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**Childhood is the embodied practice of adulthood.  
The adult will know what the child experienced.**

*Three essays on teaching our children to joyfully inquire and reason, draw upon the comfort of stories and tradition, and practice the principles of intellectual hospitality, so that one day they may create their own community for eudaimonia, or, human flourishing.*

### 3. Hospitality: Creating Community in the Classroom

#### *A Tool for Coping with Anxiety*

Childhood can be described in many ways; “a highly anxious time” shouldn’t be one of them. A chat with most parents, or a quick glance through parenting magazines and pediatric medicine websites, show anxiety characterized as steadily on the rise among school children in America. What can we, as educators who care deeply about our students’ wellbeing, do to equip them to cope with the causes of anxiety? (Because no matter what consumerism tells us, a spa day will not actually resolve deep, existential angst.)

In the *Conversation* and *Narratives* essays I addressed the pedagogical practices of Inquiry and Narration and how each leads students to develop sound, logical thinking in pursuit of the truth. Now, in *Hospitality*, I will shift to the application of community-based reason-making in order to resolve an epistemological crisis. While it may not appear clear how hospitality can resolve a crisis in which we question what we know and how we know it, I will show that this framework is a meaningful and long-lasting method for creating order from chaos, especially when that chaos is inflicted by our own community. Ultimately, practice in the application of hospitality may be the single greatest gift of a classical education.

#### *MacIntyre, Kuhn and Cary*

In *The Tasks of Philosophy*, Alasdair MacIntyre entitled Chapter 1: “Epistemological crises, dramatic narrative, and the philosophy of science”. In other words, here’s the role of the stories we tell ourselves to develop an understanding of the world when we suddenly realize we thought we knew but, in fact, we don’t know after all.

MacIntyre defines an epistemological crisis as when an individual, “recognize[s] the possibility of systematically different possibilities of interpretation, of the existence of alternative and rival schemata which yield mutually incompatible accounts of what is going on around him” (Tasks 4). Or, as MacIntyre goes on to illustrate, this time using the story of Hamlet, it is when he has, “too many schemata available” and thus the “problem of which schema to apply” or, “whom now to believe?” (Tasks 4). Hamlet’s problem of having too many choices, and not knowing whom to believe to help him make a decision between those choices, is familiar to us today. We live in a culture affected first by deconstruction—subdivide every topic into many,

many iterations, hence creating almost infinite versions. And second, by relativism—no one version is better than another, do whatever feels right to you. At the heart of this crisis is the loss of expertise. Devaluing traditional understandings of human flourishing, and the leaders who keep us connected to those traditions, has unmoored us. As MacIntyre puts it, “...an epistemological crisis is always a crisis in human relationships” (Tasks 5).

MacIntyre believes the solution to our adrift and disconnected culture is new narratives that employ new learning and understanding in order to explain anomalies in our old paradigms. Instead of rejecting old narratives for their flaws, he advocates embracing both the old and the new and using them in a complementary fashion to maintain an overarching tradition. He says, “The criterion of a successful theory is that it enables us to understand its predecessors in a newly intelligible way” (Tasks 11). We should view old scientific ideas, for example, not as errant but as responding to the questions of their time. There is no need to wholly reject a previous theory now proven to be inaccurate (and send ourselves into an anxious spiral questioning whether any theory of today can be trusted or if it, too, will soon be debunked). Instead, we can look over the span of scientific development and see each theory as a product of its time contributing to our continual growth in understanding. Rather than becoming distressed by crises of understanding that occurred in the past, we should embrace them as important moments in the larger narrative of how we got where we are today. For example, while we may see anomalies in Newton’s theories today, it is still important to acknowledge that without Newton we couldn’t have gotten to Einstein. In MacIntyre’s words:

What some, at least, of those who have been educated into such a tradition may come to recognize is the gap between its own epistemological ideals and its actual practices. ... What the scientific genius, such as Galileo, achieves in his transition, is by contrast not only a new way of understanding nature, but also and inseparably a new way of understanding the old science’s way of understanding nature. It is because only from the standpoint of the new science can the inadequacy of the old science be characterized that the new science is taken to be more adequate than the old. It is from the standpoint of the new science that the continuities of narrative history are reestablished (Tasks 18).

In essence, it is important not to deny that epistemological crises have occurred and will occur again. Rather, it is beneficial to acknowledge that conflict—between both ideas and people—will repeatedly occur. These crises are not a problem but rather an opportunity, for only through acknowledging these inevitable difficulties will we be able to prepare our children to cope with them. Some conservative thinkers, such as Burke, wish to avoid conflict by relying solely on tradition, that is, old ways of seeing the world and operating within it. “Not reason, but prejudice, not revolution, but inherited precedent, these are Burke’s key oppositions” (Tasks 12). They see paradigm shifts that occur as a result of an epistemological crisis as irrational, and instead cling to the idea of a neutral ground that can act as a perpetual buffer between conflicting traditions thereby denying the need to ever interact directly with contradictory views.

