

“Human-ites”

by J. Scott Miller, Dean



Photo by
David John Arnett
(Photography '24)

SEVERAL YEARS AGO, alumnus Christoph Luschin ('06) wrote in to describe his six-year-old daughter who, while staring intently at a copy of the *Humanities* magazine and referring to faces on the cover, asked, “Who are they? Are they the Human-ites?” Apparently, the girl assumed that our magazine described yet another tribe in the Book of Mormon’s saga of warring factions.

Some days, when I venture into the world of social media attacks on BYU and the College of Humanities, I feel like I am entering a turbulent world. We live in a time of “identification,” where a myopic focus on political or group identity robs our communities of the valuable benefits that can come from our differences. Add to this the fact that rage mongers use unmonitored public forums to monetize our natural fear of others, and we find our world mirroring the enmity and dysfunction of the *-ite* societies described by Alma and Helaman.

One primary marker of identity is language, a trait that often defines us as human at a very fundamental level. Among the thousands of languages spoken on the planet, some (such as Ainu, Bantu, Diné, and Inuit) are called by their word for *human* or *the people*. Other language names (such as Cherokee, Sioux, or Comanche) are applied to their speakers by outsiders to describe their inability to speak the observer’s language. The in-group and out-group differentiation that language marks can become an impassible barrier. But if one is willing to leave one’s comfort zone and seek to understand how others see the world, language can be a portal into remarkable new worlds and insights.

Professor Allen Christenson (Interdisciplinary Humanities), who speaks fluent Mayan and spends time doing fieldwork in Guatemala, notes that Mayans call themselves “corn people” based upon a folk belief that one is, literally, what one eats. When North Americans come to visit, Mayans attribute their inability to speak Mayan to the fact that the outsiders eat wheat. They insist that if the visitors change to a corn diet they will, over time, become corn people too and will thus be able to speak Mayan. And it works: after nine months or so of eating corn and living among the Mayan people, visitors do, in fact, begin to understand and speak basic Mayan, a physical and linguistic change that will open them to both smooth communication in everyday exchanges and also a

worldview that stems from different conceptions of time, nature, relationships, and cosmology.

When we learn a second language, we become, in a very literal as well as figurative sense, doubly human because we acquire a new identity, sometimes even a new name. This can be a very humbling and disorienting experience, but it also teaches us a great deal and can be a source of remarkable personal, intellectual, and spiritual growth as we find ourselves strangers in a strange land. Among bilingual people who share the same language, code-switching between languages can add unique layers of nuance, an experience that monolingual speakers may never access. Learning other languages changes us forever, turning us into new creatures with more complex identities and new ways to belong—helping us escape the monochromatic identities often foisted upon us by those who choose to see the world through narrow, polarizing glasses.

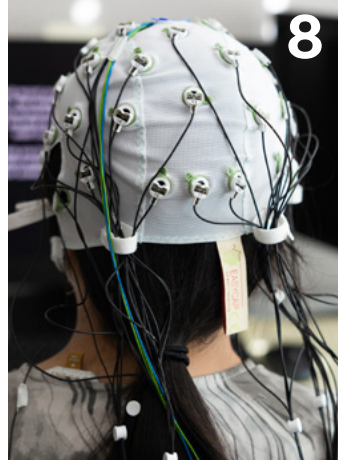
The humans of the College of Humanities represent a remarkable collection of people who, at face value, seem fairly homogeneous but, under the surface, live wildly rich lives with complex identities. Some have spent years traveling and living in foreign countries, speaking several languages fluently and moving seamlessly between very different communities. Others have invested the time and energy to polish talents or have cultivated interests that connect them with experts around the globe.

Yet others have become world experts in fields and cultures that require significant feats of inquiry and imagination. These diverse scholars are amazing, multidimensional resources of empathy and human understanding who unselfishly choose, semester after semester, to share their talents and insights with students from across the entire university. On top of this, their very presence on campus demonstrates their abiding commitment to support our sponsoring church, adding the identity of disciple to that of scholar and teacher.

This issue of *Humanities* explores the breadth and depth of the unique community of disciple-scholars that makes up the College of Humanities at BYU. We hope that it will help you better understand the grand, unfinished project underway here, as well as the hope we nurture that our students, after months or years of consuming the bounteous intellectual and spiritual feast we provide, will gradually become multilingual, brightly faceted “human-ites” who identify themselves, and all humankind, as children of a common God. ■

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William Glackens. *Family Group*, 1910–11. Courtesy National Gallery of Art, Washington; Photos by David John Arnett (Photography '24)

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