

**Speech Given by Cheyenne Mountain Charter Academy Founder Deborah Cole on Western Civilization at the James Irwin Charter Schools All-School Presentation to Staff on August 2, 2021.**

When we were planning our new school, the founders of Cheyenne Mountain Charter Academy brainstormed about what we were looking for in the curriculum we would select. As we surveyed the options, a mantra gradually emerged that summed up the qualities that consistently stood out whenever a curriculum impressed us favorably: that mantra was **systematic, coherent, sequential, and content-rich**. The first three of these qualities describe **how** a curriculum is put together; we might refer to them as the **form** of the curriculum; the fourth refers to **what material** is actually included in the curriculum. This we might call its substance. This last, the substance of curriculum, is what I will focus on in my brief presentation this morning.

One of the things that disturbed me in my observations and experience of mainstream education at that time was the poverty of actual content, of subject matter, that students were learning, what we refer to generally as knowledge. Over and over again, our kids were betraying their ignorance about the world around them, and they were being kept in that state of ignorance because of impoverished curricula. These sub-par curricula were not some unhappy accident of the educational publishing industry but rather a product of an educational mindset that relegated the importance of the accumulation of factual content to third or fourth-tier importance in education and referred dismissively to the mastery of such content as “the rote memorization of the facts.” The conventional wisdom of the educational establishment was that the important thing was for students to learn *how* to think, a higher order intellectual attainment than the mere, humble mastery of a body of knowledge, and that if students needed to access facts, they had a computer at their fingertips and could use their highly vaunted “research skills” to find them. The hole in that argument, so big that you could drive a truck through it, was that you

couldn't look up information about things you didn't know existed. A certain basic knowledge base was imperative as a point of departure for useful and meaningful research. If a student had no notion of world geography, how could he ever be expected to make sense of the alignment of nations and particular theaters of military operations during World War Two? If he had no notion of when World War Two occurred or why, none of the information that assumed that background would be useful; it would be virtually incomprehensible. Or to take a completely different kind of example, you can't look up the rules for when to use the subjective form of a pronoun and when to use the objective form unless you know enough grammar to realize that there is such a thing as rules governing whether to use **I** or **me** in a given grammatical construction.

You couldn't google "Western Civilization" if you'd never heard the term.

So for me, as a founder of Cheyenne Mountain Charter Academy, content was vitally important. I wanted our students to be feeding their minds with a rich banquet, not with the thin, content-poor gruel of the typical mainstream school.

This prologue brings me to my specific topic. This rich banquet of content, I insisted, had to include substantial servings of instruction in what we refer to as Western civilization. Western civilization is broadly considered to be a heritage of intellectual, social, religious, and political beliefs, norms and institutions that evolved over the course of a long human history and is characteristic of Europe and those areas of the globe which Europe came to dominate, such as North America and Australia. Our students needed grounding in their understanding of themselves as Americans, native-born or increasingly, by adoption, and of the major cultural streams that contributed to the creation of modern American society and its traditional values and its distinctive characteristics. Significantly, they needed to become aware of what was good and valuable in their national identity and its heritage during at time when that heritage is

increasingly under assault as bad or inferior to that of other cultures.

An emphasis on Western civilization did not mean eliminating the study of the rest of the world. A thorough scope and sequence would necessarily include world history and culture as well as Western civilization. In casting about for a curriculum that would fulfill this requirement, we decided that the Core Knowledge Scope and Sequence was the best selection available, and so we adopted it as a guide for curriculum through the grades for history and geography, both U.S. and world.

I'd like to speak a little about some of the specific components of Western civilization. This will necessarily be both ridiculously broad and brief.

First, we define it primarily in contrast to Middle Eastern and Asian cultures as well as the cultures of the Native Americans and Africa. There are certain “mutations” of Western culture, such as communism and fascism or Naziism, which together we can call totalitarianism.

Western civilization is generally considered to rest on a heritage received from Jerusalem – what we call the Judeo-Christian heritage -- and from Athens and Rome, the classical tradition. The first is rooted in the beliefs of the Jewish people, codified in the Old Testament of the Bible and then developed in Christianity and the New Testament of the Bible; and the second is the legacy of Greece and of Rome, the latter of which admired and emulated Greece in many ways but also had its own distinctive culture.

These are some of the contributions that came out of this amalgamation of traditions and laid the groundwork for Western civilization and more specifically, American culture.

From Jerusalem we received:

- a **monotheistic religious belief**, and a God who loved humanity and wished to redeem it
- a belief in the **dignity and worth of each person**, independent of wealth or social status
- a belief in a **rational universe** created by a supernatural intellect
- a **strong moral code**, characterized by self-restraint, on the one hand, and generous regard for one's neighbor, on the other
- a **literature** that is infused with these values
- a **musical heritage** rooted in liturgical worship that gave rise to Western music

From Athens we received:

- A respect for the **life of the mind**, including a speculative interest in man and his place in the world, which gave us **philosophy** and **political theory**
- A recognition of the **value of the individual**, which gave rise to democratic city-states in which **citizens ruled themselves** and prized their **liberty** above their lives
- Belief in an **orderly and predictable universe**, which permitted speculation about the natural world and the **beginnings of scientific inquiry**
- The art and science of **medicine**, and the oath of the ancient Greek doctor, Hippocrates, "First, do no harm." Until very recently, graduating medical students traditionally recited the Hippocratic oath.
- The **dramatic arts**, both tragedy and comedy, and the visual arts of sculpture and architecture which became the basis for subsequent Western artistic development

From Rome we received:

- The Roman alphabet
- The calendar
- A codified legal system
  - The conception of natural law
  - A presumption of innocence
  - A requirement of solid evidence
  - The right to face one's accuser
- Engineering and architectural achievements such as road building, aqueducts, arches, and the invention of concrete

Finally, these are some important elements of the Western heritage evident in American historical development, although not exclusive to it:

- The principles just outlined in the Roman legal system gave rise to the eventual development of the right to private property, the right to free exchange of goods, that is, free enterprise, and the sanctity of contracts.
- They advanced the notion of freedom for all individuals with an expansion of human rights
  - first and most radically, the abolition of slavery, after a long and protracted historical struggle. In other parts of the world that have not received the legacy of Western civilization, slavery continues to be practiced.
  - the progressive widening of the right to vote, freedom of expression, including the right to dissent, the freedom of worship and the uncoupling of established religion from the state
- and finally, a form of government outlined in our Constitution, enshrining government of the people, by the people and for the people, and designed to optimize individual freedom from oppression by dispersing power through checks and balances and federalism;

- the subordination of the military to civilian control.

Needless to say, in wrapping up this summary of almost 3,000 years of history in five minutes, the development of Western civilization was slow and organic and took many different paths over hundreds of years. However, if I were pressed to identify one single element in Western culture that distinguishes it from all others, I would say that it is the recognition of the value of the individual and the love of liberty. These are distinctively Western values that have historically attracted to our shores immigrants from all over the world “yearning to breathe free.”