

“Recovering the Lost Tools of Learning”
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Introduction:

Once upon a time, but not that long ago, there was a backwoodsman who lived and worked in a very isolated forest where he chopped down trees with an axe for a living. One day the woodsman bumped into a fellow from the city who took him into town to a hardware store and the city slicker showed him a device that he said would increase his productivity and profit a 500%. He said if you normally chop down five trees in one day, with this new thing, you will chop down fifty. So he bought it.

The woodsman could hardly wait for the next day to arrive. As soon as the sun was up, he was out in the woods whittling away at his first tree. He worked and he worked, and he sweated and sweated. But by lunch time, he had only made it half way through one tree. He thought to himself, “this afternoon, things will go better.” By the end of the day, however, he had only chopped down two trees. Normally he could take care of five. Frustrated, disappointed and even angry, he resolved to work even harder the next day. But the results were pretty much the same. So were the emotions.

On the third day, he thumbed a ride into town, and went to the hardware store where he had gotten this new fangled device that was supposed to help him be so much more productive, and asked to speak to the manager. He told the manager that this thing he got from them didn’t work and that it wasn’t any good.

So the manager asked to see it, examined it carefully, checked its chain, made sure it fit snugly on its guide, examined the fuel mixture and level, and its moving parts. Everything looked fine. Then the manager said to the woodsman, “Stand back and I’ll test it.” The woodsman, unsure about what he meant, obeyed nonetheless. The manager pulled the starter cord with a jerk and the device made a loud, roaring noise: voovoom,

voovoom! The woodsman, shocked at what he heard, yelled out in surprise: "What's that noise?"

You see, the device was a chain saw, but woodsman didn't know what it was or how it worked. He had a great new tool, but he didn't know how to use it. Since he didn't know anything about the tool or how to use it, all he experienced was frustration, difficulty and discouragement in his work at felling trees. Similarly, if a plumber doesn't know how to use his wrenches and pliers, he'll have a very hard time fixing a leaky faucet. If a carpenter doesn't know how to wield his hammer and saw, he will find it very difficult to build a house. So it is for many students and school. If don't know how to use their intellectual tools, it's terribly hard to learn and get an education. As a result, education and schoolwork is nothing but difficult, frustrating, and discouraging. Because we have lost the tools of learning, going to school and trying to learn is just about as painful as a root canal.

About 60 years ago, a woman named Dorothy Sayers (1893-1957) recognized this problem and in 1947 wrote one of the most important essays on education in the 20th century titled, "The Lost Tools of Learning." Today, I would like to tell you a little bit about Dorothy Sayers and her essay (Google "Lost Tools of Learning" on the internet and you should find it easily), and to encourage you to recover the lost tools of learning so that you can chop down the trees in your educational forest a lot easier than you would otherwise be able to do.

But who is Dorothy Sayers? What do we know about this woman?

Dorothy Sayers was an English novelist, essayist, playwright, and medieval scholar. Her popular reputation rests primarily on a series of highly successful detective novels and mysteries stories that featured a key character named Lord Peter Wimsey.

On the average, she produced two novels a year for about fifteen years, beginning with a work entitled *Whose Body?* (1923) and concluding with the novel

Busman's Honeymoon (1937). Sayers was one of the first women to graduate the University of Oxford where she earned a degree in medieval literature in 1915.¹

Sayers was also good friends with a number of famous English writers at Oxford known as "*The Inklings*" which included such notables as Charles Williams and Owen Barfield, and perhaps most famously J. R. R. Tolkien who wrote *The Lord of the Rings* and C. S. Lewis who wrote *The Chronicles of Narnia* (especially *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe*). And as we know, these books have been recently made into Hollywood movies which I bet many of you have seen.

Having been the daughter of an Anglican priest, a marked religious development took place in her writing at the outbreak of World War II. At that time she produced essays on the social, cultural, and moral issues facing her country at the time, (*Creed or Chaos?* 1947), and also presented a series of well-received radio plays published under the title *The Man Born to be King* (1942). In a book titled, *The Mind of the Maker* (1941) she is at her best as a defender of the Christian faith, especially in her explanations of the doctrine of the Trinity (which she saw as a key to understanding artistic creativity and the work of the human imagination). She made no secret of her personal commitment to Christianity, and she has had a lasting influence on Christian thinking in the English-speaking world.

