

# This is What Happens to Students When They Read the 'Great Books'

Many of our readers have heard of, and a few have probably been educated by, ["Great Books" programs](#). They consist of reading and discussing "classic" works of literature, philosophy, and even science that were a standard part of many high school and college curricula as late as a century ago.

For decades they have been the exception—a niche in the higher-ed marketplace. Now Intellectual Takeout has [blogged](#) a bit about Great Books before, but it's worth calling attention to just what a vision informed by them can accomplish for some people. In the words of one beneficiary, it is nothing less than "the rebirth of wonder."

Yesterday I came across an [article](#) about a Catholic bishop—James Conley—who wants to bring the study of Great Books to a secular campus within his own diocese of Lincoln, Nebraska. What's interesting about that are his reasons for it, which are not at all sectarian and are truly inspiring.

Thus:

*"...I went to public schools my whole life. I didn't have a very good education at all. It was during the early 1970s, and there was a lot of experimentation in education, a lot of educational models that were being tried...*

*But providence stepped in, and I went off to the University of Kansas, and I learned about a program that was being offered there called the [Integrated Humanities Program](#) ... There was no religious motivation at all for me to get involved in the program; it just sounded like an interesting program.*

The program was started by two English professors and one Classics professor. They were seasoned, tenured professors, and they were very good teachers. They had discovered that students really had not been exposed to the great things of Western culture—literature, poetry, music—things that were part of the staple of education a generation or two before. They were frustrated as university professors that you couldn't presume that students had the fundamentals.

So they chose as the model 'Let Them Be Born in Wonder,' the Latin phrase, *nascantur in admiratione*, the idea being that these students had never been exposed to wonder, so as teachers let's introduce them to these beautiful things that had always perennially been taught through the ages. It was a freshmen/sophomore program. We read the great Greek classics, beginning with *The Odyssey*, all the way through to the Romans, in the second semester. We read *The Aeneid*, among others. And in the third semester, we read early Christian authors, passages from the Bible, *The Confessions* of St. Augustine, *The Consolation of Philosophy* by Boethius. The last semester we began with *The Canterbury Tales* and read Chaucer, continuing with the early Moderns and ending with the modern day.

What happened was, students, as in my own case, fell in love with this beautiful literature, the characters, everything else surrounding it, because not only was this a literary program, we had a lot of extracurricular things: we'd go star-gazing, learn about the constellations and how they worked into the literature we were reading, especially the pagan authors. And we would have, every year, a spring waltz, where the students would come together and organize a beautiful experience of waltzing...It was a poetic exposure to beautiful music, beautiful dancing. We also memorized poetry, because the professors realized that none of us had really memorized anything. In the history of education ... repetition is the mother of learning. We'd learn reams and reams of

*poetry, so our imaginations would be filled with this great verse from the best of English poetry.*

*All these things combined into a rebirth of wonder. I had never known these things had existed. It opened up a whole new world to me. From being kind of a mediocre, boring student—this program was not geared towards honor students, by any means; we were all pretty much run-of-the-mill students—what it did was, we fell in love with learning and we became excited about learning because of these beautiful things.”*

Parents, take note.