

The End of Learning

ANYONE WHO turns the dial of a television set nowadays may be tempted to remark that genuine learning came to an end during the latter half of the twentieth century. For the moment, however, I employ the word "end" not to suggest termination, but in the sense of "purpose" or "object." Despite the tremendous sums expended upon public instruction, most people seem to have forgotten that learning has an aim or object. (Here I do not mean to deny the claim that knowledge is its own reward.) The more vague we grow about the end of learning, the more shallow and trifling does twentieth-century learning become.

Five years ago, the report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education, *A Nation at Risk*, emphasized the pressing need for "life-long learning." The Commission's members declared that "educational reform should focus on the goal of creating a Learning Society. At the heart of such a society is the commitment to a set of values and to a system of education that affords all members the opportunity to stretch their minds to full capacity, from early childhood through adulthood, learning more as the world itself changes. Such a society has as a basic foundation the idea that education is important not only because of what it contributes to one's career goals but also because of the value it adds to the general quality of one's life. . . . In our view, formal schooling in youth is the essential foundation for learning throughout one's life." Yet true learning extends far beyond the classroom, the members of this Commission added—"into homes and workplaces; into libraries, art galleries, museums, and science centers; indeed, into every place where the individual can develop and mature in work and life."

A Nation at Risk has been both a symptom and a catalyst of growing public concern over the fallen state of learning in our land. No other great nation in the history of mankind ever enjoyed such possibilities for widespread learning as does the American Republic; but our prosperity brings intellectual and moral triviality. Popular diffusion of learning seems to have been most successful among two peoples whose material resources were scanty and whose life was austere: Scots and New Englanders in the latter half of the eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth. (These were folk reared almost from infancy on the Bible.)

Amidst our present affluence, the typical college-graduated American does not read through one serious book in the course of a year. Yet perhaps we begin to be roused from our intellectual and spiritual sloth by the alarming indices of social and personal decadence. Some of us grow aware that most of our schools are little better than centers for minor-sitting and sociability; that many of our public libraries pander to triviality and salacity; that most colleges offer to the typical student what Christopher Jencks has called "an introduction to middlebrow culture and middleclass conviviality, if indeed they aspire so high; that the fascinations of the boob-tube are converting most Americans into passive vessels, subject to every fad and

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foible of the hour." For some decades past, "learning" has been regarded by a great many, implicitly at least, as a disagreeable imposition from which one is emancipated on commencement-day.

Once upon a time it was somewhat otherwise: one thinks of Samuel Johnson's wherry-boy on the Thames who would have given everything he possessed in order to learn Greek. Once upon a time the unschooled, or many of them, felt a reverence for learning. Why so? Because they took it for the path to wisdom, and not worldly wisdom merely. Learning, they fancied, was orientation—though they did not employ that precise word.

Indeed that is what true learning undertakes: to *orient* men and women. To orient, or orientate, is to settle, to find bearings; to locate one's self in one's environment with reference to time, place, and people; to determine one's true position. Like much else in our secularized society, the concept of orientation is derived from the ancient ways of the church. In the early church buildings, Christian worshippers faced toward the eastern end of the church, which its builders deliberately had so oriented; and so it is to this day with most Christian congregations throughout the world. From the East, the hopeful light of morning.

In those centuries when learning was revered, learned men aspired to become not intellectuals, but sages. An intellectual is puffed up with pride; in the observation of Bertrand Russell (of all people!) "an intellectual is a person who thinks he knows more than he does know." A sage, on the other hand, is a person who knows how little he knows—but, like Don Quixote recovered from madness, he knows who he is and where he stands. The true sage, oriented, looking toward the Light, knows that wisdom comes from above. To him, men and women turn for prudent counsel concerning this world and the next. With T. S. Eliot, the sage inquires,

Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?

Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?

The sage knows that life begins and ends in mystery. And he apprehends the end of genuine learning, which begins in the fear of God. That end is to know God and enjoy him forever.

Thus is the sage oriented. The fundamental purpose of learning for us creatures here below is to orient ourselves, that we may take our bearings in the midst of divine creation.

