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[00:00:00] [Sound of book pages being rapidly flipped.]

Courtney: [00:00:12] Welcome listeners to the Good Enough Homeschool podcast where we cheerfully eviscerate popular homeschool curricula. But in today's show we're not eviscerating anything. Instead, we're focusing on E. D. Hirsch Jr's, How to Educate a Citizen. And to help us we have invited Julie Feickert. So, welcome Julie. Tell us a little bit about yourself.

Julie: [00:00:31] Oh, I am so excited to be here. I am a homeschooling mom with four kids. This is my ninth year homeschooling. One of my children has always been homeschooled from kindergarten on. Two of my children have been in a mix of homeschooling, private, public, public charters, all sorts of different options. So we kind of run the gamut in terms of educational options for our kids.

[00:00:53] We tend to lean heavily towards a very liberal arts-based neoclassical style education for the most part for our kids. My oldest does do quite a bit of Greek and Latin as well. So more of that traditional classical idea. My husband and I run a company where we develop and distribute robotics curriculum, which has absolutely nothing to do with classical education. We are work from home, home school kind of people.

Courtney: [00:01:19] Awesome, thank you.

[00:01:21] AJ, you have some thoughts about Hirsch?

AJ: [00:01:24] I do. I do. But first, I wanted to give a little bit of an introduction to who E. D. Hirsch Jr. is for those people who might not be familiar with his work. He is best known as the author of the book Cultural Literacy, which came out I think back in the 1980s. He's also the founder and chairman of the Core Knowledge Foundation.

[00:01:45] For decades, he has been championing this idea of a knowledge-rich sequential curriculum. His work has been mostly focused on public and later charter schools. Many homeschoolers will probably recognize his 'Grader' series. That "What Your First Grader Needs to Know, What Your Second Grader Needs to Know, those books.

[00:02:01] The Core Knowledge Foundation also makes their entire K through 8 scope and sequence document available for free, as well as their language arts and social studies programs that they've been developing over the last 10 years or so.

[00:02:14] So these are also materials that are often appealing, particularly to classical homeschoolers, because they are very well designed, very coherent and it's a very academically rigorous program. The site for that is CoreKnowledge.org and we'll put a link to that in the show notes.

[00:02:29] Today we're going to be talking about Hirsch's most recent book, and he's written a bunch. But the most recent one is called *How to Educate a Citizen*. In this book, he argues that American students need a shared knowledge base and a healthy sense of patriotism if we're ever going to overcome our divisions as a nation.

[00:02:47] So I've read probably every book Hirsch's ever published. About 10 years ago, I was given a chance to design the curriculum for a pre-K through 12 classical school. I chose Core Knowledge as the basis for the lower school program. So that was mostly the the K through 8. Our upper school humanities program was all Western great books. What I discovered is that Core Knowledge really gave kids the background they needed to discuss those books intelligently when they were in high school. And I still believe it's an incredibly solid program. It's miles better than what you'll find in most public schools.

[00:03:22] In the intervening years, I have to admit, I have developed some concerns about some of the assumptions that underlie Core Knowledge. Those are things that tie into my problems with this book that we're going to be discussing, *How to Educate a Citizen*. People who've been listening to the podcast for the last few episodes, will also recognize that these are concerns that I have about classical education, as well, as it's been presented traditionally, even currently.

[00:03:48] I wanted to start by saying that I'm completely on board with most of Hirsch's basic ideas. So the idea that students need a knowledge rich curriculum, that that curriculum should be cumulative, and therefore carefully designed, that it should have lots of world history and geography and literature. In other words, a humanities based program, that kids of all backgrounds are capable of high academic achievement if they're given the right kinds of support. So those things are great, and I have no arguments there at all.

