In this issue, a leading member of the art community makes an impassioned plea for including fine arts education in the core curriculum. Alexandra York explains how the fine arts, from poetry and painting to music and drama, educate the mind, body, and soul. Her remarks are based on a speech delivered at Hillsdale College's November 1997 Center for Constructive Alternatives (CCA) seminar, "Art and the Moral Imagination."

Early one morning, a man was walking along a bluff overlooking the ocean when he noticed a barefoot woman on the beach, clearly engrossed in a strange activity. She was picking up starfish that had been washed ashore by the tide and, one by one, throwing them back into the sea. Intrigued, he scrambled down the bank of the cliff and approached her.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"I'm saving starfish," she answered, gently tossing another into the water.

The man let his eyes drift over the endless shoreline in wonder. "But," he stammered, "there are thousands of starfish stranded on this beach. You can't save them all!"

"I know," the woman smiled, picking up another starfish, and tossing it back into the sea. "But I'm saving this one. And this one. And this one."

Those starfish languishing on the barren sand are the youth of America. They have been swept up onto the beachhead of ignorance and sloth by the tide of our failed progressive educational system.
falls to us now those of us who understand the deep purposes of education, to save the future generation. We can do this by returning our children, one by one, back to the sea of structured creativity, where each individual child—by nature of being a child—can be taught to swim toward the promise of adulthood. To help accomplish this task, I propose that we incorporate art education into the core curriculum. Art educates the whole person as an integrated individual. It educates the mind, and it educates the senses, it educates the soul.

The Core Curriculum

It was at Hillsdale College six years ago that I announced the formation of American Renaissance for the Twenty-First Century. I marvel at the good distance we have come since that time. The foundation’s mission of promoting a rebirth of beauty and life-affirming values in all the fine arts is, of course, not only for the purpose of improving the arts but also for the purpose of elevating our entire culture. It is an ambitious mission that poses great challenges.

These challenges take many forms, not just in the arena of the fine arts but in the arena of ideas—especially ideas that rule our educational system. Let us remember that the three “Rs” of education—reading, writing, and arithmetic—were not instituted in schools just to help the populace read the daily papers, write letters home to Mom, and pay bills owed to the general store. These primary skills are taught for the larger purpose of instructing students to think critically and constructively. School, in other words, is and should be meant to prepare young people for life.

Reading teaches students to comprehend the world and their place in it. Writing teaches them to communicate, develop arguments, and persuade. Arithmetic teaches them to measure attributes, grasp reality, and bring the physical universe into perspective. These are the basics. Over time, most schools have made science mandatory, as well as physical education (which is beneficial, except when—too often!—soccer wins over syntax). However, mastery of the basics is not really expected of most students anymore, and the core curriculum has become so diluted as to be meaningless. Academic subjects are regularly adulterated and distorted in the name of “political correctness,” while the very notion of truth is cast into doubt.

In light of these problems, we need to remind ourselves why certain studies should be mandated in the first place. It used to be a truism that students cannot effectively direct their own education. They don’t yet know what it is that they don’t know. Teachers and parents should set the principal standards of education. And they should presume that a certain level of knowledge and mastery of basic subjects is necessary if students are to lead productive and informed lives.

Why Fine Arts Education?

It is with these thoughts in mind that I propose not only a restoration of the old-fashioned three “Rs” but an addition: art education—specifically, fine arts education in the established Western tradition. The reason for focusing on art forms evolving from our Western heritage is that the forms themselves, the physical presentations, are the most malleable, with the richest aesthetic vocabulary for expressing the most complex ideas. The Western tradition began with the ancient Greeks, was revived during the Renaissance, and was still going strong through the nineteenth century. Sadly, it has been absent or under attack during most of the twentieth century, but it is resurfacing with vigor as we approach the millennium.

