

My house is located on a plot of land that is, unbeknownst to it, currently in the middle of some kind of power struggle. For about several generations our city of Baton Rouge has done anything but educate its people well. Others have picked up on this throughout the decades, attempting to withdraw from the thing, leaving and cleaving to a whole new model, new tax income, and new values. The city of Central was formed a few years back as a kind of purging, a breaking away from the metropolis in order to do things differently. Now, the city of St. George has been proposed. Our house sits amidst that potential new city. What's the reason? Ironically enough, all have claimed education reform as their driving purpose, the bloodline of their efforts.

Simultaneously, there is a state-wide and nation-wide battle over education standards. My own state of Louisiana got into it because our Governor hired a guy from up north to enact Uncle Sam's education plan Common Core, which is really just a Common Corpse. The Governor eventually reneged on his idea – perhaps we could say he repented of his bad idea - which caused an uproar from many who haven't quite realized the value of repentance.

Education reform isn't just an issue among the public educators. The Catholic Diocese of Baton Rouge, who has historically prided themselves on a kind of Jesuit-driven academic approach, has in the past few years become serious advocates for Common Corpse. Academic specialists and principles alike are jumping on the wave and riding this thing to Hope Island. Several private Christian schools in Baton Rouge have already made plans to train their teachers in the next year toward these standards. It's hard to say how long the enthusiasm will last, because it's hard to say when "latest research" will hand us the next academic silver bullet. What's not hard to say is that Hope Island is a far cry from Treasure Island. All that to say, education reform is swirling around our heads and if we don't get it right, we will become the swirl, if we haven't already.

Many people think of education reform as a sweeping change, a kind of beaurocratic burn sparkling with law books, press conferences, and plenty of friction among teachers' unions. But this is not so. Education reform is ultimately a personal reform, it is a reform which takes place in the hearts and minds of each individual first. It is a reform that occurs first and foremost among parents, fathers and mothers who have a certain idea of what their child ought to become. Then and only then will school *systems* change. Here, for now, I only want to say a few things about principles of education reform, offer a recommendation about education standards, and then point you to a good book that has a lot to say about Common Corpse.

Education reform will only happen if we 1) ask the right question, 2) become the right people and 3) rely on the right power. A bit about these three:

## **Ask the right questions.**

I watched a LPB special a few weeks back where several educators and politicians sat on a panel and fielded questions from a room full of Louisiana citizens. Some questions were pro-Common Corpse; others were anti. The questions and answers weren't impressive, because they were the same kinds of questions we expect at those kinds of things, the same explanations I was taught to give as a public school student: they were summaries. The one question that did stand out, the one worth having on air, was from a woman who simply referred to the standards themselves and then asked something along the lines, "Do you think this way of reading literature is the best way to teach our students how they ought to read all literature?" She was referring to something called higher criticism, which I have no problem with, when it is taught well and in conjunction with other kinds of reading. To be sure, higher criticism, in a much lower form, is the kind of reading required on most standardized tests. So, it shouldn't surprise us to see Common Corpse espousing this and only this method. Unfortunately, we should not expect to find the Medieval Quadriga as part of the discussion.

This audience member was the only one to ask the right kind of questions we should ask of education, and those are questions that get closer to first principles. True education reform will not happen unless we ask the right kinds of questions and get the right answers. In *Classical Christian Education: An Introduction*, I present several questions that stir. They are worth giving again here: What is man? What is the chief end of man? Who is

God? What is the good life? What is happiness? What are truth, goodness, and beauty? What are liberty, equality, and justice? How should we measure student success in school? How should we view Western tradition? What subjects do our students most need? How integrated is religion with education? Is there right and wrong? How is knowledge best acquired? Why should students learn? How are curriculum choices made? What is a successful teacher? Whose responsibility is education? This is the mat on which our education discussions should be fought. Let's get those right and then discuss which high schools should close and which ones should become accredited.

