

My Passions

Bertrand Russell, in the prologue to his autobiography spoke of three passions for which he had lived:

Three passions, simple but overwhelmingly strong, have governed my life: the longing for love, the search for knowledge, and unbearable pity for the suffering of mankind. These passions, like great winds, have blown me hither and thither, in a wayward course, over a great ocean of anguish, reaching to the very verge of despair.¹

We probably all have these three passions in different combinations. In my case, the order would be learning, compassion, love.

1. Learning

My prime passion is learning: learning rather than knowledge, because for me the process is more important than the end result, which was the case with Russell. When I was a boy, I was almost infinitely curious and was always asking questions: too many said the teachers. In grade 9, when we were learning about physics, the teacher said that heat was invisible. It was a winter's day in Canada and one could see the waves of convection currents rising from the radiators at the base of the cold windows. That was something I should ask next year, said the teacher. The next year the question was put off again. Teachers sent me to professors; professors sent me to famous professors, and they in turn sent me to world experts. These real experts did have answers to my questions, but also had the humility to mention that most questions had not been definitively resolved.

1.a. Sharing

When I received my doctorate in London, I felt that I had to learn more before I could teach so I embarked on post-doctoral research. Only nine years later did I feel that I had someone to share with students. And there was a curious sense that if I had received more, I needed to give more. Unlike money which could be saved, real learning is only fruitful if it was shared.

To my great surprise, the PhD (or the fuddy duddy as our Latin master called it) had a very different effect on most persons. The moment they had the piece of paper they felt a right, nay a need, to inform everyone who would listen about their new found "truths." As I looked around, I realized something even more surprising. Those who did not bother with the PhD, often felt an even greater right and need to inform others about their knowledge and insights. If one posed questions, which suggested that there might still be things for them to learn, they were either silent or at times (mildly) aggressive as if their being caught out was the questioner's fault.

For a while, I saw my purpose in life as sharing all that I had learned, until I realized that many persons actively did not want to know. Gradually, I learned that the advice given to small children: be silent unless spoken to, was often a good formula for everyday life. Unless persons posed questions, it was relatively useless to offer them answers. Hiding one's light under a bushel was not just a Biblical story: it had something to do with survival.

1.b. Connections

As a young scholar I found a useful answer to the eternal question: what do you do? I work on 1 man (Leonardo da Vinci), one word (perspective) and 1 object (the proportional

compass/sector). This was considered very risqué, but pleased almost everyone at cocktail parties because they now had a neat way of cubby-holing me. Most colleagues had only 1 person, e.g. Shakespeare and then only 1 topic concerning Shakespeare: e.g. the comedies or the late plays, or a given protagonist, e.g. Hamlet.

In my mind, Leonardo was of particular interest because he used perspective and developed a version of a proportional compass. The individual facts were significant, but it was the connections between them that interested me most. My friend, Wong Cho Hor calls this the learning interlink:

My focus now is on Interdisciplinary Learning Interlink. How many in college these days can link Chaucer to Henry Plantagenet's sudden outburst against his boyhood friend Becket leading to the tales, i.e. the martyrdom at the West Transept of Canterbury Cathedral? And how many Chinese students at Oxbridge are aware that the head of Thomas More is also at Canterbury?

Paradoxically our whole educational system is organized against such insights. We all learn that algebra exist. Some of us learn that the word has Arabic roots (from Arabic: الجبر, transliterated "al-jabr", literally meaning "reunion of broken parts"). Very few of us learn that the Arabic roots have Persian roots, which have Hindu roots. We need a contextual history, that shows the connections between/among things, what Ted Nelson would call the intertangledness of things. In this contextual world, the frame story of the Pancatantra in India inspires not just the Arabian Nights, but also Boccaccio's *Decameron* and Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. Interlinked learning is not about one superpower, one country, one religion: it is about our common humanity, about what we share. Almost everyone smiles in the same language.

1.c. Truth

When I was young the world began in binary, black and white terms. There was good and there was evil. There was truth and there was falsehood and as a good person, or rather as one who sought to be a good person, it was always obvious where one stood: one chose the day, the light, the good, the true.

In the 50s and early 60s, this straightforward picture became blurred. When I retired, truth came under attack. The world, which had been post-modern, now claimed to be post-truth. Oscar Wilde had recognized that truth was seldom pure and never simple. But even Wilde, who was no saint, had never doubted that truth exists. In my own case, there was a sudden welling from within to insist that truth is not a fashion: it exists, must be sought after and defended. My trendy academic acquaintances assured me that truth was outdated. I ignored them. They were more successful professionally. But I continue to seek truth, fully aware that the means towards truth are multiple (cf. the *pramana*), but I continue seeking nonetheless.

