

liberal learning and the light of faith: an initiation into wholeness

Jeanne Heffernan

WHenever I survey the scene in higher education and consider the role that Christians are to play in it, I immediately turn to my intellectual heroes for wisdom. Let me call these people "signposts in a strange land," borrowing the title of Patrick Samway's volume on Walker Percy. Among their number I would include such diverse thinkers as Wendell Berry, John Paul II, and Cardinal Newman. The signposts tell us that something is amiss. They alert us to the fact that, yes, we inhabit a strange land. But what makes the land—our land, the land of the academy, not to mention the larger culture—strange? I think that our land is strange because it is too flat; its surface has been reduced, leveled, so that what were once mountains are barely molehills. Or, better, what are mountains are now reckoned as molehills. Our topographical map is askew.

How so? Well, if Wendell Berry is right, and I think he is, we've taken our map from the wrong surveyors. The academy's most illustrious mapmakers are reductionists; their equipment is suited to studying small bits of earth, but they presume to measure the whole world with it, to compass the horizon using a microscopic lens. For Wendell Berry, chief among misguided mapmakers is Harvard sociobiologist E. O. Wilson. Wilson is a very clever scientist; this Berry grants. But he is a poor philosopher, theologian, and political theorist. Does Wilson claim these areas of expertise? Not exactly. But he presumes to speak on all of them because his method is imperialistic: it conquers every territory of knowledge and becomes its master. In Wilson's own words, "all tangible phenomena, from the birth of stars to the workings of social institutions, are based on material processes that are ultimately reducible to . . . the laws of physics."

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That matter is subject to the laws of physics is not the problem. Wendell Berry objects to the notion that everything tangible is reducible to and, as Wilson argues, determined by, the laws of physics. Wilson's reductionism is thoroughgoing; there is no room here for a non-material explanation of anything in our experience. Even meaning itself succumbs to the cold clutches of scientific reductionism. As Wilson reveals, "What we call *meaning* is the linkage among the neural networks created by the spreading excitation that enlarges imagery and engages emotion." Berry rightly points out that "[t]his idea is explicitly imperialistic, and it is implicitly tyrannical. Mr. Wilson is perfectly frank about his territorial ambitions. He wishes to see all the disciplines linked or unified—but strictly on the basis of science." With meaning reduced to molecules, the profoundest insights of all the disciplines are imperiled. Contrasting the world of Shakespeare's *King Lear* with Wilson's laboratory, Berry notes that only in the former is there a genuine place for the miraculous and mysterious.

But then how has Wilson been able to concoct such a scheme? What has happened here? For Berry, the fact that Wilson can seriously propound the theory of consilience and the fact that he has been richly rewarded for it with accolades and a prestigious post in the academy testifies to the fact that the university is lost. It has no meaningful unity, but is fragmented, and split into different territories, each speaking hyper-specialized languages. As Berry argues in "The Loss of the University" in *Life is a Miracle*, there is no common tongue with which to communicate, no forum within which to discuss—and defend—one's ideas. Thus, safely distant from theologians and Christian literary scholars, an E. O. Wilson can say that

Milton's own testimony notwithstanding, *Paradise Lost* owes nothing to God's inspiration. Without challenge, Wilson is allowed to rest in what E. F. Schumacher called "a methodical aversion to the recognition of higher levels . . . of significance."

NOW THIS IS NOT A PROBLEM IN THE NATURAL sciences alone; so many of our disciplines fall prey to a similar reductionism. This is the predicament of the modern university. But it was not always so; this radical fragmentation of knowledge is a relatively recent thing. As H. J. Massingham has observed, "Modern knowledge is departmentalized," whereas, he continues, "the essence of culture is *initiation into wholeness*, so that all the divisions of knowledge are considered as the branches of one tree, the Tree of Life whose roots go deep into the earth and whose top is in heaven."

