

The Need Beyond Reason

Edward L. Hart

"Oh, reason not the need," King Lear cried in a flood of understanding as his daughters told him he had no need of any retainers; there were many servants to take care of his needs. "Allow not nature more than nature needs,/ Man's life's as cheap as beast's," Lear saw (2. 4. 267, 269-70). His physical wants could be taken care of by servants, but in taking away his retainers, his daughters had stripped him of the last vestige of his dignity as a human being. Like an ox in a stall, he could have food set before him, he could be kept warm enough to stay alive, but he would not be human. In that flash of insight delivered in his "Reason not the need" speech, he discovered that the ultimate result of a purely utilitarian philosophy of life is dehumanization.

During the next hundred years, will the disciplines of the humanities have to fight for existence again over the same ground fought over during the past hundred years? Every indication is that they will. Every indication is that the Philistines of the twentieth century are even more blind, more powerful, and more skillful in battle than their nineteenth-century counterparts. The only hope is that the humanities will find defenders as capable as those who kept them vital in the past.

Always at the door of every liberal curriculum in America, from kindergarten to the universities, is someone to ask Regan's question: What is the need? What is the need of music in the high school? Can students live without it? Yes. Then let it go. What is the utility of poetry? It has none. Then let it go. To our shame we in the humanities have at times left the high ground of our true defenses and have engaged the enemy in his bogs and quicksands. We have, in essence, at times conceded to our critics their basic premise: that to be justified in a curriculum a thing should be useful or needed. Having conceded the point, we then proceed to show how useful languages are in the business of the world; or we show how necessary the craft of

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composition is for a student planning to enter law school. By these devices we may win a battle, but by reliance upon them we are bound to lose the war; for once we have agreed to the point that usefulness should be the sole criterion for the existence of an object of learning, we have become King Lear in the hands of inhuman monsters who will squeeze the life out of our disciplines and reduce them to trades.

There can be no other grounds for the defense of the humanities than those articulated by John Henry Newman in his essay, "The Idea of a University." Knowledge is its own end and beauty is its own end. When the most primitive human being added a design to the pot he had made, the design had no use. It did not make the pot either stronger or more leakproof. But it made the life of the maker richer for having conceived and executed the design; and it made the life of everyone who looked at it richer. That is the justification for the design on the pot, or for the design on a blanket or a canoe. The blanket is no warmer for the design, nor will the canoe float better; but to strip people of the means of responding to life in a distinctively human manner is to return them to a way of life indistinguishable from that of cattle. And that is the condition of life toward which the purely utilitarian approach inevitably tends. It is the condition of life unconsciously aimed at by every critic who objects to the teaching of the arts because they are not useful.

I should think that at Brigham Young University more than at any other place in the world one ought to encounter no objection to the idea that a thing is worth learning if it enlarges the scope of human existence. Such enlargement produces joy, "and men are, that they might have joy" (2 Nephi 2:25). It is significant that joy comes from that which we find in life beyond need. Joy comes from service to others, for instance; it comes by the sacrifice of something that might have been useful to ourselves for the benefit of others. Here is an example, then, of joy coming because a need was *not* satisfied. Even in purely private and selfish ways, joy comes from those little things that are beyond need; as a character in Robert Frost's poem "The Star-Splitter" discovered he didn't need a farm and did need a telescope, so he got rid of the farm and spent the rest of his life gazing at the stars. I remember as a high school student being employed in the summer on a farm from sunup to sundown. The endless hours of riding a plow or a rake or a mowing machine have been forgotten, but I can never forget those few minutes each day beyond the call of *need* when I read, and when I made that great discovery that the classics are the classics because they are the most interesting and best written books around.

Do we Mormons really believe that the purpose of life is the enlargement of souls and not the accumulation of property? Do we really believe that all we take with us to the next world is the knowledge we have attained here? If the answer is yes, why should not a knowledge of Latin syntax be as valuable a cargo as a knowledge of corporate taxation? And why should not the ability to write a poem or an essay be as valuable an acquisition as the ability to work out a mathematical problem? Still, as a visiting professor at Berkeley a few years ago, I had two young university students call as home teachers. Somehow we began talking about Latin, and they doubted if it should still be taught: "It's a dead language, isn't it?" The conversation reminded me with some chagrin that I had once shared their attitude. Proud of my ignorance, as a second-year university student, I had told Professor Brewster Ghiselin that I didn't know any Latin and had never missed it. His laconic answer initiated a perception that may have changed my life. He simply said, "A jellyfish never misses its face." I have since learned some Latin and some other languages as well and should miss them a great deal if they were gone. The truth is that we never miss something we have never become acquainted with. One of the marks of a genuinely educated person is that he respects the knowledge of others, even if he has not been so fortunate as to acquire it himself. On the contrary, a mark of an uneducated person is the assumption on his part that anything he does not know must not be worth knowing.

