

Classical Education – A Conversation with Dr. Robert Jackson

Transcript of Podcast Episode 351

Julie Walker: Hello, and welcome to the Arts of Language Podcast with Andrew Pudewa, founder of the Institute for Excellence in Writing or as many like to say, “IEW.” My name is Julie Walker, and I’m honored to serve Andrew and IEW as the chief marketing officer. Our goal is to equip teachers and teaching parents with methods and materials, which will aid them in training their students to become confident and competent communicators and thinkers.

So Andrew, we often have conversations about IEW being *classical*. Is it really classical? Can it only be used in a classical school? This is not that conversation today, but it’s going to feel very much like IEW is classical and is used in many classical settings such as Classical Conversations, Great Hearts schools, which we are excited to have a role in helping that organization grow, including you speaking at their conference this coming February. We also have the privilege of having a guest on our show who can speak to this more fluently than certainly I can. And I know you and ...

Andrew Pudewa: Oh, I love guests on the shows. You know that. And I don’t have to talk so much. But this one, I particularly was excited because I was just saying to Nathan: this is one of the smartest, goodest, noblest, cheerfulest guys that I know. So it is ...

Julie Walker: No pressure, Rob.

Robert Jackson: Oh, my goodness. With that lead-up, how can I possibly fulfill that? That’s wonderful. Thank you, Andrew.

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah, so Dr. Robert Jackson. And what is your title? What is your actual role?

Robert Jackson: I am the executive director of the Great Hearts Institute.

Andrew Pudewa: Awesome. So we need a little bit of history. How did you get involved in classical education? – the very short version. How did Great Hearts come to be, and what is it today?

Robert Jackson: Well, I’ll try to pack that all in pretty quickly. But let me just give you my short form biography, autobiography. I had for years been interested in education and Great Works from as early as my time in high school and the youth group and on college campuses in various ministries. But I would end up taking a degree, an undergraduate degree in psychology and then studying, knowing I would go on to grad school education.

I really felt a calling after having spent a year overseas working with teachers, future teachers, and just thought there was something remarkable, something truly transformative and life shaping as one generation transmits its heritage to the next. And so getting to know those teachers in Hungary, coming back, and getting graduate training and so forth, I landed at a

smallish liberal arts college in Manhattan, The King's College, and was given both the mandate or at least the strong encouragement from my provost to design an education program worthy of the name, and by that he meant show us the history; show us the philosophical underpinnings. Let's prepare the next generation of undergraduates to know more about education than our generation by really diving deep. And then in the process, prepare and equip them to go out and to take their place in classrooms across this country, and perhaps even to lead and start schools. Now, I did that for twelve years at The King's College.

And with, I guess it was probably about year eight or nine, I bumped into a headmaster, school leader, from one of the Great Hearts Academies, who my student introduced me to because he was being recruited. Student was being recruited; headmaster was just in town. He introduced us; we hit it off. He invited me to come see the Great Hearts Academies.

I visited and was just smitten. I was awestruck because I'd been watching charters and, you know, other forms of classical education, but I'd never heard of the Great Hearts Academies based in Phoenix, Arizona. But after I did, I quickly changed my tune. You know, I was telling students primarily that were thinking about going into the classroom: Well, you'll probably want to find a classical private school. Maybe you'll want to join Teach for America. This is back in the 2000s.

But as soon as I discovered Great Hearts, I thought, you've got to go. You've just got to go and check it out. At least give them the first right of refusal. Several did. Several were employed by the Great Hearts Academies. At that point, I believe there were probably about fifteen or sixteen schools in Phoenix serving six or seven thousand students. Again, I was so struck by the phenomena, the way this thing had sprung up in the desert, that I was just delighted to have some small part providing them prospective teachers. And those teachers went.

Eventually, I got a call from the co-founder, Dan Scoggin, who asked if I could come out and help, perhaps because he saw, I would say, the quality of the young people that left my classrooms. And that was on them. But hopefully, I had some small part to play. And because of those relationships that were forged with Great Hearts, they were looking for someone to help and to lead and to establish more connections and more positions within higher education where we could recruit and where we could train teachers ultimately from Great Hearts. And that's how I joined them in the year 2013 nine years ago.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, and it must have been almost, for you, this sense of having finally found, you know, this great mission that you completely align with because when I'm around you, you just ooze enthusiasm. You are enchanted. You are enchanting. Anyone who listens to you for any length of time wants to get in, do it, be part of it. I'm just curious; when was the first Great Hearts school opened? Do you know?

