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ONE: A CASE FOR CONSERVATIVE SCHOOLING

Thirty-five years ago it must be now, as a premise for his act a comedian named Shelly Berman—kind of the Dennis Miller of his day—divided words into “cleans” and “dirties.” Berman wasn’t getting at obscenity in this instance but rather to the fact that certain words have agreed-upon positive or negative associations. Berman’s point was that with some words you don’t have to make the case that what they represent is wrong, bad, or harmful—that is to say, “dirty”; nor do you have to establish that others are “clean.” That has already been worked out sometime in the past. Thus as long as you are communicating with someone who buys into the conventional wisdom about the cleanness and dirtiness of something—or at least is in accord with *your* wisdom about it—you can simply get on with your business. And that is good because it speeds things up and saves energy compared to a situation where you would have to stop and take the time to work all that through before you could proceed.

But while the clean/dirty shorthand can be good, it can be bad too. Shelly Berman didn’t need to attend to it to get his comedic job done, but the rest of us need to keep in mind that there are times when we would be better off if we gave more attention to exactly how clean or dirty something actually is in contrast to what we assume or accept it to be. That is to say, if we don’t look into the reality beyond the meaning of language, we can be lead down some bad paths in life.

A couple of examples from the 1960s come to mind that illustrate this point. Back then, there was serious talk about what was called free love and open marriage, two concepts that justified and promoted promiscuity and sex outside of marriage. There is no denying that the terms “open” and “free” are about as clean as you can get. The problem was that these concepts turned out to be less than great in practice. In fact, it can be argued that among the outcomes of all this so-called freeness and openness were illegitimacy, sexually transmitted diseases, diminished and broken families, lowered respect for women among men, and lessened power and sense of self-worth among women (limiting sexual access being both a basis of personal strength and a source of personal integrity for women).¹

In retrospect, it seems clear that people, caught up with attractive-sounding cleans, went about tearing down fences (moral imperatives, social rules) absent any measure of understanding of why these fences were put up in the first place. It was only later that these individuals painfully realized why those barriers were there, what purpose they actually served. Or at least some of them realized it

later; others, it would appear, paid the price without ever figuring out what went wrong. Within this last group were many people who kept right on doing what got them into trouble under the illusion that the idea was still as clean as they originally thought it was but they just hadn't been implementing it well enough. What they had to do, they decided, was even *more* of what they had been doing, only this time be more effective or consistent about it—which of course only lead to continued dire straits for them. What they didn't comprehend was that the fix they were in stemmed from getting caught up with what sounded good or what they wanted to believe, and not being connected enough to the true reality of life which is bigger than their or anybody else's notions and wishes.

The inability or unwillingness to see that attractive, popular, or seemingly valid concepts, preferences, and conventional meanings do not necessarily square with reality despite their highmindedness and apparent legitimacy is found in every dimension of life. In ways that should become clear as we go along, this blind spot in human beings is a major underpinning of the discussion of conservatism and its educational implications that follows.

TWO DIRTIES IN EDUCATION: TRADITIONAL AND CONSERVATIVE

For decades, both traditional and conservative have been dirties in the field of education. Even as these terms are taking on significantly greater cleanness in the wider culture these days—an example, politicians embrace the label of conservative where once they ran from it—by and large, the dirty connotations of conservative and traditional still prevail among professional educators. This is particularly the case among those viewed as educational experts, i.e., those in the profession who speak out publicly, write books and articles, and serve on university faculties in teacher education.² If you read or hear about traditional approaches to instruction or conservative teachers from educators, don't take it as praise. The profession has seen—and still sees, although perhaps with a bit less certainty and unanimity than in past years—traditional schooling as something to be overcome and replaced by (three cleans) progressive, innovative, or modern schooling practices. As for conservative teachers and curricula, the associations they have tended to bring to mind among those in the field of education are stodginess, rigidity, and resistance to change (change being a major clean). The image is of an anachronistic individual, probably old (there is an ageist tinge to this) teacher up in front of a class droning on about irrelevant matters (relevance another major clean) and boring students into a stupor in the process. Conservative teachers, so it goes, are stuck in the past, and the past is

precisely what needs to be overcome. In fact, early retirement might be the best answer for them.

The view of traditional schooling in the profession is exemplified in a passage about the traditional curriculum from an article in *Teacher Magazine*, widely read by educators:

Within the traditional curriculum, teachers and textbooks transmit information to students, who spend their time as docile recipients. They study structured textbooks containing drills and exercises that reinforce skills and knowledge they often perceive as having no relevance to the world outside the classroom. Emphasis is on the memorization of facts rather than on problem solving and creative thinking. And students are tested, drilled, and retested regularly to make sure they have learned the facts and absorbed the information. The theory that prevails in the traditional school contends that learning is hard work and that students must be persuaded to undertake and stick with it. A system of external rewards and punishments provides the incentive for students to achieve. Learning is viewed largely as an individual activity, and students are discouraged from collaborating with one another; working together is often viewed as cheating. Since children naturally dislike hard work and would rather be playing than learning, or so the theory goes, the main challenge for the teacher in the traditional school is to maintain order and to control the students so that teaching and learning can take place.³

The author goes on to say that this approach has “demonstrated a tenacity to survive” (like a roach perhaps?), and that a growing number of teachers, school administrators, and scholars believe “the traditional school not only doesn’t encourage learning but often obstructs it.”⁴

With the references to drill, docility, punishments, and memorization—dirties all—this passage from the professional literature in education puts traditional schooling in a bad light to say the least. And very important, even though this quote doesn’t state it explicitly, it strongly implies what *should* go on in schools. The way it works is if this traditional arrangement is wrong—and the way it is put few would argue that—it is pretty much self-evident what is right: *the opposite of this state of affairs*. So get rid of the textbooks and a predetermined, fixed curriculum. Don’t stay stuck in the past; start focusing on what is relevant to kids’ life today. Emphasize the process of thinking instead of just taking in facts. Ease back on formal testing, especially standardized tests. Make learning

fun and interesting for students, not stress-producing and taxing work. Focus on cooperative activity instead of competition and individual work that separates people. Cut out all the exposition, lecturing, and demonstrating. Stop telling kids what to think and how to be. And quit pushing kids so hard and trying to control everything.

Indeed, this alternative-to-traditional-education is the way many teachers and teachers-to-be and those who train and supervise them look at things. This package, this perspective, defines their personal and professional challenge. In fact, for most of this century, since the very powerful influence beginning in the 1920s of John Dewey, William Kilpatrick, Harold Rugg, and other progressive educators, as they were called, this way of perceiving schools and this conception of what is needed has directed the actions of most educators.⁵ While there have always been some who didn't buy in to this view,⁶ the generalization holds: for the better part of this past century, to be right in the education profession has been to be against traditional education as characterized in the quote above and to affirm its opposite.

The widely accepted and almost villainous picture of traditional education has effectively served the cause of those who want what are held out to be avant-garde approaches to education. Because a good way to promote anything is to create a dichotomy in the minds of those you are trying to convince, including yourself (we shouldn't forget that we are an audience to ourselves and have to explain and justify things to ourselves as well as to others). It helps greatly to establish the perception that there are but two positions or stances (not three or four, two) on some matter: yours and an obviously inferior alternative. Your case is particularly compelling if you can paint the other side as not only misguided but also immoral—and that is what has happened, as over the years traditional teachers and those who espouse this approach have been characterized to various degrees as bad guys in a melodrama of sorts. In any case, what you want to stay away from if you are trying to promote something is people perceiving several viable options, or the possibility of adopting a little of what you want and some or a lot of something else; that would only muddy the water. Much better is the simple dichotomous choice: what you are pushing, which is obviously good—that is to say, couched in the cleanest possible terms—and what the other side wants, which is obviously bad, a collection of dirties. In this comparison, you and what you favor, or are trying to convince yourself of, is the hands-down winner. No contest.

