

# EXCELSIOR NEWSLETTER

Excelsior Classical Covenantal Community

February 2011

[www.excelsiorclassical.org](http://www.excelsiorclassical.org)

## “Attention Span: Our National Education Crisis” by Oliver DeMille

Reminder:

We will

**not have class**

**on**

**February 11th**

in order to allow

some of our

students the

chance to attend

TeenPact.

On October 16, 1854, in Peoria, Illinois, Stephen Douglas finished his 3-hour address and sat down. Abraham Lincoln stood. He “reminded the audience that it was already 5 pm,” and then told them that it would take him at least as long as Mr. Douglas to refute his speech point by point, and that Mr. Douglas would require at least an hour of rebuttal (1). He recommended that everyone take a one-hour dinner break, and then return for the four additional hours of lecture. The audience amiably agreed, and matters proceeded as Lincoln had outlined.

“What kind of audience was this? Who were these people who could so cheerfully accommodate themselves to seven hours of oratory?”(2) This was only one of seven debates, and many people attended as many as they could.

In contrast, I was invited as a guest on the early morning NBC station newscast in Yuma, Arizona the day after the Columbine High School tragedy in Littleton, Colorado. The primary purpose of my visit was to deliver lectures at the local community college and then give a speech at an annual foundation banquet—the title of my speech was along the lines of “What Jefferson Would Do to Fix Modern Problems.”

The Columbine coverage took up most of the hour, and when it came time for our interview the anchor turned to me and said, without any preview, something like: “What would Thomas Jefferson think about this Columbine tragedy—you have 30 seconds.”

I don’t remember my exact answer, but I tried to communicate that Thomas Jefferson would not try to analyze and solve such a problem in thirty seconds, and until our means of dealing with serious national problems stops being handled in 30-second sound bite opinions we will continue to see such problems—indeed, they will get worse. With that our interview was over, we unhooked our microphones and left the studio.

But the event has troubled me ever since. Hundreds of television professionals asked similar questions over the next few days, and have done so repeatedly with hundreds of events since—answers are given in thirty second sound bites, people shake their head at the day’s latest shocking news, and then they go on about their work.

This is how we deal with problems in America today—and then we conclude by calling on government to fix everything. We express opinions--in soundbites on television, at work and social events, and in restaurants and taxis. Then we shake our heads and go back to our lives. We live on a steady diet of opinions, opinions, opinions. In 30-second doses. And then we forget and move on.

What is the difference between these two sets of audiences—those who listened attentively for seven hours to Lincoln and Douglas and came back for more, and those of us who hear and express opinions lightly and then move on?

Not to put too fine a point on it, but these two audiences are drastically different—in their culture, their education, their habits and in their capacity to be free.

The group who heard Lincoln were capable of education, and capable of freedom. The latter group is largely incapable of either unless something changes.

Specifically, a great education ultimately comes down to one thing. Those who have it can gain a superb education. Those who don't cannot. A nation of people with it can earn its freedom. A nation without it is either not free or in the process of losing its freedom.

If you are going to be a successful leader in the future, you must develop this trait. It is not just a nice thing to have, or a good thing—it is essential; it is vital. Without it you cannot be a statesman and the world will be led by whoever has it—whether they are virtuous or not, good or evil, dedicated to moving the cause of liberty or some other cause.

You will probably not like to hear what I have to say about it—because it will mean that you have to change, and change is hard; I didn't like it when I learned it—because I had to change.

Jefferson probably didn't like it either, but he did it. Lincoln probably didn't like it; but he did it. You must have this trait if you want to be a successful learner and become a leader. The nation must have leaders with this trait if it is to stay free.

So, if I say things you don't like, ignore that. Don't ask, "Do I like what he's saying?" Ask, "is it true? And what changes will I make because it's true?"

Each of us needs this trait because each of us wants to fulfill our mission in life, to really make a difference in the world. So, even if it is hard to get this trait—and it is—it is worth it, and it is important.

The vital trait I speak of is attention span.

