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PEGASUS

A NEWSLETTER FOR THE CAUX ROUND TABLE FOR MORAL CAPITALISM
NETWORK LOOKING AT BUSINESS ABOVE THE CLUTTER AND CONFETTI



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What Knowledge is of Most Worth?

Education's Purpose

by Michael Hartoonian

Introduction

“Why” questions are always the most complicated – and the most useful.

The why or philosophical questions are, indeed, the most useful, interesting and difficult questions we can entertain. They are the inquiries that separate us from animals. This is both an advantage and a curse. As Shakespeare asked, “What is a **man** if **the** chief good and market of his time be but to sleep and feed? **A beast no more.**” People must eat and sleep, but consider – animals feed; humans dine. Animals have sex; humans make love. Animals die; humans pass on. Why the difference? In a word, EDUCATION – the path from unconsciousness and innate reactions to consciousness and learned perspectives. All knowledge, however discovered or created, by any culture or cultures, is rooted in nature and derives lessons from consiliences with experiences that advantage us to create and discover what is moral. It is altogether true, therefore, that we have a duty to take up the joy, discipline and love revealed to us in history and the physical world. This benevolent duty is the one true purpose of education – that is, to make us better.

- *In 1798, the German philosopher Friedrich Schelling introduced the concept of “the secret bond” connecting our mind with nature. The idea has taken on more empirical weight since the 18th century.*

The Cultural Context

*Athens, itself, is a school where we understand that,
Any society that does not educate its warriors to be philosophers,
And its philosophers to be warriors,
Will have its wars fought by fools,
And its philosophy crafted by cowards.*
-Pericles, King of Athens

Are we becoming surrounded by cowards and fools?

As I look around the world, I witness many nation states and groups that are truncating our ethical, economic and social wisdom through laws banning rational thought, using religious doctrine over scientific grounded medicine and most of all, I see morally unfit leaders who believe that they can do whatever they care to because God or some warped sense of self and history said they should.

Have we come to believe that any individual or random group has the wisdom to be so certain about the depth of our ignorance? Do we understand the learning obligations of holding the office of citizen (and of leadership) and the humility to see the limits of our individual and collective knowledge? Do we understand the purpose and responsibility of a democratic/learning society?

The fundamental understanding of teaching and learning is exactly what Pericles is talking about. It's about teaching relationships that are friendly, loving, connected and responsible. That is, transmitting to the next generation the elements of culture that provide the virtue and feedback loops that will allow us to carry on a conversation between the DNA of a democratic society and our genetic identity. At birth, our genes are arranged in a rather random set. Cultural education and individual learning should be about a critical consistency between the culture/environment and the development of the democratic mind, meaning that the only way to learn to be a democratic citizen is to be immersed in a democratic society. As Winston Churchill said: "First we shape our dwellings, then our dwellings shape us." This is the genius of teaching – why, what and how is this teaching/learning done? This essay is about defining those relationships.

Cultures created and held responsible four fundamental professions – **education**, then law, theology and medicine. In addition, within the context of a democratic republic, there is and must be a tension between the enlightened citizen and these professions. However, all must be responsible searchers for truth, which is always contested, as well as critically love the institutions and nation in which they spend their life's time. The tension is displayed in debate, defined by civility, intellectual rigor and the character to be able to consider the possibility that you or any of us, could be wrong.

Every society creates a cultural narrative. That narrative reflects identity and purpose and becomes that culture's curriculum. That curriculum informs survival. Early in the evolution of human society, it was clear that survival would depend on a family's or a community's memory and ability to discern a truth to discriminate among those cultural elements that should be passed on to the next generation and those that should be left behind, as well as elements to be created anew. These cultural values, which have a half-life of one generation, implicitly demand that people must evaluate these essential characteristics and teach them to each other and to their children. As societies advanced, this task became more complex and professions were created by cultures to do that work. In other words, who would help deal with and explain death, the cosmos and the mysteries of the hidden soul? Who would explain the need for order with justice? Who would deal with the sick and the nature of health? And who would take these ideas and intentionally and critically pass them on to the next generation?

Certainly, other groups of people would administer and guide the implementation of the cultural concepts, but the professions were created to judge which ideas and narratives were necessary for cultural survival. This is and has always been tricky business because of the changing nature of the cultural context and the nature of being human. Because of this complexity, citizens must cultivate a deep civic inquisitiveness and acquire a built-in scrap detector. When the culture works well, the professions, working in concert with one another – and the general wisdom of the people – debate, synthesize and recommend principles and policies that create more gentle and cultural beneficial changes on the landscape. What this means is that the professional's first responsibility is to the

veracity of the content or knowledge of the discipline in which they work. Thus, a medical doctor's first responsibility is to the science of medicine, not the patient. If she doesn't know the science, the patient suffers. Likewise, knowledge of the law is more important than the lawyer's client. In education, the student does not come first. The content of the discipline does. You can only teach what you know and to the degree that you put students, patients, clients or parishioners before disciplined inquiry, to that same degree, you corrupt their learning and well-being.



