

Freeing Prisoners of The Here and Now

By Mark Kennedy

“It is for freedom that Christ has set us free.” Gal 5:1

Musing over my lifetime ‘I wish I had that on a T shirt’ list, my thoughts went back more than four decades:

Dateline: October, 1986, an early evening Prenatal Class somewhere in Greater Toronto

“I don’t want to **tell** you about childbirth,” said the progressively minded instructress to us dozen or so fathers-to-be, who pretty unanimously wished we were somewhere else.

She went on, “I want to **draw out** what you already know about having a baby!” The shuffling male feet and vacant stares spoke eloquently of our profound ignorance on the subject.

‘This won’t take long.’ I thought, ‘we may even be home in time to watch the hockey game.’

That’s where my ‘I wish I had that on a T shirt’ reverie comes in. In my mind’s eye, I can see myself clad in a white cotton garment bearing a message in bold, black letters. **“EVERYTHING I KNOW ABOUT CHILDBIRTH, I LEARNED FROM ARNOLD SCHWARZENEGGER”**, it would say.

Allowing my imagination to run on a bit, I envisaged the instructress’ puzzled look and her question:

“Well what exactly did Mr. Schwarzenegger teach you about childbirth?”

“Absolutely nothing!” I would reply, and that, of course, would be the point.

At that prenatal class, none of us typical Canadian men knew anything about the subject. That’s why we were taking the course. We’d come to learn, to be led from the dark slough of our childbirth vacuity into the bright sunlit uplands of parturient sagacity. We wanted liberation from the prison of our ignorance, not an opportunity to share vague snippets of the misinformation we’d picked up during our incarceration.

It wasn’t her fault of course. Our well-meaning instructress was laboring under a popular misconception. Back then, a few prominent educational lights mistranslated and misapplied the Latin roots of the word ‘education’.

According to them, the original Latin roots for the word ‘education’ meant ‘to *draw out*’, so they postulated that education should be a ‘*drawing out*’ of information, not a ‘putting in’.

And that was exactly what our teacher was trying to do. It wasn't her fault that she couldn't draw the water of childbirth wisdom from a room full of empty wells. She was just trying to follow a deeply flawed philosophy based upon a profoundly incompetent Latin translation. Fact is, the word 'education' comes from two Latin words, "e" (or "ex"), meaning "out of", and "ducere", meaning "to lead" - **not** "to draw". So according to its Latin root, "e ducere", **really** means '**leading** out of', not 'drawing out'. Based upon that, more accurate translation, education is supposed to lead students out of folly or error or intellectual darkness into wisdom, **not** to draw out knowledge that was never there in the first place.

Prisoners of the Present

It's not very complimentary but we need to face it: many North Americans are sheltered from reality by the all-encompassing present: the barren, boastful, tyrannical here and now. Our ubiquitous, highly entertaining technologies encourage us to speed through life in the superficial lane, with not much thought about where we've come from or where we're going. Thanks to modern social engineering, coercive media and monolithic secular education, young people especially, have been indoctrinated with a highly intolerant and proscriptive set of contemporary values and attitudes – telling them what to think rather than teaching them how to think. And even when cracks appear in their thought control dam, they've been taught to respond to uncomfortable or unfamiliar ideas with pre-adolescent name-calling (bigot, hater, you-name-it-o-phobe) instead of with reflective reasoning and rational arguments. Insults, name-calling and bullying are weapons of the morally and intellectually bankrupt.

But what about, "Speeding through life in the superficial lane'. What's wrong with that?'

It dismisses millennia of human history, literature and the pursuit of truth – so there's no option but to become prisoners of the present. That's what's wrong with it.

Alan Bloom saw it coming. In his 1987 book **The Closing of the American Mind**, he recognized that without knowledge about past cultures and historical values, young people are "like ignorant shepherds living on a site where great civilizations once flourished. The shepherds play with the fragments that pop up to the surface, having no notion of the beautiful structures of which they were once a part."

Christians aren't exempt from this entrapment, despite the influence of a weekly hour or two in the pew.

