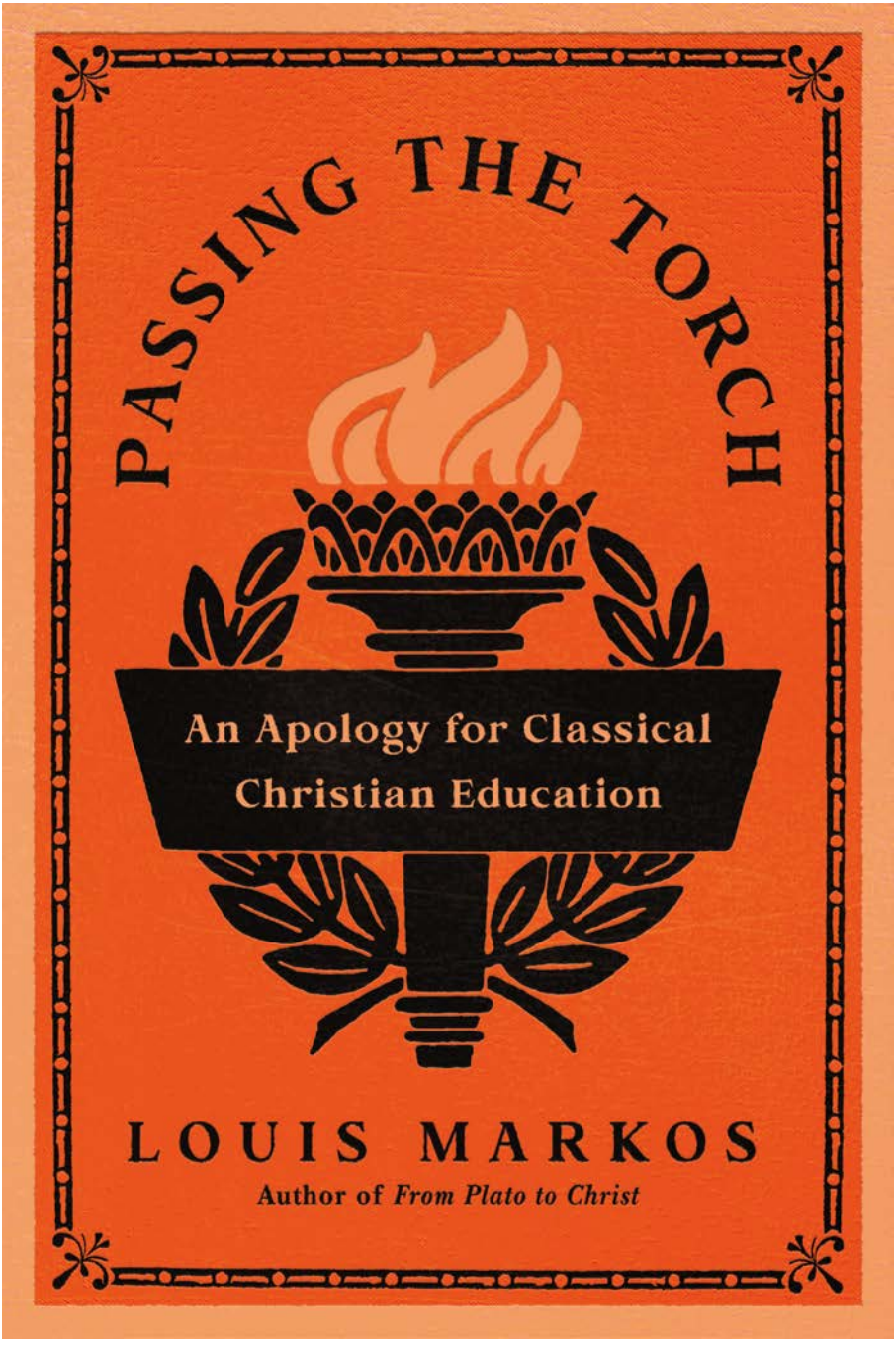

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ONE

LIBERAL ARTS VERSUS VOCATIONAL

What kind of education, we are now ready to ask, is fitting for volitional, incarnational beings who possess innate, essential worth but are inherently rebellious and disobedient, who build and create, and whose better angels impel them to form communities and practice virtue? We are, as I attempted to show in my introduction, creatures who struggle within ourselves, against nature, and against our fellow man. Our capacity for nobility, kindness, integrity, and self-sacrifice is matched only by our proclivity for depravity, cruelty, deceit, and selfishness. How is one to educate so strange and contradictory a creature?

