

We can never know enough

Back to school? Were we out?

What can be said about that old phrase except to affirm school itself? In doing so, I ask the reader to come with me into the meanings of this uniquely human structure of education. Not incidentally, St. La Salle made every word count for the Brothers of the Christian Schools, making the apostolate of his pioneering institute clearly institutional. What a tradition that simple word carried even then (scola, ecole, scholar, and on and on).

The very word implies grouping, suggesting a dynamic tension between individual gifts and the adjustment to sequential ordering. No teacher has to renounce his or her talents; nor, however, can he forget that the students have to be handed on when the term is over. But it has been a long time since that carefree, cavorting summertime of popular imagination – from which we come BACK – has dominated the scene, if it ever did. Today the top 20 percent are never out, winter or summer, nor are the bottom 20 percent. Enrichment or remediation, for solid reasons, are everywhere.

Remember when advanced placement was thought to promote elitism and snobbery? But the cold war, the arms race and the atom bomb gave the bright student an unselfish, patriotic motive for excelling. Similarly, the march of the economy pushed slower learners to catch up in summer school. No stigma there any more: a great many are using English as their second language; and they bring the richness of their many ethnic cultures right into school. That the teachers and counselors are busier than ever in furthering their own graduate education goes without saying, in view of the immediacy of so many challenges that used to be remote, like the language barrier and electronic communication.

Each generation used summer in its own way. In addition to being strongly urged to earn one's own spending money, ours (now very senior) filled in for military draftees in jobs (corner grocery, public library, you name it) and learned a great deal from so doing. At present and for the foreseeable future, the onslaught of information and the dizzying progress of technology make all of life a school. In it, we have to go all

out to understand the purpose of life itself, and the nearly infinite value of every human life.

On this last topic, with all our mind-bending progress on every hand, we have not kept up. The world has seldom seen so much generosity in fields like health care and assisted living; but paradoxically we need to fit ourselves into those old-time desks on runners and start all over again about life itself. We live in hope, as the current pontiff has often said; and the Good Lord not only reveals truth to us in various ways. He is Truth. We can never know enough; so with a smile it's Back to School.

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