

Why Great Hearts Exists:

To educate for the life-long pursuit of truth, goodness, and beauty

What We Love:

- 1. Moral, Intellectual, and Physical Virtue*
- 2. The Great Conversation*
- 3. Human Dignity and Freedom*
- 4. Philosophical Realism*
- 5. Conversation and Community*
- 6. Humility*

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This organization first and foremost *educates children*—that is our primary task. And the type of learner we strive to cultivate is essentially Socratic—the learner who, in awe of the cosmos and with a sense of passion and mission, strives continuously to know what is true, to know and practice what is good, and to love what is beautiful.

This kind of passionate, dynamic, continuously active Socratic learning can only be fostered by those who themselves practice it. The spirit of Socratic learning must permeate the entire organization and flow outwards from it. Thus the Great Hearts mission is not ONLY to educate children: we seek to educate our teachers and all our employees, the parents of the children entrusted to us, and the general public as well.

The Six Loves:

1. The Virtues: Moral, Intellectual, and Athletic Excellence

The Greeks called it *arete*, the Romans *virtus*—we say “virtue” in English, but the simple word “excellence” might suffice: simply put, we love and seek to foster the fundamental habits and dispositions of human excellence, as understood in and defined by the perennial, classically-rooted tradition of Western moral philosophy (see especially Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* for a fundamental, though not absolutely definitive, account of the virtues).

We love the *moral virtues*—we seek to cultivate the habits of justice, moderation, courage, piety, and prudence. We seek, above all, the virtue of *magnanimity*, greatness of soul, the virtue of the human person who possesses the virtues and yet exercises them without arrogance. We love and cultivate the *intellectual virtues*—the perfection of the powers of the human mind, including knowledge, understanding, art or skill, and wisdom. Knowing that the human person is not merely disembodied mind or soul, but fundamentally EMBODIED, we also love the cultivation of physical strength and skill.

(Thinking about human excellence in terms of virtue is fundamental to Great Hearts—and it is a fundamentally different way of thinking about human excellence from two other traditions that predominate in contemporary Western culture, namely, 1) the managerialist or instrumentalist way of thinking about human excellence only in terms of “objective performance” or “delivering results”, which is to reduce all the virtues to mere technical skill; and 2) the emotivist-psychological way of thinking about human excellence only in terms of emotional adjustment or well-being, “authenticity”, personal fulfillment, and related (subjective) categories.)

2. The Great Conversation

According to Robert Hutchins, “The tradition of the West is embodied in the Great Conversation that began in the dawn of history and that continues to the present day” (*The Great Conversation*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 1952.). Though by no means an uncontroversial notion, we believe a) that there is such a thing as a coherent, historically real tradition of thought, science, art, government, and social life that is particular to the West through time and space, from the ancient Mediterranean and near-Eastern world to the Aleutian islands of the 21st century, b) that there is a special genius and wisdom that are essentially unique to the Western tradition (and not merely arbitrarily SAID to be unique), and c) that contemporary citizens of the West need to be consciously aware of this tradition in order to flourish in it.

The three ancient cities of ATHENS, JERUSALEM, and ROME stand for the sources of the Western tradition: Athens for Greek conceptions of philosophy, science, and democracy; Jerusalem for the uniquely Western heritage of monotheism and faith in a personal God; Rome for ideas about law and statesmanship. If we were to add three more medieval and modern cities to our list of symbolic sources, we might speak also of LONDON, standing for the tradition of parliamentary government and common law; PARIS, standing for the university, as well as for the radical, Jacobin revolutionary tradition in modern Western politics; and WASHINGTON, the source of modern democratic politics, industry, and technology.

The West has been called by some the “civilization of the book”, and when we say we love the Western tradition, we are also expressing a preference for the *great books* of literature, science, mathematics, philosophy, theology, and history that have been written in and about this tradition.

