

"The Joy of Learning"
2 Timothy 2:14-15
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There are few subjects in this world I can say I TRULY feel confident about discussing, and role of education in our lives is one of them. I am PASSIONATELY EVANGELISTIC about the "gospel of learning." If, as you've heard me say on more than one occasion, the GOAL of the Christian life is MATURITY, that is, to continually expand our minds and hearts and sympathies; to enlarge our perspectives so we might realize how small and limited our own views often are; and to further our knowledge of ourselves and the world around us so that our interests and concerns become more universal, then educating oneself in a wholistic sense is an important part of the maturation process. Even after all the years I spent in college, seminary, and graduate school- doing research, listening to lectures, and pouring out one term paper one after another, I know I'll STILL be a student--reading, writing, asking questions, seeking answers--right up till the day I die. One of the greatest endowments any parent or teacher could bequeath a child is an incurable thirst for learning and knowledge, an insatiable curiosity about life and God's world, a profound sense of awe and wonderment before all those great mysteries that fill us within and encompass us without, WITHOUT which, learning becomes virtually IMPOSSIBLE.

I seem to have always possessed a naturally inquisitive mind- always questioning where things come from and how they work, why some things happen and why others don't. I grew up reading four newspapers every day- the Daily News and Newark Star Ledger for breakfast, and the New York Post and Perth Amboy Evening News for dinner- it was one reason my very first job was as a paperboy. The local library became my second home as two to three times a week, I'd be plopped down in the middle of the library floor with books piled up all around me. I particularly enjoyed biographies, especially the lives of the great inventors like James Watt, Robert Fulton, Elias Howe, and Thomas Edison- I longed to invent things just LIKE them. One time, I made a crystal radio set and another, I devised a small electric motor out of bits of wire and tin cans. I even fashioned a small mini-bike scavenging parts from around the house like the front wheel from my father's wheelbarrow and the engine from his lawnmower (which didn't please my dad any). Essentially, I've always viewed life as a giant challenge and it's been the constant hunger for answers and the discovery of more and even GREATER questions that drove me to pursue a doctorate and which CONTINUES to make our world so IMMENSELY FASCINATING to me.

Yet, I've never considered myself anything more than a "blue collar" guy- having worked my way through COLLEGE as a construction worker, and SEMINARY as an elementary school custodian. Following my graduation from college, I spent the next four years as a fiberglass insulator where I had a work truck and a crew I was responsible for. Believe me when I say that I'm no more intellectually-gifted than anyone else in this or ANY OTHER congregation. Rather, this is meant to say to you- "Hey, if DAVE can do it, so can I! If an average bloke like HIM can

discover joy in studying science and philosophy and history and literature and the classics and find in them lessons to help him become a better pastor and more importantly, a better PERSON, by God, then maybe I can TOO!"

Back in the 80's, a dear friend in my church informed me that after twenty years out of high school, she'd made the decision to go to college to become an elementary school teacher. Accepted to Lock Haven University in central Pa., a school noted for its fine Education program, she began her studies that fall, eventually transferring to Slippery Rock University to complete her final two years. After four years of intense studies, the proud day finally arrived; she graduated all right- with a perfect straight-A average and membership in one of this country's most prestigious honor societies. It was then that she made a startling confession to me: that the only reason she returned to school in the FIRST place was because of my constant encouragement; because I kept emphasizing to her the value of a good liberal arts education, insisting that I KNEW she could do it if only she tried. Then one day, it just dawned on her, "Hey, maybe Dave's right. If HE could do it, then so can I!"

I'm convinced that, to varying degrees, every one of us possesses that same innate curiosity, that very same instinct for inquiry, and what's MORE, that it's part of God's imprint upon our souls. This need to understand the world around us, to test our limits and then transcend them, to never settle for simply the obvious but to continuously strive for deeper and better answers, to discover who we are, where we've come from, and where we're going- such questions, I believe, arise from the "imago dei," the image of God pressed into our very nature, and it is what separates us from the REST of the animal world. But if we FAIL to nurture that quality, if we just go on stifling the creative urge to search and question and challenge ourselves, if we become simple conformists, blindly accepting everything people hand us, then life will steadily become dull and stale and prosaic and unimaginative; this creation will lose that unique sense of awe and mystery that renders everything so interesting. And when THAT happens, then it's just a short time before GOD becomes EQUALLY dead and irrelevant to us.

