
Reinvigorating Culture

Russell Kirk

Anyone who pushes the buttons of a television set nowadays may be tempted to reflect that genuine culture came to an end during the latter half of the twentieth century. The television set is an immense accomplishment of reason and imagination: the victory of technology. But the gross images produced by television are symptoms and causes of our civilization's decadence: the defeat of humane culture.

The contrast between the success of technology and the failure of social institutions is yet more striking when we look at any large American city. Some time ago I spent a day in Detroit, once styled "the arsenal of democracy," latterly known as "America's murder capital." I have known Detroit ever since I was a small boy, and have observed the stages of the city's decay over the decades. Except for some financial and political activity, and a little surviving commerce, about the foot of Woodward Avenue near the river, old Detroit is a dangerous wreck. The length of Woodward Avenue, up to Eight Mile Road and beyond, one drives through grim desolation: Beirut in the midst of its troubles might have seemed more cheerful. One passes through Detroit's "cultural center," the Institute of Arts on one side of the avenue, the Public Library on the other. Immediately north or south of those splendid buildings, immediately east or west, extends the grimy reality of a broken and dying city. "Culture" has become something locked into an archaic museum.

Detroit's technology has produced immense wealth in goods—and still does so, if at a diminished rate. Detroit's society has produced an inhumane quasi-anarchy. Take Detroit as an ugly micro-

*Cultural
decadence
no longer
deniable.*

cosm of America, and one may perceive the pressing need for a recovery of humane culture.

Our inherited culture is involved in great difficulties. I suppose that most people nowadays will assent to that statement. Forty years ago, not long after the Second World War, I often encountered people who waxed indignant at my venturing to suggest the possibility of cultural decadence among us. It is otherwise now.

Sometimes, true, I come upon men and women who profess to be well satisfied with our world, and with their diversions—rather nasty diversions, not infrequently—therein. Yet these are not tranquil people: instead they bring to mind a poem by Adam Mickiewicz:

*Your soul deserves the place to which it came,
If having entered Hell, you feel no flame.*

As marvelous innovators in the physical sciences, as wondrously efficient creators of technology, we moderns surpass our ancestors. But as for humane culture, we seem bent on destroying our civilization. Can anything be done by way of reinvigoration?

A decade ago, the report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education, *A Nation at Risk*, emphasized the pressing need for “life-long learning.” The Commission’s members declared that “educational reform should focus on the goal of creating a Learning Society. At the heart of such a society is the commitment to a set of values and to a system of education that affords all members the opportunity to stretch their minds to full capacity, from early childhood through adulthood, learning more as the world itself changes.” True learning extends far beyond the classroom, the members of this Commission added—“into homes and workplaces; into libraries, art galleries, museums, and science centers; indeed, into every place where the individual can develop and mature in work and life.” Rather as an afterthought, this Report pointed out that some observers believe that “an over-emphasis on technical or occupational skills will leave little time for studying the humanities that so enrich daily life, help maintain civility, and develop a sense of community. Knowledge of the humanities, they maintain, must be harnessed to science and technology, if the latter are to remain creative and humane, just as the humanities need to be informed by science and technology if they are to remain relevant to the human condition.”

This report *A Nation at Risk* is both a symptom and a catalyst of growing public concern over the fallen state of learning in our land. For the past four decades, influential books highly critical of American learning have flowed from the presses. No other great nation in the history of mankind ever enjoyed such possibilities for widespread learning as does the American Republic, yet our prosperity brings intellectual and moral triviality—or worse.

We Americans, at the close of the twentieth century, neglect our patrimony of culture while developing no new culture that can be called humane. My point may be sufficiently made by my friend Malcolm Muggeridge's mordant paragraph in his essay "The Great Liberal Death Wish."

*America's
patrimony
neglected.*

"As the astronauts soar into the vast eternities of space," Muggeridge wrote, "on earth the garbage piles higher; as the groves of academe extend their domain, their alumni's arms reach lower; as the phallic cult spreads, so does impotence. In great wealth, great poverty; in health, sickness; in numbers, deception. Gorging, left hungry; sedated, left restless; telling all, hiding all; in flesh united, forever separate. So we press on through the valley of abundance that leads to the wasteland of satiety, passing through the gardens of fantasy, seeking happiness ever more ardently, and finding despair ever more surely."

