

HEAD LINES

A Monthly Message from Chip Denton, Head of School

October 18, 2018

“He who has a Why to live can bear almost any How.” – Nietzsche

Dear Trinity Community,

I have quit only one job in my life—actually, I didn’t quit, but I wanted to. It was a job at East Tennessee Packing Company boxing bacon at the end of the pork line. I would stand there for eight hours a day, trying to keep up with the conveyor belt that relentlessly fed me bacon boxes. I did the same thing over and over and over: putting twelve bacon packages in a cardboard box and sending it down the chute to the loading dock. I marvelled at the women up the line from me, who had been at this for a lifetime. I finally went to my supervisor and told him I was going crazy and couldn’t take it anymore. Compare this to the job I had the next year, working as a brick-

mason’s laborer on a project to build self-storage units in West Knoxville. The work was significantly harder. My back ached, my hands were raw until they were leathered, I was dog-tired at the end of every day, and my name was an expletive. But I never thought of quitting. I knew we were building something. I could see it going up, and I understood what these buildings would be, what they were for. I had a reason to be working. It was, by my reckoning, a little reason, but it was enough.

Human beings need a Why to live by. If we don’t have one, we will invent one or imagine one. We are purpose-seeking animals. And this truth is, so far as I can see, the strongest case for a Christian school.

Other schools can teach us many things, from spelling to balancing equations, from holding a pencil to writing an essay, from collaboration to coding. But secular schools—whether private or public—have taken the Fifth on the Big Why. It’s in their DNA to remain agnostic (at best) on questions of purpose. They can share with you a smorgasbord of purposes that have been proposed across cultures, but they cannot really teach purpose in the hope that students will learn. For our public and secular schools, human purpose lies in the realm of private opinion, not public truth. This has to be contrasted with many other kinds of knowledge (scientific, mathematical, and even historical), which are regarded as public truth that every student should master and embrace. No one would tolerate the idea that the second law of thermodynamics and the historical origins of Jim Crow laws are matters of private belief or personal opinion. But when it comes to the reason for living (or not), our schools cannot speak of what is true.

Please turn over...

This is, to understate the case, problematic. If I don't understand the purpose of something, I will not use it well or enjoy it properly. I sometimes imagine my grandmother, who never learned to drive a car, being handed a cell phone. She would have no idea what this device was for. Its purpose being lost to her, she would probably use it for a paperweight or a poor mirror. This is what education without purpose yields: educated people without any idea of what people are for.

And what people are for is neither a scientific truth nor a matter of conjecture. It is a matter of revealed truth. Maybe—though I doubt it—we could have figured this out ourselves (that's called "natural theology"), but I'm really thankful that we found a bottle washed up on the beach with a message inside. And the message says, "Here is your purpose!"

That bottle is the Bible, and the message is very simple but profound: We were made by Someone for that Someone, not for ourselves. And that Someone loves us so much that he has died in order that we can live no longer for ourselves but for him and others. Or, as we like to say at Trinity: Non Nobis. "Not to us, Lord, not to us, but to your name give glory" (Psalm 115)— God first, others second, I am third. Or, in the words of the Westminster Catechism: "The chief end of humanity is to glorify God and enjoy him forever." Living to make much of God is the way to happiness, and if young people want a truly meaningful life, they will have to face this, which is as true as the Pythagorean theorem and as real as the sheer rock face of El Capitan in Yosemite. To send them out into the world without this knowledge is to fail to love them well.

You don't have to believe this to be here and thrive. Trinity is open to people of other faiths and of none. But we want everyone who comes here to understand that this is our distinctive reason for being. If Trinity School did not exist, there would be no other K-12 school in this area where Christ-following teachers show and tell students (and parents) what an education with a Christ-centered purpose looks like. Our goal is to teach our students to offer all their best—all the smarts in their head, all the strength in their limbs, all the charisma and charm in their personalities, all the grace of their bodies, all their skills in art, music, drama or robotics—and to give all this back to the God who gave them all of this and gave all for them. This is the kind of education that makes our hearts sing, "Not to us, Lord, not to us, but to your name give glory." It's the theme song of the Kingdom of God, so we'd best start learning it now, with the life we've been given, here in this place called Trinity School.

Sincerely,



Chip Denton
Head of School

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