Of course, while a “my way versus Hitler” perspective is the best pitch for the proponents of some ideology or arrangement (assuming that what they are

pushing is what they would really want if they knew all of the facts and possibilities), it isn't the best way to look at things for other people whose posture isn't already locked in. These others can only make an informed choice of what to believe and what to do if they take into account the strongest, most defensible of the various possible alternatives. If they accept an inaccurate portrayal of the "other side" or fail to take into account a third alternative better than either of them or a fourth which is a composite of two or more options, rather than a true choice they are making a mere pick or selection.

In these pages, I will outline what I believe to be a viable conservative alternative to the current, call it modern liberal, conventional wisdom in the field of education.⁷ I will describe in clean terms something that for many readers carries a pejorative, or dirty, loading at present. The conservative ideology and approach that I will outline is a more accurate picture, I believe, than the one painted to create what I see as a false dichotomy that makes certain ideas and practices seem to be on the cutting edge and the obvious best path to take and others beyond the pale. I hope that what I spell out won't be anybody's straw man to easily knock over. Perhaps what I offer here will create a base from which readers can make what more closely approximates a true choice of what road to take in education.

I use the term conservative rather than traditional to describe the approach to life and education which I will sketch out because there is much about schooling as it has been traditionally practiced that I find unappealing—the lectures, the thoughtless recitation, the fill-in-the-blank worksheets, the mindless audio-visual activities, and the rest. So I am not defending traditional education *per se*. But while the focus in these next sections will be on the conservative rather than the traditional, that is not to say that the latter term will get left out entirely, because, indeed, there is a link between the two concepts. The fact of the matter is that conservatism and conservative education *are* tradition-centered. Conservatives *are* traditionalists, upholders of tradition, in the sense that they are defenders of the old ways, the old customs, the old lives. Unfortunately many educators see this as bordering on ill-intendedness, or they conclude that anyone with this posture is out of touch and standing in the way of needed reform. My job in part, then, will be to clarify what in their own minds justifies conservatives' friendliness to tradition; or, in the language of this essay, why tradition is cleaner to conservatives than to those of a liberal or radical ideological bent.

Conservatism, like other ideologies—classical (or Jeffersonian) liberalism, modern liberalism, libertarianism, Marxism and its outgrowth critical theory, and the

rest—grows out human beings' quest to live happy and satisfying individual and collective lives. As do all ideologies or philosophies, conservatism provides an interpretative lens for making sense of life and giving it meaning. It is a set of ideals and a way of explaining and justifying states of affairs. Conservatism provides a guide to individual and group conduct. There is no single definition of conservatism; rather, there are a number of strands within this basic orientation, with each of them containing differing nuances and emphases. By no means do all conservative theorists and writers see things alike. Making sense of conservatism is complicated, and entire books have been devoted to the topic.⁸ What I can manage in these few pages is to use the life and writings of one conservative writer to give a basic sense of what conservatism is like and to ground a discussion of what schooling that operates from conservative premises might look like.

The person I have chosen is Russell Kirk, for forty years beginning in the 1950s a very prominent American conservative. My guess is that most people have never heard of Russell Kirk. To the extent that is true, it may say something about the way the media, secondary schools, and universities have dealt with conservatives, at least other than William Buckley: ignore them. Simply introducing Russell Kirk here may serve a useful purpose for some readers.⁹

WHO WAS RUSSELL KIRK?

Russell Kirk was born in Plymouth, Michigan in 1918. In 1952, he was conferred the Doctor of Letters degree by St. Andrews University in Scotland. In 1953, Kirk authored his best-known book, *The Conservative Mind: From Burke to Santayana*, which has gone through seven editions.¹⁰ In 1954, Kirk moved into his ancestral home in Mecosta, Michigan, and although he traveled widely, he lived in this home in this rural area for the rest of his life. Kirk married in his 40s and was the devoted father of four daughters. Over the span of Kirk's life, he became an honored writer, lecturer, and advisor on conservatism. To many, he was the embodiment of conservative beliefs and way of life. In early 1994, he completed his memoirs, and on Friday, April 29th of that same year, Russell Kirk died.

In the epilogue to his memoirs, entitled "Is Life Worth Living?," Kirk listed what he had sought to attain in his time on earth, and in a way summed up his life. A formal man, Kirk wrote about himself in the third person.

At the age of seventy-five, Kirk had come to understand that he had sought, during his lifetime, three ends or objects. One had been to defend the

Permanent Things, in a world where "dinos is king, having overthrown Zeus." He had sought to conserve a patrimony of order, justice, and freedom; a tolerable moral order; and an inheritance of culture. Although rowing against a strong tide, in this aspiration he had succeeded somewhat, certainly beyond his early expectation, in reminding people that truth was not born yesterday. A second had been to lead a life of decent independence, living much as his ancestors had lived, on their land, in circumstances that would enable him to utter the truth and make his voice heard: a life uncluttered and unpolluted, not devoted to getting and spending. In his antique vocation of man of letters, he had achieved that aspiration at Piety Hill [his home in Michigan]. A third end had been to marry for love and to rear children who would come to know the service of God is perfect freedom. In his middle years, the splendid Annette had given herself to him and then given him four children, presently endowed with the unbought grace of life. Annette and he helped to sustain the institution of the family by creating a vigorous example. Thus his three wishes had been granted; he was grateful.¹¹

What Kirk wrote in those last months of his life gives us a sense of what conservatism and a conservative life are about. It can serve as a foundation to build upon in attaining a clearer conception of the conservative view of life and schooling.

FIVE BASIC PRINCIPLES OF CONSERVATISM

What are conservatism's basic principles? What is the conservative perspective on life and society? What do conservatives believe? What do they value? I will outline five elements at the core of the conservatism of Russell Kirk and, I think it is fair to say, most conservatives: the search for the permanent; belief in a transcendent order; skepticism about progress; trust in the cumulative wisdom of the ages; and commitment to reason and objectivity.

The Search for the Permanent

In his memoirs, Kirk notes that Samuel Taylor Coleridge wrote that all societies exist in a state of tension between two basic thrusts: progress and permanence.¹² Kirk points out that permanence is the conservative impulse and interest. The search for the "Permanent Things" in life, as Kirk refers to them, is what most fundamentally distinguishes conservatism. Conservative's concern for,

commitment to, affirmation of, what is timelessly true and worthy is at the core of the conservative approach to individual and collective life. Everything flows from this base. Although this should not be taken to mean that conservatives have no regard for the new and the advanced; there is no need to set up rigid boundaries or deal in absolutes here. It is simply to say that given the contrast between predispositions toward permanence and progress, conservative leanings are in the direction of permanence, and that this makes an enormous difference in how conservatives approach life.

When conservatives talk about the permanent they aren't referring to just anything that persists over time. Rather, there is a distinctively qualitative dimension to their concept of permanent. To them, permanence refers the finest, the best, that which is of the highest quality. Permanence means those things, those ways, that are the most natural and uplifting to human beings and societies, those things that make individuals the happiest and most fulfilled. Conservatives underscore what they consider to be the truly finest, the very best, for people and for societies, is not necessarily the latest or the currently most popular, appealing, or enticing. In fact, they contend, it very seldom is that.

The conservative perspective differs from the liberal one, which, taking its cues in part from the natural and social sciences, is more likely to consider everything to be in flux. Conservatives are more likely to see a constant, knowable world, while liberals tend to think that truth and value are not permanent, that nothing is certain, that what is true today will not be true tomorrow, that what is true for you is not true for me, and that it all comes down to assertions where one claim has about as much validity as another. Conservatives offer that in the really important areas of life it isn't all simply a matter of preference, it isn't all relative and subjective. There are some abiding truths, things that were so yesterday and are still so today and will still be so tomorrow, and human beings can discern them. Indeed, there are Permanent Things.

