



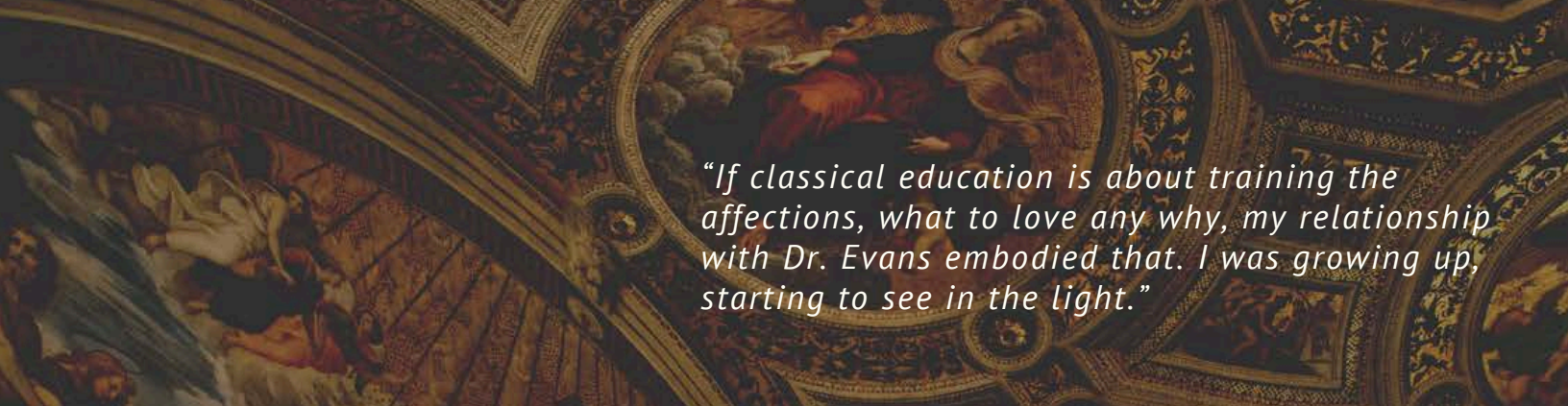
THE J-SAINTS

BY DR. DANIEL SCOGGIN, CO-FOUNDER AND ACADEMIES OFFICER

Marcus Tullius Cicero said that “gratitude is not only the greatest of the virtues, but the parent of all others.” I have reflected on this quote over the last several months, and certainly was pondering its import recently as I indulged in a belt-expanding Thanksgiving repast with my beautiful wife and our four vivacious daughters. I think Cicero hit the nail on the philosophical head. When we enter each day with a grateful heart, we have the best chance to be virtuous, to see how our actions are part of a much larger whole of gifts given and gifts received.

I am most grateful for the gift of my family. Right behind that, I am blessed in being able to work at and grow with Great Hearts. I really can’t believe that I get to do the work (and that they even pay me) to come alongside parents to educate their children in the lasting things. And it’s all icing on the classical cake that we get to engage this project with colleagues who are friends and the great works of the West as our co-companions.

One of the beautiful aspects of getting older is that you begin to see the tapestry of your life as a whole and how the little threads are intertwined over time into a providential purpose. In my Great Hearts story, there are two men and one woman who I would like to highlight here as meaning makers for me. In my reflections and prayers, I call them the J-Saints. All three of them have passed on to their just reward in the afterlife, and all three of them have J first names: John, Jeff, and Janet, hence the “J-Saints” designation in my little ledger and in how my simple prayers of gratitude are uttered.



"If classical education is about training the affections, what to love any why, my relationship with Dr. Evans embodied that. I was growing up, starting to see in the light."

John Xavier Evans is truly one of the intellectual patriarchs of Great Hearts. My mom knew I was struggling in my late teen years, fumbling around for purpose, and to her wisdom and credit sent me to a summer program with her friend, Dr. John Evans, known to friends as "Jack." Dr. Evans was a renowned, Yale educated professor of English Literature at Arizona State; known for his epic course on heroism and being a CS Lewis like figure, inspiring generations of young adults in that big public university to seek Truth. In a sense, he was doing Great Hearts before there was a Great Hearts.

That was the summer between my freshman and sophomore years; it was 1988. I drove out to Tyler, Texas to attend his Phoenix Institute. This was a crash course in great books and philosophy. I was a gangly mechanical engineering major who liked to read but had never read a great book beyond Lord of the Rings, and I had attended a large public high school where snippets of "literary moments" came out of textbooks. On a humid summer East Texas day, I stumbled into the classroom not really knowing what to expect, hoping the class might contain at least a few young ladies who appreciated faded U2 concert T-shirts.

