



The Common Good

Formation, Education, and the Crisis of the Young

We are living through a civilisational crisis and our young people are paying the price. The crisis is this: while a kind of education for the young has survived in our society, the organized work of forming their character has not. This distinction is not semantic. It is structural, anthropological, and increasingly existential. The health, and perhaps even the survival, of our civilisation depends on our understanding of the difference and committing ourselves to doing both.

Formation and Education Aren't the Same Thing

Education — from *educare* and *educere* — means to lead out, to draw forth what is latent. It presumes a self already seeded with potential, waiting to be called into the light. Its classical images are liberative: Plato's prisoner ascending from the Cave, Socrates practicing midwifery. At its best, education trusts that something is already there, obscured, and works at the level of logos -- argument, reflection, the examined proposition -- to bring it forth.

Formation — from *formare*, to shape — carries a different image: the clay and the potter, the novice and the rule, the young soldier and the drill. It assumes malleability rather than latency. Character, habit, and sensibility are not simply drawn out but fashioned by sustained external pressure working on pliable material. Aristotle's insight remains decisive: we become just by doing just things, repeatedly, until the action creates enduring habits in us. Formation precedes and enables education, because you cannot draw forth what has never been laid down.

How They Diverge

The difference between formation and education explains why a person can be extensively educated and yet profoundly unformed — able to construct sophisticated arguments for virtue while seemingly being incapable of patient generosity. Many of us have encountered the brilliant graduate student who cannot keep a promise; the activist who burns out because no one taught them

how to endure; the young professional who can analyze moral frameworks but cannot apologise. This is education without formation.

Conversely, formation without education risks producing the devout but unreflective — the conventionally good person who collapses when convention fails, the kind-hearted person who cannot muster the courage to struggle against injustice.

Education tends toward the cognitive and reflective. Formation works at the level of ethos and *hexis*: the habituated disposition, the cultivated taste, the felt sense of what is fitting before deliberation begins. Newman described this clearly in his book *The Idea of a University*: the intellect itself must be formed into a particular kind of attention — patient, disinterested, capable of holding complexity — before education can do its deepest work.

Where They Converge

At the highest level, formation and education are inseparable. Genuine *paideia* — the classical Greek synthesis — was always both: not merely information transfer, nor merely habit-drilling, but the shaping of a whole human being capable of living well and thinking clearly.

The *mousike* (music, poetry, rhythm) formed the soul's receptivity; the *gymnastike* formed the body's discipline; the dialectic then educated the formed self toward the Good. Formation prepares the ground; education completes formation by giving it reflective ownership. The formed person who also has been educated can say *why* what they love is lovable and therefore can resist both cynicism and fanaticism. They can transmit it, defend it under pressure, and adapt it to circumstances the original formation never anticipated.

The Present Failure

Most modern institutions have abandoned formation while retaining a diminished version of education — really instruction or career training.

This abandonment has causes: bureaucratic scaling, liability culture, the loss of shared moral frameworks, the lack of financial support for education by governments, and the triumph of metrics over mentorship. The result is an educated class that cannot articulate, let alone defend, the moral inheritance it lives on, because the prior formation that would make those arguments *felt* rather than merely known has been dissolved.

The recovery of formation is one of the genuine civilisational tasks of the moment — and it must happen at the level of community, practice, and exemplar, not at the level of curriculum reform. Curriculum reform without a formative community is like rearranging furniture in an empty house.

The Crisis for Young People

What young people face now is not the ordinary difficulty of finding one's footing. It is something more structural and unprecedented. The traditional sites of formation — family stability, religious community, civic life, apprenticeship, sustained mentorship by formed elders — have been hollowed out. These never were perfect, but they were load-bearing. They shaped attention, deferred gratification, provided narrative frameworks for suffering, and situated the self within something larger than mere personal preference.

Into that vacancy has rushed the attention economy, which is not neutral but actively anti-formative: fragmenting attention, rewarding reactivity, replacing genuine desire with manufactured craving, and mimicking community while preventing belonging.

The result is young people unhoused at the deepest level of the self — idealistic, often kind, but without the interior architecture that allows idealism to mature into sustained action or grief to be borne without collapse. The mental-health crisis is not separable from this. Anxiety at epidemic levels is what an unformed self feels when asked to be a coherent person in a fragmented world.

Existing and New Institutions

There is no curriculum fix for this crisis. You cannot curriculum-design your way to formed character. And the people who might serve as formative exemplars — elders who carry the tradition in their persons — are aging, isolated, and seldom in sustained contact with the young in ways that actually transmit anything. Formation always has required *proximity*, *duration*, and *love* — a senior person who sees a junior person over time, cares about their actual becoming, and models what it looks like to live with integrity through difficulty. That is in desperately short supply.

And yet pockets remain: communities of practice, some religious, that hold their ethical shape against the current; families that still transmit what they have been given from generation to generation; and the occasional extraordinary teacher who draws young people into seriousness almost by force of character. These

matter enormously. They show us that the work of formation remains possible, and therefore that it remains a task to be done by those dedicated and courageous enough to take it up. But the gap between what remains and the scale of the need justifies not only worry but grief.

The Work Ahead

What is urgently needed now, alongside the quiet work of the remaining pockets, is institutional imagination of a different order: the creation of centers genuinely dedicated to the formation of the young, created by those with wisdom adequate to the task and funded by those with moral imagination and courage.

Such centers would not be schools in the ordinary sense. They would be places where young people live in proximity to formed elders; where shared labor and shared meals shape attention; where rituals of work, rest, and reflection create interior spaciousness; where apprenticeships cultivate competence; where the rhythms of life themselves teach patience, endurance, and joy.

Creating enough formation centers of this kind to make a difference is an almost unimaginably daunting task, but the scale of the task must not become an excuse for paralysis. The traditions that formed young people in earlier generations did not ask whether conditions were favorable. They recognised that the work was essential if the societies were to survive and set about it steadily, even if imperfectly.

If we neglect this work in our own time, the outcomes for our society are bleak. It is ancient, difficult, beautiful work -- and it is ours to do in our own time, in our bewildered and disheartened society.

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