Belief in a Transcendent Order

As conservatives see it, a good life is not created from arbitrary individual or collective preferences. As a matter of fact, conservatives argue, we aren't free to do whatever we want to do. There is something "out there" that must be taken into account, that must be obeyed, that serves as a check on our personal desires and choices. Kirk writes of a *transcendent order* that exists beyond and above individual conscience.¹³ To Kirk, morality, rightness, is not merely a human contrivance, something to be equated with just anything someone or some group chooses to

affirm. In our time, there is much talk about looking inside ourselves for what is right for us and others. Kirk would turn that around: he says we should do less looking within and more looking *without*. He writes of "apprehending and applying the Justice which ought to prevail in the community of souls."¹⁴ And beyond morality, beyond ethics, individuals, if they are to create happy and fulfilled lives, need to abide by the natural order of things or, in Kirk's words, "the great forces in heaven and earth."¹⁵ To put it most simply, the challenge for each of us within this frame is to learn what the rules of life are and to live in accordance with those rules. We have the tendency to think we can live on the basis of our personal impulses and ideas, but if they don't square with the order of the universe, which is bigger than we are, we will pay for it in unhappiness and dissatisfaction.

Conservatives look upon this transcendent order in different ways. Many, including Kirk, view it primarily in religious terms and see life as the challenge to live by God's will and adhere to the tenets of the scriptures. Other conservatives reference themselves in the concept of natural law. This is the idea that there are mandates inherent in nature, with some believing in a nature God set in motion and others assuming an evolutionary reality undirected or overseen by divine forces. A natural law perspective was prominent in the early years of our country's history. The reference, for example, to "inalienable rights" in the Declaration of Independence was rooted in the concept of a natural law that overrides the laws of governments.

Still another way of perceiving the transcendent order is to hold that there are laws that stem from our nature as a biological organism. This orientation emphasizes that human beings are physical entities with a particular generic and biochemical makeup. If we go off and do something that sounds good but that in fact runs contrary to what we are as corporal beings—either as a creation of God or as a being at a particular point in the evolutionary process, however we think of it—we are going to have trouble. The failure of recreational sex as a valued practice seems to be an example of something that appeared to make good sense but which in reality ran counter to our nature as human beings. It could be that we are naturally mating creatures, pairing organisms, and that playing around with that biological imperative will sooner or later bring us grief.

Whichever of the ways one decides to look upon the transcendent order of things—or combination of ways, they aren't mutually exclusive—it places a check on what we can do in our lives. It compels us to ask ourselves whether what we are doing is spiritually justified or ordained, in compliance with natural law, and/or consistent with our nature as human beings.

Skepticism About Progress

Conservatives acknowledge that change is necessary to personal and social survival, but they underscore that it must be *prudent* change. Change, they insist, does not necessarily lead to true progress. Change may turn out to be, in Kirk's words, "a devouring conflagration rather than a torch of progress."¹⁶ Kirk quotes the French philosopher Gustave Thibon as pointing out that too often progress "carries the infection to the interior of the social body under the pretense of curing a sore on the skin."¹⁷ Conservatives contrast their vision of a personal and social world characterized by reason, order, peace, and virtue with the reality of the contemporary society that so-called progress has brought us and find too much of something else altogether: discord, vice, neuroticism, confusion, and sorrow. The level of faith in progress, belief in it, distinguishes conservatives and liberals. In contrast to the upbeat attitude of liberals that the new is and will continue to be better, conservatives have the distinct worry that if we keep on as we are, we are going to "progress" right over the precipice. The result is a predilection among conservatives to identify time-tested patterns and live by them.

It helps to understand conservatism as in part a negative reaction to modern life. The progress others applaud conservatives view as having led to an overly industrialized, centralized, homogenized, and secularized world. Conservatives see a world that pushes material aggrandizement over morality. They see people scrambling after careers that cut them off from their family and friends and a true sense of vocation. They see a destructive assault on religiosity. They see men and women sparring with one another. They see groups organized around grievances maneuvering to get preferential treatment: double standards instead of equal opportunity. Conservatives see leisure having degenerated into the consumption of coarse entertainments. They see urbanization contributing to dislocation, anonymity, animosity, and danger. They see neighborliness and mutual support replaced by isolation and impersonal government largess. They see a world that exalts equality at the expense of distinction and accomplishment. They see a pervasive pathology in this society: high crime rate; falling educational performance; declining work ethic; deteriorating families; disregard for manners and civility; and personal upheaval and unhappiness that is reflected in a multibillion dollar a year therapy industry. They see the masses of people being conditioned to embrace the new without any clear sense of what it is doing to them or where it is taking them.

Trust in the Culmulative Wisdom of the Ages

It is fashionable these days to talk about centrisms: ethnocentrism, Eurocentrism, Afrocentrism, and so on. Another centrism, one rarely used, will help clarify the conservative perspective, and that is *chronocentrism*. Chrono refers to time, so chronocentrism is orienting oneself around this time, now. Conservatives reject a particular kind of chronocentrism they find highly prevalent in our time. It is a chronocentrism so strong that it manifests itself in the belief that *only* the present counts; there is no need to attend to the past other than to perhaps carry around a few basic assumptions about what went on back then. A chronocentric perspective obscures the continuity of the present with what has gone before. It gets so caught up in current ideas and circumstances that it views and assesses prior ideas and patterns through that lens to the point that the past is distorted (a process called presentism). It is a frame of reference which assumes that this time is the best time, *has* to be the best time, and leads to the presumptuous idea that what went on before must to be inferior, behind the times. It plays out as the belief that we know more than our forebears about how to do things, no doubt at all about that. They did the best they could back then, but they were limited by the times they lived in, and we are so much more advanced now. Really, so it is averred, there isn't anything much at all we can learn from them other than in a negative sense—what *not* to do.

Much in modern culture promotes chronocentrism. More than a few elements, forces, movements, send out the message that the latest is *the* action, *the* best, the *only* thing that matters. At the core of science and technology, central to their point of view, is the idea that what is really important is the latest discovery and the most up-to-date version of something. The concept of advancement is embedded in these components of our world, the notion that things are getting better as time goes along. As well, fundamental to our economy is the promotion of a desire to consume the "new and improved." And certainly the popular culture—television, movies, the music industry, mass market magazines—sell "nowness" hard: keep up with what is in vogue, believe in it, buy it.

Conservatives are not chronocentric. In fact, they find it dangerously arrogant to think we are such hot stuff that we know it all and that things must be better now than they were. Kirk warns against "... the notion of twentieth century folk that their era was the culmination of human striving, when in truth the notions of Modernity brought upon the whole world a ruin worse than that which fell upon Roman civilization in the fifth century."¹⁸

In contrast to a chronocentric orientation, conservatives are—perhaps to coin a term—*historocentric*. A historocentric perspective—historo as in history—takes the totality of past, present, and future into account; that is the frame of reference. The conservative's historocentric point of view emphasizes the continuity of the past and the present. It emphasizes an obligation to the past, the duty to honor it and to continue its good works. And very important, this historocentric posture holds out the very real possibility that the past was not in fact backward in its ideas and its ways, and that it can offer lessons that those living in the present would profit from learning. Conservatives don't write off the past as beside the point. In fact, conservatives have concluded from their consideration of the past that by-and-large we are *not* living better, happier, more productive lives than our ancestors did. Our grandmothers and grandfathers knew something about living, but we won't ever be able to come to that reality if we are locked into the idea that we must have it right, or at least far closer to right than they did.

A major outgrowth of this historocentric orientation is the faith conservatives have in the wisdom about living that has developed over the course of human existence: call it the *cumulative wisdom of the ages*. As conservatives see it, this wisdom, this profound insight, has evolved in a natural, organic way as a result of the action of many, many individuals and groups over a great period of time. This process has resulted in truths that are bigger than any individual or group can devise. Conservatives seek out this wisdom, they honor it. This is not to say that conservatives give over slavish allegiance to the ways of the past, but they do find that the old ways have shown themselves to be to be worthy guides in the creation of decent, happy, and productive lives. At the very least, conservatives are not so caught up with their own insights and prescience that they conclude they can, without peril, willy-nilly deviate from the patterns of life human beings have established over the course of their existence.

