

→ Endorsements ←

“Sweet flowers are slow, and weeds make haste.” The mastery of the common arts by students and schools ostensibly dedicated to the liberal arts may take time, but like Shakespeare’s “sweet flowers,” it is worth the effort. So say Hugh of St. Victor, John Senior, and a host of others from the classical tradition, including Christopher Hall. This is because the common arts help us engage the givenness of reality with our hands and hearts as well as our heads. In doing so, these oft-neglected arts teach us about our world, about ordinary embodied human existence, and about the relationship between material subcreation and our “thrival,” as Hall calls it. *Common Arts Education* not only persuades that the common arts should be taught alongside the liberal and fine arts but, even better, it shows the reader how to do it. Hall himself has been embodying this integrated way of being for decades, and has now shared with the rest of us what he’s been contemplating and practicing for most of his life at both home and school. We can all be grateful.

—**Brian Williams**

Dean, Templeton Honors College and
College of the Arts & Humanities;
Assistant Professor of Ethics & Liberal Studies
Eastern University

In *Common Arts Education*, Christopher Hall has done a tremendous service for all involved with the ever-growing classical education movement—students, parents, teachers, administrators, benefactors—indeed, for anyone who wishes the movement well and wants to see it flourish. Whether you are a newcomer to classical education or a seasoned veteran with decades of experience, I highly recommend this book to you. *Common Arts Education* does much to dispel common caricatures of classical education and the liberal arts as inherently elitist, intellectualist, or simply out of touch with reality. An apology and an educator’s handbook for working with your hands, this introduction to the so-called “servile” arts integrates them with the liberal arts and the fine arts, painting a picture of classical education that engages and aims to perfect the head, the heart, and the hands. At its finest, classical education seeks the good of the whole human person; Hall’s book underscores the importance of our everyday, embodied existence that is so often lost sight of in our frenetic, digital age.

—Jeffrey S. Lehman, PhD

Director of the Graduate Program in Classical Education
University of Dallas

Chris Hall is the real deal! He challenges us and our children to unplug from our devices, go outside, and participate in cultivating God’s creation in myriad ways. From braiding rope to raising rabbits, *Common Arts Education* provides a trove of ideas introducing us to the wisdom and simplicity of traditional practices. Chris is a man who knows of what he speaks, and I for one love learning from him. Every grade-school teacher and city-dwelling parent should own a copy of this book.

