10-1-1997

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Loving God and Mankind: Rites of Passage and the Humanities

Eric B. Shumway

This article was first given as an address to the College of Humanities at Brigham Young University, October 10, 1996.

Aloha! I thank you deeply for your kindness in inviting me to participate in your homecoming celebration as a college of humanities. I can truly say with Shakespeare’s Juliet, “It is an honor I dream[ed] not of.” I have an old, rather sardonic Polynesian friend, a poet of some renown among his people who, when he heard of your invitation to me, responded with a bit of proverbial Tongan wisdom. “Samuei, neongo kuo tō tu’a ‘a e fakabekebeké, ka e ngalingali kuo tō lelei ki bo lotō” (“Even though [the honor] is obviously a wild exaggeration of your merits, yet it has no doubt distilled sweetly on your heart”). I cannot deny this.

It is sweet indeed after thirty years to come back as a guest of the university that so profoundly influenced my life and my attitudes when I was “in passage” here. Walking through the corridors of memory, I stand in reverent appreciation before the mighty figures of the teachers I had here. Frankly, as a young student, I was an unabashed hero worshipper of my professors, given to small ecstasies over their ideas in class, taking copious notes, hanging on every word and nuance, and, later in my apartment, imitating gestures, accents, even their affectations, fantasizing private conversations with them in which I sounded intelligent and impressive, and instantly forgiving them in my mind if they ever behaved as mere human beings. It was always a shock, for example, to see one of them lingering over the candy section in the bookstore or to encounter them in their grubbies, shopping at Safeway. I simply refused ever
to let them off their pedestal. Although this kind of adoration has mellowed, my appreciation and affection for these wonderful mentors have not diminished over the years.

Despite my claim to a shared BYU history with some of you, I am acutely aware that I am a stranger to most of you. In Polynesia, a stranger on the marae, or the formal place of speaking, must first tell something of his own story, background, and lineage before he can presume to share his mana’o, or message. It is the same for a long absent family member. He must tell of his voyaging and account for his behavior to the ceremonial family. The great explorer Captain James Cook failed to establish his lineage and background for the Hawaiians, and we all know what happened to him.

As I contemplated this ancient custom among the people with whom I have chosen to make my home, I realized again that the Pacific islanders view life as a voyage—a series of departures and arrivals, reunions and farewells. But mainly they see us all in passage through the vast ocean of experience. As a missionary in Tonga, I was impressed by the expression of our church-boat captain in Ha’apai: whenever we sailed outside of the harbor or over the protective barrier reef, he would say grimly: “Kuo tau tō ki vaha” (“We have fallen into the in-between place”). That is to say, we had reached the channel or come into the high seas. But I was always fascinated by the idea of falling into the great “in-between place”—a wonderful metaphor for this world, suggesting among other things that we are indeed all in passage, sharing individual and group voyaging experiences, calling advice back and forth across the water, clustering occasionally because of personal, formal, or strategic group connections, but essentially having to steer our own passage, dealing individually with the storms and currents that tend to overpower us.

We can get close to each other. Life’s essential requirement is that we compassionately assist each other, because our assistance to others affects our own voyage profoundly. But there is still rough ocean always between us, and each one must negotiate his or her destination. We can never quite get into another’s boat. Wisdom, skill, faith, courage, and love are the principal operatives in this voyage. In fact, many times they are our only companions, and
mysteriously they become an essential part of our destination. The Maori poet Vernice Wineera says it this way:

When you live with an ocean,
There is undeniably a line in your life.
An imprecise notion
Defining the boundary
Of your existence.
The apparent intersecting
Of sea and sky,
An ethereal idea
Challenging passage.
For when you advance
It recedes before you,
Ever remaining,
The passionate crossing
Between
Known and unknown;
The finite and beyond.
No erratic angle in your life,
Laving the wide earth,
This gentle curve,
Encompassing your yearning
Reveals the frontier—
No further
Than the deep warm sea of the universe.²

From this Polynesian perspective, I have organized a few thoughts around my own voyage before and after my passage through BYU, with particular reference to the humanities, which, in relation to the gospel of Jesus Christ and his church, have been such a potent force in that passage so far.

