

A Philosopher's Way

loving learning in the search for human meaning

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A Philosopher's Way

Prologue

I opened my “e-mail” Friday morning before breakfast and I found this “e-mail” from a two time student, Debii Simms:

Thursday's class discussion has prompted me to share one of my family stories with you. My father-in-law was an alcoholic but I did not know him during his drinking years. I only knew him for a little over two years when he was diagnosed with liver cancer and during those years I grew to love him. He died when his only grandson to carry the Simms name was ten months old. He was a mechanic and left my son a brand-new toolbox to be opened on my son's 18th birthday. I received a plant that is still growing in my backyard which I talk to often to make sure its roots are happy. Last May my son turned eighteen and three days before his birthday I took him to the backyard, showed him where Grandpa Bill was planted, and then gave him the toolbox to open when he felt ready. My son, Jake, stood and stared at the toolbox for a long time then told me he would wait for his birthday to open it. The next day when I went to the garage I saw that the toolbox had been removed from its cardboard box. Now, all these years we knew the toolbox was out there but we never knew what was in it. My curiosity and my concern for Jake got the better me so I opened the toolbox. Inside were all of my sons' dead grandfather's tools of his trade. There were ratchet wrenches that had his greasy fingerprints still on them, other wrenches worn from his constant handling, and all the signs of work and love and life. These were the tools that supported his family and brought him so much joy. These were the tools of his life. Later that day I asked Jake about the toolbox and he told me, "I cried, but I'm over it", and then I watched him hold that ratchet wrench with his fingers covering his grandfather's greasy fingerprints and I knew that this would be the closest my son would ever come to holding his grandfather's hand but I also knew that he would hold his hand every time he picked up one of those tools. You have mentioned your granddaughter several times during class and I wonder what tools of your trade will she have when she is eighteen. Your words that fly through the air cannot be held for a second let alone eighteen years. When she is eighteen and women are being drafted, who will point her in the right direction? Thousands of students have walked through your classroom doors to hear your teachings but she will not have this privilege without your book. How will she hold your hand when you are gone? Deb Simms

So much for the effect, indeed, the affect students have on their instructors! The following, *A Philosopher's Way* came to birth by fits and starts, the result of a long gestation period, traumatically longer than any elephant's! Over these forty-six years

many student and personal questions laid the basis in tracing the following philosophic way: what does the Philosopher do, indeed, what can he do when he has ancestral roots fed by Protagoras's castigation of his students for calling him *sophos*, *the wise one*? Then, if we look at what happens to philosophers, more questions rise up: What does a Philosopher do which results in townspeople from Colophon banishing Xenophanes for atheism when all he did was state that only one God exists? What does a Philosopher do which results in his being ostracized like Hermadorus from Ephesus because he was "...above the rest"? What possesses a Philosopher such as Heraclitus to isolate himself both from his family and fellow citizens in Ephesus? What persuades people, such as intelligent Athenian people to convict a seventy year old man, like Socrates of treason and sentence him to death when all he did was ask both his fellow Athenians and foreign visitors to Athens questions about the meaning of human wisdom?

Are these but examples of Greek stupidity or are they but proof that a Philosophers is a *persona-non-grata* to societies in particular and people in general? However, if, following Socrates, Philosophers are merely those who seek the meaning of human wisdom and linguistically *lovers of wisdom*, what possibly would occasion citizens of Colophon, Ephesus and Athens to react so violently? Such questions led me along a philosophical way, or road, Robert Frost might have talked of in his celebrated poem *The Road not Taken*:

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear,
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!

Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sign
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood and I -
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

A Philosopher's Way

Preface

loving learning in the search for meaning

I would not classify this *way* of reflection as a soliloquy like Hamlet's because this reflection does not arise out of any pain like the death of a loved one, or even out of any anger like the betrayal of a mother's duty or a brother's love. This reflection results from years of seeing student frowns, listening to student questions and struggling to present difficult philosophical texts in an understandable way to people more interested in pursuing material possessions than in seeking spiritual *Truth*.