Social, economic, political and technical employees, as well as managers, evaluate, implement and reevaluate professional content. They must continually make corrections and suggestions to their applied content, primarily by adding strength of character to themselves and their institutions, allowing them to continue learning and live more independently and harmoniously with other citizens.

When real learning and debate are missing from the cultural curriculum, change (social, ethical, economic, etc.) can be brutal and often bloody. Without a learning culture, democratic and market-driven societies become problematic. It is altogether true that a culture creates professions, first, to protect the culture and secondly, to educate citizens into the possession of the critical and conditional mind. That is, a mind that is always in research mode. Such an intellect is always asking, “If we do this (X), then we expect that (Y) might happen.”

As listed above, the four classical professions so charged to attend to this challenge are education, medicine, religion and law. These four professions were created out of the ongoing need for cultural sustainability and crafted to protect, enhance and transmit the culture to the next generation. However, once a profession atrophies, caused either by outside or inside forces, it loses its first purpose and becomes irrelevant, corrupt and the larger culture

is put in danger. This often happens when intellectual laziness, selfishness or an irresistible dogma or ideology invades the cultural DNA. The task of the professions is to understand and mitigate the issue so it doesn't destroy the culture. Within a democratic republic, this evaluative transmittal is even more necessary, since a republican form of governance is based on a set of principles sustained through enlightened legal and ethical arguments among responsible, healthy and **educated** citizens. For example, any inequitable distribution of justice, manifested in different rules and



sanctions based on such differences as class, geography or ethnicities, diminishes the republic and leaves all citizens vulnerable to disillusion and cynicism. This does not mean, however, an abandonment of knowledge, as the behavior of the fearful and closed minded would suggest, prohibiting ideas simply because they disagree. What it demands is a debate regarding the limits of law, faith and science. Enlightened citizens, who constitute the fourth branch of government – The People – are responsible for continuing civil and civic debates. The principles of any republic are often at odds, one with another, and in need of serious debate. There have and always will be tensions between the law and moral sentiments. However, the law cannot be disregarded. It is always in play

within the civic and civil arguments that move the republic forward toward justice. However, to engage in the civic debate, an individual or group needs to have an ethical grounding, historical knowledge and the understanding that we are held together by a network that shares one value above all others – in a word, that value is “character.”

To this end, all four professions **teach** about self-governance and responsibility, understanding that **learning is uncomfortable**. Indeed, you will never learn a thing if you refuse discomfort! The profession of education helps students understand how to pursue truth. We have a choice: be comfortable or be truthful. This is the case because learning starts with the confession of ignorance. The educated person doesn’t just try to prove someone else’s argument incorrect, but works to prove his or her personal theory or argument incorrect. Teachers spend a lifetime trying to understand the long historic perspectives, empirical research, subjective faith and logic in deciding what knowledge to teach. In any democratic republic, the profession of education has the responsibility for teaching the general tenets of enlightened citizenship. However, all four professions teach citizens why they should and how they can govern themselves, as well as why justice must be understood and practiced as a necessary condition of civil society. Here, every citizen has power or agency because no one should be above the law and, thus, works to construct a level or just playing field. Just as we want physicians to explain the principles of good health, we need education and law professionals to teach the standards of truth and justice, understanding that justice always carries sanctions – Lady Liberty has a sword in her right hand. Armed with this knowledge so transmitted, citizens of a republic become more competent in discussing and acting on bringing balance to the fundamental value tensions of democracy, both in their private and civic lives.

Education: A Countervailing Force

If the world is insane, the school’s job is NOT to turn out insane people who can fit into society. Yet, that is exactly what schools and universities are doing in the name of relevance. In a recent editorial, the New York Times asked parents, teachers and others what they believed to be the purpose of schools. The answers were stated with grace and with a concern for the institution itself. Except for a few comments, however, the statements were about what contemporary society and students need – skills for work and citizenship, hope, safety, food and to read and do math. Comprehension of knowledge (of most worth), as well as being a critical thinker and debater, got little or no attention. Yet, we cannot comprehend anything absent a knowledge base. You may be able to read, but if you don’t understand the vocabulary and logic of science, for example, you will never comprehend the biological and physical worlds.

Within the current pedagogical belief system, we say that kids come first, not knowledge, nor the acquisition of such. Yet, children know they do not come first. The market comes first. Around the world, we know from World Health Organization data that children have the poorest diets, worst healthcare, are the poorest (birth – 20 years of age) financially and

let us not forget, the most abused. Children first? Perhaps we should stop lying to our children and to ourselves and take responsibility for our human and democratic future by addressing the knowledge of most worth. But today, we seem focused on amusement. We are intellectually lazy and have little sensitivity to what is going on in the world. Our minds have closed to truth and our energy turned inward – “Please, someone, help me make it through the day,” is the mantra.

