By Danelda Theron

“The Great Test of Education”

Education is escapism for the curious. When confronted with life’s harsh realities, individuals seek distractions determined by their willingness to reject arbitrary absolutes. Dr. Tara Westover’s memoir, Educated, explores this escapist education by reflecting on the greater impact of the education she received from Idaho to Cambridge. Education’s value is vast, being measured through formal and informal tests throughout and beyond educational institutions. Thus, to be educated is to have undergone the physical, psychological and metaphysical changes necessary to pass these tests and become informed, engaged and productive members of society.

Besides knowledge acquisition, education significantly shapes understanding. In Educated, this education induces paradigm shifts within each individual, challenging their fundamental beliefs. Although reluctant, Tara’s mother’s studies in midwifery and practical homeopathies allowed her to question traditional motherly roles, with Tara explaining that, “this was the first time [her mother] was, without question or caveat, the one in charge” (Westover 17).

Tara and Tyler’s studies similarly allowed them to understand how their family’s values alienated forward thinking. When I was young, my parents taught me to avoid arbitrary truths by always challenging and reassessing my understanding. Whenever I learn something new, I answer questions and establish new ones. By inspiring critical thinking, those who are the most educated are those who constantly replace arbitrary beliefs with experienced understanding. By following “I don’t know,” with “let me find out,” educated individuals become driven to learn why and how things are, allowing them to develop the understanding necessary to make vast advancements unhindered by past uncertainties.

While seemingly mundane, education encourages dramatic physical changes. Neurologically, education physically alters the brain through the process of encoding, storing and recalling memories by increasing communication speed across synapses and gray matter concentration. More macroscopically, students physically travel to find teachers and educational environments. In Educated, the Westover boys and Tara’s mother found education from their father in the junkyard and the midwife in women’s homes, respectively. Less locally, Tara and Tyler found their educations from professors at universities.
These migrations were vital, allowing each Westover to find unique places where they could thrive. My personal migrations for education from South Africa to Australia to America allowed me to seek out new opportunities and perspectives in my education, unhindered by sociopolitical restraints. Education’s migrations integrate new teachers and audiences, allowing individuals to learn from and connect with more people and ideas. As ideas spread, combine, and grow, education allows individuals to become more informed and more engaged with the world and each other.

Behind education’s facade of knowledge acquisition lays the collective whole. In order to grow, humanity records and improves our predecessors’ understanding. Educated’s epigraph establishes this theme by quoting Virginia Woolf and John Dewey. The former explains that, “we don’t have complete emotions about the present, only about the past,” while the latter adds, “education must be conceived as a continuing reconstruction of experience” (Westover vii). They describe education as a process and a product of oneself that increases in complexity, developing into the capability to understand and reason beyond the present.

Over time, education’s subtle personal changes often go unnoticed until they become permanent. Tara expresses this idea in her final words, explaining that, “the decisions I made after that moment were not the ones she would have made. They were the choices of a changed person, a new self” (Westover 328). Education inspires the curiosity necessary to reveal the empty spaces in an individual’s understanding, filling it with ideas and knowledge from the past, and allowing them to begin from where their predecessors ended. This unifying force allows education to use individuals to improve humanity’s collective understanding and development by shaping the defining understanding of the individual.

Educational is escapism for the curious, the effectiveness of which is measured by one’s ability to look beyond the superficial present, sacrifice victories for compromises, and increase net good. In Educated: A memoir, education radically changes the Westovers by allowing them to reject their past reasoning and increase their critical thinking. This education drove each individual to become an active community member, setting off chain reactions that revolutionized the valley. To be educated was not to be the most intelligent nor recognized, rather, the memoir explained that the educated are those who are aware of their capabilities, reject impossibilities, and integrate themselves into the global community to increase the world’s net good. While none can know everything, education collectively allows humanity to achieve anything.

Danelda Theron is a member of the Class of 2022 from Brisbane, Queensland, Australia.

Bibliography