At Least We’re Stupid

By Dan Umhel
Columnist

Who taught us that Christian stupidity was our birthright? As a Christian who just happens to be a student of thought, a philosophy, and Biblical exegesis and interpretation, I find it rather disconcerting that, for whatever reason, dulness of mind is taken for spiritual profundity. Not only is this illuminating thesis implicitly assumed by a great many of us, it is also explicitly taught and sanctioned as “humility” or “self-denial.”

For instance, I have personally experienced the reactions of those who listen to me speak about my own faith. These reactions are many times, and all too often, negative or suspicious. Why is this? I’ll wager it is because in our age all we care about are our emotions and our feelings. For some reason we all feel that raised hands in a worship service or insipid musings on “how I feel about God today” are more authentic and more true than a well-reasoned inquiry into a perennial theological conundrum.

Furthermore, as Mennonites, we too often assume action is the antithesis of reflection, and that a concern for a faithful theology is a way around the need for faithful living. Now, I will be the first one to admit that action is the primary endeavor of all Christians, and that theology is not necessary for all good Christians to live such a life. On the other hand, sanctioned ignorance plays right into the hands of the church’s enemies, and actually encourages the opposite of humility and self-denial.

Kierkegaard once said something to the effect that first year students have no right to complain about the dangers of intellectualism. Why? Because most, if not all first year students (that goes for first year graduate students as well) are only beginning their venture into serious mental reflection. We cannot decry knowledge if we know very little, and then expect that such a stance is “humility.” In fact it is arrogance. The intelligent can be humble just as much as the unintelligent, and the stupid can be as arrogant as the eggheads. It is not the gifts we have that determine our state of humility, our practice of self-denial, or our discipleship to Christ. It is our use and misuse of our abilities that orient the gifts we are given.

In fact, it can often (though not necessarily) be the case that intellectual struggle with the real issues in the world can give authenticity to humility and engage us in self-denial. This does not mean that only those who are of a certain IQ can become humble, but it does mean that those who couched their moral laziness in spiritual self-justifying clouds are neglecting their gifts and abilities – to the detriment of us all.

Learning is a process of tension, of grace and repentance, and of arrogance and self-acknowledgment. If we are learning, there will come a point in the future when we must unlearn. The power of a new situation will force us, or entice us, to drop everything, follow, and refuse to look back. This ability, and habit, of listening to the situation, of making critical judgments, and of leaving old views behind is not arrogance, it is humility. Only the humble man can learn, and learn to unlearn.

Frequently our paradigmatic ideal for learning is Socrates, Plato, or...some favorite professor. I would go so far as to say that Jesus Christ himself (some- one Christians usually listen to) demonstrates to us learning, unlearning, and learning again. He did “grow up,” after all. Yes, it is true Jesus utterly denounced the selfishness and lack of love in the thinking and acting of the Pharisees (theologians) of his time, but could this denunciation have as its target pride and a lack of love, rather than tradition and thinking?

I know I have probably stepped on a few toes here...but some people’s toes are too priss- time and unburied anyway. And perhaps I have overstated my case, but I think this case needed overstating. After all, we are not going to be overwhelmed by a superabundance of profound insight any time soon on this campus. But in the event that such a shower of blessings (or curses) does grace us with its presence...I hope you were fore- warned of its responsibility.

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