

“The Lost Culture of Learning & Three Roads Forward”
Thales Classical Education Conference

Ryan S. Olson
Director
Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture
University of Virginia

Fellow in Late Antiquity
Center for Hellenic Studies
Harvard University

CULTURAL CONTEXT

Gregory the Great in Late Antiquity

At 32 years old, Gregory was about to receive major power and authority. Gregory had been well-prepared for it. Born into a wealthy family of power and influence, he had received a rigorous classical education that drew on the major traditions of his time in the major languages that were available—authors in Latin and in Greek, including Augustine, John Cassian, Cassiodorus, and the Desert Fathers. He was surrounded by the built environment of the golden age of classical Rome on the Caelian Hill in the central city, though it was in obvious decay all around him in contrast to the vibrant architecture of the Christian aristocracy reflected in Jerome’s home, a library of the Christian fathers kept by his own grandfather, and several magnificent churches. The influence of his mother and father was indelible on his character, as was the impression of his aunt who prayed so fervently that the skin of her elbows and knees had become calloused and tough: “Her dead body bore witness to what her living spirit had been,” Gregory wrote in admiration of his aunt.

Though he was only 32, Gregory had already held a few major public offices. Now he had become the mayor of Rome, in addition to being the likely inheritor of several major estates in the city and surrounding countryside. Drawing on his considerable preparation and early achievements, he was now responsible for resolving urban legal disputes, deciding appeals, handling the city's administrative business, supervising the Roman senate and administrators responsible for the food and water supply, and delivering important speeches at ceremonial occasions. He had arrived as a professional. But after one year, he withdrew to private life and became a monk. In his writing, Gregory describes his sense of being overwhelmed by inner conflict, desiring to live a quiet life during a confusing and confounding time, even though he excelled because of his classical education and his family influences. So Gregory retreated.

Thales Educators in Late Modernity

Can you relate? Whatever your religious convictions or personal commitments, does it ever seem like you're fighting a losing battle? The students just aren't ready to learn. The families aren't supportive enough. We don't see eye-to-eye on fundamental issues. Our budget is just too tight. We can't seem to provide enough support to our students—if only they had been further along when they enrolled here. If only my own personal financial pressures would subside. I'm giving everything I can to my students, but sometimes I'm not sure even *I* understand what's really going on today. Politics seems raucous and hopeless. Will the markets continue to grow?

The Institute I lead with Prof. James Davison Hunter at the University of Virginia—the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture—studies the dynamics that underlie all of these observable effects—the pressures and discomforts you observe. Think of it like the weather and the climate. The weather changes every day. The climate may change in slow, unobservable ways over long periods of time. What we observe today in our politics or in technology or in medicine or in business—what seems new to us today—these changes have been 150 to 200 years in the making. Based on that intellectual genealogy, we predicted many of today's dynamics in 1995.

We see today the retreat of religion from the public square; we also see the retreat of objectivity or truth that we can agree on. Worse, there doesn't seem to be any basis on which to arrive at common answers. Is unemployment up or down? Is there climate change or not? Is a fetus a human life or not? ... Proponents for both sides of these issues don't only scream at each other in disagreement—they don't even see the same reality. They use different language while invoking divergent moral authorities that ring true in their own enclosed communities. If Western civilization has been upheld by the twin pillars of Athens and Jerusalem—by the reason of Athens and the revelation of Jerusalem—we seem to have reached the end of Western

Civilization. Our students, like we, inhabit a *post-authority civilization*: neither revelation nor reason provides an authoritative basis for agreeing on anything of serious consequence.