Conservatives are particularly suspicious of individuals who presume they know enough to take it upon themselves to redesign others' lives or reshape society in accordance with some plan they have come up with or heard about. Conservatives have a distinct distrust of glib talkers and experts—"sophisters and calculators," as Kirk refers to them¹⁹—who would straighten out the affairs of the rest of us if we would do what they say. For one thing, conservatives note a rather consistent self-interest hidden beneath the high-sounding rhetoric and schemes. Listen closely and it often comes down to giving them and their kind a leg up and setting themselves up as being above any responsibility to anybody but themselves and their own. At minimum, it puts them in the center of the

action and makes them look good. And almost invariably it doesn't cost them anything to be for what they advocate; it costs *somebody else* something, but not them. An even more fundamental consideration for conservatives, they simply don't think individuals on their own or linked with like-minded others are wise enough to figure it all out without things eventually going haywire at some point down the line; or at least they aren't wise enough often enough to trust them with the store, as it were.

This, then, is the basis for conservatives' preference for the traditional, the tried and true over the new and untested. Conservatives see custom, convention, and old prescriptions as healthy checks against individuals' limited horizons, anarchic impulses, and lust for status and power. Rather than seeing life as a challenge to break with the past, go beyond it, as many do, including most educators, conservatives are more of a mind to live in a way that is continuous with the past and consistent with the best the past represents.

A Commitment to Reason and Objectivity

Conservatives are committed to seeing the world for what it actually is. They seek to ground themselves in the reality about human beings and life and not palatable concepts stemming from wishful delusions. Things are as they are. To pretend or fool oneself into believing that something is so that isn't so is to lay the groundwork for disappointment and defeat. The late Revilo P. Oliver, a classics professor at the University of Illinois for many years, summed up the conservative orientation in this regard:

A conservative is a man who is willing to learn from the accumulated experience of mankind. He must strive to observe dispassionately and objectively, and he must reason from his observations with a full awareness of the limitations of reason. And he must, above all, have the courage to confront the unpleasant realities of human nature and all the world in which we live.²⁰

Indeed, conservatives do find some things that many would view as "unpleasant realities" when they use their senses and their minds to discern what is truly going on. Among those unpleasant, and often unpopular, realities are the following: Human nature has its dark side. There are serious limitations on the perfectibility of human beings. There are qualitative differences among individuals and among cultures. And there are inherent differences between men and women in areas beyond reproductive capability. If these realities aren't acknowledged and taken into account, conservatives argue, we may be able to pride ourselves in

being on the side of the angels, so to speak, but at the same time we are going to drive down the wrong roads.

FIVE VALUES OF CONTEMPORARY CONSERVATIVES

The five principles outlined above—the search for the permanent, a belief in a transcendent order, skepticism about progress, faith in the cumulative wisdom of the ages, and a commitment to grounding themselves in reality—are foundational to the outlook of conservatives. In addition to these overarching principles, below I describe five values that are important to understand if one is to comprehend how contemporary conservatives approach things. These values do not stand separate from the principles, as they are outgrowths of them. It may be an artificial distinction to separate out these values—these affinities, these preferred ways, these commitments—from the five principles, but they seem to me to be more specific, more day-to-day, more rooted in this time and place, less basic, than the principles, and thus I put them in a different category. I suggest that the following five values are core underpinnings of the posture toward life and society adopted by conservatives in our time: love of country; belief in the government the framers devised; affection for cultural integrity; commitment to qualitative individuality; and affinity for the graceful life.

Love of Country

Conservatives tend to feel a strong emotional attachment and obligation, loyalty, to America, their country, one that extends beyond this moment into the past and on into the future. Conservatives tend to be nationalists: their primary identification is as an American. This is in contrast to primarily seeing themselves as, other possibilities, a member of a racial or ethnic group, a global citizen, a part of humankind, or an advocate of an idea or cause. It distinguishes them from liberals, who tend to be less nationalistic and more likely to take on international, group, or cause (racial justice, gender equity, democratization, etc.) identities.

Conservatives believe strongly in this country: what it stands for, what it has sought to achieve, and what it has accomplished in its history. They see this country as a remarkable and exemplary place. By no means do conservatives consider America to have been without flaws—serious ones in several areas, race being one of them—but nevertheless conservatives think America has, we have, often with great hardship and sacrifice, over the course of our history attempted

to live out America's laudable ideals and made steady progress toward their realization. Conservatives believe America deserves criticism, which is healthy, but it doesn't deserve derision and condemnation, which is destructive. Conservatives have disdain for those who ridicule this country. Conservatives particularly reject what they see as an attack in recent years on America's European heritage, seeing it as self-serving and divisive. Conservatives tend to be proud patriots who will defend this country against those who trash it.

Belief in the Government the Framers Created

Conservatives have confidence in the Constitution as it was written: a republican system of representative government with clearly delineated and limited federal prerogatives and a strong affirmation and protection of individual rights. Conservatives believe in a free market economy, with a circumscribed governmental role, where individual merit, work, and thrift are rewarded. They value property rights greatly. They are wary of the government redistribution of wealth through taxation. Conservatives believe strongly in freedom of association, in private life especially, and to a large extent in the public domain as well. In domestic affairs, conservatives place more faith in voluntary, local, private actions than government programs and requirements. In foreign affairs, conservatives are like liberals in that typically they are internationalists and supportive of strong government initiatives in the international arena—although there is a vocal minority of conservatives who think we should focus more on attending to our own business and letting the rest of the world attend to theirs.²¹

Conservatives revere our political heritage and worry that, little by little, we are straying from it. Kirk quotes Cicero who about the Roman republic said: "Our age inherited the Republic like some beautiful painting of bygone days, its colors already fading through great age; and not only has our time neglected to freshen the colors of the picture, but we have failed to preserve its form and outline."²² Kirk sees us making the same mistake with this republic. In particular, conservatives point to the ever-increasing amount of central direction from government. Kirk refers with alarm to a government that "seeks to destroy all rivals to its power and to subordinate all human relationships to its might."²³ Other departures from our republican principles that conservatives see include: Courts bypassing the legislative process and inserting their own views into the Constitution. Democratization to the point that majorities—or more accurately, collections of interest groups—are able to use the government to serve their particular interests at the expense of those who for whatever reason can't capture

the machinery of government. Group identity and group entitlements obscuring individual identity and the right to equal treatment. Coerced economic leveling through government expropriation of one person's earnings or property so that it be given to some other person or group. The low level of true participation in the political process, with, often, anonymous voting being the only form of civic involvement for people—that is, among the minority of the population who see worth in participating at all in the governing enterprise and take the time to do so. To conservatives, something has gone very wrong, and we need to reconnect with our political roots to find out what has happened to us.

Commitment to Cultural Integrity

Cultural diversity is much talked about these years, diversity being one of the two core concepts—racism, the other—of the powerfully influential ideology of multiculturalism. As it goes, cultural diversity is beneficial, right, to be sought in most every context. While conservatives have some serious concern about the effects of a press for cultural diversity on standards and equal opportunity, they agree that cultural diversity can have a positive impact on people and circumstances. But the emphasis is on *can* have rather than *will* have. Conservatives aren't as sure as liberals that diversity is always a good thing. In fact, the level of belief—much lower among conservatives—in the good results and moral justification of diversity distinguishes conservatives from liberals. For one thing, conservatives assess the benefits of diversity by measuring its impact on something else they value highly, and that is *cultural integrity*.

To define cultural integrity, you have to define *culture* first. Culture refers to the way of life of a people: core assumptions about reality, what matters and ought to go on as these people see it, and individual and collective patterns of behavior. A culture is potentially, ideally, an integrated whole, a set of interrelated and mutually complementary elements. The concept of cultural integrity gets at how well a particular culture holds together, how harmonious it is, how well one element meshes with another. Cultural integrity looks upon culture as if it were a precious and fragile plant, a plant that must be nurtured and protected. Whatever comes into contact with it must be monitored, because some things will make it flourish, while other things will make it wither and die. To continue this plant metaphor, trying to interject oak leaves—fine in themselves—into the petals of a rose does not necessarily make the rose more beautiful, and, even more, the attempt to do that could well kill the rose. And even if the oak leaf/rose petal integration is successful, the rose is lost forever.