All culture grows out of the cult, as Christopher Dawson and other historians teach us; the principal root of modern learning is religious insight, infected by intellectual diseases though much modern learning may be. Ours is a bent age. To quote again from Eliot's Chorus from "The Rock":

Many are engaged in writing books and printing them,

Many desire to see their names in print,
Many read nothing but the race reports.

Much is your reading, but not the Word of GOD,

Much is your building, but not the house of GOD.

Will you build me a house of plaster, with corrugated roofing,

To be filled with a litter of Sunday newspapers?

Our first necessity, if we mean to restore the "life-long learning" which the National Commission on Excellence in Education seeks after, is to return that learning to its original end of orientation toward the divine—that we may know what it is to be fully human, and to know that man is made for eternity.

Certain judges in this land—not to mention the National Education Association—do what they can to impede such a restoration of the end of learning. Yet even such powers and dominations cannot interfere with private and familial pursuit of wisdom. So I venture to suggest below certain orienting books—a few out of the multitude of good and great ones—that have shaped my own learning, and which may rouse conscience and imagination in anyone who troubles himself to read them attentively.

As a man of letters rather than of the cloth,

I emphasize here works of humane learning, contrasted with theological learning. (Christian humanism, far from being opposed to the sacred, is a strong prop of faith—as in the writings of Erasmus or of Sir Thomas More; indeed, some of the highest devotional works have come from the pens of Christian humanists.) These are the enlivening productions of men and women of learning, over several centuries; these authors are of the number of those dead who give us life.

Some Great Books

“Orthodoxy is my doxy,” said Dr. Samuel Johnson; “heterodoxy is another man’s doxy.” Amidst the purported Enlightenment of the latter half of the eighteenth century (a period abounding in Enlighteners, as Samuel Taylor Coleridge wrote, but singularly deficient in light), Johnson compiled his Dictionary and drubbed skeptics. It was Johnson’s stubborn and passionate faith, expressed through the instruments of his powerful intellect and his great learning, that first moved me toward Christian doctrine—as, a college boy, I sat on our front porch hard by the railroad station, reading Boswell’s life of Johnson. Read Johnson’s *Rasselas*, that fable of Christian resignation; read Johnson’s prayers and his sermons (readily available in Volumes I and XIV of the Yale edition of his works). You will come to understand the vanity of human wishes; also you will come to perceive that in the modern age, as in medieval times, faith can be sustained by reason.

Or turn to an English writer of a century earlier, Sir Thomas Browne—particularly to his *Religio Medici*, a physician’s reconciliation of faith and science, and to his *Christian Morals*. In an intolerant age, Browne was temperate. “Every man is not a proper champion for truth,” he wrote, “nor fit to take up the gauntlet in the cause of verity; many, from ignorance of these maxims, have too rashly charged the troops of error and remain as trophies unto the enemies of truth.” Feeling some sympathy with all theological systems, Browne respects the traditions of every people and every age. Common opinion and

tradition, Browne holds, are entitled to a legitimate presumption in their favor: if a thing has been long believed or practiced, we ought not to discard it unless we obtain clear evidence that it is mistaken or outworn. Some of the more important aspects of human existence, Browne reminds us, are not open to experiment. In those concerns, we rely upon revelation, authority, and the wisdom of our ancestors.

Within every soul, Browne wrote, Reason, Faith, and Passion are forever disputing. He foresaw that in future, the danger to learning and order would come not from the differences among Christian sects, but from atheism: human reason would try to take total control of the soul—at the devil’s urging. “Thus the Devil played at Chess with me, and yielding a Pawn, thought to gain a Queen of me, taking advantage of my honest endeavours; and whilst I labored to raise the structure of my Reason, he strived to undermine the edifice of my Faith.” That sentence of the masterful stylist was written in the seventeenth century; it has lost nothing of its significance near the end of the twentieth century.