On the opening day of his signature course on heroism, Dr. Evans walked in, impeccably dressed in a tweed jacket and Oxford tie, and walked to the podium. He looked us each in the eye and began to boldly speak:

***Sing, Goddess, of Achilles' rage,
Black and murderous, that cost the Greeks
Incalculable pain, pitched countless souls
Of heroes into Hades' dark,
And left their bodies to rot as feasts
For dogs and birds, as Zeus' will was done.
Begin with the clash between Agamemnon--
The Greek warlord--and godlike Achilles.***



The opening lines of the *Iliad*, of course. Something in these words, something in his voice, clear and strong, struck me to the core. If someone can speak to a soul, directly to it, he did there. I can honestly say I was converted to a life of learning that morning. To wanting more. And in entering Homer's world I felt connected to the real drama of life, alive and awake. Later on, I would encounter Keats' poem, "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer," and he captured how I felt then:

***...Then felt I like some watcher of the skies
When a new planet swims into his ken;
Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes
He stared at the Pacific—and all his men
Looked at each other with a wild surmise—
Silent, upon a peak in Darien.***

I was deeply drawn to great books as something I needed to seek out, but I was drawn to Dr. Evans because I wanted *what* he had and *who* he was. That whole summer was a joy of epic literature and philosophy, from Homer to Solzhenitsyn, and my earnest study of Plato and Milton was intertwined with curiosity about this man. What made Dr. Evans so confident and articulate? Why was he always so peaceful and happy? Why did he adore his wife, Rosie, so much? I wanted to know what he thought about things. What he loved and why? If classical education is about training the affections, what to love and why, my relationship with Dr. Evans embodied that. I was growing up, starting to see in the light.

Dr. Evans took me under his wing that summer and after. I went back to my university and on the first day of my sophomore year changed my major from Mechanical Engineering to English Literature. I never looked back. I started to read and read, not because I had to, but because of a thirst in my soul. I would call Dr. Evans and ask him what he thought and what he was reading. I ended up going back to the Phoenix Institute 3 more times, and even went back the last two times at the University of Notre Dame as his teaching assistant.

A few other notes about this great-hearted man. When that first classical charter school in the nation was started that would become the precursor to Great Hearts, it was Dr. Evans who was the curricular designer and progenitor of this program, connecting with his friends in education around the country.

It could be rightly said that Dr. Evans is the intellectual patriarch of this organization, our “Mortimer Adler,” if you will.

Dr. Evans was also a founding board member of Great Hearts and when we chose the name of this organization, Jack’s life and words were part of the inspiration. Jack’s lifelong interest was the topic of heroism. Building on Aristotle, Jack said often that the hero is that great-souled man or woman who braves all to redeem his or her generation. The Great Hearts name and project is indeed an attempt to embody this belief.

Well, the wise editors of this fine publication told me I can only drone on for 1,200 words, and I have reached that limit, only making it to one of the three J-Saints! Argh. Well, perhaps they will give me a chance for a part two at a later date where I can tell you about the amazing Jeff Van Brunt, one of the first employees of Great Hearts who had a similar impact on the DNA of our organization, and on me personally. Jeff defined our relationship with our families in deep respect for them, which is no surprise since he was an amazing husband and father. He launched our Community Investment programs and helped secure the initial funding that got this little non-profit off the ground. Above all, he was a man of radiant joy, optimism, and humor and the voice of his jokes and quips still make me laugh every day.

And on some other occasion, if you would indulge me, I’d love to tell you about Dr. Janet Scoggin, my late mother, who was a midwife, gardener, college professor, and founding board member of that first classical charter school. I will always be a proud mama’s boy. Her relentless tenacity and wisdom inspire me still.

There is so much more to say. I encourage you to think of the saints in your life, those living here and those loved in the next. The living ones are around me now, and a surprising number of them have J-names too, like Jerilyn, Jake, and Jay. But the pattern is broken by so many others, and my heart is full and happy being able to know them all.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Over twenty years ago, Dan Scoggin started as the headmaster of a classical, liberal arts academy in Tempe, AZ and soon authored the original Great Hearts business plan, laying the groundwork for what has become a network of 50 academies. Today, Great Hearts serves nearly 30,000 students. Scoggin’s leadership has been instrumental in the organization’s growth, from securing philanthropic partnerships to developing innovative programs such as the Great Hearts Online academies and the faith-based Great Hearts Christos schools. With a Ph.D. in English Literature, an M.A. in Character Education, and a wealth of experience in education leadership, he brings unmatched expertise to the classical education movement.

His personal life reflects his professional commitment to nurturing young minds and hearts. At home in Mesa, Arizona, Scoggin has raised two adult daughters who are Great Hearts graduates, and with his wife Tiffany, is now raising two younger daughters who attend Great Hearts Christos.

