

**Pulled Up Short with Stanton Wortham**

## **How can education be about acquiring nothing?**

*Featuring René Arcilla with Samantha Ha (guest host) and Chris Higgins (commentator)*

Original Air Date: May 3, 2021

**Stanton Wortham** 0:08

Welcome to Pulled Up Short. This is a podcast that's devoted to a particular kind of activity, where we're told some new perspectives on things that cause us to stop, to be pulled up short, and think a little bit about something that we believed but which turns out not to be true, or at least that we need to reconsider based on some new information that we've been given.

This is an important thing to do. It requires that we recognize deeply held presuppositions, that we entertain the possibility that our typical ways of understanding are incomplete or distorting. We need to be open to questions and alternative formulations of basic issues that we tend to take for granted. We have to be willing to consider alternative ways of thinking. This requires a commitment to imagination, to seeing the world in new ways, a commitment to systematically inquiring based on evidence and reason, wherever it leads, a commitment to being open, to moving beyond dogmatism, and considering alternative beliefs and practices, or commitment to conversation to listening deeply to others and inquiring jointly.

So in each episode, we're going to hear from someone who has an insight or something we don't typically think about that requires us to be pulled up short, to rethink something that we tend to take for granted. And we hope that you'll enjoy.

**Samantha Ha** 1:39

Hi everyone, thanks for tuning in. Welcome to another episode of Pulled Up Short. My name is Sam, and today I'm delighted to serve as a guest host for this episode with two people who I greatly admire as people, mentors, and leading scholars in the field of philosophy of education. Today we have with us, René Arcilla, who is a Professor of Philosophy of Education at New York University. We are also lucky to have Chris Higgins, who is also a Professor and Philosopher of Education, here at Boston College, who will join us as a discussant in the latter part of the episode. Thanks to you both for being here today!

Rene, I want to turn to you, because I know that you've brought a provocative topic for us to explore today. Could you get us started?

**René Arcilla** 2:26

Sure. Hi everyone and thanks for tuning in. What I'd like to examine with you all today is the question of education. What *is* education, exactly? Initially, in keeping with the podcast series theme, I'd like to describe how this question can pull us up short simply because it seems so unserious. It sounds like the kind of wrench one might throw into a conversation to demand a bit of

attention; in the meantime, one's interlocutors are apt to grow impatient with this delay in getting a grip on the practical matter at hand. Indeed, some of you may recall that the original pioneer who made it a practice of posing, for whomever he fell into conversation with, this kind of philosophical what-question, namely, Socrates, was often ridiculed for being childishly impractical. His Athenian community cared much more about how-questions concerning effective ways to accomplish things. Arguably, our interests these days are even more pragmatic. However, if we resist the temptation to automatically dismiss the question of what is education, and instead open ourselves up patiently and resolutely not only to the lack of knowledge implied by the question, but also to something attractive in this unknown, we might start to appreciate a wholly different way of understanding education. One which, after pulling us up short, may be ultimately linked to what pulls our lives along in a specific direction. In sum, I'm going to be suggesting that there is a kind of education that is less about answering questions than about extending and deepening them.

To explore this, let me relate a story. Decades ago, when I was a rather lost young man, the idea occurred to me to apply to graduate school to prepare for a career as an educational professional. I had grown numb wandering from one humdrum job to another and missed the excitement that once crackled through me in the company of teachers and students. No doubt, there was a bit of nostalgia for the childhood shelter of school, but I had also become more informed and concerned about problems threatening the world's future. How might I contribute to their solution? Improving how people acquired genuine knowledge and acted on its basis appeared to be a distinctly constructive, if modest, way to do this.

The first place that appealed to my imagination was the University of Chicago and I arranged for an interview with Philip Jackson, a prominent scholar. It had been years since I left the academic realm and when I arrived at his office, I was quite nervous, unsure about whether I was taking a turn that is right for my life, or whether he wouldn't dismiss me as a naïve and out-of-my-depth flake. With whatever self-possession I could muster, I introduced myself as someone interested in the power of education.

Before I could go on to show him that I had thought seriously about this, that I had done my homework and figured out how the specifics of my interest dovetailed with the resources of the university's department and with Jackson's research in particular, displaying in the process my own reading and analytic skills, he interrupted: "What do you mean by *education*?"