However, the delight of learning should never be confused with going to school. There are students sitting in classrooms all across this country who are not in the LEAST interested in cultivating their imagination or deepening their knowledge or enlarging their curiosity about the world. Such persons are chiefly practical for they know that with good grades comes a better job. They're interest in education is solely to increase their value in the labor market, to enhance their prospects of a higher paying job. Rather than learning for learning's sake, their PRIMARY interest is a good resume. These persons would do well to read Neil Postman's book *The End of Education* in which he argues that the objective of education is to focus on "how to make a life, which is quite different from how to make a living."

When I first entered college exactly fifty years ago this year—in 1971--I found myself taking classes like French Film, German Existentialist Literature, Introduction to Philosophy, and Playwriting. My father, a practical man who felt himself fortunate just to finish high school, hadn't the slightest clue as to what to advise me of. He asked me what classes I had registered for and when I informed him, his face screwed up into a question mark as he inquired, "But David, is this going to help you get a good job when you graduate?" My father, a child of the

Great Depression, could only see education as a means to a more secure future while I, a child of the '60s, saw education foremost as a means for developing the self- for questioning my most basic assumptions and developing a more comprehensive philosophy of life.

Bill Bennett, former Secretary of Education in the Reagan Administration, related in an article for *U.S. News & World Report* how when he first arrived at college as a young freshman, he had definite ideas as to how he wanted to use his four years of higher education. He wanted to major in English because as he puts it, he "wanted to become sophisticated." You see, HIS idea of sophistication, he believed, would land him a good job and allow him to make big money.

However, the college required all students to take an Introduction to Philosophy course during their first semester. Reluctantly, he took the course, never realizing how it would eventually change his life. He had a professor who had a knack for making such seemingly useless, abstract material actually become living wisdom. Challenged by Plato's *Republic*, it seemed to Bennett and his classmates as if the philosopher had become reincarnated right before their very eyes. Well, he was hooked. Something happened to them that first semester as they struggled their way through the *Republic*, arguing about basic notions of right and wrong. Confronted with a great text and a great teacher, they found themselves caught up in the serious enterprise of raising and wrestling with life's most profound and decisive questions. Wrote Bennett:

"Every student is entitled to that kind of experience at college. And if I could make one request of future undergraduates, it would be that they open the door to that possibility. College should shake you up a little, get you breathing, quicken your senses and animate a conscious examination of life's enduring questions. Know thyself, Socrates said. Higher education worthy of the name aspires to nothing less than the wisdom of that dictum."

Some years ago, two hundred doctors, lawyers, businessmen, university professors, politicians, and writers returned to the University of Notre Dame to pay homage to a man who had died almost twenty years before. His name was Frank O'Malley and he had been their English instructor at one time or another during the four decades he taught at the school. A shy bachelor whose bed was always lumpy with books, O'Malley never earned a doctorate, never taught a graduate seminar or wrote a book himself. After entering the university as a freshman in 1928, he was never to live anywhere other than in a campus dorm. But O'Malley was no Mr. Chips. His obligation as a teacher, he once wrote, was to assist "the unique working out to manhood of each soul," chiefly by demanding that each student wrestle with the meaning of great literary texts. At the start of every year, he memorized each student's name and had each submit a brief autobiography so he could understand them better. Years afterward, O'Malley could still recall their names and the quality of their work.

To be an English major, O'Malley insisted, "is a way of life." Deeply religious and contemptuous of specialists, he regarded literature and its criticism as cultural forms by which the imagination makes sense of human existence. He electrified his students, helping them to negotiate their way through Milton, Blake, the Romantics, and the Moderns. His reputation was such that serious students in science, engineering and business signed up for his courses as well.

For decades, his elective on Modern Catholic Writers was the university's most popular class. Baudelaire, Dostoevsky, and Virginia Woolf; Gerald Manley Hopkins, T.S. Eliot, and Graham Greene- all were used to illustrate his favorite theme: the brokenness of human nature and the redemptive value of human suffering. Said Dr. William J. Cashore, a pediatrician in Providence, R.I., "Frank O'Malley taught me more about patients and their needs than anything I ever learned in medical school."

