

Primacy of Belonging

That which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship (*koinonia*) with us; and indeed our fellowship (*koinonia*) is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.

I John 1:3-4

Towards the end of his life, John, the beloved apostle, begins by declaring that his primary purpose for preaching all that he had experienced of Christ was the creation of fellowship, a shared belonging in a divinely oriented community. The work of Christ establishes in us a belonging to community, and this shared belonging is foundational to experience of the Father. We are to be both participants and instruments of belonging, the kind of belonging that creates joy. British educator Charlotte Mason calls this need to belong the “desire of society” and places it among the desires that are both primary and universal.

The same desires stir in the breasts of savage and of sage alike; that the desire of knowledge, which shows itself in the child's curiosity about things and his eager use of his eyes, is equally active everywhere; that the desire of society, which you may see in two babies presented to one another and all agog with glee and friendliness, is the cause, alike, of village communities amongst savage tribes and of the philosophical meeting of the learned; that everywhere is felt the desire of esteem—a wonderful power in the hands of the educator, making a word of praise or blame more powerful as a motive than any fear or hope of punishment or reward. (1)

Narrate/self-reflect

In this passage, taken from *Home Education*, she identifies three primary desires:

- The desire of knowledge
- The desire of society (belonging)
- The desire of esteem (to be held in high regard).

It is worth considering both the importance and the interplay of these three. The desire of knowledge is to the mind as hunger is to the body. Unless it be atrophied, every human has a natural desire to explore those realms open to the intellect, to feed upon history, literature, nature, science, art, other persons, and ultimately God. “For this is eternal life, to know God.”[2] The mind feeds and grows, assimilating knowledge as food. But this process can be cut short. Just as, for the sake of breathing, a body will give up eating; so a mind will give up learning when faced with threats to belonging and/or esteem. While a few might bury their heads in the books to escape the pain of not belonging or seek the accolades of “first in class” as a feeble substitute for being esteemed, none will thrive in such an atmosphere.

Positively, we get the vast majority of knowledge not from personal discovery but from communion with others. In Charlotte Mason's words:

We learn from Society. In this way we learn, for most people have things to say that it is good to hear; and we should have something to produce from our own stores that will interest others – something we have seen or heard, read or thought... It is not only from the best and ablest we may learn. I have seen ill-bred people in a room, and even at table, who had nothing to say because they did not think their neighbor worth talking to... This is not only unmannerly and unkind, but is foolish, and a source of loss to themselves. Perhaps there is no one who has not some bit of knowledge or experience, or who has not had some thought, all his own. A good story is told of Sir Walter Scott, how he was travelling from London to Edinburgh by the stagecoach, and sharing the box seat with him was a man who would not talk. He tried the weather, crops, politics, books, every subject he could think of—and we may be sure they were many. At last, in despair, he turned round with, "Well, what can you talk about, sir?" "Bent leather," said the man; and, added Sir Walter, "we had one of the most interesting conversations I remember." Everybody has his 'bent leather' to talk about, if we have the gift to get at it.[3]

This story is both tragic and beautiful: tragic because a man had such a small world of interest, and beautiful, because another person cared enough to find even that small world and be interested. One can speculate that small worlds come from small communities of interest. If no one cares for a child's thoughts, his thoughts will become small and he will inhabit a small and lonely world. Our personal world is only as big as the worlds we share. To be deeply satisfying, knowledge is a shared endeavor.

Narrate/self-reflect

Question: What do we learn about communities of interest and their importance? How are such communities created?

Teachers should remember this; for we experience ourselves as belonging to those who are interested enough to share interests with us. Lack of interest destroys belonging. Those whom we hold in high regard interest us. Those who do not interest us experience us as holding them in low regard. Let us endeavor to find the "bent leather" in every student's mind. And let us give them a vast array of knowledge in which to share interest. Nothing builds esteem and belonging like the experience of genuine interest. You are interested in what I think. You are interested in what I feel. Not for any utilitarian reason, but simply because you find me to be of value. Few thoughts, conscious or unconscious, bring joy to the heart as do these.