An odd question, as I acknowledged in my opening above, but at the time I supposed it must be some kind of test. Warily, I explained, in so many words, that education is centrally concerned with the acquisition, on the one hand, of propositional knowledge, knowledge that such-and-such is true, and, on the other hand, of practical know-how, knowledge of how to act to achieve some goal. Both kinds of knowledge can be quite specialized and usually we link categories of them together. For example, the very knowledge that this is the true meaning of the term *education* may precisely enable us to act more effectively to educate ourselves and others. Mentally, I patted myself on the back for that last bit of self-reflexive wit.

Unmoved, though, and to my mounting surprise, Jackson persisted in questioning this concept. We continued to fuss, in Socratic fashion, about what exactly is education, rather than proceeding to the more urgent matter of how we could educate others better for particular purposes. As the minutes flew by, I felt my opportunity to demonstrate my understanding and ability, my own education, slip away. Out of this frustration arose in me criticism, which I prudently kept to myself, of Jackson's

seeming indifference to the world around us. Didn't he realize there's an emergency out there? Social injustice, delusion, and inefficiency: we ought to be discussing how concrete educational practices and policies could help solve various manifestations of these problems.

Abruptly, but inconclusively, the conversation reached its end. I departed Jackson's office having accomplished nothing. The only thing I learned is that this philosopher, perched on his ivory tower, was not the educator for me. He hardly seemed capable of instructing me in how to make a difference to the world.

**Samantha Ha** 7:59

Rene, as you are sharing your story, I find myself resonating with your frustration. I remember applying to graduate school myself in education, and thinking that the purpose of education is, as you said, to prepare students to take on these challenges of the world. And it seems to me that this notion of education is something that other listeners, probably resonates with them too, the idea of education as a way to equip students to solve these pressing problems. And you're right, that it feels like there's this sense of urgency, like I'm thinking about the many problems that need addressing, climate change, systemic racism, a global pandemic, just to name a few. And so, in light of your topic, I think it's interesting that what pulls you up short, is exactly an educator who's disappointing. And I was wondering if you could say more about why you felt let down by that dialogue with Phil Jackson?

**René Arcilla** 9:05

Yeah, well, as I mentioned at the outset, it didn't seem serious. I felt like I was being drawn into a philosophical game of words rather than being shown that there is a place for me in an important collective project. Indeed, the insistent focus on what education means even struck me as a touch disrespectful. It triggered a flash of paranoia: perhaps he had for some reason already made up his mind, before listening to my interest in education, that I didn't measure up.

What came across as even more pointless, however, was Jackson's suggestion that education is *not* about gaining knowledge and ability, or at least not mainly about that. If one agreed with him, one would be perversely denying what virtually everybody takes education to be for. The dissemination and maintenance of innumerable schools around the world, the ever-more precise, comprehensive, and expansive attempts to train school professionals, the push for policies that make schools more accessible to more kinds of people—what is the point of this tremendous investment on our parts if education gives us nothing? And if education somehow includes the acquisition of something besides knowledge and ability, then why didn't Jackson simply tell me what that is, why didn't he, in a fashion, hand me this other thing? Instead, he left me with nothing. This is what, as you pointed out, pulled me up short.

But the story doesn't end there. Before I resume it, though, I'd like to link Jackson's question to me, "what do you mean by education," to a related question he provoked in me which I would now like to address to us all: How could education be about gaining nothing? Put another way, how could it have nothing to do with acquiring anything? As I've related, when this latter question formed in me at the end of my interview, it had a tone of derisive incredulity. If I had dared at the time, I would have voiced it to Jackson as follows: "how can you seriously talk about education as if what we have to get from it doesn't matter?!" Today, I invite us to ponder this question without the outrage, in more receptively speculative manner: How might the stakes of education come down to something that one truly cannot *possess*?

**Samantha Ha** 11:30

I think so much about education, and maybe when I say education here, I mean, schooling rather, it revolves around this idea of acquiring something. I think about the ideas of objectives, goals, grade skills. Those are all things that you can acquire and possess, like you said, things that I can list on a transcript or my resume, for example. And so, it seems to me like you're proposing something different than that, some alternative to this familiar concept of education. And so, I'm gonna do the easy thing, as you say, and ask you to hand me the answer. So, what is this alternative conception of education? How, how can we think about it otherwise?

