship and innovation.

Ralston College, a new institution of higher education located in Savannah, Georgia seeks to “revive and reinvent the university.”<sup>127</sup> The College, which graduated its inaugural class of students from its first degree program—a Master’s in the Humanities—in June of 2023, declares a radical commitment to freedom of thought. With its core values of truth, freedom, beauty, and fellowship, Ralston seeks to revive the conditions of a free and flourishing culture through deep engagement with the questions at the heart of human life. It embraces a rigorous approach to humanistic study, one rooted in the habits and practices that have traditionally shaped a liberal arts education: direct encounters with the greatest works of art and intellect, study of ancient and modern languages, the sharing of common meals, and the demonstration of mastery through evaluations conducted by external examiners. In so doing, the College aims to rediscover and reanimate the essential features and activities of the great universities of the past. It intends to expand its programs, both graduate and undergraduate, over the next several years. Through public events, online short courses, and its podcast, Ralston endeavours to be a fellowship for anyone, anywhere who seeks the truth with courage.

The presence of Ralston College, the University of Austin, and Wyoming Catholic College in the higher education landscape suggests that there is a real and ongoing appetite on the part of faculty, students, and philanthropists for an alternative to the present state of mainstream higher education, which has become increasingly defined by ideological homogenisation, bureaucratisation, and a lack of authentic community for students or faculty. At the same time, each of these new institutions articulates a distinctive vision for higher education and the differences between them are as notable as their similarities. This diversity of approaches suggests that, in this new period of rebirth and innovation in higher education, we should seek to cultivate a wide variety of intellectual communities within higher education just as surely as we should provide our young people with various educational pathways outside of the university system.

## Conclusion

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In the preceding pages, we briefly diagnosed the most pressing challenges that currently confront education, surveyed some of the most important forms of education from the past, and explored how these traditional forms might help us better respond to our present circumstances. Throughout this paper, we have sought to champion the great gains of the past century while also drawing deeply from the rich and varied traditions of the past. The cultural inheritance we have explored here belongs to all of us and can contribute to our flourishing as both individuals and a society, particularly if we are willing to do the creative work necessary to revive and reimagine historic patterns in ways that truly meet the needs of the present. The creation and maintenance of diverse pathways of formation—necessary for

the great diversity of real human beings, and to the actualisation of the unique potential of each—is the essential condition for the revitalisation of a vibrant culture. It is our sincere hope that the stories, examples, and principles that we have gathered here will serve as encouragement, inspiration, and direction for all who seek to recognise the singular possibility, innate freedom, and transcendent value of every human being.

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