My passion for the humanities did not begin at BYU, but in my first growing-up place—St. John’s, Arizona, our tiny hometown that Rex Lee described affectionately as a “little one-horse town expecting its second horse any day.” Situated between two Indian reservations on the high, windy plateau north of the White Mountains, St. John’s produced a tiny but hearty population that eked a living from the rocky soil, watered from the highly temperamental Little Colorado River. Despite the regular extremes of drought and floods, the early settlers hung on to the little colony with ferocity and faith that became legend in the Church. “There is more faith in the little finger of a St. Johnser than in the entire Salt Lake Valley” was one visiting General Authority’s estimation—or so we heard as
children in the lore of the community. What I did hear firsthand as a child was my own mother’s response to a shaken, wide-eyed tourist who rolled into Dad’s three-pump service station after driving the fifty miles from Highway 66 without seeing another car or anything else that moved, except windblown dust and tumbleweeds. “Ma’am, what do you folks grow in this Godforsaken country?” he asked, wiping his face.

“Men,” Mom said fiercely, “we grow men.”

But St. John’s grew more than men and women who could survive in a difficult environment. Like many tiny, rural LDS communities, it also grew a tradition that embraced the arts and the humanities in an interesting way. When I was growing up in the late ’40s and ’50s, that tradition had built-in expectations of singing and dancing, performing and reciting as a part of its heritage. “To be cool” was defined largely in one’s involvement in more than just sports and hot rodding. There were just 129 students in our entire high school, but we fielded a football team, a basketball team, a band, an orchestra, and a choir—all made up of many of the same students. Those who enjoyed the pregame or half-time band performances at football games frequently watched a group of football players come off the field, file into the stands, throw off their helmets, pick up their instruments, and play. The two major high school events of the year were the regional music festival and the state basketball tournament. St. John’s High made a strong showing in the one and dominated the other, again with many of the same students. Each Friday night we danced to the music of the best live band in the region. Our basketball coach played lead trumpet, our football coach was on the drums, and the town barber was at the piano.

Our English teacher, Letty A. Patterson, also taught the Cultural Refinement lesson in Relief Society, often drawing in her students to recite poetry or act out scenes of famous plays. For one lesson, she recruited me to play Romeo in the balcony scene. Since no balcony existed in the crowded Relief Society room, poor Juliet had to climb to the top of a ten-foot step ladder that wobbled dangerously as she recited her lines; I passionately gripped my heart with one hand and held the ladder as steady as I could with the other.

The matriarch of our home wonderfully combined theology and aesthetics as well as the domestic arts in her life. She taught
music, dancing, and English in both elementary and high school and, for over thirty years, instructed the fifteen- and sixteen-year-olds in Sunday School. “It’s not everyone who gets to have Isaiah for a mother,” my younger brother Nick used to tell his friends. At home, the six children practiced on two pianos, four violins, and one cello and performed for our father every week during Sunday afternoon family hour. Although our family’s financial condition was always modest to poor, Dad purchased the musical instruments and paid for our lessons. When Nick, age fifteen, was denied access to the church organ except when he played for priesthood meeting, Dad was incensed. He assuaged his anger over the disappointment of his immensely talented teenage son, not by giving the bishop a piece of his mind, but by going out and buying an organ for the boy to play at home.

Mom was a highly public person who composed music, wrote novels, poetry, and short stories, and produced an operetta every year. For some, she was the community’s final word on gospel matters. But it was Dad’s passionate longing for things beautiful that drove the family. He was a blue-collar, one-fist-of-iron-the-other-of-steel kind of man who could speak thunder when angry but could weep over a squeaky violin rendition of Saint-Saens’s “The Swan.” When I announced to him after my freshman year at BYU that I was planning to major in English and teach poetry in college, he joked a bit about whether I’d rather do that or work for a living by getting a real job. He then proceeded to recite from memory Thomas Gray’s “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard.” It nearly blew me away—perhaps because I had not heard the elegy recited before by a man with grime on his clothes and car grease under his fingernails. As it turned out, all four of his sons chose professional college careers in the humanities areas of language, literature, and music.

