

### EXPERIENCING THE TRADITION

by Katie Sakai

I remember the day that classical education clicked for me. It was a cloudy Tuesday afternoon. I, along with ten of my fellow 14-year-old students, sat around plastic tables in a horseshoe formation prepared to discuss ideas and their consequences. Similar to the Harkness discussions at New Covenant, my class engaged in what we termed “Socratic dialogue.” Armed with rich reading material from great philosophers, authors, and historians, we challenged one another with questions and insights.

In our conversation about justice and freedom, our class began to weave together ideas from all different disciplines. We started with examples from history but quickly turned to philosophy when we realized that each pivotal event in history that we had studied could be traced back to a philosophical idea founded centuries earlier. Deeper questions naturally emerged in our conversation. *What are the consequences of ideas? Where is true freedom found?* In our discussion of philosophies, we delved into logic and theology in our search for truth. *How could we determine what was just without first determining the standard by which to measure it?* Lightbulb moment after lightbulb moment illuminated

a path of parallel themes in science, math, and literature. Literary characters and their authors wrestled with the same questions: *What does it mean to be human? Does humanity imply intrinsic value?* The patterns did not stop there. We discovered that the seemingly separate political and social issues of our time were merely branches from the same tree.

If one had traced the line of our conversation with red string, pinning together the snapshots of rich thought from all the different disciplines we investigated, our classroom might have looked much like a detective’s evidence board, with a complex web of related ideas. That string, tying together the ideas of philosophers, historical figures, writers, and great minds over differing centuries, cultures, and regimes, traced the outline of a conversation that continues to this day.

On that cloudy Tuesday afternoon, sitting around plastic tables, we had entered The Great Conversation: a dialogue among thinkers spanning thousands of years, building upon one another’s ideas and defending their views as they sought to answer life’s questions. These questions, the enduring questions, examine the fundamental ideas common to the human experience. *What are the criteria for truth? Are justice and equality the same or different? What is identity? How does duty relate to other human desires like pleasure*

*and happiness?* Everything we study, past or present; every social issue we debate; every meaningful piece of art or music; and everything that has ever given us joy or pain can be traced back to an enduring question.

As our students head out into the world, they will be continually faced with questions of identity, of justice, and of God. Each will choose his or her own path. In an age where we are bombarded with thousands of messages daily, both subliminal and overt, it is crucial that we equip our students with the ability to discern, to think critically, and to grapple with the enduring questions now. Providing students with a space to wrestle with these questions in a healthy and productive way in the classroom allows them to build for themselves a firm foundation upon which they can stand when they move on. This image of a graduate standing securely amidst the tossing waves of the ever-changing culture should compel us to champion the classical, Christian tradition. We must advance our mission to build up graduates who love goodness, seek out truth, and engage in the world around them with wisdom.