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Of Standardized Knowability

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OPINION

Of Standardized Knowability

MATTHEW S. BRENNAN

And then there was the twenty-first century—vulnerability, war, housing bubbles, bursting bubbles, blame games, bank games, cries for other people’s accountability, shame by a thousand names, the root of all ills to our great relief discovered in education, and eventually an insistence that math and science are the ways to know the world and for that reason the route to prosperity, so making education a predominantly practical and concrete means to a decidedly economic end, devoid, too often, of retained knowledge, independent thinking, and any semblance of private curiosity, as if widgets might wear caps and gowns. And so go the arts by the wayside, or at least their serious study by masses grown impatient with truths that arrive only gradually, skills made remarkably profitable by precious few, and realities no less real for their defiance of definition and measurement.

Oh, we’ve not done away entirely with art and music programs, but it probably has been far longer than these thirteen years since we treated artistic endeavors as a medium via which students discover themselves and their world. I wish you the best of luck finding a creative writing class at the secondary level. Where they have not been claimed entirely as early casualties of very real, budget-driven, academic attrition, we categorize such courses as “electives,” to be chosen by or reserved for those with rare, natural, and unproductive inclinations, or we relegate them as “experiences” to which parents ought to of a necessity expose their children for a brief moment prior to but not after the age of 14, or to which undergraduates must subject themselves as per draconian mandate.

No one important enough to talk on TV, after all, speaks of painting, writing, singing, or just plain thinking as keys to job creation, debt reduction, or energy conservation.

To each her own, I say, but it cannot go without notice that the arts—visual, aural, or written—are rarely thought of and almost never presented as ways to know the world on par with concrete disciplines more adequately captured

by the pages of textbooks, amidst objective observations, or somewhere among the answer bubbles on a 60-minute exam designed by the lowest bidder to require as little cultural familiarity as possible.

Today, in a panic, short on patience and concerned mostly with ruthless accountability and measurable achievement, we emphasize practicality and utilitarian knowledge, we dismiss arts programs, their value deemed insufficient to the very important business of the day, and we standardize English curricula until any attempt at intuitive perception or creative expression seems to betray the duty we sense as teachers and the expectations of students, parents, administrators, and a nation in desperate need of the services it says we fail to provide.

Perhaps that ought not be.

I have taught many a high-school student, no few of whom were either certain they had mastered the English language to a sufficient degree long before their junior year (as if the state’s driver’s manual required the sophisticated sum of all rhetorical skills), or so sure that mere proficiency was so far beyond their clumsy phrases and uninspired ideas that only divine intervention might pave the road to clarity and insight. My college students—first year writers—are not so different, and while there are those standouts who seize opportunity, there are more who seem to assume mine is a class they’re already more than prepared to, at least, pass.

An impression I recall above most others was made by a young woman I taught during the summer of 2003. I had just begun my graduate studies, an English major as passionate about creative writing as he was ignorant of the salability of his English degree, and I set out to spend the season teaching creative writing to teenagers who sought (or had been told to seek) a pre-collegiate experience via an academic summer program hosted by my alma mater. On the first day of class, in a tiny room with about eight desks too many, I asked each student to share a reason for scheduling our writing course. I always appreciate a glimpse at their expectations, and I like

for them to think about why we ended up in the same room; young people usually take an interest in creative writing for one of two reasons—either they enjoy writing and, unafraid to share their enthusiasm, seek instruction, or they think they're terribly incapable of thinking and writing creatively, in which case they humbly and hopefully seek guidance in the arcane ways of critical, imaginative thought.

There we went around the room until we arrived at a young lady we'll call Sally, and Sally said, if I may paraphrase: "I took this class because I don't think you can teach people to be creative." She was far from sullen, and it was (probably) not a dare, but note the period. The bold finality where one might hope for precocious curiosity.