### **Become the right people.**

Become the right people and therefore put the right people in charge of this thing. The last people who need to lead education reform are politicians and economists. True education reform will never happen without philosophers, theologians, poets, and priests at the helm. But because we moderns have become hyper-pragmatists, we think quantifying things is a characteristic of authority. Fathers therefore care more about capitalism than the economy of their children's souls. Mothers care more about women's wages in the workplace over and above a woman's gift of a home. We care for fads, talking points, quick fixes, and a misshapen view of the good life, and then we wonder why we are a superficial people. Education reform, the kind worth having, won't happen until we have personal reform, until the desires of our hearts are set in the right direction. Until then, our educational efforts will amount to little more than new Frito factories. They certainly won't be *schools*.

### **Rely on the right power.**

As has already been said, reform has to have the right kind of engine behind it, because not all 'energy sources' have the power to get us where we want to go.

Money is a pseudo-power, but not because it doesn't have any strength. Money is only power if the ones being controlled by it are weak. If the ones being summoned by money have courage, the kind that comes with virtuous integrity, money has no power. It has only so much authority as the idolater will give it.

Honor – local, national, or international - is only as good as those who give it, and this means a Blue Ribbon title conferred to a school may not tell us much about the real quality of the education therein. A nationally recognized school, recognized by a nation who is sinking lower and lower in their international academic standing, may not be worth attending.

Health leaves us in the same dilemma. If we want health in order to live, what kind of life is worth living? What kind of school is worth having? What kind of thing can make us better?

Standardize tests are never ends in themselves.

College placement has the same bankruptcy as standardized tests.

That which will have the power for true and lasting education reform will come in the form of parents wanting their students to become the right kind of person, to pursue a proper understanding of the good life, beyond 401k plans, college placement, net worth, and racial equality.

Until this happens, we will throw money, accolades, school lunches, and ACT prep classes at the problem.

### **Education Standards**

There is much to be said about education standards, particular what is called Common Corpse. Truly, they are a common bore, and that won't be recognized until we put a proper education before our eyes. Until we realize our students are people and those people are more than cogs in a wheel, more than chemical vats, we will not present before them questions that stir, and we will not assign literature which reaches to the heart of man. Our students will therefore not read Homer, Sophocles, Plato, Aristotle, St. Paul, Augustine, Aquinas, Dante, Chaucer, Machiavelli, Donne, Milton, Bunyan, Keats, Burke, Chesterton, Eliot, Adler, O'Conner, or Tolkien with any seriousness. A standard assumes there is somewhere we want to go, and it also assumes there is something worth fighting for. And as long as our education destination resembles that of a trash heap, our education standards will be little more than running quickly past the gnarly yard dogs.

Aristotle, in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, gives us a few gems:

“Every art and every inquiry, and similarly every action and pursuit, is thought to aim at some good...If, then, there is some end of the things we do, which we desire for its own sake (everything else being desired for the sake of this), and if we do not choose everything for the sake of something else (for at that rate the process would go on to infinity, so that our desire would be empty and vain), clearly this must be the good and the chief good. Will not the knowledge of it, then, have a great influence on life?”

“It is the mark of an educated man to look for precision in each class of things just so far as the nature of the subject admits.”

“Hence any one who is to listen intelligently to lectures about what is noble and just and, generally, about the subjects of political science must have been brought up in good habits. For the fact is the starting-point, and if this is sufficiently plain to him, he will not at the start need the reason as well; and the man who has been well brought up has or can easily get starting-points. And as for him who neither has nor can get them, let him hear the words of Hesiod:

‘Far best is he who knows all things himself;  
Good, he that hearkens when men counsel right;  
But he who neither knows, nor lays to heart  
Another’s wisdom, is a useless wight.’”

Movie reform, as Douglas Wilson said, isn’t putting in an old movie, pressing rewind, and playing the movie again. The same is true about education reform. If we want to have an educational renaissance, an educational rebirth, we ought not try to put the dead woman back into the womb. Folks in these parts want to make a new city to get a new chunk of taxes in order to build new school buildings and train new teachers, all so they can...make the same educational mistakes as the ones they criticize. This is like buying a shiny new casket with the money from a new life insurance payout, transferring the corpse to the shiny new casket and saying, “Aha! Resurrection!” If we want education reform, a resurrection to a kind of new academic life, we must realize that the right things must first die and our academic faith must be placed upon things that last.

### **Book Plug**

There’s not too much to say here, other than if we want to have a worthwhile conversation about Common Corpse, we should start by reading Terrence O. Moore’s *Story Killers*.