**René Arcilla** 12:18

Yeah, well, I doubt I can do more than merely introduce it. But I'm glad to try, because it's rooted in what always makes me smile about how my story continued. It turns out that I ended up choosing Chicago after all from among the schools that accepted me, and that Jackson did become my mentor. Once I joined this intellectual community, I learned from a lot of other teachers and students, too, as I still do today. But I wouldn't be speaking to you all right now if it weren't for the example he set for me. He broached the path that led to our meeting.

Yes, something in me flipped between the moment I fled his office after that first visit, and the moment I gingerly returned after accepting Chicago's offer of admission. Jackson's questioning of the very concept of education had halted me in my tracks and his insistent pursuit of this questioning, ignoring all the social problems that cried out for educational assistance, repelled. Yet I came back. Why? What is it about his question that ultimately appealed to me?

Although this appeal spurred my taking a chance on Chicago and Jackson, and then grew into an enduring calling in my life, its nature still eludes and haunts me. Once I accepted even the possibility that I didn't know the true meaning of education, that education could be about more than the acquisition of knowledge and the solving of social problems, this ignorance, instead of rendering me unable to educate or be educated, opened me to something that feels like a real, ongoing education. After decades of participating in it, here are some modest, inconclusive, provisional thoughts about why I continue to affirm this participation. About the education's allure, and why others might want to re-think education along the same lines.

Consider the etymology of the word. *Education* is rooted in the Latin term *educere*, which means *to lead out*. This verb suggests that the person being educated is both moving outward in some fashion and is being guided or drawn toward something and away from other things. Concerning the movement outward, this could be understood to be an activity figuratively characterizing that person's life as a whole, the activity of living one's given life which never rests in place until death.

What pulls this life in a certain direction? This question reminds me of the last line of Goethe's play, *Faust*. As the eponymous protagonist, a hungry and perpetually unsatisfied scholar, finally finds redemption and his appetite for knowledge is transformed into love, the chorus affirms: "The Eternal-Feminine draws us upward." Granted, many of us, influenced by our current culture's mistrust of the forms of patriarchy, may frown at this declaration's lapse into bathos: abruptly, we find ourselves viewing life through the somewhat exclusive lens of a stereotypically heterosexual male. For the purpose of this discussion, though, what I'd like to emphasize is quite simply the evocation of *eros*, in, yes, its multifarious forms, as the guiding light of education. Goethe suggests that we are led out by what attracts us. And when we reflect on our experiences of attraction, I

wonder if they are as a rule not centered on sources of knowledge, but rather on those of mysterious beauty.

Calling the object of attraction beautiful, philosophers like Kant point out, is to acknowledge that it exists independently of us and not for our pleasure. In this sense, our relationship to it is disinterested. When we love something of beauty, we are happy to celebrate it without trying to use it; there is no self-serving goal for which this love is a means. Thus, in our interactions with this beloved beauty, whether it is a person, thing, or activity, we can be much more patient with, indeed respectful of, what we do not know about it. Our ignorance merges with its surprising allure.

A stepladder: that is the striking image Nietzsche conjures up to capture the experience of being educated by what attracts us. Here is a passage from his text, *Schopenhauer as Educator*:

Let the youthful soul look back on life with the question: what have you truly loved up to now, what has drawn your soul aloft, what has mastered it and at the same time blessed it? Set up these revered objects before you and perhaps their nature and their sequence will give you a law, the fundamental law of your own true self. Compare these objects one with another, see how one completes, expands, surpasses, transfigures another, how they constitute a stepladder upon which you have clambered up to yourself as you are now; for your true nature lies, not concealed deep within you, but immeasurably high above you, or at least above that which you usually take yourself to be.

Our true self, then, is our striving to be true to a historical sequence of loves that led us, and continues to lead us, beyond our known and familiar self.

