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Exams

"The qualities which you really want, *viz* self-control, self-reliance, habits of accurate thought, integrity … are not decided by competitive examination."

Florence Nightingale, *Letter to Lord Stanley (1857)*

The "eleven-plus" (11+) is an exam taken by some students in England and Northern Ireland in their last year of primary school, to decide on admission to schools that use academic selection. The 11+ was once used throughout the UK, but it's now only used in parts of England that offer selective instead of comprehensive schools. The examination tests a student's ability to solve problems using a test of verbal and non-verbal reasoning, and most tests now also offer papers in maths and English.

I sat my 11+ exam in 1960. Back then, if you "passed", you went to Senior Secondary School, where academic pursuits were the norm. If you "failed", you went to Junior Secondary, where "technical" subjects prevailed, *and* you left school at 15. Twins in my school – a brother and sister – took the 11+ exam. One "passed" and the other "failed". So they were spilt up for higher education and went to different schools. Discuss!

The debate about the usefulness of the 11+ (or any "competitive examination") has been around for ever! In 1957, the Scottish teacher and educationalist, A S Neill, wrote to the *Daily Telegraph* in these terms:

If we are to have an exam at 11, let us make it one for humour, sincerity, imagination, character – and where is the examiner who could test such qualities?

So, here's a thought (not as an exam question, but more by way of "self-assessment"): leaving aside maths and English, verbal and non-verbal reasoning, if there *was* an exam to test humour, sincerity, imagination and character, how would you do? A pass in some; a fail in others? Top marks for this; "could do better" for that? Excellent in humour or imagination; "see me after class" for sincerity or character? What questions would you set? Who might check your results? What assessment would be used?

It's not an 11+, or even a 76+ for some of us! It's more a "continuous assessment", thinking about areas of our lives in which we could all do better, "the qualities which you really want", in Florence Nightingale's view. So, how *would* you do in humour, sincerity, imagination and character? Ready, class? Quiet, now! Turn your papers over – and begin!

A prayer for today

To assess myself, with your guidance, Lord? A continuous process indeed! Amen

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