



Why Latin? *"To be ignorant of what occurred before you is to remain ever a child." Cicero*

The other day, a man approached me after a community meeting and asked, “Why do you teach Latin and classics? Frankly, I thought it an odd question. What did the man want us to teach—something *other* than classics?”

Without the timeless texts that have formed and informed our civilization, what would the teacher teach? Without the *trivium* of grammar, logic and rhetoric, how would the student learn? Without thorough instruction in classical art and music, what would elevate and ennoble the heart? Without the spartan culture of competitive sport, the Athenian experience of Socratic exchange and formal training in the art of public elocution, where would the next generation find its true leaders?

Think about it. What would actually happen if America’s public schools attempted to teach civics without Marcus Aurelius or speech without Cicero or atomic theory without Democritus? Can we, in our most Hobbesian hallucination, conjure up the unintended consequences of a massive system of public education that would consign America’s sons and daughters to set out on life’s treacherous journey without ever joining Plato as he walked the paths of the *agora*?

Of course the idea is absurd—especially here in America. It could never happen.

After all, our nation is the embodiment of the classical ideal. The pilgrims carted their classics over the vast and furious ocean—jamming them into the little boat—believing that “zeale is but a wilde-fire without knowledge.” The patriots read and re-read Plutarch’s *Lives*, Tacitus, Sallust, Thucydides, Livy, and the rest.

Throughout our history, classicism has been not only the mark of the educated American, but a public compass helping to chart our course, shape our values, and design our republican institutions. Armed with Polybius (and other classical texts shipped from the Paris apartment of Thomas Jefferson) James Madison crafted the *Constitution of the United States of America*.

Schools without classics! Of course it could never happen here, but what if... What if the entire system of public education in the United States was suddenly stricken with cultural Alzheimer's? What if, like forty-eight million Rip Van Winkles, America's public school children became trapped in the narrow netherworld of a single, slim, existential moment?

What if all the canonical texts of liberal learning went the way of the dunce cap and a steady diet of jargon, humbug and fashionable cant became the common gruel. Fine minds would close in on themselves and tender hearts would grow hard. Artificially cut off from everything classic, lovely and sacred, the vulgar and the vile would soon abound.

Having been led from table to trough, students would feel betrayed by their parents and teachers—and bewildered. In time, they would become angry. Soon, the very hallways of these so called schools would become mean and the school yards, dangerous.

Within a single generation, our entire system of public pedagogy would become a wasteland of dispirited teachers and sullen students, marking time while lacerating each other with the contemptuous glance. Public support would wane. Those who could, would flee for their lives.

The most curious and lively of those poor young scholars left behind would follow their hearts and escape—counting life on the streets better than entrapment in the cinderblock and linoleum gulag. Not even metal mesh over the windows, elaborate electronic security systems, or uniformed guards loitering in the hallways could keep them in.

Before long, only the wealthy would have access to learning. Deep divisions based on race, class and cultural literacy would become enflamed and entrenched.

Public discourse would turn coarse, brutish and shrill. Democracy would atrophy. Jobs would migrate to more educated populations in far away lands. America—long the great egalitarian engine of hope and opportunity—would become the lost Atlantis.

Why Latin?

Because, over time, a culture without real schools will mirror the schools without real culture. And then, someday, when we awake in the morning, all there will be is *The Today Show*—the world according to Matt and Katie. All day long, we will replay celebrity sound bites and regurgitate our own thoughts—but with no context at all. All there will be is terror, the stock ticker, mass marketing and MTV.