All was not harmonious in our little town, however, despite the powerful religious influence of the Church and the community’s artistic and aesthetic heritage. For one thing, racial tensions between the Mormon Americans and the Catholic Mexican-Americans served to pinch feelings and harden hearts toward people of other accents, color, and language. Although hostility was rare, private attitudes of disparagement of each other seemed
to qualify any expression of trust or affection between the two groups. Wartime propaganda cemented our prejudice further against our country’s enemies who had killed a number of young men in the community. It was impossible for my generation to escape the effects of racial intolerance.

Two things helped mitigate sharply against those narrow prejudices that clung like barnacles to my thoughts and behavior. Both were humanities related. One was the study of Spanish, with the attendant introduction to the history, music, and humor of the Spanish-speaking peoples. The other was a remarkable and profoundly moving experience, listening to a Boston Symphony recording of Tchaikovsky’s sixth symphony, the *Pathétique*, which produced in me a kind of epiphany that was both spiritual and aesthetic. It was a moment when I first began to realize that such a moment in art comprises many of the emotions of religious experience—wonder, reverence, gratitude, humility, and most of all an abounding sense of love. More specifically, the experience had the effect of awakening my soul to universal truths that hitherto had been inaccessible to me because of my youth. I was about eleven years old at the time, home alone, recuperating from surgery.

I cannot quite explain what happened to me as the dark, melancholy strains of the symphony’s first movement penetrated our quiet house on that late summer afternoon. But suddenly amid the sounds and harmonies, I was lifted out of myself, out of my youth, out of my sheltered ignorance, and brought to a kind of communion out of time with all of suffering humanity. It was as if I saw in a vision the soul of man in a cosmic struggle against evil. I saw humanity both as predator and victim, inflicting ghastly injustices—lured by wealth and power and wasted by vain ambition and uncontrollable passion. In the midst of this special moment, I also sensed what the torments of hell must be, the pounding of an outraged conscience, the panic-stricken search for relief in all manner of delusions, the terror of outer darkness. The experience ended as the symphony ends, conveying a deep sense of tragedy and loss. The beat of the last movement throbs like a weary heart about to break. The lamenting melody simply trails off and collapses in a chaos of grief and despair, as if the soul had fallen over the edge of eternity into the abyss.
What, one might ask, was so spiritual about that experience? It sounds more like a nightmare. The miracle of it was what happened to me inside. Rather than being haunted by fear and self-doubt, I was filled with a profound pity for a humanity that I didn’t even know yet empirically; my compassion transcended the limitations of my extreme youth and my country environment. Insights and feelings came to me that only in later years could I rationally justify from literature—world history, biographies of Peter Tchaikovsky, and, of course, from scripture. You can imagine, for example, with what feelings I first discovered that Enoch had experienced similar feelings after hearing the Lord’s voice:

And it came to pass that the Lord spake unto Enoch, and told Enoch all the doings of the children of men; wherefore Enoch knew, and looked upon their wickedness, and their misery, and wept and stretched forth his arms, and his heart swelled wide as eternity; and his bowels yearned; and all eternity shook. (Moses 7:41)

Artists and critics have given different names to the experience I have just described. It is a familiar phenomenon in both art and religion but not usually one that can be consciously willed. As Wordsworth says, it comes “by chance collisions and quaint accidents . . . to impregnate and to elevate the mind.”3 It comes as a grace, as dew distilling from heaven (D&C 121:45). Robert Browning calls the crescendo of emotion that culminates in a flash of moral insight a “moment . . . infinite.”4 The bar between life and life is broken, and the soul is bathed momentarily in the truth and joy of eternity. Juanita Brooks would call the phenomenon a “sunburst;”5 Thomas Hardy refers to “moments of vision;”6 James Joyce would call it an epiphany.7 Tennyson records such a moment when his soul was “whirl’d / About empyreal heights of thought / And came on that which is, and caught / The deep pulsations of the world.”8 Joseph Smith would explain it as that moment when “pure intelligence flow[s] into you . . . giv[ing] you sudden strokes of ideas.”9

For me, this moment and succeeding moments with the symphony constituted a rite of passage. I had fallen into a new “in-between place.” More than that, I was vocal about it, feeling a fire in my bones, as it were, to tell others about this musical allegory of human experience. I am sure I made myself quite obnoxious.
Thus, I was feelingly convinced early in life that the best art, at least musical art, was closely connected to religious experience and that the supreme emotions of such an experience were those of love or within love’s orbit.

