

ENCOUNTERS:

A Student's Perspective on Teaching Science and Fostering Faith

The First Encounter

I checked my ticket stub against the number above the seat and sighed. I had already decided that the plane was too small and too full to provide me the luxury of sitting alone. And I was right. There he was, sitting with his newspaper, his barrier to impending conversation. I nestled into my seat, feeling lucky to have a seatmate who would forgo the formalities and let me enjoy my flight discourse-free. Soon I could see only blue beyond his window. I settled back and glanced at the news that flashed on the TV screen in front of me. It was going to be a long flight.

"Do you do anything like that?" The question startled me. My neighbor gestured toward the screen, which showed drunk college students blocking an intersection and throwing bottles. Police in riot gear struggled to contain the crowd, which was celebrating a basketball championship.

"No, I don't," I answered, eyes fixed straight ahead in hopes of curbing any further attempts at dialogue.

"Why not?"

"I guess because I'm a Christian." Feeling this was a sure way to squelch the conversation, I gave myself a mental pat on the back.

"A Christian—really?" I could hear the skepticism in his voice.

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"You're not?" I asked, surprised at his persistence.

He paused for a moment. "I used to be," he answered. "I used to be on fire for Christ. I used to be giving my testimony all the time, going door to door asking if people wanted Bible studies—you know, the whole works."

"What happened?" I glanced over at him for the first time.

"I suppose I just started to learn the truth about things. I started to be intellectually honest with myself. I started to look for evidence of a God, and well, there just wasn't any. Now I find purpose in knowing that I will further humanity by passing my genes and my knowledge down to my offspring. This way, the evolutionary process can bring about a better world with creatures better adjusted to its intricacies."

I gazed at him in stunned silence. What on earth was he talking about? Intellectual honesty? No evidence for a God? Slowly, in bewilderment, I began to collect myself and think of arguments against such a stance. The more we debated, the more hollow my words

sounded. I tried to persuade him of my "truth." I struggled to find excuses for my weak rebuttals. Nothing worked. I realized that this man had wrestled with thoughts that I had not even entertained. He had struggled with evidence that had never

been presented to me, had engaged in discussions to which I had never been exposed. He knew what he was talking about, and I—well, I was clueless.

Perhaps we've all experienced an encounter such as this—an encounter that shook our foundations a little. However, such an encounter can initiate the journey toward a personal understanding of God and inform decisions about our relation to Him and the world around us.

The First Step

I stepped from that plane into dangerous territory, the territory of the mind. Anybody who has ever decided to discover or

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change ideas or philosophies knows that it is neither a safe nor a comfortable journey. Occasionally, such travels produce a grand enlightenment; more often, however, we find ourselves revisiting the same landmarks, doggedly marching in circles. This exercise, as futile as it seems, is a vital first step in both a deepening faith and a more perceptive view of science.

Unfortunately, this is the part of learning that schools frequently neglect. Many teachers are used to serving information on a plate. If a student eats all her dinner, she gets rewarded with dessert: an "A." Of course, this is a useful strategy in many cases. But when it comes to helping students understand the interface between science and faith, the "serving" method is inadequate and

injurious. Until students have discovered for themselves the issues that create tension between science and faith, they will not truly appreciate the evidence for any perspective.

As a college biology major, I was required to take a senior-level class that dealt with science and faith issues. One of the best things our teacher did was to avoid, at least initially, telling us what he believed. Throughout the class, we read books and articles, wrote about our ideas, and engaged in dialogue relating to science/faith issues. At the end of the semester, we were expected to have reached some sort of conclusion. It was not until this point (despite the prodding and pleading of the class) that our teacher shared his ideas about the subjects we had explored.

This was an ingenious method, for two reasons: First, because the teacher recognized that science majors, used to passing their classes mostly by brute memorization, were tempted to seek out the teacher's view, internalize it, and then treat it as if it were the best, if not only, way of looking at the issues. Second, because the teacher realized the dangers of only hearing and accepting, not searching for oneself. He had experienced his own encounter, which forced him to question his foundation. He knew that in order to prepare students for similar encounters, he could not just hand them prepackaged, no-assembly-required foundations. Thus, he wisely equipped us not with answers, but with the tools and skills required to find them.