Amidst our present affluence, the typical college-graduated American does not read through one serious book in the course of a year. Yet perhaps we begin to be roused from our intellectual and spiritual sloth by the alarming indices of social and personal decadence. Some of us grow aware that most of our schools are little better than centers for minor-sitting and sociability; that many of our public libraries pander to triviality and salacity; that most colleges offer to the typical student, at best, what Christopher Jencks has called "an introduction to middlebrow culture and middle-class conviviality"; that the fascinations of the boob-tube are converting most Americans into passive vessels, subject to every fad and foible of the hour. For some decades past, "learning" has been regarded by a great many folk, implicitly at least, as a disagreeable imposition from which one is emancipated on commencement day.

*Signs of
decay.*

Once upon a time it was somewhat otherwise: one thinks of Samuel Johnson's wherry-boy on the Thames who would have given everything he possessed in order to learn Greek. Once upon a time, the unschooled, or many of them, felt a reverence for learning.

To learn
is to
orient.

Why so? Because they took it for the path to wisdom, and not worldly wisdom merely. Learning, they fancied, was orientation—although they did not employ that precise word.

Indeed that is what true learning undertakes: to *orient* men and women. To *orient*—or in the jargon of college administrators, to *orientate*—is to settle, to find bearings; to locate one's self in one's environment with reference to time, place, and people; to determine one's true position. By acquiring humane learning, men and women settle purposefully into the culture of their land and time.

Intellectuals
and sages.

In those centuries when learning was revered, learned men aspired to become not intellectuals, but sages. An intellectual is puffed up with pride; in the observation of Bertrand Russell, "An intellectual is a person who thinks he knows more than he does know." A sage, on the other hand, is a person who knows how little he knows—but, like Don Quixote recovered from madness, he knows who he is and where he stands. The true sage, oriented, looking toward the Light, knows that wisdom can be acquired only by much intellectual labor. With T.S. Eliot, the sage inquires,

Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?

Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?

Wisdom and virtue—so Plato instructs us—are the ends or objects of education. Certainly they are the ends or objects of what we call the humanities, humane studies. The acquisition of learning, *true* learning in the humane disciplines, will not necessarily raise the student to the condition of a sage; yet such studies will teach him what it is to be fully human, and to participate in what Pico della Mirandola called "the dignity of man." When humane studies are badly neglected, something unpleasant occurs to the order of the soul and the order of the commonwealth.

The decline of humane studies in formal education is only one of the several grave reasons why our culture, private and public, is in decay. In the passing of a cultural custom or tradition from generation to generation, age to age, the school is but one of the instruments employed for that complex task. But our own high and complex culture could not survive without an apparatus of schools; nor can those schools accomplish their work satisfactorily unless they develop and protect and renew a coherent program of studies, a curriculum, which maintains a continuity of reason and imagination.

Permit me, then, to say something about the means by which schools and colleges used to impart some acquaintance with humane studies; and to suggest that we might do well to return to some such program, for the sake of the person and the sake of the republic.

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There exist two chief purposes of a program of humane or liberal studies—purposes that have been recognized from at least as early as the sixth century before Christ.

One of these two primary reasons why civilized societies have encouraged what we now call “the humanities” is the need for cultivating a measure of wisdom and virtue in the human person, for the human person’s own sake. This program of study is intended to help to develop good character, moral imagination, and right reason.

Humane studies order the individual and society.

The other primary reason why civilized societies recognize the value of humane studies is the need for developing social coherence—that is, for teaching young people their duties and their opportunities in a civil social order, so that the community may survive and prosper, well led. This program is intended to develop civic responsibility and love of neighbor and country.

Now these two ends or objectives are coordinate, rather than opposed: if the order of the soul suffers, the order of the commonwealth decays; or if the order of the commonwealth falls into confusion, the order of the soul is maintained with difficulty. In other words, the central patrimony of humane learning provides a program of study in which teaching for the sake of the individual person and teaching for the sake of the republic are interwoven.