Like Bill Bennett and like those former students of Frank O'Malley, I ALSO know what it is to have had such a special teacher touch MY life. When I was in seminary, Professor Robert Goeser's class on Martin Luther at the Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary in Berkeley changed me for good. Bob was a short man in his mid-fifties who always entered the class sartorially dressed in his salt and pepper tweed jacket. But by the time class was over, his jacket and tie were off, his shirt hung out of his pants, and he was covered with perspiration- looking more like he'd just been in a dogfight than conducting a seminary class on Reformed Theology. The fact was that he was so FULL of Luther that he BECAME Luther right in front of us. He taught us that theology did not have to be dull, that they addressed many of the same questions that we wrestle with every day. He often drew examples from great literature--from such figures as Shakespeare, Dickens, Eliot, Hawthorne and Conrad--in order to underscore his points. He was both a masterful interpreter and communicator, and one of the reasons I returned to school to pursue a higher degree was because I wanted to inspire others in the same way this man inspired ME. After graduation, I didn't quite miss seminary so much as I did Bob Goeser. He died a number of years ago from Alzheimer's Disease so he never got to know that I dedicated my doctoral dissertation to him, but still a day rarely goes by when I don't think of him, his classes, and the huge influence he continues to exert upon me.

William Bennett, Frank O'Malley, Robert Goeser- all attest to the joy and excitement of learning, especially in discovering philosophy and great literature. Such works tell us how men and women of our own and OTHER civilizations have grappled with life's most relentless questions: What should be loved? What deserves to be defended? What is noble and what is base? To quote the French essayist Montaigne, a student should have the chance to learn "what valor, temperance, and justice are; the difference between ambition and greed, loyalty and servitude, liberty and license; and the marks of true and solid contentment." Former Education Secretary Bill Bennett asks:

"And why is it important to expose oneself to the best in history, science, literature, mathematics and foreign language? And how will it help someone majoring in business or engineering or pre-med studies? As Hamlet said, 'readiness is all.' In the end, the problems we face during the course of a career are the same kind that we face in the general course of life. If you want to be a corporate executive, how can you learn about not missing the right opportunities? One way is to read *Hamlet*. Do you want to learn about the dangers of overweening ambition? Read *Macbeth*. Want to know the pitfalls of playing around on the job? Read *Antony and Cleopatra*. The importance of fulfilling the responsibilities entrusted to leadership? Read *King Lear*. In the modern world, there is still nothing more instructive than a full, well-rounded liberal arts education, one that combines such subject matters as literature, science, history, math, philosophy, and language. They can help mature minds come to grips with the age-old issues,

the problems that transverse every plane of life. Such students will not only enliven their spirits and broaden their minds, they will more than likely profit in every OTHER endeavor as well."

The tragedy of our current day is that many colleges and universities are finding themselves struggling to survive with declining revenue streams and decreasing subsidies, especially in light of having to shut down most of last year due to covid. Major budget deficits are forcing them to layoff scores of teachers and even close many traditional departments. Last fall, *The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* reported that state-owned universities could see up to 350 faculty cuts here in Western Pennsylvania alone. Unfortunately, the first casualty tends to be their liberal arts and humanities programs such as English lit, philosophy, sociology, the languages, and music thinking that, in contrast to their science and engineering programs, they lack the same value and don't easily lead to the kind of job opportunities that those in the sciences do. The result is that more students are now graduating with greater TECHNICAL knowledge while lacking those tools and disciplines that contribute to one's capacity for CRITICAL THINKING.

Now, I'm not saying it's WRONG if your prime interest in education is to improve your job prospects- we all hope to find an occupation that compensates us well. If statistics are any indication, college graduates earn on an average significantly more than high school graduates. Still, a lavish salary is no guarantee that you'll love your job. A recent survey of upper management personnel at major corporations revealed that regardless of the money, a majority of them remained highly dissatisfied with their choice of vocation.

What I AM saying is that if one's motivation for pursuing an education is because of "the work it will do IN YOU" rather than "what it will do for your work"--that it will expand your mind, it will enlarge your perspectives, and further, it will enhance your knowledge of yourselves and the world around you; that it will provide you with principles, values, and virtues to guide you in your actions; that it will force you to test your own limits and push you to transcend them--then you'll MORE LIKELY THAN NOT find an occupation you TRULY enjoy. You'll discover how your natural curiosity and hunger to learn, your broadening awareness and openness to new challenges will not only make you A MUCH BETTER EMPLOYEE, but more importantly, it'll make you A MUCH MORE COMPLETE HUMAN BEING, and that, my friends, is what CHRISTIAN MATURITY is all about. Amen and amen.