Perhaps you could discuss this with your students if they would look up from the black mirrors in their hands. Or if they would read for extended periods of time, or converse with you in more than a couple of sentences. Or make eye contact. Or draw on a literature other than Netflix or Prime or Hulu or Fortnite. And for them, the pressure is on to achieve and to perform, so if they're like increasing numbers of students, they may take psychotropic drugs in high school and college to focus, to stay awake, to get all of their studying done so they can compete. Our attention is spread among Facebook posts and Instagram comments and short news articles and snippets of text arriving by phone after watching those three dots dancing on the screen with their promise that something new will appear at any moment. Our students, like we, exist in a radically fragmented "attention economy," as our Senior Fellow Matt Crawford has called it.

One major effect of the torrent of bits that your students and we all struggle to keep up with is the loss of meaning—what's important? What's significant? How would we know? When confronted with all of it, our students become numb to significance. We lose the thread of the first things. What should we love? For what should we have affection? What should move us to tears or to singing? It's tough to say, so we stick to learning subjects and skills and techniques without bothering with what's worthy of our love. Our students, like we, have become disordered selves. We've become "men without chests," in C.S. Lewis's phrase.

We're in a real mess. And it probably feels like it's up to you to sort it all out so you can shape and form the rising generation of leaders and contributors. And you're correct—it often is up to you or it's largely up to you. Will you retreat? It's a rational desire. But it's not *your* calling. Or you wouldn't be here.

WHAT IS EDUCATION?

This was Gregory's impulse. When all around gives way, when the center cannot hold (to quote Yeats), when the circumstances are overwhelming, retreat. Upon his father's death, Gregory converted some of the family properties he had inherited into monasteries. Following his model Benedict, Gregory began following the monastic rule and rhythms of life. He began reading deeply in his theological traditions from his moral sources. He began writing commentaries and treatises and letters. Study moved into productivity. Frustration led to fruitfulness. The contemplation of the divine led to the cultivation of the soul. In these bewildering and exciting times, how can you follow Gregory?

Thales as Exemplar

In fact, you're right where you should be. And I will encourage you today to stand up to these daunting cultural forces I've mentioned ominously here. Draw on your considerable heritage as a school—you're the inheritor of hundreds of years of cultural and political and economic and theological wisdom. The classical tradition is your set of moral sources. *Soak your classical moral sources into your roots, let them become part of you so you can serve the fruit of your own Western heritage and your attentive learning and your ordered loves to your students tirelessly and inescapably and coherently and winsomely.*

Your leaders—Mr. Luddy and Dr. Hall—have set out an inspiring mission. Here's what it says: Thales strives to give students knowledge, to teach students to think on their own, and to give students the tools they need to reach their full potential. How will you do this? Through direct instruction and a classical curriculum. A classical curriculum with traditional American values. And, naturally then, an emphasis on character education. What does that mean? What can motivate your passionate pursuit of this mission? What will motivate your students to excel by cultivating the 15 outcomes of a Thales graduate?

Education vs. Instruction

My friend and one of our senior fellows at the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture, Professor Charles Glenn, distinguishes between instruction and education. Instruction is the teaching of knowledge. Education is the formation of a human being. Instruction doesn't include formation. Formation includes instruction. Formation is about the forging not only of knowledge and skills, but of character and the virtues rooted in strong moral sources.

Character Definition

We are also the inheritors of certain basic moral goods that represent real progress over the last few hundred years. These include the dignity of all persons as worthy of universal respect, the freedom to determine one's own life, the free market, and the fundamental right to just relations with institutions and neighbors. While these do not come without their dangers, they're a stable inheritance from the Western tradition upon which we can build.

Underlying all of these ideals is the relationality of human persons. To quote Zygmunt Bauman, we are "ineluctably—existentially—moral beings: that is, we are faced with the challenge of the Other, which is the challenge of responsibility for the Other." Relationships, Bauman says, are

“shot through with ambivalence” because responsibility for one’s neighbors has “no obvious limits” and “does not easily translate into practical steps.” The practicality of rule-based ethics constrains the moral imagination required to meet our responsibility for our neighbors. Rather, we are challenged to live in such a way that our neighbors can count on us to serve them.