But many intelligent writers have pointed out, during the past forty years and more, that this program of humane studies has fallen into the sere and yellow leaf. Have we failed in our duty to sustain and develop the humane traditions of learning? Yes, we have been neglecting, here in affluent America, the essentials of humane schooling. Permit me to discuss first the decline of the curriculum with respect to the development of good character and moral imagination; and then to turn to the decline of the curriculum in its aspect of securing the social order.

In the Great Tradition of genuine education, how have wisdom and virtue been cultivated in the rising generation? Why, chiefly through the study of a body of great literature. I do not mean to

Importance of literature.

claim for humane letters an exclusive function here. For understanding the human condition in our time, a tolerable apprehension of the discipline of physics, the most philosophical of sciences, is increasingly important, for instance. But my space being limited, I confine myself here to literature as a path to wisdom and virtue.

Time was, within my own memory, when the prose and poetry taught in the typical American school, from the first grade through the twelfth, clearly retained an imaginatively ethical significance. They were meant to develop character and imagination through example, precept, and an imagery conceived in noble minds. Consider the sixth-grade reader used in my own public school near the Detroit railroad yards, some sixty years ago. That manual was divided into three parts: "Nature—Home and Country"; "Stories of Greece and Rome"; and "Great American Authors". In Part I we had lengthy admirable selections about "the world of nature", in effect opening eyes to the wonder of creation, from Theodore Roosevelt, Samuel White Baker, Captain Mayne Reid, John James Audubon, Ralph Waldo Emerson, James Russell Lowell, and other worthies; also in Part I a section concerned with home and country in the spirit of Edmund Burke's aphorism "For us to love our country, our country ought to be lovely," and consisting of selections from Irving, Dickens, Tennyson, Lanier, Leigh Hunt, Ruskin (*The King of the Golden River*, a prime favorite in such anthologies until fairly recent decades), Cardinal Mercier (whose inclusion might be denounced nowadays by the American Civil Liberties Union), Lincoln, Brown- ing, and others. Part II of our sixth-grade reader was equally interesting, with long extracts in good translation from *The Iliad*, *The Odyssey*, and the *Aeneid*. Such readings, intelligently commented upon by competent teachers, woke our young minds to wonder, and imparted some notion of what it is to be fully human—to attain the dignity of man, a little lower than the angels.

Need I contrast such literary instruction with the sixth-grade "English lit" materials of the typical public school of 1994? With the selections founded upon "contemporary relevance" and "compassion" and "social significance" nowadays? Does the typical sixth-grade anthology of 1994 warm the heart, wake the moral imagination, train the emotions? Indeed, how many teachers of literature in 1994 have been trained with a view to these functions?

Probably a good many readers of this journal know C. S. Lewis' moving little book *The Abolition of Man*. Its subject is the study of lit-

erature in primary and secondary schools. "Without the aid of trained emotions," Lewis writes, "the intellect is powerless against the animal organism." He finds that dry-as-dust school anthologies of a certain recent type are imprisoning young people in "contemporaneity" and in an arid pseudo-rationalism and in vague sociological generalizations. "And all the time," Lewis continues, "—such is the tragi-comedy of our situation—we continue to clamor for those very qualities we are rendering impossible. You can hardly open a periodical without coming across the statement that what our civilization needs is more 'drive,' or dynamism, or self-sacrifice, or 'creativity.' In a sort of ghastly simplicity we remove the organ and demand the function. We make men without chests and expect of them virtue and enterprise. We laugh at honor and are shocked to find traitors in our midst. We castrate and bid the geldings be fruitful."

So it is with us Americans now, more than forty years since Lewis wrote. I have been saying this: the purpose of humane studies is to help to maintain order in the human soul; to teach young people what it is to be fully human; to impart the cardinal virtues by the art of persuasion, not by exhortation merely. In recent years we have half forgotten this tradition, coming to fancy instead that the functions of literary studies were merely to impart "communication skills" that might make money, and to supply some diversion in a workaday world. We even have acted upon the principle that it doesn't matter what the young person reads, so long as he is able to read something or other. The time has come for us to renew the study of literature as a source of good character, moral imagination, and right reason.