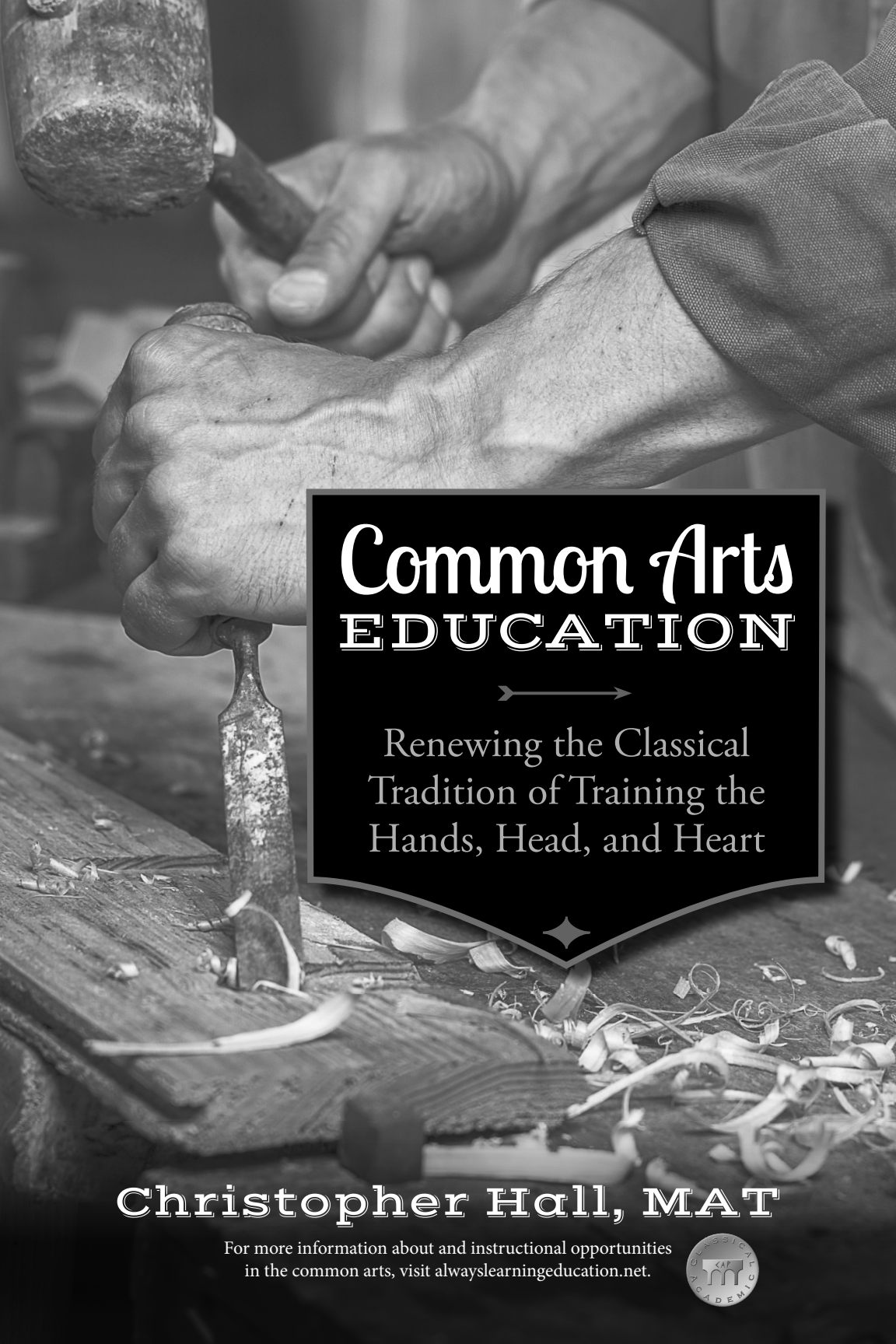
—Ravi Scott Jain

Coauthor of *The Liberal Arts Tradition*

Common Arts Education marks a profound path forward in the renewal of classical Christian education in our day. What began with the recovery of the lost arts of learning has, in Chris Hall's capable hands, expanded to encompass the largely outsourced arts of serving the basic, embodied needs of human life. His great achievement is not simply to have offered a compelling vision for the importance of common arts education; he has provided both syllabus and lesson plans for putting the common arts into practice in our homes and schools. *Common Arts Education* will doubtless become part of the syllabus of works shaping and directing the classical Christian renewal for years to come.

In *The Liberal Arts Tradition*, Ravi and I argue that the arts of language and math were never meant to stand alone. They are, in fact, part of a larger curriculum that begins in wonder and worship and culminates in wise application of knowledge and skill for the common good. In *Common Arts Education*, Chris Hall shows us the contours of the path to wisdom as it runs through the workshop of the common arts. In so doing, we discover that the words *vulgar* or *servile*, though literal translations, are profoundly misleading. The common arts, which include such vital pursuits as agriculture, architecture, cooking, and medicine, are anything but vulgar or servile; they are the means of cultivating and sustaining the life of the community.

—Kevin Clark, DLS,
coauthor of *The Liberal Arts Tradition*



Common Arts EDUCATION

➡

Renewing the Classical
Tradition of Training the
Hands, Head, and Heart

◆

Christopher Hall, MAT

For more information about and instructional opportunities
in the common arts, visit alwayslearningeducation.net.





*Common Arts Education: Renewing the Classical Tradition
of Training the Hands, Head, and Heart*

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Gratitude and Dedication



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→ Introduction ←

In 1957, the Soviet Union launched *Sputnik*. Americans tuned in on transistor radios from backyards to hear the ominous *beep, beep, beep* pass overhead, knowing full well that if the Reds could put up an artificial moon, they could certainly hit us with nukes.

The race was on, not just in the halls of government or the corridors of the Pentagon, but in classrooms all across the nation. Math and science standards were reformed, students were given access to increased funding and resources, and the urgency of the matter was reinforced by the all-too-common wailing of civil defense sirens and duck-and-cover drills. Even in my elementary years, the years of the *Voyager* probes and the first space shuttles, we practiced those drills every so often.