The term "useless knowledge" is relative. One needs to ask additionally, useful for what? If a person simply collects oddments of information, as did the woman in Ezra Pound's "Portrait d'une Femme," then there will be "Nothing that's quite your own. / Yet this is you." But if the assortment of facts anyone possesses, no matter what the assortment consists of, is thoroughly assimilated, if the facts are related to each other in the possessor's mind and in turn related to that mind, they become something that is his own. This is not to argue that a person should go out and provide himself with any kind of hodgepodge of information; but at the same time it is to claim that no knowledge can be called useless if it has been assimilated by an active mind. There are too many examples in the history of man of discoveries made on the basis of obscure parallels, distant similarities, minutiae keenly observed for us to dismiss them as useless. We think of the trains of thought put in motion by a swinging chandelier, a falling apple, or the growth of fungus on a culture dish. But lest anyone think that I have abandoned my position of denying utility the right to be

sole arbiter of a learning pursuit, I hasten to point out that I began by defending the right of the mind to pursue even seemingly useless information. The truth is that there inevitably will be things of utility come as a result of the pursuit. The larger point I am aiming at is that the kind of process described, that of an active mind thoroughly assimilating even minute particulars and making discovery of important truths on the basis of distant similarities, is essentially the metaphor-making process that goes on in the mind of a poet—and metaphor is basic in the existence of poetry.

The function of the metaphor was correctly assessed by Shelley in his *Defence of Poetry* as he discussed the language of poets:

Their language is vitally metaphorical; that is, it marks the before unapprehended relations of things and perpetuates their apprehension, until words, which represent them, become, through time, signs for portions or classes of thought instead of pictures of integral thoughts; and then, if no new poets should arise to create afresh the associations which have been thus disorganized, language will be dead to all the nobler purposes of human intercourse.¹

Thus, with the help of Shelley, we see that the threat of death to a language comes about not because people stop using it but because those who use it have lost the capacity to make metaphors. Latin, for instance, may be very much alive in the mind of a person conscious of its nuances; and English may be very dead in the mind of a person whose only goal is utility. "In the infancy of society every author is necessarily a poet, because language itself is poetry,"² said Shelley. Only if poetry dies out in a language is the language dead. Is poetry, then, needed in the curriculum of the next hundred years? It is needed unless our only aim is to exist on the level of brutish unknowing; but it certainly must find a place beyond mere need if our aim, as Latter-day Saints, is to continue to grow with a wholeness toward a godlike apprehension of our universe.

Our past hundred years has seen a decline in America, and at BYU, in the foreign language requirement for doctoral degrees. Those who have engineered the reduction have done it on the basis of the old argument: need. While a plausible defense could be made that foreign languages are needed, even in accordance with the hollow ring of the most narrow definition of *need*, I shall not make my defense on that

¹ Percy Bysshe Shelley, *A Defense of Poetry*, ed. Albert S. Cook (Boston: Ginn & Company, 1891), pp. 4-5.

²Ibid., p. 5.

basis. And I shall limit my defense of the inclusion of a foreign language requirement to the doctor of philosophy degree, leaving the more specialized doctorates to justify their own existence. The very term, doctor of philosophy, suggests that the holder of the degree ought to have made his approach to his subject on a broader basis than mere vocational utility. The term suggests that the recipient has a grasp of the principles upon which his discipline rests and that he sees his discipline in terms of the perspective of its relationship to all other disciplines. This in turn presupposes some philosophical understanding of the basic issues relative to the life of man on earth and of his struggle to understand himself and his environment. A knowledge of a foreign language, seen in this context, involves more than the technical ability (suggested by the popular notion of language as a *tool* course) to read that material important to one's field published in foreign books and journals—necessary as that may be. The learning of a foreign language is an experience, not merely an exercise such as working out a crossword puzzle; and it is an experience into which one's whole being should be totally immersed. The words of French or German or Greek do not have precise English equivalents enabling languages to be translated like simple transposition ciphers. To know a foreign language, a person almost has to learn to think all over again, and to think in modes previously unknown to him. Ways of apprehending truth vary according to the structure of the language in which that truth is reported. An English-speaking person, for example, may be incapable of understanding certain time concepts because of the fairly strict way in which we who speak English see everything as past, present, or future. Language, furthermore, did not develop in a vacuum in the country of its origin; it developed through historical periods in relation to passing events and to ways of life. To study the language is to learn something of that history and of those ways of life: in short, to have one's consciousness expanded. It is my personal belief that it is next to impossible for anyone to learn a foreign language without unconsciously developing sympathy for and understanding of the peoples who speak the language. This is a conviction that comes to me from my own experience. I learned Japanese while in the United States Navy during wartime with the intention of using my knowledge for the utilitarian purpose of helping to defeat Japan. And that was the purpose to which I did put my knowledge, nor was that purpose nullified in any way by the fact that the learning process was also a cultural experience. Knowledge of Chinese characters assisted me, as it did Ezra Pound, in the

