

Excerpts from

A Wildlife Refuge... Not A Hothouse

Thoughts for Our Teachers on Life in the Classroom

Written in 1995 by Former Headmaster Steve Larson, Edited 2017

On the Classroom as a Refuge, Not a Hothouse

Many teachers have pictured Christian elementary education as a hothouse. The main idea is that, protected by a bubble and nurtured by an ideal climate, young seedlings and plants are nursed into a life of fruitfulness and prepared for the coming storms of life.

This makes sense in many ways, but it also presents troublesome images. For example, it bothers me that the hothouse is an artificial world, removed from reality, where there are few problems to solve or choices to make. Do we want a school like that? Also, what happens when this hothouse child is transplanted to the “real world,” a place without an artificial roof, so to speak, and instead surrounded by more hostile elements than simply other hothouse children? Might the transplants be so accustomed to the warm shelter that they are not able to make wise decisions, or cope with the inevitable contrary factors of normal life?

Finally, it seems that our beliefs should be defined first by what we are for, not by what we oppose; by who we are, not by who we are not. Otherwise, faith soon becomes a mere reaction instead of an action, and our identity is forged by the negative instead of the positive. The “outside world” then becomes something to fear, avoid, or judge, instead of occupy, love and redeem as God’s creation. In many ways, the hothouse idea is a setup, a standing invitation to become defensive for Jesus. If truth is on our side, what are we afraid of?

Going in a different direction, let’s entertain the idea of a Christ-centered school as a *wildlife refuge*, a sacred place in which a student can be freed in the truth, not tamed in a tent or lost in the woods. I have long believed that the task of the classroom teacher is essentially pastoral, and that the successful teacher necessarily has a *pastor’s heart*. The following thoughts discuss the teacher’s role as that of pastor, or, even better yet, as a *keeper of the refuge*:

- Providing natural **freedom** within absolute **boundaries**.
- Providing reasonable **safety** within realistic **exposure**.
- Building a **classroom culture**.
- Nurturing **innocent rascals**.
- Teaching so **all may learn**.

Providing Natural Freedom within Absolute Boundaries

Every human being is born a free spirit, a unique individual, an unrepeatable miracle, a hand-made original, complete with the Artist's signature in the form of His image. The teacher needs to honor the Artist's handiwork by cooperating with His purposes for each student:

- Respecting every child, complete with his/her gifts, needs and backgrounds.
- Communicating openly and lovingly through good times and bad.
- Delighting in and understanding each child's unique personality.
- Giving each child permission to be different, creating space for each distinctive personality and intelligence to unfold, express itself, grow into its fullness.

While encouraging each student to develop naturally from within and providing elbowroom for the human spirit within each child, the teacher recognizes that all freedom has its limits. Every refuge has fences, borders which limit the freedom of its wildlife for their own sakes. Within the confines of the classroom, the human wildlife is fenced by the Truth:

- The *Word*, which is God Himself;
- His *First Book*, which is Holy Scripture;
- His *Second Book*, which is Nature.

This true boundary will always remain contemporary, because it is timeless. This fence is always up-to-date, because it is eternal.

Education, then, needs to be primarily *truth-discovery*, truth in word and deed, in thought and action. Each student must come to know that free will does not mean that real life is one huge gray area, where moral choices are merely a matter of private opinion. Instead, students need to recognize public truth, reality with a capital "R", a moral universe, an unchanging structure built without our help, an eternally solid framework in the unseen world, with personal choices, consequences and responsibilities. In rejecting this absolute boundary, modern man has become, as Peter Kreeft has said, masters of truth and servants of time, *instead* of masters of time and servants of truth.

Truth-discovery, then, is not limiting, even though it is rejected as such. Truth does not clip our wings. Rather, the truth sets us free to live out our destiny with a life of passion and whimsy, gusto and fire. To discover truth is to discover a world within a world, where general truths lead to deeper truths that are more subtle yet vital to our spiritual freedom and fruitfulness. To earn truth is, as C.S. Lewis said in his Narnia tales, to go “*further up and further in.*” What a great picture of a Christ-centered education!