It was in those same years that another race began, and we're still running it today despite the collapse of the Soviet Union. President Reagan's commission on science and math education showcased our abysmal test scores on the national stage. Curriculum revisions were made, budgets were expanded, and yearly standardized testing took on an expanded role. From there, it was a small step to arrive at No Child Left Behind. Today we chase STEM standards and coding, how to use phones in the classroom, how to track, accommodate, and offer individualized, prescriptive, almost therapeutic educations.

Classical education was, in part, a response to these trends. While the trends fit the modern psychological image of human beings, one did not need to look far to see that there were gaps, holes, and downright misas-

sumptions that were turning our schools into places that fit Josef Pieper's notion of the culture of total work more than notions of restorative institutions. The idea that education was about more than testing, more than preparing for a job, more than besting an enemy became a clarion call, and through the years since the first schools emerged, classical education has grown into a movement of reclamation and restoration. We've sought out orders other than utility alone to guide our choices.

But there was collateral damage beyond the walls of the school. The cultural shift toward utility extended into the home as well. If we go back to the time of *Sputnik*, the days of my parents' childhood, many families practiced skills that today we pay others—businesses and individuals—to do for us. My mother canned food, sewed many of her own clothes, and spent time with her parents on fishing trips. My father made cutting boards and benches from wood. He was also an avid marksman, and knew how to save and invest. They learned these skills in part from their parents and relatives, but also through careful observation of the world around them, self-directed study, and apprenticeship of various kinds to those who had those skills. They passed those skills along to my generation by living a certain way, continuing their own skill development by eschewing the help of those who could do it for them.

The common arts are the skills that provide for basic, embodied human needs through the creation of artifacts or the provision of services.

In my home growing up, even as my mother moved, professionally, from working in the lab to serving as a hospital administrator, she still laid patterns out on our dining room table on weekends and made many of her own outfits. She took us to farms in the summer to pick fruit, tomatoes, and cucumbers, which we brought home to preserve as jams, sauces, and pickles. My father and I spent some of my formative years at the indoor shooting range, and many hours at the public library poring over the Standard & Poor's guides for wise investments. I was apprenticed at an early age in what I learned later were called the common arts.

The common arts are the skills that provide for basic, embodied human needs through the creation of artifacts or the provision of services. These stand in contrast with the liberal arts, which are the seven unique skills used to create and justify *scientia*, a body of knowledge, and the fine arts, which we will see later may or may not be their own distinct category of arts.¹ The common arts formed the baseline rhythms of home and hearth around the world for millennia. They involved some of the first lessons a child learned at home and some of the last things an aged member of the family was able to contribute. They were the bulk of the daily work that any family member would have performed throughout most of human history.

And yet, by contrast, today we outsource most of our basic needs. We microwave more than cook, shop for things more than make, and leverage the service industry rather than do for ourselves. We fall back upon the fruits of the labor force, and our own income, more than the work of our own hands. While this is not a bad thing in itself—a community has many talents, and none of us alone can master all the skills required to keep our homes running, our families fed, and our vehicles going—the distance between ourselves and the baseline skills that fulfill our basic needs is widening by the year.

We not only don't *do* for ourselves now, we *have forgotten how to do* for ourselves, and that costs us in profound ways.

At the same time we fancy ourselves connected, we are, in fact, distanced and disjointed. We're connected to the internet, but not to the soil. We're connected to networks, but not to the hearth, the kitchen, the workshop, the woods. We spend time enjoying them, but at arm's length, rather than apprehending them in our heads, hearts, and hands. We are tourists now, rather than natives.

