CLASSROOM DISCUSSION AND THE FIERY HEADDRESS

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> Human wits are too blunt to get to the heart of all problems immediately; but they are sharpened by the give and take of discussion and debate, and by exploring every possible course, men eventually discover the measures which all approve and which no one would have thought of before discussion.
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> –Spinoza, *Tractatus Politicus*

If classical Christian schools are to be more than mere foxholes for those looking to escape cultural shrapnel, we need to remember that as educators, we may love learning, but many of our students do not, and the reason they do not is because we have not done enough to draw them to it. Instead we sometimes, because we expect love of learning to look like love of summer, incrementally lower our expectations in hopes of increasing the happiness factor, not recognizing, or at least not admitting that we are settling for a pseudo-love in the pursuit of education. God forbid that we should do so, remembering instead C.S. Lewis' admonition that we are often too easily pleased, "like . . . ignorant [children] who want[s] to go on making mud pies in a slum because [they] cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea."[1] Even before children are ready for the wisdom of Lewis, they know from a surfeit of Disney that true loveliness is often hid beneath an off-putting exterior, and Walt no doubt knew his Shakespeare who in turn knew that the finest gold is frequently stored within the most leaden of caskets. Learning is work. Very little of true value in life (salvation being something of an exception) is acquired without (our) sacrifice or effort. But the good news is, we can make that work less onerous by captivating first our students' minds, and then their hearts, through purposeful discussion strategies that move the teacher from "sage on stage" to "guide on the side" as students learn to become active, rather than passive agents of their own learning.

Two particularly effective uses of classroom discussion are Socratic seminars and the Harkness table, both of which put learning in the hands of students through a series of ever-deepening questions designed to draw and test inferences, to elicit opinion based on a pre-analyzed text, to listen to and extend what others are seeing and asking, and to train both mind and heart in understanding and evaluating the world of wonder into which we have been placed and which others have sought to understand across the many disciplines that make up academia. Let me provide a quick example of how I might use Socratic seminar to introduce my ninth graders to the *Iliad*. After a couple of days of contextualizing the novel and laying some basic groundwork, I would ask the students to read chapter 1 and to annotate their texts with the following sample

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inquiries in mind:

- How does the conflict between Achilles and Agamemnon reflect Mycenean Greek values?
- Who is more in the wrong, Achilles or Agamemnon? Or are they both in the right? If so, why are they in conflict?
- How do the circumstances of war impact competitive vs. cooperative values?
- Is Thetis a good mother?
- What was most surprising, interesting, or thought-provoking about this chapter?
- Which minor character plays the most pivotal role in this chapter?
- Which epic simile is most striking or effective?

The possibilities for generating quality discussion questions are endless, but what makes these good preliminary seminar questions is that while they require familiarity with the factual details of the reading, those facts are merely foundational in answering higher-level, more open-ended questions that require critical thinking arising from logical inference and support. Space does not allow me to explain the details of running a Socratic or a Harkness seminar, but suffice it to say that the teacher's primary purpose is to know the subject of the lesson well enough to move the student beyond basic comprehension of a source (be it written, visual, or even audio), to analysis and evaluation. When the students come together the next day, they use their preparation to investigate the text collaboratively, using a series of question types designed to dig even more deeply into the meaning, relevance, or aesthetics of a text, and in so doing, to exercise thinking skills essential to learning: listening, speaking well, asking for clarification, challenging or supporting a claim, connecting parts to a larger whole, etc. While many categories of questions can be used, five of them are modeled here by way of example using Book 1 of the *Iliad*.

1. Questions of clarification: When you say that Thetis was a good mother because she responded to her son's feelings, why was that good? Did Athena present as a real entity or as a manifestation of Achilles' subconscious?
2. Questions that probe assumptions: When you describe Achilles as petulant, what are you assuming about Greek vs. Christian value systems? Are you operating from an assumption that a good mother sometimes has to say no to her child?
3. Questions based on reasoning and support: What are typically viewed as the attributes of good leadership? How might different circumstances give rise to different criteria? How are the circumstances of the Trojan War and the Greek heroic ethic instrumental in comparing and contrasting Achilles' and Agamemnon's characters? Did Achilles need to withdraw in order to accomplish his purposes? Can you give an example of your reasoning? Why do you think x caused y? How would someone refute this thinking? What is the nature of x and why does it matter? On what authority or proof are you basing your assertion?
4. Questions regarding viewpoints and perspectives: Given that they all lived by the same heroic ethic, how do you think Achilles' fellow Achaeans viewed his withdrawal from battle? Whose reasoning does Homer seem to favor: Achilles' or Agamemnon's? Is there another way to look at this that we have not fairly considered? Why is x better than y? How is x similar to y? Why is x necessary? Is x necessary? Who benefits from this? What are the strengths and weaknesses of x?
5. Questions that probe implications and consequences: (How has Homer established Achilles' arête, or military excellence, and what do you think, given the heroic spectrum, it will take for Achilles to return? Have you ever felt so justified in your anger that you were willing to allow others to suffer as a way of getting them to understand the wrong they had done to you? What clues in this chapter suggest that Homer might understand the human cost of warfare? How does x fit in with what we learned earlier about y?