Robert Jackson: Twenty years ago this year. So in 2002 the Veritas Preparatory Academy was opened in a rental facility, a church that they were renting with 120 students, grades 7 to 12. Actually at the time it was grade 7, 8, 9, and then they would add a year each year. So 120 students. And as I mentioned, that first decade they saw the first school followed by literally fourteen more that opened up, one after the other. In fact they started as prep schools but then

realized we could do so much more if we begin working with those elementary, those grammar school students. So they opened K–5s, added a sixth grade to the prep school. And from 2010 onward we only opened complete K–12s under Great Hearts.

And so there's typically, if you come to a Great Hearts Academy, you will typically find two campuses co-located, two, you know, two sort of facilities. But it's a single facility just kind of divided in order to keep the K–5 elementary students and the prep school students separate, relative to their classroom space and some shared commons with, you know, athletic facilities and theater and performing arts centers and so forth.

So that growth—that again, I first witnessed in, and I guess it was 2011—was just explosive because they had found a need. They had found and tapped into a need that parents were expressing for a better form of education. And these are classical, charter, and therefore public schools that are available to anyone, anyone who wants to apply. The state has a lottery system, right, so that there can be a fair distribution of those seats and these charter schools.

And Great Hearts Academy is just absolutely devoted to Adler, Mortimer Adler's dictum: "The best education for the best is the best education for all." So what was perhaps once available only within elite academies should be brought to everyone in the community, and that's how they grew.

Andrew Pudewa: I love that: The best education for the best is the best education for all. That is magnificent. And that is painful, rapid growth. Now I'm assuming Arizona is a very charter school-friendly state. Not all states would be quite so amenable. But to start a charter school ... I mean, it's quite a process, isn't it? Just give us in a nutshell: what do you have to do to get a school up and running?

Robert Jackson: Well, as you allude to, the state and the state's regulatory apparatus is the first thing you need to understand. Charter laws are available in all but two of our fifty states and thus make it available under the guidance of the state, the Board of Education, the Department of Education. But depending on how your state approaches these, those charters can be more or less easy to access or to promote or produce.

And so in the case of Arizona, when they first opened Great Hearts back in 2002, the application was made to the charter board, which was a separate or independent entity that oversees and regulates all charters within the state of Arizona. And to your point, today nearly 20 percent, one in five school-aged children, are served by a charter school in Arizona.

So it has been really a leader in the country in terms of charters: To your question, the application for the charter presenting the model that the school entity intends to deploy, the staffing and business model so that there is obviously a fiduciary plan for how to execute. And ultimately because as I said, the state requires a lottery mechanism, you have to advertise and/or promote the school so that its availability or accessibility is given to everyone within the community. Those are the essential steps. But you really have to think through, okay, what's our model? Because effectively that's your entry into the market, if you will: the parental market.

And then you have to think through the business model, which I think is probably where a lot of folks, idealistic folks, folks like myself really have had to learn: what is required to prop one of these up? I mentioned the rental space for the first school. We did a lot of rentals at Great Hearts in the first decade.

Today we're in a different place. We have sort of a different capacity and are largely propping up new school builds. We've kind of built a model or constructed a template that allows us to produce for relatively inexpensive ... And when I say that, we're still talking about multiples of millions. But nonetheless, we can pencil it, as they say, to produce a school that has the facilities that we want to produce.

And these schools average on the lower side ... The grammar schools are somewhere between five and six hundred on average. And similarly the prep school will average between six and seven hundred students in each. So they're small bystanders of our district counterparts, right, of the public schools down the street.

But that being said, I would repeat that getting familiar with charter laws in your state to determine if in fact this is something that will be likely, you know, because there may be very limited numbers of charters, or there may be a real openness to charters. We are in Arizona and now Texas. I should get to that quickly just to express the growth.

