



Disability and Classical Education: Student Formation in Keeping with Our Common Humanity with Dr. Amy Richards

Lecture 1: Reframing Disability

Outline:

Reframing Disability

- Examining the nature of disability takes us to the foundations of our educational model.
- Thesis: Welcoming students with disabilities and learning differences into classical learning communities is not a secondary issue. It strikes at the heart of the classical renewal itself. It speaks volumes about the understanding of the human person towards which we are forming are students.
- The stakes are high. If we fail to orient our hearts towards students with disabilities and learning differences, we risk presenting all students with a curriculum that offers a misleading understanding of truth, an incomplete narrative of the possibilities of goodness, and a picture of beauty that fails to witness to the ultimate beauty born of shared vulnerability.
- What are the existing models?
 - On the medical model, we approach disability as something to be cured through technological intervention.
 - We might develop a medication to cure various conditions.
 - We might develop mobility devices.
 - We medicate students with ADHD so that they can sit still like “normal” students.
 - On the social model, the problem of disability is take to lie in social structures and attitudes that inhibit persons with disabilities from achieving the same autonomous participation in modern life deemed desirable on the medical model.
 - The solution lies not in changing the individual person with disabilities, but in championing societal interventions, normalizing disability and creating opportunities for disabled people.
- **There is power in both of these models.**
 - Both wheelchairs and ramps are important.
 - **However, neither of these models offer an adequate understanding of disability.**



- Both of these ground themselves in an ideal of unencumbered autonomy.
- Both the medical and the social model have similar inclinations to claim for human beings powers that do not properly belong to them.
 - The power to control suffering and
 - The power to determine the shape of our lives solely through our own choice
- When we define disability in light of this ideal of unencumbered autonomy, we unleash very real dangers for persons with disabilities.
 - Medical model: When we confuse caring with curing, we often conclude that those who cannot be cured are not worthy of our care.
 - Social model: This denies that there is power to nature itself and refuses to let us name impairment as what it is. It imagines that we can fix the plight of people with disabilities through collective action now.
- Even if we do not go so far as to eliminate people with disabilities, we need to see what happens when our model of disability sees unencumbered autonomy as a the pinnacle of human life and thus elimination of dependence and suffering is the ultimate aim in addressing disability.
 - Can we accept people with disabilities without trying to fix them first?
 - How can we reframe disability? We need a more adequate anthropology.
- Wendell Berry outlines four principles of the great economy if we are to see and act rightly:
 - The great economy included everything.
 - Everything in the great economy is joined both to the great economy and to everything else that is in it.
 - Our knowledge is always imperfect/incomplete.
 - Even though we cannot produce a complete or adequate description of the great economy, severe penalties are in store for us if we presume upon it or violate it.
- We are encumbered, but we are called to act freely.
 - Our knowledge is always imperfect/incomplete.
 - Even though we cannot produce a complete or adequate description of the great economy, severe penalties are in store for us if we presume upon it or violate it.
 - These principles point out that our world is not easy to understand.
 - To rethink the nature of disability we must first release the assumption that disability is easily assimilated into our preexisting categories (brokenness and fixing).
 - If we see the other person as a gift, then our desire to control him will fall away, and a spirit of welcome and awe has room to take its place (Yancy).
 - The person before us might have a strange vocation.



- The strange vocations of persons with disability are not best described as purposeless suffering, but as potential modes of participation in the divine life offered to every human being.
- Any attempt to address and alleviate suffering must come from a perspective of mystery that does not begin with the assumption that suffering is meaningless and unredeemable.
- Encumbrance itself is a feature not a bug of human life for it draws us into community with one another.
- Through self-mastery rather than mastery of nature we freely offer ourselves for the good of the other.
- To accept those to whom we are called to give ourselves as they are especially when they break the comfort of our normal, is not an easy road.
- The cost of genuine freedom is real and makes us vulnerable.
- Seeing disability as a strange vocation rather than as an easily understood problem that needs a solution offers the necessary context for the truths found in the medical and social models of disability.