Sayers always wrote with keen intelligence and with a spicy wit. The remarkable breadth of her work as a whole — fiction, literary criticism, religious drama, aesthetics, philosophy of education, theology, and the magnificent translations of Dante's *Divine*

¹ Sayers herself was an early feminist of sorts (though she had doubts about some aspects of the early forms of feminism) who expressed herself on the subject most poignantly in an essay entitled "Are Women Human?" delivered before a women's society in England in 1938. In this address she spoke these often quoted words: "A woman is just as much an ordinary human being as a man, with the same individual preferences, and with just as much right to the tastes and preferences of an individual." She spoke about work, the home, interests, clothing emphasizing the *human* aspect and priority in each area. She spoke with her trademark acerbic wit: "I am occasionally desired by congenital imbeciles and the editors of magazines to say something about the writing of detective fiction 'from the woman's point of view.' To such demands, one can only say, 'Go away and don't be silly. You might as well ask what is the female angle on an equilateral triangle.'"

Comedy that climaxed her achievements — all reflect the interests and depth of her mind. In short, she was very gifted and just flat out brilliant.

For Sayers, Dante's constant admonition to his readers to 'Look' was a key to her own work, and her basic goal was to help sincere people see things they might otherwise miss, to learn how to pay attention, and to equip them with the ability to think and understand for themselves.

She got down to specifics on education in her magnificent essay titled "The Lost Tools of Learning." This essay was written for and presented to students attending a course in education at Oxford University in summer of 1947.² In it, she claims that students have lost the capacity to think critically and to learn. Consequently she set forth her proposals for a way of teaching and learning designed specifically to recover the lost tools of learning in order to remedy this unfortunate situation.

That was in 1947, and her insights are more relevant today than they were when she first wrote this essay. First, she makes some observations from every day life that show how we have lost the tools of learning. Then she makes a central point about schools and education based on these observations. Finally she proposes a solution to our educational problem that I think is promising for us today. So let me highlight these three features of Sayers' article and make some concluding suggestions that I hope will be helpful for you, for teachers and students alike.

Disquieting Questions and Concerns

Sayers's essay begins with what we might call some disquieting or disturbing concerns and questions about the inability of literate people to think, speak, and write

² Originally published in a posthumous volume of her essays entitled *The Poetry of Search and the Poetry of Statement* (London: Gollancz, 1963). More recently this essay has been republished in Rosamond K. Sprague, ed., *A Matter of Eternity: Selections from the Writings of Dorothy Sayers* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1975).

well, concerns and questions which I will read from her article and then paraphrase in language we can more easily understand. She writes:

- Recognizing that in earlier times, students left school for the university at a very young age, she asks, “Are we altogether comfortable about that artificial prolongation of intellectual childhood and adolescence [a concept worth exploring] into the years of physical maturity which is so marked in our day?

**WHY DOESN'T OUR INTELLECTUAL GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT
KEEP UP WITH OUR PHYSICAL GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT?**

- Has it ever struck you as odd, or unfortunate, that today [1947], when the proportion of literacy throughout Western Europe is higher than it has ever been, people should have become susceptible to the influence of advertisement and mass propaganda to an extent hitherto unheard of and unimagined?

Do you put this down to the mere mechanical fact that the press and radio and so on have made propaganda much easier to distribute over a wide area?

Or do you sometimes have an uneasy suspicion that the product of modern educational methods is less good than it should be in helping us disentangling fact from opinion and the proven from the plausible?

**WHY ARE THE RADIO, TV, ADVERTISING, THE INTERNET, MOVIES AND
MUSIC SO INFLUENTIAL IN SHAPING OUR THINKING AND OUR LIVES
TODAY?**

- Have you ever, in listening to a debate among adult and presumably responsible people, been fretted by the extraordinary inability of the average debater to speak to the question, or to meet and refute the arguments of speakers on the other side?

WHY CAN'T PEOPLE IN A CONVERSATION OR DEBATE ADDRESS THE REAL ISSUES AND ANSWER THE REAL QUESTIONS BEING ASKED?

- Or have you ever pondered upon the extremely high incidence of irrelevant matter which crops up at committee meetings, and upon the very great rarity of persons capable of acting as chairmen of committees?

And when you think about this, and think that most of our public affairs are settled by debates and committees, have you ever felt a certain sinking of the heart?

WHY CAN'T PEOPLE LEAD COMMITTEES AND KEEP THEM FOCUSED ON THEIR TRUE PURPOSE?

- Have you ever followed a discussion in the newspapers or elsewhere and noticed how frequently writers fail to define the terms they use?