understanding of the nature of language and of poetry (for "language itself is poetry," as Shelley said). Four things that are red, put together in a character, may no longer mean any of the individual things, but may mean the one quality they have in common: redness. Here we are back to that basic metaphoric process from which so much has grown, not only in poetry but in all of the sciences as well.

Japanese characters have both *on* and *kun* readings. The *kun* reading is the Japanese meaning already existing in the spoken language before the Chinese character was borrowed to stand for the written word. The *on* readings are Chinese pronunciations of the character, and there may be many for any one character, each one coming from a different period of Chinese history when the character was pronounced a certain way; for sound changes occurred in Chinese according to patterns of its own development, just as they did in English or German or any other language with a long history. Hence, to know Japanese well, a person must inevitably absorb some Asian history and some sociology of family life and some knowledge of world religions. There is even a special set of Japanese honorifics for reference to the Buddha.

From history to sociology to religion and to a great deal besides, the learning of a language stretches the mind toward an understanding of itself and of the universe. How can anyone be called a doctor of philosophy who knows no language but his own? Can a monolingual person know even his own language? How many of us have testified at one time or another that we really began to know English only after we started to learn a foreign language? Can any person locked, within the narrow confines of one language not fully understood, be competent to interpret the nature of either man or his universe as seen through the knotholes provided by his particular discipline? It will be to our detriment and to the detriment of our clientele if during the next hundred years we do not reclaim some lost territory. There is no "tool subject" that can serve adequately as a replacement for a foreign language. Should a doctor of philosophy degree be granted to a person restricted in his ways of knowing through lack of foreign language study?

All that has been said of the value of studying a foreign language applies equally, of course, to a study in depth of linguistics. But what about fiction? There are those who ask what grown men and women are doing spending their lives reading and teaching *stories*, tales that never actually happened. Who *needs* fiction? For the study of history, the Gonerils and Regans of academe find some justification in the fact that it really took place.

A case could be made for the utility of fiction; it has uses as an escape from tedium, historical fiction can teach one the real facts of a past historical age, and fiction is sometimes even useful as therapy. But all of these justifications skirt the real issue: "Oh, reason not the need."

It is in that reach of the mind for understanding beyond immediate need that fiction came into being and has a right to continue in being. Confronted with a real but isolated experience, we usually do not know what to make of it. It is usually only after time has gone by and the mind has related the isolated experience to all the other experiences we have had that we begin to understand it. The same process we have talked about before takes place: the metaphor-making process of the mind; only in the case of fiction, the metaphor is extended. From all its past experience the mind puts together the "before unapprehended relations of things" and builds a sequence of events touching upon all the relevant pieces of sights, sounds, colors, and actions synthesized by the imagination. When the work is finished it is a whole experience, one that relates the initial isolated event to a total perception of life. It is fiction, and fiction is an elaboration of a metaphor in that it brings multiple similarities and associations together. And the finished work, as Aristotle remarked about 2,300 years ago, is more valuable than a mere record of an historical event, because that event may have been an accident or an aberration that either has no meaning or that has one not discovered solely in the fact of its recital.

Fiction, it is not original for me to say, is thus in a sense more true than actual events; and a great historian is only great to the extent that he has acquired some of the assimilative powers of literature. Then who needs fiction? Anyone needs it who wishes to be alive as a human being rather than as a mere animal. Anyone needs it who wishes to discover the broader truths of his own existence—and of the existence of others as depicted in the fiction growing out of great authors' lives; for, after all, we learn too little from our own direct experiences to understand the multiplicity of truth acquired by the race of man. Direct experience is the most uneconomical teacher, especially if it is fatal—as many experiences are. But the need we are speaking of is a psychic need, the need to grow, the hunger for understanding, rather than physical need. And the reason for the need is beyond empirical reason; hence, it is a need beyond reason.

It is possible, shifting ground for a moment, for a person to acquire vast amounts of information without ever putting it to a good use or even understanding it. In "The Deserted Village," Goldsmith's schoolmaster seems to have done this:

And still they gazed, and still the wonder grew
That one small head could carry all he knew.