Now I am not arguing that literary knowledge may be made a satisfactory substitute for religious convictions. But neither can religious convictions of themselves insure good character, moral imagination, and right reason. Formal schooling cannot instill what Aristotle called "moral virtue"—that acquisition coming from good habits, formed chiefly in the family—but formal schooling can help much to develop what Aristotle called "intellectual virtue," the aspiration of Socrates and Plato. If we remind ourselves of how much the tradition of literary studies has accomplished, over the centuries, to transmit to the rising generation fortitude, prudence, temperance, justice, faith, hope, and charity—why, we perceive afresh

*Virtues
intellectual
and moral.*

why reinvigorated courses in humane letters are indispensable to a sound education.

Let it be understood that the transmitting of intellectual virtue is a complex process, much more than a matter of uttering platitudes in classrooms. People who seek to restore the moral aspects of schooling frequently call for abrupt reform and speedy results. One well understands this demand; one sympathizes with the exasperation of many a parent on encountering the vulgarized positivism which has flowed out of teachers' colleges for more than half a century. All the same, the process of restoring meaning and moral purpose to formal instruction necessarily is a difficult one, requiring time for its attainment. I do not mean that it is a hopeless task. What once has been, may be again.

*Assault on
normative
learning.*

Over the centuries there was developed an educational tradition, altering with the passage of the years and yet retaining an essential character, that preserved in Europe—and presently in America—some continuity of culture. This tradition persisted, little challenged, well into the nineteenth century; it was strong still, within my own time, at the older British universities. But today everywhere that venerable pattern of education is obscured, at best; often it is broken and derided. The French and the Italians have abandoned much of it during very recent years. Public educational authorities in Britain have greatly injured the old pattern of humane learning, deliberately, during the past three decades. In America, the assault upon the old normative schooling became intense during the 1920s and 1930s, and in large degree has triumphed almost everywhere by this time.

The antagonist educational structure of our day, little concerned with meaning, aims confusedly at personal advancement, technical training, sociability, socialization, custodial functions, and certification—not to mention fun and games. The very possibility of ascertaining the meaning of anything is denied by many a department of philosophy. What does this twentieth-century educational system—if system it may be called—transmit to the rising generation? Chiefly certain technical and commercial skills, together with that training in the learned professions which is vital to our civilization. Modern schooling, at every level, offers little toward the ordering of the soul and the ordering of the commonwealth. Yet neither the person nor the republic can long endure unharmed, if education contin-

ues to ignore reason, imagination, and conscience—or else treats those three as objects of antiquarian interest merely.

If there is no education for meaning, life will become meaningless for many. If there is no education for virtue, many will become vicious. The American public begins to sense these unpleasant prospects; thus slowly opinion shifts toward such proposals as tuition tax-credits or voucher plans, which might make possible the survival or even the regeneration of a schooling rooted in the long intellectual and moral experience of the species.

The sort of education that prevailed without much challenge until well into the nineteenth century sought an ethical end through an intellectual means. It aspired to the apprehension of meaning. The generations of scholars who contributed to this mode or tradition of culture were well aware that a high culture is a product of art, not of nature; and that it must be nurtured, for the intellectual and moral qualities of humankind always are menaced by overweening will and appetite. They knew that humane literature, shaping the sentiments as well as the intellect, has a purpose much superior to the inculcation of recent “values” and the effacing of “values” of yesteryear.

*High culture
must be
nurtured.*

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Now I pass from observations on the ethical function of humane letters in forming mind and conscience in the person, to the parallel function of humane learning as an agent of civil responsibility and social coherence.

Nowadays one hears talk of the need for a “civil religion”—in effect, a worship of the human community rather than of a deity, or of transcendent truth. Unwise emphasis upon the public educational system’s teaching of social conformity can lead to such an extreme; but such a pseudo-religion is not the kind of social coherence that I am talking about. The voice of the people not being the voice of God, I do not propose to render unto Caesar any more than properly belongs to Caesar.

