

EDUCATION WEEK

Published: September 29, 2004

COMMENTARY

The Discipline of Wonder

By Terry Roberts

In his classic 1940 tome entitled *How to Read a Book*, the philosopher-educator Mortimer Adler delivered what has become, for me, a telling indictment of our age. Almost as an afterthought, Adler described:

What kills wonder is habituated boredom; what grows it is inspired practice.

“Education: the central aim of which has always been recognized, from Socrates’ day down to our own, as the freeing of the mind through the discipline of wonder.”

What is remarkable about this statement is not Adler’s stunning self-assurance (you get used to it after several hundred pages), but rather the intensely evocative phrase—*the freeing of the mind through the discipline of wonder*. Adler makes it clear, both in *How to Read a Book* and in his other writings on education, that the freeing of the mind is a process that can and should go on throughout one’s lifetime, and that schooling is only the preparation for becoming educated through life.

But what does he mean by *the discipline of wonder*?

The ideal of lifelong learning, that catchphrase so often bandied about, implies that wonder is a quality that can outlast childhood, perhaps even survive adolescence. What Adler says very clearly in *The Paideia Proposal* (1982) and elsewhere is that it is a fundamental attribute of the human psyche, and not only *can* it outlast the splendor of childhood, but it *should*. It is an attribute of any healthy, evolving adult. What gives the free and open state of wonder the necessary durability to last a lifetime is discipline—in the sense that wonder can and should be sharpened, focused, trained.

Adult wonder is intricately bound up in a set of skills and habits—formerly known as the liberal arts—that are not specialized but general to all vocations and avocations. These skills (Adler’s good friend Robert Maynard Hutchins defined them in part as reading, writing, listening, observing, understanding, and thinking) are fed by practice far more than by direct instruction; they are nurtured by meaningful and novel work rather than dull repetition. What kills wonder is habituated boredom; what grows it is inspired practice. The reason Adler’s offhand written comment on the discipline of wonder seems to me such a harsh judgment on our current educational ethos is that I fear we are systematically killing wonder even in our best schools.

I would offer three symptoms of wonder’s demise, based on contemporary experience. At the National Paideia Center, where I serve as the director, we offer training and technical support to a cohort of music teachers from a large urban school district. The stated goal of our collaboration is to train these teachers to integrate seminar discussion and project-based unit planning into their music instruction, with the specific purpose of teaching literacy skills as part of the music curriculum. At first glance, this seems to imply a beneficent integration of the liberal arts. But in fact, the real agenda is to teach testable reading and writing skills in music classes, so that the music program itself can survive in a district that views it as extraneous to the real business at hand: raising test scores. What human experience is more conducive to the discipline of wonder than music? What experience is more crucial to human development?

A second example of why Adler’s definition of education seems so critical in our current milieu has to do with the perfect school. In this case, we work closely with a large urban elementary school in the South whose test scores are consistently among the top five in the state (while their competition for those top spots consists of much smaller magnet and charter schools for the gifted). The school’s staff is proud and hard-working, its administration dedicated and demanding, its parents supportive and committed—and its test scores the stuff that superintendents’ dreams are made of. And yet, in a recent conversation over lunch, the principal and her core academic team raised the great, unspoken question: What really makes

them different? The reply that grew out of the resulting conversation had several parts. One, the school was a truly extraordinary place not because of its scores, but because its people believed in a shared, core vision: the realization of the potential to lead within every child. The school is an incubator for leadership, and I would suggest, for wonder. “Isn’t it ironic,” the principal admitted over dessert, “the state doesn’t test what really makes us special. They don’t even know how.”

The third symptom resulting from our systematic disregard for wonder has to do with the decline of the teaching profession—a profession that is truly in crisis. Unbeknownst to the vast majority of American citizens, most of the 50 states have assigned a task force the job of finding, not so much highly qualified teachers, as any teachers at all. And in many of the programs designed specifically to recruit the best and brightest into the teaching profession, participants are taking their degrees and then fleeing the classroom as soon as possible. Why? In part, because teaching has lost the aura of an inspired and inspiring profession. Our best young professionals are technically proficient but have lost the mission and the spirit of wonder.

The sad fact is that in far too many schools we have dumbed down the education we provide, even as our test scores have gone up. We have reduced in quality the texts we ask our students to read and study. We have focused increasingly on a narrow range of subjects—sacrificing not only music but in some places the plastic arts, foreign language, and even science and history. And perhaps most disturbing of all, we have narrowed our teaching focus to those skills that can be measured with a multiple-choice question or, at most, a brief essay. I am awfully afraid that what we now term “high-stakes accountability” has squeezed wonder out of the classroom, quietly and efficiently eliminating it as our schools, with only a few stubborn exceptions, have become intentionally less intellectual.

If, indeed, it is an inescapable fact that what gets tested is what gets taught, we have to relearn the art of assessing the written and spoken word. We as teachers must ourselves relearn the art of reading and the art of conversation; we must relearn the discipline of wonder ourselves, so that we can foster it in others. If not, our schools run the risk of becoming not just political but trivial. “We cannot concede,” wrote Robert Hutchins in 1952, “that the conquest of nature, the conquest of drudgery, and the conquest of political power must lead in combination to triviality in education and hence, to all the occupations of life. The aim of education is wisdom, and each must have the chance to become as wise as he can.”

Have we systematically sacrificed wisdom for proficiency? I wonder.

Terry Roberts is the director of the National Paideia Center, in Chapel Hill, N.C.

Vol. 24, Issue 05, Page 31

© 2004 Editorial Projects in Education