Education should be the counter force to this contemporary madness.

Wanting to Know (Why) is Irresistible

We all have a desire to know, particularly when and what we realize we don't know. This desire is universal and irresistible, unless driven out of us. Knowledge is the original temptation of humankind and no child can overcome it for long. But it is a desire that grows by what it feeds on. This thirst is impossible to shake, particularly for people with curiosity, intellectual energy and the willingness to understand that they may be wrong in their knowledge base. Most of all, this desire to know is necessary to the development of the democratic or open mind, a mind that can hold at least two contradictory ideas at the same time and investigate the better way forward.

Why do I want to know? It's human nature. It makes me feel better. It helps me behave better. And it provides me with perspective. Ignorance remains bliss only to the intellectually blind. As soon as one sees that he or she is ignorant, that person wants not to be so. Of course, others may do all in their power to keep you from knowing.

We need a new theory about how the mind works, based on confronting our misconceptions about how the world works. We all carry fully developed theories or stories about ourselves and the world that are complex, explainable and for the most part, incorrect. These misconceptions are injurious to self and society, particularly a democratic society, simply because they are rooted in incompetence.

There is a relational sequence loop in the decline of a democracy. The sequence runs like this. First, any and every society absent attention and correction to relationships will become corrupt. The corruption stems from relational incompetence. That is, proper interactions with knowledge, people, institutions and the land. This incompetence always leads to violence. From the child who disrupts the classroom because she has not learned today's lesson, to the husband who slaps his wife because he cannot rationally discuss family issues, to a nation that invades another, causing war – these are all examples of violence brought on by incompetence. Of course, the only remedy to violence and its causes is to entertain the realities of the mind and attending pedagogy.



Education and A Changing World

Every once in a great while, a radical break appears in the continuity of time that shakes the foundations of society and its traditional values, declaring those values irrelevant to the vagaries of the present. Those breaks in time I call the “times between the times,” one of which we are passing through now and trying to decide if we should embrace the fracture with all its fears and opportunities or ignore natural and social history at our great peril. What makes our time so dangerous, but not unique, is the growing reality that we have lost our intellectual and moral directions and continue to blame political leaders, family breakdown, a dumbing down of and by media and inequities of income across the globe. It doesn't seem to occur to us that the most insidious inequality is inequalities of knowledge, including the knowledge of being human.

To say it again: there is no doubt that institutional corruption and the inequalities of income are damaging to any republic. But the deeper issue is not the unequal distribution of money and property, but the unequal distribution of knowledge. With apologies to T.S. Eliot – *Where is the knowledge we have lost in information? And where is the wisdom lost in knowledge?*

How are we educating ourselves? This is a large cultural question. And why? This is even a larger and more important question.

All children in the world receive an education every time they walk down their streets or ingest media. Truthfully, we all do. Metaphorically, the architecture, art and social media add to the conception of *streets*. Our contemporary street walking has narrowed our vision and broken our covenant (natural and sacred relationships) with the past and therefore, the future. Confining our vision to the here and now has also diminished our sense of community and has left us with a collective delusion built on a deep disrespect for religion, history, science and intellectual acuity. We have all become exceptional people because of our ability to construct personal realities filled with entitlements and devoid of personal responsibility. These are the ingredients of insanity.

Education, Society and Democracy

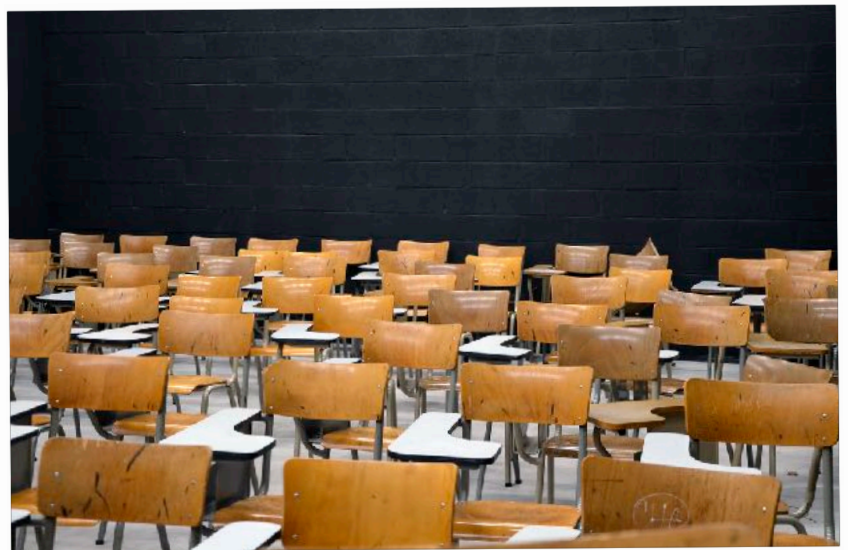
Any hope of surviving as a democratic republic/market economy anywhere in the world will depend on two elements: (1) our need to enhance our common learning and (2) our insistence that schools embrace the noble work of serving as a counterweight to the “street” education we and our children are receiving.