An intellectual and spiritual descendant of Browne and Johnson, the most effectual Christian apologist of our own century has been C. S. Lewis, a professor of literature. *The Abolition of Man, or Reflections on Education with Special Reference to the Teaching of English in the Upper Forms of Schools* is Lewis’s sharpest weapon, though some readers of *Discipleship* may be unacquainted with it. Do not be disheartened by the somewhat specialized subtitle of this tiny volume: actually, Lewis writes here about what is called “reductionism,” or the deliberate attempt to reduce our understanding of human nature to a “realistic”—and lowered—assessment. In many literature-and-language textbooks, Lewis points out, there can be discerned an excising of anything spirited or heroic—so that we are left “men without chests.” In *The Abolition of Man*, Lewis describes the enemy; in other books, immensely popular, he prescribes Christian faith as the Way. I was mightily influenced by his early book *The Pilgrim’s Regress: an Allegorical Apology for Christianity, Reason, and Romanticism*, first

published in 1933. This Oxbridge don is a most worthy heir of John Bunyan the tinker.

Turn we now to the gentler sex. *The Need for Roots: Prelude to a Declaration of Duties toward Mankind*, by Simone Weil (first published in 1952) is "one of those books which ought to be studied by the young before their leisure has been lost and their capacity for thought destroyed in the life of the hustings and the legislative assembly," T. S. Eliot wrote in his preface to this slim volume: "books the effect of which, we can only hope, will become apparent in the attitude of mind of another generation."

Simone Weil affirms that unless we nurture our roots, personal and social, we end in totalitarianism and a dreary loneliness. "To be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul," she writes. "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. . . . Every human being needs to have multiple roots. It is necessary for him to draw well nigh the whole of his moral, intellectual, and spiritual life by way of the environment of which he forms a natural part." Readers of *Discipleship* will be particularly interested in her essays collected in *On Science, Necessity, and the Love of God*.

Orthodoxy and Health

Let us not shun the Romans. *Orthodoxy*, by G. K. Chesterton (first published in 1909) is intended to raise up the standard of the religious understanding of man, against the materialists and mechanists. A surprising number of people have come upon this book by chance, and their lives have been altered thereby; so perhaps not by chance. Chesterton, the witty and paradoxical author of many, many books, was not a Catholic when he wrote *Orthodoxy*, although later he became the most vigorous of Catholic apologists. Dogmas are necessary because they are true, Chesterton says; and they bring us not servitude, but joy.

"Orthodoxy makes us jump by the sudden brink of hell," Chesterton puts it; "it is only

afterwards that we realize that jumping was an athletic exercise highly beneficial to our health. It is only afterward that we realize that this danger is the root of all drama and romance. The strongest argument for divine grace is simply its ungraciousness." Among Chesterton's other books, *Heresies* and *The Everlasting Man* (which undoes H. G. Wells) have been particularly influential upon inquiring intellects.

Now I commend a book by an old friend, not many years departed from among us: Max Picard's *The Flight from God* (first published in 1934; now difficult to obtain). Picard was a sage living upon a mountain in the Ticino of Switzerland. Modernity does not smile upon sages who love silence. If you possibly can, track down this small volume and Picard's several other little books, particularly *The World of Silence*.

In all ages, Picard wrote, man is in flight from God; but in our time, the objective world of Faith has been ruined, and the Flight immerses nearly everyone. Formerly man had to separate himself from the world of Faith by an act of decision; today it is from the Flight that a man must decide to part himself. The Flight has become an organized thing—almost a conscious thing. It shapes its own pseudo-religion, its own economics, its own language, its own art; it destroys nature and community.

Yet Picard was not dismayed. "It is unnecessary to doubt when one thinks of God," he wrote: "all doubt is within the Flight. It is unnecessary to fall away from God; it is comic, like a copy—though a clumsy one—of the most monstrous apostasy within the Flight. The Flight is designed to be an enormous machine of doubt and apostasy; all doubt, all apostasy, all terror of God, are within the Flight, and one's own morsel of doubt, apostasy, terror, is being torn from one by the machinery of the Flight. . . . The more desperately it plunges onward, the more plainly stands before us the one who is alone: God."

We flee, but God pursues, Picard tells us. The best-seller lists will be crammed with salacity and triviality, doubtless, until television extinguishes altogether the books of the

Flight. Yet a Remnant will find the buried writings of Max Picard.