**Samantha Ha** 17:59

There are so many things you said, I feel like that pulled me up short. One, the first being the idea of education as something that has to do with attraction, with beauty, with the lore. I feel like that's so different than the way in which we normally talk about education. And so I really love that idea. And also this last idea, that you just mentioned, the metaphor of the stepladder. I really appreciate that as well, because it kind of helps me to see education as situated across time, as well. Because if it's a step ladder, it helps me to see that I'm inspired by what has come before. And also something about grappling with the desires of the present. And also, again, motivated by this attraction, the allures of the future. And so I like the stepladder as a way to visualize that. So thanks for sharing that. And I'm thinking back now to your conversation with Jackson. I'm wondering, given where you are now and how you're thinking clearly has evolved so much from that initial conversation. What do you think he was trying to do in hindsight? What are your perspectives on that conversation now?

**René Arcilla** 19:25

When Jackson addressed this question to me, he was leading me away from one concept of education, toward another. That education is chiefly about the acquisition of knowledge, and the power this knowledge might equip us to solve our social problems—this is what he cast in doubt. At the moment he did this, it seemed to me that if we failed to gain such knowledge and power, we would possess nothing. We would be utterly defenseless before the world's threats. The only way I could make sense of his insouciance about this condition is to think that it proceeded from a complacent disregard for others more beleaguered than him. Hence my initial reaction.

But that fear and indignation became beside the point when I realized that I was also responding to an invitation Jackson extended, responding in a way that I was barely aware of, let alone understood. What if the very activity of questioning, rather than being employed as a rhetoric of attack and

rejection, were inspired by, and expressed, something beautiful and mysterious? What if it transmits wonder at those things that interest us in the world, indeed wonder at the world itself, drawing us deeper into it? Instead of preoccupying ourselves with the life we might lose and that others presumably don't have, suppose we set out to articulate together, in questions that are ever more detailed and encompassing, what we might live for?

**Samantha Ha** 21:03

I definitely think that this version of education you're proposing is very different than how schools are usually conceived. And I think it pulls me up short for that very reason. It's not about, as you say, having something, but about being drawn toward and led out by something else. And in thinking about that, it gives me a lot of hope, actually, and excitement to think about the possibilities of seeing education in this way. And one part of that, I feel like there's hope and excitement for our school children, for people who get to experience education this way. But I also feel like in your interpretation, and talk with Philip Jackson, you're also showing us a different notion of the educator, as someone who has this ability to cultivate this kind of responsiveness to mysterious beauty. So I think those implications are, are important to think about to what the educated person is, in your context now, and the educator, very different notions, too. And so thinking about this, I have two questions that are kind of drawn toward implications of your view of education. And so the first one is thinking about our investment into education, as it's conceived now, as is conventionally conceived. And I want to ask, Is this investment now just wrongheaded? Are you saying that no one should devote themselves to helping students gain knowledge and improve their societies? Maybe in short, I'm asking is it time to close our schools?

**René Arcilla** 22:55

This question is easy. Of course it would be preposterous to close the schools. Even though it's true that when I was at the start surprised by Jackson's question, I took him to be attacking conventional education, I soon saw that there is no call to understand him in this way. Like most of the rest of humanity, he does not dispute the value of an education that furnishes one with knowledge and enables one to solve more problems. He was rather pointing to something so much more that education could be for us in addition.

**Samantha Ha** 23:28

I see. So adding on not necessarily that we have to close our schools, but this is an additional part of education, maybe that we can nurture as well.

**René Arcilla** 23:38

Exactly. Yeah. I like that.

**Samantha Ha** 23:41

So I'm wondering if you've convinced me right at all of our listeners, about this alternative concept of education. How do you think we should live differently? How do you think that we can cultivate the power of this kind of education in our world and live a life that's somehow more led out? As you say?

**René Arcilla** 24:04

Yeah, that's the big question. I don't have a big answer, but I do think it also connects to schooling. If we think about experiences of attraction that shaped the course of our lives, I imagine that many of us would focus on events that took place outside of educational institutions. Some of us might

wish, though, that we were better prepared to understand and appreciate the meaning of what was drawing us. We might wonder about how others articulated features of their experience of being led out and how they might show us what, in our experiences, might guide us. As many have affirmed, this kind of tell-and-show is at the center of humanities-based liberal learning. Supporting such learning that enriches our education in the second sense could be a vital aim of schooling.