## II. Attention Span and Freedom

Of course, attention span by itself is not enough to guarantee education or freedom, but a person lacking attention span must either develop it or he will not become educated, and a nation without attention span must either gain it or lose its freedoms.

If I were speaking of making money, the point would be obvious. If you don't go to work and stay a few hours, your paycheck will be small. In fact, figure out what your paycheck would be if you crammed your work the day before a big bill was due, and you'll have a pretty good indication of how much that same amount of study is really worth. Or, figure out how much money you'd make if you spent four years putting in an hour or

two a day between fun activities—you certainly wouldn't make enough to live on. If you put in that same kind of study, you won't have much of an education to show for it either. The diploma on the wall may look the same, but it will be empty.

Without attention span—specific, dedicated time spent at work or managing one's resources—income and wealth will dry up. The same is true of education, where the currency is study instead of labor, and the commodities are virtue, wisdom and freedom.

But how does a person or nation without attention span develop it, increase it, or improve it? There is only one way: discipline yourself to put in the time.

Speaking of attention span and education: Slow down and learn. Slow down and put in the time reading, writing, discussing, listening, pondering, thinking, praying. Spend hours and hours in the classics, and you will acquire a superb education. A nation of superbly educated individuals will maintain its freedom.

In Lincoln's day the culture of learning was based around books. Today, as Neil Postman points out in his excellent book *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, the culture of learning is based on television and internet technology. All of our forms of public discourse are based less and less on books and more and more on electronic media.

Most of the major decisions of society are made in five places—families, churches, schools, businesses and governments—and four of the five are moving consistently away from books toward electronic media. Politics is now almost exclusively an electronic event, more and more people attend church in front of their television set, businesses survive through electronic marketing, and schools are "computerizing" as quickly as possible—the wave of the future, we are told, is virtual education, virtual politics, e-business and electronic evangelizing.

Even the family is increasingly virtual—parents and children communicate with fax and email, and family time is increasingly spent in front of the television set, except for those off in their own rooms surfing the net.

Now don't get me wrong: I like the latest hit movie or website as much as anyone, and I believe that television and internet technology are of great benefit to society—they significantly empower business and greatly enhance entertainment.

But they have also displaced books as the source of cultural learning, and this is a very discouraging development because of the impact of society's morals; but that is not my chief point here. My point is that it is

bad to replace books with television and internet because of the consequences to education and freedom.

Specifically, the medium of the electronic screen teaches at least five deadly fallacies about education, and consequently freedom:

Fallacy Number 1: Learning should be fun.

Indeed, the lesson seems to be that everything should be fun. The worst criticism of our time is that something is boring, as if that made it less true or less important or less right. There is nothing wrong with fun, but there is everything wrong with a society whose primary purpose is to seek fun. In American society, particularly among those under 40, the love of fun is the root of all evil. This is the legacy of the sixties—seeking fun has become a national pastime.

With respect to the education of an adult, fun is simply not a legitimate measurement of value. Things should be judged by whether or not they are good, true, wholesome, important or right. Commercialistic society judges things by whether they are profitable, and even socialism judges whether something is fair or equitable. But what kind of a society makes "fun" the major criteria for its actions and choices?

Consider how this lesson impacts the education of youth and adults. Learning occurs when students study. Period. No fancy buildings or curricula or assemblies or higher teacher salaries change this core principle. Learning occurs when students study, and any educational system is only as good as the student's attention span and the quality of the materials.

Now, study can be fun, but it is mostly just plain old-fashioned hard work, and nearly all of the fun of studying comes after the work is completed. In essence, there are really two kinds of fun—the kind we earn, and the kind that we just sit through as it happens to us. There are very few things in life as fun as real learning, but we must earn it. And this kind of fun always comes after the hard work is completed.

No nation that believes that learning should be fun, in the unearned sense, is likely to do much hard studying, so not much learning will occur.

And without that learning the nation will not remain free. Nor will people stay moral, since righteousness is hard work and just doesn't seem nearly as fun as some of the alternatives.