This reflection results both from successes and failures, my own understanding of the texts with which I have struggled and my instruction of students whom I have had the privilege to serve. So, this soliloquy does not raise any question about self-destruction rhetorical or otherwise. Rather, this soliloquy reflects upon the question of self-discovery and the human search for *Truth* through the love of lady wisdom.

I write this with reluctant hope. The hope is that same hope which Wittgenstein voiced in the *Preface* to the third edition of his *Philosophical Investigations*, namely "...to stimulate someone to have thoughts of his own". The reluctance results from an insight of Augustine within his *Confessions*:

When elder people named some object, and moved towards something, I saw this and I grasped that the thing was called by the sound uttered when they meant to point it out. This intention was shown by their bodily movements, as it were the natural language of all people: the expression of the face, the play of the eyes, the movement of other parts of the body and the tone of voice which expresses the human state of mind in seeking, having, rejecting or avoiding something. (*Confessions*, I, 8)

Yet, the written word is one that truly echoes in an empty void. As written, the word lacks interpretation because it lacks the human context of the mouth, face, hands, feet, all of which paint the written word into a spoken word's physical portrait. This written word not only lacks any body but lacks clothes as well. As a teacher, my words are embodied and without the body they parallel a Van Gogh's self-image that merely describes his rejection as a lover without being able to see his bandaged ear and his vibrant, sorrowful eyes. Without the body words are ephemeral sounds abstracted from the painting splashed upon the canvas of the classroom. For this reason I take issue with Arthur Schopenhauer's celebrated statement, "Style is the physiognomy of the mind". The physiognomy of the mind is nothing but a verbal characterization lacking embodiment!

Although books I have read and authors I have listened to taught me many things, I have learned more from spoken dialogue with students than from anything I have read, heard or have written. Their questions forced me to rethink what I thought I knew and pressed me to become a student again, struggling to understand what I thought I had understood. But, the principal thing I have learned from teaching is that students do not seek knowledge any more than they seek grades. They seek hope that *Truth* exists and thus that their pedestrian lives might have some meaning other than a day-to-day existence within a given social structure or a moment to moment pleasure, even though that pleasure be a personal friendship! Indeed, just as Gilgamesh, within that five thousand year old *Epic of Gilgamesh* did not search merely to extend human mortality, but rather to seek a meaning for living other than that assigned or sought by a given society or something more enduring than a moment-to-moment pleasure of a king and conqueror, so do contemporary students seek a meaning for their all-too-short mortal living. This human mortal living is why the lead sentence of Camus' *Myth of Sisyphus* strikes me as central to teaching as a vocation and the love of learning as life's purpose:

The only truly serious philosophical problem is suicide - that is, answering the question whether or not (my individual) life is worth the pain of living.

So, is the question whether or not human life has a purpose other than the effort to project the pain of being alive as Sartre claims within his autobiographical work *Les*

Mots, The Words? Or is the question whether or not one should strive to stay alive as long as possible driven, perhaps by the greed of a Midas? Neither is true. As a matter of fact, our daily observations of the sun rising and setting, our yearly experiences of nature's seasons progressing from spring to summer, then falling into winter and climbing back up to spring again indicate that the life of nature herself seeks some kind of longevity and has the characteristic hope of being eternal. This repetition of the seasons implies that nature herself is learning and that she seeks to continue that learning within the eternal cycle of nature's death and rebirth of winter to spring! Indeed, upon further reflection of beings struggling to live within the seasons of nature, the purpose of living beings does seem to be learning itself. The sixth century B.C. Confucius makes love of learning central to being virtuous and thus being human (*Analects Book I*) and identifies the degeneration of society with lack of the love of learning (*Book XVII 8*).

