

## *A Symphonic Approach: A Reflection on Educational Vision and Methods*

<https://www.westernacademy.net/founding-vision/>

by Jeff Presberg

When reflecting on the methods we will seek to employ at Western Academy, it is easy to let the imagination wander and wax romantic. It's easy to dream of the many school parts in perfect harmony, to see bright cheerful boys happily marching through their days and years at the school, like clay in a master's hands, emerging as polished, courageous young men eager for their next step in the world. And it's easy to slip into that temptation to think, if just this one time we can get the parts and alignment right, we can make the perfect system and guarantee a perfect human product. But, while this present season of Spring is a natural time of hope and youthful imaginings, it is also the end of a school year. And as a teacher and an administrator for many years at a boys school, I am well aware that come spring time, a teacher doesn't always see flowers. It can be a time, exhausted by the year's work, where the eye tends to see the weeds, and is tempted to see them in a big patch rather than as a few scattered here and there among much healthy growth. In addition to the many successes, there is that student who never quite developed his study habits, the parent who didn't think enough was done, those goals every teacher has to admit that were not fully met.

And while we are in a spring time in the life of Western Academy, and it is a time of hope, ideals, energy, and vision, it is well to remember there is no perfect school and no perfect method. Our success, our "institutional perfection", will rely on remembering that fact and keeping our approach to a human scale. We will depend on good teachers more than on good text books, and on prudential judgment more than on absolute rules. We'll be aware that the process will not always be clean and linear-it will involve struggle, getting dirty (literally and figuratively), repetition, apologies, painful and joyful moments of growing in self-knowledge, and so on. We will have to acknowledge that stumbling block to perfectly constructed plans-free will-and the strange tendency to be selfish and to rebel against oneself and one's conscience. It is a tendency recognized by modern science with various terms, and by Western Tradition with the idea of original sin.

While our view is fundamentally positive, these reminders of human nature and the human condition also remind us to incorporate a good amount of freedom into our approach. We understand that any real virtue will require it, that the boys will need to learn to exercise their freedom in order to make good decisions when no one is watching, and that true spiritual liberation is what they really want. We will be mindful of emotions and relationships-two other obstacles to perfect systems. We especially will be aware of the importance of friendships, and the dynamic between parent, teacher, and child.

Our general approach will bear in mind the ultimate purpose of education, and a liberal arts education in particular, as Jacques Maritain states in *Education at the Crossroads*:

"Thus the prime goal of education is the conquest of internal and spiritual freedom to be achieved by the individual person, or, in other words, his liberation through knowledge and wisdom, good will, and love." At the same time we will be developing the skills and habits to enable a student to enter the world with confidence. Our integrated approach will unite the many parts of education into a single whole educational experience. While we will not feature one defined method of teaching, we have respect for and will draw from many different methods, old and new. For example, we will respect the nature and individuality of a child, and for the younger ages we will have more "hands-on" learning—following some of the great reminders of Maria Montessori. We will emphasize beauty and educating the imagination, including what is termed the moral imagination. We will seek to personalize learning, and will ask questions while leading the students to discover the answers themselves. And, as we have mentioned, we will employ particular methods such as the use of narrative and field teaching (of course, the textbooks we choose will feature distinct methods). We will give attention to details and little things, such as daily homework, careful reading, exercises of rote memory, grammar, personal grooming and order, etc. We will understand the importance of process, habits, skills, and fostering a passion for learning. We will educate the mind to see details within bigger pictures and systems, to see the relational nature of things, and to see the Big Picture. As many thinkers like Maritain, Pieper, and Pope Benedict XVI have encouraged, we will seek to develop the full capacities of reason, including the ingredients of logic, conscience, practical wisdom, common sense, intuition, and contemplation.

Benedict states,

*...the scope of reason must be enlarged once more... What we need is something like what we find in Socrates: a patient readiness, opened up and looking beyond itself...a new readiness to seek the truth and also the humility to let ourselves be found...the mystical capacity of the human mind needs to be strengthened again.  
(Truth and Tolerance)*

Contrary to the assertions of some educators and theorists, the young mind is not meant to just gather facts and data and later to assemble it all into abstractions. As Maritain argues, "thinking begins...with insights" and, "what matters most in the life of reason is intellectual insight or intuition." According to Maritain, this understanding requires that the teacher perceive and "...from the very start...respect in the child the dignity of the mind, and conceive of his own effort as preparing a human mind to think for itself."

Of course, we will not just seek to educate good minds, we will also seek to educate the heart, to educate "chests" as C.S. Lewis advocates in *Abolition of Man*. But, before we get too light-headed, let's view some examples by which we can get a glimpse of this general approach.