Here is an alternative, and I think recoverable, vision of learning. This vision is guided by what the medievals called *adaequatio rei et intellectus*: the principle that the understanding of the knower must be adequate to the thing to be known. To put it simply, there are different ways to know different things; and there are different ways to know the same things. Take a book. Let's say the Bible, a first edition King James at that. Now, a physicist can tell us a great deal about the atomic particles of its parchment; a chemist about the carbon remaining in its pages; a linguist about its distinctive verbal forms; a religious historian about the social and political context of its creation. Yet none of these has comprehended its meaning; each has added to our understanding, yes, but none is adequate to the full reality of the object; the proper bounds of the disciplines prevent this.

This is why we have universities, ideally communities of learners who complement one another's work in an effort to understand the whole. The recovery of the liberal arts taking place in many of our colleges and universities is a step in the right direction. Baylor's Interdisciplinary Core, Pepperdine's Great Books Program, and Valparaiso's Christ College curriculum come to mind in this connection. Even in secular universities, the study of the liberal arts promises some protection against reductionism. To put it posi-

tively, the liberal arts in and of themselves can begin one's initiation into wholeness.

Consider this scenario. A non-believing student with an empirical, pragmatic bent enrolls in a state university. He declares a chemistry major, loads up on natural science courses, and quickly refines his grasp and practice of the scientific method; its precision profoundly shapes his habit of mind. Flush with his newfound knowledge, he examines everything—even his girlfriend—according to its chemical components. (This, of course, gets him in trouble!) But in the following semester, he begins to satisfy his general education requirements with courses on British literature, Western civilization, and art history. Suddenly, he's taken aback. The tools which had served him so well in the lab offer little assistance in interpreting George Herbert or understanding Augustine's *Confessions* or accounting for the paintings of Giotto. Herbert evokes in him a fascination with language—with the way in which finite forms gesture toward transcendence. Augustine prompts a new and strange self-examination. Giotto whets his appetite for beauty. All of this is mysterious to him, and he can't reduce it to the proportions of chemistry. He has experienced intimations of something beyond. And, like the unforgettable Binx Bolling in Walker Percy's *The Moviegoer*, he undertakes a search; he has thus begun the initiation into wholeness.

What may deliver him into a fuller wholeness? The light of faith. It is the leaven his liberal arts

studies need in order to rise to new heights, for a Christian perspective markedly changes learning. What might it mean to view education, and specifically higher education, from a Christian perspective? I think it entails at least two things: a certain orientation toward learning and a sense of the proper breadth of education.

Christian orientation toward learning

A Christian orientation toward learning, as I see it, is an openness to the truth that is marked by wonder and gratitude. James Taylor in his remarkable *Poetic Knowledge: The Recovery of Education* describes wonder as "an emotion of fear, a fear produced by the consciousness of ignorance, which, because it is man's natural desire (good) to

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know . . . is perceived as a kind of evil." Ignorance is a kind of deprivation, the awareness of which produces fear. Think of walking into a great study filled from floor to ceiling with beautiful books and at once feeling surges of anxiety as well as excitement and desire. We are aware that we don't know the riches the books contain; we're daunted by this fact, and yet we're drawn to the books just the same; we want to know. As Taylor reckons, this is what Plato and Aristotle understood as wonder, the existential starting point of philosophy.

PLATO AND ARISTOTLE ILLUMINATED MUCH ABOUT the experience of wonder and the birth of philosophy in the soul; they were great teachers. But it seems to me that what we learn from revelation adds immeasurably to our orientation toward learning, because we know from God's self-disclosure to the Jews and, even more, in his Incarnation in Christ that the unmoved mover of the ancients is actually a personal God—so personal that we call him Father—who created the world out of generosity, who considered his creation very good, and who so loved the world even after it rebelled that he sent his only Son to die for its salvation. This prepares us, it seems to me, to approach the learning process not only with wonder, but also with profound gratitude. Everything about our Christian story should encourage this, for we see from start to finish that self-giving love is the very ground of existence; it is the deepest truth about the world. It is out of this love that we have been given everything—from the creation of the world to its salvation—as a gift. And the proper way to receive a gift is in gratitude. Thus, the Christian can affirm what Socrates expressed so well about education in the *Republic*, namely, "the object of education is to teach us to love what is beautiful," to which she will add, "and to be grateful to her heavenly Father for it."

