

A Call to Leadership Education

By Rebecca Smith

I believe that each of us has a calling we are meant to fill -- a mission if you will -- that only we can accomplish. Last summer, I attended a seminar on leadership education, by Oliver DeMille. He'd just finished a masterful discourse on the need for a renaissance of classical literacy, and leadership education. As his seminar ended, a sense of mission came over me, and I realized that the Lord had just knocked at my door. The desire came over me to make the sacrifices necessary to gain the education I lacked. But that would only be the first step for me. There was much more, which began to take shape over the months that followed.

According to DeMille, when public compulsory schooling became the American way, we put ourselves on a conveyor belt of sorts. While education for the masses has been integral to the goal of widespread literacy, it has edged out leadership education, which is badly needed in our time. We rarely see this latter type of educating in today's America. I pondered over my own experience on the conveyor belt, as the seminar drew to a close. I knew that the vast majority of my homeschooling peers were also products of the conveyor belt approach. Surely I wasn't alone in my need for scholarship. I sensed that a population of homeschoolers existed that would also want to participate in the creation of a leadership society. Certainly I wouldn't have to re-invent the wheel, I thought.

Fortunately for me the Texas homeschooling community, to which I am a recent transplant, already enjoys an abundance of great leadership. Even better, there is an infrastructure of resources in place that has been built over the course of at least twenty or thirty years, beginning with the pioneers of the 1980's who wanted more for their children, just like I do.

Now fast forward to October of last year, and you find me sitting by a beautiful lake, adjacent to the Lake View Conference Center in Waxahachie, Texas. I had by now contacted the other Thomas Jefferson Education (TJEd) families I knew, who were dispersed all over the D/FW metroplex. Beginning with about ten families, we met in July and formed the North Texas Statesmanship Society. I'd heard about the opportunity to attend the THSC annual Leadership Conference for home school support leaders. Anxious for training, I jumped at the chance to attend, though not without some trepidation. After all, my support group leadership experience amounted to a grand total of three months. I wondered if I really had what it takes to create the kind of community I'd envisioned. I was almost overcome with a sense of inadequacy at the prospect of my present path.

Then something amazing happened, in that half-hour by the lake, on that beautiful autumn afternoon. In a moment of prayerful meditation, an indelible sense of calling washed over me. It replaced the suffocating fear that had me captivated just a moment earlier. Conviction of the rightness of my course came into my mind with a cascade of

ideas, adding vibrant details to my earlier vision of what to do. In that moment, God made it abundantly clear that He had work for me to do, and I'd better get to it. I walked back into the leadership conference, carried by this greater vision. It was a watershed weekend for me. I didn't know any of the leaders there, and didn't converse with nearly enough of them. But those who I did get to know and observe were inspiring leaders and statesmen, all with missions of their own, going about the work they were called to. They inspired me to be a better person, lifting me up by their examples of courage.

I am ever drawn back to this idea that it's not just a select few of us who are meant to be statesmen. Oliver DeMille maintains that in order to meet the challenges of 21st Century America, we will need a generation of statesmen and stateswomen. Indeed, each of us really does have a calling we are meant to fill that only we can accomplish. As to what that is, no one but the individual can determine. Of all societies in history, I think ours is among the most needy of statesmanship.

Russell Kirk, in his ageless "Roots of American Order" quotes Simone Weil, a French philosopher and born again Jew: " 'Our 20th Century. . . is a time of disorder very like the disorder of Greece in the Fifth century before Christ. [In her words], it is as though we had returned to the age of Protagoras and the Sophists, the age when the art of persuasion - ~ whose modern equivalent is advertising slogans, publicity, propaganda meetings, the press, the cinema, and radio ~ took place of thought and controlled the fate of cities and accomplished coups d'état. So the ninth book of Plato's *Republic* reads like a description of contemporary events.' "

Considering this, I have to ask myself, "How long has this been true in America? When was the time that we were still thinking for ourselves? When did we stop?" While I claim to be no expert on this subject, I suspect that this shift from independent thinking to dependence on persuasion occurred gradually, but accelerated with the advent of mass media. Weil's astute assessment of modern times, even half a century ago, reflects our American reality today. Our sources of propaganda and persuasion have only broadened with the inventions of the television, cable networks, and internet. Think of the Y2K phenomenon. Remember the propaganda surrounding that non-event? The amount of money funneled into the Y2K campaign was staggering.

With the angry masses ever clamoring for our attention, it's no wonder we feel like there is little we can do to make a difference. But this is wrong thinking. There is much we can do. Homeschoolers, educators, and parents are uniquely equipped to influence future generations for good. But do we realize how much power we hold in our hands? We are molding the next generation. In this context, does it make any sense to replicate the conveyor belt model of learning in our homes? And yet many of us, not knowing anything but this unnatural approach, unwittingly beat ourselves up in the pursuit of mediocrity.

Let's discuss two of the seven keys to a great education (see Oliver DeMille: "A Thomas Jefferson Education").

First: Inspire Not Require. Was your natural love of learning as a child smothered in the education process? Think about your upbringing in the public school system. If all of our teachers had set out to inspire great learning in each of us, exposing us to the greatest classics down through history, allowing us to explore our greatest talents in depth, what would have happened? Our founding fathers like Thomas Jefferson were mentored this way. They thirsted after great knowledge. Their mentors filled the need. Because of this, they were prepared for the miraculous work of building a new nation where all men are created equal.

Second, You Not Them. How does a child choose to get a great education? One of the elements of conveyor belt schooling is that children's initiative is marginalized, even discouraged. In general, we don't believe anymore that a child if left to himself, might make wise educational choices. If done well, education can be a mix of child-initiated learning and wise parent-mentoring. The most powerful way to insure your child's acquisition of a world-class liberal arts education is simply to get one yourself. The sooner we realize that homeschooling is more about our own education than our children's, the better. The best mentors are first and foremost excellent students, pursuing life-long learning and growth.

Who are the mentors who can help us rise above our limitations? God is naturally our first and most important Mentor. If we are careful observers, we can identify other mentors who are most willing to help us. Plato mentored Aristotle. George Washington had his brother Lawrence. Thomas Jefferson had George Wythe. Esther had Mordecai. Who were your mentors? Statesmen and stateswomen are visionary leaders, walking an independent path. They look for the need that they can fill, and then go about doing it. When that need is filled, they find and fill another one. They do it again and again. They heed an inner-voice that guides them undeviatingly to serve the common good. Anchored to true principles, guided by God and the greater good, they live publicly and privately virtuous lives. America needs them desperately. We are meant to be more than we've allowed ourselves to be. One inspiring stateswoman put it this way: "In ten years, your education will be the same as your children's. Will it be poor, mediocre, or great? If not you, then who? If not now, when?"

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