[00:04:15] Hirsch's premise, as I said, in *How to Educate a Citizen* is that there's a common knowledge base, particularly one instilled in elementary school (so basically, very early on in a child's education) will lead to a unified national culture. And he bases this assumption on periods in American history, when at least on the surface, we had such a thing. He claims it was largely created by a common curriculum in the form of textbooks like McGuffey's Readers or in the patriotic style of education that we had in the 1940s and 50s. This raises some red flags for me, because my question here is always well, common culture—whose culture exactly? I'd say we've never really had a unified culture in America. What we had and we still have is a dominant culture and that would be, frankly, WASP culture. White Anglo-Saxon Protestant culture. Today I would have to say emphasis on the white part.

[00:05:08] Hirsch talks about cultural literacy. He's talking about fluency in the language and the assumptions of this dominant culture, including, I think, its presumed superiority. I think in this book, he's conflating cultural unity with cultural dominance. He does talk about how we might broaden the curriculum to include more marginalized peoples of all sorts. And again, I do want to emphasize that Core Knowledge as an example of the type of curriculum he's talking about is really a whole lot better than anything else out there that I've seen. Kids in elementary school, they study a different Native American people group each year, they have readings across World Literature. They're doing the right things on that score, perhaps not to the extent I might like to see but they're doing it. But what frustrates me about Hirsch's argument. And honestly, it's more of, I won't say it's an argument, it's a lot of assertion, he's not really giving us evidence that this is going to work. He's pretty vague about how exactly we are supposed to broaden the representation of people given what is actually going on in American education and politics, and has been pretty much forever.

[00:06:13] The other thing that I have some concerns about is that he throws around terms like patriotism and nationalism. And he tries really hard to separate those from the kinds of things we've seen over the last four years. This is a place where I feel like right now, the American people are caught between the 1619 project on the one hand and Trump's 1776 Commission. And given that reality, I think it's really, really unlikely that what Hirsch is asking Americans to do is going to happen. What he's asking is that they essentially accept a, and he uses this term, civil religion, that's going to be delivered by the public schools to their children. And that they're supposed to replace their ethnic identities, or their gender identities, or their sexual identities, or all these other things with some kind of mythical American, quote, "ethnicity." And that's the

term he uses, ethnicity. I think he's under estimating the kind of tribalism and sectarian religion and frankly, flat out racism that we have been seeing during the Trump administration.

[00:07:10] I mean, if we can't even get people to agree that the Civil War was about slavery, I can't imagine how he thinks that the State Boards of Education are going to cheerfully fall in line with what amounts to a national curriculum. And as Courtney would say, I don't think so.

[00:07:24] My big question with this book, and obviously, this is, you know, up to the other hosts here to discuss, where does this leave us? So is there a way for us, specifically as homeschoolers, to use say, Core Knowledge in a way that minimizes some of these problematic aspects. So the limitations of the curriculum, while maintaining the really, really good parts about it. That it's coherent, it's academically rigorous. These are things that secular classical homeschoolers kind of drool over, right? This is what we want. So how do we make that work, practically? I'm both having my critiques of Hirsch, but also some questions for the other hosts, and for also for our listeners to think about.

Courtney: [00:08:01] Well, and this is why I thought of you, Julie, because you do use some Core Knowledge, right?

Julie: [00:08:01] I do. I've been using core knowledge for about a year and a half right now, I used first and second grade with my daughter in kind of an accelerated timetable. And then we've been doing third grade Core Knowledge this year. And I'm using both sets of books, the language arts content books, as well as the history and geography and they now have science curriculum as well. So we're using all three.

Courtney: [00:08:28] How do you feel like it works for your family in terms of this idea of patriotism, or nationalism, or instilling this pride in the United States and our culture here? Do you see that as an issue yet? Or how does that work in your house?

Julie: [00:08:47] I have actually been really surprised as we've delved deeper and deeper into Core Knowledge... And obviously, with every curriculum, it gets more and more intense as the grades go on. But I've been really surprised at the amount of what I would consider to be patriotic information that's included in the curriculum. I can say with certainty that my daughter who is using the program now is being exposed to a great deal more of the idea of America being a country that is around people being treated equally, and that people come here because they want to be part of this great—I'm gonna use the word experiment. That

doesn't appear in Core Knowledge, that I've seen in third grade. But that people want to come here and be part of this.