To live with such responsibility for our neighbors that we can be counted on by them and accountable before them is to require character, as Paul Ricoeur argued. As its etymology insists, character is the deeply engraved consistency of virtue (excellence) oriented toward benevolence and justice. By cultivating habits, sensibilities, emotions, allergies, perceptions, and excellences of being a person for the other, virtues are engrained into the soul of the person such that she can be counted on by her neighbors to do what is good and right. This is human love: to live in self-giving ways that redound to others’ bodily, intellectual, spiritual, material, civic thriving and thus to the human inputs that strengthen a city’s thriving.

Since becoming a person for the other does not occur automatically, intentional formation of character impresses itself on adults as a basic responsibility toward the young. “There is no craft more privileged,” George Steiner says of teaching. “To awaken in another human being powers, dreams beyond one’s own; to induce in others a love for that which one loves; to make one’s inward present their future: this is a threefold adventure like no other.” That is the irreplaceable vocation or role of parents first and foremost, and also of you as educators, as well of clergy, coaches, and other adults.

Character is a way of being that is deeply etchedⁱ over time, especially early in life, through habits, actions, decisions, beliefs, emotions, institutions, relationships, commerce, friendships, media, personal reflections, service to others, and innumerable other influences. Character is fundamentally relational, expressed in social bonds as dependability and predictability. A person of good character can be expected to “walk” in certain predictable ways because of her identity with the good and by habituation of action.ⁱⁱ

Character is the coming together of three formal properties: moral attachment, moral discipline, and moral autonomy (to use Emile Durkheim’s categories). That’s the form of character across all societies and cultures. The substance or content of character varies based on religious and philosophical commitments. But it must include moral discipline, which is the ability to say no to temptation. It must include moral attachment, which is a “yes” to a cause, creed, or community outside oneself. And it must include moral autonomy, to moral sources, which is responsibility for oneself—the freedom and self-restraint to say, “Here I am!” to my neighbor who needs me. Attachment, the yes; discipline, the no; and autonomy, the “Here I am!”

The Content of Their Character: method & conclusions

Given the fact that character is contested in our culture and adults have a difficult time addressing it, we wanted to understand what was happening on the ground in schools. So five years ago, we launched a major research project that has two parts—a set of case studies about 10 types of American high schools, as well as a major national survey to understand how parents and their teen-aged kids are thinking about and practicing moral formation. It's a complex study by nearly 20 researchers that's worth much discussion. A summary of what we learned about character and citizenship formation among the 10 school types appears in *The Content of Their Character: Inquiries into the Varieties of Moral Formation*.

Here are the five major conclusions: character must be caught, taught, practiced, and sourced, and those efforts of a school are strengthened or sabotaged by other adult influencers such as parents, clergy, and the like. I only have time to talk about one, and it's "sourced." You have knowledge and wisdom about the others, no doubt.

Moral Sources

Like water from a geyser, character springs from deep sources. Whether we are conscious of them or able to articulate them, deep wells of belief and habit issue forth in the observable behavior and persistent characteristics we call "character." These moral sources are an animating faith or philosophy—the picture of the good life to which one holds and at which one's life is aimed. Sources provide the motivations for moral action.

The basic story of moral sources in the Western world can be told as a shift, from outside the self, to inside the self. With the Hebrew Bible's narratives of paradise and exile, Plato's conception of the good, Aristotle's notion of flourishing, Jesus' teaching of the kingdom of God, Buddhism's nirvana or Buddhahood, Muhammed's way of submission, the Tao—with all of these, though profoundly diverse, the source of morality, of the good life, was external to the person. Character was something with which one must be in conformity and to which one must be accountable. But in the 17th-century Rational Enlightenment, René Descartes shifted from the self that is connected to an external moral source, to an autonomous, enclosed self;ⁱⁱⁱ unattached inwardness was essential. Jean-Jacques Rousseau in the Romantic Enlightenment makes the inner nature the source of morality, meaning that one's self-expression of moral sentiments and feelings was "authoritative."^{iv} Romantic expressivism or emotivism was intensified further by Johann Gottfried Herder, who believed that each individual had a unique way of being; failing to express and "be true to" this unique way of being was to do violence to the person, to be

inhumane.^v Thus, we find the truth within us, and we are concerned to protect those feelings and sentiments for others.