My years at BYU as an English literature and language major opened my vision further to the close relationship between the study of language arts and religious experience. It was here I learned that prophets and poets spoke God’s truth and that good literature is indeed a vast repository of human parables, narratives, and poetic imprints about men and women in passage, struggling within the maelstrom of the cosmic opposition between good and evil. I learned at BYU that education is a lifelong process of “getting a new heart” as well as “getting new eyes,” and ultimately it all had to do with perspective and love.

It was at BYU that I learned the miraculous nature of books—that the pursuit of knowledge was akin to an act of worship and that learning to use a sound-thinking brain was one way of loving God with all of one’s mind. It began to dawn on me here that true doctrine and true authority were only part of true religion, a definition of which eventually evolved in my mind: True religion constitutes all the values and truths revealed by God to his children and all the truths that we have induced about God and humanity. True religion is also the sum total of one’s inner life that is grounded in those truths—the quality of one’s impulses and desires, the way one perceives, acts, and enjoys. Finally, any experience that lifts and ennobles one in a greater love and reverence for God or a deeper love for fellowbeings and better prepares one to act morally is a religious experience.

It was at BYU that I first began to realize the powerful relationship between the study of literature and religious experience, in that both are mainly born and nourished in the concept of otherness. This concept of otherness implies at least four powerful virtues: (1) perception, a way of looking at another; (2) attitude, a way of thinking about another; (3) sensibility, a way of feeling about another; and (4) behavior, a way of treating another. Abandon any one of these virtues and you have something less than true religion.

The first three virtues of otherness, perception and attitude and sensibility, are the ultimate concerns of literature; the fourth,
behavior, is the ultimate concern of scripture. Joseph Conrad, the
literary artist, says: "My task which I am trying to achieve is, by
the power of the written word to make you hear, to make you feel—it
is, before all, to make you see. That—and no more, and it is every-
ting."\textsuperscript{10} James, the Apostle of Christ, says: "Be ye doers of
the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves" (James 1:22).
The need for a synthesis of all four virtues is obvious to the Latter-
day Saint. Without vivid and accurate perception, clear thought,
and genuine feeling, religious action is little more than hollow
exercise. Without righteous action, however, seeing, thinking, and
feeling can be moral delusions.\textsuperscript{11}

At BYU, I was converted more fully by the Book of Mormon
to the truth and majesty of the atonement, indeed all the doctrines
of Christ. I made closer friendships with the men and women of
scripture, their lives and teachings. I was also converted and
changed forever by Thomas Hardy's Tess, Browning's David,
Coleridge's mariner, Dostoyevsky's Sonia, Wordsworth's Cumber-
land beggar, and Bronte's Jane. Intensely, though vicariously, I was
thrust into the peopled worlds created by artists who, despite
their own personal weaknesses, enjoyed gifts of great imaginative
power in communicating truth, wisdom, and beauty. At the same
time, thanks to faithful teachers, I was able to cultivate the
Arnoldian sense of a mutually sustaining relationship between a
strictness of conscience and a spontaneity of consciousness, be-
tween keeping covenants with exactness and honor and giving
motivation and freedom to one's creative imagination.

David O. McKay and Orson Whitney are well-known Church
leaders who argued that poets and prophets often speak by the
same spirit. Even though their techniques and language may differ,
the impact power is much the same. Some say it's easier to ratio-
nalize a poet or literary artist than a prophet. For many it is the other
way around. Let me give you a case in point. I still teach an intro-
duction to literature class to nonmajors at BYU—Hawaii and begin
every course with a section on Mormon literature. I am always fas-
cinated by the response of certain students to the assignment of
reading President's Kimball's speech in the October 1978 general
conference, in which he decries the wanton destruction of animal
life for sport. Most of us who were around at that time remember
his reciting the little primary song, “Don’t Kill the Little Birds.” Quoting President Joseph F. Smith, he said, “It is wrong, and I am surprised at prominent men whom I have seen whose very souls seem to be athirst for the shedding of animal blood.”

