



Unbeaten Paths

by Andy Rusnak

Read Directly, Hear, Speak

“From the Archive,” in the January 2017 issue of *Harpers*, features a 1931 commentary by journalist Gerald W. Johnson, in which he writes: “... [T]he fact remains that it was while this unmistakable nonintellectual reigned in the Executive Mansion that our political life attained and maintained a brilliance it had not reached before”

Johnson goes on to say of the men (today, of course, it is women and men) who opposed that nonintellectual, ... “[I]t is only sober truth to assert that in the enterprise of saving the country—as they saw it—from [Andrew] Jackson, they attained heights which they might never have reached except under the sting of a sharp and roweling spur.”

There are probably many variables and contingencies, some known, others forever elusive, why we at times seem to enter circuitous political patterns that prefigure the total destruction of a workable order. As impracticable and unprofitable in this era that worships the spontaneously-registered image over the contemplative, challenging idea, humanism and the humanities are cycling through another round of severe scrutiny by the politically powerful, criticism driven by a gross lack of understanding for the pragmatic contributions that studying the humanities make to economics and politics, not to mention the importance of living the truly, not just expedient, open and self-examined life.

Forms of the current debate started in the 17th century with John Locke’s Empiricism pitted against Immanuel Kant’s Rationalism. Then Matthew Arnold haggled with Thomas Huxley in the 19th century, claiming that the classics should take precedence over scientific study. C.P. Snow solidified “The Two Cultures” argument in the mid-20th century. Today our debates have collapsed into either/or ultimatums, the only options either ignored or cleverly removed from reality, discussions are trapped in layers of protective sophistry. Confusion, frustration, the inability to decipher clear choices, the inability to compromise, becomes a breeding ground for autocracy. It’s as if the intolerant want everyone to see the same hierarchy of goals and influences when they engage in whatever brand of self-awareness defines their level of success, usually one of strict economic utility—no thinking beyond the superficial, no questions, no suggestions, just blind adherence. But, as the great humanist Maya Angelou reminds us “... [M]aking a living is not the same thing as making a life.” One would think this is not rocket science.

But, we humanists are guilty. The humanities have become stagnant. We’ve not done a good job of defending and communicating their importance outside our oft-perceived elitist bubble. We’ve not grown the humanities, we’ve not convinced that an engineer or computer programmer is a better engineer or computer programmer if they read Shakespeare, Plato, Morrison or Simone de Beauvoir. We assume too much, especially that there’s a natural desire on the part of everyone to

reach a higher plane via exposure to and passive study of the humanities, that making a living is antithetical to making a life. The current political climate is proof enough that the importance of the humanities have been devalued, de-funded, even delegitimized.

Being active, advocating, fighting (not dismissing the verb “fight”) for the humanities, means finding that “brilliance” we’ve never reached before, or the “light” will be shed by others with cynical interests and our efforts to educate through study of the humanities will grow more and more glaring. Under this interrogation, we humanists need to act differently, think differently, reach for heights we may never reach “except under the sting of a sharp and roweling spur.” Feel the spur, for it is now digging into our flesh. Today’s is an opportunity, a joyous opportunity to redefine who we are, our place in the growth of ... they still call it humanity.

“Books are for the scholar's idle times,” Emerson wrote in his famous oration, *The American Scholar*. “When he can read ... directly, the hour is too precious to be wasted in other men's transcripts of their readings. But when the intervals of darkness come, as come they must, – when the sun is hid, and the stars withdraw their shining, – we repair to the lamps which were kindled by their ray, to guide our steps to the East again, where the dawn is. We hear, that we may speak.”

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Andrew Rusnak". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "A" and a stylized "R".

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