To use another metaphor to make this point, culture can be seen as a mobile constructed over a long period of time and hanging in delicate balance. Change one element of the mobile and it will tip; overload it and it will crash to the floor.

Still another image, culture is like a fine piece of crystal: introduce a foreign element and it is likely to shatter. When you break crystal, it remains shattered in pieces; and if that crystal is one of a kind and for some reason it took generation upon generation to produce, it will be impossible to replicate.

Metaphors aside, an example from American history: If diversity is such a good thing, Native Americans should have been enriched by the introduction of European cultural elements: European outlooks and ways related to property, religion, literacy, toil, competition, and the rest. But rather than enrich the Native American cultures, European culture proved to be—yet another metaphor—bacteria that made them sick. It wasn't just guns and false promises that devastated Native Americans, it was alien approaches to life. Simply, Native American cultures could not absorb the intrusion of these foreign elements. Native American cultures' distance from other cultures had served to keep them pristine. Closeness served to contaminate them. Mixture served to destroy them. Native American cultures lost their cultural integrity, and in all likelihood, irretrievably.

Conservatives celebrate the pluralism of America and the contributions of the varied peoples who have been part of this country's story. But at the same time, conservatives underscore that a hybrid culture is not necessarily a better culture. Their observations of American life lead them to conclude that diversity too frequently results in a culture characterized by a mish-mash of various traditions, and that ironically it leads to homogenization: the push toward diversity encourages conformity and blurs valid differences.

From the vantage point of history, conservatives note that people have tended to live out their lives amid their own people, within the context of their own heritage, in alignment with their own ways. Conservatives demand the freedom to do the same. They demand that they have that choice, and that they not be compelled to live in accordance with what some individual or group has decided they must do. Most conservatives are a long way from being cultural relativists. They believe that some cultures are better than others, and that they have the right to make judgments about cultures and to live their lives accordingly. They assert that protecting one's own cultural heritage is a worthy endeavor, particularly if that heritage runs the danger of being lost or is under attack. They hold dear to the idea of cultural integrity.

Commitment to Qualitative Individuality

Conservatives care deeply about the whole: ethnicity, family, religion, community, nation, world. But at the same time conservatives don't lose sight of the individual: the separate, distinct, and volitional human being. Conservatives recognize and applaud individual differences: human beings are not all alike and that is a glorious thing. Kirk writes of conservatism's "affection for the proliferating variety and mystery of human existence, as opposed to the narrowing uniformity, egalitarianism, and utilitarian aims of most radical systems."²⁴ Human beings are not, in fact, equally admirable. There are qualitative differences among them (thus the use of the rather cumbersome term "qualitative individuality" in the heading to this section). Individuals differ in character, ability, interests, styles, and accomplishments. Conservatives sing the praises of differences in distinction and drive rather than promote equality to the point that it becomes sameness and universal mediocrity.

This focus on the qualitative differences among individuals manifests as a concern among conservatives for individual virtue. Virtue has to do with a person's character, his or her moral fiber, or, as my mother used to put it, what someone is made of. Virtue is seen in different ways by different people, but it involves the possession by an individual of such personal characteristics as honesty, diligence, orderliness, self-discipline, willingness to work hard, frugality, moderation, temperance, kindness, generosity, fairness, independent-mindedness, dutifulness to family, and civic responsibility.

Conservatives recognize the propensity of individuals to be the opposite of the qualities just listed. Kirk talks about "the impulses toward cruelty, destruction, and ruthless self-gratification that forever are fighting to master our inner nature."²⁵ Conservatives contend that while circumstances can help, they alone cannot make a person virtuous. Becoming virtuous is a task each person has to take on him—or herself. Individual human beings face the challenge of defeating the external and internal forces that distract them and pull them down and making themselves into virtuous persons, people of sound character, quality human beings.

Beyond moral worth there is also physical perfection. (Perfection is employed loosely here, and shouldn't be taken as implying that human beings can ever actually attain it.) Kirk didn't emphasize physical development toward an ideal form or pattern, but enough other conservative writers have to warrant its inclusion here. I think of two writers from many years ago. One was the Harvard psychologist and philosopher William James, who gave a great deal of attention to physicality and the place of physical development in the overall positive

unfolding of a individual.²⁶ The other is the creator of the Tarzan series of books begun in 1912, the conservative writer Edgar Rice Burroughs. Some readers may not realize how successful Burroughs books have been, selling millions upon millions of copies in Stephen King fashion. By the way, the Tarzan in the books is nothing like the way the character was portrayed in the old movies, grunting out "Me Tarzan-you Jane." In the books, Tarzan was highly verbal and sophisticated. I haven't seen the 1980s "Lord of Greystoke" movie or the recent television Tarzans, so I don't know how he comes off there. Burroughs was quoted as saying, "I have been considerably influenced by the hope that they [the Tarzan stories] might carry a beneficial suggestion of the value of physical perfection."²⁷ In both James and Burroughs, the ideal is the same: a healthy, lean, lithe, alert, active, graceful, fierce, and proud physicality in service to an individual's equally developed reason, willfulness, and virtue.

The picture one gets from all of this is an individual who vigorously, and with élan, gets on with life. There is an action orientation here, action directed by reason and decency. It is a life characterized by self-reliance and getting things done. It is a heroic life. Burroughs' biographer wrote, "ERB's heroes . . . face dangers and seemingly hopeless situations undauntedly and with a refusal to yield to discouragement. With these men the solution was always found in action This rejection of passivity—a resignation to fate, or quietism—was part of Burrough's practical view of life. When a difficult situation arises, a man must do something to solve it on his own."²⁸ The life depicted in these stories isn't an introspective or psychological life. It isn't a life caught up in looking within and pondering how it all went and why it all is. To the conservative, life isn't all that complicated: there is a family to care for, work to do, leisure to be enjoyed, and a community and nation to be served. So cut short the navel-gazing and rationalizing and get on with it while there is time, and have some joy in your heart as you do that.

Affinity for the Graceful Life

Conservatives, at least of the Kirk stripe, live what can be called a graceful life. Besides Kirk, another example of conservatives who advocated and exemplified this kind of life were the Southern Agrarians, as they were called, writers and poets prominent in the 1930s and 1940s, among them, Donald Davidson, Allen Tate, Cleanth Brooks, and Richard Weaver. A contemporary writer who reflects this value is the Kentucky-based Wendell Berry.²⁹ These individuals take their work seriously in that they seek to define and create a true vocation for themselves. But they aren't careerists in the modern sense: they don't get caught

up in thinking that upward occupational mobility, status, and financial reward is everything and wind up chasing after a career and letting it consume their time and attention. Conservatives of the sort I have in mind try to work at an even pace and with dignity and control. They protect the time with their family and friends. They value leisure that is something other than television and the rest of mass entertainment with its rat-a-tat-tat sensations and vicariousness. Kirk found television so jangly he wouldn't watch it. The image is of a life with good art, good books, hiking, boating, card-playing with friends, that sort of thing. It is a life lived at a measured pace and not as if it were a race to a finish line. It is a life with good manners, civility, kindness, fidelity, and decorum. These are things that many of today's intelligencia and underclass trivialize, but to conservatives they matter a great deal.

In his writing and the way he lived, Kirk affirmed rural and small town life. The emphasis in Kirk's life was on being connected to the earth, to the land, to a community, to a home. He stressed the value of family and children and, within that, conventional relationships between parents and children and husbands and wives. Some would call this old fashioned, although Kirk undoubtedly would not have taken offense at that, because to him there is nothing inherently bad about the fashions of old. To be sure, the kind of life Kirk advocated and lived was not a life in accordance with what is considered to be the enlightened thinking of the day, but Kirk contended that it was consistent with our nature as human beings and more likely to make people happy and fulfilled rather than warring with themselves and each other.³⁰

While conservatives—again, of the sort I have in mind—acknowledge the contributions science and technology have made to our lives, they also have reservations about the effect these forces are having on the kind of life they most value. What is science and technology, these creations and the ways of thinking and acting that accompany them, doing to us? Conservative literary critic Sven Birkerts' response to a passage in Cormac McCarthy's novel, *All the Pretty Horses*:

What I find here, what gathers around me as a kind of weather as I read, is a feeling about the primary components of the human experience—the new presence of nature, the sensuous thingness of things, the unbroken quality of passing time, and a near-sacramental awareness of human beings which has everything to do with presence and, perhaps indistinguishably, boundedness With every passing year we lose further these givens: the awareness of time, space, thingness, and other flesh-and blood individuals.