[00:09:26] We did a unit last year, for example, in second grade, on immigration. And we did a unit on civil rights leaders and with the civil rights leaders, it actually went back further than what we normally think of as the Civil Rights Movement. I was surprised at the inclusion of that because I don't normally see that in homeschooling curriculum. And there's a place... we're learning different American songs for the year. We just learned "America the Beautiful," for example. But there's a lot more inclusion of that material in the program that I've seen with other programs.

[00:09:54] Now, as a parent, as someone with a more of definitely a more liberal bent, I'm always hypersensitive. And more sensitive, probably, than my child to whether or not we're presenting things in a truly equal way to our children.

[00:10:06] Now, as AJ said, it really is a much better curriculum than what else I found on the market so far from my perspective, and I feel like giving my child that background info about America and what does make America a really unique and interesting country is helping her education along. It's giving her that background knowledge that would have been more common previously.

Courtney:

[00:10:26] That's an interesting perspective, here. I will say I'm certified in social studies as a teacher. And when I had my social studies teaching methods class 20 years ago, one of the first papers that my professor threw at us, professional papers to read, like a journal article, was on this exact divide in social studies education about telling history with this inclusion of problematic material, versus instilling patriotism in our students and that sort of narrow straddling that you have to do as a teacher.

[00:11:06] While we may be homeschoolers, we still have to deal with that. We don't get to opt out. I don't think it's all that out of touch for parents to expect schools to inculcate their children into the dominant culture, because historically, one of the purposes of public school was to be educated in what it was to be a US citizen. And we even see that today in the naturalization process. I mean, when you become a US citizen, you get tested on your knowledge of what it means to be a US citizen, of civics. And part of the explicit goal of social studies is to socialize children into our culture.

[00:11:45] And yeah, our idea what our culture is, is changing and broadening and becoming more inclusive. And I think that's a good thing. I don't think it's an impossible task. Although I do think it's really hard. I thread that needle every week when I teach social studies. And it's by far the most difficult task I face as a teacher. Give me calculus any day of the week.

[00:12:06] A couple years ago, I read a blog post by Jasmine Lane, an early teacher from Minneapolis. And she made the excellent point that it's a privilege to not have to worry about test scores, or reading comprehension, that for children who are not of the dominant culture, choosing not to know these pieces of knowledge is simply not an option if they want to be successful in this culture.

AJ: [00:12:30] I think that that is a lot of Hirsch's idea. For all of my critiques of him, I do think that his heart is exactly with those children. And I think that that's why he has spent all these decades trying to develop a coherent curriculum that could be—that's being made available for free to anyone to download from the internet. Because he wants those kids to have opportunity.

Courtney: [00:12:53] Absolutely. If you have read Hirsch's books and you have not picked up on his social justice angle, then you didn't read very carefully. Another perspective is from one of my favorite authors, Courtney Milan, and she wrote this bit in her most recent book, *The Duke Who Didn't*, and I think it's really important. Now it's set in the UK. It's a Regency romance novel. But here is a little excerpt. And I think it's really important when we think about this. The character who is a person of color is talking to his aunt who is not. She's white. He says,

"It's not foreign. That sauce was fermented here with yeast found in Wedgeford. The idea came from here. It was made here. If tea is British, the sauce is British. If this sauce is British, I am British, and my wife is British, and my children will be British. I need not change myself to belong. I already belong. It is the rest of England that is out of step."

[00:13:55] And I think that that's a really important point of view. We don't have to change these people who are not of the dominant culture. We have to open our minds to recognize that they're already here. They are us.