The schoolmaster, apparently, had not heeded the admonition from the book of Proverbs that it is good to get wisdom: "therefore get wisdom: and with all thy getting get understanding" (Proverbs 4:7). One of the best ways to get understanding is to attempt to put down on paper all that we know of a given subject. This process is known as composition. A person facing a blank sheet of paper faces, on a smaller scale, naturally, the same kind of problem faced by God as he proceeded with the task of organizing our world out of chaos. And chaos is exactly the condition in our minds, no matter how crammed with information, before we begin to compose. There is no greater challenge that a person can face than that of a blank sheet of paper; and there is no greater feeling of accomplishment than that which comes from having organized chaos into the order of a well-written page. Each small area of truth, no matter how small, when composed into order represents a defeat of chaos and of mental anarchy.

Once again, the process is the familiar one we have recognized in relation to poetry, fiction, and language study: the metaphor-making capacity of the mind. Familiar modes of order are used to conjecture the relationship of new truths, based on remote similarities: the old truths with allowance made for the differences inherent in the new. Edna St. Vincent Millay once said that it is not true that life is one thing after another; it is one thing over and over. But one thing over and over is monotonous only to the person who sees the similarities without scrutinizing the infinite variations that make our earth, for instance, distinct from every other world God may have created, that makes every leaf and every twig and every person distinct from all others, though recognizably participating in repeated patterns. Every truth has always something old and new in it.

The need for the skills of composition is one that is well recognized; but it is not always recognized for the right reason. The utilitarian basis for admiration of composition skill is that its possession makes for better engineers, lawyers, or Madison Avenue hucksters. The overlooked fact is that these utilitarian uses of composition skill are by-products, not ends in themselves. The inner need a person has to compose is the pull toward godhood—the necessity for inner growth: for experiencing a vision of the wholeness of those small parts of the universe that have come within our experience and knowledge. The true meaning of integrity, in terms of personality, is being one person: not believing one thing and doing

another, not going off in more than one direction. Integrity is an older and more comprehensive term than the modern phrase about "getting it all together." If a person has integrity, he will have it all together; and the chances are that he got it all together, on the road toward integrity, by a process of composing, of organizing everything he knew about life, including what he knew from sources of faith as well as from sources of empiricism, into a fairly simple pattern that is complete and meaningfully interrelated. On the road to perfection, man is expected to contribute his own means and resources to the limits of his ability. It would appear that the least we can do is make the effort to organize the thoughts of our minds into patterns that square with the divine plan. The effort at organization is composition; and this justification of composition goes far beyond, but includes within its borders, the need involved in grubbing a daily existence.

The actions involved in grubbing for a daily existence, incidentally, will probably be less exhaustive for most people of the civilized world during the next hundred years than they were during the past hundred. I assume that suitable means of providing energy will be discovered and provided. I believe this, although I have to admit that at the moment there is no action on the part of any member of the present government of the United States designed to justify my belief. But assuming that the present will unfold without our being thrown back into one of civilization's already-passed ages of hand labor, our children will have even more leisure than we had—as we have had more than our parents had. The presence of too much leisure has already added some corrupting pages to our history. But here we have to stop to determine how much leisure is too much; and the answer is simple: any leisure time at all is too much for the person who does not know what to do with it. It is clear that in the past decade a great many people would have been better off, and we all should have been better off, if they had had to work instead of investing so many hours in crime, pornography, and other aimless diversions. It is apparent, also, that more leisure is going to make the problem even more acute.

One way to attack the problem of leisure would be to require more work out of the members of society so that they can be kept out of mischief. This is a hopeless approach, however, since not that much gainful employment is available. This leaves open a second solution, that of providing people with more worthy and worthwhile things to do with their increasing leisure. And this is where humanities ought to come into the picture. Industry and technology and trade are going to train the people they need for their purposes; but those people, and all

the rest of the people as well, are going to have more than enough time in life for their jobs. Unless, with all that leisure, we are going to put up with steadily increasing depredations against us, we are going to have to educate more people for life than for jobs. The sciences do not have the means of educating for living; only the humanities (including religion) possess those means. If the arts of music, painting, poetry, fiction, language study, and composition occupy an important place in the curriculum of the next century, we may anticipate generations of students finding meaning and joy in the discovery of the old truths in their new surroundings and, most important, discovering their kinship with God as builders of order out of chaos by composing the new-won truths into edifices of human integrity that will reflect his glory. More than it ever did in the past, the future rests on the shoulders of the humanities.