The Truth is our soul’s *Emancipation Proclamation*, for it is the only boundary sturdy enough to free us from ourselves. *Rebellious* wildlife escapes the refuge, and limping away, gets hopelessly lost. *Domesticated* wildlife are no better because they lose their punch, their vibrancy, and grazing contentedly, live an empty, pointless life. But wildlife captured by the eternal sureties are wild indeed, and, kicking up their heels, will never leave home. True wildlife will not join those who, in Paul’s frightening words, are “*always learning, but never coming to a knowledge of the truth.*”

The goal of Christ-centered education is not merely *to know* the truth, but to “*practice the truth in love.*” In a world constrained by greed and lust, what could be more liberating than wisdom and goodness? As G.K. Chesterton once said, “*He who has the faith has the fun.*” We were born to be live wires, wild in the truth. The more truth we discover, the more we become our true selves, and the more clearly we can see the Real world, living in harmony with the mysteries of the universe. Only those who dwell in the truth are free to enjoy the comforts of home.

Providing Reasonable Safety within Realistic Exposure

I fear that much of what passes for Christian education has protected our children right out of reality. With good intentions, the lack of exposure has resulted in believers unable to participate in the vision of life destined for us by Jesus, a life in which the salt is able to penetrate the meat of the world and preserve it for Him.

It is a fine line, to be sure, between realistic exposure and overprotection. We need the Eternal Teacher here and always to grant us wisdom. The point is, though, that it is worth it to keep discerning the subtleties, because *the sheltered life cannot truly be a light to the world and a salt of the earth.* What will help us draw the lines? We can begin by asking, in every teaching situation, “Is it true? Is it real? Is it right?” The teacher needs to think out loud, ask these questions with the students, and reflect inwardly on other questions like these: “What is helpful to know now? What needs to wait until a student can more fully process

it? Would this unnecessarily give the student the wrong impression? Is this experience too intense for their emotional maturity level, or will this experience be helpful to their emotional, spiritual and intellectual development? Will this situation or book enable us to teach the student discernment, problem-solving, risk-taking? Will this experience build into the student a sense of adventure, and will it reveal the need for that adventuresome spirit in the fruitful Christian life and faith? Are we only avoiding the inevitable?"

I like to keep in mind these words of Helen Keller when thinking about those kinds of questions: *"Security is mostly a superstition. It does not exist in nature, nor do the children of men experience it. Avoiding danger is no safer in the long run than outright exposure. Life is either a daring adventure or nothing at all."*

The questions above are just starting points. Jacques Ellul has stated the main concern well:

"...Christian education must educate for risk and for danger. We must not shelter the young from the world's dangers, but arm them so they will be able to overcome them. We are talking about arming them not with a legalistic and moralistic breastplate, but with the strength of freedom. We are teaching them not to fight in their own strength, but to ask for the Holy Spirit and to rely on Him. Parents must be willing to allow their children to be placed in danger, knowing that there is no possible education in Christ without the presence of the real dangers of the world, for without danger, Christian education is only a worthless pretty picture which will not help at all when children first meet up with concrete life."

There are two great dangers of a sheltered life: on the one hand, a believer could easily become weak, unreal and irrelevant; on the other hand, a young believer could be inadvertently kept from a true picture of faith in Christ.

Building a Classroom Culture

What is a teacher, anyway? An inspiring mixture of lecturer, coach, discussion leader and nurse? A discerning combination of friend, older sibling and authority figure? How about a guard dog, bellwether and kicker of the sheep all rolled into one? Hmmmmm..

The question being begged here is, what is the teacher's biggest task, the one most important job above all others? It is true that each teacher is obligated to fire the imagination, dispense knowledge, model wisdom, stimulate curiosity, and motivate a group of students to work hard in developing habits of learning and character. Any teacher can probably add to this list. But isn't there one

overarching concern that teachers could look at as they try to gauge their effectiveness? In fact, is there one task that would enable a teacher to succeed in all the ideals mentioned above?

I believe that there is one unifying task, a general plumb line by which to measure success in the classroom. The most important job of a teacher is this: *to build a certain kind of culture*, a mini-society in the classroom, a humane and cooperative culture in which learning is promoted and allowed to flourish.

All teachers soon realize that each classroom develops its own patterns of thought, speech and activity; its own modus operandi and distinctive set of traits, a class personality, peculiar to that group of students and teacher. Each particular classroom culture may be helpful in the learning process, or it may militate against it.