This book, therefore, is an invitation to explore these older, embodied skills, the common arts, in your classroom, or for those who have chosen the path of homeschooling, in your home. I will make clear as we advance that these arts are not mission creep for our schools or antithetical to the notion of liberal arts. Rather, they offer a clear path by which the liberal

1. Kevin Clark, DLS, and Ravi Jain, *The Liberal Arts Tradition: A Philosophy of Christian Classical Education* (Camp Hill, PA: Classical Academic Press, 2019), 6.

arts become manifest in the world, and they offer us a clear opportunity to grow into our roles as virtuous subcreators. After we trace the historical arc of the common arts, and the nature of their integration with the liberal and fine arts, you will find that the common arts offer clear avenues to introduce, explore, and make tangible the core disciplines of math, science, and history. They serve as natural vehicles for the practice of the arts of language—grammar, logic, and rhetoric—because mastering them requires reason, research, communication, and careful thought. In addition, they serve as natural vehicles for the practice of the arts of mathematics, the quadrivium. Best of all, the act of practicing the common arts, the dispositions required to master them, and the thoughtful application of their artifacts foster the exploration, distillation, and embodiment of virtue. In short, they embody the liberal arts, form the foundation for the fine arts, and offer avenues for cultivating virtue, all while providing for our basic needs for food, shelter, clothing, tools, health, defense, and much more.

As I write this introduction, the global Covid-19 pandemic has extended into the summer. Schools have been shut down for months in my part of the country, and a second wave of infections seems to be building. As families have faced closures of stores and interruptions of supply chains, and even as they fear seeking treatment at medical facilities, the importance of the common arts has become all the more apparent. In fact, people are seeking out these arts in earnest yet again. Seed companies sold out months early as families sought to grow gardens. There was a shortage of chickens before there was a shortage of eggs at the grocery stores: more people were purchasing chicks to raise them at home. Yeast couldn't be found at the grocery stores because people started to make bread again. Folks were thinking of survival.

My contention is that, viewed through the lenses of and fired within the crucibles of classical education, the common arts are more than the arts of survival. They are the arts of thrival.

PART 1

Uncommonly Common:

The Common Arts in
Our Cultural Moment



CHAPTER 1

→ No Tomato ← Left Behind

The tomatoes were ripe and fresh, nestled by the half dozen in their green Styrofoam tray. I had just removed the cellophane top, and their scent was starting to drift across the room, drawing curious stares from behind the pages of free-reading books. Attention was slowly starting to drift toward the back table. It was 1997 in a third-grade classroom near the Baltimore city line, and I was getting ready to make salsa.

A few drifters started to arrive at the worktable in the back of the room, those whose curiosity about food overpowered their curiosity about reading. They sat in relative quiet, watching how I used the knife, cutting board, and bowl to make something a few of them had heard about but almost no one had tried. The first few visitors, in their excitement, were loudly declaring their knowledge about vegetables, knives they'd seen in the kitchen at home, how Grandma's cutting was different from mine. With a look, and the knowledge that you can't still a pot of water with your hand, I stayed silent, let the work in front of me speak for itself, and those initial ripples slowly slid into an attentive hush.

Slowly the onions were diced. Slowly the avocado's soft green was drawn from the rind, and the pit passed around for examination. Slowly the lime was cut, then squeezed. The jalapeños were opened, seeded, and sliced, but set aside only for those with more adventurous palates, who

would later mimic fire coming out of their ears. Not everyone was a fan of the hot stuff. It was enough that many of them would soon eat the dreaded vegetables voluntarily.

But it was the tomato that was drawing most of the curiosity.

As I took them one by one from that green Styrofoam tray and started to slice them up, Brandon developed a puzzled look. Slowly reaching across the table, and wisely away from my cutting surface, he picked up a dried leaf that had been peeled off and discarded from the top of the bunch. Turning it over, he said “Really?”

“Yes,” I said, the first words I had uttered in about five minutes of shared, attentive stillness.

“Well, how did they grow in there?”

It took me a long moment to realize that he thought the tomatoes had grown in the tray, under the cellophane. The leaf was a piece of evidence that he was trying to make sense of: plant’s leaves are on the outside, right, so why was this leaf on the inside where the fruit was?

“Can it get sun through all that plastic?” was his next question, and I realized that today’s lesson needed to be about something more than salsa.

The next hour was spent talking about plants that grow in a garden. There was no internet available in the classroom in those days, so we went to town on that question using books and hastily sketched drawings of garden plots and plants in colored chalk on the front board. Unlike a few moments before, it was now open season for all kinds of questions, and the callouts settled into a steady cadence of properly asked questions, a sea of hands now in the air. None of this was part of the scope or sequence of my county-mandated curriculum, but of course neither was the salsa. For these children, experience, broad and wide and deep, was what they most needed to be nourished by.