Therein may lie the heart of this matter—a seeming lack of faith in artistic mindsets, as if they cannot yield broadly applicable perspective, worthwhile truths, or a priceless sense of our selves within a thousand contexts, and as if such thinking is merely for entertainment, aestheticism, or diversion,

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not to mention this assumption that art is only for the artistic, all of whom are so designated without recourse upon their birth.

To be clear, science matters. We ought to observe deep space and theorize the primordial conditions under which matter coalesces and stars ignite, but to be mesmerized by open flames in the dark of some night is also a very real way to know "fire." We ought to know that distinct pathogens sometimes enter our bodies, causing illness and injury in very precise, predictable ways, and that when necessary we can

help our bodies combat those pathogens so to improve the quality of and even prolong lives, but to have an oncologist tell you at your most helpless moment that she can help is a definitively singular way to understand "doctor."

Math matters, too. We ought to know how much space there is between the sun and the planets, and how long it takes light to reach Earth, but to see Venus in the night sky, to be awed by her luminescence, and to bear witness to the truth that ours is not a planet alone, or even only one of 8 (another quirk of this twenty-first century), is also a very real way to conceive of "humanity." We ought to design technology that can independently map facial features and gather data that indicates, physiologically, what most human beings find attractive, but to recognize genetically induced symmetry does

about as much to help us comprehend "beauty" as expert rhetorical analysis of plot devices does to help us "know" whatever it is we know when women cry at the end of *Marley and Me* and we brutes among men subtly paw at our inexplicably itchy eyes.

I have known many students who at 16 or 18 were far more capable and aware than I was at their age, and whom I expect to become exceptional researchers, engineers, chemists, architects, surgeons, physicists, investors, and entrepreneurs, but not one of them will study enough to adequately grasp what I feel when I watch a student make a mature, good idea for the first time—and know it—or what I feel when I watch one come to life on a stage, or the profound difference between understanding what multiple myeloma does to a cancer patient's bone marrow, and what I felt and knew on the morning of my father's passing, which changed the color of the world.

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There is much to know that one must experience, but it is not enough to live it. One must recognize what he sees, hears, and feels, how he reacts and what he wonders, and what he fathoms beyond the tangible facts of the matter. He must face it, embrace and sometimes grapple with it, and ultimately express what it is he comprehends as only he may; he must make manifest his intimate knowledge, for himself and, sometimes, for the rest of us, else he does not know it at all and cannot fully know himself. He must sense it, for he who does not recognize what lay within recognizes not half of what he is or can be.

We must somehow capture our impressions, sensations, and intuitive perceptions, all of which are valid, unavoidable, intrinsically ephemeral, and often suppressed ways to know our selves in our universe. Such is art. Among innumerable means, sketching, painting, journaling, sculpting, music and photography begin to do our immediate and developing knowledge justice as we shape and testify to what must be to varying degrees psychological, spiritual, public, private, enlightening, confounding, and simultaneously subtle and overwhelming.

No artist ever impressed by a delicate facial feature, the contour of a shadow, an act of genuine charity or deliberate cruelty, or the façade of a particular building in the fleeting light of day would disagree that she has known what few

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others have known. No matter the degree of our innate skill, art is a way to learn of ourselves, our world, and those with whom we share it, not because we recreate what it is we see, but because we seek the depth and weight of a moment's impression on our very being. In lending form, language, and color to our ever-evolving sense of eternal human pre-occupation we recognize within and without truths revealed only by contemplation of that which we allow to make an impression.

For my part, I do not paint, I shape no clay, my flip-phone camera never quite "captures" the moment, and while I did once sketch rather often and with some facility, I now rarely put pencil to paper for artistic purposes. I do, however, dabble in carpentry and landscaping to outstrip the average homeowner, and an impulse to write creatively lingers deep within, even while I am most often writing small-group discussion prompts and lesson plans to suite the Common Core. My yard was once my canvas, lumber and soil my medium, and what I could imagine I could create—I could move a creative inkling from wherever it existed within, out into the observable world, not so that others could see it, but because it was profoundly meaningful and essential to my own happiness and well-being—essential to know myself and shape my environment in a manner enabled only by this translation from the inkling I could barely know, to the knowledge and awareness I possess via artistic expression.