Obviously, I don't have time to detail the many ways schools could do this. Let me conclude by simply returning to my opening and one thing we could develop further in our schooling: the art of enhancing the questions that engage us. In Philip Jackson, I met a teacher who, instead of knowledgeably confirming an answer to the question of education, pursued that question so that it eventually echoed, for me, the larger, more comprehensive one of what attracts us. He intimated that one could deliberately strive to enhance and celebrate a question's beauty by being alive to new opportunities to pose it and new ways to reformulate it. Imagine, then, if we were to devote more of our liberal learning courses and programs to the art of responding to each other in a questioning way and to deepening our questions. Perhaps this could be moving to others besides me?

**Samantha Ha** 26:01

Thanks, Rene. And it seems that maybe this is the perfect time to ask Chris this question. Maybe it's moving to him as well. And so with that, I'd like to invite Chris to join our conversation. Chris, do you have any questions or thoughts to share after hearing Rene's thoughts?

**Chris Higgins** 26:21

Yes, thank you, Sam. And thank you, Rene. So it is moving to me. And it's probably worthwhile telling our listeners that I've known you for a long time, Rene, and I know Phil a little bit as well. So this isn't an abstract story to me or abstract characters. But as long as I've known you, I've never heard you talk about this exact story of your first meeting with him. So it's wonderful for me to hear this and the way you've woven it into concerns that I have heard you talk about, and I know that you have about education, and life and beauty, and so on, and so forth. So this was definitely really cool for me to hear. I do have some questions.

So let me start with this. Because what I like is the way your story, both sort of how Phil treated you and the way that you now are sort of handling us and trying to get us to question. I like the way it echoes the Socratic dialogues and the figure of Socrates. And in my one serious conversation with Bill, I have to say it was somewhat Socratic, I thought we were just going to sit down and talk about a poem. And I felt examined pretty closely, it turned out that I was under the microscope. And not Wallace Stevens, as I thought, so I, you know, I know where you're coming from, he was a Socratic figure.

But if you think about the Socratic dialogue, so let's take the Euthyphro...for example, here's this guy, he's totally headstrong. He's heading to the court at high speed, to try to convict his father of impiety. And after about two seconds, Socrates makes it clear that he's never really thought in the slightest about what piety is. So in that case, it's really good that he stops him in his tracks, because we don't want people who have never thought about the nature of piety, going around and accusing people of impiety, especially with the possible death sentence hanging in the wing. So slowing him down makes sense. But it feels like it's a little different what happened between you and Phil, so I'm not sure how much you're like euthyphro. So the way I understand it is, yeah, you're like, thank you

very much, right? You're a much more thoughtful person, then then you're forever. And I know, that's not where I'm going.

What I'm saying is this young Rene, and, you know, I never met this young, this very young Rene, and it's interesting to hear you talk about somebody who felt that we are in the middle of an emergency. There were social injustices, as you say, delusions, I love that word very 70s. And that there was efficiency and you wanted to make a difference. You had become informed, concerned, and concerned to contribute to solving the world's problems. These all sound really good and very different than youth of Rose, rash, headstrong, dangerous ignorance. Right?

So you come to Phil, and you have this idea that you want to contribute to human flourishing or to justice through education, which you understand as acquisition. And then he helps you see pretty quickly that you haven't thought very much about what education is. And it's not only or primarily acquisition at all, and that it's this other thing, it's being led out by the world and by our capacity, our responsiveness to the beautiful. So the reason why that feels different to me than the Euthyphro case is that, you know, education was the means you had in mind. And you realize that you hadn't really understood what education is, but what happened to justice? What happened to justice in that story? So by the end of the story, it seems that not only have you given up on the idea of sort of piling in knowledge as a grad student about education to help other people pile in knowledge to fix society. But at the same time, the story tells of this young Rene leaving justice behind for pursuit of mystery, questions, and beauty. And you know, I care about that pursuit, I'm not trying to belittle that pursuit, but hearing your story anew, my question is what happened to the concern for justice? And was that really the right Socratic question for Phil to ask you? What is education? Maybe the conversation should have been about justice. Did he derail you from something important into another set of concerns?