And that's because both of those states have been amenable to charters. But then I would say the business model is the thing to be mindful of for anyone who's really serious about propping one of these up and being attentive, always attentive to your base. And by that I'm talking about parents, community leaders, even those within the community, business leaders who've come to see the value of placing one of these schools in their community. Value, by which I mean property values, are often known to rise if a Great Hearts Academy is situated in a particular neighborhood, but the value is nonetheless perceivable, perceptible.

Julie Walker: So Rob, I have a question for you that I think maybe our listeners, some of, many of our listeners might have is, *charter*. You keep saying this word *charter* school. It's a publicly funded educational program. How is it different from the public school down the street, or how is it different from homeschooling through a charter school? This is not an independent study type program. This is a five-day-a-week program. Is that correct?

Robert Jackson: That's right. And I think you will see even Great Hearts has begun to investigate because of the interest in some of these modified approaches. But our brick and mortar, if I may use that term, our schools are those five-day-a-week, sort of the, you know, the 8 to 3:00PM school offering, including athletics and extracurriculars and afterschool programs.

I mean, there's a whole slate of things that go into one of these schools. But to the point we have built them, these charters are different than what you might find in your local school district. They're public. But they're public under the aegis, as I mentioned, of some kind of board or governing entity at the state level that makes provision for a model to be delivered distinct from and governed by a board and/or a community, you know, a leadership organization – in our case, what's called a charter management organization (CMO).

So that CMO is responsible for fulfilling the charter. The charter's the contract, if you will, with the state, right, the contract that says if our organization can produce this model in this community school, the state will pay us per-pupil funding, often a little less than what our district counterparts receive as it turns out. But nonetheless, they will pay us per pupil for each student enrolled and thus publicly funded schools under the aegis of this charter provision in any state.

Now, mind you: Provisions for chartering can be done at the state level as in Arizona. They can be done through university entities. That does also happen. And then you'll see many states including Florida, Louisiana, states we're looking to enter in the next couple of years, where we have a district offering a charter.

So literally the Great Hearts Academy that's going to go into Baton Rouge this coming fall '23 is a charter overseen or governed by that same district board, right, that same entity of educational authorization that's running the other district schools but making provision for this specific model that they have approved. So it's distinct and looks different than the one down the street in part because it's contracted, if I can use that language, to do something different.

Andrew Pudewa: And that gives you control over curriculum and who you hire and how you schedule things within certain parameters. I'm curious. Obviously, it hasn't been a hard sell to get people excited about a more classical curriculum. I love how you said, you know, working with the teachers in Hungary – you said “passing on the traditions from one generation to the next.” But I think there is this conflict between the progressive idea and the classical approach, you know, however you want to do that. So give us a thumbnail sketch of what is the general curricular scope of a Great Hearts school? And how do you approach educating people about the value of that?

Robert Jackson: A classical education as we would use the term, and I think this applies to most classical schools to be found in the country, focuses on that tradition of liberal arts education that encompasses the arts, the sciences, and the whole sweep, right, of subject areas that constitute human knowledge to the best of our ability, again, pertinent to or relevant to the age and the developmental capacities of the child.

But we will, if I could just kind of enumerate them, study basic literacy and numeracy throughout their career, which will lead them into the study of multiple languages, study of the arts, and the artifacts of the tradition, and that would clearly include music, visual art, drama, poetry. Those will be throughout the thirteen years, right, at a classical academy. And then in a sense, the coherent center, right, for this form of education is equipping those young people to lay hold of as you quoted me, the tradition that we have inherited. And that comes chiefly through the Great Works, often referred to as Western Civilization.

You know, canonical great books, but not just books. Great works of art, great works of history and philosophy to be sure. And imaginative literature is just replete; the curriculum is just filled with that, in part because we're so dedicated to, to borrow the title, the poetic imagination, right, the *Poetic Diction* of Owen Barfield. We're trying to convey to young people that the mind and the spirit are made to be integrated. We're made to know the world, and we're made to love that which is there before us, that which is given us.

And so I would say just chiefly a classical liberal arts education emphasizes primary sources, gives ample context in the form of our nation's history—the history of the tradition, I should say—not just our nation, but you know, all that sweeps back into antiquity: the political, the legal, the religious, all of the social features that have given shape to this tradition, and that we work that out in what's typically referred to as a Socratic seminar, a Socratic seminar, sort of mirroring or echoing much of what Socrates did in those Platonic *Dialogues*, the back and forth, the exploration of what we know.