The Master said, Yu, have you ever been told of the Six Sayings about the Six Degenerations? Tzu.lu replied, No, never. The Master said, Come, then: I will tell you. Love of Goodness without love of learning degenerates into silliness. Love of wisdom without love of learning degenerates into utter lack of principle. Love of keeping promises without love of learning degenerates into villainy. Love of uprightness without love of learning degenerates into harshness. Love of courage without love of learning degenerates into turbulence. Love of courage without love of learning degenerates into mere recklessness.

All living beings love the learning of being alive! Plants, after all, imprint upon the light of the sun to facilitate photosynthesis and manufacture chlorophyll, the life blood of the plant, bush or tree leaf. A plant, bush or tree placed in a dark corner or out of the sunlight struggles to reach the light, even to the extent of growing out of its natural shape. We witness plants, bushes and trees seeking light as a principal source of nourishment so we might speak of such a plant, bush or tree as learning because such behavior nourishes the very life of the plant, bush or tree, even though that behavior be instinctual. Therefore, this very instinctual and repetitious effort to continue its living seems to indicate that plant life seeks to find its meaning in its continued living, nourished throughout nature's cyclic seasons, notwithstanding the inevitable advent of

winter.

Non-human animals of all varieties also manifest such learning. Scientists call this learning imprinting and a case in point are fowl, specifically ducks and chickens. As I was growing up on the farm, sometimes we would hatch chicken eggs under ducks because they are such good “setters”. However, as an eight year old child, only one seasonal rotation taught me that if I did not take the newly hatched chicks from under the ducks and place them with a Bantam hen, then the ducks would lead the chicks to the pond and the chicks would drown. This imprint-learning is nature’s way of ensuring an animal’s survival and, indeed, the continuation of the species and, thus, of promoting life. Again, and generally speaking, an animal’s imprinting seems to indicate that nature seeks meaning by continuing the very life which the animal initially enjoyed.

We observe a similar search for meaning within human beings. They naturally imprint on a search for *Truth* as the source of happy human living. Such imprinting we call learning. Children are the case in point because they are innately, consistently and persistently curious. Were Schopenhauer to describe this “urge”, he would say that it is the *Wille zum Leben*, literally, *the will to live*. Children manifest *this will to live* as humans each time children question any answer a parent or another person gives them. Questions, after all, are the natural way of learning. Humans thereby express their curiosity and wonder in what becomes a life-long search for *Truth*. If and when a human being stops asking questions, that person stops seeking *Truth*. A void thereby develops so his or her human life becomes boring, even empty of meaning, like the “modern man” described by Merleau-Ponty within his *Sacred and the Profane*. Such a human person lacks meaning for living his or her life beyond any here and now specific activity he may focus upon. The picture of any such focus is one’s immediate pleasure or pain.

As Victor Frankl observes within his *Man’s Search for Meaning*, the attitude of such people is manifested by their statement prior to suicide, “I have nothing to expect from life any more”. Frankl notes that such an attitude results in the person living within what he calls an “existential vacuum”. Such people, he observes, are “takers”. Their

actions of taking their own lives through suicide reflect that attitude. Frankl insists that human beings must cease seeking meaning for living from the world and realize that life itself questions each person's meaning to contribute to being alive daily and hourly.

Professor Jerome Lejeune, a French geneticist describes the natural effort to live out one's meaning within human DNA that begins with the very act of conception. The human DNA's molecular efforts to produce life begin when the sperm penetrates the ovum within the woman's womb. Conception occurs and implantation results about the tenth to fourteenth day. He observed that the sperm's DNA activates, or "reads" the ovum's DNA. Thus, the magnificent story of human struggle to live by contributing meaning unfolds: the male message tells the first cell how to build the membrane that will "house" the baby as well as how to build the placenta that will take the supplies from the blood of the mother in order to nurture the fetal child. So, the male's sperm naturally sends this "read" message to the first cell division. The male thereby fulfills his masculine duty to build the baby's intrauterine shelter as well as to provide the placental means to nourish the fetal child. Then, in a complementary manner, the female's DNA activates its own message in the life of the fetus. This message effects the different parts that must be assembled to form this conceived-person into a viable baby. This message, therefore, programs the mother's body to feed the fetal child until the child is ready to be born. Thus, the female's ovum performs her maternal duty and naturally sends the message to nurture the fetal child. The human sperm and ovum, therefore, once united through conception immediately as it were, marry and thereby initiate the continuation of the life of the human being in a complementary manner. So, the sexual differences of male and female within the sexual act then continue to manifest those same differences in the union of the sperm with the ovum. Just as the *yin* and *yang* are complementary within the celebrated *Tao* symbol, so the sperm and ovum are complementary in fetal preparation.