No nation focused on unearned fun will pay the price to fight a revolutionary war for their freedoms, or cross the plains and build a new nation, or sacrifice to

free the slaves or rescue Europe from Hitler, or put a man on the moon. We got where we are because we did a lot of things that weren't fun.

Americans today believe that it is their right to have fun. Every day they expect to do something fun, and they expect nearly everything they do to be fun. Most adults eventually figure out that fun isn't the goal, but many of today's students firmly believe that learning must be fun; if not, they put down the books and go find something else to do.

Fallacy Number 2: Good teaching is entertaining.

Since fun is the goal, teachers must be entertaining or they aren't good teachers. "He is boring," is the worst criticism of a teacher these days. The problem with this false lesson, besides the fact that some of the best teachers aren't a bit entertaining, is that it assumes that teachers are responsible for education in the first place. Now remember, I'm speaking of the role of adult and youth students to own their responsibility for their education.

This is not intended as license for parents and educators to abdicate the responsibility to be all that they can be as mentors. But think of it: if we, as students are waiting around for our teachers to get it right or else we're not gonna study, who really loses? Whose job is education anyway?

All of us have watched a movie with a bad ending, and since our goal in watching was to be entertained, we are upset that the movie ended that way. We blame it on whoever made the movie; it was their fault. Our culture approaches teachers the same way—if we weren't entertained or didn't learn, it is their fault. "What kind of a teacher is he, anyway; I didn't learn anything in his class."

But if I don't learn something in a class, it is my own fault, no matter how good or bad the teacher is. Good teaching is a wonderful and extremely important commodity, but that is another essay, and it is not responsible for a student's success. Only students are.

Our society likes to blame its educational shallowness on its teachers because it is just plain easier to blame than to study. And it is easier for parents and politicians to join the blaming game than to set an example of studying that will inspire their youth to action.

The impact on education is clear: We blame teachers and our schools for the problems, while we do everything except the hard work of gaining an

education for ourselves, thus inspiring and facilitating our children to do the same.

The impact on freedom is equally direct: Students who have been raised to blame educational failure on someone else usually become adults who expect outside experts to take care of our freedom for us. Even those who become activists tend to spend a lot of time exposing the actions of others, “waking people up” to what “they” are doing. And whether “they” refers to conspirators, liberals, or the religious right, the activists seldom do anything about the situation except talk—in more shallow 30-second sound bite opinions.

A corollary of this false lesson is that students need a commercial every 8.2 minutes. We are conditioned to short attention spans, and therefore to shallow educations and nominal freedoms. The reality is that unless you spend at least two hours on something, chances are you didn’t learn much. Without attention span, little is learned.

Fallacy Number 3: Books, texts and materials should be simple and understandable.

Now, mind you—I’m not suggesting that authors should be purposely obscure or irrelevant. I’m just returning to the idea that we, as students, must step up to whatever obstacles may be in our way. It’s our job to do whatever it takes to get an education, no matter the quality or interest level of our materials. But even beyond that obvious point, the problem with this error is that the complex stuff is actually the best, the most interesting, ironically the most fun, and certainly the most likely to produce individual thinkers and a free nation. The classics, the scriptures, Shakespeare, Newton—works really worth tackling are the best and most enjoyable.

Consider the impact of simple materials on education. For example, what kind of nation would the founders have framed had they been taught a diet of easy textbooks, easier workbooks, more quickly understood concepts and curricula? A free people is a thinking people, and thinking is hard work—it is, in fact, the hardest work, which is why so little of it takes place in a society which avoids pressure and takes the easy path.

The only reason to choose easier curriculum is that it is easier, but the result is weaker graduates, flimsier characters, vaguer convictions and impotent wills. Thucydides said it bluntly: “The ones who come out on top are the ones who have been trained in the hardest school.” This is true of individuals and of nations.

I am not saying that everything that is hard has value, but I am saying that most things of value are hard. If your studies weren’t hard, really hard, chances are you didn’t learn much.

