

In this issue, a leading member of the art community makes an impassioned plea for including fine arts education in the core curriculum. Alexandra York explains how the fine arts, from poetry and painting to music and drama, educate the mind, body, and soul. Her remarks are based on a speech delivered at Hillsdale College's Center for Constructive Alternatives (CCA) seminar, "Art and the Moral Imagination."

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THE FOURTH "R" IN EDUCATION:

Reading, WRiting, ARithmetic, and ARt

by Alexandra York *

Early one morning, a man was walking along a bluff overlooking the ocean when he noticed a barefoot woman on the beach, clearly engrossed in a strange activity. She was picking up starfish that had been washed ashore by the tide and, one by one, throwing them back into the sea. Intrigued, he scrambled down the bank of the cliff and approached her.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"I'm saving starfish," she answered, gently tossing another into the water.

The man let his eyes drift over the endless shoreline in wonder. "But," he stammered, "there are thousands of starfish stranded on this beach. You can't save them all!"

“I know.” The woman smiled, picked up another starfish, and returned it to the ocean. “But I’m saving this one.” She continued undaunted, “And this one. And this one.”

Those starfish languishing on the barren sand are the youth of America. They have been swept up onto the beachhead of ignorance and sloth by the tide of our failed progressive educational system. It falls to us now, those of us who understand the deep purposes of education, to save the future generation. We can do this by returning our children, one by one, back to the sea of structured creativity, where each individual child—by nature of being a child—can be taught to swim toward the promise of adulthood. To help accomplish this task, I propose that we incorporate art education into the core curriculum. Art educates the whole person as an integrated individual. It educates the senses, it educates the mind, and it educates the emotions. It educates the soul.

THE CORE CURRICULUM

It was at Hillsdale College six years ago that I announced the formation of American Renaissance for the Twenty-First Century. I marvel at the good distance we have come since that time. The foundation’s mission of promoting a rebirth of beauty and life-affirming values in all the fine arts is, of course, not only for the purpose of improving the arts but also for the purpose of elevating our entire culture. It is an ambitious mission that poses great challenges.

These challenges take many forms, not just in the arena of the fine arts but in the arena of ideas—especially ideas that rule our educational system. Let us remember that the three “Rs” of education—reading, writing, and arithmetic—were not instituted in schools just to help the populace read the daily papers,

write letters home to Mom, and pay bills owed to the general store. These primary skills are taught for the larger purpose of instructing students to think critically and constructively. School, in other words, is and should be meant to prepare young people for life.

Reading teaches students to comprehend the world and their place in it. Writing teaches them to communicate, develop arguments, and persuade. Arithmetic teaches them to measure attributes, grasp reality, and bring the physical universe into perspective. These are the basics. Over time, most schools have made science mandatory, as well as physical education (which is beneficial, except when—too often!—soccer wins over syntax). However, mastery of the basics is not really expected of most students anymore, and the core curriculum has become so diluted as to be meaningless. Academic subjects are regularly adulterated and distorted in the name of “political correctness,” while the very notion of truth is cast into doubt.

In light of these problems, we need to remind ourselves why certain studies should be mandatory in the first place. It used to be a truism that students cannot effectively direct their own education. They don’t yet know what it is that they don’t know. Teachers and parents should set the principal standards of education. And they should presume that a certain level of knowledge and mastery of basic subjects is necessary if students are to lead productive and informed lives.

WHY FINE ARTS EDUCATION?

It is with these thoughts in mind that I propose not only a restoration of the old-fashioned three “Rs” but an addition: art education—specifically, fine arts education in the established Western tradition. The reason for focusing on art forms evolving from our Western heritage is that the forms themselves, the physical presentations, are the most malleable, with the richest

aesthetic vocabulary for expressing the most complex ideas. The Western tradition began with the ancient Greeks, was revived during the Renaissance, and was still going strong through the nineteenth century. Sadly, it has been absent or under attack during most of the twentieth century, but it is resurfacing with vigor as we approach the millennium.