These students came from homes where dead bodies were sometimes found outside on the sidewalk in the morning. One time a girl came to my class with the same clothes on for three days before I found out, only with some gentle prodding, that she had been taking care of her two younger siblings for all that time since her parents had been taken away by the

police. The kids had been hiding out, not found, waiting for their parents to return.

In general, these third graders had bigger concerns for safety and security, food and shelter than they had for learning, but with the right kind of coaxing they were every bit as openly curious as any group of eight-year-olds. What they didn't know came as something of a surprise, however. I thought everyone knew that tomatoes grew on plants in gardens, usually with rounded wire cages around them.¹ It had not occurred to me as a young teacher that some of my students had never seen a tomato plant. The only time they had, in fact, encountered tomatoes was in their local grocery store, where they were typically seen packaged for convenience, ready to go in your cart by the half dozen, with the tray, with the cellophane.

Slowly and steadily across that hour, a picture began to emerge. Not only had they not experienced the fruits of gardens outside of supermarkets, these children had never built things. Most had no idea that the metal in garden tools had come from the ground first, and had to be refined, treated, and worked in certain ways to become useful. Some did not know that wood came from trees, or that chickens were birds. The more we dug into the host of topics that surround gardening, the more we all realized, them and me alike, that there were realms of knowledge and experience to which they had never been exposed, much less apprenticed.



Fast forward a decade and a half to a suburban, affluent, rigorously college-prep independent school, where the graduates went to Ivy League powerhouses more often than not. I was teaching science at the time, and serving as a department chair, building a program that would coherently introduce and then leverage tablet computing, at that time a new develop-

1. The funny part is that, twenty-four years on, I realize that my *own* understanding of tomatoes was pretty limited at that time too. I had the basics, but I didn't really *understand* tomatoes like I do now, nor had I *contemplated* them. Having grown up in suburbia, in a home where common arts were practiced, but not the common art of agriculture, I had never grown them myself. I had seen them grown in my grandmother's backyard, and on farms that we had visited over the summer to gather food for canning, but I had never grown them with my own hands, or with my own mind. More on this later.

ment in educational technology. Our parents were clamoring for it: colleges were moving to clickers and laptops and modeling software, and the way of the future was clear. *E* was more than a letter now, it was the new-and-improved way of learning, business, and American life.

I had worked out a project in which students would use a variety of apps on iPads to assist in the design and construction of simple musical instruments using household items. The plans for flutes, ukuleles, water-glass xylophones, and more had taken shape across two weeks of solid applied physics and online research. To a one, they were carefully mapped affairs complete with scale diagrams, materials lists arranged by cost, flowcharts of energy transformations, just about everything you could ask a middle schooler to demonstrate in order to show applied scientific knowledge. We had been gathering materials for a week, and we were now ready, finally, to turn those plans into physical forms. We even had plans for a concert: what better song to work out than “Happy Birthday,” all things considered? We were about to usher in a new age of technological education: access to information had never been more facile, and we were at the vanguard of a generation.

I started my first-period class with some basic admonishments about safety and sticking to their plans, then turned them loose. After the first two minutes, however, it was obvious that something was amiss.

Circulating through the room, I noticed students who couldn’t cut with scissors. Some handed them over to partners because they were “afraid to cut.” Only a handful could confidently cut a straight line.

No one knew knots. Those who were making string instruments called me over to help them tie their strings off at pegs and bridges. I asked them to look up the right knots for those kinds of things on their tablets, and they could find them readily enough on YouTube, but they spent the next half hour watching and rewatching, trying their hands at overhand loops to mixed success.

I am firmly convinced that we used more glue in that one class period than the art department used in half a year. Slathered and gobbed, it took some of those initial bonds more than three full days to set. Oftentimes, even after setting, they had the look of melted ice cream about them, with

vanilla droplets squished from cracks, thick slabs popped from shallow nooks and crannies.