Plato provides a parallel example of nature's use of imprinting to ensure the continuance of life within his dialogue entitled the *Symposium*. Plato turns to myth to suggest the origin of the *love of beauty* as the driving force of the human search for

meaning and the consequent human love of learning. His teacher, Socrates, tells his listeners a story about **Porus** and **Penia**. **Porus** and **Penia** are Greek names, **Porus** having a masculine ending, meaning *fullness* and **Penia** having a feminine ending, meaning *emptiness*. **Porus** is a noble and rich man whereas **Penia** is a poor and destitute peasant lady. One cold day, **Penia** walks by an alley and sees **Porus** lying there drunk and shivering. She lays down beside him to make him warm and to get warm. She becomes pregnant. **Penia** names the ensuing child **Aphrodite** who becomes the *Goddess of Love and Beauty*. So, from the cohabitation of *fullness* with *emptiness* as spurred by the need for warmth in a cold world wherein humans act in extreme ways, the *Love of Beauty* is born.

Plato thereby characterizes the struggle to live as productive of both love and beauty. The sexual relationship between man and woman, man as *fullness* and woman as *emptiness* gives birth to the *Love of Beauty*. Yet, I, as a Philosopher, understand this myth also as portraying the necessity of dialogue between the *emptiness* one finds in a *curious question* and the *fullness* of knowledge discovered in an *answer* in order to *give birth to the love of the beauty of learning*. The human *will* as **Penia** who is the emptiness of love seeking to be united to its beloved lays down with the human *mind* as **Poros** who seeks fullness, becomes pregnant and gives birth to the Love of Wisdom! Thus, Socrates' definition of what it means to be a human being echoes in my mind whenever I enter a classroom: *knowing*, as *fullness*, that one does not know, as *emptiness*, is human wisdom! So, I enter the classroom with the *fullness* of my academic and philosophic knowledge which through student questioning brings me *to knowing that I do not know* and propels me into a continuous cycle of the love of learning!

Therefore, as Socrates might say, we human beings find our meaning if and when human beings reflect this basic fact: the effort and pain involved to be human requires that each human being knows that s/he knows that s/he does not know - ***Scio me nihil scire!*** What a paradox! The very purpose of being human, therefore, seems to be achieved through self-knowledge, which self-knowledge, as in the case of Socrates is to challenge others to be who each one is, a human being, *knowing that he or she does not*

know! Humans, therefore, are human only when they acknowledge the limitation human knowledge which lights our way out of the darkness of ignorance!

So, we humans in our so-called Western world, more properly referred to as the occident, where the sun sets, find our philosophical beginnings in Plato's *Apology* wherein Plato, the student recounts the Athenian trial of Socrates, his seventy year old teacher for treason. I refer to this dialogue as "our philosophical beginnings" because the *Apology* bears witness both to the philological and the linguistic beginnings of Philosophy as both asking questions and seeking the meaning(s) of words. Philosophy, literally, the *love of lady wisdom*, therefore, begins by questioning the meaning of the word, *wisdom*, in Greek *sophia*, in order to analyze its meaning and to understand what it means to be a human being.

