

Father Brown's Lesson for American Education

I was a voracious reader as a child, and I've become one again in the past few months. Unfortunately, my teen years were filled with many wasted hours as I pursued video games rather than learning, reading, or many other more productive activities.

I was far from alone in this. More than a quarter of American adults fail to read [even one book](#) in a 12-month period. This is rather hard to swallow given that each generation of Americans achieves [higher and higher levels of education](#).

It would seem that we are promoting education without learning, or at least without promoting learning habits. We're meeting thresholds and checking off requirements, but we are not equipping people with tools to be scholars, or even to be human beings who are interested in the world which they inhabit.

G. K. Chesterton's priest detective, Father Brown, shows us a different way. Father Brown, a portly clergyman of astounding intuition and intellect, is not one to shirk his responsibilities in the pursuit of knowledge, nor is he one to set aside the pursuit of knowledge with the excuse of duty calling. His character is one of balance, as Chesterton describes in his short story "[The Salad of Colonel Cray](#)":

Father Brown was made of two men. There was a man of action, who was as modest as a primrose and as punctual as a clock; who went his small round of duties and never dreamed of altering it. There was also a man of reflection, who was much simpler but much stronger, who could not easily be stopped; whose thought was always (in the only intelligent sense of the words) free thought. He could not help, even

unconsciously, asking himself all the questions that there were to be asked, and answering as many of them as he could; all that went on like his breathing or circulation.

An interesting thought isn't it? Having two natures which seem at odds with each other, but which actually promote each other even within the same person?

What would happen if we applied the same attitude to our education system, encouraging students to be faithful in fulfilling their duties and responsibilities, while also training them to be deep, intelligent thinkers?

Unfortunately, such is not the state of America's learning environment. School guidance counselors, parents, and employers all blindly push students to further their education. They teach them to fulfill their duties (finishing school, getting a job), but never how to think and process intelligent thought.

When we treat education as a chore, as merely something to list on a resume, we miss much of the point of learning. Yes, duty and job aspirations are important considerations, but they are not the be-all and end-all of learning. There can and should be a balance between duty and the pursuit of knowledge.

Each of us has the duality that Chesterton shows us in Father Brown's character. Duty and curious reflection need not be at odds with each other. Instead, they should work together, helping us become better, more well-rounded individuals.

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