If one seeks to build an atmosphere of belonging, find something in every person that is worthy of interest. Not all thoughts and feelings are noble. Not all are worthy of interest. When we share ignoble, unworthy interests, we may negatively bond, but we do not delight in one another. Two may share disdain for a third, but that disdain contaminates the relationship not only with the third person but also between the two sharing the disdain. There must be no toleration in the

classroom of disdainful attitudes and certainly not disdainful talk. Such attitudes and words must be confronted immediately as a dark, hurtful way of thinking and talking. Students must learn that just because a dark thought crosses their mind, it does not mean they have to accept it. Thoughts can be rejected, and the mind can be turned to that which is worthy.

Narrate/Self-reflect

Question: How have we seen lack of interest, disdain or ignoble interest destroy belonging? What does it mean practically to find the “bent leather” in everyone?

If genuine interest in me (my thoughts, my feelings, my interests and activities) builds belonging and esteem, it is augmented by appreciation. When someone sees within us that which is worth appreciating and expresses appreciation, our hearts soar. Appreciation of others is a habit of mind and so is contempt. All humans are both bearers of the divine image and selfish, frail incompetents. The question is, What do we see when we see another. Where does our mind go? Do we have the habit of sweet thoughts, quick to find the good and appreciate, merciful with the flaws? Or are we quick to see the failings, to mock in our mind, and to disdain. What do we see, and what do we express? In so many classrooms it is only the negative and the extraordinary that get expressed. We hear little appreciation for small kindnesses and small victories, little gratitude for the small contribution that each can make. What’s called for is not praise as reward for success (a response that quickly cheapens), but genuine appreciation for a rigorous effort, quietly expressed. As important as it is to identify student weakness, teachers will never be a positive support if they fail to see and to appreciate that which is worthy in every child. No classroom is emotionally safe where even a single student is not appreciated.

Just as we build interest by being interested together, so we build appreciation by sharing appreciation. We need to hear what we appreciate about each another. In this, the teacher must take the lead. Not a day should go by in which she does not publically express concrete appreciation for some worthy trait of a student. This is not praise for performance or appearance, but recognition that some aspect of a fine and noble character has manifested itself. “John, I see your noble heart to serve others.” Or, “Kathy, I appreciate your sensitivity to the needs of others.” In addition to expressing appreciation themselves, teachers should gently exhort students to express appreciation for one another. Ideas should be sown, and habits cultivated. Expression of appreciation can be made a topic for regular prayer. “Lord, give us the grace to appreciate one another and opportunity to express it.” It can also be an object of direct challenge. “Let’s invite the Lord to show us something we can appreciate about one of our classmates. Look for an opportunity to express that appreciation.”

Narrate/Self-reflect

Discussion: How have we seen appreciation build belonging? What can be done to build the habit of appreciation?

When our classes are not places of shared interest and appreciation and lack the joys of shared thoughts/feelings and delight in one another, the atmosphere goes dark and students begin to feed upon one another. A vicious cycle begins. Increased relational pain results in further loss of

interest and lessened ability to appreciate, leading to greater, deeper relational pain. As relational pain increases, so does predatory behavior. Preying upon one another becomes the norm and the habit.

The teacher must lead the move against such things. He or she must be an anchor of emotional joy and strength, a sure protector. She must model interest and appreciation; always able to see that which is worthy in a child and joyfully to communicate that recognition. She must lead her students in the habits of genuine interest and appreciation. A final note: the daily habit of giving thanks can go a long way towards achieving these ends. Students must give more time to expressing appreciation for that which is good than disdain for that which they do not like.

Narrate/Self-reflect

Discussion: What do we take away from this text?

[1] Mason, Charlotte, *Home Education*, 100-101.

[2] John 17:3

[3] Mason, Charlotte, *Ourselves*, 73-75.