WHY STUDENTS LEARN THINGS BY HEART

Memorization in a Hillsdale Classical School

Students memorize or "learn by heart" dozens of poems, songs, and excerpts from important historical figures and documents during their K-12 education. The question is: Why?

At the most basic level, knowing something by heart sharpens the abilities of the mind. Children already have a great capacity to memorize and remember, and giving them a steady stream of things to memorize keeps that ability sharp. Students can then apply this agility of mind to various bodies of knowledge and daily tasks to help them excel in anything they do.

Memorization also helps students make new connections in thought and understanding. Growing in understanding oftentimes involves the mind making connections between something it already knows and something new that the student learns. The best way to ensure there is a broad foundation of knowledge is continually to compare new information against it. And the strongest pieces of that foundation are those that are committed to memory. Additionally, once a student has something in his or her memory, it is more pliable and open to play and manipulation. We need only to recall a child manipulating a song he is singing to see this creativity with memorized content. In turn, the child's creativity fosters flexibility, which can be applied not only to art but also to solving problems generally.

It is worth recognizing the obvious: that memorization answers to human nature. It is natural for human beings to memorize and remember. We memorize without even trying, though as with running, we of course do much better when we work at it. While we may sometimes chafe at the work of memorizing, having something in our memory to recall at will is real power—and a joyful one at that—a possession no one would refuse were it not for the practice required to gain it. At the same time, memorization helps students withstand a culture of noise and high-intensity, intrusive stimulation.

When looking at the specific kinds of things students learn by heart, we see that memorization furnishes the mind and memory with excellent things in song, story, and speech. After all, students are not memorizing the ugly or meaningless things of the world. These excellent things become the standard for good and great things of many sorts for a lifetime.

And yet, things known by heart not only establish a standard, but they also give shape to the student's mind, forming its contours. They inform the imagination most powerfully. It is called "by heart" because memorized things become part of us and also they teach us to love the right things. Memorized things are not only right and loveable, but they attune our desires to other goods worthy of desire, love, and emulation.

Memorization, therefore, gives students something beautiful and meaningful to carry with them in their lives. Things that are memorized take up a kind of existence within the student which forms his or her thoughts, feelings, and attentiveness to beauty and meaning in the world. This interior possession also ensures that no matter their situation or environment, students have access to beauty, meaning, and the joy of these possessions, real boons to life. Poems, songs, and quotations are possessions—and reminders—about goodness and justice and happiness that can never be taken away from them.

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To conclude with an example and a relevant quotation, consider these lines from the great American poet Robert Frost's "Choose Something Like a Star." The poet asks a star to

> Say something to us we can learn
> By heart and when alone repeat…
> So when at times the mob is swayed
> To carry praise or blame too far,
> We may choose something like a star
> To stay our minds on and be staid.

And these lines from the renowned Russian writer Fyodor Dostoevsky, which apply equally to things that are memorized as to memories:

> "[T]here is nothing higher, or stronger, or sounder, or more useful afterwards in life, than some good memory, especially a memory from childhood, from the parental home. You hear a lot said about your education, yet some such beautiful, sacred memory, preserved from childhood, is perhaps the best education. If a man stores up many such memories to take into life, then he is saved for his whole life. And even if only one good memory remains with us in our hearts, that alone may serve some day for our salvation."

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