What is Classical Education?

I’d like to introduce this evening’s topic with a story told to me by one of the professors in the Philosophy department in a university where I taught for several years ---

Dr. Edwards, whose name I changed for this narrative, told me that he had a dream in the late 1990s. He dreamt he met the great philosopher Aristotle, the Greek thinker who has had such tremendous influence on Western thought and culture. It seems Aristotle offered Dr. Edwards a choice among one of three gifts: to possess great wisdom, to appreciate great beauty, or to receive 10 million dollars, tax-free. Since philosophy is the love of wisdom, Dr. Edwards understandably chose great wisdom as the gift he most wanted.

In this dream, the ground shook and lightning flashed, and so the gift of great wisdom was bestowed. Dr. Edwards felt the change come over him. Now Aristotle was still standing there, so he said “Dr. Edwards, you now have the gift of true wisdom -- please do freely share your gift with the world.” At this point Dr. Edwards looked up and said, “You know, I really should have chosen the money.”

Now that I’ve introduced Aristotle to you all this evening, and modeled Dr Edwards as what a Classical thinker is NOT, I’ll get right to it and define Classical education –

1. It’s the pedagogical method formulated and used by two of the greatest thinkers of Classical antiquity, Plato and Aristotle, both of whom lived in Athens during the late 5th and early 4th centuries, BC. Plato was famously Aristotle’s teacher. They are both considered to be among the supreme geniuses of all time, outstanding among those who most influenced the history of human thought
2. Classical pedagogy aims at forming students to be excellent, to be virtuous, and so to be happy, or eudaimon (Greek word for happiness is eudaimonia – “good spirit”)
3. Classical education aims to make a student eudaimon or excellent through the study of the 7 Liberal Arts, that is, 7 fields of inquiry that Plato introduced in his Dialogue called *The Republic* : the first three liberal arts, Grammar, Logic and Rhetoric, have come to be recognized as stages in a child’s intellectual development. Grammar, Logic, and Rhetoric form the *trivium*, where *trivium*  is nomenclature developed during the Middle Ages, and Arithmetic, Geometry, Astronomy, and Music form the *quadrivium*. All together these 7 fields of enquiry or academic subjects have been accepted for over 2 millennia as essential to forming a well-educated person.

Now, if classical education seeks to form humans to be excellent, the logical next questions are, what do Plato and Aristotle think being human is, and how does this pedagogy accomplish what it sets out to do?

The answer to what is it to be a human kind of thing is : it’s to be a rational soul somehow interacting with a material body, where the quasi-divine part, the power called intellect, controls and at all times directs the senses, the emotions, even the will, which is the power for choice of action.

The answer to the “how” question is: Classical education seeks to form children, your children, by bringing what makes them be human, the rational and sensitive powers of the soul, to full actuality. What might this mean? For Plato and Aristotle, and for the entire Classical tradition, human beings are perfect or happy, eudaimon, when they live a life of virtue, such that the intellectual powers of the soul habitually control and guide all movement of the will and passions. What I’m explaining briefly here pertains to Classical education taken in itself, outside of the foundational and most important Catholic character of Regina Luminis Academy.

I’d be amiss if I didn’t briefly mention the virtues within the Classical Greek view.

The first virtues to be acquired by education and practice are the Moral virtues : modesty, moderation or temperance, justice, honesty, courage, long-suffering or perseverance, and prudence. This last virtue, called phronesis in Greek, is “practical wisdom.” As such, it is a key element in forming an excellent human person. Prudence is the habit of choosing the best end and the best means to attain the best end.

The intellectual virtues are know-how or techne, episteme or scientific understanding, Sophia or theoretical understanding of first principles, and phronesis, practical understanding. Prudence acts as both a moral and intellectual virtue, given a particular context.

For Plato and Aristotle, a student cannot even begin to engage in intellectual subjects until he or she controls the use of their senses, and learns to **discipline,** that is, **focus** their attention, and so not get lost in distractions. Classical pedagogy teaches a child to think reflectively, to enter into a partnership with the subjects he or she learns, so that what is known is not easily forgotten. Unlike the Common Core approach, which teaches students to learn for the sake of a test, students at RLA and other classical schools don’t cram facts in order to score high on an exam, only to forget what they just studied. RLA students study to be learned and morally excellent Catholic thinkers.

In Classical education, children are trained to practice the moral virtues first and always, since these help quieten the emotions and the sensitive powers that make us human. When the rational powers control and guide the human soul, a student can as fully as possible “own” eternal truths, and of course, the supreme Eternal, unchanging Truth Who is God almighty Himself. Classical education aims to teach a student a lot, but not comprehensively learning every single fact about everything. This type of education aims to teach children to know in depth, to ponder and to be able to see how all truths connect with the First Truth.

I’ll finish up my run-down of Classical education with an overview of the techniques Classical education employs, and which you’ll see modeled here this evening.

1. Socratic Dialogue: A teacher proposes a concept or theory to students, and together they talk through what this information might mean, and why they think it may or may not be important. They also talk through how this information connects with what they already know.
2. Didactic teaching: the presentation of facts, such that 2 plus 2 equals 4. If a teacher seeks to explain what a sunflower is to a child, the teacher will cut the flower into its various parts and label these one by one. Didactic teaching “tells” the student about something.
3. Mimetic teaching: This method helps a student experientially encounter what they learn. Using the sunflower example, a teacher will introduce students to the sunflower’s seeds, and help them plant a few of these indoors in a glass terrarium. As the seedlings germinate, the teacher helps the students learn the names of the plant’s parts while inviting them to take out one seedling and feel the texture of the newly formed cotyledons, and to view first-hand the hair-like projections all over the roots. At the right time, the teacher will lead the students to re-plant the seedlings outside, and maybe to decorate popsicle sticks and create a name for each young plant. The students come to own what they learn about the sunflower, remembering both facts about the plant as well as their experiential encounter with it.

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I’m sure that I’ve spoken long enough, so now I’d be delighted to welcome a few questions . . .

Please allow me to introduce an outstanding young lady who graduated from RLA this past June and who did amazing work as a high school student – she is now doing even more amazing work at Neumann University – she can give you her own personal account of how Catholic Classical Education helped her prepare for university. It’s my joy to welcome Miss Angela Quillen --