Any good educational system, from classical times to the present, has taught the rising generation loyalty to the public order, duties to the community, the rudiments of politics, the civic virtues. The principal means for conveying this body of knowledge and sentiment, until quite recently, was the study of history.

Our intellectual ancestors knew that what men call the present is merely a film upon the deep well of the past. The evanescent

present vanishes as I write; my words of five minutes ago already have become part of the past; and the future is unknowable. From understanding of the past, chiefly, is meaning derived and some measure of wisdom gained.

Properly taught, the historical discipline greatly interests most young people. I recall writing in the seventh grade an essay in apology for historical studies in the curriculum; I wrote it with enthusiasm, comparing historical researches to the fascinating exploration of a huge deserted castle. In those days there was an historical course for nearly every grade of school; in high school, we had a year apiece of ancient history, modern history, and advanced American history; also a year of government that amounted to constitutional history.

Rare indeed are the schools that deal so generously with historical studies nowadays. First there came along, under the influence of disciples of John Dewey, abominable courses in "civics"—courses generally repellent to pupils and boring to teachers. (What few good programs in civics I have happened to encounter have been the creations of individual ingenious teachers, not at all the programs outlined by typical civics textbooks.) Then there triumphed "integrated" programs of Social Studies along sociological lines, now imposed upon nearly every public school, in part at the admonition of the late James B. Conant. With justice, students call this pseudo-discipline "Social Stew." It is a mess; "there is death in the pot, compound it how you will."

I confess to having been director of a K-12 series of social-science textbooks, used throughout the country; and in that series we employed history as the primary discipline. But the series would have been better had we not tried to be all things to all disciplines. The incoherent character of most social-science curricula leaves the student without much information of an enduring sort, let alone knowledge, let alone wisdom. But why should I labor the point? Some readers may recall my article on this gloomy subject in *The Harvard Educational Review*, a few years ago. The failure of America's social-studies curricula is now widely acknowledged.

In the typical social-studies program, history is contracted to a shadow of its former substance, and the Tartars or the Dinkas are given equal time with the Roman Republic or the Protestant Reformation. I reviewed a "world history" textbook, a decade ago, in which I found but one reference to the Jews: "Jesus came from a

people called the Jews, who had lived for a long while in a country called Palestine." That was the beginning and the end of the history of Judaism. Christianity did obtain one other mention: it was noted succinctly that such a religion had prevailed in the Middle Ages and had caused the building of a number of churches.

My old friend T. S. Eliot touched upon this neglect of the historical discipline in his lecture to the Vergil Society, in 1945. The historical ignorance of our age he called "the new provincialism," the provincialism of time. This latter-day provincialism is an attitude "for which history is merely the chronicle of human devices which have served their turn and been scrapped, one for which the world is the property solely of the living, a property in which the dead hold no shares. The menace of this kind of provincialism is, that we can all, all the peoples on the globe, be provincials together; and those who are not content to be provincials, can only become hermits. If this kind of provincialism led to greater tolerance, in the sense of forbearance, there might be something to be said for it; but it seems more likely to lead to our becoming indifferent, in matters where we sought to maintain a distinctive dogma or standard, and to our becoming intolerant, in matters which might be left to local or personal preference."

*Provincialism
of time.*

Those who ignore history are condemned to repeat it, Santayana reminds us; and historical illiteracy in the United States may become a major cause of grave blunders in public policy—indeed, that form of provinciality already has had disastrous consequences. For many of America's young, the Republic seems either a work of nature, not requiring support; or else an oppressive force, exacting taxes and restraining desires. One thinks of the words of Cicero in *De Re Publica*: "Our age inherited the Republic like some beautiful painting of bygone days, its colors already fading through great age; and not only has our time neglected to freshen the colors of the picture, but we have failed to preserve its form and outlines."