The awareness does not survive easily among the clicking of keys and the exchange of myriad signals we use to guide ourselves through the new virtual space that encloses us Is human nature endlessly malleable, or do we accept modification only to a certain point? My instinct tells me that we can only travel a certain distance from the world that our deepest instincts are programmed to. After that, who knows? A betrayal of the given must exact consequences. We may be risking an alienation unprecedented in our species' history, a unbearable lightness of being that we have no choice but to keep on bearing.³¹

As eloquent as Birkerts is, let's leave this section with the words of Russell Kirk, who expresses the hope that there will be in our time a "regeneration of spirit and character," and where the average person will find "true family, links with the past, expectations for the future, duty as well as right, resources that matter more than mass-amusement and mass-vices . . . purpose to labor and domestic existence . . . hopes and long views and thoughts of posterity . . . [and] true community, local energies, and co-operation."³²

A CONSERVATIVE EDUCATION

What form of schooling will best contribute to the realization of the conservative vision? I will describe five characteristics of schooling for children and adolescents that I think can be derived from the conservative orientation outlined above: an American education; the passing on of tradition; bringing the finest to students; a focus on what individual students are made of; and transmitting teachers. I won't go into specific programs and practices here. What I hope to do is point out some useful directions to those who would take on that task.

An American Education

A conservative education would be in the most fundamental sense an American education. It would be about us as Americans, about our heritage, beliefs, institutions, traditions, people, and current reality. In contrast, liberals are more likely to center schooling elsewhere, such as in a concept of global or democratic citizenship, social transformation, social justice, group identity, developmental responsiveness, or the school as a humane community. In the conservative frame of reference, it is a pluralistic rather than multicultural America. The late New York University professor Neil Postman contended that cultural pluralism as a

lens for looking at who we are shows the young how various racial and ethnic groups fit into a more inclusive and comprehensive American story:

While it [cultural pluralism] conceded that the American Creed was based predominantly on an Anglo-Saxon tradition, the argument was made that its traditions were being enacted largely by immigrants, who enriched it by their own traditions The idea of cultural pluralism entered the schools in the 1930s America was shown to be a composite culture from which, in principle, none were excluded Even the horrendous stories of the massacre of "native" Americans, slavery, and the exploitation of "coolie" labor could be told without condemning the ideals of democracy, the melting pot, or the Protestant ethic. Indeed, such stories often served as an inspiration to purify the American Creed, to overcome prejudice, to redeem ourselves from the blighted parts of our history.³³

Postman asserted that multiculturalism can lead to alienation and divisiveness and seriously threatens the public schools.³⁴ Too often, according to Postman, cultural diversity becomes a preoccupation to the point that it obscures cultural commonality and unity.³⁵

Postman argued that characteristically multiculturalists proceed from the premise that oppression and privilege are "the key to understanding white history, literature, art, and most everything else of European origin."³⁶

It is possible, by ignoring its transcendent ideals, to tell America's story as a history of racism, inequity, and violence To point out that the Constitution, when written, permitted the exclusion of women and nonproperty owners from voting, and did not regard slaves as fully human, is not to make a mockery of [the American] story. The creation of the Constitution, including the limitations of the men who wrote it, is only an early chapter of a two-hundred-year-old narrative whose theme is the gradual and often painful expansion of the concepts of freedom and humanity.³⁷

Within the conservative concept of America, the emphasis is on our common destiny rather than our conflicts.

The Passing On of Tradition

The transmission of tradition is a central task in a conservative school. By tradition is meant the ideas and events and individuals that have shaped the students'

circumstance, which for all students, even those from non-European backgrounds, includes the Western heritage. Kirk's wife Annette, who shared his views, put it this way to educators: "Your mission and ours, then, is to make the old truths new, to teach a reverence for the past, for we are but dwarfs standing on the shoulders of spiritual and intellectual giants. We recall the words of Cicero when he describes how the neglect of an inheritance may lead to dissolution."³⁸ What stands out is Annette Kirk's use of a word like reverence in this context. Russell Kirk observed that large numbers of students seem to have been taught to revere nothing.³⁹ What also stands out in what Annette Kirk said is the humility with reference to the past. This compares with the kind of self-assurance that leads people to conclude that they have little if anything to learn from what has gone before and are altogether capable of shaping their own lives or remaking society based solely on what they happen to have in mind at the moment.

Over four decades ago, the conservative writer Clifton Fadiman wrote that tradition is "the mechanism by which all past men teach future men."⁴⁰ According to Fadiman, one of the positive results of the transmission of tradition is that it will help preclude students from becoming Lost (his capitalization). Reflecting on his own traditional education in the early part of this century, Fadiman noted: "I do not feel Lost. I know how I came to be an American citizen in 1959; what large general movements of history produced me."⁴¹ What Fadiman said so many years ago speaks to the lives of many youngsters these years who seem quite rootless.

Nothing that has been said thus far should be taken to imply that a conservative education would try to inculcate a slavish adherence to tradition. Fadiman, wrote that the primary job of the school was the transmission *and the continual reappraisal* of tradition.⁴² Conservatives talk about respect for the past, but they also value very highly the use of one's mind. They don't require students to check their rational faculties outside the classroom door. In fact, one of the criticisms conservatives level at modern-day schooling is its tendency to tell students what to think about the past.

Bringing the Finest to Students

A central component in a conservative education would be students' encounter with the finest things, or the Permanent Things as Kirk called them: the best literature, ideas, art, and examples of human conduct. The curriculum of a conservative school is not driven by what students or the teacher finds interesting or relevant. Nor does it stem from what promotes personal or social development,

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speaks to a contemporary issue, or enhances a skill. All of these may be important outcomes to pursue, but the conservative wants to avoid a situation where goals such as these are sought at the expense of getting the best into children's experience. The timelessly finest, the Permanent, is not, it should be noted, limited to what actually exists; concepts, portrayals, and images of what things *could* be like or *ought* to be like can be among the finest too. Sometimes schools bring reality, problems, and conflict into the lives of students to the exclusion of positive models for students to emulate. Unintentionally to be sure, schools often promote despair at the price of hope. Of course, exactly what is finest or best is a judgment that has to be made, but the conservative school and the conservative teacher is willing to make that judgment.

A number of *core knowledge schools* around the country are currently receiving a great deal of attention.⁴³ These schools draw inspiration from the writings of University of Virginia professor emeritus E.D. Hirsch, Jr., who, through his writings, some of which have made best-seller lists, has come to be associated in with the concept of *cultural literacy*.⁴⁴ Basically, cultural literacy is the possession of the background knowledge necessary to make sense of contemporary phenomena. The conservative concept of the finest, or permanent, things is somewhat different from Hirsch's concept of cultural literacy in that it is more selective. Within the permanent-things frame, it isn't *any* knowledge useful in meaning-making that justifies something's inclusion in a student's course of study; rather, it is knowledge of the *very best* that justifies something's inclusion. It is this awareness of—and, it is hoped, commitment to—permanent things that conservatives care about. Thus a piece of literature isn't brought to students attention because it is something they ought to know about in order to understand what they encounter now and later on, but rather because it is truly exemplary.