Amid this sea of possible moral sources, what are yours at Thales Academy? The answer of your well-crafted mission statement is “classical,” i.e. the Greeks and Romans of antiquity and the traditions built upon them.

The Hellenic Tradition, The Trivium

From the Greeks and the Romans, the Western world received foundational values that remain at least important enough to be contested in American culture today. I’ll use the ancient concept of Trivium to summarize those classical moral sources.

Trivium is a simple Latin word that means—as many of you will know—an intersection of three roads. From the medieval period, the trivium has been an educational concept meaning the three basic subjects or phases of education (vs. instruction): grammar, dialectic, and rhetoric. These three elements are present in ancient educational praxis, as can be seen in classical Greek, Hellenistic, and Roman literature, as well as in archaeological and inscription evidence from these periods.

The Greeks emphasized *enkyklios paideia*, which basically means a complete or well-rounded education. *Enkyklios paideia* likely originated with Aristotle, and it’s attested in Philo of Alexandria (e.g., *De cong.* 9). The images Philo uses of education proceeding toward the development of wisdom are of progressing toward an entrance hall in a house leading to a staircase (ἐν μὲν οἰκίαις αὐλαιοὶ πρόκεινται κλισιάδων) and of suburbs leading to a city (ἐν δὲ πόλεσι τὰ προάστεια, *De cong.* 11). These entry ways to wisdom are γραμματικῆ, γεωμετρία, ἀστρονομία, ῥητορικῆ, μουσικῆ, τῆ ἄλλῃ λογικῆ θεωρία πάση—grammar, geometry, astronomy, rhetoric, music, and every other thing befitting logic. Note the presence of the three trivium subjects and part of the quadrivium—minus arithmetic. The AD-first century Roman educationist Quintilian described subjects that should be covered before the rhetoric stage as part of the *orbis doctrinae* (well-rounded teaching): reading and writing, grammar, logic, literature, astronomy, geometry, and the theory of music. Cicero (*De or.* 1.187ff.) and Seneca (*Ep.* 108.1) are similar. The picture from these authors comports with archaeological evidence. Writing exercises that students did on papyrus, shards of pottery (ostraca), wooden tablets, and parchment attest to this in places like Greco-Roman Egypt, Italy (especially Pompeii) and the Near East: Dura Europos and Palmyra. There was a broadly fixed core of texts and practices in antiquity. This approach would be replicated for hundreds of years by such lights of the Western tradition as Isidore of Seville (560-636) and the Venerable Bede (672-735). Alcuin of York (735-

804) adapted classical education and wrote to Charlemagne (r. 752 [Rome 800]-814): “If only there were many who would follow the illustrious desire of your intent, perchance a new, nay, a more excellent Athens might be founded in Frankland; for our Athens, being ennobled with the mastership of Christ the Lord, would surpass all the wisdom of the studies of the Academy. That was instructed in the Platonic disciplines and had fame for its culture in the seven arts, but ours being enriched beyond this with the sevenfold plentitude of the Holy Spirit, would excel all the dignity of secular learning” (Ep. 86 Migne, Jaffe 110).

The original, classical part of classical education was picked up by another classicist, Thomas Jefferson, as well as by Benjamin Franklin, and then eventually by a British medievalist in the Twentieth Century, Dorothy L. Sayers, who advocated that we “turn back the wheel of progress some four or five hundred years, to the point at which education began to lose sight of its true object, towards the end of the Middle Ages.” Sayers argued that the “trivium was intended to teach the pupil the proper use of the tools of learning” before he began to apply those tools to various subjects. Take language as an example: the student learns the vocabulary and structure, then how to use it and define terms and make accurate statements, and then to express that language “elegantly and persuasively.”