Art in the Western tradition is an intelligible aesthetic representation of the world and of humanity. Its primary forms are painting, sculpture, poetry, literature, drama, music, and architecture. A working knowledge in all the fine arts will facilitate an appreciation of them, but protracted study is critical for advanced perceptual and conceptual development. Why should the teaching of fine arts become the fourth “R”? Because to teach art is to teach life. Each lifetime, in its own way, has a “theme,” an ever-unfolding personal destiny, scripted by the individual. Every good work of art is just the same: First, it is an idea in the mind of the artist a mental abstraction, a vision seen through the “mind’s eye.” Then it goes through the aesthetic process of transformation from mental vision into physical object or experience that can be perceived through the senses and the intellect of others—that can be understood. Finally, it takes on a life of its own to be enjoyed and considered as an individual entity, an end in itself, just like every human being.

Because human beings have free will, they choose their values by a process of selection. This is why character development and the development of art are so similar. They are both self-created. Learning a demanding art form promotes both curiosity and confidence that can be transferred to real-life situations. How does it do this? Let us take the benefits of art education one at a time: Sensory education, using painting as our example; mental education, using creative writing as our example; and emotional education, using music as our example. These examples should not be construed as mutually

exclusive. Happily, each art form augments the lessons learned in all the others to educate the whole person. Painting and music have their own aesthetic vocabulary appealing primarily to a different sense organ, as fiction appeals to all the combined senses through imagination. Equally important, every art form is rooted in a discipline of craft, and learning the techniques of any craft teaches purpose, structure, observation, selectivity of essentials, and judgment of execution with verifiable outcome. In other words, the proficiency of the means employed and the end results can be assessed on the basis of objective criteria. Furthermore, disciplined but ductile (i.e., malleable) art forms can be endlessly manipulated and styled to provide aesthetic emphasis, as well as to dramatize ideas and content.

WHAT ART TEACHES

Observing Reality

To take our first example: We can readily grasp how creating what seems to be the simplest of paintings requires knowledge of drawing, color, shape, composition, and perspective—knowledge derived not only from technical training but also from close observation of reality. Once a student has learned to render the three-dimensional world of nature in this two-dimensional form, enjoyment and appreciation for the real world automatically become enriched with keener observations. In order to paint a single tree, a student really has to look at it. How his sense of seeing will be improved! What nuances of color alone will he notice in the future because of these acute observations? What varieties of textures, edges, and shapes gleaned from scrutinizing fragile, scalloped leaf formations will enhance his everyday experience of the patterns made by interlacing shadows, the woven surfaces of fabrics, or the eyelashes of a newborn infant? To imitate nature, the student must observe nature.

Making Judgments

Interpreting nature through painting—consciously creating a mood—will benefit the student even more because it requires developing a process of selection in order to fulfill a larger intention, that of endowing the work with significance. Subject matter is then employed indirectly to express something more. Now, questions arise as to which observations are most relevant to that deeper intention. Those graceful veins in the leaves—are they important enough to delineate, or should he just suggest them? What of the bark sheathing the trunk? Since the student wants a serene feeling, should he apply the paint thinly with light brushstrokes to de-emphasize the rough surface? In order to create an atmosphere that stresses the mysteries of nature, should he push the blue of the sky toward violet? Because this next level of art teaches how to formulate a hierarchy in the selection of essentials, it also increases his contemplation of the relative importance of all things in life, large and small.

Understanding the Human Condition

Inherent in the process of exercising sensory perceptions, the student must by necessity also exercise his mind. And beyond this first horizon of sense-mind interplay lies the limitless vista of imagination. Meaningful art is not just a mimicry of life; it is an inquiry into the human condition, an expressive exploration of man's desires, dreams, fears, and fantasies. Important art is important because it is multi-layered, stimulating the senses, touching the heart, and awakening the mind to great verities and great possibilities. Aesthetics, then, become the means to art's supreme end: content. Content is inseparable from the underlying theme of a work; it is that, but it is much, much more: Ultimately, it is the human spirit incarnate—the shimmering breath of light streaming from a thoughtful artist's mind, hands, and soul.