As far back as the golden age of Athens, the birthplace of humanism in the West, the answer to that question has been clear: by means of a liberal arts education that frees ("liberates") the mind from the idols of the agora (the marketplace) and equips it to think critically, contemplate creatively, and act virtuously. Such an education was initially reserved for the aristocratic children of the wealthy; tradesmen, servants, and slaves, in contrast, would receive a servile education whose purpose was merely to teach a skill: *technē* in Greek, from which we get our words *technique* and *technology*.

There is, of course, nothing wrong with learning a trade; vocational schools have always performed an important function in society,

ensuring that the skills necessary for the survival of the community are preserved. Vocational education, however, does not address the whole person; it concerns itself with neither shaping the mind nor molding the character. Vocational education is functional rather than formative; it trains the body without transforming the soul. As such, it does not provide the kind of holistic paideia that a society needs if it is to pass down its culture to the next generation.

Built on the same Greek root (*pais*, *paidos*, "child") from which we get our words *pedagogy* and *pediatrics*, *paideia* means "education," but in a much fuller sense than we typically ascribe to the word. In addition to meaning "training," "instruction," and "discipline," *paideia* connotes "rearing," "fostering," "nurturing," "breeding," and "cultivating." Paideia was the process by which the proper virtues of wisdom, courage, justice, and self-control were instilled in aristocratic children via an education in such "liberal" subjects as grammar, logic, rhetoric, math, philosophy, music, and gymnastics.

In the Roman period, Cicero used the Latin word *humanitas* to describe this process of rearing just and philanthropic citizens through, in part, a study of classical literature, art, and philosophy. From *humanitas* we get the words and concepts *humanity* (the quality possessed by people who behave in a benevolent and civilized manner) and *humanities* (the core liberal arts disciplines that shape and form virtuous citizens).

In the New Testament, paideia connotes the process of nurture, instruction, and discipline by which Christians are formed in the image of Christ:

> And, ye fathers, provoke not your children to wrath: but bring them up in the nurture [*paideia*] and admonition of the Lord. (Ephesians 6:4)

> All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction [*paideia*] in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works. (2 Timothy 3:16-17)

> Now no chastening [*paideia*] for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby. (Hebrews 12:11)

For Greek, Roman, and Christian alike, man's dual nature makes paideia a necessity as well as a possibility: for we are creatures for whom discipline is as compulsory as it is profitable. It may not seem pleasant at the time, but its rewards are great, leading the pupil—which is what *disciple* means in Greek—into righteous living by drawing him into relationship with divine standards of Goodness, Truth, and Beauty (Greco-Roman) or a personal God who is himself Goodness, Truth, and Beauty (Judeo-Christian).

Throughout most of human history, only the elite had the resources and the leisure to pursue a liberal arts education. In America, that is no longer the case, at least on the precollegiate level. Granted, not everyone can or should get a four-year liberal arts college degree, particularly between the ages of eighteen and twenty-one, but there is no reason why all American students cannot receive at least a partially liberal arts paideia in grade school, middle school, and high school. Once they graduate from twelfth grade, many young people will choose to go directly into the workforce or to a vocational school. I am in no way opposed to that.

But we are a rich nation with vast resources, and there is no reason why the classical Christian vision I will be discussing and defending in this chapter and those that follow cannot be implemented, in whole or in part, in public schools across the nation. We live in a democracy, not a monarchy or aristocracy; that is why it is vital that all future citizens be given the opportunity to wrestle with the great ideas that shaped our cultural, political, economic, and social systems. Although it is possible for the elite class of a nation to preserve most of its cultural riches, in a democracy of (at least theoretically) equal citizens, the passing down of culture is best effected by a broad base of citizens who are invested in its preservation.

