

Learning, Transcendence and the Nature of Humanness

Paul Michalec

11-15-16

The question that has energized this course is what, if anything, is uniquely human? As the title for the course, *Theological Anthropology*, suggests we examined this question both from a theological and anthropological lens. In one sense the course title is a statement of the twin nature of humanness as both God created and a creature of the earth, desires and social relationships. Throughout the course we read about those aspects of our divineness, our biological characteristics, and our relational qualities that inform or obscure our unique human qualities. In this paper I will take a different tact on the question of what makes us distinctly human in ways that other aspects of God's created earth and inhabitants lack. I will examine our capacity to learn, and by extension what constitutes knowledge, and how learning and knowing materialize in formal educational settings.

Before marching directly into the academic territory of anthropology and theology I want to first make a side turn toward the arts for understanding and insights. Why the arts? In this course we explored the deep questions of what it means to be human. The texts we were in conversation with voiced primarily, although not exclusively, a male and western view of humanity. One notable exception to this trend was *The Twelve Theories of Human Nature* by Stevenson, Haberman & Wright (2013). At the end of each chapter the authors analyzed the text through a female lens of knowing and experiencing the world. So, with a few exceptions, the course readings were slanted toward a narrow understanding of unique human qualities.

The arts, as the poet Emily Dickinson argues, allow for the telling of truth, but as she states, "tell all the truth but tell it slant". In other words, instead of arguing for truth straight on

in a way that might invite resistance or a right/wrong confrontation it is better to come in sideways to capture new ways of seeing. Charles Taylor (1989) lifting up what he calls “semi-suppressed” Platonic views notes that Plato “...seems to think of the poet, inspired by mania, as capable of seeing what sober people are not” (p. 22). In a similar fashion T.S. Eliot, opines on the value of poetry: “The chief use of the “meaning” of a poem, may be to satisfy one habit of the reader, to keep his mind diverted and quiet, while the poem does its work upon him: much as the imaginary burglar is always provided with a bit of nice meat for the house-dog” (1933, p. 151). Sometimes it is good to distract the mind and pull away from Plato’s “forms” or Kant’s “categorical imperatives” to see the world free from the barking and biting dog of rationalism.

Rumi, the 13th century Persian poet and Sufi mystic writes in his poem *Two Intelligences* that, “*There are two kinds of intelligence: one acquired, as a child in school memorizes facts and concepts from books and from what the teacher says. There is another kind of tablet ... a spring overflowing its springbox. This other intelligence does not turn yellow or stagnate. It's fluid, and it doesn't move from outside to inside through conduits of plumbing-learning. This second knowing is a fountainhead from within you, moving out.*” It is this second kind of knowledge and learning as the outcome of teaching that is at the center of this essay and its exploration of unique human qualities.

Education in the modern world is perhaps the most familiar route toward the two forms of intelligence articulated by Rumi. The first type of education defined by Rumi is consistent with didactic forms of pedagogy where the teacher takes the lead in the education process and passes knowledge down to the learner. The implicit sense of what it means to be human in this model is driven by the “hegemony of reason” (Taylor, 1989, p. 22) where the student becomes a receptacle to be filled with objective chunks of information that in total constitute the full person.

The ways of human knowing defended by Plato (the rule of reason over desires), Kant (an “ethical commonwealth” resisting human sin through reason) and Aristotle (the good life revealed over time through the application of reason to life) are all consistent with the Rumi’s description of intelligence moving “...from outside to inside through conduits of plumbing-learning”. Taylor (1989) argues that “the aim of this philosophy was precisely to reject all qualitative distinctions and to construe all human goals as on the same footing, susceptible therefore of common quantification and calculation according to some common currency” (p. 23). This rejection of “all qualitative distinctions” in favor of “common quantification and calculation” is an apt description of standards based education that relies on direct forms of instruction.

As noted by Kant, “man must therefore be *educated* to the good” (Stevenson, 2000, p. 121) and to be educated requires a teacher. And the Bible points toward education, teaching and learning, as an important quality of both the God/human relationship but also the human/human relationship. We are introduced to the image of *God as teacher* in Psalm 78:

¹ Give ear, O my people, to my teaching;
incline your ears to the words of my mouth.
² I will open my mouth in a parable;
I will utter dark sayings from of old,
³ things that we have heard and known,
that our ancestors have told us.

Hans Schwarz (2013) in his discussion of the origin and long-term ramifications of sin and evil points out that one of the early lessons of the teaching God is to show care and empathy for Adam and Eve. Instead of harsh retribution toward the first couple in the aftermath of their choice to eat the forbidden fruit of knowledge, God offers grace and clothing as they leave the Garden and enter the harsh world.

As creatures created in the image of God, humans also inherited or mimicked the God-like quality of teaching. In Deuteronomy 32:1-2 we hear, in rather poetic tones that good teaching about the Lord can soothe like cool water:

Give ear, O heavens, and I will speak;
let the earth hear the words of my mouth.

²May my teaching drop like the rain,
my speech condense like the dew;
like gentle rain on grass,
like showers on new growth.

The work of an Old Testament prophet, it can be argued, is certainly the hard life of a teacher calling the people back to their better angels. The instructional style of scolding and harsh punishment can be effective but doesn't always leave the teacher-prophet as the favorite member of the religious community. Another great teacher, Jesus, by contrast, chose the pedagogical style of parables, storytelling, and community building to create a learning space where God and humans came together in dialogue.

