

THE PURSUIT OF GOODNESS

By Leanne Fawcett, Headmaster, Archway Chandler

At Great Hearts, our mission is to lead our students in the pursuit of the true, the beautiful, and the good. But some might well ask, “How can you teach goodness? What does that even mean?”

become strong enough to control appetite, anger, laziness and greed. He rightly taught that it is through acting well and doing well that we become good—and not through just talking and thinking about goodness.

Strengthening the soul

In the '70s, when I was in elementary school, the predominant approach in schools was somewhat different. Instead of training young people in good moral actions, we experienced something called “values clarification.” The idea was if you could teach children to be “critical thinkers” about ethics, without dictating or judging what their morals should be, they would

magically become good, tolerant, well-adjusted children. So we were given extreme scenarios and moral dilemmas to talk about in grade school. Nobody was right and nobody was wrong. Everyone’s idea of morality was equal and, as such, was to be discussed, respected and affirmed.

Teachers asked us such questions as, “If a man’s wife was sick and he couldn’t afford her medication, would it be OK for him to steal the medication?” We were tossed into the deep end of frightening adult situations, of complicated and controversial issues of the day without any prior attempt at forming character. Such an approach was highly inappropriate, to say the least. Rather than strengthening our souls, it

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The ancient Greeks, our teachers in so many things, would have asked a different question: “How could education NOT include goodness?” The Greeks believed that there was no difference between the physical, intellectual and moral powers of the human person. Young people needed training—i.e. education—in each one of these areas in order to reach their full potential. The body, the intellect and the moral habits of what the Greeks called the soul all were thought to require education.

The philosopher Aristotle summed up ancient Greek wisdom when he taught that only through habitually practicing the moral virtues in life could the human soul





Photo by Jared Platt

tended to confuse us and make us think that our childish perspectives on issues way above our heads were just as good as anyone else's.

Classical schools take a different approach, one that Aristotle and the Greeks would recognize (and one that the Values Clarifiers of the 1970s would find puzzling). The classical school holds that a person becomes virtuous not by talking or thinking, but by performing virtuous actions, and by being rewarded for them. He becomes kind by acting kindly; she becomes brave by acting bravely.

These good actions often go against our natural first impulses and will be hard to perform at first. Adults—teachers and parents—must train children to perform these actions if the children are to become good; the young no more become good naturally than do world-class athletes become great without training. Adults must reward, praise and affirm good actions, not thoughts or words. And they must punish bad actions, not merely reflect on or talk about them. This is the classical approach to teaching

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goodness, and while it is ancient, it is just as relevant and effective today in the modern classical school.

Character education?

Another way in which the classical approach differs from the contemporary approach is the classical school understands that goodness cannot be compartmentalized and taught in slogans, programs and sound bites. It doesn't work that way. Moral goodness is woven into every human action, into every word and deed.

It cannot be boiled off or put into an abstract curriculum or set of "modules." It is not something that can be put on a flash drive and handed out for the occasional plug-in.

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An entire school—its rules of conduct, its curriculum, its traditions and activities, and the words and actions of its teachers—is “character education.” Everything at a school the adults say, do, assign, correct, explain, praise, reward and punish is sending messages about moral and ethical things—some subtle, some loud and clear.

To engage in comprehensive character education—not just a program—is a huge responsibility, and this is why we must be intentional about everything. Great Hearts is selective, even picky, about who and what we place in front of our students and about the school culture we surround our children with.

We are highly selective about our teachers, our curriculum, our books, the kinds of assignments and classroom activities we engage in, the music and art we expose kids to, the things that happen in the gym and at recess, and, of course, the rewards and consequences we employ to reinforce and correct student habits. Everything matters. “Character education” is infused into everything we do—it is everything we do.

Teachers and books

The ancient Greeks believed the best way for a young person to learn good habits of behavior was by identifying with and imitating someone who already practiced them. This is why we select teachers who are excellent role models. They must be good people, not just smart people or effective instructors of reading or math skills.

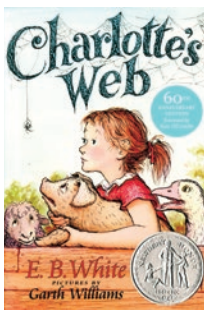
We hire people who believe there are virtues that transcend time, culture and religion, and who evidently live their lives that way. They are comfortable modeling what is right and avoiding what is wrong in their actions, and they are comfortable talking about such things when appropriate.

They cannot be philosophically or personally lax relativists. Good teachers must always be good people, who hold themselves to standards, exhibit virtue themselves and serve as constant models for the students. And it is worth re-emphasizing the wisdom of the saying that character is caught, not taught. Preaching and moralizing seldom have the desired effect on the young mind. Being exposed to good adult role models and inspired to imitate them is all-important.