I am aware that many today maintain that it is unfair, inegalitarian, and ethnocentric to expect students with Asian, African, and Latin American backgrounds to be expected to immerse themselves in the civilization and culture of the West, and I can sympathize with their concerns. But it must not be forgotten that the American system that has drawn people from all over the world to our shores is the product of a serendipitous crossing of the Greco-Roman and the Judeo-Christian. Our country has been greatly enriched by the immigrants who have flocked here from every corner of the globe—all four of my grandparents emigrated here from Greece around 1930—but the bedrock ideals of freedom and democracy, equality of dignity and opportunity, private property and social responsibility, individual initiative and communal sacrifice are gifts of our tradition that have made it possible to assimilate so many different cultures and religions into our body politic.

That does not mean, of course, that people cannot or should not retain their ethnic identity. I proudly consider myself a Greek American, even though my family has been in this country for almost a century. As an American, I have learned, respect, and abide by the traditions on which this country was founded. As a Greek, which identity complements and enriches my primary identity as an American, I keep alive as best I can the ethnic traditions of my immigrant grandparents. I believe that dual identity has strengthened me, as I believe it has the many Honduran American, Indian American, Vietnamese American, Nigerian American, and Filipino American students I teach each semester. Indeed, when I conduct my master of fine arts students through the Greco-Roman myths and biblical stories that have inspired and influenced art in the West, I encourage my dual identity students to integrate their ethnic background into their artwork. Over the years, I have had Mexican American artists fuse a Greek myth with a Mayan myth to produce a highly original painting, Iranian American artists contrast biblical and qur'anic

stories to create a dialogical work of art, and Chinese American artists refract Eastern folk tales through the lens of Western myth. There is much value in encouraging dual identity students to study their own ethnic heritage, but that should not be the primary or central role of classical Christian education.

I am also aware that many readers of this book will be concerned that I am advocating for the proselytizing of Christianity in our public schools. I am not. Public schools are not the proper arena for the sharing of the gospel of Christ; that is the work of churches and of private Christian schools. However, those aspects of Christianity that are foundational to the worldview on which our civilization rests—the history of Israel and the church; the essential dignity and essential depravity of man; our dual, enfleshed-soul nature; the ethical teachings of Moses and Jesus; transcendent notions of goodness, truth, and beauty; the reality of purpose, design, and meaning—form a legacy that must be passed down in our schools if we hope to preserve the ideals and freedoms our nation cherishes and, when we are worthy of ourselves, shares.

By no means have we lived up to all the ideals and freedoms championed in our tradition, but that is why we must continue to wrestle with the founding documents, people, and events that have shaped the soul of our nation. I will have more to say on these matters in chapters to come. For now, I return to my discussion of the meaning and history of paideia in the West.

Though the concept of paideia has long been known by defenders of the liberal arts, it was given prominence on the eve of World War II, when the first volume of German classicist Werner Jaeger's *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture* was published (1939, with volumes 2 and 3 following in 1943 and 1944). Jaeger's exhaustively researched trilogy definitively identified the ancient Greeks as the founders of paideia, of a system for passing the torch of culture to their children and grandchildren.

Beginning with Homer in the eighth century BC and reaching its zenith in the fifth-century teachings of Socrates and the fourth-century writings of his star pupil, Plato, the goal of paideia was to form and mold the next generation of gentlemen-knights (in its aristocratic form) or citizens (in its democratic form) in accordance with universal patterns and ideals. Its focus was simultaneously on the individual and the community. The worth of each student was acknowledged and upheld, but the goal of paideia was not to make that student into an autonomous individual who cared only for his own pleasure and advancement but into an active and virtuous member of the *polis*.

One of the foundations of the Greek paideia was the study of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Modern readers might find it difficult to understand how virtuous citizens could be shaped by a close reading of Homer's epics, but that is because we have artificially separated the aesthetic from the ethical. Homer offers something far greater than a pretty poem; he delves into and then wrestles with the very spirit of man. Poetry, Jaeger explains, "cannot be really educative unless it is rooted in the depths of the human soul, unless it embodies a moral belief, a high ardour of the spirit, a broad and compelling ideal of humanity. And the greatest of Greek poetry does more than show a cross-section of life taken at random. It tells the truth; but it chooses and presents its truth in accordance with a definite ideal."[1]

For the Athenian democracy, that ideal was embodied in the law; for Plato, in the Forms. Homer, the fountainhead of paideia, found his (aristocratic) ideal in the person of the hero: a view that was revisited by Aristotle—whose standard of virtue was not Plato's abstract Form of Virtue but a flesh-and-blood virtuous man—and the New Testament writers, who held up the incarnate Christ himself as the

[1]Werner Jaeger, *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture*, 2nd ed., trans. Gilbert Highet (New York: Oxford University Press, 1945), 1:36.

ideal. All understood that true paideia does not and cannot thrive in a virtue-free, morally relative vacuum; a fixed standard grounded in truth must exist, or there will be nothing against which to measure the goal and the quality of the instruction.

