

Swimming in the deep end

by [L. Gregory Jones](#) in the [July 5, 2000](#) issue

The principal of the Catholic high school was taken aback by the phone call. It came from an inmate in a nearby prison. He was known to be wealthy, but had been incarcerated for having acquired some of his wealth by fraudulent means. Now the man was offering to make a significant donation to the school.

In return for this donation, the inmate wanted the high school to make it possible for his adult son, a high school dropout, to receive a high school diploma. As the principal inquired further, it became apparent that the inmate did not want the son to have to do anything to earn the diploma. He simply wanted the son to be sent a diploma.

The principal was flabbergasted. Why, she asked the inmate, did he care so much that his son, now in business for himself, receive his diploma? “Because education is important,” replied the inmate.

The reply is humorous, but at the same time tragic, because it was spoken in utter seriousness. It points to a cultural crisis: people believe and continue to assert that education is important, but the assertion is increasingly disconnected from the ends at which education aims or the process by which students learn to care about those ends.

Why is education important? Is it simply a formal certification that acknowledges having made it through a certain number of years of school? A way of designating that people have done their time?

Or perhaps, less pejoratively but no less problematically, education is important only as a means of certifying that people have some basic skills necessary for minimal job performance. While such certification is important to a community’s ability to function, it does not foster communities of people who care about teaching and learning—nor is it likely to produce the next generation’s teachers.

I believe that education is important because human flourishing requires that we undertake a lifelong process of formation, of seeking to understand and master a variety of modes of inquiry. Only through a patient, often painful process of learning disciplines do we begin to cultivate the character, shape the habits, acquire the virtues and discern the truth that students and teachers alike need.

Education is important not only in its formal settings, but also—and more determinatively—in its lifelong commitments. Diplomas and degrees are not the aim of education so much as they are markers of achievement on a longer and richer journey.

If the ends of education can be discovered only through a lifelong journey, then perhaps we need to focus less on the markers—standardized tests, diplomas and degrees—and more on the ways we shape one another’s habits through our practices of education in schools and congregations. Perhaps we need richer conceptions of formation to accompany our convictions about education.

We seem to understand the importance of education only retrospectively, as the fruit of habits learned over a lifetime. Initially, we learn how to do things by means extrinsic to us. We learn to spell, to add or to say the Lord’s Prayer by repeating the words, numbers or phrases that others teach us. Similarly, we learn to play the scales of a piano by having another show us how to move our hands.

Over time, we transform those extrinsic modes of learning into intrinsic habits. We begin to understand the ways in which the alphabet is used to create words, and grammar to construct sentences. We learn how the dynamics of addition and subtraction are linked to multiplication and division, and eventually to theorems of algebra. We begin to discover how the Lord's Prayer shapes a relationship with God and an understanding of God that invite other patterns of prayer and worship. We master the rhythm of the scales and begin to explore the chords and patterns of beautiful music.

Eventually these modes of practice and inquiry become a part of our lives. We then continue to learn by making new connections between practices, between disciplines, between modes of inquiry. Over time we become equipped to advance our understanding even further by criticizing poor theories, challenging false constructions, correcting distorted practices and seeing possibilities that others have not seen.

Our education proceeds toward increasingly intrinsic patterns of inquiry, practice and discipline. We discover that our ends are being transformed and our understanding of the truth is being deepened through our lifelong commitment to learning. There are no shortcuts, whether in our mastery of language, our understanding of mathematics, our knowledge and love of God, or our musical theory and practice.

Anglican theologian W. H. Vanstone once observed that the church is like a swimming pool in which all the noise comes from the shallow end. Most of the wisdom is to be found in the deep end, among those who have taken the time, and cultivated the habits and disciplines, to learn to swim in deeper waters. Vanstone was particularly concerned about the shallow spirituality in the churches, but his comments are also true of our knowledge and our love of God, of the world and of the disciplines we seek to understand and practice. If we are to love God with all of our mind as well as our heart, soul and strength, then we need the kind of sustained learning that leads us into the deep end of the pool.

Unfortunately, in our culture—inside and outside the churches—too much of the noise is coming from the shallow end. We laugh at a wealthy man trying to buy his son a degree, but how different is he from our own attitudes and actual practices about education? Do we care more about the degrees or the certification than the habits of learning? Do we really want to understand, to live, the importance of education?