Fallacy Number 4: “Balance” means balancing work with entertainment.

Today’s adults don’t usually find out what really hard work is until they graduate and have to support a family. The average person supporting a family in modern America puts in over fifty hours a week at work; in most countries the amount is much higher. But the American high school system conditions most students to attend class five hours a day and do outside study a few extra hours a week. The rest of the time is filled with activities, friends and occasional family time. And this has become the standard for balance.

Most college students follow suit: they are in class three to five hours a day, they study a couple of hours a day, and they fill the rest of the time with activities and friends. Again, this is considered “balanced.”

Once people get out of school and go to work, “balance” most often means the need to spend more time with their family. But while in school, they say it to mean that they need to spend more time with their friends engaging in fun activities. Family time and study time are shoved aside.

One of my mentors, a religious leader from my faith, taught that the right approach to daily life is eight hours a day of sleep, eight hours a day of work, and eight hours a day of leisure. And he spoke at a time when leisure didn’t mean entertainment. Indeed, leisure means serving people, studying, learning, being involved in community service and government, and so on—whereas the slaves in Rome were considered incapable of leisure and so their masters gave them entertainment to keep them pacified. The media age has tried to convince us all, quite successfully, that we need entertainment—and often.

I take the eight hours sleep, eight leisure and eight work quite literally—it is a solid and realistic approach to “balance.” In all my years of teaching, I have never had a married, working 40 hours a week student complain about not having time to study. They all make the time. Those who complain are always those wanting more time for entertainment, never those who want more time for work or family. Every single one of those complaining that they want balance has been someone without a full or steady part time job. That is amazing to me. The simple truth is that they are right

—they do need balance. They need to start working and studying as if they were college students.

Studying a minimum, and I mean minimum, of forty hours a week in college is balance—it balances the pre-college years where most students did real, intensive study only a few hours in their whole life. And a few college students actually studying enough to become Jeffersons and Washingtons is balance to a whole generation of college students playing around.

If you really want to invoke balance, I think you could make a strong argument that entertainment is not part of a balanced life—unless it is the leisure sort done with family or to learn or serve. Get rid of entertainment time, and fill it with studying, and you will start to find balance. Until then, you will continue to feel unbalanced—and whatever you blame it on, the study will not unbalance you.

On occasion I have had students who did become unbalanced in the side of their studies, and I have recommended that they cut back and spend more family time. But this has happened perhaps three times in hundreds of students. In contrast, it always surprises me who tries to argue for balance—they are usually the ones in no danger whatsoever of becoming unbalanced studiers.

Fallacy Number 5: Opinions matter.

This is perhaps the biggest, most widespread and most fallacious lesson of the electronic age. A time traveler visiting from history might well consider this the most amazing thing about our age. Everybody has an opinion, which can be delivered in 30 seconds or less, and these opinions are considered newsworthy, valuable, and a sound basis for public policy and individual action.

But an opinion is really just something you aren't sure about yet—either because you haven't done your homework, or because after the homework is thoroughly complete the answers are still a bit unclear.

Opinions are at best educated guesses, at worst dangerously uneducated guesses. In any case, opinions are just guesses. Great people in history know and choose. Opinions are really nothing more than the lazy man's counterfeit for knowing and choosing. Again, there is a place for opinion, but after the hard work is completed, not as a replacement for it.

In short—opinion is not a firm basis for anything except passing time (which may be one of the reasons the market won't listen to more than 30 seconds of it at a time).

Imagine what the educational system might look like in a society that values opinions over knowledge. Or try to imagine the future governmental and moral choices of a society where all opinions are created equal, and endowed by their creator with inalienable rights. Certainly such a society will not be wise, or moral, or free.

### III. How to Increase Attention Span

Now, in pointing out these false lessons of the electronic age, my point is not that books are better than computers or televisions. There is nothing I know of that makes paper and binding inherently better than plastic and silicon.