In addition to the living, breathing role models of the teachers, a school that is taking its responsibilities



THE SECRET GARDEN
Frances Hodgson
Burnett



CHARLOTTE'S WEB
E.B. White



SHERLOCK HOLMES
Conan Doyle

to teach goodness seriously must also be seriously selective about what books it puts in its curriculum and in its library. What the ancient Greeks understood, and what a Great Hearts school continues to uphold, is that stories always teach something implicit about moral goodness. Again, not by explicit preaching or moralizing, but simply in what they depict and how they depict it. Just as everything in a school is “character education,” so, too, does every tale, poem or story have a moral aspect.

Thus, what a school endorses or gives its seal of approval to must be the very best. The books on the shelves and in the classrooms speak loudly about what the school holds to be good. To offer just a few examples, it makes an enormous difference whether a school assigns timeless fables, fairy tales and myths depicting serious themes and actions, or contemporary, soon-to-be-forgotten narratives drawn from only the present moment.

It makes a difference whether the school gives children beautifully-written stories full of well-drawn characters in a meaningful and compelling drama—think *Charlotte's Web*, *The Hobbit*, or *The Secret Garden*—or if it gives them cleverly-composed and marketed vignettes of self-absorbed, sullen, contemptuous, materialistic and disrespectful children engaged in nothing important whatsoever.

The drama of life and death, good and evil, past, future, and destiny? Or just a series of amusing and insignificant episodes? Aesop, Sherlock Holmes, and Narnia? Or tween celebrities and *Wimpy Kid*? The responsibility of the school is clear.

Sense of purpose

One of the ways Great Hearts ensures students develop a sense of purpose and calling is through our consistent philosophy and message that school is about more than just a preparation for college and career, it is a preparation for all the dimensions of life. For professional life, of course, but also for future life in citizenship and community, family and in the meaningful pursuit of cultured leisure.

Through our program of studies, through our celebration of intrinsic reward, encouragement of creativity and learning for



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their own sakes, we foster the growth of students who see their purpose as much greater than just making a paycheck. And because we orient students towards living the whole of their lives well, meaningfully and in balance, we are preparing them to be more successful, more motivated, and more fulfilled in their careers than can a society that only focuses on training for professions. A Great Hearts education is for the whole person, for the whole of life, and not just for one part of it.

As our students advance into the high school years of the Great Hearts program, they encounter books, dramas, epics and stories that tackle the deepest and weightiest of all human themes. Instead of the personal concerns of the moment, they are led to ponder ancient and timeless human questions about life, heroism, fulfillment, forgiveness, redemption, truth, justice, duty and destiny.

While their teachers must still be role models of women and men living their own lives well, the great books students read in the Great Hearts high school take on increasing importance in leading them to think about great questions that would be almost unimaginable without them. Our students read Dostoyevsky, Shakespeare, and Dante not because they are dusty and difficult classics, but because they are profound, life-changing works of art and imagination. Our students read ancient epics like the *Odyssey* not because they are old and traditional, but because they are timeless in their relevance to human life

and action. Our students read political and moral philosophy by thinkers like Plato and Aristotle and Jefferson and Lincoln not because of some abstract academic or scholarly purpose, but because to engage with their ideas is to think seriously about the most important questions about real life in community and society.

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Great hearts, great minds

Great Hearts is rightly known for the high academic achievement levels of its students. The average SAT score of a Great Hearts graduate is 1830, and 98 percent of students go on to college, some attending the most prestigious universities in the country.

So why aren't our schools called "great minds" instead of Great Hearts? While the answer is contained in all that has been written above, we might turn to two important thinkers, one ancient, and one modern, to sum it all up.

Plato once wrote that "justice in the life and conduct of the state is possible only if first it resides in the hearts and souls of the citizens...Knowledge without justice ought to be called cunning rather than wisdom." How relevant this insight remains to our world—that justice in a community is impossible without personal goodness, and that all the intelligence

and specialized training in the world will not make a person wise, nor a society good. An education that is only intellectual will fall terribly short of what is needed.

More recently, C. S. Lewis wrote in the classic *Abolition of Man*:

...no justification of virtue will enable a man to be virtuous. Without the aid of trained emotions, the intellect is powerless against the animal organism. I had sooner play cards against a man who was quite skeptical about ethics, but bred to believe that 'a gentleman does not cheat', than against an irreproachable moral philosopher who had been brought up amongst sharpers...the Chest-Magnanimity-Sentiment—these are the indispensable liaison officers between cerebral man and visceral man. It may even be said that it is by this middle element that man is man: for by his intellect he is mere spirit and by his appetite mere animal.

A Great Hearts education certainly trains students in the use of their minds. We do this well, but that is not what distinguishes us. We form the intellect and the character, the head and the heart, in the pursuit of truth, goodness and beauty together. Great minds, and great hearts—this is what the world needs, and what it has always needed.