The Lost Seeds of Learning

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As graduates of the Geneva School, you have been given a Christian Classical education, but what exactly is the character of this gift, this education, that you have been given? Many people, following the lead of the ingenious Dorothy Sayers, talk about recovering the “lost tools of learning.” At one level, the reasons for this metaphor are pretty clear. For centuries, the standard collection of Aristotle’s logical texts went by the name of “the Organon,” or “the tool.” Thus, when Francis Bacon set out, in the seventeenth century, to overthrow the scholastic approach to learning, he called his work, the “New Organon” or the “new tool.” My hope here is to help you appreciate in new ways the mystery of what you have been given in a Christian Classical education. I would like to do this by first considering some of the difficulties that arise when we imagine that learning is primarily like using a tool. I should clarify here at the outset that I am not opposed to using tools (How could I be? I came here in a plane, and we are all wearing clothes); nor do I think that using tools as a metaphor is always a bad thing. My concern is simply that the use of tools should not provide our primary image for learning. I suggest that we find a more subtle and more appropriate metaphor in the biblical image of the seed. Ultimately, I hope to show you that a seed provides a better image than a tool to describe the education that you have been given specifically because of the character of the gospel.

But first, let’s consider briefly what happens if we construe learning to be primarily like using a tool. At one level, such an image is appropriate. We often use tools to make things, and the verbal arts, like grammar, dialectic, and rhetoric, are also concerned with making verbal things—whether making clear statements, making sound arguments, or making whole persuasive texts. The difficulty arises, however, from the assumptions that often accompany the metaphors and similes that we use.
In this case, if learning is understood to be primarily like the use of tools, then learning will tend to be understood as a power to control objects in the world. After all, that is what tools do—which is to say that the tool metaphor imagines reality, first and foremost, as matter moving through space. In order to appreciate why this might be important, consider one of the earliest modern expressions of the vision of learning as a tool: it appears in a little book by René Descartes, published in 1637, and known in English as his *Discourse on Method*. Descartes proposes a new approach to knowledge, what he calls a “practical philosophy,” by which:

Knowing the force and the actions of fire, water, air, the stars, the heavens, and all other bodies that surround us, just as distinctly as we know the various skills of our craftsmen, we might be able, in the same way, to use them for all the purposes for which they are appropriate, and thus render ourselves, as it were, the masters and possessors of nature.\(^2\)

Notice that Descartes imagines knowing a world that consists of “force and action”: that is, matter in motion. Because learning is imagined primarily as a tool, the assumed purpose of knowing is to push matter around, through space and time. This image of learning involves three immediate assumptions. First, it tends to reduce the particulars of any “place” to an empty “space” that has no unique qualities. Second, such an image of learning tends to reduce all “time” to universal measures of duration. In effect, it assumes that the most important thing about time is that every minute consists of exactly sixty seconds, every hour consists of exactly sixty minutes, etcetera. This works well when you are conducting science experiments, but, as you know from your own experience in writing a term paper, for example, the sixty minutes between two and three in the morning really are not of the same character as the sixty minutes between two and three in the afternoon—even if only because the latter is so much closer to the deadline. The third assumption that the tool image of learning encourages is the reduction of what is “real” to inert “matter.” Thus, to imagine that learning is primarily like using a tool is to risk reducing place to mere space, time to mere duration, and reality to mere matter.
At the same time, for Descartes, learning is understood to be like the “skills” of “craftsmen” specifically because the ultimate purpose of mastering natural forces is to serve ends that are chosen by humans. As he explains:

This [knowledge] is desirable not only for the invention of an infinity of devices that would enable one to enjoy trouble-free the fruits of the earth and all the goods there, but also principally for the maintenance of health, which unquestionably is the first good and foundation of all other goods of this life [...]. If it is possible to find some means to render men generally more wise and more [astute] than they have been up until now, I believe that one should look for it in medicine.³

This passage is very revealing; it is almost prophetic in the way that Descartes connects knowing with making and then connects biological “health” with the “first good” for humans. For a variety of reasons, what Descartes implies but cannot say explicitly here is that, because he has reduced reality to matter in motion, he must also reduce ethics to the avoidance of pain and the pursuit of pleasure. Again, this is not to say that there is anything intrinsically wrong with tools but to insist that, when we imagine learning, or the act of growth in knowing, to be primarily like using tools, then certain assumptions come with that metaphor—assumptions about the character of place and time, the character of reality, and the character of the human good.