And by the way, all of this curriculum has an attendant pedagogy, a very distinct and integral pedagogy, the seminar being one of those features such that laying hold of this great tradition becomes the child's engagement, the student's capacity to know and to apprehend and to be a part of what sometimes is referred to as the Great Conversation.

They're not passive bystanders. They are certainly not those who are just sort of receptacles being filled up. They are agents, right? They are active in coming to terms. They're joining this conversation that stretches over literally millennia, and they do that in the context of a school culture that emphasizes civility, curiosity, intellectual modesty, honor, nobility. As you said earlier, these are just critical to the formation of mind and heart. Hence our name, Great Hearts.

Julie Walker: I was wondering if you were going to go there.

Andrew Pudewa: We are sold. We're all going to move to Phoenix so we can put our kids and grandkids in.

Julie Walker: Well, turns out we can go to Baton Rouge.

Andrew Pudewa: Baton Rouge. And so now you said you've expanded into Texas. I know that because we have contact with many of the schools in Texas. How many total are there now – Great Hearts Academies?

Robert Jackson: Forty, serving 27,000 students in those two states. We are in San Antonio. We have schools in Dallas, and in Fort Worth, and some of those neighborhoods. I want to be careful here because Texans really love to identify very specifically with their locale, and God bless them for doing so. But that being said, it's not just DFW, right?

There's more room to grow in Texas with those other metros like Houston and Austin, and that's to come. But next year, '23, we will be opening a school in Baton Rouge. And then we have a charter, have just received a charter this summer to open another in Jacksonville, Florida. So our trajectory as an organization has been to the East. We're headed back to the East, as it were, from whence I came.

Andrew Pudewa: Now I would guess that you've got to ... Your curriculum's pretty well set because you've been at this twenty years. You know what works. You know what you want to do. You know the things you don't need to do. I'm assuming your students if tested by state standards, perform very well without having to "teach to the test" as the way many schools do. But I'll bet getting great teachers is one of the challenges you face. Am I right?

Robert Jackson: It is absolutely job #1. I've often said that our talent team, right, those who go out and recruit the folks ... You know, I told you I was engaged by a headmaster who was out in New York City recruiting. Well, we have a team, more than a dozen, that goes, you know, into the highways and byways and across the country to college campuses largely to recruit undergraduates and graduate students to come and join us.

And at this stage, again, trying to serve those or populate the classrooms of forty schools requires that we will have probably on the order of four thousand applicants for six hundred spots that we will hire. And so it is just a nonstop, constant cycle of generating more and more leads. And to find the right kinds of teachers, as you said, means that we're really looking for those who have some inkling of the liberal arts tradition.

And if they weren't necessarily steeped in it, because most of us did not have a classical education in, you know, in the past couple of generations ... If they weren't steeped in it, are they receptive to it? Are there signs that they are hungry, that they want to discover the tradition, and they're ready to learn, right? They're truly receptive and eager to pass on that tradition to the next generation. Those teachers, those types of teachers are not easy to find. I'll just put it that way. They're not easy to find, but they are crucial to the success of our endeavor.

Andrew Pudewa: And you've worked, I know, with ... I'm sure you get teachers who have varying levels of interest, commitment, passion for what you're doing. But you work kind of on a continuous ... I wouldn't even say continuing education; it's a continuous development of the faculty of the schools. That, I think, is something that's both challenging and attractive.

You know, people want to be part of something that is growing, that is vibrant, that is enriching. And you know, just working for a school, and you kind of get into this grind. And after about five, six years, it's so easy to think, what am I really doing here? Am I making a difference? Is it worth it? But at your school, what do you do to keep those teachers growing and more and more integrated? Because obviously some of them have to take over leadership roles at a certain point. You have to grow and recruit from within for the leadership, I'm sure.

Robert Jackson: Oh, that's absolutely right. And I would say that that training or assimilation into classical education ... Because again, I would say the vast majority of our teachers, the majority of our teachers, would not have received a classical education, would not have gone to a Great Hearts or a Great Hearts school. But they may have joined a Great Books program in college.

They may have been a reader all their lives. And in any case, when they come into our academies, we begin first with that school leader whose primary responsibility is to cultivate the faculty, to equip and to assimilate them into the school culture that I described by way of the pedagogy, right, that we deliver, which focuses on the content.

