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OPINION

# Louise Cowan: What's so great about teachers?



By [dallasnews Administrator](#)

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We think so much about teachers at the Dallas Institute and smart so keenly at the injustices done to them that we have to avoid becoming like mad old King Lear, who attributes every wrong in his world — including thunderstorms — to the ingratitude of daughters. Or like the monomaniac Ahab in *Moby-Dick*, who steers the Pequod away from its course in pursuit of the white whale, piling on the creature the evils of human suffering.

Indeed, we are so greatly and, I might say, justifiably aware of the indignities done to teachers today that we are likely to overdo it — assigning to them not just their rightful share but *all* the benevolent qualities in the relationship between generations. And this, we must admit, is a slight exaggeration. For certainly we have to acknowledge the instruction given by parents and others in the art of just being human. Ordinary people teach others in all sorts of ways.

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But though such mentors may instruct, they are not *teachers*, dedicated persons who profess as their lifework the twofold task of forming the young for their own sake and, even more important, for society's. Teachers are instructing the young not primarily to enable them to succeed in life but to preserve and extend the valuable parts of civilization.

But why do teachers generally need to undertake this task? Why don't we leave education of the young to their own biological connections? Birds do it; dogs do it; why shouldn't we do it? The answer, of course, is that on the most basic level we do. But just as putting a Band-Aid on someone's injured finger doesn't make one a doctor, so giving direction in the normal skills and activities of daily living doesn't make one a teacher. Schools have a unique purpose — the formation of citizens who are knowledgeable and wise enough to govern themselves.

And this is one of the things wrong with our educational philosophy. We've made teaching more like behavioral instruction (like the training of young animals) than the drawing out of noble aspects in rational and imaginative beings. We've neglected the elevating metaphors — those bundles of symbolic content revealing nobility that would otherwise remain hidden. We have become almost completely fact- and skill-centered, and our incessant testing is only one evidence of such reduction.

A teacher is not really needed for the mastery of facts and skills. To gain this sort of information something simply has to capture a student's attention long enough for bits of data to sink in. A film, a cellphone, a game, an iPad — these are adequate vehicles for the acquisition of information

and skills. And for almost a century now we have increasingly reduced education to this sort of robotic learning and are beginning, in all areas of our national life, to face the consequences. For facts are mere information, and skills are mere habits of behavior. Neither is necessarily related to principles and virtues needing to be instilled in our young if democracy is to survive.

Sometime last century, we started substituting the word "value" for the older word "virtue." Virtue, from the Latin *virtus*, the Old French *vertu*, means strength. What is implied in its American usage is strength of character, moral goodness. There is a moral law to which people are subject if they are to have civilization instead of anarchy or tyranny. And though political freedom does not concern the salvation of souls, it does concern, as our forefathers noted, "Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness." To have a free society requires that we uphold and practice certain public virtues.

We have been encouraged by psychological and social scientists to speak of virtues as "values," as though they were trinkets we happen to value. Thus democracy, freedom, justice may only be *our* "values," but *our* preferences — we are told — should not be considered better than others'. The intellectual world and the media have been so fearful of American bigotry and intolerance that they have had to make it seem that all our convictions are related only to ourselves. We must give *material* help to other nations, supply them with food, weapons and instruments, but not intrude on their values. Our nobler aspirations have become, in public parlance, simply "values."

Until fairly recently, moral law had not been thought to be merely subjective. It had been considered to be written on the human heart, universally valuable, the inerrant guide to civilization for all, worth striving and even dying for. And these cultural qualities that we used to consider the virtues are the responsibility of teachers.

*For teachers are the representatives of a culture.* Their task is to ensure the passing on of the wisdom of a people. We mistake educational aims when we consider their task to be primarily the development of the student. That is a secondary purpose, the primary one being the preservation of the body of knowledge that produced the precious enterprise called civilization.

The enemy of education is barbarism. The teacher's duty is thus to fight off that ever-present menace by preserving and transmitting the heritage of freedom and virtue that has come to us from the past but is always open to new insights and new communities. Our sacred bond as a people is the public school teacher's greatest concern.

American teachers, then, should be educated in ways quite different from the ways in which most have been schooled for almost a century. They need an education in the best that has been thought in the long Western recording if, as I'm arguing, they are the conveyors of our culture. They need to be considered dedicated professionals who have committed themselves to the preservation and transmission of a people's body of knowledge. Other motives — the discovery of new knowledge, the development of the student's personal talents, the amelioration of social ills — are byproducts that may or may not ensue from the primary task.

What stands between the West, then, and the barbarism that constantly threatens the human project is the work of Homer and Sophocles, Plato and Dante, Augustine and Shakespeare, Newton and Einstein and hundreds of other thinkers. Teachers don't have to study all these writings directly, but they *do* have to know that they exist and are still relevant. And they have to have sampled enough of this serious body of knowledge to experience the pride and humility of knowing that we stand upon the shoulders of giants. In T.S. Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent," when he posits someone's remarking that we know so much more now than they did in the past, he replies, "Yes, and they are what we know."

Beginning in our own epoch and increasing in the future, a technological storm of information will besiege us. In this artificial world, the imagination will have to suffice. Language will have to do the work of our senses: seeing, hearing, touching, tasting, smelling. But we teachers, we nurturers of souls will still exist. *Above all else, we shall have to teach what it is to be human*, what it is to love parents and friends, to revere our nation, the world and life — what it means to have feelings, sentiments, convictions, faith, hope and love. We shall have to teach the virtues.

And for this, we shall need to be shaped by the great thinkers who have gone before us, which it is the business of our schools to provide. Teachers are the medium through which the present makes contact with the past while anticipating the future. Without properly educated teachers the human project sinks into barbarism.

Dostoevsky wrote that when men stop believing in God, many of them become criminals. I'm saying that when we stop teaching the highest and noblest aspects of our past, too many of our most idealistic young will become mass murderers, whatever kind of weapon they use. More important than banning assault weapons is the recovery of the best of our tradition. As Alexis de Tocqueville commented in the 19th century, American democracy is something that doesn't come naturally, so unique that it has to be taught. It is taught by teachers who know of the existence of this hoard of wisdom that is our heritage and who have studied some of it themselves.

The value of human life directly depends on our sense of inheriting noble ideals to which we ourselves must measure up. America put its hopes for the succession of democratic ideals from generation to generation into its schooling. Its educational institutions, then, represent not the *oikos*, the nurturing life of families, but the *polis*, public life. Democracy, as I said, has to be taught. Only the instruction of our young in wisdom and virtue can achieve the remarkable system of government envisioned by our founders.

And the only possible quality control resides not in school *systems*, not in constant *testing*, but in the *education of teachers*.

*Louise Cowan, 96, is a professor emeritus at the University of Dallas and a co-founder of the Dallas Institute of Humanities and Culture. Her email address is louisecowan@juno.com. This essay is adapted from her speech she gave last month as the institute's Cowan Center for Education proclaimed 2013 the Year of the Teacher.*



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