What was the effect of that speech? Why, I remember the whole hunting culture in Utah scrambling for cover. When the “shooting” was over and the conference concluded, many came out from behind the rocks and trees, brushing themselves off, making light of their wounds, talking about the value of family outings and family hunting traditions and the positive economic impact on society of the hunting enterprise. Because of their powers of rationalization, they were able to relegate President Kimball’s wonderful and courageous admonition to little more than a glitch on the television screen.

Next, I have the students read Douglas Thayer’s short story “Opening Day,” an excruciating, intimate view of a soul in conflict over the shedding of animal blood for sport. In this context, the literary artist is not so easily dismissed or rationalized. The story is about a returned missionary who promised God during his mission he would never kill for sport again but who comes back to a family that can’t wait to take him on a deer hunt. The unfolding psychological and emotional drama draws the reader in to see, hear, and feel things that are missed in a direct homily. It forces us to examine the dynamics of the heart, the spirit, and the family in a context of shedding blood. If the prophet’s preachment tingles our ears, the literary artist hits us in the solar plexus.

By the way, I was not personally acquainted with Professor Douglas Thayer when I was here as a student, but I knew he was a writer. I would frequently come to the library to find my favorite study table taken over by Doug’s short-story manuscripts. Lining the edges of the table with the pages of a story in process, he would walk slowly around the table, peering at each sheet, marking and correcting, backing up from page eleven to page five, getting the flow and consistency right, and muttering to himself. I was impressed and amused. Little did I know he would write works which one day would constitute another rite of passage for me.

Despite the powerful contribution BYU made to my intellectual and spiritual development, my life’s voyage was soon to bring
me into an intimacy with non-Western peoples and cultures, children of God not of the Wasatch fold or even under the Stars and Stripes forever. This intimacy gave me yet again new eyes and a new heart. BYU in my day was largely white and Eurocentric. And, as I have already mentioned, my growing-up place had not prepared me totally for close encounters with people of color in settings and cultures far different from those I was familiar with.

Three profound experiences, all humanities related, provided points of passage through another great “in-between place” in my life. The first was being “born again” in a new language. This metaphor is not inappropriate when as a twenty-year-old missionary, in pre-MTC days, I was dropped into an island village in Tonga, with only two suitcases, Tongan scriptures, and a native companion and told not to leave my post for any reason until I could speak the Tongan language. In the meantime, I was to direct in that part of the island the missionary work made up of eight Tongan missionaries, seven of whom were married, six of them old enough to be my father. None spoke much English. Although I had authority, I had no real identity, no way to connect with a people I feared and resented—for I was still nursing a tiny bitterness that I had not been called to a Spanish-speaking mission after which I could converse with an additional 250 million people in the world. Instead, I was to learn a language spoken by only a hundred thousand isolated Polynesians. In this tiny island context, with meager means of communication yet feeling laden with a serious responsibility, I was a cipher, afflicted by culture shock, an identity crisis, waves of homesickness, and near despair. As W. O. Facer had written in his journal in Tonga fifty years before my time: “When you get that kind of homesickness you wish your mother hadn’t had you.”

At least two things saved me here. One was a profoundly spiritual outpouring and reassurance during a desperate, broken-hearted and contrite prayer. The other was the magnificent sounds of a strangely powerful music filling the air every night as the villagers practiced their *lakalaka* for Queen Salote Pilolevu’s birthday. I was later to learn that this traditional performance is one of the most sophisticated art forms in the world, combining the eloquence of poetry and grand chorus harmonies with the movements of a stately communal dance.
Frequently in the muggy darkness those sounds penetrated our missionary quarters. As with Tchaikovsky's *Pathétique* symphony in my early youth, there was something deep and profound about this music that first lifted me out of my despair and then brought me to a kind of communion with the Tongan people, whom I hardly knew, with the beauty of their lives, the richness of their past, and the dignity of their culture. Crusts of fear, ignorance, and prejudice were beginning to dissolve within me, replaced by sensations of love. I had caught the "deep pulsations" of a new world. When the language began to come in a rush of spiritual energy, the Tongans were no longer just anthropological curiosities or a blurred generalized populace defined by their material poverty. They could now be understood, appreciated, even revered, as wonderful individuals and collectively as one of the great civilizations of our planet.

