

The Missing Ingredients in Modern Education

While working at a local Catholic High School I couldn't help observing how the whole enterprise too often focussed on achievement rather than accomplishment.

There was a constant race for "good grades" which at worst functioned like votes in a popularity contest. "Sally didn't get an 'A' so you don't like her!"

Parents were not so interested in education, but were very concerned that the student would achieve high scores on the standardized tests, which might ensure acceptance to a "good college" so as eventually to graduate into a "good job." The entire educational program too easily became a cog in the great machine of a materialistic philosophy that assumes without question that life is about accumulating prosperity, position, prestige, and power.

As such, education becomes a commercial transaction in which "right answers" are the chief coinage. Facts, like wages, are accumulated through hard work and are spent at the shopping mall of quizzes and tests. The reward, like any glittering trophy bought at the mall, are top marks, a dazzling grade point average and membership of (drumroll and fanfare of trumpets please) the Honor Society!!

Any idea that education should be about the widening of the mind and the soul is lost in the unseemly scrum to get those "good grades." The notion that education might be about the joy of discovery, the sweat of learning to think, to experience the great works of art and literature, to understand the passionate drama of history, the intricate beauty of the created world, or the intricate mystery of mathematics is forgotten in the pressure to perform and win

glittering prizes.

We have facts without understanding and education without enlightenment. To paraphrase St. Paul we have the “form, but deny the power thereof.” Or to quote the legendary Texan about the dude ranch, “It’s all ten-gallon hat and no cattle.” What is lacking is that “Aha!” moment of not just intellectual understanding, but an in-depth experience in which there is not only understanding but enlightenment.

What are the missing ingredients? Two things we are taught to distrust in our rational, materialistic, and mechanistic age: imagination and emotion. Imagination is that intuitive quality of the human mind that works laterally, makes connections across the neat divides of academic disciplines, and envisions new possibilities and opens fresh perspectives. Imagination and creativity are often seen as the enemies of education because the imaginative person is often unconventional and challenging.

The academy distrusts emotion even more. The term itself produces dismay and even disgust, for if imagination is unconventional and risky, “emotion” is mistaken for sentimentality and subjectivity. Emotion, however, is something deeper than mere subjective sentimentality. True emotion is a profound surge of feeling grounded in an existential apprehension of objective truth. It is, if you like, a visceral appreciation of truth deeper than intellectual analysis or the mere linguistic expression of a truthful proposition. This gut-level experience is kick-started by imagination—which allows the new connection to be made.

When imagination works and emotions are properly evoked, an inner enlightenment takes place. An inner transaction takes place, a small enlightenment occurs and we come to apprehend—not just comprehend. Furthermore, emotion is the secret ingredient that makes us take action based on our

education. The word "emotion" comes from the same root as "motion," "motor," and "motivate." Emotions motivate, or as the Russian proverb says, "The heart moves the feet." When speaking of an emotional experience like a scene in a film we say it "moves us" or it is "moving," and so it is. The emotion moves us forward from theory into action.

How this might occur in education can be illustrated by the mysterious alchemy of movies. A friend who doctors Hollywood scripts explains how imagination and emotion in movies work by describing his first experience watching the film *Star Wars*. He went to view the film in a crowded cinema at a grand London venue that seated two thousand people.

At the climax of the movie the hero, Luke Skywalker, is flying his fighter down a narrow canal on the dreaded Death Star. His colleagues have already been shot down, and he is being pursued by his nemesis, Darth Vader. The hero's task is to drop a bomb down a ventilation shaft into the heart of the Death Star to destroy it for good. He has already missed twice and has only one more bomb, and time for one more pass. His life, the life of his friends and the future of his whole world rests on his success. Luke is flying with a computer guidance system when he hears in his mind the voice of his mentor, Obi-Wan Kenobi saying, "Use the Force, Luke." He resists, not wanting to give up his technology and rely on the spiritual aspect of his being, but the voice insists: "Use the Force." At the last moment, he pushes the computer guidance system away and trusts the force, spots the ventilation shaft, drops the bomb and destroys the death star.

At that point, the entire audience stood up and cheered, and my friend points out that they were not cheering because the good guys won. They knew that would happen. They were cheering because Luke used the Force. He not only did the right thing and defeated evil, but he did so by "using the force." At that moment of high emotion two thousand people experienced a little moment of enlightenment. More than that, two thousand

people not only affirmed that there is a battle going on between good and evil, but that they wanted to be on the side of good and to be able to “use the Force” and make moral decisions through spiritual guidance.

Is it a trivial example? Perhaps, but the effect of movies like the *Star Wars* saga, with its strong mythic themes and challenging moral choices not only show the power of the media in the screen age but also shows how enlightenment might happen within education. When climactic scenes like the one described occur you can be sure that the scriptwriter and director have planned the entire film to produce through imagination the emotion that motivates—that moment of enlightenment. Everything in the movie from the storyline to the acting, the direction, the music and every element of production are funneled into that brief moment of emotional impact.

An education that leads to enlightenment will be engineered in as painstaking a way. Every reading assignment, quiz, test, and discussion would be aimed at the target of bringing the student to the “Aha!” moment of apprehension. Good teachers understand the power of imagination and true emotion and are not afraid of it. Furthermore, what applies to education equally applies to evangelization. Spreading truth is not simply a matter of inculcating doctrinal propositions and moral regulations. The preacher, like the teacher, weaves in the powerful blend of imagination and emotion, to bring about the “Aha!” moment of faith which means not only education of the mind, but enlightenment and salvation of the soul.

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