Expressing Values

Through meticulous crafting, the content becomes a theme illuminating itself. It resides within and emanates from the art as a pure result of the artist's purposeful and personal attempt to imbue it with intelligent meaning. It is great art's "anima," or inner self; both source and sum, it is the substantive realization of the artist's deepest values, true or false, good or bad, beautiful or ugly. Because the written arts are conceptual in form, those who create them have an opportunity to explore the moral imagination directly. And here is where the moral imagination fully enters into the creative process, for even a novice approach to this highest level of art educates the mind philosophically.

Let us use creative writing as an example. Because literature is a conceptual transmission from the mind of a writer to the mind of a reader, it becomes, whether a wide avenue or a narrow labyrinth, an enchanting passage to the imagination. It takes us on a journey of ideas, not to what is but to what could be and might be. Good fiction compels the author to weave a theme through the events of a story and actions of the characters. Assuming craft, the more universal and fundamental the theme, the greater the fiction. Assuming theme (which is a big assumption since most fiction today, as most art, lacks theme), the student first creates scenes in his imagination and then creates heightened visions of all that is possible. Gradually, as he learns to distill his thoughts and to communicate through the techniques of narrative, description, dialogue, metaphor, and dramatization, his imagination is freed to create whatever he can dream up!

New questions arise: Is this idea true? How is truth determined? Is it relevant to all human beings or just a few? Or only me? Are my characters understandable? Are they behaving morally or immorally and why? Are their actions motivated by their value systems?

Because the written arts are conceptual in form, those who create them have an opportunity to explore the moral imagination directly. An artist's value system is consciously or unconsciously inherent in every work of art. This is so precisely because, as we have seen, the process of creating art requires constant choices. But creative writing requires the author to pay special attention to the internal lives of fictional individuals. How does he make up fictional human beings so as to render them believable? He does so by infusing their thoughts, utterances, and actions with values.

As readers, we understand that we come to "know" fictional people largely the same way we learn to know real-life people: We discern their underlying "character" by observing their actions and listening to them. A rational person selects his values through the use of reason and logic, making sure that the values are consonant with nature and human nature. If they are, they will be life-serving values. If they are life-serving values, they will be moral. If a person (or a character) acts only on these values, his actions will be moral. If his actions are moral, he will be moral. If the author wishes to present an immoral character, he will create a fictional person who acts consciously against sound values. And just think of all the in-betweens, the conflicted characters! By learning creative writing skills, a student can play out real conflicts in an imaginative setting with imagined people. Talk about a chance to explore ideas, issues, behavior, and psychology in a safe environment!

Training the Mind

As the visual arts train the senses by honing physical perceptions of the world, so the art of writing trains the mind by demanding conceptual formations and philosophical views of the world. If the student is engaged in both art forms, what he learns in one will reinforce what

he learns in the other, beginning an interactive process with incalculable power to foster discreet subtleties of awareness and sensitivity in every walk of life. Moreover, the student learns lessons about how to be alone; how to enjoy “kairos” or the fullness of time so much as to forget time as “chronos”; how to experiment boldly; how to make learning and discovery an adventure; how to rejoice in the endeavor.

Uniting Reason and Emotion

Lastly, but perhaps first in today’s world of rampant subjectivism and temperamental indulgence, the arts educate the emotions. Not everyone is passionate—passion is the fervent intensity of emotion a person experiences only when he is exhibiting the highest level of devotion to values—but everyone has feelings, if only instinctual fears or desires. And all feelings, whether complex or primitive, mentally inspired or physically excited, can be conveyed productively and safely through the structure of an art form. In this way, the pubescent youngster in particular can learn to deal constructively with feelings often so strong he doesn’t know what to do with them; he can actually “work them out” through the creation of art. This doesn’t mean he wallows in an “Express yourself!” state of mind nor does it mean he needs psychotherapy. It means he is displaying healthy emotional flowering and psychological growth.