"We have too many "forever children" in the Western church today," said Os Guinness in his book, **Renaissance**, "Christians with no appreciation of the past, who are condemned to live Peter Pan lives in the Never-Never Land of the present, with little knowledge of the past (or much care for the future) to inspire their heroism, to season their wisdom and to protect their steps from the pitfalls into which previous generations have fallen." Os Guinness, **Renaissance**, IV Books 2014

C.S. Lewis noted the arrogant assumption that's common in every new generation, that they somehow stand on a higher moral and intellectual plain than all previous generations. He called it "chronological snobbery".

“We need intimate knowledge of the past.” He said, “Not that the past has any magic about it, but we cannot study the future, and yet need something to set against the present, to remind us that the basic assumptions have been quite different in different periods and that much which seems certain to the uneducated, is merely temporary fashion.” C.S. Lewis, “**Learning in Wartime**”

The task for us in Christian schooling then, is to lead students beyond the tyrannical present so they can consider and explore broader realities and better ideas, or at least unfamiliar ones. That means we have to ‘guide students with our eyes’ to the place where they can honestly and intelligently examine world history and great literature in tandem with the foundational principles of our faith.

In depth studies in both history and literature are essentials in an education of quality. But each is important in a different way.

About History:

“In history, a great volume is unrolled for our instruction, drawing the materials of future wisdom from past errors and infirmities of mankind.” Edmund Burke

Any legitimate study of history must be based in facts. It should examine the well-documented accounts of the past and of the people who shaped events. In Christian schools especially, it must also explore the foundational beliefs of history makers, their societies and their nations, because core beliefs produce actions and actions create history. And it should include teaching biblical principles for morality, social structure and justice while noting the consequences for societies that intentionally ignored those principles.

Let’s be clear, I’m talking about **real history** here - trustworthy accounts of the people and events that shaped the human story – not revisionist pseudo-history, where some facts are manipulated and others ignored, while trendy social values are dressed in period costumes and shoehorned into historical settings (see Curtis R. McManus’ study of Canadian university History courses, in his book with the regrettably profane title, **Clio’s Bastards**). And I’m not talking about ‘traditional’ accounts that promote popular myths. (Did Christopher Columbus really discover America as some elementary history books used to say - and maybe some still do? That would be news to the Indian and Inuit people who arrived here centuries before him.)

For Christians especially, the pursuit of truth is the overriding point. We are, after all, supposed to be people for whom truth matters because Jesus defined himself as the Way, the **Truth** and the Life. So, we don’t avoid teaching historical realities, even if they sometimes expose the shortcomings of our own society as well as its strengths. We’re supposed to seek truth because the truth sets us free. And we shouldn’t impute guilt to our students for the actions of their ancestors either, but we must prepare them to transform their world for the better. To do that, they need a comprehensive knowledge of the past so they can rise above the sins and misguided traditions of bygone eras and step outside contemporary culture too. History makers do exactly that, people like:

John Howard in the 19th century and Chuck Coulson in the 20th, who sought to transform traditional punishment-focused prisons, into institutions that also offered opportunities for reform and restoration.

Florence Nightingale, who 150 years ago stood against strong male opposition, to create the principles and practices of modern nursing.

General William Booth who brought the message of Christ and the practicalities of Christian compassion to “the least of these” – poor, the marginalized and socially unacceptable folk around the world – the ones who ‘people of consequence’ were apt to ignore.

Sir Wilfred Grenfell, whose remarkable accomplishments in the late 19th and early 20th century, radically improved the lives of Newfoundland and Labrador’s coastal inhabitants.

Dr. Martin Luther King, who, in the face of glaring injustices and hatred, chose to advance Christian love, reconciliation and compassion. “I have a dream,” He said, “ that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhoodwhen we allow freedom to ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, black and white, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, "Free at last! free at last! thank God Almighty, we are free at last!"

‘Teaching history, so that Christian school graduates can be freed to be history makers.’ Not a bad motto for a history department.

About Literature

“Good literature continually read for pleasure must, let us hope, do some good to the reader: must quicken his perception though dull, sharpen his ability to discriminate though blunt, and mellow the rawness of his personal opinions.” A.E. Houseman

Unlike studies in history, learning from world literature is as much an exercise of the heart as it is of the mind. Creative literature appeals to the emotions. At its best, it touches readers with stories that invoke universal themes of truth, love, courage, compassion and justice. Skilled authors know that emotions can advance important ideals more effectively than presentations of mere facts. Literature can inspire people to change the world for the better. The 19th Century book **Uncle Tom’s Cabin** effectively enlisted worldwide support for the anti-slavery movement. Dickens classic **A Christmas Carol**, continues to inspire generosity to the poor, especially around Christmas time. Alan Paton’s **Cry The Beloved Country** hastened the end of South Africa’s apartheid.