Or how often, if one man does define his terms, another will assume in his reply that he was using the terms in precisely the opposite sense to that in which he has already defined them?

WHY DON'T PEOPLE DEFINE THE TERMS THEY USE CLEARLY SO THAT OTHERS CAN UNDERSTAND WHAT THEY ARE SAYING AND RESPOND APPROPRIATELY?

- Have you ever been faintly troubled by the amount of “slipshod syntax” [sloppy word order in sentences] going about? And if so, are you troubled because it is inelegant or because it may lead to dangerous misunderstanding?

WHY CAN'T PEOPLE PUT THEIR WORDS IN THE RIGHT ORDER IN A SENTENCE SO THAT THEIR MEANING IS CLEAR?

Here are some fun examples of “slipshod syntax.”

- ❖ I live by the river. Drop in sometime!
- ❖ Local high school dropouts cut in half!

- ❖ Kids make nutritious snacks!
 - ❖ Save soap and waste paper!
 - ❖ Stolen painting found by tree!
 - ❖ Juvenile court to try shooting defendant!
 - ❖ Include your children when baking cookies.
 - ❖ Eat here and get gas! (sign at a truck stop)
- Do you ever find that young people, when they have left school, not only forget most of what they have learned, but forget also, or betray the fact that they have never learned how to tackle a new subject for themselves?

WHY CAN'T STUDENTS REMEMBER WHAT THEY STUDY AND WHY CAN'T THEY LEARN A NEW SUBJECT ON THEIR OWN?

- Are you often bothered by coming across grown-up men and women who seem unable to distinguish between a book that is sound, scholarly, and properly documented, and one that is to any trained eye, very conspicuously none of these things?

[Are you bothered by grown-up men and women] who cannot handle a library catalog?

[Are you bothered by grown-up men and women] who, when faced with a book of reference, betray a curious inability to extract from the passages relevant to the particular question that interests them?

WHY CAN'T PEOPLE DISTINGUISH BETWEEN GOOD AND BAD BOOKS? WHY CAN'T THEY FIND A BOOK IN THE LIBRARY? WHY CAN'T THEY USE AN ENCYCLOPEDIA WELL?

- Do you often come across people for whom, all their lives, a "subject" remains a "subject," divided by watertight bulkheads from all other "subjects," so that they experience very great difficulty in making an immediate connection . . .

between such spheres of knowledge as philosophy and economics, or chemistry and art?

WHY CAN'T PEOPLE FIGURE OUT HOW ONE SCHOOL SUBJECT CONNECTS TO OTHER SCHOOL SUBJECTS, SAY SCIENCE AND PHILOSOPHY?

- ❖ Literature and history?
- ❖ Economics and auto mechanics?

All these disquieting concerns and questions that Sayers places before us are designed to cause us to ask why we are in such bad shape intellectually. You know, many of us are not in very good shape *physically*. Many of us are not in much better shape *intellectually*. The question is WHY are we so out of shape intellectually?

As a matter of fact, a bit later on in the essay, Sayers sounds the alarm, and speaks directly of her deep concern about the contemporary generation of intellectually *unprepared* young people who are essentially defenseless against the influences of the day. She states her concern in these urgent words.

For we let our young men and women go out [intellectually] unarmed in a day when armor was never more necessary. By teaching them to read, we have left them at the mercy of the printed word. By the invention of the film and radio, we have made certain that no aversion to reading shall secure them from the incessant battery of words, words, words. They do not know what they mean; they do not know how to ward them off or blunt their edge or fling them back; they are a prey to words in their emotions instead of being masters of them in their intellects.

Certainly if this is an accurate description of the state of affairs in the late 1940s, then it must surely be even more true today, especially with the potency of our high tech communications systems which are deployed to advance so many ideas and often harmful influences today!

Primary Point

Sayers continues the argument of her essay by proceeding to make her primary point about schooling and education in the light of the dismal situation she has described. She writes: “Is not the great defect of our education today that although we often succeed in teaching our pupils ‘subjects,’ we fail lamentably on the whole in teaching them how to think? They learn everything except the art of learning.” Elsewhere she states the same thing quite bluntly: “We have lost the tools of learning—the axe and the wedge, the hammer and the saw, the chisel and the plane—that were so adaptable to all [educational] tasks.”

What, then, is to be done?

A Solution

Sayers makes a daring proposal for the restructuring of education based on the model of the medieval education. She says that it does not matter when or for whom it was originally designed, but that what matters is the light it throws upon what the educators of the Middle Ages believed was *the right order and purpose* of the educational process. It worked like this.