Christian revelation also informs us that the context within which all learning takes place is a great drama. Think about these biblical themes: the way of life versus the way of death; truth in contest with falsehood; the forces of light arrayed against the powers of darkness; heaven and hell. Human life is charged with supernatural meaning, meaning that transcends the bounds of time and history. As Pope John Paul II explains in his encyclical *The Gospel of Life*:

Man is called to a fullness of life which far exceeds the dimensions of his earthly existence, because it consists in sharing the very life of God. The loftiness of this supernatural vocation reveals the greatness and the inestimable value of human life even in its temporal phase. Life in time, in fact, is the fundamental condition, the initial stage and an integral part of the entire unified process of human existence. It is a process which, unexpectedly and undeservedly, is enlightened by the promise and renewed by the gift of divine life, which will reach its full realization in eternity (cf. 1 John 3:1-2). At the same time, it is precisely this supernatural calling which highlights the relative character of each individual's earthly life. After all, life on earth is not an "ultimate" but a "penultimate" reality; even so, it remains a sacred reality entrusted to us, to be preserved with a sense of responsibility and brought to perfection in love and in the gift of ourselves to God and to our brothers and sisters.

If we understand life as a sacred reality, entrusted to us, we will insist that education remain faithful to the supernatural dimensions and destiny of the human person. Our thoughts about education will begin, as Jacques Maritain's did, with a consideration of the essence of man. "Man," in Maritain's words, "is a person, who holds himself in hand by his intelligence and his will. He does not merely exist as a physical being. There is in him a richer and nobler existence; he has spiritual superexistence through knowledge and love." Thus, contra E. O. Wilson, Maritain insists that man "is in some way, a whole, not merely a part; he is a universe unto himself, a microcosm in which the great universe in its entirety can be encompassed through knowledge. And through love he can give himself freely to beings who are to him, as it were, other selves; and for this relationship no equivalent can be found in the physical world."

a sense of the breadth of education

Man is in some way a whole, a universe unto himself, and education should be commensurate to his stature; this is the second insight a Christian perspective offers. Education must reflect the height, depth, and breadth of human experience, attending to the body, soul, and spirit, to time and

eternity. It must, in short, guard against reductionism. It should not attempt to understand the human experience according to the epistemological constraints of any one discipline, nor should it focus on a narrow and limited goal, such as “career preparation.”

Instead, as Wendell Berry has passionately argued, education should be about the making of a good, that is to say, a fully developed, human being. And it does so by engaging the student in broad, basic studies that enable us to understand the whole, the cosmos. A curriculum should be faithful to the many-faceted nature of reality, from sub-atomic particles to the heights of religious mysticism. From a Christian perspective, this makes sense, since God reveals his wisdom and love through the Book of Revelation and the Book of Nature; faith and human reason both yield truths that originate with the Author of Truth. As Ambrose of Milan affirmed, “Anything true, by no matter whom said, is from the Holy Spirit.” The unity of truth lends dignity to the investigation of all of reality—sacred and mundane—as all reality bears the stamp of God’s creative love. In the words of John Henry Newman, “All that is good, all that is true, all that is beautiful, all that is beneficent, be it great or small, be it perfect or fragmentary, natural as well as supernatural, moral as well as material, comes from Him.”

Hence, there should be a Christian impulse to offer an expansive, unified curriculum, grounded in the conviction that approaching life and learning through a dedication to the liberal arts illumined by faith provides the surest initiation into human wholeness. Cultivating this kind of wholeness, which is to my mind the work of Christian humanism, runs against the reductive impulses so pervasive in our culture—in the academy, politics, medicine, and economics. A Christian humanism consciously resists this reductionism and insists on seeing things whole.