**René Arcilla** 30:27

Yeah, I think I mean, that's a great question. It's, it's really critical. And of course, it resonates so strongly with our time today. I think the quick answer that I would, I would propose is, of course, Justice doesn't go away. The concern for justice, the need for justice doesn't go away. But maybe what happens with this kind of thinking, with this invitation to think is that we get a fuller sense, and I think I got a fuller sense of, you know, justice for what, right? I mean, where we want to extend fairness of opportunity to people who have been unfairly excluded, but what is it exactly that we want people to, to be able to have access to in their life? And it seems to me that that part of what Phil was opening me up for right is the sense that part of what we want us all to be able to cultivate, is thinking, right, that's part of what being alive is. And that's part of what we're being shut out of, it seems to me by many of the prevailing concerns of our day. So I don't think of his invitation to me as somehow supplanting the need for justice, or somehow marginalizing that or setting that aside. I think of it more as saying, all right, if you're interested in justice, you should also be alive to the question of, okay, justice, for what? And that's where I think the sense of beauty and mystery, the sense of life is something that attracts us, comes in.

**Chris Higgins** 32:22

I like that answer a lot. I mean, I find that convincing, because when people talk about education, educational justice, it seems like they assume that it means fair distribution of something called education without thinking, is justice only distribution? And also, what is the thing you're distributing? Is it just a leg up in the labor market? Is that a set of credentials and skills? So I find that convincing, that we're not really thinking very seriously about justice, if we don't question this



kind of logic of distribution, and that the good being divvied up is a bunch of credentials. On the other hand, we do have a system, right, where if you want to live a flourishing life, then you need work that pays, that's safe, and that's meaningful, and talk about a lottery. Not every job is like that. And we have, for better or for worse, we've saddled the schools with the job of trying to come up with some supposedly fair way of deciding who gets meaningful, safe and well paid work and who doesn't. So I'm not trying to belittle that good, either. The district distribution of that good is pretty important.

**René Arcilla** 33:34

Yeah, and I think that, you know, perhaps one of the things, if you realize that human life is more than just, you know, increasing our potential to master bits and pieces of it, then, in a sense, maybe that becomes all the more of an incentive to try to question some of the structure of the, you know, social structure that we have today that privileges precisely that.

**Chris Higgins** 34:06

All right, well, that brings me then to this topic of schooling. That was one of the most interesting moments I thought, in your exchanges with Sam, about sort of what is your position about schooling given that you have this forgotten and broader conception of education in mind. You know, so Phil was Socrates, you and now in a way you're trying to pull us up short here. So you're kind of like the Socratic figure and I thought, when Sam asked you like, alright, so is it time to shut down the schools? She kind of had you because I think there you pictured Socrates drinking the hemlock, and you thought I better not take the most radical position here because nobody, you know, nobody likes Socrates and it could be dangerous, right? So you said no, of course not. That's absurd, to close the schools. But it was kind of too much black and white. Right. So the question yeah, shutting down the schools entirely right now is absurd. But in some ways that kind of dodges the question of what do you see the current state of formal education as being?

So I heard a couple different possibilities. I heard you saying, well, it delivers something that is a valuable educational good. It's just not the whole of education. I also heard you saying that schooling could and should be reconceived as a preparation for the kind of education that you most value, which seems a little bit different. And then I guess I also want to just hold out the possibility even though we don't have to close down the schools is that what you're pointing to is the possibility that schooling is in large part, a kind of weird mix of the non-educative and even the mis-educative?

I mean, if we came into a hospital, and there were like, 100, doors off the main lobby, and only one of them was labeled health. And then we went into that door. And it turned out, they weren't even that good at helping you become healthy. Like, I think we would call the Board of Health and say, shut this place down. This place is really lost it. They now think, they're calling this this practice medicine, but actually health is really not their main concern. They are trying to avoid lawsuits. They're trying to hold fundraisers for the whatever Association. They have lost track of the main aim of the practice.

So I want to invite you to just try to state your case here very clearly. What do you think of the schools? Are they very problematically non-educative and mis-educative, calling for radical reform if not a slower abolishment? Maybe you are a de-schooler, Rene, and you don't know it, and you're just afraid of the hemlock. Or does schooling, just need that sort of tweak toward becoming a preparation for true education. Or is schooling its own thing, and it has a kind of educational

business that's important, and it does it well. It's just not the whole thing. Which is it? Choose your poison here, Rene.

