

Is Homeschooling Enough?

An Introduction to *Sedes Sapientiæ* School

by T. Rene Kozinski

A Young Man Being Introduced to the Seven Liberal Arts by Sandro Botticelli.

“Great Books,” “integrated,” “classical,” and liberal arts” are phrases thrown around when we’re thinking about education. Many people I have met have heard of the Harvard Classics, emblematic of “the return to the liberal arts of the classical Western tradition,” associated with Columbia, University of Chicago, and St. John’s College. Many parents in Catholic circles have heard of *Designing Your Own Classical Curriculum* by Laura Berquist, and have become more-or-less aware of what a classical curriculum entails. But, in practice, is the less-aware category more accurate? Many of us are from the 1970s Dewey-infested Public Schools, trying to give our children something—well, at least it better be *different*—trying to accomplish *something* classical while being somewhat in the dark about what the term even means, and how possibly to accomplish a comprehensive and genuine liberal-arts education at home. Parents wonder if having their children

memorize reams of poetry, read *The Odyssey*, draw some triangles from circles out of Euclid, and try to link grammar with logic, is, well, enough. In other words, they end up feeling like they’ve given their children a bad Jackson Pollock version of whatever it is—classical? liberal? Great Books? How do you make a usable transcript for college out of random paint spots?

This essay is an attempt to grapple with these questions and problems, the foundation of which is simply this: Classical education is hard, and much harder today than it ever was.

problems, the foundation of which is simply this: Classical education is hard, and much harder today than it ever was, and thus it may not be a task the family, all by itself, can handle. The family is just not self-sufficient, and many Catholic families simply don’t have the intellectual, cultural,

And some parents have become critical of the liberal arts in general, complaining that it does not create students able to specialize later, but rather perpetual generalists who end up working service jobs because they have no real, usable skills.

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spiritual, and social resources to properly educate children. Thus, a family’s lack of self-sufficiency might mean more than ordering curriculum resources online and consulting other home-schooling families—it might mean the need for a school.

To show this, we first need a better grasp of the major fault line in modern education, which will help define and collate the terms we’ve been throwing around: “Great Books,” “liberal arts,” “integrated classical education”; these are all on the opposite side of a chasm from “Prussian” or “Deweyite” education, the education most prevalent in the United States from the late 1800s. They are distinguished most profoundly by their ends: Deweyism is meant to create experts or specialists in pragmatic, transitive arts that are useful for a rising industrial nation. By transitive arts we mean those which go outward, like a transitive verb: “The carpenter builds the house.” John Taylor Gatto, in his seminal book *Underground History of American Education* helps illustrate this education for a technological age by describing the factory-style bells and classrooms, with students trained to stay at one task for long periods and move in herd-like groups with

same-age peers, like the way factory workers are grouped in similar tasks with a task-master (think Dickens). In this kind of education, similar to factory tasks, the different subjects are not connected for the student-worker, nor are they ever connected, because they are not connectable. They are silos of ever-more esoteric skills, such as memorizing countless trig formulas without ever knowing *why*. This form of education has been quite successful in producing certain specialists, but I would say it has been rather abysmal in terms of producing better human beings. It is not education, but training, and it is geared exclusively toward what Josef Pieper calls “the work-a-day world.” Indeed, it is predicated on the non-existence of anything transcending this world.

The other side of the education fault line is a much older form of education, beginning with the Pre-Socratics somewhere in Ionia (modern Turkey) looking up at the stars, down at the earth, across at each other, in *wonder*. Josef Pieper calls this openness to reality “intellectus”—the whole person receiving knowledge, beauty, truth, and goodness, thereby becoming more able to see order and to love what one sees. This was the beginning of what Edith Hamilton called “the Greek Miracle,” and it is the education that arose out of Socrates’ impromptu, peripatetic walks from places like Athens to Pireaus. It was the education that Charlemagne thirsted for, the one that nurtured Saint Thomas Aquinas and Saint Thomas More, and the one that Cardinal Newman called for in his *Idea of a University*.

This kind of education is what Sister Miriam Joseph in *The Trivium* calls “intransitive.” Like the verb, it

is about the subject of the education: “The rose blooms” is an intransitive verb the action of which works back upon the subject. A liberal education is one that *perfects* the subject, the person, making him or her become truly human, able to fulfill her nature. A liberally educated person is thus free—not free in the sense of license, but free in the sense of being able to *be* what she is made to be: human. Thus the liberal arts are focused on what it means to be truly human; and the Catholic version, so prevalent in the Middle Ages, included of course what the Greeks were in some sense

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stretching for: being in the image of God. This means that we are creators of beauty, recognizers of truth and order, kings and queens of creation, entrusted with each other. Out of this end in education and society came scientists, doctors, teachers, lawyers, all of whom understood that their craft was in service to the fulfillment of the human person and of the creation as a whole; the body or society could not be seen as a soulless mechanism because it was natural and organic, possessing eternal, spiritual significance—it was all God’s. We are stewards, not masters.

