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Credo

Reverence, a kind of humility, corrects belief's tendency to warp or harden.

BY MARILYNNE ROBINSON

Illustrations by Oksana Badrak
Credo—"I believe"—is the first word in creeds intended to establish a uniformity and commonality of belief. I am not aware that any religion other than Christianity has created creedal statements to establish standards of orthodoxy, though the idea of orthodoxy itself is very widespread. The creeds seem to me to be, all in all, an elegant solution to the problems of volatility and syncretism all religions deal with. They do not proscribe other beliefs or enforce behaviors as evidence of orthodoxy, but instead implicitly define orthodoxy as the affirming of essential elements of sacred narrative, briefly interpreted. "I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and Earth." Thus Earth is rescued from the ancient opprobrium of dualism, the notion that creation was the work of an evil god, a demiurge, and is itself evil. This is a great deal to have accomplished in 12 words. It did not by any means put an end to the temptations of dualism, which are with us yet, but it anchored Christian doctrine in Hebrew monotheism, and this was crucial. I have received and I enjoy the belief that this world is secure in the love of God, and in every way profound, as an expression of divine intent can only be profound.
So, at some point in early Christian antiquity, this statement was composed that I find authoritative and beautiful, which permitted me to look at the world with reverence. And at some point in the evolution of Protestant thought, an unease developed, which I share, about the defining, insofar as it meant the enforcing, of standards of orthodoxy. I understand that my thought has a history, and that I am disposed toward the acceptance of some beliefs and the rejection of others by accidents of descent and education. This is an inescapable condition—if I were to reject the mind I have received in favor of another one, that choice would also be historically determined. So I have chosen not to linger over the problem. I am happily at home on the mental terrain circumstance has chosen for me. Except for that descent into hell, which I don't find in scripture, there is nothing in the Apostles' Creed I am not ready to affirm.

However, I do not consider it either necessary or meritorious in me or in anyone else to be able to affirm it. History up to the present moment tells us again and again that a narrow understanding of faith very readily turns to bitterness and coerciveness. There is something about certainty that makes Christianity un-Christian. Instances of this are only too numerous and familiar. Therefore, because I would be a good Christian, I have cultivated uncertainty, which I consider a form of reverence. You will notice how often I fall short of it. Therefore I will make frequent use of the first person singular. I will venture on those broad statements to which I am so prone, with that pronoun as caveat. And I am theologically committed to the -o in credo, to the "I" in "I believe," since I am impressed by the fact that religion can only be a highly individual experience for the very good reason that God in his wisdom has made us all highly individual.

So this is what I believe. More precisely, this is some small part of what I believe, or rather of the way in which I believe, at this point in my life, allowing for the certainty that I am in error in ways that are significant and unknown to me—there is a special Calvinist peace that comes with learning to make that concession. I am confident that I have been and will be instructed, knowing that instruction means correction, the discovery of error.

My habit for a long time has been to consider disputed and in some cases discarded doctrines on the theory that if in the past thoughtful people have found them meaningful, they might in fact be meaningful, though, of course, meaningful is not the same as wholly sufficient or correct. Take for example the two terms in that venerable controversy, free will versus predestination. There are problems associated with both of them, but in such great matters problems are to be expected, and problems have their own interest and their own implications. In the universe that is the knowledge of God, opposed beliefs can be equally true, and equally false, and, at the same time, complementary, because contradiction and anomaly are the effect of our very limited understanding. As a writer it is important to me to remember always, or as often as I can, that we inhabit a reality far larger and more complex than our conception of it can in any way reflect. I am speaking not only of time and causality, but also of the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts.
Free will is an attractive phrase. It has a very humanistic sound. It seems to be based on the conviction that God would not be just if he judged people on any other grounds than their own choices and their own actions, allowances having been made for circumstance and also for repentance. To put it another way, God is just, therefore his dealings with us must satisfy our notions of justice. But if history tells us one thing, it is surely that human beings are not good at justice. So perhaps it is better not to insist on a rigorous alignment of divine intent with human expectation, especially when its effect would be the very human one of narrowing the reach of God’s compassion. It was Rabbi Abraham Heschel who said that while our laws would not permit one’s father to serve as one’s judge, God is not only our judge but also our father. In other words, there is much more in play here than justice as we normally conceive of it. As soon as the word “father” is spoken, as soon as parental love is recognized as an element in judgment, it becomes impossible to imagine that God could simply weigh merits and demerits and conclude on that basis. It would be a very cold and unfatherly human parent who could do such a thing.