Christian life and learning: an application

A student trained in the ways of Christian humanism would emerge from the university a more whole, integrated person. She would be equipped to engage the world in a distinctive way, reflective of her deep Christian education. Let me

briefly sketch how such a person might apply in a practical way what she has learned. Having spent the last year in Washington, I am sensitive to how pressing the need for Christian wholeness is in the world of policymaking, a world often marked by ideologically drawn categories and a frightening reductionism. By contrast, instead of working within the comfortable but hopelessly inadequate categories of liberal and conservative, a Christian humanism prompts us to an independent analysis of political proposals, judging them in light of a biblical anthropology.

This kind of perspective, it seems to me, can helpfully inform our approach to two policy areas that are especially susceptible to the reductionism a Christian should resist: environmental regulation and stem cell research. It is a mark of our impoverished politics that one would not expect the same person to be concerned about both things, but this is exactly the kind of dichotomy Christian teaching defies.

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When approaching environmental policy, Christians are singularly able to resist the impulse to regard natural resources as simply material to be used at will for our comfort and security. Such an attitude has implicitly informed much of our land-use. In the words of Aldo Leopold, founder of the Wilderness Society, we have too often used the natural world according to a simplistic formula of economic utility,

which “defines no right or wrong, assigns no obligations, calls for no sacrifice, [and] implies no change in the current philosophy of values.” Hence Leopold’s plea for a more comprehensive “land ethic” informed by what he calls an “ecological conscience.” Christian theology yields vital—indeed, indispensable—resources for the development of such a comprehensive ethic and the formation of such a conscience. Drawing upon the Catholic tradition, in particular, I think that the Church’s understanding of the sacramentality of creation, the requirements of a just social order, and the resources of the spiritual life are critical elements in the theoretical and practical enterprise of conservation.

For the Christian humanist, the natural world is a material resource ordained for human use, but it is more than that. A reflection of God’s creativity,

it has the sublime power to inspire contemplation and praise. Even in its mundane use, however, it is to be treated in a particular way. Pope John Paul II calls for a “ministerial dominion” that is respectful of earth’s integrity and rhythms and mindful of the fact that man does not own, but simply stewards creation. The practice of stewardship, moreover, entails a consideration of justice to our fellows; our use of the world’s resources must be defined in light of the needs of others. This is why the pope calls the ecological crisis a moral crisis: the wasteful habits of some have harmed many. In order to enact environmental policies that both accord due respect to the natural world and redound to the global common good, we need to bring a larger, richer vision to environmental policymaking; we need, in short, a biblical vision of creation to guide our decisions.

Likewise, a Christian vision is necessary in the area of biotechnology, a field often governed by a similarly reductionist impulse. When this is applied to embryonic stem cell research we see an even more grievous example of instrumentalization than we find in environmental policy, and so the expansive vision of Christian humanism is especially needful here. Unlike many policymakers on Capitol Hill, Christians recognize human life as a

sacred reality, and they refuse to render it raw material for our use—even for the sake of the noblest causes. As I see it, a Christian conscience allows the poetic profundity of the psalms to shape its vision of the tiniest member of our species, seeing in the fragile embryo not a reserve of DNA to be harvested at will, but a human being mysteriously participating in the supernatural destiny of God’s children.

In each of these cases—the one concerning the environment, the other the embryo—the disposition of the Christian humanist is marked by humility before that which she did not make and should not aim to master. Inspired by the richness of the biblical vision, she attempts to see things whole and to see them *sub specie aeternitatis*—under the aspect of eternity. Possessed of such a perspective, she resists the reductive impulse of our time and the despair to which it inevitably leads. Instead, as Berry suggests, she insists that meaning suffuses the cosmos, and so she exclaims with love for the world what Edgar so tenderly spoke to Gloucester, “Thy life’s a miracle”! ✠

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Prayer

Let me hang in the space
you invent.
By my feet, if need be.
Like the bat
in her surplice of leather,
folded
in expectation.

Suspend me from whimsical rafters
of your grace,
permit me to sound out
the intricate
shapes of your orchard.
Feed me
with your deft fruit.

Linda Mills Woolsey