



Light from the Furrows

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The humanities, although sometimes called “elitist,” are, at their core, accessible in ways few other disciplines may claim. This is because the fields that comprise the humanities make human beings and their creations their subject matter. Unlike plasma physics or non-Euclidean geometry, most of the discoveries and insights scholars in our discipline make involve some fundamental aspect of the human experience, with which all of us are intimately acquainted by virtue of being human.

But being born human does not necessarily make us human.¹ It takes us a couple of decades to learn how to live in the world as humans, during which time we are constantly shifting between our lower instincts and nobler motives. Our primary learning strategy during that period is based upon imitating a diverse collection of other humans. From the varied examples of others we learn how to care for and use our bodies, and how to unlock the remarkable powers of our brains. We spend most of our waking time using body and brain to analyze, create, and narrate our way to a level of being in the world that gives us both a storehouse of knowledge and, as we age, the wisdom to continue learning and to impart our knowledge to others through language and example. This is an existence that few, if any, other living species attain. We humans are, indeed, miraculous and remarkable for the things even the lowliest of us can do. We are constantly surprising ourselves with our technological and verbal achievements and should be even more amazed at our moral and ethical development—individually and as a species.

As we think about the legacy of human intellectual and artistic achievement, we often

imagine scholars in their book-lined offices, under light of candle or lamp, mustering all their insight and wisdom to think great thoughts that then spill onto pages accompanied by angelic choirs. Or we envisage artists who, paint brush in hand, wait until some muse sends them into a sudden rush of creativity. In reality, although such inspiration does happen, it is rather more like randomly timed bursts of thought that come to the mind, often at the oddest moments.² Albert Einstein developed his theory of special relativity while commuting to work on a Swiss train. Charles Darwin came up with core components of his theories while mountain climbing in the Andes and noticing fossils at the top of the peaks. Paul McCartney woke up from a dream with the lyrics to “Yesterday” singing in his head. And we cannot forget Archimedes’s “Eureka!” moment in the bathtub. Each of these individuals—and a host of

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other, talented people—came to enlightening thoughts while doing very mundane things, effected no doubt through their considerable dedication to their field.

But light can likewise emerge from the furrows of the soil, from stone boxes on a hillside, or from lotus blossoms in the mud. That very possibility had to exist for the Restoration to begin and for it to continue. God can open up and enlighten any mind He wishes, and we may achieve enlightenment through study and faith, but we also learn (and experience) that such knowledge, unlike awareness of mathematical principles or the comprehension of scientific concepts, is contingent upon a way of being in the world that includes dedicated behavior and consecration. Spiritual understanding can be, apparently, something of a now-here, now-gone phenomenon.

John Bunyan likened Christians to flowers in a garden that collect larger quantities of dew to share with surrounding plants.³ To extend the allegory, we are a garden filled with a wide variety of flowers able to water others’ roots in widely different ways. Medieval Jewish scholars dedicated their intellectual faculties and energies toward understanding and interpreting scripture. For those whose talents lie in academic thinking, such sharing is natural. For others, whose skills lie elsewhere, consecration takes other forms but is no less acknowledged and valuable to the kingdom.

Recent events in the world, the academy, and the kingdom underscore the importance of this principle of sharing our light with one another. The current crisis of faith, both within the industrialized world and the Church, has spawned new studies, new approaches, and new thinkers, especially in the academy, sharing insights that help us remain firm in our faith or possibly guide us to better anchorage. All of these drops of dew from a variety of people from different angles and backgrounds are indeed to be welcomed and embraced. Brilliant things come from brilliant minds, which serve as syncretizing instruments, finely tuned and trained.

Why did God choose an adolescent farm boy to serve as the conduit of the Restoration? To give us all hope that He will speak to us as well. He always will, but He will do so more consistently when we develop habits of mind that allow us inspiration even when we are plowing our fields. ■

ENDNOTES:

1. As Salman Rushdie has noted, “*When we are born, we are not automatically human beings. We have to learn how to be human beings. And some of us get there and some of us don’t.*” “Interview: Salman Rushdie,” by Ameena Meer, *BOMB*, Spring, 1989.
2. “*First forget inspiration. Habit is more dependable. Habit will sustain you whether you’re inspired or not. Habit will help you finish and polish your stories. Inspiration won’t. Habit is persistence in practice.*” Octavia E. Butler, *Bloodchild and Other Stories*.
3. In *Christian Behaviour*, published in 1663 when he was in prison.