Education is the seed bed of every government. It is simply the case that a republic must rely on a different kind of learning, different commitments and different skills. Political philosophy tends to divide governments into three classifications: despotism, monarchy and republic. To survive, the dictator, plutocrat or other despot, must educate people into fearing the world, while the monarch relies on symbols and the teaching of chauvinism disguised as

honor. The republic is unique – it depends on a special or exceptional characteristic. A republic hangs on its ability to cultivate virtue in all its citizens. This is the insight that a republic will only survive if it invests in the educational resources necessary to create and preserve lives of virtue and self-sacrifice and operationalize the true meaning of one’s ethical and material infrastructure manifested in *E Pluribus Unum*. This democratic education produces the understanding that human beings, by definition, are all morally equal, as well as the understanding that systemic good can only be manifested through laws constructed by virtuous individuals, not by identity groups interested in superficial or skin-deep attributes.

While the moral trend of most of our history may have been in the right direction, the 21st century suggests a dangerous turnaround. Today, there is no guarantee that the will to create a more perfect world will continue. There is nothing in our personal DNA to make it so. A republic is always dependent on the current generation and the responsibility we take today for the future. That responsibility can only be realized through deep learning imbedded in our families, media, businesses and above all, in our education practices. In Thomas Jefferson’s first draft of the Declaration of Independence, he said “Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of (PUBLIC) Happiness,” meaning that happiness was a function of community wealth (commonwealth), what we would now call the “ethical and material infrastructure.” While the individual must come to govern self in the republic, it is the commonwealth that develops virtue. While each ethical decision is personal, an individual cannot be moral alone. It does take the community to develop moral content and character. In the 18th century, this ideal became ubiquitous throughout the world. Today, not so much.

All of us, necessarily, must be educated into virtue by all the institutions of our culture, including our political ones, so we can become fit for the rule of law and fit to govern ourselves. The fundamental understanding and bedrock of any republic is virtue. This is the ability to put first things first. Such wisdom is best acquired through public instruction. This means instruction that is concerned not (just) with the notion of making one better off, but making one better, period. This is the education we once called “liberal.” This education is not training for career or vocational work, which plays to our baser instincts and motivations, but a general education of arts and sciences; religion; philosophy and literature; history; geography; languages; and political economy that will not only create and sustain the citizen, the culture and the economy, but will give life a point and purpose.



Conclusion

There's an old military understanding that says a great deal about one's respect of people. In a totalitarian society, the maps belong to the top officers and only to them. In a democratic society, every individual has access to the maps. In battle, the democratic mind knows that anyone might find themselves in a leadership situation. There's also a tacit expectation that every soldier/citizen will have the knowledge to understand and navigate the land or seascape. This goes to the meaning of the Athenian notion that warriors and philosophers must share the same attributes or we're left with cowards and fools. In fact, the foundation for democratic life is the discipline that challenges us to struggle with the **why** questions, regardless of calling.

To enhance our continuing discussion and guide educational content and practice in a more philosophical oriented direction, we might ask:

- What (why) is the proper relationship between the constitution or common law of the state (nation) and the character of its citizens?*
- What (why) is the proper relationship between self-interest and public interest?*
- What (why) is the relationship between forms of government and social economic class? Will a large, impoverished mass and a small elite generally produce oligarchy? Does greater equalization of wealth really favor democratic rule?*
- What (why) is the relationship between education and democracy?*
- What (why) is the relationship between the health of social institutions and the well-being of citizens?*
- What (why) is the relationship between the historical myths of individualism and the assumptions about the inclusive reality of life?*
- What (why) is the proper relationship between natural law and positive law?*

Why must an individual, claiming citizenship, be able to answer the question: "How shall I live my life?" Such questions can help us stop fragmenting our intellectual and cultural resources. When we fail to use these resources, our investigations soon fall into the quicksand of simple-minded answers to complex problems. In truth, can issues like war and peace; immigration; abortion; trade; environmental pollution; genetic engineering; and space exploration be intellectually discussed without reference to philosophical questioning? Can we even begin to address these issues without a careful study of the tensions between the public and private lives of the citizen? Between ethics and law? The study of how we come to wisdom is the necessary epistemology for democracy.

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