# Everyone, Everything, Thoroughly

*Jan Amos Comenius and the thread through our time*

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## Abstract

Jan Amos Comenius (1592–1670) lost his home, his books and his family. He spent forty years in exile. Yet he gave Europe a new picture of learning. Every child should go to school. Every child should learn through things, not only through words. Learning should last a whole life. This essay follows his life as he described it himself: a labyrinth with a turn. It traces the thread behind him. That thread runs from the Sermon on the Mount through Hus and Chelčický. It traces the thread after him. It leads to our schools, our picture books and our hopes for peace. It ends with what we kept and what we lost. We kept the schools. We lost the whole they were meant to serve. Possible connections are included as echoes, next to documented traces.

**Keywords:** Comenius; Labyrinth of the World; pansophy; Pampaedia; Sermon on the Mount; Chelčický; lifelong learning; education for all.

## 1. A man in a burning world

Comenius was born in Moravia in 1592. His church was small. It was called the Unity of the Brethren. By the age of twelve he had lost both parents.

He studied in Herborn and Heidelberg. He came home to teach. Then war came.

In 1620 the Protestant army lost at the White Mountain. The Brethren were hunted. In 1621 his town of Fulnek was plundered. He lost his house and his library. His first wife and their children died.

He hid on the estate of a nobleman, Karel of Žerotín. There, in 1623, he wrote a book. He called it The Labyrinth of the World and the Paradise of the Heart.

## 2. The glasses

In the book a young pilgrim sets out to see the world. Two guides join him. The first is Searchall. He stands for curiosity. The second is Delusion. He stands for the habit of taking over what everyone thinks.

Searchall puts a bridle on the pilgrim. Its straps are made of curiosity. Now he cannot stop. He is driven from street to street.

Delusion gives him a pair of glasses. The lenses are ground from Assumption. The rim is made of Habit. Through them near looks far. Small looks large. Ugly looks beautiful. Black looks white.

Then comes a small detail with a large meaning. The glasses sit askew. The pilgrim can look under them. When he does, he sees things as they are.

This is the oldest picture of a freethinker I know. A freethinker is not a rebel. He sees that a shared expectation fails. He sees it before others do. He names it. He gives a new picture of the whole. To do that, you first have to look under the glasses.

## 3. The city

From a high tower the pilgrim sees the world. It is a round city. Light falls only from above. Beyond the walls lies a dark abyss. Beyond the world, the margin says, there is nothing.

At the second gate Fate hands out the callings by lot. Six streets run through the city. They are the six estates: families, crafts, scholars, clergy, rulers and soldiers. Each serves the others. But the streets cross. There the confusion starts.

In the middle stands the palace of Wisdom, queen of the world. She turns out to be Vanity. King Solomon comes to unmask her. He is seduced himself. His company is scattered and killed.

The pilgrim despairs. Everything he has seen is a maze. Nothing leads out.

## 4. The turn

Then, in chapter 37, a quiet voice calls. Return. It calls a second time. It calls a third time. Return to the home of your heart. Shut the door behind you.

The pilgrim obeys. Inside it is dark. There is one round window, thick with dirt. On the walls hang broken pictures of the virtues. On the floor lie broken ladders, torn ropes, plucked wings and loose wheels.

Then light falls from above. The pictures become whole. They begin to move. The loose wheels join into one clock. The clock shows the course of the world.

This is the centre of Comenius. Order does not come from outside. It is not imposed on the parts. It arises from within, when the light comes.

## 5. The source

Where did this picture come from? Read the Sermon on the Mount. Enter into thy closet, it says, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray. The inner room with the closed door is the same image.

The Sermon was the root of his church. It runs as a thread through two centuries before him.

In Prague, around 1400, Jan Hus preached in Czech to ordinary people. He had learned from John Wycliffe in Oxford. The true church, Wycliffe taught, is not the rich institution. Hus saw that the church was failing. He said so. He was burned at Constance in 1415.

After his death the reform became a war. One man refused to follow. He was Petr Chelčický, a layman from South Bohemia. He saw what others did not want to see. Whoever defends the truth with the sword becomes the power he fought. He took the Sermon literally. No oath. No violence. No judging others.

Around 1440 he wrote The Net of Faith. The net is Peter's net. It holds people together. Two whales tear it apart: the emperor and the pope. Power tears the net.

From that book the Unity of the Brethren was born in 1457. It was the church of Comenius. He became its last bishop.

So the thread runs: the Sermon, the Waldensians, Wycliffe, Hus, Chelčický, the Unity, Comenius. At each knot someone saw the same thing. Power, wealth and outward law did not bring the good. Each turned inward. Each built something new that worked without force.

## 6. The other teachers

Comenius had other teachers too. Each one answered a wound.

In Herborn, Johann Heinrich Alsted taught him that all knowledge is one whole. That gave him order in a breaking world.

