

Georgia and Arkansas Revive an Old-School Teaching Method

In his rousing [keynote address](#) at The Heritage Foundation's 50th anniversary gala last month, then-Fox News host Tucker Carlson offered an unexpected piece of advice: "Don't throw away your hard-copy books."

Unlike digitized books, films, and albums that can be canceled, [rewritten](#), or vanished altogether, physical copies are "the enduring repository that cannot be disappeared."

With their resurrection of poetry recitation requirements, educators in [Georgia](#) and [Arkansas](#) are protecting that repository in more ways than one, steeping students in a reality they can affirm, trust, and love.

Both states' departments of education recently proposed revised K-12 English language arts standards that would [require](#) that students recite "all or part of significant poems and speeches as appropriate by grade level," as the Georgia standards put it.

In stark contrast to [ideological curriculums](#) that reduce great words and deeds of the past to matters of identity, power, and will, the recitation of great works of poetry will reacquaint students with the existence of truth, goodness, and beauty, teaching them what no ideology can—namely, how to be at leisure.

If leisure seems a ridiculous object of education to us, that's in part because it entails a disposition radically different from the habits encouraged by most mainstream institutions today.

Against the incessant barrage of screens, images, and headlines that seems inescapable, leisure requires the

silence, space, and attention to apprehend reality. Against the outrage fomented by corporations that profit from division and unrest, leisure celebrates the great gift of human life. And against the urge to self-promote built into every social media platform, leisure demands love.

Hence, while no child needs to be taught how to be outraged [or entertained](#), children must be taught how to occupy their leisure. That has always been the case, as the etymology of the word “school” suggests (*schol* is the Greek word for leisure), but is especially vital in a day and age in which children—indeed, all Americans—are [constantly bombarded](#) by different forms of entertainment totally at odds with genuine leisure.

Carlson captured the challenge well: “As the world becomes more digitized, and people live in [a] realm that’s disconnected from physical reality,” he explained, “the only way to stay sane is to cling more tightly to the things you can smell.”

Poetry recitation primes children for this firm grasp of reality.

To recite a poem, a student must first learn it by heart, which means he or she must not only read it slowly and carefully, but read it aloud, listening closely to its cadence and tone, again and again.

This practice allows one to notice the subtle details we all too often miss when we approach life like an RSS feed, jumping from one meme or short-form video clip to the next, constantly refreshing for new updates and distractions.

To instead sit down with a single poem demands a wakefulness of the soul, a disposition also required for leisure.

As 20th-century German philosopher Josef Pieper explained, leisure is first and foremost a form of silence that prepares

and permits the soul to apprehend or “hear” reality. Reciting a poem entails something similar, drawing the listener into what the acclaimed poet Dana Gioia at the recent National Symposium for Classical Education [called](#) a “zone of consciousness” different from one’s normal “zone.”

It also “add[s] an element of pleasure ... to learning in any subject,” Gioia explained and vividly conveyed with his own marvelous recitations.

Poetry’s rhyme, meter, and narrative delight students, as does the [thrill of performing](#) and even competing with classmates. Students who initially balk at the challenge of committing unfamiliar language to memory and then reciting it before peers soon find the feat exhilarating and even fun, experiencing the festivity inherent in leisure, which traditionally took the form of a religious feast.

Just as in Genesis God contemplates and affirms the goodness of His work after completing it, Pieper noted, “man celebrates and gratefully accepts the reality of creation in leisure.” The reader of poetry models this celebration in an act that simultaneously expresses love and wonder at the world around and beyond us, and relishes the human capacity to do so.

“The very first thing you should do every single day is tell all the people you love that you love them,” Carlson reminded listeners, “because you do, and affirming things out loud makes them real.” Poetry recitation allows students to experience this unity of love and knowledge, and in doing so, it inculcates a love of learning and genuine leisure.

Indeed, poetry recitation introduces students to learning as something one can (and should) pursue for its own sake, rather than as a means to some other end, pushing back against a utilitarianism common in approaches to education.

Insofar as students see value in education, they often understand that value to be instrumental. Why go to school? So

that you can learn the skills you need to get a good job, make good money, and make a name for yourself.

While education is of course useful, that mindset can rob students of the joy of doing something neither because it will get one ahead, nor as an escape from the rat race, but because it's intrinsically worthwhile.

Reading and reciting poetry cultivates this joy. Though far from useless—great poems [enrich](#) vocabulary, and performance [sharpens](#) public speaking skills—poetry nevertheless presents itself primarily as something lovely, and only incidentally as something useful. In this, it imitates leisure, which restores us for work only when we seek it for its own sake.

In a 1780 [letter](#) to his 12-year-old son, John Adams counseled John Quincy Adams to prioritize his study of Latin oratory and Greek poetry above more “useful sciences,” which he could attain thereafter. The elder Adams no doubt knew from experience the importance of learning how to be at leisure early, before high office demands the bulk of one's time.

Georgia and Arkansas seem to have taken a page out of the second president's book in carving out for students space for the contemplation, festivity, and beauty of poetry among the more useful sciences.

Let's hope other states follow suit.

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