It need not be so with us. The celebrating of the Bicentenary of the Constitution could have been the occasion for a vigorous revival of historical studies in our schools—the renewal of one large aspect of humane schooling; but that opportunity has been lost. From history, as from humane letters, every generation acquires its sense of the human condition; its acquaintance with the possibilities and the limitations of human action; its awareness that we the living are involved in what Burke called "the contract of eternal society" which

joins us with those who have preceded us in time and with those who will follow us in time. The historical consciousness shows men and women that they are part of a great continuity and essence, possessed of duties and rights—something better than naked apes, something higher than the beasts that perish. Historical consciousness lacking, private appetites and the ravenous ego begin to pull society apart.

It is not dull courses about “problems of democracy” or “social group relationships” that will wake the imagination of young Americans at the end of the twentieth century. The sweep, the drama, the color, the courage of true history all can be restored to the revived curriculum. The strong popular interest in the past, so evident among Americans today, can have its counterpart in the schools. It is through identification of one’s self with the current of historical events that a young woman or a young man acquires an affection for his society—not by “in-group” and “out-group” analyses. Mankind can endure anything except boredom, it has been said. In reconstituting the curriculum, we must thrust out the social-studies usurper and restore the legitimate ascendancy of the historical discipline.

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Between the Great Tradition of learning as I have described it briefly in these pages, and what passes for learning nowadays in nearly all our schools, public or independent, a gulf is fixed. This separation had its beginnings in the nineteenth century, if not earlier; but the breach was widened conspicuously some sixty years ago, as the domination of the Instrumentalists, the disciples of John Dewey, was extended over the public-school empire. Increasingly, socialization as an educational end crowded out the development of personal excellence; and obsession with “current awareness” supplanted the search for meaning in the human past.

I do not imply that the Great Tradition is wholly lost. Now and again I am surprised and pleased to discover healthy elements of the study of literature and of history holding up their heads in rural schools of Michigan, say. An increasing number of parents, painfully aware of the decay of the Great Tradition in more concerns than learning, endeavor to make up at home for some of the deficiencies of the school; others seek out, or take a hand in founding, independent schools concerned for mind and conscience. Yet many

even of these last have no clear notion of how to go about the business of renewing the search for wisdom and virtue.

What is the difference, essentially, between the Great Tradition in schooling as it prevailed in North America in the year when George Washington assumed the presidency and the first Congress assembled, and the bewilderment and discontent in schooling that we see about us in the year 1994? Obviously the schools of our time have vastly superior physical facilities, and improved technology, and enroll a great many more young people; yet the eagerness for true learning seems to be much diminished in our age, and the intellectual and moral results of schooling seem inferior, at every level of society, to the results obtained in, say, 1794 or even 1944. Why so?

Perhaps because, as Manning wrote, all differences of opinion are theological at bottom. The Americans of two centuries ago shared, nearly all of them, certain assumptions about human nature; and those assumptions were founded upon religious doctrines. The Americans of 1789 were tolerant enough in religion; but their toleration did not signify indifference or hostility. They, unlike us, were willing to tolerate those vexatious little wretches who wish to pray during the school lunch-hour; unlike us, the American of 1789 did not forbid pupils to engage in a moment of silent meditation—during which some juvenile bigots might actually be praying privately, confound them.

*Religion's
retreat has
harmed
education.*

Yes, despite doctrinal differences among denominations, it may be said of the Americans of 1789 that in general they believed in the existence of a transcendent order governing the universe; in the teaching that man is made for eternity; in the dogma that human beings have a proclivity toward the sinful; in the concepts of the community of souls and the community of this earth, with the duties that community requires. Half a century later, Tocqueville found these beliefs undiminished among Americans. They have not vanished yet—not among the general population. But in schools?

In some colleges, some schools of education, some graduate schools—why, even in some of our divinity schools—it is possible still to encounter professors who retain an understanding of human nature derived from religious teaching. But it is otherwise with the large majority of teachers in 1994; they have grown up in an arid climate of opinion almost totally secularized, so far as their formal schooling was concerned. The psychologist and sociologist, not the

poet or the historian—and emphatically not the theologian—have been their intellectual mentors.