Art in the Western tradition is an intelligible aesthetic representation of the world and of humanity. Its primary forms are painting, sculpture, poetry, literature, drama, music, and architecture. A working knowledge in all the fine arts will facilitate an appreciation of them, but protracted study is critical for advanced perceptual and conceptual development. Why should the teaching of fine arts become the fourth “R”? Because to teach art is to teach life. Each lifetime, in its own way, has a “theme,” an ever-unfolding personal destiny, scripted by the individual. Every good work of art is just the same. First, it is an idea in the mind of the artist—a mental abstraction, a vision seen through the “mind’s eye.” Then it goes through the aesthetic process of transformation from mental vision into physical object or experience that can be perceived through the senses and the intellect of others—that can be understood. Finally, it takes on a life of its own to be enjoyed and considered as an individual entity, an end in itself, just like every human being.

Because human beings have free will, they choose their values by a process of selection. This is why character development and the development of art are so similar. They are both self-created. Learning a demanding art form promotes both curiosity and confidence that can be transferred to real-life situations. How does it do this? Let us take the benefits of art education one at a time. Sensory education, using painting as our example, mental
Learning a demanding art form promotes both curiosity and confidence that can be transferred to real-life situations.

Understanding the Human Condition

Expressing Values
And here is where the moral imagination fully enters into the creative process, for even a novice approach to this highest level of art educates the mind philosophically.

Let us use creative writing as an example. Because literature is a conceptual transmission from the mind of a writer to the mind of a reader, it becomes, whether a wide avenue or a narrow labyrinth, an enchanting passage to the imagination. It takes us on a journey of ideas, not to what is but to what could be and might be. Good fiction compels the author to weave a theme through the events of a story and actions of the characters. Assuming craft, the more universal and fundamental the theme, the greater the fiction. Assuming theme (which is a big assumption since most fiction today as most art, lacks theme), the student first creates scenes in his imagination and then creates heightened visions of all that is possible. Gradually, as he learns to distill his thoughts and to communicate through the techniques of narrative, description, dialogue, metaphor, and dramatization, his imagination is freed to create whatever he can dream up!

New questions arise: Is this idea true? How is truth determined? Is it relevant to all human beings or just a few? Or only me? Are my characters understandable? Are they behaving morally or immorally and why? Are their actions motivated by their value systems?

Because the written arts are conceptual in form, those who create them have an opportunity to explore the moral imagination directly. Moral. If a person (or a character) acts only on these values, his actions will be moral. If his actions are moral, he will be moral. If the author wishes to present an immoral character, he will create a fictional person who acts consciously against sound values. And just think of all the in-betweens, the conflicted characters! By learning creative writing skills, a student can play out real conflicts in an imaginative setting with imagined people. Talk about a chance to explore ideas, issues, behavior, and psychology in a safe environment!
because feelings are its primary themes. The instrument chosen to channel music's emotional flow, whether it be piano, clarinet, violin, or voice, is not important. Learning to master the instrument is. The discipline of serious music is exact and exacting, teaching the precision of mathematics in a poetic realm as well as the exhilarating balance and the exalted integration of "reasoned harmony" (music's form) and emotions (music's content). It is not often in our culture that children are taught to unite reason and emotion. Tonal and melodic classical music does this for all of us. So the competence to hear and appreciate it as a practitioner can be a rare source of indescribable pleasure and a safe emotional release.

Like life, musical passages contain highs and lows, fast and slow tempos. The musical vocabulary includes dissonance and resolution, tumult and sublimity, all emboldening a student in the process of making music to feel to his heart's content within the security of a confined experience. There is no way to fall out of control because the rhythm keeps the music going. The notes must be played on time, and to orchestrate emotional content through so rigorous a structure, the student must learn to merge reason and emotion; otherwise, the resulting music will be cold and sterile, mathematics without the poetry. Classical music is too mentally demanding to permit the flailing and screaming incited by much of rock 'n' roll. It forces the musician to control his emotional output, offering him the experience of cathexis (concentration of psychic energy) rather than catharsis (purging).

Because music deals with broad abstractions- triumph, defeat, love, loss- it also allows a musician to personalize the universals of the human condition, to feel on a grand scale both the hope and the hurt that necessarily accompany an individual life fully lived. For the teenager, it unlocks gateways to mature excursions into the ecstasy and the vulnerability of love, the headiness and the hazards of risk. Once he begins to understand the value of classical music, he may turn to it in moments of emotional need to help him experience deep stirrings that may not make it to the surface of consciousness by themselves.