Computers are better than books for many things, such as tracking and storing large amounts of information, speeding up communication and technological progress, and increasing the efficiency and even effectiveness of business. Television is better than books for many purposes, including mass and speedy communication, business advertising and marketing, and entertainment options where important ideas can be portrayed and carried to the hearts of people more quickly.

My point is not that books are inherently better than electronic screens, nor is it that electronic media is bad. Nor is my point that the electronic media undermines our morals; the truth is that many books are at least as bad.

My point is that books are better than television, or the internet, or computer for educating and maintaining freedom.

Books matter because they state ideas and then attempt to thoroughly prove them. The ideas in books matter because time is taken to establish truth, and because the reader must take the time to consider each idea and either accept it, or (if he rejects it) to think through sound reasons for doing so. A nation of people who write and read is a nation with the attention span to earn an education and a free society if they choose.

The very medium of writing and reading encourages and requires an attention span adequate to deal with important questions and draw sound and effective conclusions. The electronic media arguably does not do this in the same way.

Now, idealism aside, the reality is that 30 second sound bites is how public dialogue takes place in our society, and we can either whine about it or we can adapt to the realities and develop our skills to be

leaders. A leader of public dialogue in our day must use the 30 second method; in fact, the reality is closer to 6 seconds than 30.

I am not saying that we should ignore this reality and prepare for 7-hour debates to impact public opinion. The electronic age is real and statesmen should be prepared to utilize it effectively.

But there is a huge difference between those who just polish their media technique and those who do so after (or at minimum, while) acquiring a quality liberal arts education.

Technology is a valuable tool, and a person who has paid the price to know true principles and understand the world from a depth and breadth of knowledge and wisdom, and then applies his or her wisdom through technology is much more likely to achieve statesmanlike impact. His 6-second sound bites will not be opinions, but rather ideas that have been fully considered, weighed and chosen.

Indeed, and this is my most important point, in the electronic age your attention span is even more important than it was at other times in history.

The future of freedom may well hinge on one thing—our attention spans. And certainly your future success as a leader and statesman depends on your attention span. One thing is certain: there will be no Lincolns, Washingtons, Churchills, Gandhis, or the mothers and fathers who taught them, without adequate attention span.

## CONCLUSION

I wish I had some tricks to give you to increase your attention span. But there is only one that I know of: discipline and hard work, hours and hours and hours studying, with hopefully some prayer and meditation in the mix.

There will be leaders of the next 50 years; I believe you will be among them. But only if you increase

attention span. Otherwise, you will be one of the masses, going along with whatever those in power do to society, led along by your “betters”—not because they are better morally, but because they have a longer attention span.

Too many leaders in history have been people without virtue, who ruled because they had the knowledge. Knowledge truly is power. In the year 2010, it is time for people of virtue to also become people of wisdom. I challenge each of you to be one of them.

Don't let your habits of entertainment, your attachment to fun and slave entertainment stop you from becoming who you were meant to be. Become the leader you were born to be—spend the hours in the library. Let nothing get in your way.

Many things will arise to distract you; study will often seem the least attractive alternative for the evening. But you know better. You were born to be the leaders of the future. Now do it—not in 30-second sound bites of opinion, but in seven to ten hour daily stretches of building yourself into a leader, a statesman, a man or women capable of doing the mission God has for you.

## Endnotes:

1. Postman, Neil. 1985. *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. New York: Penguin Books. p.44
2. Ibid.
3. Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, 1,1.84.4. For a fuller treatment of this subject, see Josiah Bunting III. 1998. *An Education for Our Time*. Washington D.C.: Regnery Publishing, Inc.

Article taken from: <http://www.tjedonline.com/free-article.php?id=166>

## February Headmasters

February 4th - **Erik Dukes**

February 11th - **OFF for TeenPact**

February 18th - **Don Dye**

February 25th - **OPEN**

## February Lunches

February 4th - **Atlanta Bread Co.**

February 11th - **OFF for TeenPact**

February 18th - **Abner's**

February 25th - **Steak Escape**