

HEAD LINES

A message from Chip Denton, Head of School



March 2022

Dear Trinity Community,

I am glad to express again my gratitude for many who have stepped into the gap while I have been working at home, especially Jez McIntosh, our Associate Head of School, who has led the school with grace, skill, wisdom, and diligence.



Five weeks after my accident and four after my surgery, I am much improved. I can move about with relative ease, I can now type with two hands, I can dress myself and walk a few miles each day. But I still have a ways to go; I'm not quite right yet.

Not yet, but eventually I should be. And that is the wonder. The body heals, bones mend, muscles strengthen—at least for most of us, and I pause to pray now for those whose bodies fail or fight this natural process. My own progress gives me an opportunity to reflect anew on the age-old classical comparison between the arts of healing and the arts of learning. As far back as Plato, healing, teaching, and farming have been called cooperative arts because the artist (the doctor, the teacher, the farmer) mainly helps nature produce results that it is, at least in theory, able to produce by its own powers. These arts are distinct from what Mortimer Adler calls “operative arts,” such as sculpture, woodworking, or motorcycle repair, where the artist is the principal cause of the product. My doctors and physical therapists have done much for me (more on this below), but they rely on my bones’ capacity to fuse and heal, and on my muscles’ power to awaken, stretch, and grow strong again. The mind, like the body, has the power to do what is good for itself: to gain expanded knowledge and better understanding. When Charlotte Mason claimed that students were “born persons,” this is part of what she meant. Students come to us ready to learn, eager to learn, with the power to learn—all a gift of personhood created by God. And that is a wonder.

Some healing is involuntary, but not all of it by a long shot. My own involvement in my healing process is critical. This is especially true for my physical therapy, where I have to do the sometimes painful work of stretching and strengthening. So it is with students too. One of our guiding pedagogical principles at Trinity is “Let the students do the work.” Education that sees students as passive recipients will never be the wonderful cooperative art that it should be. Indoctrination, poorly designed lecturing, or mind-numbing worksheets are forms of educational malpractice that waste the opportunity students have to engage in their own learning. For this active learning, the teacher’s job is to design experiences where students are asked good questions, where they themselves learn to ask good questions, where they practice the arts of learning: reading, writing, speaking, listening, observing, measuring, calculating.

Going all the way back to Hippocrates, the father of medicine, the physician's primary role has been conceived as a cooperative one, helping patients manage the regimens of food, air, sleep, water, and exercise. "Do no harm" is the motto of one who, in many cases, trusts the human body that God has made. But there are times when drugs and surgery are necessary, when the work of a doctor becomes more operative. I am deeply grateful to Dr. Alex Creighton, a Trinity parent and orthopedic surgeon, who put a titanium plate on my humerus and did so with consummate skill. My body needed that help to heal, but when he had finished his work, he sent me home and said, "Take care of yourself, rest, do physical therapy, and I'll see you in four weeks." That is good doctoring, and good teaching is much the same. At the end of the *Theaetetus*, Plato's dialogue focused on the question of knowledge, Socrates' pupil Theaetetus says, "I am sure, Socrates, that you have elicited from me a good deal more than ever was in me." This is the highest tribute a teacher can be given. We do not create or deposit knowledge; we *elicit* it. "*Education*," from the Latin, means literally "to lead out." As Thomas Merton said about his teacher Mark Van Doren, "Mark's questions were very good, and if you tried to answer them intelligently, you found yourself saying excellent things that you did not know you knew, and that you had not in fact, known before" (*Seven Storey Mountain*).

There are times when teaching, too, needs to become more operative. All of us, sooner or later, run into learning obstacles. It may be theoretically possible for us to learn anything by discovery, but most of us need guides, coaches, models, and metaphors to help us along from the unknown to the known. Whether it's Einstein's theory of general relativity or the rules for restrictive clauses or how to sound consonant blends and digraphs, we may well need a teacher to get us over an impasse. Trinity's Learning Services team are the educational counterpart to physical therapists, devoted to helping students strengthen and develop their learning moves that, for various reasons, aren't yet as facile, nimble, and strong as they would like. These educational experts play a vital role in training all of our teachers to be sensitive to the learning blocks that we all have.

Teaching is a humbling vocation, and teachers are often unaware of the most important learning that happens in their classrooms. Mark Van Doren had no idea about his impact on Merton until he read *The Seven Storey Mountain*. What is more, the teacher is, as Socrates claimed, like a midwife: only a helper, hardly at the center of the drama of learning. Even more, the work of learning is often incomplete and hard to measure. How many teachers have come away from classes saying to themselves, "I'd do that differently next time." Still, even with our imperfect efforts, we have reason to believe that students are *learning how to learn*. As the not altogether successful Socrates says to Theaetetus at the end of the dialogue that bears his name, "If you should ever conceive afresh, you will be all the better for the present investigation. And if not, you will be soberer and humbler and gentler to other men, and will be too modest to fancy that you know what you do not know. These are the limits of my art."

This is our hope at Trinity too: to teach our students how to learn; to show them that we are all, always, learners; to know the limits of our art; and to be humble enough not to fancy that we know what we don't. That is the heart of a classical education shaped by our Christian faith.

Non Nobis,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Chip Denton". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Chip Denton
Head of School