[00:14:11] I think it's especially important to consider when for several years, over half of all the babies born in the United States are not white. They're children of color. But 80% of the school teachers in the United States are white, middle class women. And what we find, I think, in these

education culture wars, are these assumptions that we have to somehow change these children in order for them to be part of the dominant culture, when instead we just need to recognize that they are here. They are us.

[00:14:42] So is there a way to be a unified culture without there being a dominant culture, that's WASP? I'm not sure that it's an easy task. I'm not sure that you can have a culture that's not a dominant culture, and have it be successful. But I think we can have a unified dominant culture that respects and values all of its members and all of their diversity for who they all are. It's hard.

[00:15:08] But also, I think, even stepping back, that this assumption that there should be a carefully sequenced, systematic set of knowledge that all children should learn is, by itself, highly controversial. We tend to forget it, I think, as people who are really into classical education. But even more than this problem of dominant culture, this idea that our children should have common knowledge is seen as undesirable.

[00:15:28] And I got so much pushback this week, when I made a random comment that teachers should set a schedule of knowledge to cover and stick to it because children can't learn what they're not taught. I got so much pushback from other teachers. So even that basic idea that children should be taught certain cumulative pieces of knowledge, much less as part of a set curriculum, is extremely contentious in the public school system. And so if we can't even agree that kids should be taught a set curriculum in our public schools, I can see Hirsch's argument to do so as this main thrust of the book. I think, first we need to get stuck in this idea, and then worry about exactly what is taught. You can't teach something if you can't persuade people that you should teach it.

[00:16:10] When I read the book, I was struck by the sentence that, "Education is not, in humans, chiefly for the benefit of the individual, but for the group." And I think we've lost this clarity of purpose when we speak of education in the modern day US. I think it's easy to overlook this public common good as a homeschooler, because in a way... I mean, people don't like to hear this, but we've already broken with this unspoken, although sometimes very loud and pointed, tenet that we should send our children to public schools. And instead, we struck out on our own paths. And for many, it's easy to want to validate our choices by saying that our own paths are the most important things, but we're not islands in and of ourselves.

[00:16:48] And despite the United States's culture of bootstrap, loner in the wilderness, mentality, we all exist together here in this country. And

that's one reason why I value activities like Girl Scouts and 4-H clubs for my children, because it teaches them the importance of group community service with other children from varied backgrounds who don't think like them, or have parents like them or go to church like them.

[00:17:11] And I also found this idea interesting. This idea that identity and ethnicity are inborn and indelible from birth is a false view that leads to group hostility. And I'm sure Hirsch is gonna get a lot of pushback about that. I think it rubs a whole bunch of people the wrong way. But if you look at it from a historical perspective, for example, 100 years ago, peoples we would consider to be white today, like Irish people, or Greek people, or Slavic people, were not, in fact, considered to be white. So that concept of ethnicity does change over time. And I think a lot of people forget this.

[00:17:42] Of course, that's one of the basic goals of public education in the United States, to sort of shed this idea that we're a citizen based solely on the place that we're from, or that our parents were from, and give it to everybody. In contrast, there are countries like Kuwait, where over half of the residents are non-citizens because the right of citizenship is so limited. I think we often take for granted our rights to citizenship because we were born here, or born abroad to a US citizen parent or adopted by a US citizen parent. And we shouldn't take it for granted. We definitely shouldn't take for granted the assumption that our children are taught how our citizenship works, or how our law works.

[00:18:17] Every year, I have to teach children that non citizens are and I quote, "Generally entitled to the equal protection of the laws to political freedoms of speech and association and to due process requirements, a fair procedure where their lives, liberty or property are at stake." In other words, they're protected by the Constitution, too. So in terms of being a homeschooler, I think that this is when I come to the Charlotte Mason side, the idea that we choose to teach our children with books and that those books are critically important.