To be sure, I make my mistakes—it is often only on my third attempt that the quality of my work matches the quality of my intention—but it is neither the perfect work nor the perfect method that I seek. I do like it when the Mrs. seems impressed.

Truly, though, I seek knowledge of what is possible and what is not yet, of what has been known or made and what can be known or made, of what can be imagined now that I have imagined, and what I or we might become now that, for at least a moment, I have been.

I don't have a yard anymore, or a garage in which to build. I'll manage, but I am certainly the lesser for it. Luckily, having had the experience, I know with a certainty that I need dirt and wood, so to speak, to shape the contours of wherever it is I eventually land. You really should see my third tries.

I cannot boast of ever having exhibited much of an inclination for creating music, though I wish I hadn't resisted piano lessons as a child. Alternatively, I had a friend that same summer of 2003 who could play any tune on a piano or guitar for no better reason than that he had once heard it and now happened to be in the same room as an instrument.

Music makes "sense" to him in a manner that, through at least these first 32 years of my life, I know not. The creative element escapes me as if it works according to rules set out in a manual I did not receive.

However, to this day my heart swells with the opening crescendo of the Alan Parsons' Project's "Sirius," the tune for me and many others so indelibly linked to the announcement of a certain inimitable player from North Carolina who hasn't actually been introduced as a starter in an NBA playoff game for well over a decade. Currently trending techno-beats drive me crazy, beach-themed Kenny Chesney songs calm me down, Bill Withers can make any day lovely, and while I'd like to tell you that nothing strikes at my heartstrings like Beethoven's finest work, the truth is that I can't resist the "Hey Mickey-esque" rhythm of The Ting Tings' "That's Not My Name."

I know the difference between a live concert in a small venue hosting a band of whom I've never heard and the favorites trapped on my iPod, I have sensed the difference between reading about Abraham Lincoln and feeling small in front of his memorial for the very first time, and I know that the value of the expensively framed landscape hanging over my fireplace pales in comparison to that of a good friend's finely inked crosshatching of our two Labs donning scarves my wife insists they love to wear. Somehow, I become part of each work. Its expression was once in the hands of another, its interpretation has been my own, and as actors of equal significance we have together participated in the art of creation, just as you, gentle reader, participate fully in the creation of what hasn't been my meaning since I placed the last mark in this article.

Even when we do not create, we respond, and in so doing we complete the act and develop a fuller sense of ourselves and our relation to all else that is, which must be as important as whether we keep straight the difference between mean, median, and mode, whether we can distinguish between a leukocyte and a lymphocyte, and whether we can respond to a surprise writing prompt with a clear, thesis-driven, two-page composition that can withstand a full ninety seconds of scrutiny and win us our way into the school of our dreams.

What of musical, graphic, and linguistic activities as opportunities for meditation and contemplation, or as means not of production, but of self-preservation—as a sort of relief valve for us to release tensions and work out perturbations unlikely to find outlets in cold, standardized criteria? The bridges must be built, but knowledge and skills of tremendous value resist prescription and formulaic assessment.

I had a student, once, let's call her Bernadette, who researched the life and literature of William Faulkner as the bulk of her graduation project. She'd read *As I Lay Dying* and learned along the way about Faulkner's remarkable use of point of view as well as his fire and flood motifs. In addition to academic research and composition, all students were required to apply hard-won insight to construct some creative complement to their more traditional work.

As I intended it, inspired by an American author's contribution to the human cause, students were supposed to imagine and creatively seek a similarly meaningful, private end. Imagine studying Ralph Waldo Emerson's philosophical essays, then developing a worldview all your own while employing a similar sentence structure, or researching the work of Arthur Miller, then crafting your own dramatic exploration of human morality.