Language and music were key to this "born again" miracle, the opening of the heart and the eyes of understanding. But another aesthetic/spiritual event was equally important. It took place at an all-Saints mission conference just a few months after I arrived in Tonga. The following account appears in my book *Tongan Saints: Legacy of Faith*:

After a late afternoon meeting, the visiting authority, Elder John Longden, Assistant to the Council of the Twelve, retired to the home of the school principal. Soon a large group of Saints from Vava‘u gathered on the front lawn to perform a *lakalaka* dance in honor of this General Authority from Salt Lake City. As with all *lakalaka* performances, this one began in majesty and ended in exaltation, the voices of two hundred singers reverberating through the grounds of the school.

The group dance concluded with a male solo dance, a *tau‘olunga* performed by the Vava‘u district president, Malakai Manu ‘Unga. It was fascinating to me to see a man dance with such graceful movements and warmth. Elder Longden sat forward in his lawn chair, clearly animated by the beauty of the performance. Suddenly he sprang to his feet and commenced his own version of the *tau‘olunga*, imitating Brother ‘Unga's every movement, including the whirls, the nods, and the bows. I nearly swallowed my tongue with surprise. Whatever grave dignity Elder Longden had conveyed from his chair as a travel-weary but interested spectator was now transformed into overflowing and overwhelming love and appreciation that manifested itself through the movements of his whole body.
Here the white man, knowing little of the ways of the brown, and the brown, knowing less of the ways of the white, were caught in a glorious moment of harmonious feeling which transcended color, race, or culture.

Slowly they gravitated together in the movements of the dance, until they embraced—equals, brothers, co-stewards in God’s kingdom, communicating a love and wisdom that surpassed words. For me it was as if the barriers of race, ignorance, and prejudice had fallen, and I stood bathed in the insight of Peter’s vision: “Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons” (Acts 10:34).15

The insights and illumination of these experiences have been repeated and reaffirmed many times in our lives since, as we have lived among people and students of many races. Again, it has been frequently in those poignant moments when the art, music, language, and literature of a people become the means by which the Spirit works on us, endowing us with greater love for all of God’s children. It changes our mind-sets. It frees us from the narrow prejudices of our upbringing. It allows us to participate lovingly and imaginatively in ways impossible before such illumination.

For example, I was deeply moved by a portrait of our first Shumway grandchild, Spencer Kealoha, drawn by a Nigerian artist, Nnamdi Okonkwo, a graduate of BYU—Hawaii and now a graduate student at BYU. Having two blondes for parents, baby Spencer inevitably was born a true paleface in a land of robust color within the population—thin of lip, narrow of nose, and pigment deprived. But since the drawing was to be a gift for doting parents whom Nnamdi loved, the black artist, perhaps in a burst of inadvertent compassion and artistic license, conspired against cold nature and rendered Spencer in tones of an African child—not as a caricature by any means, but as an authentic ideal. Clearly little Spencer’s unique features are all present, but with the added beauty of slightly fuller lips, a generous nose, and a warm ebony coloring. I recognized immediately what this art piece represented: a resonance of brotherhood and a “one-blood-of-all-nations” perspective of black as beautiful, not as a curse or mark of Cain, but as a distinguishing feature of a people whose heritage of suffering, art, dance, and music is one of the world’s humanities treasures.

BYU—Hawaii is a place where students of many nations come together in a powerful manifestation of harmony amidst diversity.
Obviously, a shared gospel faith and testimony helps create an environment where bonding and appreciation, even affection for one another, can occur. Prophets have called it a “living laboratory” in which a common humanity is magnified, even exalted, by the sense of a common divinity.

I am always touched by how this sense is sustained by the students sharing and participating in the arts and humanities of each other's culture. For example, in the Fijian section of the night show at the Polynesian Cultural Center, you will just as likely encounter a Samoan, Hawaiian, or Tongan as a Fijian. The same is true of all other performance sections of the famous night show. On campus, in our Song Fests and Culture Nights, the Filipino club may do their version of a Maori haka, the Koreans, their effort at a Samoan slap dance, sometimes even in jest. Everybody loves it.