The model was divided into two parts: the *Trivium* (which means consisting of 3 parts) were the tools of learning: grammar, logic, rhetoric. Then there was the *Quadrivium* which consisted of “subjects”—arithmetic, astronomy, music, geometry. Together they added up to the Seven Liberal Arts.

But the most important feature of the syllabus was the composition of the Trivium or the tools of learning — grammar, dialectic or logic, and rhetoric — which came before the Quadrivium and was the preliminary preparation for it. Sayers presents the genius of this arrangement in these simple words: “The whole of the Trivium was in fact intended to teach the pupil the proper use of the tools of learning before he began to apply them to subjects at all.” So, she continues to explain how the syllabus worked in these words:

First, he learned a language: ... the structure of language—any language—and hence language itself—what it was, how it was put together and how it worked. Secondly, he learned how to use language: how to define his terms and make accurate statements, how to construct an argument and how to detect fallacies in argument....³ Thirdly, he learned to express himself in language: how to say what he had to say elegantly and persuasively.

As Sayers points out, though bits and pieces of the medieval tradition still linger in modern education, there is still a great difference between the medieval and modern education which she explains in this manner. “Modern education concentrates on teaching subjects, leaving the method of thinking, arguing, and expressing one’s conclusions to be picked up by the student as he goes along; Medieval education concentrated first on forging and learning to handle the tools of learning, using whatever subject came handy as a piece of material on which to doodle until the use of the tool became sound.” This was the essence of her program. She states the reasons why she was such an advocate of this approach with these words:

I am concerned only with the proper training of the mind to encounter and deal with the formidable mass of undigested problems presented to it by the modern world. For the tools of learning are the same in any and every subject; and the person who knows how to use them will, at any age, get the mastery of a new subject in half the time and with a quarter of the effort expended by the person

³ Sayers sadly notes that the subject of logic is where the 20th century curriculum shows such a sharp divergence from the medieval syllabus. In short, the study of logic has fallen into disrepute in the modern world, and she says that its neglect is the root cause of nearly all those disquieting questions which she noted in the modern intellectual situation. She offers two reasons why logic is demeaned. First is because we have fallen into a habit of supposing that we are conditioned almost entirely by the intuitive and the unconscious. She adds that the best way to ensure the supremacy of the intuitive, the irrational, and the unconscious elements in our make up is to continue to neglect the study of logic. A second reason why logic is spurned is the mistaken belief that logic itself is based on universal assumptions that are either unprovable or tautological. But as she counters, logic is simply the art of arguing correctly. If A, then B. The method is not invalidated by the hypothetical character of A. And as she concludes, the practical utility of formal logic lies not so much in the establishment of positive conclusions as in the prompt detection and exposure of invalid inference.

who has not the tools at his command. . . . To have learned and remembered the art of learning makes the approach to every subject an open door.”

For Sayers, indeed, this is the very purpose of education: “For the sole true end of education is simply this: to teach men and women how to learn for themselves; and whatever instruction fails to do this is effort spent in vain.”

So what Sayers does in the rest of her essay is to sketch out a plan — a modern Trivium with modifications suited for the 20th and 21st centuries the details of which you may read for yourself. If you take what Dorothy Sayers says serious, it can have a powerful impact on you as students and how you learn, and on teachers and how they teach. It encourages you to know and do several things.

- ❖ Recognize there is a proper order to learning: tools first, subjects second.
- ❖ Realize that your “basic” courses are designed to teach you how to think and learn.
- ❖ Take other challenging courses in language, logic, and speech that will increase your skills in thinking and learning.
- ❖ Understand how much more rewarding, enjoyable, and efficient school will be if you develop the tools of learning first, then master your subjects!
- ❖ Know that recovering the lost tools of learning will enrich and develop you as a whole person and help make life more meaningful and interesting!
- ❖ Realize that there is a purpose to this process, and that is to know and live by what is good, true, and beautiful.
- ❖ Grasp that the vocational and economic benefits of knowing how to think and learn are huge!

Conclusion

You know, if you are woodsman and you have a chainsaw, you got to know how to use if you want to fell some trees. If you are plumber, you have to know how to use your pliers and wrenches if you are going to fix that leaky faucet. If you are a carpenter,

you have to know what to do with your hammer and saw if you are going to build a house. If you are student, you need to recover the lost tools of learning!