By contrast, if we imagine learning to be like the planting of seeds, I suggest that this will help us to remember certain things that our culture would otherwise obscure from us about the character of place, time, reality, and the human good. In order to appreciate this, we should notice something that all seven of the traditional liberal arts share. At one level, your curriculum has been shaped by the three verbal arts—grammar, dialectic, and rhetoric. However, you have also studied all four parts of the quadrivium, or mathematical arts, in some form—whether arithmetic, geometry, music, or astronomy. The first thing that I would bring to your attention is that all seven liberal arts are encompassed by one Greek word—that word is “logos.” This term can be translated as “word” (as in
grammar), but also as “reason” (as in dialectic), but also as “message” (as in a persuasive discourse or an oration). However, the word, “logos,” also includes a mathematical sense of “ratio,” or proportionality. In that sense, the term “logos” extends also to the mathematical arts that make up the quadrivium. Thus, “logos” includes “word,” “reason,” “persuasion,” and mathematical “ratio.” The crucial point here is that “logos” includes all four of these meanings because each meaning gets at a different aspect of a single reality: that is, the reality that humans use signs to mediate between themselves and the world.

“But why,” you might ask, “does it really matter that the meaning of the word ‘logos’ encompasses all the liberal arts?” This is important for Christians, I suggest, because the New Testament transforms the word “logos” in still further ways. First, in the gospel narratives, Jesus describes the logos of God as being like a seed. As you all know, Jesus tells a parable about a man who goes out to plant seeds—which fall on different kinds of soil. In each of the synoptic gospels, Jesus also explains the parable and specifically identifies the seed in the story as corresponding to the “logos” (Mark 4:14), whether the “logos of God” (Luke 8:11) or the “logos of the Kingdom” (Matt. 13:19). In effect, Scripture uses the image of a seed to reveal the life-giving character of the “logos of God.” What does this, in turn, suggest about the liberal arts—the arts of the logos? The seed image suggests what can happen when the redeemed human practice of the liberal arts of the logos (whether verbal arts or mathematical arts) participate in the logos of God. In the same way that a seed takes the nutrients from the soil and draws them up into the life of the plant, so also the gospel of Christ, the logos of God, draws us up into the life of God. This is why Dante, for example, describes the whole life of redeemed creation as like a rose that rises up to participate in the divine life. That, of course, is the main difference between a tool and a seed: a tool is dead and will always be dead, but a seed can communicate life. In other words, the purpose of what you have been given in a Classical Christian education is to communicate life, the life of God’s self-giving love revealed in his Son.
Here we come to a matter requiring great care: on the one hand, if you crush the seed in order to make something instrumental with it (for example, you can crush a mustard seed to make mustard) the seed will never come to life. On the other hand, if you simply hold on to the seed, it also won’t come to life. In order for the seed to come to life, you must release it into the ground where it must die before it can, with the benefit of heat and moisture, come to life and, in time, bear new seeds. The Psalmist says, “he who goes out weeping, carrying seed to sow will return with songs of joy carrying sheaves [of the harvest] with him” (Ps. 126:6). In order for the seeds of God’s word to germinate, there needs to be moisture, the moisture of tears—which are, I suggest, the tears of repentance. But moisture is not enough without also the warmth, the heat, the fire, of divine love. This is why the choice of metaphor matters. This is why it makes a difference whether you imagine that what you have been given are the “seeds of learning” rather than the “tools of learning”—this is the difference between life and death. Thus, you have been trained in the arts of the logos—the verbal and the mathematical arts—not simply so that you can control stuff in the world (as fascinating as that can be). Rather, you have been given this education so that you can improve your ability to participate in and communicate God’s self-giving love.