My experience with my first period class was repeated by two more the same day. By four p.m., I was looking at some good projects in the making, some great ideas starting to take form, but if the ideas were seventh grade plus, the quality of the craft, the skills of the hands, were decidedly second grade. The ideas were there, but the craft could not keep up.

It got me thinking. Here we are, a top-notch academic program populated with affluent students who really underperform at making things. They routinely take home state titles from the athletic fields, but they can't cut with scissors. They can argue and debate like seasoned politicians, but they can't articulate how to build things, not for lack of eloquence but for lack of experience. They have traveled the world, but don't know nature in their own backyards. They know how to build a transcript, but not how to build a birdhouse. They know how to use a word processor, but can't articulate the processes by which their clothes are made, their food is cooked, their toys are built. They have filled their heads, but they've never learned to use their hands. They have been informed deeply, and trained to the rhythms of bell, test, and transcript, but in terms of formation, they've experienced only the shallows when it comes to virtuous craft.

*There were realms of knowledge and
experience to which they had never been
exposed, much less apprenticed.*

As I delved into these questions and concerns, I realized that there was an impoverishment here, one as great as that I had encountered over salsa years before. These students lacked for neither goods nor opportunities; it was not an impoverishment of means but one of ways. Like my third graders, these seventh graders suffered from a lack of experience in the basics of living in the world, the ways we meet the fundamental needs of our human condition. They lacked experience in the ways of craft.

In more recent years, as an academic dean developing curriculum and experiences for lower school and middle school students, I began to encounter stories in the news that echoed what I had seen in the classroom. It became clear that such lack of experience was not confined to the classroom or to these particular populations of students, but was, rather, a systemic issue.

- The US Navy began requiring their academy graduates to know celestial navigation due to a strategically unsound reliance upon GPS technology.²
- A crew of US Marine officers was reprimanded and removed from training following a round of cheating on a land navigation course. Students had looked up the locations of the landmarks because they lacked the basic skills of map and compass navigation.³
- Medical schools report a lack of students capable of managing the manual dexterity required for surgery.⁴
- Children are increasingly challenged to identify the plants and animals native to their backyards.⁵
- Many teens and young adults do not know how to prepare food and consider microwaving a pizza cooking.⁶
- Home Depot produces videos to show millennials how to use a tape measure, mop a floor, and hammer a nail.⁷

2. Geoff Brumfiel, "US Navy Brings Back Navigation by the Stars for Officers," NPR, February 22, 2016, <https://www.npr.org/2016/02/22/467210492/u-s-navy-brings-back-navigation-by-the-stars-for-officers>.

3. Shawn Snow, "Six Marine Lieutenants Face Separation After Allegedly Cheating on Land Navigation Course," Marine Corps Times, August 7, 2018, <https://www.marinecorpstimes.com/news/your-marine-corps/2018/08/07/six-lieutenants-getting-booted-from-the-corps-after-allegedly-cheating-on-land-navigation-course/>.

4. Sean Coughlan, "Surgery Students 'Losing Dexterity to Stitch Patients,'" BBC News, October 30, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/education-46019429>.

5. Sarah Cassidy, "Attenborough Alarmed as Children Are Left Flummoxed by Test on the Natural World," *Independent*, August 1, 2008, <https://www.independent.co.uk/environment/nature/attenborough-alarmed-as-children-are-left-flummoxed-by-test-on-the-natural-world-882624.html>.

6. Lancaster University, "Warning over Poor Cooking Skills among Teenagers," Science Daily, June 17, 2015, <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2015/06/150617104206.htm>.

7. Tyler Durden, "Home Depot Panics over Millennials; Forced to Host Tutorials on Using Tape Measures, Hammering Nails," ZeroHedge, October 10, 2017, <https://www.zerohedge.com/news/2017-10-10/home-depot-panicked-over-millennials-forced-host-tutorials-using-tape-measures-hamme>.

- And then there's stuff like this . . .



Fig. 1.1. Cat found poster.⁸

Yes, it's a joke, but there's a reason why it's funny. We've all met a Dan.

It was becoming clear: a lack of a certain kind of embodied experience was becoming widespread, particularly among younger generations. As I started to gather my research and sort what I had found into categories, some questions emerged. *What do they know how to do, and what have they lost? What should they encounter, and in what context? How did we get here?*

The more I considered these questions, the more a common factor showed up: the common arts were the basic experiences that all these students had been missing.