Jaeger points to two places (one in the *Iliad*, one in the *Odyssey*) where a young man of about nineteen years (Achilles; Telemachus) is challenged by a teacher figure (his tutor Phoenix; Athena in the guise of a mortal man) to heed the example of a hero. In the former case, Achilles refuses to be guided, and it leads to his destruction. In the latter, Telemachus accepts and abides by the touchstone held up before him, and he is victorious. Whereas Achilles will not allow himself to be shaped and formed by the paideia of Phoenix, Telemachus eagerly embraces the process.

Achilles's moment of testing comes in book nine of the *Iliad*. Several days earlier, he pulled out of the Trojan War because Agamemnon stole his war prize. But now the tide of war has turned against the Greeks, and Agamemnon is forced to offer innumerable war prizes to convince Achilles to put on his armor and fight. Along with the ransom, Agamemnon sends Odysseus, Ajax, and Phoenix to convince Achilles to accept it and return. When Achilles rejects the more-than-generous offer, Phoenix attempts to instruct him by way of a story of a hero from the past generation: a pure, Achilles-like warrior named Meleager.

Meleager, like Achilles, lived for the battlefield, but when he felt dishonored by his leaders, he pulled out of the fighting. Knowing they could not win without Meleager's strong right arm, the leaders of his people offered him countless war prizes if he would return. Although he refused the offer, the sounds of battle around his camp eventually stirred his blood and forced him to return. But Meleager had delayed for too long, and those who had offered the gifts would no longer make good on their promise. As a result, Meleager, though he saved

his people, was robbed of the honor the war prizes would have given him.

The lesson Phoenix attempts to teach Achilles is grounded in the cultural understanding that soldiers fight for war prizes: not because they are materialistic in the modern sense of the word but because war prizes signify honor, and they are all, Greek and Trojan alike, driven to gain as much honor as they can before death takes them. Since Achilles knows from his immortal mother, Thetis, that he is destined to live a short but glorious life, it is even more vital that he accumulate as many prizes as his brief years will allow him.

But Achilles will not be persuaded by the paideia of his tutor. Some of his reasons for refusing to accept the prizes and return are, from a Christian point of view, admirable. Achilles wonders aloud whether honor is such an important thing: perhaps honor is an internal gift shared alike by the coward and the brave man; perhaps our value cannot be counted in gold and weapons and concubines but is something we possess merely because we are alive. Admirable ideas, indeed, ones that will someday reform the world, but Achilles is not listening carefully enough to his tutor. It is not that we can never have new ideas or that society can never change, but that, being the kinds of creatures we are, we must hold in tenuous balance the dreams of the individual and the needs of the community, the passions of the heart and the demands of the moment, high ideals and earthly realities, the desire to build and the duty to preserve.

Christians ask, "What would Jesus do?" Achilles would have done well to follow the lead of the wise Phoenix and ask, "What would Meleager do?" Or, in this case, "What *should* Meleager have done?" One must not simply throw off one's culture and traditions. Paideia teaches us our possibilities and our limits, the superhuman greatness to which we can aspire and the tragic folly into which we can fall. Rather than fulfill his proper role and use the gifts he was given to defend the Greeks, Achilles allows his best friend Patroclus to fight in

his place. When Patroclus is killed, Achilles reacts by rejecting utterly his noble ideas of intrinsic human value and embracing instead a nihilistic ethic of revenge and despair.

In the end, he finds some balance and reconciles with King Priam, the father of his friend's killer, but he knows he has made a mess of things and that his own death will soon follow. To cast off the paideia of one's culture is to remove oneself from the vine that nourishes, the circle that protects, and the template that gives shape.