Sure, I graded some uninspired work, but I was also treated to insight most people would believe far beyond the years of a teenager, the profound expression of students who discovered meaning in the mortality of a parent, and original art, music, song, and even dance beyond reproach. Each student lent meaning to her or his presence in our classroom that I and perhaps even they would otherwise never have known.

Bernadette took it upon herself to write a story of her own design, alternating distinct perspectives just as Faulkner did, building character via point of view and diction just as Faulkner might, and deliberately employing similar motifs for her own purpose—to question humanity in just that gothic style for which Faulkner is known. And if that weren't enough, Bernadette, who was something of a musician, used her own computer software (in the ancient, pre-Garage Band days) to compose for her story a simple, yet original symphonic score to match the ebb and flow of her identifiably Faulknerian plot.

No, the Bernadette's of the world are not exactly typical, but they are not as rare as some might think, and her work illustrates what a willing student can achieve. (Ah, that elusive will, the unassessed battery so haphazardly included.)

Without doubt, she still knows Faulkner, Southern Gothicism, fiction, theme, tone, character, plot, motif, musical composition, research, and herself more precisely and thoroughly than ever she might have in absence of artistic expression. It wasn't just the good work of an exceptional student, and it wasn't creativity for its own sake—giving an artistically inclined student a chance to “do her thing.” We witness in this the way in which artistic endeavors enable

perspective and understanding, and that knowledge of self and environment that arise not because we seek to express or portray what we already know, but because we may know only when we attempt to express and portray.

Art is method, and it makes accessible what would otherwise remain not only beyond our grasp, but beyond our imagination. As for Bernadette and her artistic inclinations, she is about to complete graduate studies in medical physics.

I regularly emphasize to my novice writers, and especially to those who struggle to find anything at all worth saying, that we do not write because we know; we write in order to know. Artistic frames of mind—those in which we allow our experience to strike us, in which we are patient enough to contemplate our intuitive reactions, sensations, and impressions, and in which we subsequently seek cognizance of subjective truths not in place of but as essential complements to objective observation—are essential to knowing what is knowable, and that is as true of our very nature as it is of the material world.

Within an educational institution evermore dictated by standardized curricula and state-approved expectations, where purportedly objective assessments have evermore influence on weighty assessments of educational and professional quality, that which goes by the name “education” quite naturally dismisses activities that defy its own increasingly characteristic objectivity. In an environment where the arts are presented and perceived as curiosities of no economically defensible, scholarly, civil, economic, or personal benefit, more and more is left undiscovered

and unknown because we marginalize the very ways in which it may be fully known, as if one could know a ball game absent the noise of its crowd, or a cathedral by sight alone, reducing its spiritual grandiosity to architectural tendencies.

The argument for the arts, though, is not for a return to that magical yesteryear when the masses adored the transcendent value of creative expression and students across the land treasured their every enlightening lesson. The argument is one for art as a learning strategy, or a critical lens through which to view our literature and ourselves. It is an argument not for technology in the classroom, absent-minded creativ-

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ity, or yet another non-English task to be piled on English teachers. It is, rather, an argument for the opportunity in the midst of standardized education to embrace the artistry inherent in our subject matter and our pedagogical craft, and a challenge to keep lit the torch that lights the way to knowledge that really is unknown and unimagined by other means, no matter the discipline

“You go too far, good sir,” you might say to me, but, having hesitated, I think not. I hope never to teach writing as process, alone, nor reading as if a book is but equal to the sum of its parts. Art is not leisure any more than a song is a sound, and I call upon you, my colleagues, to nurture artistic expression and critical perception as means to as worthwhile an end as any other. Our practice very much ought to illustrate that not all things worth knowing may be normed and standardized.

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To teach language as art, to artistically conceive of the task with due respect for sound standards, is to remind ourselves and call to mind for our students that there are innumerable ways to know a world that does not for long hide from us anything we do not hide from ourselves.

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