8. Unable to find original image source. Taken from <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2610360/Hilarious-photos-missing-pet-signs-owners-world.html#i-9ce70e47>.

CHAPTER 2

What Are the Common Arts?

Common arts are the skills that provide for basic human needs through the creation of artifacts or the provision of services. We need to eat, drink, build shelters, defend ourselves, bargain with others, maintain our health, work raw materials into various forms, and repair artifacts that are broken. The common arts run the gamut of the skills necessary to meet those needs.

Some of them produce physical artifacts that either directly influence our survival or can be used as tools for meeting our needs. Some of them provide nothing tangible at all, but rather serve to orient us in the world, or to find a way to acquire a service we need. All of them provide for our basic needs at the minimum. When masterfully practiced, they reflect an aesthetic not only of work, but of the true, good, and beautiful.

Scholars like Hugh of Saint Victor and John Scotus Eriugena categorized the common arts in the medieval period like this:

Hugh of Saint Victor

Fabric-making (Tailoring and Weaving)
Armament
Commerce
Agriculture
Hunting
Medicine
Theatrics

John Scotus Eriugena

Architecture
Trade
Cooking
Navigation

They did so to reflect categories and draw distinctions between the ways we meet our basic needs, the elements of these arts, and how they overlap in practice. Some of these categories and distinctions may seem strange to modern eyes because of our latter-day associations. For example, we might think of woodworking as a stand-alone common art, worthy of study for a variety of applications from homebuilding to furniture crafting; Hugh, however, lumps it in with armament. He does so because woodworking is part of fortification. Whether or not we agree with the way these arts were parsed does not impact or influence the notion that we can see that this chart is far from exhaustive! A true list of the common arts could be pages long, and even medieval writers like Theophilus, writing within a few decades of Hugh in the late 1100s, would begin the process of extending and refining the small divisions that separate the arts into myriad categories.¹

The common arts were not always called “common.” To some ancient, medieval, and modern scholars, they were “servile” or “vulgar.” They considered these arts to be merely skills that people used to make a living in the world, oriented primarily toward making money.

Plato and Aristotle labeled them the servile arts. In Plutarch’s *Lives*, Lycurgus is commended for avoiding them altogether:

One of the greatest and highest blessings Lycurgus procured his people was the abundance of leisure which proceeded from his forbidding to them the exercise of any mean and mechanical trade. Of the money-making that depends on troublesome going about and seeing people and doing business, they had no need at all in a state where wealth obtained no honor or respect. The Helots tilled their ground for them, and paid them yearly in kind the appointed quantity, without any trouble of theirs. To this purpose there goes a story of a Lacedaemonian who, happening to be at Athens when the courts were sitting, was told of a citizen that had

1. For the purposes of this book, I’ve divided the common arts into thirteen categories, each with its own descriptive subsection. This decision was simply a matter of picking arts that are easily approached by schools or homeschooling families seeking activities that fit the rhythms of home. It is worth noting that even within these categories, we could drill down to find vast, but connected, subfields and explorations. Consider marquetry in woodworking, or silversmithing in metalwork, for example.

been fined for living an idle life, and was being escorted home in much distress of mind by his consoling friends; the Lacedaemonian was much surprised at it and desired his friend to show him the man who was condemned for living like a freeman. So much beneath them did they esteem the frivolous devotion of time and attention to the mechanical arts and to money-making.²

Cicero waffles over them, calling some of them noble and some of them not:

Let us consider trade and other occupations. Which ones befit a gentleman and which are beneath him, we have generally been taught as follows. First, any occupation is to be rejected if it incurs public ill-will, such as tax-collecting and usury. Also unfit for gentlemen are those jobs done by hired workmen, whom we pay for manual labor only and not for artistic skill. Their very wage is a token of their slavery. We also consider vulgar those who buy from wholesale agents to sell at retail. They would make no profit without a good deal of outright lying. And there is nothing more base than misrepresentation. Mechanics also pursue a common calling, because there can be nothing liberal about a workshop. . . .