Building a Personal Foundation

In both religion and science, nobody gets to share foundations. Nobody gets to heaven on someone else's coattails, and nobody becomes an esteemed scientist by copying another's research. Both paths are long and narrow, and both require a sturdy foundation that each person must build for himself or herself. Although difficult, it's important to maintain a healthy skepticism about the blocks one chooses, asking: "Are they strong enough? Do they really fit? Do they create a tension that will keep me balanced?" I learned this the hard way. I realized that all my life I had been sharing someone else's foundation. I hadn't taken the time to struggle with building my own. Since I hadn't faced the questions of the building process and hadn't struggled to place my building blocks properly, my foundation was weak. The smallest earthquake caused my blocks to tumble. And because I hadn't put them there to begin with, I didn't know how to repair them.

Pitfalls

Once the foundation materials have been located, the building process begins. And here is where the teacher is invaluable. He or she can help evaluate and test the plans for each student's foundation. This does not imply that every foundation must be alike; merely that professional help is needed to analyze the strength of each. Many foundations are strong in one area but weak in others. They will wobble like an arch with only one leg. Albert Einstein described the relationship of religion and science in this manner*: "Science without religion is lame, religion without science is

*Albert Einstein, *Out of My Later Years* (New York: Philosophical Library, Inc., 1950), p. 26.

blind.” Only a practiced eye can detect the lack of balance in a foundation and pose the questions that expose its weaknesses.

Obviously, then, real problems will arise if the teacher has failed to build his or her own foundation. I’ve watched many religious students, as they journey through science, fall into the same dark pit in which their teacher is groping around. If there is any excuse for the fall, it would be this: We students look up to our teachers. We put a tremendous amount of trust in their words. If you’re a teacher, you know this. In fact, you probably went into the profession because of a teacher you admired. Try not to forget that your students place you on an academic pedestal. Know your weaknesses and your biases, and remember that if you decide to present your views in class, you need to make these weaknesses and biases clear.

I believe strongly that teachers should keep their opinions private until their students have had a chance to discover the issues and have begun to form their own conclusions. Then, when they discern the appropriate time to let students know how they feel, they should remember this adage: “Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks” (Matthew 12:34, NKJV). Teachers, if you share your heart with us, then we will better understand the ideas of which you speak. If you have been a Christian all your life, say so. If you believe, paradoxically, in both carbon dating and a 6,000-year-old world, tell why. If you think the fossil record is a bunch of hocus-pocus, recognize that you’re going to need to explain your view. And remember that you are sharing your story, not as a means of converting us to your way of thinking, but as an example—to guide and encourage us as we embark on our own journeys and work through our own struggles.

Hearing you admit the weaknesses of your own foundations and understanding which tensions you allow to remain will help us avoid many pitfalls. This is, of course, most beneficial if students have already embarked on the journey. It is human to be blind to one’s own intellectual frailties. In spite of this, I would suggest that by trying to be more candid in these areas, you will grow as a teacher and contribute to your students’ growth as well.

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Happy Endings: Another Encounter

This heading may be a bit misleading. There is probably no end to a journey that compels us to question two of the most pervasive paradigms in our existence. In fact, it is much more likely that we will continue to grow in our understanding of both God and science throughout our earthly lives and will never be able to congratulate ourselves on having “made it.”

Even if this journey has no ending point, I believe there can be joy along the way—the joy of discovering the reason for the journey. What motivates us in the pursuit of truth? Perhaps it is the One who says He is the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6). As a teacher, you can infuse your students with the joy of the journey. God can powerfully work through you to assert His influ-

ence on the heart of every earnest searcher whom you encounter. You have been entrusted with an awesome responsibility. God has given to each human being a mind that longs for truth, but also a soul that longs for communion with Him. In a Christian school, you have an opportunity to provide instruction and encouragement in both these areas. If you are only interested in the former, perhaps you should reconsider your commitment to teach in a religious environment. I came to a Christian school for a reason. And when a teacher touches my life, he or she has a chance to touch it for eternity. I know this; I’ve experienced it.

And because of my teachers, I am beginning to understand a few things that hadn’t made sense until now. Primarily, that the wisdom of God is not the wisdom of this world (1 Corinthians 1:21). Furthermore, I now see that faith in God does not follow logically from the intellectual struggles of science or any other academic endeavor. God provides us with evidence that is more compelling than that provided by our senses—the evidence of the heart. This evidence can never be disproved. It surrounds and encompasses us. If we fully embrace it, it will lead us to another sort of encounter: a joyous relationship with our Saviour. This encounter will mark the beginning of an entirely new journey, an entirely new sort of science, and a learning experience that will last for eternity. ✍

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