Having said that, it should be noted that the core knowledge schools have much to recommend them from a conservative perspective, because essentially they are conservative in their orientation. They focus on content and character, and, as a matter of fact, they do spend significant amounts of time with permanent things. Hirsch labels himself a political liberal and an educational conservative. He contends that progressive schooling practices have, in fact, resulted in greater academic and social inequity. He argues that the way to achieve liberalism's aim of social justice is, ironically, through conservative, not liberal, educational policies: "[T]he best practices of educational conservatism are the only means whereby children from disadvantaged homes can secure the knowledge and skills that will enable them to improve their condition."⁴⁵

There is a body of knowledge that conservative schools think worthy of teaching to students—they don't waffle about that. Kirk worries about schools "substituting facile generalizations for the inculcation of a genuine body of knowledge."⁴⁶ Conservatives find that the best way to proceed is to organize the curriculum around the traditional academic disciplines—math, science, literature, history, and art. They stay away from merging these subjects, or integrating them into the investigation of themes or issues. Conservatives find that attempts to move away from separate subjects too often detracts from students' engagement with the best within these fields, and it lessens the maturity and intensity of study whenever the best does happen to be encountered. Also, conservatives tend to favor a prescribed course of study with few options. They want to focus students' work on what truly matters, and they are not sanguine about students, young as they are, having the insight and perspective to choose wisely from a series of electives. Conservatives' realistic appraisal leads them away from romanticizing the wisdom and seriousness of intentions among students and toward the sobering conclusion that giving students wide latitude in shaping their studies almost invariably results in the trivialization of the educational enterprise.

Many conservatives are themselves highly capable in the area of technology. Nevertheless, one hears many conservatives—certainly not all—concerned about schools becoming so enamored of computer technology and the Internet that students won't often enough think, read, write, and speak in serious and sustained ways. There may be much information in cyberspace but little wisdom and beauty. Often on their own, without the help of the school, students get very capable with the hardware and software; better than their teachers, in fact. Educators may be overestimating how difficult information-processing skills are to acquire, and how necessary schools are in that process. What the vast majority of youngsters appear to need is exposure to knowledge, capabilities, and possibilities they are not likely to come across pushing computer keys.

Over the years, conservative proposals have been quite scarce in the educational literature. One notable break in the liberal and radical left predominance has been the writings of philosopher Mortimer Adler.⁴⁷ A report prepared in the 1980s by a group Adler headed, the Paideia Proposal, was quite conservative in its orientation. In one of the three strands that comprise its curriculum, students explore great books and other works of art.⁴⁸ Back in the 1940s and 1950s, the poet Mark Van Doren wrote eloquently about the value of a general, or liberal, education that helps an individual "think the best thoughts of which he is

capable.”⁴⁹ Russell Kirk points out that “a liberally educated man has a great store of knowledge and common sense; ignorant enthusiasm cannot remake the world.”⁵⁰ Clifton Fadiman in his modest way noted about his own basic education that now, “My tastes are fallible but not so fallible that I am easily seduced by the vulgar and transitory.”⁵¹

In recent years, Arthur Powell has written about prep schools, many of which operate in ways conservatives find amenable to their way of thinking. Powell notes that prep schools are more likely than other schools to stand their ground against the anti-intellectual and anti-academic attitudes of students, parents, and the mass culture. These schools don't so readily cave in and reflect current biases; instead, they challenge them.⁵² For conservatives, nothing is needed more in this day and age than for schools to counter the tide of contemporary attitudes about what is important to know.

A Focus on What Individual Students are Made Of

A conservative school cares about more than what a student knows, prefers, and can do. It also cares about what a student *is*. The term that is most often used for this concern is *character*, which is an updated way of getting at personal virtue, which was discussed in the list of conservative values above. Both liberals and conservatives care about virtue or character. What distinguishes them, however, is that conservatives are more likely to focus on what contemporary educator Kevin Ryan calls “stern” virtues such as orderliness, self-discipline, and courage, while liberals are more likely to emphasize “soft” virtues such as care, compassion, and self-esteem.⁵³ Other traits conservatives are likely to promote are honesty, hard work, independent-mindedness, perseverance, honesty, respect, loyalty, mannerliness, and family and civic responsibility.

Character—let's that term rather than virtue because it resonates more to the modern ear—has to do with both how strong a person is and how *good* a person is; personal morality is involved here. Conservatives are more likely than liberals to link morality to religion. Conservatives usually argue that morality can't be dealt with in a completely secular matter, divorced from the transcendent. Kirk criticized the liberal approach. “In America, the notion of ‘values’ has been thrust forward by sociologists and educationists . . . as a substitute for the religious assumptions about human nature that formerly were taken for granted in schools.”⁵⁴ As well, Conservatives tend to be less relativistic than liberals. Liberals reject a fixed idea of virtue or morality and stress instead that what is considered good and moral depends on the circumstance. There are some things that liberals

are willing to teach directly, such as care for and service to others, democratic participation, and commitment to social justice, but in most areas the liberal view is that morality comes down to personal choices by students. In contrast, conservatives are more predisposed to think that if you look hard enough you'll find that things aren't in as much flux and relative as you may have assumed. Thus conservatives affirm that there are permanent moral truths that warrant endorsement by the school. An example, Kevin Ryan, asserts that sex is not a morally neutral matter and advocates that schools promote sexual abstinence among unmarried teenagers.⁵⁵

Conservatives think there is the need to actively teach morality in schools. Kirk quotes Alexis de Toqueville as saying that literacy and book learning are of little use unless they are united to "the moral education which amends the heart."⁵⁶ These matters should not be ignored or relegated to classroom opinionizing. Kirk is blunt in this regard: "If there is no education for virtue, many will become vicious . . ."⁵⁷ Kirk notes that schools stress sociability but "neglect the development of right reason and ethical insight that grows out of the arousal of the moral imagination."⁵⁸ Kirk criticizes what he sees as the liberal posture: "A 'value,' as educationists employ that unfortunate word, is a personal preference, gratifying perhaps to the person that holds it, but of no binding moral effect upon others. Choose what values you will, or ignore the lot of them: it's a matter of what gives you, the individual, the most pleasure or the least amount of pain."⁵⁹

Conservative educator Edward Wynn writes about what he calls the *Great Tradition* in education, which has emphasized the transmission of good moral values to students.⁶⁰ Wynn points out that schools have not always stayed away from this responsibility; in fact, historically they have accepted it. I referred to Edgar Rice Burroughs earlier. The academy he attended late in the nineteenth century said it was interested in "developing the whole man, [with] moral training of the students given as much consideration as mental training."⁶¹ It is only in recent years that schools have tended to reflect the liberal emphasis on value analysis and value choice by students along with the stress on group participation and interpersonal skills rather than character as traditionally defined.⁶² The ways schools approached teaching good character (which subsumes good moral traits) in prior years have included the following: Teachers and schools publicly *stood for it* and let students know they did. They *modeled it* in everything they did. They *professed it* whenever the occasion allowed. They *illustrated it* through the curriculum materials, the books they chose and so on. Students *experienced and developed it* in the curricular and extra-curricular activities the teachers and schools

organized. The teachers and schools *affirmed it* through rituals and ceremonies, and *acknowledged and rewarded it* whenever it was demonstrated by students. Conservatives assume that if schools truly intended to impart good character they would find the ways to do so with at least reasonable success. It is not an impossible task, say the conservatives. What it takes is a deep commitment among educators to take on the job and get it done.

In addition to morality, there is physicality. This involves supporting students in becoming healthy, active, vigorous physical beings. The aim is to create a physical vitality that is supportive of overall personal strength: an individual who is independent, confident, self-reliant, a doer, assertive, competitive, collaborative, and resilient. Among the possibilities for how to achieve these ends: Participation in individual and team athletics (not spectating, nor sitting on the bench while the stars perform). Outdoor activities such as hiking and climbing. Martial arts. Dance. Health and nutrition classes. Readings that portray a physically healthy and active life. There is also schools' encouragement of basic physical efficacy, the enhancement of students' ability to manage their concrete surroundings in practical ways: for example, taking on household repairs or doing something when the boat stalls instead of just sitting there. Really, it is not so much teaching students to do those kinds of things as it is promoting the disposition to confront the world rather than freeze up out of a sense of one's own ineffectuality. In this regard, I was taken by the basic manual skills element in the Paideia Proposal put out by Mortimer Adler's group.⁶³ That is not the sort of thing one hears these days from educators, but conservatives would considerate it an intriguing possibility.