But those professions that call for a higher level of intelligence and which confer some benefit on society, such as medicine and architecture, are proper for those whose social position they become. Commerce on a small scale is contemptible. . . . But of all occupations by which gain is secured, none is better than agriculture. None is more profitable, delightful, or becoming a free man.³

2. Plutarch, *Lives*, Britannica Great Books Series, vol. 14. (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 1988), 44–45.

3. Cicero, *De Officiis*, 1.150–151.

Even C. S. Lewis weighed in on this topic. He contrasted the liberal arts with “vocational training.” The liberal arts were focused on students learning skills that could be applied to the study of anything, but vocational training had more to do with learning a specific skill that could then be applied to earning a living. This tends to be the way most of us think about the common arts today, too, with vo-tech and trade schools serving their specialized roles in our educational system, typically for “non-college-track” kids.

My contention is that we think of the common arts that way because of the time in which we live, and that, by seeing past the lenses of our current moment, we may see them in a better light. Toward the end of the 1800s, as our industrial revolution was accelerating into the electrical age, the notion of providing a public education came back to the forefront. There were local schoolhouses and plenty of independent schools at this time, but no common idea about how they should be run or by what curricula they should be advanced. Groups like the Carnegie Foundation and its associates were charged with the reformation of American schools and financed by captains of industry. They shaped our current system into what would later be called blue-collar and white-collar tracks. The blue collars, named after the denim shirts often worn by floor workers in factories, were destined to track a certain way in school: away from college and toward “trades,” the name implying trading a skill for an income. The white collars, named after the starched button-downs worn as part of a suit, were destined to track a different way: through high school, off to college, and then perhaps to further education or to management positions.

*We started to develop the rhythms in which
we live today, where we can get anything
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and do so relatively inexpensively.*

Oriented in this way, the American school system automatically relegated practitioners of the common arts to lower socioeconomic status, and the tag has stuck. Even with the introduction of the GI Bill after World War II, and a massive expansion in the number of universities and graduates, the change was accelerated: these college graduates now found jobs by which they could pay for televisions, cars, and washing machines, all

mass-produced, and they could even afford to pay others to fix these items. Grocery stores turned from locally owned stores and farmers' markets into chains and supermarkets.

Because chains had buying power and transportation, they could source strawberries from the tropics in the middle of winter, rather than wait for them to emerge in the spring. We started to develop the rhythms in which we live today, where we can get anything any time of year, much of it from far away, and do so relatively inexpensively. Work (and leisure) hours expanded to fill in the gaps created by not having to make, tend, or produce from home, and we established the pattern of outsourcing that continues to this day at an ever-expanding clip. Now we can order anything, from groceries to baseball gloves, and have it delivered to our doors.



Fig. 2.1. The much-used chessboard on the left was hand-painted in the early 1990s. The chessboard (in the box) on the right was ordered in early 2020. The common artist in charge of both projects knew what he was getting into, but the younger iteration met the need with skill and time-on-task, while the later iteration simply paid for it to be delivered. (In two days, no less!) Which could meet the challenge if the infrastructure for manufacturing and delivery was not there?

We can also make it all the way to middle school without ever having lit a match, tied a shoe, told time by the sun, or made our way around with a paper map. We may never have grown anything we've eaten in all that time, or learned what to do if someone has a broken tooth. The first generations to make these transitions still remembered, and practiced, their common arts skills. But as they aged and opted for outsourcing, raised their children at that new baseline of convenience, and those children did the same for their children, the path to today opened before them.

Along with losing skills of the hand, the fullness of the arts of head and heart begin to languish. It is hard to reason when there are whole realms of reality that one simply has not encountered, premises that are real but inaccessible for comparison or for use in decision-making because one has not

encountered or experienced them. It is hard to be free when one lacks skills necessary to survival and must rely upon artificial structures of business to provide for all basic needs. On the positive side, rediscovering these arts not only realigns skills of head, heart, and hands, but also points us to the interconnectedness of the liberal, fine, and common arts. The liberal arts lead the way in classical education, but the fine and the common arts express, make manifest, and support the goals inherent in the practice of the liberal arts.

As we weave the common arts in with our liberal arts curricula, let's consider some metaphorical shapes and poetic images that might help us to tease out, discover, and trace the arc of connection among these arts.