As if all this weren’t crazy enough, the Gospel of John goes a step further. Beyond describing the logos of God as a seed, John also identifies the person of Jesus as the “logos” of God. In this sense, the logos is not reducible to the liberal arts, because the logos of God is a particular person. Thus, you have been trained in the verbal and mathematical arts also in order to improve your hearing—so that you can better hear the voice of Jesus. Of course, Jesus also made a point of describing his own life, death, and resurrection in terms of a seed that must die in order to bring new life (John 12:24). As followers of Christ, we are also called to take up our cross daily and follow him. The phrase, “take up your cross” is an expression indicating that we are on the way to death. This point is crucial to grasp because the hope of resurrection does not mean that we get to skip death. The hope of resurrection is not is not to be confused with the powerful youthful delusion that we are
immortal. In following Jesus, we are called to go through death before we can know the resurrection of the body—this is what the image of the seed reveals above all. The real question, then, is not and never has been, “Are we going to die?” The question is really, “How?” How are we going to die? Are we going to die by holding onto our life or by giving it away? In other words (if we go back to the image of the seed) you can take your mustard seed of faith and plant it, or you can make mustard, but, either way, the mustard seed dies: the difference is that when you plant the seed, instead of crushing it, you share the life that you have been given, and you participate in the hope of resurrection.

Please don’t misunderstand me; I am not saying that everyone is called to martyrdom. The particular manner, the particular way, in which we give our lives can take many different forms. For some of you, the daily giving of your life might happen primarily through that process of salutary undoing, known as “parenthood.” For others, the giving of your life might involve choosing not to marry. For still others, it might involve answering the call of the rich young ruler to sell all that you have and give it to the poor so that you can follow Christ. Maybe you are more like Zacchaeus, and your calling is to give just half of your possessions, or maybe your calling is more like Barnabas, who sells a field, or an investment, and gives it to the Lord. Whatever your calling, don’t miss the voice of Jesus.

I mention this because you may not yet realize that your training in the verbal and mathematical arts (the arts of the logos) can help you in the exercise of practical wisdom. In T.S. Eliot’s play, *Murder in the Cathedral*, the words of the character, Thomas Becket, remind us powerfully, if indirectly, how knowledge of place and time can inform judgments regarding particulars. The setting for the play is 12th-Century England, where Thomas has taken up his duties as Archbishop of Canterbury with the knowledge that, in doing so, he may well forfeit his life. At one point, when the three knights who will eventually kill Thomas are battering at the door of the Cathedral, those who are with him are alarmed by his apparent lack of concern for his own safety, and Thomas says: “Remember where you are and what is happening.” As he explains, “I am not in danger, only near to
death. Just as with planting seeds, in order to discern how we, in particular, are called to give our lives, we need to remember where are and what is happening. I should clarify that there is an important prior question that has already been answered if you are a follower of Christ. The short answer to the question, “Who am I?” is “I am a redeemed Child of God whose life is in Christ.” The key point here is that, given who we are, we then need to understand our place and our time. Among the traditional liberal arts, it was actually one of the mathematical arts the enabled people to know where they were and what was happening when it comes to planting seeds: the knowledge of both place and time relied, to some extent, on the art known as “astronomy.”

