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MY CLASSICAL EDUCATION JOURNEY

My journey in classical education has been a long and winding road, a journey that has led me to beautiful places to which I am eager to introduce others. It started with a decision about how to educate my daughters. When my oldest was ready for pre-K4, I was not sure that I wanted her to stay at the daycare where she had been the previous four years. I sensed that she was ready for more than she would get were she to stay there another year. In addition, I had been thinking about homeschooling, and my husband, Jonathan, was on board with the idea and gave me his blessing. He knows that education is very important to me, and he had faith that I would do what was best for the girls. Given the depth of the commitment, the decision to homeschool is never undertaken lightly and ours required even more consideration because I also work full-time as a professor. Given the significance of such a commitment, I decided that I could use the pre-K4 year as an experiment in homeschooling. If it worked, then it might indeed be a good path for our family.

As it turned out, the following year I was offered a fellowship at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, New Jersey. It was an excellent opportunity: a year on sabbatical living with a vibrant community of scholars. It would, of course, mean uprooting our family for a year. Again, Jonathan was supportive—God has indeed blessed me with an incredible husband—and we made our way from New Orleans to New Jersey. Because we were already homeschooling, and the pre-K4 year had gone beautifully, I stayed the course while we were in Princeton. We were using a semi-structured curriculum that began with content for two-year-olds, so both of our girls, ages two and five, were old enough to have lesson time. Every morning, we would have time together to pray, read and discuss a Bible lesson, and immerse ourselves in story. Then I would do sep-

arate lessons tailored to each girl. After completing the lessons, I would compose a list of learning activities for them to do under the supervision of either my husband or the person we hired to come in for the day to be with the girls. Then, I would go off to work for the rest of the day. By the time we returned to New Orleans, I was committed to homeschooling our daughters for the long term. The basic pattern of common time together, then individualized instruction, activity list for the day, and standard workday for mom was our routine for eleven years.

For our first three years of homeschooling, I used Sonlight and found it to be a perfect introduction as we embarked on our educational journey. Although it is not, strictly speaking, a classical curriculum, it is literature rich, which went well with the ethos of our home—our family loves books. I personally have always turned to reading for joy, succor, encouragement, escape, and knowledge. My books have been my friends and companions through life and I was eager from the beginning to pass this love on to my daughters. So eager, in fact, that I started reading aloud to each of my girls as soon as we got home from the hospital on the second day of her life. That was the start of our ritual of reading aloud at bedtime. Some might wonder at this, but it was the beginning of a beautiful life surrounded by books—a life both of my daughters have embraced. They are so beguiled by books that they are on a first-name basis with our public librarians. In the summer of 2021, they both jumped at the opportunity to spend the summer volunteering—our twelve-year-old helping with the book sale put on three days a week by the Friends of the New Orleans Library, and our fourteen-year-old working with the nuns at Pauline Books and Media, a Catholic bookstore that had long engaged her imagination and filled her with joy.

All this to say that the Sonlight curriculum's heavy focus on high-quality children's literature was an excellent fit for us. At the start of every year, we experienced something like the joy of Christmas when the Sonlight box came and we opened it, oohing and aahing at the great books we would read that year. Many of these books are children's classics. One series that stands out to me from the pre-K4 curriculum features the stories of Uncle Wiggily. I had never heard of this adventurous rabbit, but he captured and held my four-year-old's attention for twenty minutes at a time. This is all the more remarkable because there are almost no pictures or illustrations in the Uncle Wiggily stories. The few that are there are simple black-and-white sketches, perhaps one per story. The series was written in the early twentieth century, and the majority of

each tale consists of several dense pages filled with vibrant but rather formal language. These are *not* your typical picture books filled with colorful images and comparatively few words. No, the stories are quite substantial and they demand concentrated attention, but they are filled with twists, turns, and adventures delightful to young minds.¹ I was surprised by how much my little four-year-old could absorb and by how enraptured she was by the writing that painted a world she was eager to enter into. This made me certain that we were on the right educational path.

Then, soon after we returned to New Orleans, I was invited by Danielle Bennette Dukes to attend an informational session at the Classical Conversations campus where she was acting as the director. This was the pivotal moment in my introduction to classical education. It was there that I had my first exposure to the uses and importance of memorization for young children. I was enchanted and impressed by the twelve-minute Timeline Song in which children sang about human history from creation through to the twenty-first century. I was amazed at how much young children can absorb mentally and intellectually. We enrolled our children with Classical Conversations and stayed there for eight years until my oldest completed ninth grade and my youngest, sixth grade.²

1. Here's an excerpt from the beginning of "Uncle Wiggily Starts Off" to give you a sense of the language. The whole volume is accessible at: <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/15281/15281-h/15281-h.htm>.