My addition to Sayers is this: Certainly we need to teach students to use the *tools* of learning, but because of our historical moment, which I defined as post-authority in a radically fragmented attention economy with disordered selves, we must at the same time create a *coherent, irresistible culture of learning* through *three habits and virtues* that are rooted in Classical moral sources and that correspond to the elements of the Trivium. Let me explain. And here I’ll draw on the renowned classicist, Victor Davis Hanson, who collected several of these examples.

Grammar

In antiquity, the Grammar stage included learning to read and write characters in Latin and/or Greek and/or a local language such as Hebrew, memorizing vocabulary and working with passages from Homer, Euripides, Isocrates, and Menander (Morgan 170).^{vi} Students wrote lessons on papyrus such as grammatical exercises, morphological tables, parts of speech, the practices of interpreting literature, conjugating verbs and declining nouns, exploring the origins of words, case usage, demonstrating stylistic excellence in syllabic length, accent usage and tone. Grammar was important for understanding literary texts, for speaking and for writing, and speaking and writing had to conform to standards of “reason (*ratione*), antiquity (*vestutate: maiestas*, ‘grandeur’ or ‘dignity’), authority (*auctoritate*: “derived largely from poets and historians”) and usage (*consuetudine*: “agreed usage” of the educated)” (Morgan 172-173).

The grammar stage was focused on a “free consensus” on the basics of education: skills such as reading and writing, awareness of linguistic structure, knowledge of basic facts and texts that would easily be accessible throughout one’s life in the mind, and familiarity with a particular set of texts.

The grammar stage requires memory, honed through the virtue of *faith* or, more generically, *meaning*. *Intellectual modesty and humility* are required to submit to the historical archive, to the tradition that transcends oneself. By taking in and digesting and ruminating on facts, phrases, and ordered fragments of knowledge deemed important by historical consensus, a student gives precious time to submit to a tradition. That which is engrained in one’s memory is then available in the next phases of education and, indeed, throughout life.

Building and then accessing memory is the personal habit that empowers the “yes” of character. By implanting in a student a tradition through memory, a coherent set of narratives and poems and mathematical ideas and historical dates and biographical sketches and geographical data and so on, the student attaches to a tradition, to a creed, to an intellectual and moral community that transcends but nonetheless is rooted in particular times. It is thus in the act of “remembering,” of putting back together the parts that one has memorized in an affirmation of ideals or a person worthy of worship, of ascribing worth as the Old English has it, that motivates the uncoerced moral action of character. Memory and remembering thus lead to faith, to meaning that grounds one’s being in ultimate reality. As a young person, a tradition that one may not be able yet to affirm or to attach oneself to because it is beyond comprehension, one practices mimetically—by imitating those who ascribe worth to the tradition or community or creed, in a way, maieutically as a midwife would birth a completely helpless child.

The Greeks believed in the supremacy of culture. Nearly anyone could be a Greek—could learn the language, love the right literature, adopt the same values, participate in the polis. Which part of the Mediterranean world one came from didn’t matter: you could be “Hellenized” by being enculturated. (Think of Hebraic Jews and Hellenized Jews in the New Testament book of the Acts of the Apostles.)

This is a challenge to the post-authority civilization in which we live. We live in a time when reason and revelation are rendered inadequate as grounds for moral action or arbitrating truth. Those are external standards that may violate my own happiness, comfort, or prejudices, the sentiment goes. It’s painful to learn by heart, to memorize, to recite, and it’s pointless if what I’m supposed to be learning in the grammar stage has no authority or importance.