Science cannot be ignored, even in a hasty list of humane learned writers; for that matter, science—if in a slow and reluctant fashion—may be at work restoring faith. So we take up here briefly Michael Polanyi and his book *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (1958). A famous physicist and chemist, Polanyi also is a social thinker of the first rank. In order to understand the limits of “impersonal” physical sciences, and the relationship between the natural sciences and the social order, one cannot do better than to turn to this volume. For those who prefer to begin with an abridged version of Polanyi’s ideas, there is his little paperback volume *Science, Faith, and Society* (1946, and a later paperback).

Polanyi believes in the existence of a transcendent realm; he is not at all captive to nineteenth-century materialism and mechanism. “Christianity is a progressive enterprise,” he writes. “Our vastly enlarged perspectives of knowledge should open up fresh vistas of religious faith. The Bible, and the Pauline doctrine in particular, may be still pregnant with unsuspected lessons; and the greater precision and more conscious flexibility of modern thought, shown by the new physics and the logico-philosophic movements of our age, may presently engender conceptual reforms which will renew and clarify, on the grounds of modern extra-religious experience, man’s relation to God. An era of great religious discoveries may lie before us.”

Above I have mentioned a dozen writers of high learning that hearten us on dark days. (With the single exception of *Personal Knowledge*, all the books named are notably short ones.) These are sages, uniting with much learning what Pascal called the wisdom of the heart. To make a baker’s dozen, let me add one virtuous pagan: Marcus Aurelius, whose *Meditations* comforted me when, a sergeant, I sat lonely upon dunes in an illimitable desert. If you have read these thirteen sages, and none other, you will not be perfectly learned; but at least you will be better fortified for the devil’s chess-match.

A little learning is a dangerous thing, Alexander Pope instructs us. Certainly it is unhealthy to remain lifelong a presumptuous sophomore, assertive that one has the answers to riddles which have perplexed the good and wise since the age of Job and earlier. Our institutions of a learning allegedly higher have turned out, especially since the Second World War, generations of such wiseacres—some of whom have proceeded to sack the Ivory Towers that dignified them with degrees.

But prolonged learning, even if acquired piecemeal—even if confined of necessity to reading one great book each year—puts down vanity and the anarchic impulse. Lifelong learning should commence very early indeed, with having a children’s version of the Bible read to one—and Hans Christian Andersen’s tales of wonder, too, at the same stage of existence. It should ascend, with the passing of the years, to Plato and to Vergil and to Dante and to Shakespeare; but in ascending to the high dream, that learning should not transcend Scripture nor even the tale of “The Little Fir Tree.”

Once I encountered on the moors of Galloway an elderly shepherd who had been made wise by much reading of Walter Scott. He had come to know, in solitude, that the true end of learning is not a “career” and the acquisition of creature-comforts, but rather orientation: to face toward the Light.

Not all learning comes from books: good conversation, and judicious experience of the world, and contemplation, count for as much or more; a learning purely bookish is a frail reed. Yet if a people cast aside the Law and the Book, speedily they find themselves condemned to what Edmund Burke called “the antagonist world” of madness, despair, and unavailing sorrow. We Americans have been sinking into the parlous condition of knowing the price of everything, and the value of nothing. The first step toward redemption is to confess that we have been stumbling about complacently in a pit of ignorance. To acquire the cardinal virtue of prudence, nearly all of us need a cordial acquaintance with books.

Augustine of Hippo, in perplexity of spirit,

heard a child repeating *tolle lege, tolle lege*; pick it up, read it; pick it up, read it. Opening at random the Epistles of Saint Paul, Augustine encountered this passage: "Not in revelling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires." Obeying, Augustine began to enter into sanctity. Augustine was the most learned man of his age, and his wisdom descends to us in two great books especially.

Therein lies a moral obvious enough. It is said that the ideas most powerful in the age which is now passing away have been those of Darwin, Marx, and Freud. Who now reads Augustine of Hippo? Yet, as Benjamin Disraeli put it, prevailing opinions generally are the opinions of the generation that is passing. Some of us have unlearned the errors of yesterday; and given grace, as little children we may begin to learn, gaining ground with every month that passes, something more of the sources of truth.

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