MacIntyre, agreeing with Thomas Kuhn in his book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, says that paradigm shifts are, in fact, completely rational. Furthermore, the principle of “incommensurability” denies the rational existence of a true neutral ground (Tasks 16). In *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* MacIntyre calls, instead, for one tradition to invite other traditions to engage in dialogue. He says, “There is no standing ground, no place for enquiry, no way to engage in the practices of advancing, evaluating, accepting, and rejecting reasoned argument *apart from that which is provided by some particular tradition or other* [italics mine]” (Whose Justice 350).

Is it possible, though, in this age where knee-jerk cries of intolerance have created a swift and devastating cancel culture, for leaders within one tradition to engage in meaningful dialogue with leaders of another? Only if they do so carefully and with clearly articulated rules of decorum. Dr. Phillip Cary describes a method for bringing order to chaos through communal meaning-making in his article, “How Can We Know? Co-creating Knowledge in Perilous Times”. He describes this concept as:

...a kind of hospitality, where members of one tradition welcome others onto their home turf, making them feel at home in alien territory where they do not have power but will still be heard. In the practice of hospitality, members of rival traditions can learn one another’s thinking the way one learns to become fluent in a foreign language. This is always possible, for the simple and inescapable reason that traditions, like languages are *learned*. There is no *a priori* reason why someone cannot learn to participate in a new tradition the way they learn to speak a new language. When that happens, a member of one tradition comes to understand another tradition like a native speaker, and it becomes possible to resolve conflicts between rival traditions in a way that does not inevitably come down to a contest of power. This means irrationality is not inevitable, for even when incommensurable traditions come into conflict, it is possible to learn the truth by honest reasoning (Cary 2017).

In essence, this form of intellectual hospitality does not say we should avoid conflict, but rather that the only way to resolve it is for one tradition to invite the other into a shared conversation and each learn to speak the other’s language, that is, come to understand the ideas of the other.

Intellectual hospitality resolves anxieties brought about by deconstructivist and relativist thinking because it is the opposite of both. Whereas hospitality functions within boundaries via self-control, deconstructionism, by perpetually subdividing into ever more options, effectively removes all boundaries. Hospitality, a conservative practice, respects the boundaries of tradition and expertise while relativism says there are no experts and everyone can choose their own truth.

The conflict-avoidant among us may still pine for a fictitious neutral ground. To help them understand why we should embrace conflict that brings growth, we can turn to the Aristotelian Notion of Process that says that the pursuit of human flourishing is ongoing. We are

forever working towards our *telos*, our end purpose, while understanding that we may never reach it. But, as long as we are in pursuit of the Truth the conflicts or crises or shifts we experience along the way are not in vain; but rather, they serve the greater purpose of aiding in our pursuit of, and formation toward, the ideal.

Another benefit to the principle of intellectual hospitality is that its rules for decorum address power differentials when a minority is in conflict with the majority. Culture war conflicts, where we are most likely to see this minority/majority differential, can dissolve into inarticulate actions described by Cary as “performative rage” if the minority feels unheard. Where this is a factor, hospitality places the participants in clearly defined Guest and Host roles that preclude cruelty or indifference on either part. The boundaries of decorum, far from being oppressive, facilitate a path to resolution. To quote Cary again, this time from prepared remarks for a radio interview with Tony Campolo on postmodernism: “You welcome your guests, precisely in their otherness and strangeness, because you’re interested in how they’re different from you and want to learn who they are and how they think. And precisely because it’s your home turf, you have to make a special point of treating them not just fairly but honorably and graciously” (Cary 2016).

In the classical classroom, hospitality should be a habit. From navigating conflict on the playground to learning a foreign language, students who have practiced facing the unknown with composure and a plan for structuring new information, will be better equipped to cope with their own, inevitable, epistemological crisis one day without drifting, rudderless, onto the rocky shoals of anxiety.

### *The Grand Conclusion*

I prefaced this collection of essays with this thought: “Childhood is the embodied practice of adulthood. The adult will know what the child experienced.” By this I mean that young children learn abstract concepts through experience first. Long before they can define love, they have known it. Educators are wise to intentionally use the early years as a time to practice the best of all that humans can offer each other.

All children begin life asking questions. It is important to preserve that innate desire and shepherd it along as a way of confirming for each student that they have the intelligence and capacity to do hard things.

All children love stories. Narratives that illuminate truth, either in descriptive or literary form, are powerful tools for sinking an orderly understanding of ideas deep into a child’s mind and soul.

All children love play. Acts of hospitality that appear as trivial as hosting an imaginary tea party are, in reality, foundational experiences for creating a space for dialogue and empathy.

Let’s seek to give our students a truly liberating education, an education in which students joyfully employ the tools of inquiry and reason, draw from the comfort of stories and tradition, and practice the principles of hospitality so that one day they may be fully equipped to create their own community dedicated to human flourishing.

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