

Rolheiser: Intelligence versus Wisdom

There's a huge difference between being bright and being wise, between brilliance and wisdom. We can be highly intelligent, but not very wise. Ideally, of course, we should strive to be both, but that isn't always the case, particularly today.

We're living in a culture that rewards brilliance above wisdom and within which we pride ourselves first of all in being brighter than each other.

Who has the highest degree? Who went to the most elite university? Who's the most entrepreneurial? Who's the most popular? Who's the cleverest scientist, researcher, writer, journalist, television personality, or wit at the office or family table? Who's the most brilliant?

We never ask: Who's the wisest?

Today intelligence is valued far above wisdom, and that's not always good. We're a highly informed and intelligent people, but our compassion is not nearly on par with our brilliance.

We're bright, but not wise.

What's the difference between intelligence and wisdom? Wisdom is intelligence that's colored by understanding (which, parsed to its root, means infused with empathy). In end, what makes for wisdom is intelligence informed by empathy, intelligence that grasps with sympathy the complexity of others and the world, and this has implications.

Learning, to be truly helpful, must be matched by an equal growth in empathy.

When this isn't happening, then growth in intelligence is invariably be one-sided and, while perhaps providing something for the community, will always lack the kind of understanding that can help bind the community together and help us better understand ourselves and our world.

When intelligence is not informed by empathy, what it produces will generally not contribute to the common good. Without a concomitant empathy, intelligence invariably becomes arrogant and condescending.

True learning, on the other hand, is humble, self-effacing, and empathic. When we develop ourselves intellectually, without sufficient empathy, our talents invariably become causes for envy rather than gifts for community.

Ironically, at the end of the day, intelligence not sufficiently informed by empathy will not be very bright, but instead will be an arrested intelligence wherein its fault will not be in what it has learned (for learning itself is

good) but in where its learning stopped. It will suffer from a hazard aptly named by Alexander Pope, where “a little learning is a dangerous thing”, where we have read one book too many but one book too few!

One might object here and make a plea for science and scientific objectivity. Isn't empirical science the product of a pure intellectual pursuit which refuses to be colored by anything outside itself? Isn't the ideal of all learning to be purely objective, to not have a bias of any sort?

Where does empathy play a role in pure research? Doesn't an eye turned towards empathy fudge pure objectivity?

Pure objectivity doesn't exist, in science or anywhere else.

Science today accepts that it can never be purely objective. All measurement has its own agenda, its own angle, and cannot help but interfere (however infinitesimally perhaps) with what it measures. Everyone and everything, including science, has a bias (euphemistically, a *pre-ontology*).

Thus, since all learning necessarily begins with an angle, a bias, pre-ontology, the question is not: “How can I be purely objective?” But rather: “What serves us best as an angle from which to learn?”

The answer is empathy. Empathy turns intelligence into wisdom and wisdom turns learning into something that more properly serves community.

However empathy is not to be confused with sentimentality or naiveté, as is sometimes the case.

Sentimentality and naiveté see a fault within intellectuality itself, seeing learning itself as the problem. But learning is never the problem. *One-sided* learning is the problem, namely, learning that isn't sufficiently informed by empathy, which seeks knowledge without understanding.

I teach graduate students who are mainly preparing for ministry within their churches and so, for them, graduate learning is, by definition, meant to be more than just scoring high marks, graduating with honor, being informed and educated, or even just satisfying their own intellectual curiosities and questions. By their very vocation, they are striving for wisdom more than for mere intelligence.

But even they, like most everyone else in our culture, struggle to not be one-sided in their learning, to have their studies bring them as much compassion as knowledge.

We all struggle with this. It's hard to resist a temptation that's as endemic in our culture as certain bacteria are in our waters, that is, the temptation to be clever and bright, more informed than everyone else, no matter if we aren't very compassionate persons afterwards.

And so this column is a plea, not a criticism: To all of us, whether we're doing formal studies; whether we're trying to learn the newest information technology; whether we're trying to keep ourselves informed socially and politically; whether we're writing articles, books, or blogs; whether we're taking training for a job; or whether we're just mustering material for an argument at our family table or workplace, remember: It's not good merely to be smart, we must also be compassionate.