One of my favorite memories as a stake president on campus is visiting a ward Relief Society meeting in which a young Tongan woman gave a cultural refinement lesson on the music and poetry of India. Nervous but well prepared, she spoke and recited with surprising expertise. All went well until she turned on an audio tape of a traditional Indian song. Instantly, the Relief Society room reverberated with the sounds of a woman’s voice so different and an accompaniment so strange, our teacher, much in control before, now broke out in an uncontrollable laughter that almost immediately turned into weeping. Turning off the music, she begged forgiveness through her tears and then made this comment, “I confess I cannot grasp this music. The sounds are so different from those of my island. But I do know I have sisters in India whom I love, though I’ve never seen. Their spirits are lifted by this music, their lives of hardship sweetened. Therefore, I’m going to love this music, though I don’t understand it.”

As our separate voyages intersect today for a brief moment, perhaps I can conclude by calling two bits of modest advice across the water, especially to you students. First, beware of pure specialty. Develop a healthy skepticism of the so-called cutting edge research in the humanities, which often means simply another rush to a new critical fad without fully trying to absorb the grand heritage. The cutting edge, like the argumentative edge, too quickly snaps the ties with precious parts of our vital past and severs the
heart strings of our humanity. I remember reading in a teacher education journal a few years ago the lament of one scholar who said that our colleges produce people today who have “ephemeral knowledge and tenacious dislikes.” That is, too many programs narrow and constrict students through passionate proselytizing to one point of view or another. “Let us not narrow ourselves up,” pleads Brigham Young, “for the world, with all its variety of useful information . . . is before us; and eternity with all its sparkling intelligence.” Our education should widen our interests and deepen our appreciation and love.

Finally, it is true that in a contemplation of the humanities we explore and celebrate what it is to be human. But your voyage and mine is bent more on what it is to become like God, which is to love the way God loves, as Enoch eventually felt and understood. Why is it that we must love God first with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our strength, and with all our mind (see Luke 10:27) and then second, love our neighbor as ourselves, which Christ taught means loving all humanity? Partly, it is because if we don’t love God first and all he represents, instead of loving our neighbor as ourselves, we are just as likely to end up “loving” our neighbor’s wife, or his goods, or his reputation, or his sins that complement and magnify our own. Love also needs both anchor and compass on our voyage. For me, loving God with all one’s mind means not only putting one’s critical faculties in God’s service, but one’s imagination as well. This requires a will to purity as well as analytical discernment, a passion for good, even perfection, as well as for beauty and understanding.

Where love and human understanding are concerned, the humanities can provide rites of passage through much of this dark world, but they will never have power to save us in the celestial kingdom. Only Christ, his gospel, his authority, his prophets, and his church can do that. Francis Thompson, the nineteenth-century poet, expressed it well in his poem “Hound of Heaven.” In the poem, the soul of man is in rebellious flight, and Christ, compared to a hound, is in the exorable pursuit. Christ’s words resound in response to the soul’s panic to find comfort and fulfillment in every kind of human pleasure—art, nature, erotic love, wine, fame, fortune, fashion, and so on. Surrounding the soul, “like a
bursting sea,” the voice of Christ says, “All things betray thee, who betrayest Me. . . . Naught shelters thee, who wilt not shelter Me. . . . Lo, all things fly thee, for thou fliest Me!”

I wish you well on your voyage and pray that your passage will be as powerfully enhanced by the humanities as mine has been. I pray especially that the love of God will be not only our anchor and compass, but our motivation and reward, indeed our destination.

Eric B. Shumway is President of Brigham Young University—Hawaii Campus.

NOTES

1William Shakespeare, Romeo and Juliet, 3.1.66.
11Much of the preceding six paragraphs were taken from a previous lecture entitled “Literature as Religious Experience,” given by the author at BYU—Hawaii, February 1975.
14W. O. Facer, journal, in possession of the author.
Rites of Passage and the Humanities


16Personal notes of the author.