Education therefore, as a social phenomenon, is likely a fairly unique human quality noted by both secular and religious scholars. Education holds at the root of its meaning the Latin word, "educere" which means to "draw out" in much the same way, it seems, that Rumi speaks about education as "a fountainhead from within you, moving out". What is there to be "drawn out" by the educator in ways that knowledge condenses like dew on parched earth? Karen Armstrong (2009) in her book *The Case for God* provides an historical look at the development of a religiously-organized community of practice. She believes that there is a distinct human propensity, across time and cultures, toward religion and religious practices. She argues that since the earliest records of human history archived on cave walls and sacred places the message is that we "Homo religiosus" are hardwired to connect with something bigger and more inclusive than the individual self; a universal sense of being that reaches beyond the purely rational that

exists “out there.” By “being” she means not a single entity or thing but an all-inclusive presence that enervates the world.

For early humans (*Homo religiosus*) rituals or practices were the tools of conscious choice to connect with “being” by disrupting “...the normal and allow for access to inner resources resulting in identity transformation” (p. 7). Furthermore, these closely scripted practices and rituals lead to a discovery of a transcendent dimension of life not simply “out there” but ultimately “in here” at the deepest level of our being” (p. xviii). In this way the search for a transcendent experience, facilitated by an educator or shaman, lead back to the human soul and insights on how to make sense of the normal world of day to day action.

Two religions that exemplify the process of using ritual to achieve connection to the unifying being of all existence are Hinduism and Buddhism. Core to understanding Hinduism is the presence of a “true self that is that eternal dimension of reality that is somehow not different from the highest reality of brahman” (Stevenson, Haberman & Wright, 2013, p. 40). A principal teaching text of Hinduism is the Upanishads which is intended to “bring about a shift in identity from the transient ego self-associated with the body to the eternal and infinite self that is not different from the All” (p. 41). Buddhism is known as a religion but is more frequently considered a formal set of “practical teachings designed to remove the arrow of human suffering” (p. 57). A principle practice in Buddhist teaching is meditation which enables mindfulness or the process of “giving attention to breathing as one seeks deeper and deeper insight into the nature of reality as marked by dissatisfaction, impermanence, and lack of solid self” (p. 71). In short, meditation when done correctly creates the capacity for individuals to slip past the limiting confines of suffering and enter a state of being where all things are connected through a shared experience of change.

The Taoist poet Chuang Tzu writes in his poem *The Woodcarver* about the process of consciously focusing one's talents and gifts on the daily existence of work. In the case of the woodcarver the work is carving a bell stand at the command of the Prince of Lu. The bell stand is so beautiful that the Prince, as well as all the people in the village, believe that the bell stand is the work of spirits. In stunned amazement they ask the woodcarver what his secret is. In an effort to dispel the myth of spiritual intervention the carver runs through a litany of mental and spiritual preparation before he started to carve the bell stand. When the woodcarver had achieved the ideal state of inner peace that is when the work began.

"What happened?
My own collected thoughts
Encountered the hidden potential in the wood:
From this live encounter came the work
Which you ascribe to the spirits."

The concept of a "live encounter" is both a way to speak of the unique human quality of connecting deeply with the world in an existential way and it offers a particularly poetic way to frame learning. Jean-Paul Sartre is famous for stating that *existence proceeds essence* because after all humans are only and ultimately just the choices we make. Sartre argues that we are created into our fullness as humans through our choices, "Man is nothing else but what he purposes...he is therefore nothing else but the sum of his actions, nothing else" (Stevenson, 2000, p. 196). For the woodcarver this means choosing "live encounters" with the material world. And finding the most productive live encounters that allow for work that seems to be from the spirits requires a life-time of learning how to be present to his gifts and the unique qualities of the world.

"I was collected in the single thought
Of the bell-stand.

Then I went to the forest
To see the trees in their own natural state.
When the right tree appeared before my eyes,
The bell stand also appeared in it, clearly, beyond doubt.
All I had to do was to put forth my hand
And begin.”

As much as the woodcarver resonates with Sartre’s advice to pay close attention to choices, because that is all humans are made of, the woodcarver seems to see an aspect of life that is more than choices. The woodcarver walks the woods in their natural state until the “right tree appears” and then, only then, does the woodcarver make a choice to select that particular tree. But even after the choice the woodcarver must still “put forth” a hand to invite the tree into a relationship. Soren Kierkegaard, hints at a similar space of relationship beyond choices when he writes about a transcendent God that we connect with only through a choice involving a “...free, nonrational leap into the arms of God” (Stevenson, Haberman & Wright, 2013, p. 228).

This essay and the format of the course were organized around the question: what, if anything, is uniquely human? I have attempted to answer this question through the lens of teaching and learning. What then are the unique qualities of human as learner/teacher? I would like to propose the following items:

- aesthetics; seeing truth at a slant;
- resisting the hegemony of reason;
- teacher as prophet calling out the inner wisdom of the learner;
- transcendence, connection to something greater than self; and
- seeking live encounters grounded in relationships.

References

Armstrong, K. (2010). *The case for God*. Random House Digital, Inc..

Schwarz, H. (2013). *The Human Being: A Theological Anthropology*. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.

Stevenson, L. F., Haberman, D. L., & Wright, P. M. (2013). *Twelve Theories of Human Nature*. Oxford University Press.

Stevenson, L. (2000). *The Study of Human Nature*. Oxford University Press.

Taylor, C. (1989). *Sources of the self: The making of the modern identity*. Harvard University Press.