Your Greek moral sources will tell you that the belief that human nature is constant through time—that human beings, for all of their glory, are tragic creatures with almost unlimited potential in fateful tension with proclivities toward vice—is Greek. Think of Thucydides’ *History of the Peloponnesian War* about how fickle human beings are. Reflect with Thucydides about his horror over the Thracians’ massacring women and children of Mycalessos, and especially the terrible scene of children being butchered in a school (7.29-30). Or Euripides’ *Medea* and *Phaedra*; or degenerate constitutions in *Artistotle* (Hanson). Virtue doesn’t grow intentionally, Aristotle says (Hanson 2001, 40). The Greeks trusted the average citizen and common sense, favoring neither rich nor poor. Constitutional and consensual government was a Greek notion. Why? Because a tyrant or a set of elites couldn’t be trusted to get it right; only by deliberation, by finding a common view based on lived experience, could the right policies and practices be found. This is epistemic modesty.

So standing against the rejection of reason and revelation, in humility and attachment to the moral sources of the Classical tradition, we memorize, we recite, we affirm, we attach, we midwife the character of the young people in our care. We give them a “yes” that they can say and live and practice and identify as their own. They will remember the grammars you taught them if you instill the virtue of intellectual modesty and humility and hone their practice of learning by heart, of submitting, of attaching, of mimesis, and then of helping them to see the connection between what they believe and say, and what they do, their behavior. There are many resources in our Classical tradition about this because the notion that words and deeds must match—this is the virtue of honesty and integrity—these are thoroughly Greek ideas.

Dialectic

On to logic or dialectic. Both Philo and Quintilian call this the “science of reason” or the “science of conducting a philosophical dialogue.” In his *Topica*, Aristotle defines dialectic as reason that begins from a generally accepted opinion (100a). Here we have the syllogism, famous from Aristotle’s *On Interpretation*. The focus of this phase is on developing independence and clarity of thought and of expression. The teacher led the student through an arduous exploration of all elements of a text or a problem or a creature so that the student could do the same for himself when the teacher was not present. In this phase, the student begins to develop his own thoughts about a text, about an argument or a train of thought or about a solution to a problem. Although those thoughts are not likely expressed uniquely or creatively at this stage, they represent a student discerning for herself the deficiencies or strengths of an argument. Quintilian pictures this as the process of a student helming his own ship. Plutarch likens the successful student to a bee: “The bee by nature finds the smoothest and best honey in the most bitter flowers and

sharpest thorns...., [he] will learn somehow to extract something useful and helpful even from works which are suspected of being immoral or inappropriate” (*Quomodo adul.* 32e-f). Or the student is a successful climber who toils up a steep mountain and meets an easier gradient and “richer soil.” “And if by perseverance of study he pass even beyond these gentler slopes, fruits for which none have toiled thrust themselves upon him, and all things spring forth unforbidden” (12.10.79). This is educational progress indeed.

What this requires is attentiveness based on cultivation of the virtue of what Aristotle called *phronesis* – good judgement or prudence – which flourishes when it is oriented by *hope* and *purpose* (Arist. NE VI.vii.6-7). This stage is not excelled by means of fragmented attention or by accepting any argument or solution. It is at this stage that the “no” of moral discipline engages. Shall I pursue this? Is that right? What about the truth of this? “No.” Some of the material I’m studying does not fit the attachment. Discernment and judgement are required. Attentiveness to what is *extra nos* (outside us) is requisite. Defining, comparing, categorizing, reconsidering. All attention-requiring.

What will draw us out of the dark mirror? Moral discipline cultivated by attentiveness through practice of *phronesis* expressed in hopeful *purpose*. Draw deeply from the moral sources of our Classical tradition. The very notion of dissent and open criticism of government, of religious institutions, of the military and, in fact, civilian leadership of the military. These are from Greek sources. Read Sophocles’ *Antigone*, a speech from Thucydides, Plato’s *Apology*, the *Bacchae* of Euripides, Josephus’ autobiography, or Demosthenes’ speeches. All over the place, we see individual protest, criticism, and free. (See Hanson 2001, 34-35)

Why stare hopelessly and helplessly into a dark mirror? Things can change, thought deserves criticism, discipline can be exercised, despite the weakness and frailty—indeed because of the weakness and frailty—of the human condition. Nurture that judgement in your students, drawn from the moral sources of the Classics.