Socrates questions the meaning of the word *wisdom* as applied to him by the Delphic Oracle when she told Cherephone, Socrates' student, that Socrates was the *wisest* person in Athens. So, the discipline we currently label *philosophy* is the unitary expression of two Greek words, a masculine word *Phile*, *love* and a feminine word *sophia*, *wisdom* – thus echoing, as we shall see, the oriental feminine *yin* and masculine *yang* which make up the symbolic 10,000 existing things in our planetary world. Now, Athens considered people wise who could put order into the world. So three groups were considered wise, politicians, poets, and crafts-people: politicians because they created a city-state through the laws they enacted; poets because they could order words through meter and rhythm into poetry; crafts-people because they could order clay, wood, stone into works of art. In addition, the Athenians looked upon the so-called Sophists as wise teachers because they taught students studying law how to organize words so they might argue either side of a legal argument and win the case. These Sophists charged a large amount of money for such legal instruction.

Although Socrates was a stone cutter, he certainly knew that he lacked the knowledge skills any of these three groups possessed and he refused to take any money for his instruction through questioning his students. Therefore, given the fact that Socrates admitted to the practice of Philosophy, or the love of wisdom, he begins his

search by performing a linguistic analysis of *wisdom* to determine its meaning as he questions these three groups of wise Athenians. Socrates seeks to find the *reality*, or meaning of wisdom by questioning his Athenian peers who *appear* to be wise as a result of the various works they perform and who are, on that account, *called* wise!

Of course, the question is: are these groups called “wise” because of the position each group occupies? The people in each of these groups have acquired power because they are wealthy; they have acquired reputation because they are honored. Yet, are they wise because of the wealth they have amassed, or the reputation for which they are honored? Or, are they truly wise? Socrates’ questioning unmasks their appearance and lays bare their lack of self-knowledge! What *they have* is not *who they are*. But, the only meaning Socrates’ questions reveal they possess is that which they have acquired. Thus, they lack the only meaning they could give to the world, which is their self-knowledge, that is, the individual humanity and gifts each one possesses.

As Confucius observes, the questioner searches continuously, high and low, left and right and that which provokes these questions and prompts our search is an “it”, perhaps the *Tao*, perhaps Lady Wisdom, which is as illusive as “she is insistent”: The Master said, “If a man does not continually ask himself ‘What am I to do about this, what am I to do about this?’ there is no possibility of my doing anything about him”. (*Analects*, Bk. XV, 15):

Yen Hui said with a deep sigh, “The more I strain my gaze up towards it, the higher it soars. The deeper I bore down into it, the harder it becomes. I see it in front; but suddenly it is behind. Step by step the Master skillfully lures one on. He has broadened me with culture, restrained me with ritual. Even if I wanted to stop, I could not. Just when I feel that I have exhausted every resource, something seems to rise up, standing out sharp and clear. Yet though I long to pursue it, I can find no way of getting to it at all. (*Analects*, Bk IX, no. 10)

The corner stone of loving wisdom is the question; the essence of seeking wisdom is to question: principally, why, but also what, how and when? The answer is simple: whereas a question opens up a person’s mind to learning, an answer closes off that openness because an answer is knowledge so the knowledgeable person remains

comfortable in the knowledge-answer. The love of Lady wisdom, however stimulates questions as a result of a passionate love of learning; Lady wisdom seduces the human being by the very emptiness discovered by the question asked! Such love of learning prompts human reason to find answers, answers which at best are only approximate, at worst are taken as real and, therefore, unsatisfactory.

Yet, whereas knowledge renders a knowledge comfortable in its possession, love seeks to embrace the *being of reality*. Reason's knowledge, however, only provides an imitation of "reality" with various *mentally constructed beings*. Reason can not grasp the *being of reality* in knowledge so human knowledge remains only a partial imitation, a temporal grasp of this *world of being*, or reality. Yet, love seeks to understand the *world of being* whereas reason only finds and produces a world of appearances, which constitute a *world of knowledge dreams*. Many past and present so-called philosophers substitute reason's world of knowledge dreams for the world of being and stop in their quest for Lady Wisdom! I find so many students today who make this same substitution of the end, or a knowledge world of various mental beings within this human world for the means, or the search for *why* whatever exists exists at all? They too stop in their pursuit of that question *why does anything exist at all* which is the corner stone of loving Lady Wisdom and the very essence of the Philosopher. Again, I draw upon Wittgenstein:

The whole modern conception of the world is founded on the illusion that the so called laws of nature are the explanations of natural phenomena...we feel that when all possible scientific questions have been answered, the problems of life remain completely untouched...It is not how things are in the world that is mystical, but that it (the world) exists. (*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Preface)

Few people, whether students or academics, understand the nature of any question because so many approach a problem looking for an answer and, therefore, never think to understand the intrinsic thrust of the question. Take, for instance, this human being looking at me from the mirror in with I peer. Students are amazed at what they assumed in the familiar logical definition of this *anthropos*, Greek which we translate as "human being". Plato comments in his *Cratylus* (399c-400d) that this Greek word probably comes from the Greek word for *eyes* and thus means *to see* and the Greek verb *to turn around or*

up. So, Plato defines the human being as one who lifts the self up from the ground and looks around! Anthropology would call such *homo sapiens*, or *wise human being* that no longer walks on all fours!

Now, the logical definition of such a human is: rational animal. Technically and Logically, human is the *species* that results from the combination of the *genus* of *animal* and the *specific difference* of *rational*. However, I approach through English grammar what e. e. Cummings calls this “fine specimen of hypermagical ultromnipotence” (#78 of 100 Selected Poems). *Animal* stands as a noun, or name word whereas *rational* stands as an adjective, merely a modifier of the noun. However, an adjective is nothing classy! Yes, we make more of this adjective, *rational* than we do of the noun, *animal*. Then I tell them a true story to explain this exaggeration of a mere adjective.

I was hired to teach Philosophy at Canisius College, Buffalo, New York in the middle 60’s and the first meeting was the inauguration of the new President. I was standing to the right of the new President with my wife and standing at his left was a good friend and another Philosophy new hire, Stanley Vodrask and his wife. All were in tie and tails formal dress when the Academic Vice President called for a champaign salute to the new President. As we raised our glasses, Stanley let out a fart which combined all the sound of a railroad engine horn with a skunk’s odor. I immediately stated: “Mr President and ladies and gentlemen: you have heard nature salute you with both sound and scent; may we all now salute you with words of praise and drinks of champaign!” The whole reception room rocked with laughter and gulps of champaign!

The purpose of this story is simple: humans are basically animal and the animal includes farts, burps, body elimination, perspiration, bad breath and many other aspects of animal living! Notwithstanding a human’s best efforts of “rational control”, the animal of us reminds us of our radical basis in nature and shows the rational of us who controls what, when and how!

Now, if we take a long view of history, we find so-called scientists,

archaeologists, anthropologists, sociologists and political scientists characterize, separate and define this human animal from all other animals and beings within this planetary world as being “best”, as anything from “tool using animals”, to *homo faber*, or the *human making animal*, or, *logos*, the *speech animal*, or *homo religiosus*, the *human most religious animal*. However, all these attempted definitions miss the point of what it means to be a human being. As Socrates and Confucius clearly observe, human being is essentially a *question asking animal*, so, a human being is being human whenever that person asks questions. Yet, the primary, or basic question is self-questioning that constitutes the examined life - something which Camus classified as an “absurd being”.

To be human, therefore, means to question, as in to question the meaning of to live humanly. Children intuitively recognize this fact and this is the reason why one might define childhood as the questioning era, or characterize children as *why* humans! In this respect, Philosophy is both attractive and avoided. Because Philosophy challenges any solution with a question, any solution humans think they find within any other academic discipline is challenged by a philosopher’s question! Philosophy, therefore, is a continuing process in which a philosopher is always *on the way* never finding the end of this human journey. Neither Socrates, Confucius or any philosopher stops this philosophical journey with any dead-end path such as wealth, honor, reputation, power or indeed any human achievement.