Why do we teach mathematics as problem and proof and that sort of solution, the development of mathematical thought and thinking? Because that's intrinsic to the nature of the discipline. Why do we teach history with a sympathy and an expression that these who've gone before us

need to be understood on their terms, what they were facing—with an understanding that we weren't there.

The stakes and the rules of engagement – it was just another time, another place. But they were human as we were human. What do we see there, and how can we read their stories, their lives, in a way that helps us to recover some of our humanity, to understand our humanity from whence we've come? And I use those two examples simply to state that if we can find teachers who love their subject matter, and that is crucial, but secondly and equally important, love students and again, that desire to transmit what they know to that next generation, then we can work with them.

And the school leader is primarily responsible. We call them *headmasters* or *head of school*. That term, it actually derives ... The headmaster derives from the notion from kind of yesteryear of the head master teacher. These are master teachers coming up through the ranks that are now providing that oversight and equipping that faculty.

But at the network level, we're blessed because essentially we have forty headmaster teachers, right, forty schools, forty leaders. And we have a very gifted and talented team dedicated to the development of our faculty: my dear colleague Jerilyn Olson, dear colleague Jake Tawney, responsible for PD or the development of the people in our organization on the one hand and then responsible for the curriculum and the success of every student on the other.

These two folks, they just work hand in glove to make sure that all of our schools are outfitted or equipped with what they will need to work through a process of, as I'm calling it, assimilation or acculturation into the classical model, especially in those first two to three years of a young teacher's tenure.

So important that they know that they have a headmaster who absolutely is devoted to them and is devoted to their success and that there's a network-wide set of structures that are there to support them with their lessons and their planning and their preparation and with models or master teachers to whom they can go to understand better the craft of teaching.

Andrew Pudewa: You began with kind of just your Great Hearts people, and you started a conference. And I think I missed the first one but came to the second one if my memory is correct. And now this thing has just grown every year, and it's going to be happening in February. I'm very excited to come because I feel like, you know, in a way ... You don't have to specify, but I'm sure there are people who do not like what you do.

You are threatening to certain progressive elements. And so there is that need for solidarity. There's that need to get everyone together and be reaffirming of the vision. And so tell us a little bit about the organization that is bigger than Great Hearts, as well as the conference that you will be holding in February in Phoenix.

Robert Jackson: We propped up the Great Hearts Institute about four years ago. Formerly known as the Institute for Classical Education, we had a slight rebrand this summer just to clarify for all of those friends and colleagues in the wider classical movement that we're here in a very

magnanimous posture to help and provide some of what we've learned to a broader public, to other schools, most of which nationwide are operating in relative isolation. I think the benefit of our CMO, of our network of forty schools is that collective wisdom that I mentioned.

And we have brought that to bear in this institute as a place for us to bring scholarship and research in contact with practitioners and derive from practitioners, but also for reporting to practitioners what are some of the best and the brightest ideas that you're going to need to know as you teach in this classical school. It was effectively a professional development project, gathering when we first did it internally. And then as you said, four years ago we opened it up to our friends and colleagues across the country and felt as though we were stepping forward to say we've learned a little bit in almost twenty years.

And we would love to see what you're learning out there in the broader movement because there are three or four associations of classical educators. Most of them, I think all of them to an org are private and religious. And we bless them for doing that. But we know there are another 220 or 30 classical charters like Great Hearts in this country. And they don't necessarily find, you know, the perfect fit from a classical religious association.

Instead, we wanted to prop up a big tent and invite all of the private, religious, classical schools and all of the charter classical schools in the country to the same convening here in Phoenix, which we do in the springtime, which is not a bad time to come to Phoenix as you can imagine.

Andrew Pudewa: Only in Phoenix is February considered spring.

Julie Walker: Exactly.

Andrew Pudewa: Everywhere else it's still winter, but another good reason to go to Phoenix. How many people are you expecting attending this year? I know it's grown every year.

Robert Jackson: Started around three hundred. We expect around six hundred this year. And then, of course, we'll have a few hundred online because we'll open up some content for those who can't necessarily get to the Valley of the Sun. And we have just an all-star cast of scholars and practitioners like yourself who are going to be coming, delivering content for two and a half days, focused on ... And our theme this year is The Tradition Today. So we really want to sort of dig into and explore how is it that the tradition that we've talked about throughout this time transmitted to the folks who are living and breathing right now? How do we make it so very relevant?