Rhetoric

And finally, rhetoric. The rhetoric stage involves, in Quintilian’s estimation, the learning of techniques and arts that are useful in law courts and in government and (we would say today) business. He says the orator must strive to perfect his eloquence and to be a good person because, if he is skillful, he will be able to influence the minds and bodies of his audience. Ancient educators had their students paraphrase and rewrite Homer and other epic myths, alter narrative sequences based on certain goals, retelling stories with different syntax and structure. These exercises allowed a student to articulate for himself what he had learned—in his own

words and style—while at the same time placing himself in a tradition but from where he lived, in his language, in his time. What would be said and how it would be spoken depended entirely on the audience, on the goals, on the moment, to determine what was appropriate. Dorothy Sayers argued that the rhetoric stage corresponded with the “Poetic Age” of child development: “The Poetic Age is popularly known as the ‘difficult’ age. It is self-centered; it yearns to express itself; it rather specializes in being misunderstood; it is restless and tries to achieve independence; and, with good luck and good guidance, it should show the beginnings of creativeness; a reaching out towards a synthesis of what it already knows, and a deliberate eagerness to know and do some one thing in preference to all others.” It is telling that Sayers, who did much to revive interest in the trivium, was a creative artist. She translated Dante; she wrote the Lord Peter Wimsey murder mysteries. Sayers wrote advertising copy in London for years. And she wrote an essay called “The Mind of the Maker” in which she argued that the Christian doctrine of the Trinity is an analog for the human creative process: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit correspond, she argued, to the Idea, Energy, and Power of the artist’s creative process.

So the rhetoric stage is about *imagination* being cultivated through the virtue of *love* or, more generally, *belonging*. It requires that the student learn to serve a creative craft or a capacious vision as a response to a need or a goal that has as its end the flourishing of the other. The habit that we must instill, then, is *creativity* and *entrepreneurship*—not only *novel and responsive* ideas, but also ones that serve, ones that meet needs. This is the “Here I am!” part of character formation that instills moral autonomy. True, free, vibrant rhetoric is personalized and responsive based on the proper ordering of loves in the soul.

Character education itself can claim a beginning in the West some 2,800 years ago when what we would call middle-class farmers took responsibility for handing down—through hard work and freedom—a cultivated piece of private property to their next generations. It was from this seed bed such a culture flourished that we received the model of the polis, the city, the community that was dedicated to the flourishing of as many citizens as possible.

Indeed, the institution of private property and the need for free economic activity are Greek concepts. Often, private property and free enterprise are characterized as fundamentally selfish activities. But this isn’t the whole story. As Greek farmers demonstrate, private property has a time dimension—consideration of the next generation. And except with rare cases, enterprise *requires* a customer, a beneficiary of the product or service. So it requires creatively working with old ideas and concepts and reactions to solve new problems or to solve old problems in new ways.

The Greeks also strove for military superiority through advanced technology, through exceptional discipline, a preference for decisive conflict, and the substantial application of capital to warfare, even as there was a broad distrust of militarism and a concern to creatively defend their picture of the Good Life and the culture that sustained it.

So our students do not only exist for themselves. They live in a world that has needs that they can meet in creative, innovative ways. And the Greeks demonstrate this with their agriculture, with their economies, with polis culture, with the academies, in innovative warfare technology and tactics, and so on.

What will order our loves in the torrent of information bits? The student excelling in the rhetoric stage can craft and create and convey ideas and activities in the world that respond to needs and benefit others in self-giving ways. So much for our reflections on the moral sources of classical education through the Trivium.