All art training nurtures this, but music is indispensable for guiding psychological development because it speaks directly to the sentient consciousness. One might say that music is emotion because feelings are its primary themes. The instrument chosen to channel music’s emotional flow, whether it be piano, clarinet, violin, or voice, is not important. Learning to master the instrument is. The discipline of serious music is exact and exacting, teaching the precision of mathematics in a poetic realm as well as the exhilarating balance and the

exalted integration of “reasoned harmony” (music’s form) and emotions (music’s content). It is not often in our culture that children are taught to unite reason and emotion. Tonal and melodic classical music does this for all of us. So the competence to hear it and to appreciate it as a practitioner can be a rare source of indescribable pleasure and a safe emotional release.

Like life, musical passages contain highs and lows, fast and slow tempos. The musical vocabulary includes dissonance and resolution, tumult and sublimity, all emboldening a student in the process of making music to feel to his heart’s content within the security of a confined experience. There is no way to fall out of control because the rhythm keeps the music going. The notes must be played on time, and to orchestrate emotional content through so rigorous a structure, the student must learn to merge reason and emotion; otherwise, the resulting music will be cold and sterile, mathematics without the poetry. Classical music is too mentally demanding to permit the flailing and screaming incited by much of rock ‘n’ roll. It forces the musician to control his emotional output, offering him the experience of cathexis (concentration of psychic energy) rather than catharsis (purging).

Because music deals with broad abstractions—triumph, defeat, love, loss—it also allows a musician to personalize the universals of the human condition, to feel on a grand scale both the hope and the hurt that necessarily accompany an individual life fully lived. For the teenager, it unlocks gateways to mature excursions into the ecstasy and the vulnerability of love, the headiness and the hazards of risk. Once he begins to understand the value of classical music, he may turn to it in moments of emotional need to help him experience deep stirrings that may not make it to the surface of consciousness by themselves.

Students of Life

So we begin to see the vital importance of fine arts education, the invigorating and reinforcing spiral of experience inherent in learning the various art forms. From art form to art form and back and forth between real life and art, the senses, the intellect, and the emotions flow together, charging each other along the way with powerful images, sounds, and ideas. Students of art become students of life. Once they experience the arduous bliss of creating art, some will pursue it as a profession, of course. But the purpose of art study is not to make artists of our young people; it is to help them become complete human beings.

Youth is forward motion. And the arts can forever inspire this forward motion because they are open-ended and can continue to absorb our natural creative energies indefinitely. No art form can ever be entirely mastered because the techniques can always be further expanded and exploited. Skills and appreciation learned while we are children can serve us as adults. As we grow and develop as human beings, we can continue stretching our capabilities through artistic expression, if only as casual hobbyists or spectators. Our bodies will age, and our physical prowess will diminish, but our minds and our imagination need never grow old. Practical knowledge of the arts can keep us forever active mentally and emotionally. We can forever learn, grow, and advance—the hallmarks of youth.

Clearly, art education is not a luxury, it is a spiritual necessity. At its apotheosis—aesthetically, philosophically, and psychologically—art provides a spiritual summation by integrating mind and matter. It allows abstract values to be perceived by the senses. And when form and content are exquisitely unified in art, they are capable of communicating universal truths through beautiful physical presentation in the most technically proficient manner. Art offers an experience of complete continuity, a harmoniously integrated experience of

mind, body, and soul—for its makers and its worthy beholders. Thus it is the very souls of our emotionally abandoned, value-starved youth that we can rescue through art education—one at a time. For it is art that best inspires the moral imagination.

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