In contrast, Telemachus, the untested son of Odysseus, profits by the paideia offered him by Athena. Disguised as a mortal man named Mentor—the origin of our word—Athena gently but firmly mentors Telemachus as he transitions from a timid boy who dreams that his father will return and set things to right into a confident young man who understands and accepts his role in his family, his culture, and his troubled island kingdom of Ithaca. Over the course of *Odyssey* 1-4, Athena-Mentor guides Telemachus into embracing his full duty and identity. Her chief method for doing so is holding up before the eager eyes of Telemachus a role model who, like himself, is the son of a famous Trojan War hero to whom fate has been unkind.

The name of that role model is Orestes, son of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra. Seven years after his father is treacherously killed by his wife's lover, Orestes returns to his father's house and exacts revenge on the usurper. Athena challenges Telemachus to live up to the courage, loyalty, and determination of Orestes, no matter the cost to himself. Though Homer would have been aware of a darker version of the myth, in which Clytemnestra kills her husband and Orestes kills his mother, he wisely leaves out those taboo crimes so as to provide an ethical paideia within the bounds of traditional moral standards. Athena could hardly have held up a matricide as a role model for Telemachus, whatever the strength and gravity of Orestes's motives.

The Orestes of Homer is a hero, for he risks all to save his *oikos*: the Greek word for a household that functions not merely as a dwelling for a single nuclear family but as an economic and political unit. Orestes recognizes his role within the *oikos* once led by his father and does what he must to restore it to its original state. Telemachus has never seen his *oikos* in its proper working form, but he trusts the paideia of Athena and the role model she offers him. He receives the story Athena tells him about Orestes as a standard of proper filial duty and courage against which he can test and measure his own decisions and actions.

To reinforce the story and its hero–role model, Athena then sends Telemachus on a journey to the restored households of two Trojan War heroes, Nestor and Menelaus, who knew and fought alongside the father whom Telemachus himself has never known. By so doing, she offers her pupil a liberal arts education—exposing him to the great tales, deeds, and figures of the past and exhorting him to live up to their legacy.

Writing in the first century BC, the great Roman historian Livy offers a similar rationale for why a culture must study its past. In the introduction to his epic, 142-book history of the Roman Republic, Livy explains with admirable precision the essence and purpose of a liberal arts education grounded in man's dignity and depravity and his moral nature: "The study of history is the best medicine for a sick mind; for in history you have a record of the infinite variety of human experience plainly set out for all to see; and in that record you can find for yourself and your country both examples and warnings; fine things to take as models, base things, rotten through and through, to avoid."[2]

Telemachus imitates the good example of Orestes and matures into a pillar of his civilization; Achilles ignores the bad example of Meleager and comes close to tearing down the foundations of his own.

[2]Livy, *The Early History of Rome*, trans. Aubrey de Sélincourt (New York: Penguin, 1971), 34.

Fast-forward eight centuries to the golden age of Athens, where the paideia of Phoenix and Athena-Mentor took on new forms while retaining the same basic function. Sophocles, the playwright of *Oedipus* and *Antigone*, dramatized myths that predated the Trojan War as a vehicle for compelling his fellow Athenians to wrestle with ideas and issues that were more relevant to the fifth century than the thirteenth. Pericles, Athens's greatest statesman, guided those same Athenians to be involved, loyal members of the *polis*. Phidias, the artist who carved the statues of Athena in Athens and Zeus in Olympia, shaped ivory, gold, and marble into objects of timeless beauty.

All three, Jaeger explains, used their specific paideia to sculpt the soul of the citizens of Athens the way gymnastics sculpts the body. Both Sophocles and Phidias pierced through the surface to reveal the deeper, essential spirit of man. There is a strange serenity and equanimity that gazes at us through the heroic characters of Sophocles and the noble statues of Phidias. In both, we catch a glimpse of the true nature and mission of paideia: culture deliberately guiding and forming human character in harmony with an ideal sense of balance and proportion. Meanwhile, in Pericles, as in Sophocles, we encounter the true gentleman-citizen of the golden age who possessed a kind of urbanity and inner peace one rarely sees elsewhere.