1.d. Wow

Among the trendy scholars, I witnessed something else. Once truth was outmoded, everything became matter of fact and prosaic. It was as if everything was pedestrian and little more than boring. There was no enthusiasm. Indeed, enthusiasm was treated as something suspicious, as if one had gone off the rails, had become slightly mad, or was a complete "nut case."

For all this, something in me went in the opposite direction. The popularity charts from 1 to 3 for restaurants, 1 to 5 for films and 1 to 10 for overall satisfaction were all very well. But there

are things that are in a different league, where simple marks are not enough, where there is a sense of wonder: the stars in the night sky in the desert or in the mountains; Beethoven's, Mahler's or Brückner's 9th symphony, the Mona Lisa, the Grand Canyon, Ayers Rock or Mount Kailash, where the only word, that is even a distant approximation of the tremours that go through our body, is wow.

It is not yet a recognized field of study, but wowology certainly deserves to be, as does wonderology. It is the science of making us aware of the exceptional, the remarkable, the inimitable, all that Mary Poppins would have described as Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious. Wow is about the memorable, the unforgettable.

Humans are body, mind and spirit (kaya, vac, citta). Body and matter are bounded, limited, literal. Mind and spirit are unbounded, unlimited, and metaphorical. Wow is about everything that makes us see beyond the limits of the body and matter, all that contradicts limitation and opens the portals of the unending and the infinite. It is the essence of poetry, of the mysterious, the wondrous, of myth and religion. It is our connection with the Divine.

2. Compassion

Compassion is a most noble of goals. So many have done so much more. The Buddha analysed the causes of suffering much more profoundly. On the surface, it is obvious that we need to be compassionate. But when I leave a train in India and 200 people, mainly children, are clamouring for help, it is difficult to do the right thing. I always feel inadequate.

When I was in my 20s there was a wonderful woman in Jersey who used to complain about persons who were only kind. For a couple of decades, I repeated this as if it were a truth. Then gradually I gained a new respect for kindness. I was not a billionaire. I had no great funds for magnanimous donations that would reach the headlines. But kindness was always an option. If someone was suffering, I could listen. If someone was in great doubt, I could give hope. The story of the rich merchant's son, who had given up all his worldly possessions and his prayer became a leitmotif in my life. Saint Francis, who had modelled his life on Christ, now became someone on whom I modelled my life.

Oh! Lord, make me an instrument of your peace:

Where is hate, help me to bring love,
where people are offended, that I bring forgiveness,
where is discord, that I bring faith,
where is the error, that I bring the Truth,
where is despair, that I bring hope.
Where is sadness, that I bring joy,
where is the darkness, that I bring the light.

Oh! Master, don't let me try so much:
To be understood, as to understand.
To be loved, as to love

As it is in: Giving, you receive:
Forgiving that one is forgiven;

By dying that we rise to Eternal Life.
Amen.²

It was easier to say the prayer, than to live it. It was easier to admire Saint Francis than to achieve his magnanimous humility. Time and again the pettiness of fellow human beings tempted one to compete with them in their petty comments. Fortunately, time and again, I was reminded of Nelson Mandela, who spent 26 years in jail without becoming bitter and who always urged not to look to the falling, but to the getting up again, for therein lies the greatness of man.

And then there was my friend Christel in Wolfenbüttel, who always had a smile, like a Cheshire cat, seemingly suspicious for its broadness and yet utterly genuine. One day I asked about it and she recited a poem. It became and remains an inspiration. It is a practical symbol of compassion. Even if we are powerless and penniless, we can always afford a smile to show that we care about our fellow human beings. Often, we are powerless in being able to solve tragedies and states of great suffering. And yet, always, a smile, a kind word, can bring light and hope to those who are suffering.

Smile

(Poem by an unknown author of the 17th century)

A smile costs nothing, but gives a lot.
It makes the person who receives it rich, without the giver becoming poorer.
It only takes a moment, but the memory remains - sometimes forever.
No one is so rich that he can do without it,
and nobody is so poor that he could not be made richer through a smile.
A laugh brings happiness into the home, promotes
goodwill in business and is a sign of friendship.
It gives rest to the weary, hope to the discouraged, sunshine to the sad and it is
nature's best remedy for anger.
You cannot buy it, it cannot be begged for, borrowed or stolen, for it is worthless until it is
really given.
Some people are too tired, to give you a smile.
Give them yours, because nobody
needs a smile more than the one who no longer has one to give.³

2. Love

Most of my friends are married. My best friend, John, was married three times. Another friend, Harry, married five times before he came close to sublime bliss and has been very happily married for over three decades.