The teacher's noble task is to cultivate (the word from which "culture" derives) the ground in such a way as to make fruitfulness a distinct probability. The teacher, in order to succeed, needs to build the classroom culture in such a way that students are willing to uphold their part of the bargain, to work hard, to accept the responsibility for their learning.

A main ingredient, this culture where intelligence is waiting to happen, is to keep close watch over the delicate balance of freedom and responsibility. As every parent, teacher, coach, minister and youth leader knows, this is a difficult proposition. A healthy classroom culture manages to avoid the two extremes of authority: a teacher's mere swaggering of authority to show who's boss; and the opposite when the students are left to fend for themselves in a classroom empty of intellectual and moral direction and content.

The following are thoughts and opinions, all with the intention of encouraging us to build a classroom culture in which each cooperative student grows, slowly but surely, bearing fruit in due season:

1. **One for all and all for one!** Emphasize group responsibility for each other while still appreciating individual needs and gifts. Nurture a spirit of teamship in the class, the strong sense that they are all in this together, that we are our brother's/sister's keepers. When one student succeeds, everyone celebrates. When one struggles, they all rush to help. When one rebels or disobeys, everyone senses a basic disloyalty to the class. When one obeys or cooperates, everyone knows that class pride has been strengthened. In our ego-driven society, this type of culture will take time and energy.

2. **Start with a vote of confidence.** Most students deeply appreciate the chance to show the teacher that they are worthy of trust. Show them that you have confidence in them at the start. And if they continue to be trustworthy, increase your trust in them in tangible ways. For many students, a wonderful cycle begins: we treat them the way we would like them to be; they strengthen their resolve to please us by being responsible; they thus fulfill our prophecy; they become increasingly trustworthy; we provide more and more privileges and freedoms as they can handle them; and we're off and running.
3. **Privileges are earned, not granted.** At the same time, students need to be shown that a logical consequence of not being trustworthy is to remove certain privileges, or at least not increase freedom. It is important that these consequences are somehow connected to the misdeed, that the punishment fits the crime. Of course, students also need to see that you will never give up on them, that they are freely able to earn their privileges, and that you dearly want them to learn from their mistakes. This is a helpful picture of redemption for them, and a powerful, life-changing lesson that could last a lifetime.
4. **Involve students in classroom management.** A lot of what happens, and when it happens, can just as well be decided by the students. These sorts of things confirm in their minds that you think they have a lot to offer and that you believe them to be worthy of your confidence and trust. While doing this, of course, the teacher must never give up the moral or educational leadership of the classroom.
5. **Think out loud in the classroom.** The students need an example of how to process ideas, decisions, and consequences. They need to talk through, with the teacher in the group context, the reasons why a decision worked well, or why it didn't, or how it can be improved. Teachers need to nonjudgmentally, carefully, logically discuss classroom content during those teachable moments, whether it's before, during or after the fact. Teachers need to provide an example of what it means to have an active mind, risking opinions and asking questions out in the open, searching for wisdom and trust.

Nurturing Innocent Rascals

What is it about *The Little Rascals* that is so appealing to all ages? How have those brief black-and-white films of everyday neighborhood children's misadventures kept their popularity for over forty years?

I think those tales continue to capture our imagination because they fulfill every child's longing to outsmart the world, to outfox life's apparent foxes, with an innocent twinkle in the eye. Children are born with an insatiable curiosity, too, and an eagerness to learn by experience. Haven't we all yearned to explore the mystery of growing up by getting our feet wet? All kids have a natural talent for creative trouble and intrigue. I'm sure you remember that great line from Aunt Polly after reflecting on her life with Tom Sawyer: "*Why Tom might even be President someday, if they don't hang him first*".

If this wonderful spark of innocent wit and thirst for self-made adventure isn't allowed to move children forward, then two things could happen: they might move in reverse, or they'll get stuck in neutral. Jesus seemed to acknowledge the importance of becoming righteous rascals when he instructed us to be "*clever as serpents and innocent as doves*." In other words, if our innate knavery doesn't find a positive outlet, it will often seek the lowest level and locate a negative one. Either we will learn to innocently outthink life's challenges, or we'll foolishly hoodwink situations as they come down the pike. Actually, the third option is probably worst of all, which is that we'll be a lifeless mush-brain and, essentially, a waste of space. At any rate, all of us either add light cleverly to the world, and thereby "*serve God wittily*" (as Thomas More said), or we'll increase the darkness through deception, sloth or ignorance. When virtue is impeded, vice has its way.