In ancient times, before the invention of the desktop computer, around 1970, many people had to depend solely on a particular device to help them know the date: this device was called a “wall calendar.” Maybe you have seen one in the home of a distinguished relative, or maybe even in your own home. The problem with wall calendars is very similar to the problem with smartphones and personal computers: they make it unnecessary for people to keep within themselves the knowledge of how to use the constellations in order to calculate the days of the solar calendar. In a pre-industrial agricultural context, if there are important seasonal climate variations, this is no small matter. You desperately need to know, for example, whether spring started two months ago or two months in the future. If you plant too early or too late, your crops will not grow and people will go hungry. If you know how to read the stars, however, they can tell you what is happening in the world around you; they can tell you about the character of this particular moment. In the same way, only by understanding this particular moment can we begin to understand the answer to the question when it comes: “Is this the time to give my life in a final way?” In contrast to the image of learning as a tool, which treats all time as a measure of duration, the image of learning as a seed reminds us that there are particular times for specific actions.

But in order to plant seeds that will actually grow, we need to know more than the correct time. In fact, whether now is indeed the correct time will depend on where you are. So, where are you?
Before you try to answer, turn off all your electronic devices. Where is this place and how do you personally know? How would you explain your answer to others? Traditionally, the art of astronomy, among other things, would provide important clues for knowing where we are, such as latitude. As presumably everyone in Florida knows, especially if you have ever travelled any great distance North of here, latitude makes a difference. Some places have four distinct seasons, and some places do not. When it comes to planting seeds, however, we need to know more than longitude and latitude; we need to know more than the elevation, or the direct sun exposure for this slope, or even the shape of the local landscape, or the proximity to the ocean, or the weather patterns, or the soil composition. There is something more: each place has all these variables in conjunction with a particular history—including its past use and abuse—and a particular future, a future in which you can participate (even if you cannot control it completely). In order to plant well, we need to know the particular character of a given place, and that includes the history. Do you know where you are? Thus, when we imagine learning as the reception of a seed, we are also reminded of the need to know where we are—to know the history of the particular people in this place, as you ask whether this is indeed the place where you are called to give your life. “Remember where you are and what is happening.”

Thus, because you have been given a seed rather than a tool: you can remember that time is a gift of unique moments, rather than just a measure of duration; you can remember that a place results from the particulars of personal presence, rather than empty space; you can remember that reality consists of God’s self-giving love, rather than merely matter in motion—and that this love is our highest good. These are the blessings that would otherwise be lost: a sense of place, time, reality, and the human good. These are the blessings that come when you remember that you have been given the seeds of learning.

Of course, this has already been said better by a poet, a poet who wrote a series of meditations on four particular places that each bear memories of eternal moments in time. The last meditation is about a place called “Little Gidding” and it ends like this:
With the drawing of this Love and the voice of this Calling
We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.
Through the unknown, remembered gate
When the last of earth left to discover
Is that which was the beginning;
At the source of the longest river
The voice of the hidden waterfall
And the children in the apple-tree
Not known, because not looked for
But heard, half-heard, in the stillness
Between two waves of the sea.
Quick now, here, now, always—
A condition of complete simplicity
(Costing not less than everything)
And all shall be well and
All manner of thing shall be well
When the tongues of flame are in-folded
Into the crowned knot of fire
And the fire and the rose are one.

You have been given the lost seeds of learning: so that, given who you are, you can “Remember where you are and what is happening,” so that you can discern, is this the time, is this the place, is this the
particular way that God is calling you to give “not less than everything” and so to participate in his love? May God give you great joy as you answer that call.

Notes

1 Although there are important distinctions between metaphor and simile, I focus here on the more general qualities that these figures of speech share in common: that is, what Janet Soskice, in discussing metaphor, identifies as “speak[ing] of one thing in terms which are seen to be suggestive of another.” See Janet Martin Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Oxford UK: Oxford Univ. Press, 1985), p. 15.


3 Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, p. 35.


5 Strictly speaking, “immortal” means “deathless,” or “not subject to death.” My point is simply that this is not the same as the Christian hope of resurrection. The Christian understanding of “eternal life” names a reality in which followers of Christ participate, to some extent, in the present and which endures through death, taking mature form in the resurrected body. Such a belief in eternal life does not, however, mean that one gets a pass on death, as the example of Christ so vividly reveals; resurrection comes by going through death, not by being immortal.