Uncle Wiggily Longears, the nice old gentleman rabbit, hopped out of bed one morning and started to go to the window, to see if the sun was shining. But, no sooner had he stepped on the floor, than he cried out:

"Oh! Ouch! Oh, dear me and a potato pancake! Oh, I believe I stepped on a tack! Sammie Littletail must have left it there! How careless of him!" . . .

Well, when Uncle Wiggily felt that sharp pain, he stood still for a moment, and wondered what could have happened.

"Yes, I'm almost sure it was a tack," he said. "I must pick it up so no one else will step on it."

So Uncle Wiggily looked on the floor, but there was no tack there, only some crumbs from a sugar cookie that Susie Littletail had been eating the night before, when her uncle had told her a go-to-sleep story.

"Oh, I know what it was; it must have been my rheumatism that gave me the pain!" said the old gentleman rabbit as he looked for his red, white and blue crutch, striped like a barber pole. He found it under the bed, and then he managed to limp to the window. Surely enough, the sun was shining.

Howard R. Garis, *Uncle Wiggily's Adventures* (New York: A. L. Burt, 1912; Project Gutenberg, 2005), story 1.

2. We left Classical Conversations because of a significant change in our family life that involved a cross-country move and a new academic position for me. We made the decision that the girls and I would be best served by transitioning them to a small classical Christian school that is in line with our faith and educational philosophy. I was very happy and grateful to have been able to homeschool for eleven years, and just as grateful to have an excellent classical Christian school nearby when we needed it.

Our time with Classical Conversations continued to emphasize the importance of reading great literature and also introduced me to the idea of intentionally choosing to read classic works. In order to learn more about educating classically, I read Susan Wise Bauer's *The Well-Trained Mind*. Her book provided a wealth of information and helped me to curate an excellent list of classic literature to read with the girls. I was also inspired and encouraged by the fact that Bauer was a fellow home-schooling professor—there are relatively few, so it was reassuring to find another who was so prominent.

As with many classical schools, the educational structure of Classical Conversations is divided into distinct historical time periods and that provided a helpful way of structuring our study. We followed a three-year rotation that took us through the ancient world, the medieval period, and the modern world. As we did this, I was slowly introduced to classic literature I had never read before. For instance, my introduction to Homer's *Odyssey* was reading a children's version aloud to my daughters. I did this by using a strategy I had learned from Danielle Dukes, which was finding a classic book that had been adapted for a young audience and then finding adaptations of the same book for progressively higher levels. We then revisited that book every time we came back in the cycle to the relevant time period. For instance, following this approach, we read a beautifully illustrated children's version of the *Odyssey* by Gillian Cross when the girls were about five and eight years old, and then a more sophisticated, prose version three years later when they were eight and eleven.³ (I chose the prose version over one in verse that would have been harder for them to follow.) In this manner, I began to acquire the classical education I had never had.

As I navigated through this journey with my daughters, I began to think about the privilege of being able to immerse ourselves in great literature and to wonder about the kind of education the children in my neighborhood were receiving. Our home in New Orleans is in a largely low-income and working-class African American community, and at the time, two mothers living across the street from me, both of whom knew I was an educator, asked about resources to help their young children with their reading because the mothers did not feel their children were getting what they needed at school. I directed them as best I could, putting one in contact with a literacy program that targeted struggling second graders, and sharing with the other the activities I did with my kindergarten-aged daughter.

3. You can find this delightful version of Homer's *Odyssey* at <http://capress.link/bit01>.

At the same time that this was happening with families on my street, Quintesha Lee, the woman who was staying with my daughters during the day while I was at work, was carefully observing the educational approach I took with my girls. Her daughter and my youngest were both in kindergarten. Quintesha was struck by how well my daughter was reading and asked for help with her daughter's reading. She was very frustrated with what was happening at the school her daughter was attending and was eager to have resources to help her daughter learn to read. I happily shared the resources I used and she was pleased with the progress her daughter began to make. As she spent more time with our girls, she took more ideas to apply at home.⁴

It was at about this time that Danielle and I discussed how we might bring classical education to a larger group of students who were unlikely to ever receive this kind of education. It was these discussions that led us to cofound Nyansa Classical Community, a classical Christian afterschool program. For the first six years, Nyansa took place at my church. We read classic literature with the children and put this literature into dialogue with African American history and culture. When we read the *Odyssey*, for instance, we paired this with an introduction to Romare Bearden's *A Black Odyssey*. This powerful series of paintings and collages draws on Homer's timeless theme of journey, struggle, and growth and applies it to the history of African American people. It is a masterful blending of this Western classic with the African American tradition.