Francis Bacon taught him to read the book of nature. Vives showed him what was wrong with the schools. Ratke showed him that teaching could be different.

After the losses he needed a place that could not burn. Augustine gave him the restless heart that finds rest only in God. The last prayer of the Labyrinth follows Augustine almost word for word.

And Nicholas of Cusa gave him learned ignorance. The more of the whole you see, the better you know your limits. It is as old as the first beatitude: blessed are the poor in spirit.

## 7. The plan

The turn did not keep Comenius indoors. It sent him out with a plan.

In exile in Leszno he wrote the Janua (1631). It taught Latin through things, not rules. It was soon read across Europe and beyond.

Then he wrote the Great Didactic. Its formula has three words: omnes omnia omnino. Everyone, everything, thoroughly. Boys and girls. Rich and poor. Town and country.

He designed one school for all children, in stages. It began at the mother's knee, with the School of Infancy. In Sárospatak he wrote Schola ludus, school as play. Pupils acted out what they learned.

In Amsterdam, in 1658, he published the Orbis pictus. Each page shows a picture. Each thing in the picture has its name. First the thing, then the word.

His last great work was never finished. It was called the General Consultation on the Reform of Human Affairs. One part was the Pampaedia: education for all, from cradle to grave, in eight schools. Another part was the Panorthosia. It proposed a reform of school, church and state. It included a world council for peace.

In 1656 Leszno burned. His house burned. The manuscript of his life's work burned. Where your treasure is, says the Sermon, there will your heart be also. He fled to Amsterdam and began again.

## 8. What we inherited

Look around a school today. Much of what you see, Comenius wanted.

Every child goes to school. In the Netherlands school became compulsory in 1901. Across the world it is now a shared goal. The United Nations calls it education for all, and lifelong learning for all. That is omnes omnia omnino, and the Pampaedia, in modern words.

Every young child has picture books. Every school book has images. That line starts with the Orbis pictus. Goethe wrote that it was the only children's book he had.

The kindergarten came in the nineteenth century, with Fröbel. Comenius had already written the School of Infancy two centuries before.

Learning through the senses, through play and through doing is now common sense. It was not common sense in 1630.

Lessons in the mother tongue. Schools in stages. Classes by age. All are in the Great Didactic.

In 1700 Leibniz founded the academy of sciences in Berlin. His helper was Daniel Ernst Jablonski, grandson of Comenius. Another grandson became its secretary. The dream of one house of all knowledge went to Leibniz through the family.

In 1737 the same Jablonski consecrated Count Zinzendorf as bishop. The renewed Unity lived on in Herrnhut. The church of the Sermon survived.

Along a second branch, Chelčický's line reached Tolstoy. In 1894 Tolstoy named him as a forerunner of non-violence. Gandhi read Tolstoy.

Europe named its school exchange after Comenius. UNESCO gives a Comenius Medal to educators. A world council for peace now exists, imperfect, in New York.

## 9. What we lost

We kept the schools. We lost the whole.

Comenius did not want schools to fill heads. He wanted them to form people. Knowledge, faith and action belonged together. School was a way to lead every person out of the labyrinth.

Our schools teach many subjects. Few teach the turn. Few ask where the heart is.

Look again at the glasses of Delusion. Lenses of Assumption. A rim of Habit. Near looks far. Small looks large. That is a fair description of a screen in a pocket. A feed shows us what we already believe. It makes the small large and the distant near. We wear these glasses all day. And they no longer sit askew.

Look again at the city. Fate hands out the callings at the gate. The streets cross. The market is full. Wisdom turns out to be Vanity.

And look at the dream of pansophy: all knowledge in one place, open to all. We have built it. It is called the internet. Now we are building machines that answer every question.

Comenius would see the expectation that fails. It is the belief that more information makes us wiser. It is the belief that the whole can be bought, stored and searched. He would name it. He would point to the closed door.

## 10. The thread

Comenius did not get out of the labyrinth by walking faster. He got out by turning.

The Greek myth gives the other image. Ariadne gives Theseus a thread. He follows it out of the maze. The thread is not a map. It is a line that connects.

The life of Comenius is such a thread. It runs back to a sermon on a hill. It runs forward to every child with a picture book. It runs through people who lost almost everything and still did not choose force.

His last book appeared in 1668. He called it Unum necessarium: the one thing needful. After a life of plans, he came back to the start. One thing is needed. The rest follows.

He died in Amsterdam in 1670. He lies in Naarden. No one knows why there.

His motto is said to be this: Omnia sponte fluant, absit violentia rebus. Let all things flow of their own accord. Let force be absent.

## Note on method

This essay reads the life of Comenius through his own book, the Labyrinth. It uses the definition of a freethinker from the series The Golden Thread. It includes documented traces and possible connections. Possible connections are called echoes. An example is the inner room of the Sermon and the turn in the Labyrinth. They show where the thread can run.

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