Moral sources strengthened or sabotaged by ecology

Do everything you can to create a strong, coherent, thick school culture by fostering attachment to the Classical treasures you've inherited to resist being disordered selves in a radically fragmented attention economy inhabiting a post-authority civilization.

How can you possibly do this with everything else you have to do and with the cultural forces you're up against? Renew yourself in the moral sources of Classical education. Study the Trivium. Consider the sources and stories I've mentioned today. Behind these principles and summaries are authors on whose works you could feast for a career—Homer, Hesiod, Livy, Euripides, Sophocles, Thucydides, Herodotus, Euclid, Aeschylus, Hippocrates, Plutarch, and many more. Remember this tradition. Draw on this tradition. Sink your roots deep into it. Find ways of studying it together and deepening your knowledge of it. It's your heritage. And it's yours to transmit to your students, who yearn to share it.

Recall our new friend Gregory. Gregory retreated to the monastery to study, contemplate, and pray. But only for two years. Almost as soon as he'd settled into the contemplative life he had yearned for, he was called back into service by the pope as the diplomat to the Byzantine emperor Tiberius II. Then at around age 50, in 590, Gregory became Pope Gregory I, or Gregory the Great, and he served as pope until his death in 604. He fought off the threat of a foreign power, he dealt with the disastrous effects of a major plague, he led liturgical innovations, he expanded the influence of the rule of Benedict, he evangelized large parts of Britain and Europe, and he made major improvements in the management of the church's extensive land holdings.

How did he stay connected to his moral source throughout this very active life that drew on his considerable administrative, diplomatic, and leadership gifts? This is the problem of the *vita activa* (active life) and the *vita contemplativa* (contemplative life) that has been reflected on in our time by Hannah Arendt. For Gregory, the key was living a mixed life—taking the lessons and dispositions of the contemplative life into one’s activities. This he achieved by regularly retreating, shutting out busy, urgent, demanding activity to nurture his soul; and by cultivating friendships with colleagues who would encourage him and provide him examples of who he aspired to be so that, in his exhaustion, he could follow their pattern.

This is your challenge in the confounding cultural times in which we live: to resist the sweep of impoverished influences by nurturing your personal and professional soul in the moral sources of your institution—at Thales and other schools represented here—in the rich Classical tradition that you’ve inherited, perhaps through the structure of the Trivium I’ve outlined here. Reflect that tradition more and more in your personal conduct, do everything you can to contribute to a school culture that attracts students to join your way of life, and in the process shape their soul with the virtues of faithful/meaningful humility attached to the tradition, of hopeful/purposeful attentiveness disciplined by that attachment, and of loving creativity responsive in service to the needs of others.

ⁱ Søren Kierkegaard picks up the meaning of the Greek word from which our English word derives: “Morality is character; character is something engraved (χαράσσω), but the sea has no character, nor does sand, not abstract common sense, either, for character is inwardness,” Søren Kierkegaard, *Two Ages: The Age of Revolution and the Present Age, a Literary Review*, ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Kierkegaard’s Writings, XIV (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), bk. VII.73.

ⁱⁱ For a rigorously philosophical and existentially relevant discussion, see Ricoeur and Blamey, *Oneself as Another*.

ⁱⁱⁱ Percy, *Lost in the Cosmos*, 44; Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 143.

^{iv} For a brief discussion summarizing Rousseau’s logic on moral sentiments, Richard Sorabji, *Moral Conscience through the Ages: Fifth Century BCE to the Present* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014), 176–178.

^v Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992).

^{vi} Teresa Morgan, *Literate Education in the Hellenistic and Roman Worlds*, Cambridge Classical Studies (Cambridge, U.K. ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998). For the historical discussion here, see also Raffaella Cribiore, *Gymnastics of the Mind Greek Education in Hellenistic and Roman Egypt*, 2nd printing, 1st pbk. printing (Princeton University Press, 2005).