“Liberal arts,” specifically, refers to the intransitive arts that help perfect the human person through the different kinds of logic: poetics, rhetoric, and mathematics. These are arts, or skills, that enable a human being to understand order, beauty, and truth within understandable settings (Aristotle said that philosophy should not be studied too early, for example). The liberal arts are by nature integrated, because a person is integrated, a mirror of the integrated cosmos. For example, mathematics, if studied as the grammar of beauty

and order, shows us a kind of logic; logic shows us the mathematics of language, poetics, the most natural, universal way to appreciate beauty, order, and truth, and to connect it to human life. Later, once these arts are mastered, we move onto the sciences: philosophy, theology, natural science, and social science. We use the liberal arts to receive, critique, converse, grow, and love within the adventure of the sciences of the created natural and social world, and the uncreated world of the Divine, and in doing so we become integrated and more human, moving towards perfection, the fulfillment of our nature. So much for the liberal arts.

“Classical” simply refers to the fact that this education is built on a long tradition of thought and writing that goes back at least fifteen hundred years. “Great Books” is the canon of works—mathematical, philosophical, theological, poetical, logical, rhetorical, historical—which are the vehicles through which we understand not only the arts themselves, but also the changes and principles in human thought over time.

I should think that just reading the previous paragraphs should alert the reader to the good possibility that this kind of education would be very difficult to do alone, without help by an institution of experts in this kind of education, in other words, a guild of masters of the classical liberal arts and sciences. How can one educate another in the liberal arts and order such an education to the more complex and extensive sciences, if one hasn’t studied them in this properly ordered way oneself? The other essential element is, I believe, *conversation*, and such requires, well, other people! And sometime a milieu broader and more extensive than the household. I have always thought of the liberal arts as perfected not only through a trans-temporal conversation with masters who lived long ago, but also through

real-time conversation in a classroom (or informally in a pub!) Though I still argue with Hobbes and imagine him with the body of a dragon, and laugh at him in a shamefully derisive manner, and still hope to meet Socrates, I need other, living human beings to converse with. This real-time conversation is a catalyst through which human beings, social creatures that we are, help each other to a greater knowledge than is possible alone with, alas, a non-living book. The Socratic conversation towards truth, the plays and playground, the choir and the lunchroom, are innumerable necessary opportunities to become liberally educated. I myself have been educated in and have had the privilege of both living and teaching in liberal arts communities since 1996. It has been a great gift, a gift I would wish other families to enjoy.

Happily, not only have there been Catholic Great Books colleges rising in number, but also small classical schools for K-12 have been opening: The Lyceum in Cleveland, Great Books Discussions online, and the rapidly expanding Great Heart schools. Having discussed why classical, liberal-arts education can sometimes be best effected in a school environment, I'd like to introduce the reader to a new Catholic liberal arts academy, *Sedes Sapientiae* School in New Jersey. With many families interested in sending their children, the school has been searching for a site and gathering the needed support.

I spoke with Aileen S. Coccia, the founder, who holds a Master of Liberal Arts in the Great Books from St. John's College, Annapolis. She is the mother of five children, and she and her family have lived, worked, and studied in two well-known Catholic educational communities: International Theological Institute in Austria, and Wyoming Catholic College. Her experience especially at Wyoming Catholic College sparked her commitment to

the integrated, classical approach to education that is the hallmark of the Great Books colleges. While living and working in Wyoming, she saw the need for a classical, Catholic, liberal arts (specifically Great Books) school for K-12 in her area.

I asked Aileen what first drew her to the idea of classical Great Books: "When I started to homeschool, I gravitated towards things called classical, like Laura Berquist's book—and some of the curriculum through Kolbe Academy in Napa, California; however, I didn't really understand what this meant." Many parents are in the same situation: They want "classical," and intuit that there is tremendous value in this kind of education, but there is a lack of understanding of what it means to be a classically educated person. Even many colleges and universities that claim to offer liberal arts education are sadly lacking compared to the real thing. And, as we learn from philosophy and practical life, if one does not understand the end of an action, the chance of that

action being a good and fruitful one is small. We can easily end up with young adults in our home who have read the *Iliad* and taken some Latin, but who have never reached the levels of deep thinking and integration, the recognition of truth philosophically, theologically, poetically, musically, and artistically, that is the *telos* of the Catholic classical method.