We'll start with a history lesson. To study a major battle in history class students would learn many facts and details, but the study would not end with a mere collection of names, dates, an idea or two, and a test. It would include several more ingredients: understanding the various conflicts/issues and events leading to the battle and the battle's consequences; learning about the soldiers and their leaders; studying a few figures in more depth, and touching upon their personalities, character (noble or not), and choices; a study of the

weapons, tactics, and sundry other things such as uniforms, lodging, music, etc. ; and a presentation of material in a narrative form-as a story, whereby students can have a sense of the whole battle as well as of its intense drama. It may include making a topographic map out of plaster and clay, showing the terrain, battle lines, and movements; and, if possible, the students would take a field trip to the battlefield.

Similarly, in natural history class the young students will study local birds and trees-a woodpecker, for example. Their study would include the parts of the woodpecker, what enables him to use his head as a hammer, the insects he hunts, his manner of flight, his unique call and markings, his seasonal wanderings, etc. The students would take notes and keep nature journals, which would include reflection, observations, pictures, and simple data. Furthermore, the boys would regularly take nature walks and observe the studied bird. The study would include periods of quiet observation-an exercise that would help tune the boys' eyes to see the world of nature around him, of which he is a part, as well as enable a reaction of simple wonder. Completing the walk, the boy would make his journal entry and may write a short narrative or poem about the bird. And, before we leave our examples, let's turn to learning a symphony. In it we will touch on a view of the purpose of art, the Western idea of leisure, and why we'll incorporate festival days to our school calendar.

For a student to really understand a symphony, he will have to attain a significant amount of detail-notes, keys, timing, instruments, rhythm, movements, etc., as well as the historical context and themes, and the biography of the composer. He will have to integrate the details to have a sense of the whole, the interior dynamics, and how the various parts relate to one another in creating a whole composition. But his understanding of the work would be incomplete if he did not experience the beauty, power, and artistry of the symphony.

To be open to the full experience of the symphony would open up possibilities. His imagination and memory may be stirred, his emotions tapped and unconsciously exercised with the music-perhaps feeling the serenity of a beautiful pasture, the courage of a marching soldier, the profound grief of a mother bereft of her child, or a joy best expressed in song. He may sense an indefinable source, beyond fingers and human breath or calculation, animating the work, giving it beauty and, with invisible lines, holding it together. Carried away by the music, he may smile and tap to the rhythm. In a moment of deep interior stillness, he may have an experience where his heart soars, his intuitive eyes open, and he sees with an unshakeable certainty the goodness of things-an experience and knowing that cannot be taught or forced. If it comes, it comes freely and is a gift that completes the experience of the symphony. As lofty or "romantic" as this may sound, it is an experience Western Tradition understands to be a real leisure moment, the source of a festival or holy day's joy, and a taste of the fullest happiness. In Maritain's words: "...if either intuition or love exists in any hidden corner, life and the flame of life are there, and a bit of heaven in a promise." It is an experience that refreshes one to his core and is available to young and old, educated and uneducated.

And here, within Western Tradition's understanding of leisure, we see the indispensable relation of the arts to contemplation, festivity, and leisure. As Josef Pieper states: "...the

effect of festivity, the stepping out of time and the refreshment that penetrates to the depths of the soul, reaches the celebrant in the form of a message couched in the language of the arts." (*In Tune with the World: A Theory of Festivity*) At this point, we can assert that the student's knowledge of the symphony is complete and liberating; he has experienced the essence of the symphony's gift. Yet, we can also argue that if the student had trained well in making music, his understanding for the symphony would have an extra dimension. He would have gone through the painful and repetitive process of learning to play an instrument, developing the habits and skills necessary to play songs. He would have moved beyond just playing the mechanics to feeling the music and adding his own personal interpretation, and he would have learned how to harmonize with others in making music. At the least, this student would have a greater appreciation of the craft of the symphony-he may have also learned how to play a part in it.

As it has been said, the end is in the beginning, so let us return to our Spring. As Western Academy moves beyond its Spring, and as we teach young students in the Spring of their lives, we will remind ourselves that Summer is the end and that Fall and Winter are natural parts of the cycle. And just as Western Academy will need to periodically revisit its original seeds and vision to keep to its purpose and its way, so too we hope that men who have passed through Western Academy will know how to revisit their youth.

Boys come with unique personalities, active imaginations, and big eyes constantly ready for wonder. They come eager to defend what is good, to "fight the bad guys." They naturally see things and events like stories and approach learning as an adventure. They assert independence but are still securely tied to their family and community. They are naturally affectionate, know they are in need, and trust that they have their parents there for support. They quickly bounce back from a fall. They have a ready faith and persistent desires to know why and, as my four year old asks, "What means that?" And they believe there is an answer.

As a Western Academy student continues along the path of education and adulthood, moving to more specialized and isolated studies, we hope he will not dismiss as childish these qualities so evident in young boys. Rather, he will continue to integrate and develop them. He will grow in wisdom while he continues to seek it, and find his freedom in the bonds of Truth.

Principal, St. John Academy (2018- )  
President and CEO, Samuel & Erasmus Institute (2013- )  
Founding Headmaster, Western Academy (2009-2013)  
Head of the Lower School, The Heights (2002-2009)