[00:18:49] I'm not a huge fan of the Core Knowledge myself. I thought about it, I looked really hard at it, but I didn't like the sequencing. And I prefer the ability to choose books that I wanted to use, which has become more and more important to me the longer I've done this. This idea of living books, of the best that has been thought and said of classical works, is really important. But we need to broaden it. We need to teach the Popol Vuh and Greek mythology.

Jen: [00:19:12] Let me just jump in real quick and say that I do a lot of curriculum counseling at this point. We have so many, you know, what I call, new homeschoolers or crisis homeschoolers. And overwhelmingly they want to do something different than the public schools that they've left. They want curriculum with representation. They want own voices they want, I hear, not whitewashed, when they're asking me for resources.

[00:19:37] And while many of the idioms and the American culture that you find in the Core Knowledge books, specifically I'm talking about the the Grade books, I don't even know how much of that is that important anymore. I believe in Hirsch's intent, that everyone should know everything about what country they live in, in this case, America. And kids should know what a citizen and what green card holders how they are equal under our Constitution. And many, many children have no idea how a bill becomes a law because Schoolhouse Rock is now over.

Courtney: [00:20:13] I have a whole set of thoughts about early elementary science and social studies education in the United States. But anyway.

Jen: [00:20:20] But anyway, I mean, if we're truly going to be a melting pot, which I learned this week in my Bookish Society class that a lot of kids didn't know what that meant—

Courtney: [00:20:28] They don't teach it anymore. It's considered to be a racist idea, because you're losing your ethnicity.

AJ: [00:20:33] Yeah, no. What you want is "chopped salad."

Jen: [00:20:35] Well, the chopped salad would involve all the elements of said salad to know where the other ones came from. Terrible analogy.

Courtney: [00:20:46] We're going to eat ourselves. We sound like cannibals.

AJ: [00:20:48] There are a couple of things that came up for me though, in this discussion. And one of them has to do with the descriptive versus prescriptive cultural literacy list. This is what already exists. But what he then does, is say, this should therefore become prescriptive. Everybody should learn all of this stuff, so that they can go back and read those texts without having to Google to find out the reference or doing what most people do is just keep reading and not understanding most of what they're passing their eyes over, because they're not getting the references. So I think it's important to think about that. What is a description of our current culture? And if we prescribe that for the next generation, how does the culture change? How does it ever change? And

does that not simply replicate the existing culture? Is that not a fundamentally, the most, conservative way to pass on knowledge? And is that actually what we want to do? Right?

Courtney: [00:21:45] But isn't that our whole idea of educating children? Because otherwise, why would you bother to educate them all? They could just like pick up random stuff.

AJ: [00:21:52] My point is not that we shouldn't do any of that. But that there has to be a mechanism built in, that allows for the content of that body of knowledge to change over time. And I know Hirsh is aware of this. And I suspect that what Julie is using, for example, the books that they have come out with in the last 10 years are probably rather different from the materials that were available in 2010.

[00:22:15] So I'm not saying that this is not there. But I think the difficulty is that there's the potential for the idea of cultural literacy to become this kind of—

Courtney: [00:22:26] Set in stone kind of granite—

AJ: [00:22:28] Yes, exactly. And I think that that, as somebody who, again, is on the liberal side of things, and I would even say the progressive side of things, I want to see change happening, and I need it to happen rapidly, because I need my daughter to be safe. I don't want to wait several generations. I won't be here several generations from now to see things changing. So I do need change to happen a little bit more rapidly than it seems like this would allow for.

Courtney: [00:22:51] That's why I feel like it's so important to pick good texts. We can assign those now. Teachers really come into play because—Julie, I'm sure that you don't just, like, open these books and swing into it and never bring anything else into it.

Julie: [00:23:03] No, of course not. I do use it as our spine curriculum. But then I bring in additional books. We do a lot of discussion in our home, a lot of scaffolding of the information, really focusing on trying to make the connections. And that is one thing I feel like Core Knowledge has done a really nice job of because it is so carefully sequenced. Whether or not the sequence works for everyone, different matter. But because it's so carefully sequenced, making those connections is really helpful. And there's this focus on what connections your children should be making, which makes it easier for me to bring in books, right, because there's so many great books to choose.