As a student who came to be called a “teacher”, I reflect that I experienced two types of teachers. The first were instructors who transferred the knowledge they had acquired so that their instruction as well as their classes were boring. They “gave” only what they possessed and what they possessed is what they had taken from what they received! These instructors were finders and constructors of dead-end streets. I tried to remember them as I viewed my student years extending into multiple transcripts, but as I looked at the grades and tried hard to remember, I could not even recall the content of the course title much less anything that was taught. The second type of teachers were human beings who shared their learning discoveries with me and other students. They gave of themselves and projected the gifts of their learning to us! Their classes were exciting and

caught me up in the new discoveries they experienced as they shared their past learning discoveries with us in class. They lived to inject meaning into the world as a projection of their self chosen vocation. Exiting their classes, I found myself propelled *on the way* in my search for Truth and in love with Lady Wisdom.

As my eyes searched these course names, the grades evoked images of animated teachers who loved the search for *Truth* through the love of lady wisdom. I relived that classroom experience of discovery! Perhaps the Englishman and Catholic Christian, Francis Thompson, a college dropout and homeless vagrant, best mirrors Confucius' sentiments (and, indeed, my experiences of being drawn to the search for *Truth* by such animated teachers) in his 1897 *Hound of Heaven* as he describes not an "it" called *wisdom* that humans seek, but a "Voice" which pursues him, as an individual human being who is fleeing from a loving God:

I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;
 I fled Him, down the arches of the years'
 I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways
 Of my own mind; and in the mist of tears
 I hid from Him, and under running laughter.
 Up vistaed hopes I sped;
 And shot, precipitated,
 Adown Titanic glooms of chasmèd fears,
 From those strong Feet that followed, followed after,
 But with unhurrying chase,
 And unperturbéd pace,
 Deliberate speed, majestic instancy,
 They beat - and a Voice beat
 More instant than the Feet -
 'All things betray thee, who betrayest Me'.

Although this homeless Catholic Christian Frances Thompson portrays himself as being pursued by the human and divine "Voice" of Christ, does not any human being, like Socrates within the *Apology*, understand an interior voice calling any and every human person to that search for *Truth*, which humans traditionally call "lady Wisdom"? That voice beckons each person to love wisdom. As Socrates reflected, he was only sent by God as a messenger to the Athenians. But the call of that "voice" extends to all of us to lead an examined life of self-knowledge:

Gentlemen, I believe that the God is really wise and that by the Delphic Oracle God meant that human wisdom is worth little or nothing. I do not think that God meant that Socrates was wise. He only made use of my name and took me as an example, as though he would say to men, “He among you is the wisest who, like Socrates knows that his wisdom is really worth nothing at all.” Therefore, I still go about testing and examining every man whom I think wise, whether he be a citizen or a stranger, as the god has commanded me. Whenever I find that he is not wise, I point out to him, on the god’s behalf, that he is not wise. (*Apology*, IX, 23)

Both Socrates and Francis Thompson, indeed, all humans seek but two things: to live and to be loved. I find students today initially so put off by this simple statement of mine. They are so preoccupied with the trials and tribulations of living: single parent mothers, even single nursing mothers in my night classes; military people seeking a degree as a condition of promotion; older people seeking a distraction from sitting at home; married young students, regularly late to night classes because of traffic after work; advanced placement Sophomore high school students who want a promise of an A to sustain their inflated A + high school GPA; foreign students whose student visas have expired; students who beg for entrance into my classes two weeks late because they had to work to obtain tuition money.

Yet, I insist that they and all humans control only one thing only: what comes out of them, that is, a person’s reaction to all those things which come at them and demand they pay attention. Inevitably my first class becomes an A.A. basic class, that is, a class in attitude and ability. As I comment, most of the problems students as humans confront will be the result of the person’s attitude, seldom a problem of ability. Why? The answer is simple. Once we reflect upon ourselves, we usually find that the problem was occasioned by our attitude not our ability and even what we thought we could not do was merely the result of our attitude toward our ability!