Aileen continues: "Our experience at Wyoming Catholic College was eye-opening for me in this respect. As the librarian, I ordered books and set up the stacks; I was once handing

a book to a student and I couldn't pronounce the Greek title, much less know what it meant or how it connected to anything else. My daughter was standing there as I stumbled through "prolegomena," and she said to the student, 'She wasn't liberally educated.' I began to understand what I didn't understand, as Socrates said. In 2010 we moved back to New Jersey, and this was my opportunity to go to St. John's, as it had a graduate program in the Great Books which I could do each summer. After I started, I began to think, 'This should be available to younger children, K-12.'"

"I then visited The Lyceum in Ohio; while there I saw a genuine Catholic, integrated, liberal arts

culture. One story the headmaster shared has stayed with me: There were some young students who had just read about Robin Hood and were out at break discussing whether or not he could be considered a just man. A senior student, who had of course already read the same reading, joined the discussion. Later, because of this discussion integrating what

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they were learning poetically and about the virtues in philosophy and theology, the senior class held a trial of Robin Hood during their annual dinner. You could see that there was a true, ordered, beautiful community of learning which transcended age groups. I thought, 'What a beautiful education' and 'we could do this.'"

I asked Aileen what it meant to her, using examples, to have an integrated curriculum, and how this creates a beautiful community: "Part of our mission statement at *Sedes Sapientiae* is 'to develop the kind of students

who become witnesses to eternal truth.’ In order to become these witnesses, young people need to *experience* the foundational and connected nature of truth, as it is found in nature, in scientific and poetic knowledge, which all points to one God, one Creator, one Designer. For example, when I was at St. John’s, we were studying Kepler’s Laws of Planetary Motions. There was a classical guitarist in the class who said, ‘this relationship of the planets here is a perfect 5th—just like the musical scale.’ The planets are in an order that is also musical, an order we as human beings recognize musically, scientifically, and poetically. If, for example, a student is learning about the laws of planetary motion, and is also in the school choir singing *Adore Te Devote*, which has a Perfect 5th, and is about the Eucharist, the Logos Who also spoke the planets into motion—wow, you have an amazing experience of the Word Who spoke the creation into being, and whose creation is also an expression of beauty—that truth, whether musical or scientific, is beautiful.

“As students and parents experience this together, in discussions as well as community events, they are able to help make these connections for each other and it creates a kind of excitement and depth to conversation and thus relationship. Speaking about and experiencing truth, beauty, and goodness together forms a community that is beautiful because it is about truth. Most people in our culture now create connections and conversation through popular culture, TV, movies, celebrities, and there is generally no real historical, literary, or religious connection one can make. In a Catholic classical learning community, however, you have all this. Students, more so than in homeschooling, can, through classroom community and discussion, develop articulate speech, independent and critical thinking, and can begin to ascertain first principles,

the deepest assumptions in any communication. They can become seekers within a conversation.”

Finally, I asked the toughest question: How do students at *Sedes*

Sapientiae gain the basic requirements needed to get into and succeed in many colleges and universities, such as the science track and AP classes?

“We will do a ‘normal’ science track—biology, chemistry, etc.; however, it will also be integrated and connected with the other subjects they take.” This is indeed a tough question: How do our liberally educated students plug into a society and economy that is still largely ensconced in Dewey-like factory-style specialization? Some concessions must be made so that students can plug in; but I, like Aileen, think that a liberal education can make a person not only able to have wonder and the true joy that brings, but also able to critique and evaluate their specialty within the larger scheme, the moral and economic and poetic and political paradigm. In other words, the “uselessness” of liberal education can, in the end, make the most useful human beings, because they understand the consequences of thought and action—and are less likely to repeat history because they have studied that too, and in light of philosophy, theology, and logic.

A great liberal arts community is

the best option, I believe. However, these schools are not as numerous as they need to be, and so what should families do? There are some online options, such as Great Books Discus-

sions, which is a fully accredited, comprehensive, quality program with weekly discussions run by teachers, some with Ph.D.s and Masters degrees. The other option? Start a school—or at least a weekly tutorial that allows students and parents to meet and discuss the readings. With a few other families, perhaps hire a graduate of a Catholic Great Books program (Thomas Aquinas College, Wyoming

Catholic College, St. Thomas More, to name a few) to create a curriculum and run discussions with parents and students. The effort is worth it—I can attest to that, both for myself and my children. ☩



Horace, Virgil, and Varius at the House of Maecenas
by Charles François Jalabert

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T. Renee Kozinski holds an M.A. in the Great Books from St. John’s College, Annapolis.

She currently teaches Great Books, Socratic discussion courses for high school students (greatbooksdiscussions.org), is a published essayist, and an aspiring portrait painter. She lives with her family in Lander, Wyoming. Sedes Sapientiae is a middle/high school, grades 6-12 opening in Morris County, New Jersey.