

Why Modern Education is Doomed to Die

One of the great transitions in education in the past fifty years has been the increased emphasis on the so-called STEM subjects – science, technology, engineering and mathematics – and a corresponding diminishing of the place of the traditional liberal arts or humanities, especially literature, history and philosophy. This has been due in part to the utilitarian perception that the STEM subjects are “useful” whereas the humanities are “useless”. One is practical and therefore relevant, the other is impractical and therefore practically irrelevant. It is, however, also due to the radical relativism among those who teach the humanities, which places a cognitive abyss between the subjects being taught and the people teaching them.

If the person teaching literature believes that all literature and all reality is ultimately meaningless, he is not only at odds with the authors he’s teaching but questioning the very validity of the literature itself. If the person teaching history is a “progressive”, which is really simply a euphemism for a chronological snob who looks superciliously upon the past as being inferior to the present, he is hardly likely to inspire a belief that the past has anything to contribute to the present. If the person teaching philosophy is a radical relativist who believes that the greatest philosophers were wrongheaded, it is difficult to see why the wrongheaded people are worth studying.

The problem is that the STEM subjects cannot themselves be sustained in the longer term if the roots from which they sprang are allowed to atrophy. The humanities, properly understood, are the collective wisdom of humanity. A society that is ignorant of this collective wisdom will decay. Ultimately, if it doesn’t destroy itself in a more dramatic

way beforehand, it will collapse. The civilized superstructure on which science, technology and engineering depend can only survive if the civilization itself survives.

A world without the Great Books is a world condemning itself to ignorance of the first things and the permanent things. It is a world that cannot answer the most important life-sustaining and civilization-sustaining questions because it doesn't even ask the questions in the first place. What is right and what is wrong? What is truth? What is goodness? Are there lessons we can learn from the weight of collective human experience that we call history? Are there mistakes we can avoid if those lessons are heeded? What is love? What's the difference between physics and metaphysics? What's the difference between knowledge and wisdom? Is knowledge without wisdom dangerous? These are the questions which the Great Books ask and, more to the point, these are the questions that they answer.

It is a truth as applicable to the organic structure we call human civilization as it is true of an organic structure we call a flower that a stem will not survive if the roots are allowed to rot. The humanities are at the roots of civilization and should therefore be at the core of all education. The STEM will prosper, it will grow strong, it will support the flowers and the fruits that humanity needs, but only if it is itself rooted in humanity.