

The Critical Role of Humanities

by Thomas B. Griffith

The fundamental role of the humanities is to teach us Christlike virtues.



An American Sign Language class taught by Tom Osmond in the College of Humanities in 1981. Photo by Mark Philbrick/BYU Photo

It is a common conversation on a university campus. An eager young student, anxious about what major he or she should pursue, seeks counsel from an older person. I had countless such conversations during the time I served as a BYU campus stake president. I always prefaced my counsel with a disclaimer: the views expressed are mine and not necessarily the Lord's. Not surprisingly, as a former humanities major, I strongly urged students to study the liberal arts. I would appeal to their sense of tradition. "The humanities have been central to the concept of a university since its inception." (Tradition, I have since discovered, has little appeal to most of the rising generation.)

I would entice them with dreams of power and wealth. "A disproportionate percentage of the titans of industry and the rulers of nations have been students of the humanities." (This argument was always greeted with skepticism. I am reminded of the promotional brochure created by a philosophy department trying to lure students away from disciplines that promised a greater financial return on investment: "Learn how to be the kind of person who won't be troubled that you aren't earning much money.")

Next, I told them they should study the humanities for the sheer practicality of it. I would try to explain, "We study the humanities to learn how to be a human!" (That argument was intended to elicit a smile. It rarely did.) Channeling Mortimer Adler, I would point out that humankind has been involved in a *great conversation* about the *ultimate questions* since the *dawn of time* (emphasis added to the italicized phrases in my most serious tone). To participate in that conversation may be the most fully human activity in which we can engage.

Had I been speaking with students at another university, my arguments would have run out there (and my guess is that finance or

engineering would claim another supplicant), but because they were BYU students, I felt free to offer my view about the most important reason to study the humanities. It comes from BYU humanities professor Arthur Bassett, whose teachings have changed many of our lives, where Jesus tells us that "life eternal" is to "know" God and Christ.¹ How can we "know" God and Christ, Brother Bassett asked, if we don't know something—in fact, a great deal—about Their major project: humankind? To study the humanities, Brother Bassett taught, is to learn how God works at that which He cares most about: bringing to pass the eternal life of humankind.² And the purpose of all that learning is that we might imitate Christ and thus be better able to help Him in His project.

This instrumental approach to the study of the humanities involves much more than relishing what appeals to our own sensibilities. In fact, much of what we learn about humankind will offend those sensibilities, and it takes the eye of faith to see God at work in many places. But we are learning what we can about humanity so we might be agents of at-one-ment, better able to understand and therefore help heal the wounds that are an inextricable part of the human condition so others can experience the abundant life Christ promises.

And with that learning, properly done, comes two virtues indispensable to a disciple of Christ: empathy and humility. *Empathy* by understanding that each person is endlessly complex and that his or her thoughts and feelings and actions are the result of a complex mix of biology, culture, and agency. *Humility* by understanding that we have much to learn from those G. K. Chesterton called "splendid strangers"³ and C. S. Lewis recognized as "the holiest object presented to our senses."⁴

And as it turns out, the measure of our lives will be taken by how well we learn from others. In a passage that tears down walls of separation put up by nationalism, tribalism, and a smug sense that we already know all there is to know about God and His ways, the Lord tells us in 2 Nephi 29:11 that He speaks to all people, "both in the east and in the west, and in the north, and in the south, and in the islands of the sea," and that He commands them to write what they have learned. That alone should spark our curiosity to read what others have written. But if it does not, the Lord adds a not-so-gentle reminder that we will be judged by what others have written.

Why that measure? Because learning how others experience life in all its variations gives us a better sense of how God sees the world and nudges us to be more like the Catholic teacher who saw in his belligerent, obnoxious, and arrogant student not a thing to be cast aside but only our Lord in one of his more unrecognizable forms.

We study the humanities not to copy the behavior of fallen men and women (although there is much to emulate) but to imitate Christ, whose Incarnation helped him to "know . . . how to succor his people according to their infirmities."⁵ ■

1. John 17:3

2. Moses 1:39

3. G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995), 25.

4. C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (New York: Macmillan, 1949), 15.

5. Alma 7:12