Then, when we were reading Greek mythology, we got some comments from the children questioning why we were reading about so many White people. This inspired the idea of commissioning Black and Brown depictions of the Greek gods and goddesses. Because these are imagined beings who even in their stories can often shift in appearance, this recasting of their images made sense to us. The children loved the new illustrations and it helped them to enter even more enthusiastically into the stories. I then asked my college student volunteers to sit one-on-one with the children to help them to write haikus based on the different gods and goddesses and their characteristics. We kept a notebook of their work, and at the end of the year, created a beautifully designed booklet complete with the new images and the children's poetry. It was a wonderful project that the students took pride in.

4. Quintesha would later go on to join the board of Nyansa Classical Community (NyansaClassicalCommunity.org), the classical Christian afterschool program mentioned in the subsequent paragraphs.

The culmination of this project occurred a year later when Jane Wolfe, co-owner of Melba's, included our booklet in her new book program in which she chooses an author, buys one hundred copies of the author's book, and then gives the copies away to customers.⁵ She chose our poetry booklet for the December 2018 giveaway. Several of the children who had poems in the volume went to Melba's, where they were generously treated to lunch. Then, as customers learned about the book and its authors, the children were in demand, signing books left and right for dozens of adults eager to see and enjoy their work. The smiles on the children's faces were absolute gold.

Experiences such as the one these children had at Melba's reinforces for me a desire for children like those I have worked with to have greater access to classic literature and classical education. While I would love for the children who participated in Nyansa's afterschool program to be able to attend a classical Christian school full-time, we are not yet at a point at which this is likely to happen anytime soon. For this reason, I see a great deal of potential in programs such as Nyansa, which bring classical Christian programming to children where they are. I received a powerful confirmation of the value of this work in the summer of 2019, when I heard Dr. Vernard Gant speak at the Urban Education Leadership Retreat sponsored by the Society for Classical Learning and the Spreading Hope Network. Dr. Gant likened education to living, healing waters and noted that in scripture we see God providing these waters in a variety of ways. Some had to go to the source for their healing. In other cases, God provided pools or springs of living water that were close to those in need of healing. He used this analogy to talk about how the benefits of a life-giving Christian education will come to disadvantaged students in different ways: some will go to Christian schools full-time, while others will acquire it in their communities in other ways. He contrasted what he described as the institutional (children go to the school) with the incarnational (Christian teachers empowered by the Holy Spirit go to the students).⁶ I like this analogy for thinking about how under-resourced

children may have access to classical Christian education. In this vision, Nyansa is an example of a pool or spring located within the community that brings healing and living water to children where they are. Until every child whose parents desire this has access to a high-quality classical Christian school, programs such as Nyansa can play a role in bringing the classical renewal to new places and communities that are unlikely to experience this kind of education in any other way.⁷

As beautiful as my homeschool and Nyansa journeys have been, the good news of how classical education has shaped my life journey does not stop there. It has come to influence my scholarly work as well. My main area of research focuses on understanding the history of race and its effects on social life in the United States. While homeschooling and working with the children of Nyansa, I was also continuing my work as a professor, writing about race and history and teaching courses on these topics as well. As I sought to better understand our country's difficult history with race and racism and considered how we might find ways forward toward real understanding and reconciliation, it seemed to me that I needed more than the standard tools of sociology to do this. Mainstream sociology focuses on structural inequalities and structural solutions to those inequalities. While structural changes are certainly important for addressing injustices—Brown v. Board of Education and the Civil Rights Act of 1964 are prime examples—we live in a time when the most obvious legal changes have already occurred, but we continue to struggle mightily with the many legacies of racial injustice. What I was looking for was something that mainstream sociology does not readily offer: a way of thinking and talking about the moral dimensions of our lives and of envisioning the contours of a good life and a good society. Just laws are absolutely necessary, but certainly not sufficient for a good society.

My most significant turning point in thinking about how to bring my work on race and inequality into dialogue with these larger questions about the good life and good society occurred in 2013 as I was rereading *Habits of the Heart* by Robert Bellah. I very much resonated with the message of the appendix entitled "Social Science as Public Philosophy," which called for the revival of an earlier kind of social science that was both historical and philosophical in nature. This led to my reading other books by Bellah and other authors related to him and his approach, including *The Good Society*

7. Nyansa devoted the sixth and seventh year of its existence to creating a structured, twenty-week curriculum of activities that provides a blueprint for replicating what we have done in New Orleans. We are excited to have new partners and new sites offer what has been so refreshing and life-giving to our children in New Orleans.

5. Jane Wolfe began this wonderful program of bringing in authors and giving their books away. It is part of her personal passion to use her business for community development. You can find an article that provides an example of her work with the book program here: <https://www.shreveporttimes.com/story/life/2019/11/07/melbas-new-orleans-serves-po-boys-books-side/4166567002/>.