As for the gender identities that schools promote directly or indirectly, conservatives are more of a mind than liberals to value traditional "real man" and "real women" categories. Liberals are more likely to believe that conventional gender roles need to be broken down and redefined. In response to this position, the conservative message to boys and girls and men and women goes something like this: "Rather than buying in or caving in to the theories and imperatives coming at you from highly vocal and insistent self-anointed experts, ground yourself in your physical, organic being, in your actual experience, in that reality. Look around you and use your reason and find out for yourself what really works for men and women; see who is truly in flow in their lives instead of lurching along. Study the history of the relationships between men and women yourself rather than allow someone to summarize it for you." Conservatives contend that if people did that they would discover that traditional concepts of masculinity and femininity and traditional patterns of men-women relationships make much

more sense than they had been told. As for schools, conservatives want them to desist from the unisex propagandizing. Let boys and girls be who they are and quit trying to re-socialize them into what you have decided is better. Schools and teachers, say the conservatives, could start with that.

In our time, many consider manners and personal kindness to be unimportant concerns, but conservatives think that mannerliness and kindness are key measures of a person. How one treats other people is important in itself, plus it says a great deal about someone's character generally—everything is connected. In a biography of George Washington I read not long ago, I was taken with how seriously Washington took his own mannerliness, to the point of writing down to-do lists for himself in this area.⁶⁴ Washington understood that manners make a positive difference in the way people function with one another. He also realized that working on one's manners contributes to personal development in other ways as well, such as increasing self-respect and self-control. As for kindness, I note that the prep schools Arthur Powell describes make kindness one of the two primary expectations they communicate to students (the other one being that the student do his or her best academically).⁶⁵ Conservatives suggest that at least schools could make it known that they believe in good manners and kindness, exemplify them in the way they operate, and approve when they see them and disapprove when they don't. As it is now, too many schools are accommodating themselves to the boorishness and incivility that is currently prevalent in society.

Transmitting Teachers

What would characterize the kind of teacher that is needed in a conservative school? I will list five traits.

First, the teachers would have content they are committed to transmit to students—thus the term transmitting teachers. Distinctions are subtle here because every teacher has material they want to get across to their students, but many teachers see themselves primarily as facilitators or coaches and as essentially acting in a supportive role with students, and they focus on skills and attitudes and student choices and relationships. This results in the classroom undertaking being more diffuse, less concentrated, having less thrust toward substantive learning, and having less momentum than those under the direction of the kind of conservative teachers I have in mind. The conservative teachers seriously, maturely, embrace particular knowledge and ways which they consider crucial that students acquire, and they feel a strong inner push to get that through to

students, get them engaged with it, studying it, moving forward with good speed in that direction. To put it simply, conservative teachers *teach* in the conventional sense of the word.

Second, the teachers would be *well educated*. The conservative approach is centered on what has been called here the permanent things, the finest things, the best things. This approach depends on more than teachers caring about children, being able to relate to them, and having a grasp on the techniques of teaching. To be sure, those are valuable attributes and capabilities for teachers to possess, but they aren't enough. A solid academic background is a requisite for effective teaching within this conservative frame of reference. Teachers need to possess the knowledge and attitudes that come out of a first class general or liberal arts education.

Third, the teachers would be *cultured*. In the kind of education conservatives envision, it is important that conservative teachers do more than point the way to students; they should *be* the way. They should be positive examples for students to emulate, or as Arthur Powell puts it, "living alternatives to cultural mediocrity."⁶⁶

Fourth, the teachers would have *strong personalities*. Conservative teachers are authority figures, not modest facilitators, and they have to be strong enough to take on that posture. They must have the personal strength to stand up to the tastes and preferences of students that conflict with what they are trying to impart. They need to have the personal wherewithal to set high standards of conduct and academic engagement and stick with them. They have to be strong enough to "bring students to them," to what they are teaching and what they represent. The liberal approach is more of a "go to students" methodology: relating to and responding to student concerns and interests. In the conservative frame, there are crucially important things students need to learn, and they must come "over here" from where they are at the moment in order to learn them. It takes strong, grounded, purposeful teachers to instruct in that fashion.

And fifth, the teachers would be willing to *defer to parents*. Conservative teachers are not trying to set themselves up as surrogate parents to their students. They recognize that their students are their parents' children, not theirs. In the name of professionalism, they don't attempt to be all-powerful in the lives of students. Conservative teachers are teachers, not social reformers, psychologists, or social workers. They don't try to create communities in the classroom that supplant or diminish the importance of parents and the family.

It is beyond the scope of this writing to go into where we are going to find teachers who match up to these traits, including whether the existent teacher

training institutions attract people like this and train them in this direction, but it does sketch out, at least in a beginning way, what kinds of people are needed to teach successfully within this philosophical frame.

Is This Kind of Education Good for All Students?

Should this be the kind of schooling all students receive? Conservatives say yes. The conventional wisdom in education says that this brand of schooling might work with more advantaged children and adolescents, but that it isn't appropriate for low income and minority students. The thinking is that these students need something else, with the something else differing depending on what group you talk to.

One faction in the education profession says that what these students need is a neo-Deweyian approach (after John Dewey, an educational philosopher, politically to the left, who died in 1952 but whose ideas and the practices they inspired live on strongly in our time). Deweyian education stresses the replacement of traditional curriculum with one grounded in the experiences, interests, and needs of students; strong reliance on learning through group activities; close, caring relationships between teachers and students; and using the classroom to teach democratic living and confront social problems.⁶⁷

A second group proposes that minority children need schooling that is centered in their own cultural or racial experience. For African American children, that would be an Afrocentric (centered on Africa) program that would produce a sense of heritage and connectedness and pride among African American children.⁶⁸

A third group reflects a radical left critical theorist ideological perspective. Prominent exponents of this point of view include the recently deceased Brazilian educator Paulo Friere and Americans Henry Giroux and, particularly in his earlier writings, Jonathan Kozol.⁶⁹ Basically, their aim is to celebrate the culture of students from victimized classes or races and help them attain a critical understanding of the circumstances that have kept them oppressed and feel solidarity with others like themselves.

The conservative response to these three groups goes something like this: "What you advocate sounds good, and no one questions your good intentions and sincerity. The problem with what you propose, however, is simply that it doesn't get results. What does get results is the kind of education most if not all of you yourselves have had, and that is one that emphasizes traditional content, book learning, and hard work. The people with status and power in America

whom you disparage know something, that this is the kind of education one needs to function effectively in America. It is the kind of education they seek out for their own children. What you want done in schools keeps youngsters who need it most from the knowledge that marks an educated person and results in a sense of personal entitlement. What you want cements in group identities that further marginalizes people, or gets them mired in problems or wallowing in self-pity or indignation to the point that it distracts them from the realities of what it takes to make it in America.”

Conservatives point to the success that African American educator Marva Collins has had teaching Shakespeare and self-reliance to minority children.⁷⁰ They note the success Jaime Escalante had teaching advanced placement calculus classes to low income Hispanics in Los Angeles.⁷¹ They note how Barclay Elementary School in Baltimore which predominantly serves low income African American students turned around for the better when it adopted a traditional program.⁷² The fact of the matter is poor and non-white children need what *every* child needs: a challenging solid academic education. If those who downplay this kind of schooling would take a hard look at reality instead of referencing themselves in their good intentions and high-sounding rhetoric they would see that.

IS IT ANY CLEANER NOW?

The challenge I took on in this essay was to see if I could make conservative education cleaner to a reader than it may have been before. I hope that after reading this you will at least be prompted to look closer into the reality beneath educational labels and assertions. That is a good thing to do. It doesn't make comics or education advocates' job easier if they can't just throw out a clean or dirty word or pitch and take it from there. But it makes you better off. And I'm convinced it makes students and this society better off as well.