Seminars can include incentives for full and courteous participation by all students, but what I have found is that when we help students to have something to say and give them a safe forum for saying it, even the most initially reluctant eventually get caught up in the energy of a discussion where their thoughts matter and are heard.

While these kinds of discussions can and should be used in the grammar school, they are perfectly suited to secondary students who, with their evolving frames and increasing abilities, require teaching methodologies that go beyond the acquisition of information and instead serve to develop critical thinking skills designed to help them put down roots in an increasingly complex academic landscape that includes uncertainties, ambiguities and nuance, big-picture thinking, independent thought, reasoned discourse, and deep theology, all while sojourning through an increasingly God-less and shallow culture.

But, how exactly does discussion combine good thinking with love of learning? Move students from *passive* to *secondary passive* attention (see John Milton Gregory's *The Seven Laws of Teaching*), which despite its name is anything but passive. Rather, it is a level of focus capable of overriding more primitive pin-ball flights of fancy in favor of an attention sustained through absorption in the work, "when the objects that we are trying to fix in mind attract us in their own right."[2]

Wouldn't we all like our students to be so fascinated by their learning that they do not see it as work, thus countermanding the effects of the Fall, but to instead be so carried away on the wings of love that they forgot how many periods are left until lunch, or until homework logs go the way of turntables? Of course we would, but then there is the snag in the fine print: learning takes work—sustained, persistent effort—not the stuff normally connected in a student's mind with the *love of learning*. Nevertheless, the effort required to purchase this pearl of great price can be cultivated through pedagogies that while not less costly, can be rendered less onerous. It is easier to work hard for something one loves or at least does not hate. Using discussion in the classroom is one of the ways I strive to build camaraderie between students and learning. I will admit, it has not always been easy for me to set aside a more conduit model of teaching in which I disseminate, they regurgitate. Regurgitate well and I punch a hole in the ticket to their future by means of a letter grade reflective of their competencies. But I want more than that, and so do they, which is why I have learned to invest the time and to allow the breathing space that profitable discussion demands.

One final thought on the value of question-based discussion strategies for cultivating an authentic love of learning: by modeling and then passing onto the students the habit of asking and pursuing open-ended questions, we take advantage of the need to move from the known to the unknown in learning something new. Learning is a process that presupposes a gap, a gap that properly appropriated, can become a teacher's best friend. In his book *In Pursuit of Elegance: Why the Best Ideas Have Something Missing*, Matthew May shows that our natural human capacity for curiosity is at the heart of our "need to know." According to May's research, when it comes to using enticement to create curiosity, "less is definitely more." Using examples such as marked improvement in driver attention when traffic lights and signage are removed from busy intersections, and the rollout of the original iPhone with its startling lack of physical keypad and even more austere marketing silence, and a description of the *Mona Lisa* as an example artistic *sfumato*, or smoky lack of distinct lines and edges—May makes the case that our minds can be moved to Gregory's *passive secondary attention* by allowing missing information to serve as a catalyst for intellectual seduction. For this seduction to have its way with us, though, we have to find the middle ground between too much information, in which there is no

space for curiosity, and too little information which can result in frustration and irritation. As May observes, "When we perceive a gap in our knowledge, we feel deprived, a feeling we label as curiosity. And it's our desire to alleviate that feeling that motivates us to obtain the missing information. How deeply deprived we feel is relative to how deeply we perceive the gap" which in turn depends on how much we know and how much we want to know.[3]

How much more interesting might students find learning if it were packaged as a series of curiosities and mysteries that they had the ability to unlock? Learning is about careful observation—about seeing what is there as well as what is not, about closing the gap between what we know and what we can know next. Deep questioning is a way of closing that gap while opening another. Like everything else, it would be a mistake to use nothing but this type of learning in the classroom, and I for one, would really miss the days I get to hold court and teach "like my hair's on fire," but discussion is a fun and effective way to do more than entertain (or confound) students with my fiery enthusiasm. It is a way to show them how to take hold of that fire for themselves. And this, I would argue, is what a love of learning will look like. Look for the fiery headdress.

NOTES

1. C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* (San Francisco: Harper,2006), 26.

2. John Milton Gregory, *The Seven Laws of Teaching* (San Bernardino: Renaissance Classics, 2012), 18-19.

3. Matthew E. May, *In Pursuit of Elegance: Why the Best Ideas Have Something Missing* (New York: Broadway Books, 2010), 84.