My weakness in (carnal) love was not a weakness in desire. One problem lay in not being able to multitask. As an undergraduate there was a wonderfully beautiful girl, Ivana, who quickly brought me into a quandary: a) I could respond to her love and lose my scholarship or b) I

could continue with my studies. Around me, I saw persons who got married, had three children, and finished their PhD in the midst of everything. I was envious, but could not have done it.

When I had finished my PhD, there was a wonderful woman from France, whom I wanted to marry and duly asked her to do so. She was independently wealthy and chose not to accept. In 1986, I met an English nurse in Los Angeles. She wanted to marry me, wanted me home by five and also wanted to possess me. When I realized that I could never be truly happy with her I chose not to marry. Perhaps by way of compensation, I have loved more persons metaphysically: in a curious no man's land, where I showed more affection than normal friendship and less than in a physical relationship. The Don Giovannis and Casanovas could attest that very different models were possible, but they were not mine.

In my case, it took a very long time to love myself in the sense of not being ashamed for simply existing and once this hurdle was overcome, it became much easier to love to an extent that some worried that my expressions of metaphysical love were actually disguised versions of carnal love. But for me, personally, spiritual friendship in the model of Aelred of Rievaulx remains the only true model. While I have fallen short in the guiles of Eros, I have found solace in the aesthetic distance of agape.

For a long time, the three passions were separate: learning, compassion and love were like three competing hobbies. Then one day I realized that they were also connected. Learning brought and fostered faith; compassion fostered hope and love fostered charity. The three passions were linked with the three theological virtues and in a sense constituted the basis of religion in a deeper sense. Humans, who are a threefold combination of body, mind and spirit need three passions and three virtues to keep them in harmony.

As I look back, I realize that I shall never be rich as billionaires or even millionaires; as holy as Buddha; as saintly as Saint Francis; certainly never as much a statesman as Mandela; never quite as adventurous as Lawrence of Arabia or Captain Sir Francis Burton; indeed never as much as most of the greats.

Gratitude

But I have lived with gratitude, joy, and with many vows and I am still learning to be even more grateful to the Creator, my parents, teachers and friends who continue to widen my horizons: to look further than the body and the earth; to look beyond the keimpe and the kim; to look upwards to heavens and sing praises to the miracle that is life.

Notes

¹ Bertrand Russell: <https://users.drew.edu/jlenz/br-prolog.html>

² Saint Francis: <https://www.sanfrancescopatronoditalia.it/notizie/attualita/san-francesco-fa-di-me-uno-strumento-della-tua-pace-9331#.XgZKQ0dKibg>

Oh! Signore, fa di me uno strumento della tua pace:

dove è odio, fa ch'io porti amore,
dove è offesa, ch'io porti il perdono,
dove è discordia, ch'io porti la fede,
dove è l'errore, ch'io porti la Verità,
dove è la disperazione, ch'io porti la speranza.

Dove è tristezza, ch'io porti la gioia,

dove sono le tenebre, ch'io porti la luce.

Oh! Maestro, fa che io non cerchi tanto:
Ad essere compreso, quanto a comprendere.
Ad essere amato, quanto ad amare
Poichè:

Se è: Dando, che si riceve:
Perdonando che si è perdonati;
Morendo che si risuscita a Vita Eterna.

Amen.

³ Ein Lächeln: <https://www.wissensuchtwege.de/Archiv/download/einlaecheln.pdf>
Lächeln

(Gedicht eines unbekannten Autors des 17. Jahrhunderts)

Ein Lächeln kostet nichts, aber es gibt viel.
Es macht den reich, der es bekommt, ohne den,
der es gibt, ärmer zu machen.
Es dauert nur einen Augenblick, aber die
Erinnerung bleibt - manchmal für immer.
Niemand ist so reich, dass er ohne es auskommen
kann und niemand so arm, dass er nicht durch ein
Lächeln reicher gemacht werden könnte.
Ein Lachen bringt Glück ins Haus, fördert den
guten Willen im Geschäft und ist ein Zeichen für
Freundschaft.
Es gibt dem Erschöpften Ruh, dem Mutlosen
Hoffnung, dem Traurigen Sonnenschein und es ist
der Natur bestes Mittel gegen Ärger.
Man kann es nicht kaufen, nicht erbetteln, leihen
oder stehlen, denn es ist so lange wertlos, bis es
wirklich gegeben wird.
Manche Leute sind zu müde, dir ein Lächeln zu
geben. Schenke ihnen deines, denn niemand
braucht ein Lächeln nötiger als jener, der keines
mehr zu geben hat.