3. Human Dignity and Freedom

At the heart of the Western tradition of thought is what we might call the “discovery of the individual”: from Greek conceptions of the hero striving with his enemies to the philosopher striving to know reality, to the Judaic and Christian ideas of the individual person in relationship or covenant with God, to Anglo-American ideas of autonomous citizenship, the free individual looms large in Western thought. While some strains within the Western tradition conceive of individual freedom as a negative “freedom from”, a complete and absolute independence of the individual will from all restraints, a more robust and deep-rooted way of thinking about freedom has always been as *to conceive of liberty as freedom FOR the good*, freedom to do what is right for self and for others. In this way of thinking, freedom always brings with it the obligation to pursue the good. Great Hearts has a special affinity for this Western notion of “freedom FOR”, as opposed to other notions of freedom.

Inherent in the human person is the unique Western notion of *dignity*, a moral worth and value to be found in every human being, irrespective of birth, class, or accomplishment; such a conception of human dignity is evident in Greek philosophy, in Judaeo-Christian religion, and in modern ways of thinking about “the rights of man”. One particular manifestation of this thought is the Western aversion to treating any person as a mere thing, an object, a means to an end. Another, one with

obvious educational implications, is the axiom that *all human beings are capable of knowing truth, of doing good, and of loving beauty*; if this is true, then they should be taught in a way that enables them to reach their fullest human potential, and not merely trained to perform social or economic functions.

4. Philosophical Realism

Great Hearts plants itself squarely within the classical tradition of Western philosophy: following the example of thinkers like Plato and Aristotle, we posit the knowability of the cosmos, the power of human reason to know not just itself and its works, but a reality outside of itself, and the ability of reason to cut through limitations of culture, history, and social conditioning to know truth.

We prefer this classical tradition of thought in opposition to what we might call the “sophistic” or “skeptical” tradition, which goes all the way back to ancient Athens, and which is alive and well today. The skeptic holds, generally speaking, that “man is the measure of all things”; that “truth” is relative or even non-existent; that notions of good and evil are mere social conventions, and that ethics are non-rational; that beauty is just a question of taste or preference; that reason is merely the power to make infinite distinctions.

5. Conversation and Community

The West has been called by some the “civilization of the dialogue”, because of the unique way in which argument, dialectic, reasoned speech, and *conversation* have operated in Western philosophy and politics through the ages. The Western intellectual tradition has itself been called “the Great Conversation”, a dialogue of ideas and persons, of books and thinkers that spans thousands of years of history and cuts across divisions of language, culture, religion, and history. At the heart of a Great Hearts school is the Humane Letters seminar, a place where contemporary, 21st-century Americans join this Great Conversation about the true, the good, and the beautiful.

There is something universal about this conversation—it transcends the peculiarities of place and time, and participates in something that has been going on for thousands of years in the West. At the same time, following the example of Socrates, who devoted his life to seeking absolute and universal truth without leaving one particular city, we hold that this conversation must be rooted in relationships, friendships, in the COMMUNITY of a particular place, a particular group of friends, in a particular school. Without personal friendships and familiarity, which take time to develop, and without a sense of place and community, the conversation will run cold or become sterile, a mere intellectual exercise.

6. Humility

Great Hearts conceives of its mission as one of *radical service to others*, to the community, to the American republic. Like Socrates, we view our mission as a kind of piety or obedience—he famously explained in his trial that he sought the truth and engaged others in conversation because he believed that’s what the god of the Delphic oracle had ordered him to do. And, like Socrates, our love of excellence and relentless pursuit of truth seems destined to look like arrogance to others not similarly inclined. We must, therefore, actively cultivate HUMILITY, self-deprecation, self-giving in our work and in our way of communicating with others about what we do and what we love—above all, our schools must cultivate the practice of humility and service in our students.

We must continually emphasize that Great Hearts pursues excellence not because we think we are or ought to be better than everyone else, but rather because we think that there are things, thoughts, thinkers, and examples that are much better than ourselves.