Calvin and Hobbes discussed a similar idea in a recent cartoon. Calvin is about to "paste Susie's pate with a slushball," when his imaginary friend Hobbes offers this insight: "Some philosophers say that true happiness comes from a life of virtue." This succeeds in stopping Calvin dead in his tracks. Calvin proceeds to drop the slushball, go inside to clean his room, do his homework, write a love note to mom, shovel the walk outside for dad, set the dinner table, and take out the garbage. He walks away quite self-satisfied, then stops and thinks about it all. After a moment of soul-searching, Calvin rushes outside again to throw a snowball directly into the back of Susie's head. After this deed is done, Calvin laughs maniacally and tells Hobbes, "Someday I'll write my own philosophy book." The final word comes from Hobbes as they walk off: "Virtue needs some cheaper thrills."

My questions are these: How can we educators provide healthy outlets for a child's clever resourcefulness, instead of, for the sake of convenience and discipline, extinguish that important human impulse? Are we working hard to find some "cheaper thrills" opportunities to practice an innocent roguery? Or do we instead invite rebellion and naïveté in our pursuit of order and control? It's this simple: Christian schools need to produce street-smart, resourceful, adventuresome risk-takers, not naïve, fearful, indecisive killjoys.

Teaching so All May Learn

In many respects, traditional education continues to make the same mistake in the classroom. Without meaning to, too many educators do not give their students *permission to be different*. Natural difference among individual students includes not only the personality and background, but also the unique way each student thinks, acts, and approaches the whole learning experience. If we aren't careful, we can easily fall into the same trap: providing rich literature and art and thought, and then allowing only a few of the students to truly feed on it.

In his book *Frames of Mind*, Howard Garner, of Harvard University, has identified seven intelligences inherent with each student: *logical-mathematical, linguistic, musical, spatial-visual, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal, and intrapersonal*. Each of these intelligences is relatively independent of the others and distinct from each other. In each child these seven are uniquely developed to different degrees. Sometimes one mode of thinking is primary and highly developed, and the other modes are practically nonexistent. With other children, several modes might be developed, with no particular one to a very high degree.

Each student has a singular blend of these seven (probably there are more) intelligences, which means that each child in a classroom best learns in a uniquely gifted way. Most traditional educators focus heavily on the logical and linguistic, and essentially leave the others out in the cold. The ideal learning experience will involve a balanced blend of these different approaches to learning, not only so each can reach the content, but also to enable each intelligence of a student to be strengthened and developed.

These different intelligences, or ways of thinking, tend to cluster around three main learning styles: *auditory* (about 20% of the students), *visual* (about 45%), and *kinesthetic* (about 35%). Even though students have their own unique combination of these three styles, each child will learn best in one particular style. The auditory student learns best through *what they hear* and then translate logically; the visual student understands best through *what they see* and grasp pictorially; and the kinesthetic student will process content most effectively *through touch* and physical movement. All three types of learners are "smart," they merely learn in different ways. All our lesson plans, then, as well as our methods of assessment, need to include all three learning styles if we desire each child to learn in the classroom. The danger for each of us is to teach in the style we learn, rather than the way *each child* learns.

I believe that only the multi-sensory, integrated, interdisciplinary curriculum and approach will be sufficient to this task. For example, those students leaning toward the *logical and linguistic* side usually need a constant challenge to be

creative risk-takers, to go without closure occasionally, and to deal with structural ambiguity. The students developing in the *other modes* tend to require ongoing demands toward academic excellence, task commitment, and project completion. To work the right magic, we need a big bag of tricks.

By approaching the class content from all these different angles, there will be something for everyone, and every student will have an opportunity to succeed and learn. By varying our teaching methods and styles and assessments, we in effect are giving permission for each one-of-a-kind prize package to *remain* a one-of-a-kind. Only then will we teach a way in which all can learn.