6. This beautiful, powerful talk can be accessed on YouTube: Vernard Gant, "The State of Christian Education and A.C.E. Youth," address, 2019 Urban Education Leaders Retreat, July 8, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NG9pRVq2uCE&ct=17s>. A.C.E. stands for Academically disenfranchised, Culturally diverse and disesteemed, and/or Economically disadvantaged. Dr. Gant's use of the water analogy begins at 22:00 minutes into the talk, but I highly recommend listening to and learning from the entire talk.

(1991) by Bellah and *Reconstructing Public Philosophy* (1986) by William Sullivan. I began to question why early sociologists had so completely severed the discipline of sociology from its philosophical and historical roots. These questions were coming to me as I was simultaneously immersing myself more and more in my daughters' classical education.

While I read children's versions of the classics with my children, I also began to read for the first time the standard scholarly versions of the works of Aristotle, Plato, and others. As I did this, I realized that the kinds of questions those writers dealt with—the meaning of justice, the nature of the good society, the practice of citizenship—were at the root of what had attracted me to sociology in the first place. And yet never in my study of sociology—the discipline in which I have acquired one undergraduate and two advanced degrees—was I ever required to read these authors, grapple with their philosophical questions, or connect them to the empirical work I was doing.

I continued to read classical and canonical writers more deeply and sought to study them in community, attending short-term seminars on Great Books through St. John's College, ClassicalU.com, and the Albertus Magnus Institute whenever I could. Some of the courses I took included works by de Tocqueville, Rousseau, Dante, and Socrates. In these studies, I discovered that there were dimensions to this reading that spoke directly to the historical work on race that constitutes my major research interest. Most of my scholarly work is in the area of the historical sociology of race, examining the past in order to better understand how racial systems have developed and changed over time. I, like the vast majority of sociologists, rarely went back further than the nineteenth century in doing this work. But, as I continued to read the classics, I realized that in order to truly understand race—where the concept has come from and how it has developed—one must go back to a time when race as a category of social understanding did not exist at all. Classical antiquity was such a time. Consider, for instance, Herodotus's *Histories* with its exploration and speculations about different kinds of people. Certainly some people groups are considered to be better and more cultured than others, but in the ancient world there was no settled racial hierarchy based on color.

I then discovered the work of Frank Snowden, an African American classicist who taught at Howard University. His books *Before Color Prejudice: The Ancient View of Blacks* and *Blacks in Antiquity* were life-changing in that they showed me the importance of following the experience of

people of African descent from antiquity, through the Middle Ages, and into the modern period in order to understand how, as a human community, we went from recognizing differences in culture and appearance to developing a rigid hierarchy in which light skin is almost universally valued as beautiful and preferred while dark skin is associated with deformity and deficiency. Snowden's work opened a door into a past in which these associations were not assumed.⁸

The work of Rebecca Futo-Kennedy and others in *Race and Ethnicity in the Ancient World* also provided a treasure trove of readings carefully curated and translated into English, showing how many ancient writers made sense of differences in culture and appearance. Again, these diverse readings showed a great variety of views of different kinds of people of color, with no uniform denigration of black or brown skin. The discovery of Kennedy's work brought new, valuable lenses to my historical studies on race that I may have never found had I not been reading deeply in classical literature.

In short, classical learning has profoundly affected my life both personally and intellectually. It has become a motivating passion in my life and I am eager for others to share in it. Although today's political climate has been highly critical of a form of education that makes classical and canonical readings central to the curriculum, I stand by the importance of classic texts. I know, moreover, that I am not unique in being a Black woman intensely drawn to the classics. Generations of Black intellectuals from Phillis Wheatley to Toni Morrison have also embraced the classics.

Against criticism that such texts enforce a whitewashed education that encourages cultural assimilation, I and others have found instead that reading these enduring texts has provided a life-giving fount that refreshes and energizes. We weave these texts together with the best of African American culture, and plumb their depths for insights into the issues of race, difference, inequality, and justice with which our society continues to grapple. It is in combining these traditions that I experience a version of the psalmist's observation of the power of "deep calling to deep" (see Psalm 42:7) in which the soul reaches beyond itself for something greater to sustain it.⁹ The combination of texts from the

8. I will also note that there is an ongoing scholarly debate on the extent to which something such as racism did or did not exist in the ancient world. In his book *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity*, Benjamin Isaac argues that the seeds of racism were already there in what he describes as "proto-racism."

9. In Psalm 42, the writer expresses how his soul calls out to God as a deer pants for streams of water. Classic texts have been life-giving water for my soul.

Christian, classical, and Black intellectual traditions provides a rich feast that sustains me through times both difficult and joyous, and I pray they may do the same for you as you encounter these texts in the conversation throughout this book.

PART I

BLACK WRITERS AS GUIDES TO
TRUTH, GOODNESS, AND BEAUTY