Pericles believed firmly that the laws of Athens played the role of tutor to her citizens, a political paideia that shaped the soul of the *polis*. He says as much in the famous funeral oration he gave in 431 BC, after the first year of the Peloponnesian War, a speech on which Lincoln closely modeled his Gettysburg Address:

> Let me say that our system of government does not copy the institutions of our neighbours. It is more the case of our being a model to others, than of our imitating anyone else. Our constitution is called a democracy because power is in the hands not of a minority but of the whole people. When it is a question of settling private disputes, everyone is equal before the law: when it is a question of putting one person before another in positions of public

> responsibility, what counts is not membership of a particular class, but the actual ability which the man possesses. . . . We are free and tolerant in our private lives; but in public affairs we keep to the law. This is because it commands our deep respect. We give our obedience to those whom we put in positions of authority, and we obey the laws themselves, especially those which are for the protection of the oppressed, and those unwritten laws which it is an acknowledged shame to break.[3]

At the core of Greek cultural and political paideia lay the belief that freedom and obedience, private autonomy and public duty, proper pride and proper shame were not at odds. Democracy does not mean a relativistic free-for-all but a deep respect for the law and a tolerance for others who hold themselves to the same laws.

In the paideia of Pericles, as in those of Sophocles and Phidias, a concerted attempt is made to shape and form man as he ought to be. In sharp contrast to the finally antihumanistic project of the modern utopian progressive, who seeks to remake man in his own image, the Greeks sought to mold their citizens in accordance with objective, transcendent standards of goodness, truth, and beauty. The Greeks first discerned those standards in the ordered structure and design of the cosmos and then later applied them to the agora, the law court, the theater, the workshop, and the schoolroom. The golden age architects of the Greek paideia, Jaeger explains, did not see the human soul "as a chaotic flow of inner experience, but subjected it to a system of laws, as the only realm of being which had not yet incorporated the ideal of cosmos. Like the body, the soul obviously had rhythm and harmony."[4]

Even the Sophists, who were cultural relativists and tended toward materialism, recognized the connection between the design in the cosmos and the design in the soul. They knew that there could be no properly working *polis* or system of punishment and reward if

[3]Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, trans. Rex Warner (London: Penguin, 1972), 145.
[4]Jaeger, *Paideia*, 279.

citizens were not able to be educated in virtue and so be empowered to choose or reject that which was noble and good. That could only be accomplished by passing down the treasure of their culture to the next generation.

Indeed, Jaeger gives the Sophists a central role to play in making the Greeks conscious of their culture and their need to pass it down:

> Originally the concept paideia had applied only to the process of education. Now [under the tutelage of the Sophists] its significance grew to include the objective side, the content of paideia—just as our word *culture* or the Latin *cultura*, having once meant the *process* of education, came to mean the *state* of being educated; and then the *content* of education, and finally the whole *intellectual and spiritual world* revealed by education, into which any individual, according to his nationality or social position, is born. The historical process by which the world of culture is built up culminates when the ideal of culture is consciously formulated. Accordingly it was perfectly natural for the Greeks in and after the fourth century, when the concept finally crystallized, to use the word *paideia*—in English, *culture*—to describe all the artistic forms and the intellectual and aesthetic achievements of their race, in fact the whole content of their tradition.[5]

Though Jaeger does not use the phrase "liberal arts" in this passage, the way he describes culture and paideia provides a perfect gloss of the methods ("the process of education"), goals ("the state of being educated"), tools ("the content of education"), and ethos ("the intellectual and spiritual world") of a classical liberal arts education.

Such an education should be national rather than global, committed to training up students in "all the artistic forms and the intellectual and aesthetic achievements of their race." It should uphold and instill truths that are universal and that have relevance to all cultures at all times; nevertheless, it must be grounded in the traditions, sacred and secular, of a people. It should promote *our* heritage, but in such a way that that heritage embodies and illuminates the struggles of all humanity.

[5]Jaeger, *Paideia*, 303.

When I say "our," I mean the common heritage that all immigrants, including my grandparents, agreed to be a part of when they came to America. That agreement does not mean the forfeiting of one's native culture or religion, but it does mean a willingness to abide by the laws of our nation and to study, understand, and respect the traditions out of which those laws arose and on which they were built. Indeed, a citizen, whatever his place of origin, who does not study, understand, and respect those traditions will be prevented from participating fully in the ongoing experiment that is our democratic republic: what Lincoln, in his Pericles-inspired speech, called "government of the people, by the people, for the people."

But what are the parameters of that tradition? On what list of canonical works does it rest? And how can such works form the backbone of a liberal arts education that would do justice to the full and essential nature of man?

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