It is not my present purpose to undertake apologetics. Rather, I am pointing out that the basic assumptions about the human condition at present prevalent in schools of pedagogy are very different from the basic assumptions of 1789. Traditions are rooted in certain postulates or dogmata. If those fundamental beliefs are denied or gradually atrophy, the traditions that have linked generation to generation begin to wither. Outward forms may remain, but they are sapless. The ethical end of literary studies sinks into a muddy sentimentality, and presently the teacher may proclaim himself quite value-free. The history that was intended to transport the student out of the prison-house of the evanescent moment may become an instrument of partisanship or ideology. And this withering of educational traditions may be part and parcel of the general decay of an old order—an order about to be supplanted, it seems, by some dull, arbitrary, professedly egalitarian domination.

The philosophical historians of our age—Christopher Dawson, Eric Voegelin, Arnold Toynbee, and others—instruct us that culture begins in the cult: seeking to communicate with unseen powers, men and women associate in worship, and out of that religious bond there grow social union, common cultivation and irrigation, common defense, the rule of law, the crafts, the arts, the sciences. Out of the cult, too, come history and philosophy, the marks of high culture. Any culture develops its life-giving traditions; and so long as those traditions are cherished and believed, the culture flourishes, supposing other things favorable enough.

But losing faith in traditions—and such deprivation occurred in civilizations that fell long ago—a people are forced back upon a rude pragmatism in private life and in public, a groping through the dark wood of their time, without sense of continuity and purpose. In private existence, such servility to the evanescent moment leads to boredom, alienation, perhaps narcotics; in the affairs of nations, such naive improvisations (ignoring history) may end in ruinous blunders not to be undone.

When vital customs, habits, and traditions are neglected or received only with cold doubt, humane letters sink into fatigue, eccentricity, perversity; while history becomes a tool of the ruthless ideologue. And education? Why, when schools no longer are permitted to discuss ultimate questions, they do no more than transmit tech-

*Education,
not indoctrination.*

niques and approved social attitudes; or they become, perhaps, dull forums for trivial disputes among sophists; or—this last the fate of schools of the twentieth century, in many countries—are made into complexes for ideological indoctrination. Who then really cares about the inculcation of wisdom and virtue? Who is soberly concerned for the civic responsibilities of a free people?

Ultimate questions require philosophical and religious responses. If it is made difficult or even impossible for existing public schools to touch upon ultimate questions of meaning—why, something must be done to ensure the survival of a society's higher culture. Arbitrary governing of school curricula by ideological cliques or by judges subject to *pleonexia* must be diminished, or else means must be found to enable people to obtain schooling in alternative institutions. Somewhere and somehow the Great Tradition of learning must be carried on; otherwise presently a decadent form of our culture will be dominated by the selfish and the vicious: by masters who think in Newspeak and chuck history down the memory-hole.

So much for my vaticinations and hopes concerning traditions of thought and the core curriculum. Out of hard necessity, I have taken up grave subjects summarily. Like human bodies, educational modes frequently suffer from disease. What the blood is to the human body, tradition is to a nation's culture. A curriculum deprived of tradition's renewing power becomes desiccated; a culture so afflicted must crumble to powder eventually, whatever its wealth and seeming strength.

*Tradition
culture's
lifeblood.*

This essay has been an exercise in diagnosis. The remedies, if they are to be found, must be the work of many minds and consciences. If our culture is to be reinvigorated, as much attention must be paid to the humane studies as to the scientific and technological disciplines. Otherwise, even extraordinary monetary rewards will not secure performance with ordinary integrity; great errors will be made in private life; public policies will be formed by the unimaginative, the foolish, and the corrupt. American consciences and American sentiments, as well as American minds, must be opened to meaning.

In learning, the time is out of joint. If you and I are unable to set it right—why, in the phrase of George Washington at the Constitutional Convention, "The event is in the hand of God." But God, we are told by the proverb, helps those who help themselves. Other cul-

tures, for lack of moral imagination and right reason, have sunk into oblivion.

Some years past, I found our four-year-old daughter Cecilia browsing through an illustrated volume of Roman history, with pictures of classical ruins. To herself, in the twilight beside a window, she was murmuring, "And then, at the end of a long summer's day, there came death, mud, crud!" Let it not be so with our culture.