Great literature demands more than emotional creativity of course. Like timeless music, enduring literature needs a structural foundation of such high quality that, in the final product, you hardly notice that it exists. That’s where vocabulary, grammar and syntax come in. They’re the literary equivalent of the notes, rests and rhythm in symphonies. So, even though those particular aspects of literature aren’t very entertaining, our students need to learn them well to develop their own communication skills.

Appreciation for an author's style, wit, compositional mechanics and message is so very important, but in a Christian school, the most overlooked aspect of literary studies is development of scripturally based discernment. The worldview of authors - their core beliefs about morality and the meaning of life - permeate their works, whether they intend them to or not. Personal beliefs flow naturally through their stories. Jesus said, "Out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks." Luke 6:45. Logically, that applies to what an author writes too.

When Edgar Allan Poe wrote brilliantly about the horror of permanent separation from loved ones after death in his poem "**The Raven**", he betrayed his tragic personal beliefs about eternity. He couldn't help it. That is what he believed, or at least, what he feared.

Oscar Wilde, in the preface to his novel, **The Picture of Dorian Gray**, tried unsuccessfully to convince readers and himself that somehow his literary work was a pure and amoral artform, above the banalities of right and wrong - worldview-less. And then he proceeded to prove himself wrong by writing one of the most overtly moralizing tales in all English literature.

With sparkling wit and a youthful spirit of adventure Mark Twain advanced his belief about racial equality in the American classic, **Huckleberry Finn**.

Teaching our students worldview discernment is important. It isn't a matter of keeping them from exposure to non-Christian perspectives or of limiting their reading just to Christian authors. The skill of identifying an author's worldview in his writings and comparing that perspective to the principles of Scripture allows readers to reject false or misleading ideas without losing appreciation for the author's work as whole. But without literary discernment, a reader's emotions can be destructively manipulated by a skilled but unscrupulous author. American social reformer George B. Cheever explained,

"A man who writes an immoral but immortal book may be tracked into eternity by a procession of lost souls from every generation, everyone to be a witness against him at the judgement to show to him and to the universe the immeasurableness of his iniquity."

Oscar Wilde was fixated on a book like that, called **A Rebours** (Against Nature), by Joris-Karl Huysmans. Its seductive message contributed greatly to Wilde's self-destructive lifestyle and tragic end.

There's a 'carry-over' benefit to developing discernment in written literature. Media theorist, Marshall McLuhan called books "cool media", because they give readers time to discern - to consider and evaluate ideas at a moderate pace. So we teach Christian school students to take time discerning the underlying moral values in a piece of literature as compared to the teachings of Scripture. But, like it or not, the kind of modern literature that has the most powerful influence on young people, including most of our students, is "hot media" - film. "Hot Media" is 'hot' because it doesn't allow much time for thoughtful reflection or discernment. So emotionally appealing presentations can be especially captivating even if the particular emotions in question are destructive. "Hot media" provides a 'don't think, feel' form of literature and viewers who haven't learned biblical discernment can be especially susceptible to whatever morality film creators want to present. If students are taught to use biblical discernment in "cool media" they at least have the basic equipment to apply to "hot media".

The Burden of Key Bearers

Isn't it daunting to realize that we hold the keys to free our students from the prison of the here and now. No wonder Scripture warns, "Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly." James 3:1.

Some students will balk at being led into new and unfamiliar educational territory, like horses that refuse to leave a burning stable. Others might become so entranced by the new ideas themselves that they miss their eternal relevance. "Ever learning but never coming to a knowledge of the truth." Nevertheless, we must do our best to lead them out into what the Bible calls "The glorious liberty of the children of God" which transcends time and soars far above human wisdom.

"The church is the one thing that saves a man from the degrading servitude of being a child of his own time." Said G.K. Chesterton. Because Christian schooling is an integral and essential part of *the church*, (whether the church realizes it or not), we must help accomplish that too.