And I hesitate with that term only because this is often sort of a critique: Is that really relevant to be reading Plato or Dante, right? Aren't those a bit outdated? And of course, we know they're not in that they have a perennial message for what it means to be human. And so we want to talk about that in this year's event. And we've got almost forty scholars signed up to join us today.

And we will be going at it for math. We're going to have tracks in math and science. We will have a humanities track, a fine arts track. And this year in particular we're going to dedicate

some time to exploring and providing real kind of nuts and bolts talk around school culture. How do we promote school culture?

And then through all of it, leadership. What do we do to lead this movement forward? I think that's particularly salient to this moment because a lot of folks have begun to take notice of classical education. And they need to understand that in their local community they potentially need to consider how they will add value or participate in the classical movement in some way, shape, or form. Whether they're a parent, whether they're a potential board member, whether they're a teacher, or even a prospective school leader, I think this truly is a movement that's going to call upon many Americans across this country to step forward and say, "I want to join that movement to renew classical liberal arts education in this country."

Andrew Pudewa: This is so awesome. It's so awesome because it is so easy for me to just get depressed almost to the point of hopelessness about the condition of general education and the future and the literacy and numeracy levels of people. If it weren't for people like you, schools like Great Hearts, parents and teachers involved in this, I think I would just give up totally.

So I need to come to conferences like this just to keep me hopeful for the future. And then you see the power of it, the transformative power. So anyone can come. You don't have to be a Great Hearts faculty. You can from ... Like anybody could sign up and come to the convention?

Robert Jackson: Oh, absolutely. And we expect about four hundred from outside, probably a couple of hundred from our own organization. It's welcome to all.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, let's wrap it up with you giving us the exact details on how people can get the information on when, where, and how.

Robert Jackson: The National Symposium for Classical Education will be hosted February 22, 23, and 24, in Phoenix at the convention center, which is right downtown and a quick shuttle from our Sky Harbor airport. The details for the symposium can be found most easily by going to our website, www.GreatHearts (all one word): www.GreatHearts.Institute

From there, cover page, you'll see the symposium. Click and look through. The speakers, the program, and the details can all be found very easily from GreatHearts.Institute's website. And we look forward to seeing some of your listeners there. And of course, Andrew, you and your team from IEW – we're looking forward to hosting you as well.

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah. And I'll just throw in one thing. The times that I have attended, I have been profoundly impressed. And in fact, one speaker in particular, Willingham, who talked about general knowledge and reading comprehension – that was so incredibly impactful. I've cited and quoted that talk and his work many, many times.

I would never have known about it without you. But the thing I really love is you create enough space for people to have kind of the fill-in conversations and, you know, meeting people from all over the country. And I think you have organized it in this super balanced way to be a conference where there's all this high quality presentation. But there's also this opportunity for conversation.

And I just commend you for you and your team. I know it's not all you, but it's been great, and I am very much looking forward to it. So, GreatHearts.Institute, which I honestly didn't even know was a domain.

Julie Walker: Right?

Andrew Pudewa: It's pretty cool. We should get Excellence in Writing.Institute.

Julie Walker: We'll stick with IEW.com. I think that's pretty safe. Well, Rob, I would just want to close by saying I hope all of our listeners heard you say like I did that it is remarkable to be a teacher. I love that. I love that that that is your heart for education, and I think that is going to continue to propel Great Hearts forward. Andrew, can I go to this conference with you in Phoenix?

Andrew Pudewa: Well, I don't know. If you have time.

Julie Walker: Right. Thank you.

Robert Jackson: Thank you, Andrew.

Andrew Pudewa: Thank you, Rob. God bless.

Julie Walker: Thanks so much for joining us. If you enjoyed this episode and want to hear more, please subscribe to our podcast in iTunes, Google podcasts, Stitcher, or Spotify. Or just visit us each week at IEW.com/podcast. Here you can also find show notes and relevant links from today's broadcast. One last thing: would you mind going to iTunes to rate and review our podcast? This really helps other smart, caring listeners like you find us. Thanks so much.