AJ: [00:23:36] As Julie was saying, one of the things that did surprise me, as well in Core Knowledge was exactly how much time and emphasis was placed on American history, American literature, American music, all of those things. It is absolutely an American curriculum. History is set up so that you spend half the year doing world history. And that's done sequentially, half the year focused on American history, which is also done sequentially. So you basically have two streams of history going from K through eight.

[00:24:04] The other question I had, is there a distinction between educating for citizenship and patriotic education? So I'm all about educating for citizenship. Is that the same thing as patriotic education, where we're supposed to not just understand how our system works, but approve of that system, value that system?

Courtney: [00:24:23] You remember Allan Bloom and *The Closing of the American Mind*?

AJ: [00:24:27] Yes, I do.

Courtney: [00:24:28] He lays into moral relativity real hard, if you recall.

AJ: [00:24:33] Yep.

Courtney: [00:24:34] But it was the first time that I'd read a book where someone so clearly expressed a negative to that. This idea that we should like our own country best was important to valuing our country and that it was perfectly natural and normal. Other countries inculcated this belief in their own children and so we should too.

AJ: [00:24:57] You get to say that when you're a white man in America.

Courtney: [00:24:59] I think the idea that we can value our country like we value our family...that analogy, I think still holds up. Even if there are parts of your birth family you don't like, you have an idea of what kind of family you want, what kind of country you want, and you're willing to put forth the effort to make a found family or make a country that reflects your values. And I think that's where that citizenship thread comes in. Knowing how it works, what you can do, what the systems are. And that that is really patriotism, to me, is this idea that you see the flaws and that you still love it anyway, that's kind of growing up, right? We see the flaws in our family, we see the flaws in our friends, and we love them anyway.

Jen: [00:25:39] My four older kids are all in their 20s. They were all homeschooled. And I think I gave them a pretty good civic education.

They know a lot more than their peers. Many 21, 22, 23 year olds were over this last week with their ballots, for help. How do I do this? Why are we voting for judges? What does this mean? I would say overwhelmingly, they are not happy being Americans. They've all looked into going somewhere else. You can't. And they know this, and they are all feeling trapped. To say that this election is important is just such an understatement. These kids are just on the edge, because they have a lot longer time to live here.

AJ: [00:26:21] Right?

Jen: [00:26:21] And they don't like it. I think if you ask them, they're not patriotic.

Julie: [00:26:24] I'm really struggling as a mom right now and a homeschooling mom because of course their education is 100% dependent on me. How do I instill in them the idea that the principles that America was founded on, equality and being able to come here and make a life for your family and become part of this great experiment is an amazing thing? It's the idea that we should all be working towards a system of equality where all people are treated equally under the law and have opportunity is an amazing thing. And then trying to square that with, but bad news kiddo. It's nothing like that.

Jen: [00:26:56] It's not working out that way.

Julie: [00:26:57] It never has been. It may never be. I also want my children to grow up to be fighters who will fight for that ideal.

Courtney: [00:27:03] When I think about that, that's when I think about like Girl Scouts or 4-H Club and teaching my kids, you've got to dig in. If you want something, you've got to work on it. And that you have to make change happen, that it's not always easier. It's not always possible. That's the task of a citizen, right?

Julie: [00:27:22] I've really struggled with how to present this information to my children and I really appreciated the way it was being presented in these books that I'm reading to my daughter, of this great ideal.

AJ: [00:27:31] It is possible, as with any curriculum, for the people teaching it to take it in one direction or another.

Courtney: [00:27:38] Thanks for listening to Good Enough Homeschoolers. Before we go, show some love for your favorite podcast by leaving us a review.

Then stay tuned for next week where we will show some love and hate for a curriculum. We promise!