After a while, these students realize that if they are thankful for being alive and for being loved their attitude undergoes changes which release abilities so they seek hope in the possibility of such a living and loving. Then they allow themselves to find personal meaning and happiness in their human journey through time and space. Teaching has

taught me that being human is neither difficult nor complicated. Whatever text I have “picked up”, notwithstanding the culture, the time or the condition of the author, whether rich or poor, free or slave, contains the author’s desire to live and to be loved. *The Book of Ecclesiasticus*, so named by St. Cyprian and written in Greek as the *Wisdom of Jesus Ben Sirach*, or Siracides about 190 B.C. has this comment:

The poor man’s wisdom keeps his head erect
and gives him a place with the great. (11: 1-20)

That “poor man’s wisdom” seems to be the search to live and to be loved, the hope that in and through such living and loving one may find personal meaning and happiness. True lovers of wisdom, such as literally the most wise Sisyphus of Camus’ *The Myth of Sisyphus* or the Socrates of Plato’s *Apology* transcend the mortality of human knowledge and the effort to control that are so typical of people “who know”, make knowledge their goal and live in a knowledge dream world. The gods sought to control Sisyphus in their constructed dream world, yet he transcended their efforts. Socrates’ Athenian peers would control his question asking, but, he transcended their efforts. Both Sisyphus and Socrates lived for love, Sisyphus for the love of living and Socrates for the love of wisdom. Such love of living gave Sisyphus happiness in spite of his being chained to his rock for “eternity” while love of questioning gave Socrates happiness despite the physical death visited upon him through the guilty verdict and the legal requirement to drink hemlock.

Both the mythical Sisyphus and the historical Socrates teach us that the attempt to control, whether by the mythical gods or the political state, is an exercise in futility because the lover of living, that is, the lover of wisdom lives beyond material mortality and the efforts of power to control the love of living. Such lovers of living keep their heads erect and stand alone in that “place with the great”. After all, “...the heart has reasons the mind knows not of”. I find our common sense language usage fascinating in its “poor man’s wisdom”: we speak of “not losing heart”, implying that such an action results in dying, whereas notwithstanding the implications of “losing one’s mind”, as difficult as that might be, does not mean one loses one’s life! Pascal within the *Pensees*

reflects: “We know the truth, not only by reason but also by the heart” (Chapter 10,1)
 Then Camus within his *Le Premier Homme*, his last work, completed by
 his daughter, Catherine Camus, places the following speech in the mouth of Jacques, a
 speech which echoes the words of any human being who seeks wisdom through the love
 of learning:

Oh yes, that was how it was, the life of this child was like life was in the
 neighborhood’s island of poverty, bound by necessity totally new, in an
 infirm and ignorant family, with his youthful blood boiling (with) a ravenous
 appetite for life, an untamed and hungry intellect and all the while an ecstasy
 of joy punctuated by the sudden counter punches inflicted by a world
 unknown to him, leaving him abashed at the time, but he would quickly
 recover, seeking to understand, to learn, to assimilate this world he did not
 know and he did assimilate it because he seized upon it so avidly, not trying
 to worm his way in; he was willing to go along but would not abase himself
 and finally he was never without a sure confidence, yes a certainty, since he
 was guaranteed that he would achieve everything he desired and nothing
 would ever be impossible for him, nothing that is of this world and only of
 this world; he was preparing himself (and was prepared also by the bareness
 of his childhood) to find his place anywhere because there was no position he
 wanted, but only joy and free spirits and energy and all that life has that is
 good, that is mysterious, that is not and never will be for sale. (*The First
 Man*, translated from the French by David Hapgood, Alfred A. Knopf, New
 York, 1995 pp. 277-78, yet, retranslated by Robert Buckenmeyer from *Le
 Premier Homme*, Éditions Gallimard, 1994 © Bibliothèque Nationale, 1994
 pour la lettre de Louis Germain, pp. 255-56)