**René Arcilla** 36:57

First of all, I think you answered the question, because I mean, I want to say all three, right? I mean, all three are absolutely right. I know you're not going to let me get away with that. But...yes, I don't think schooling is the whole thing. I think what's missing in schools is an attention to this larger sense of education, which, you know, we schools could do a better job of trying to address. So perhaps one of the things that schools could do with the idea that they're not, the whole thing is say, okay, maybe we need to strengthen more the part of schooling that addresses this larger sense of education, particularly in programs of liberal learning. And then, you know, along with this comes a reason for furthering the critique of all the stuff in schools that doesn't seem to be really connected to either learning or education in this larger sense. You know, I think that yeah...

**Chris Higgins** 38:12

Alright, I'll let you have your cake, and eat it too, and also serve it to somebody. I'll let you have all three answers if you tell me more about this idea of yours, that in order to make schooling stronger, and in particular, to make it help us connect with this other kind of education, requires strengthening liberal learning. And I can imagine someone saying the school curriculum is a reflection of the old liberal arts model. That's why everybody has to take some math, some history, some language, some science. It's even why, you know, what did they say, in Latin, *mens sana incorpore sano*, a healthy mind and a healthy body? It's even why we have sports and drama. So don't we already school with something like the liberal arts in mind? So what needs to be improved? And how would that help us get back to your epiphany about education is being led out?

**René Arcilla** 39:15

Well, I think you and I, I agree that a lot of the actual practice of liberal arts education today has become kind of stultified and sclerotic. You know, I mean, it's true that we continue to, you know, identify a piece of learning with this idea of the liberal arts, and there is this residual connection with the tradition. But I think that, you know, one could make a case that we've arguably forgotten what the point of this, a large part of the point of this learning, is about. You know, when we say that the liberal arts are about freedom? What exactly do we mean by freedom here?

So, you know, my part of what I'm interested in is, is trying to connect what remains of our commitment to liberal education, with the idea that there is some kind of fundamental education going on with that's rooted in life itself, what it means to live a life, what it means to have this thing of us that's being pulled out in some way or drawn out. And so the hope is to revitalize it and rethink from the ground up, right? What exactly is a liberal education? What parts of it remain vital, and what parts of it have, you know, honestly, don't seem to serve any purpose beyond just continuing as a certain traditional set of rituals.

It's kind of connected to an earlier point that you made, which I like very much, you know, like where you said, we shouldn't try to identify healthcare with just hospital care. Right? I mean, there's a lot more to this idea of health than just what goes on in hospitals. So similarly, it seems to me that maybe we could do a better job at trying to connect liberal education to something outside of, of

just, you know, university seminar rooms and sort of traditional forms by saying, okay, what is the fundamental conception of education that that's at stake here?

**Chris Higgins** 41:46

It reminds me of something Dewey says, John Dewey, where he says that for thousands of years, people would have thought it really weird that we would try to invent an institution that only educates because all at all institutions educate and shape human beings and human life in some way. And then he said, even worse is then if we're going to fall into this kind of amnesia and think that therefore, only that institution educates. Because it's the one that tries to do it so single mindedly so we don't want to have that kind of myopia. Rene, yeah, thanks. Thank you so much. It was good to talk to you about these ideas.

**René Arcilla** 42:23

This is a great conversation. I wish it could go on and on and on. And of course it will, Chris right.

**Chris Higgins** 42:29

Yes, absolutely.

**Samantha Ha** 42:31

Of course, it will continue, hopefully too with other folks who are listening. Hopefully they have much food for thought. Thank you, Rene, for sharing your thoughts with us today. And thank you, Chris, for, as always, asking the tough questions.

**René Arcilla** 42:46

You're very welcome.

**Chris Higgins** 42:47

Thanks for having me.

**Samantha Ha** 42:49

So that's the end of our episode for today about the allure and mystery of education. Join us next week when we welcome Becca Lowenhaupt, who is going to help us question the dominant narrative that sees this pandemic year only as a year of learning loss for school children. As always, if you like our podcast, we hope you subscribe so you don't miss an episode. See you next week.