Students of Life

So we begin to see the vital importance of fine arts education, the invigorating and reinforcing spiral of experience inherent in learning the various art forms. From art form to art form and back and forth between real life and art, the senses, the intellect, and the emotions flow together, charging each other along the way with powerful images, sounds, and ideas. Students of art become students of life. Once they experience the arduous bliss of creating art, some will pursue it as a profession, of course. But the purpose of art study is not to make artists of our young people; it is to help them become complete human beings.

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Youth is forward motion. And the arts can forever inspire this forward motion because they are open-ended and can continue to absorb our natural creative energies indefinitely. No art form can ever be entirely mastered because the techniques can always be further expanded and exploited. Skills and appreciation learned while we are children can serve us as adults. As we grow and develop as human beings, we can continue stretching our capabilities through artistic expression, if only as casual hobbyists or spectators. Our bodies will age, and our physical prowess will diminish, but our minds and our imagination need never grow old. Practical knowledge of the arts can keep us forever active mentally and emotionally. We can forever learn, grow, and advance- the hallmarks of youth.

Clearly, art education is not a luxury, it is a spiritual necessity. At its apotheosis- aesthetically, philosophically, and psychologically- art provides a spiritual summation by integrating mind and matter. It allows abstract values to be perceived by the senses. And when form and content are exquisitely unified in art, they are capable of communicating universal truths through beautiful physical presentation in the most technically proficient manner. Art offers an experience of complete continuity, a harmoniously integrated experience of mind, body, and soul- for its makers and its worthy beholders. Thus it is the very souls of our emotionally abandoned, value-starved youth that we can rescue through art education- one at a time. For it is art that best inspires the moral imagination.

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The Pursuit of the Sacred

Donald M. Reynolds
Director, The Monuments Conservancy

Anthropologists teach us that notions of the sacred are inherent in human nature. In other words, as human beings we have a natural propensity to sanctify, to make holy. The word “sacred” refers to that which is set apart as holy or which is dedicated to some exalted purpose. We secure sacred things against defamation or violation. Sacred things, then, we say are inviolate.

Human life, for example, is inviolate. It is one of the things we hold most sacred. We have strict laws to protect it. Some cultures hold that all life is sacred. There is a certain logic to this conviction, which becomes clear if we think for a moment about the nature of life. Scientists teach us that life begins with matter and that man is its highest form. Philosophers and theologians teach us that man has both an animal and a rational nature. We are rational animals with souls that are immortal. We might say that matter aspires to life, life to immortality. That miraculous emergence of life from matter and its transcendence in the human spirit is the unifying and perpetuating principle of all creation. Its most perfect embodiment is the human person. Its most eloquent expression is the human figure.

The figurative tradition derives its richness and its longevity from how artists embody and express in their work the miracle of life—what I have already referred to as the transcendence of the human spirit. From earliest times, the human figure has symbolized the unknown forces that govern the universe. It has also served as the vehicle for those powers mankind ardently reveres. In one form or another, it has been at the center of ritual throughout the world since prehistoric times, and it has been the medium through which the human and the divine communicated.

The human figure embodies the universe of human existence and experience. It personifies all that is human and, therefore, the one form in art with which we totally, uniquely, and immediately
identify. That empathy derives from the fact that the figure is the complete expression of the beauty, mystery, and dignity of the human person, the quintessential form of life. Therefore, the figurative tradition occupies a unique place not only in the history of art but in the entire sweep of human history. It has always been an accurate barometer of civilization’s attitude toward humanity and respect for individuals.

The ancient Greeks were the first to establish standards of beauty for the human figure based on the perfection of physical development. They recognized that the body’s design is a perpetual marvel of proportion, flesh, and organization. They also recognized the indivisibility of the mind, body, and spirit. Medieval theologians saw the human body as a metaphor for the universal community of mankind. And they audaciously taught that all human beings are united by the divine grace of the Creator, the first maker of symbols, who gave them their physical and spiritual form. It has been said that ever since God formed man out of the clay of the ground and breathed life into him (Genesis 2:7), the human figure has been the central theme in art and people’s yearning for immortality its underlying principle.

From earliest times, the human figure has symbolized the unknown forces that govern the universe.

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**Imprimis Endowment Acknowledgements**

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