Belief in the doctrine of predestination has been said to make people either smug or frightened or superstitious or some combination of those three. No doubt it can be associated with these aspects of human behavior, simply because they are so commonplace that they can be associated with any doctrine. I have never known a self-declared believer in predestination, but I have observed these same traits among those who espouse free will. That doctrine can allow them to persuade themselves that they know what is necessary to do and that they do it or have done it, and that they know what it is right to believe and either believe it or put a lot of effort into trying to believe it. And/or it can make them afraid to think or feel outside what they take to be essential limits, the limits that protect their certainties, because God has terrible punishment in store for wrong thoughts and shaky convictions. And/or they look for signs and interventions that they can understand as proving God’s favor toward them, a temporal version of the idea of eternal reward for moral and religious accomplishment.

Predestination is more attractive to me because it makes everything mysterious. We do not know how God acts or what he intends, toward ourselves or toward others. We know only that his will precedes us, anticipates us, can never forget or look away from us. I think a sense of mystery, therefore reverence, is appropriate to all the questions at hand. What is right conduct, after all? The old Pharisees, with whom Jesus was probably more closely in sympathy than with any other religious group, and who were very serious about reconciling their lives and thoughts to the commandments of God, figure in the Gospels as instances of the fact that earnest piety in itself can be a problem, because it can lead to the confidence that righteousness is achievable, and achievable through our efforts. As we all know, it is in fact those sinners who keep attracting Jesus’ kindly attention. Then what to do? How to act? Maybe these are and ought to be open questions. If the answer is, out of love, then emphasis falls on the object of the action, the person we hope to serve, and not on our own merit in performing the action.
taught, that the encounter with the other is always an encounter with God, and the appropriate response is therefore always reverence. Predestination puts self-interest out of the equation, and this seems to me to liberate one to act on motives that are more consistent with Christ's teaching.

(Some substantial portion of people reading this are thinking: how can she say that, when it flies directly in the face of Max Weber's thesis in The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism?) That very old and very dubious little book has an authority in the educated American mind that is perhaps unique—among those who haven't read it, but, more amazingly, among those who have. Although it deals with Germany, its consequences for the interpretation of this civilization are enormous, and they show no signs of diminishing. I have taken a good many controversial positions in my life, and I never feel lonelier than when I say, Max Weber's thesis is unsupported by evidence and is crudely reasoned. But since its dead hand lies on historical and religious traditions that are of great interest to me, here I stand. At the risk—no, in the hope—of shaking America's one last unquestioned conviction, I will say before God and any assembly of witnesses: Max Weber wrote a bad little book. It is a nuisance to have to interrupt myself with this excursus, but very often I am assumed to be ignorant of the book and the thesis because what I say is at odds with it. No, I have read it a number of times, including the copious footnotes in the revised edition.)

But to continue. In writing I exercise that difficult imperative—to judge not. The old doctrine of predestination is associated with the belief in the perseverance of the saints, which might also be called the faithfulness of God. Freedom from the impulse to judge ourselves and to judge others is an escape, at least potentially, from the entrapments of scrupulous piety. It is no accident that the liberal traditions of Protestantism descended from Calvinism, which was explicitly predestinarian, whereas other major traditions were predestinarian, too, but much quieter about it. In its explicit or Calvinist form the doctrine launched a kind of intellectual adventurism, and produced a thousand schisms that fairly quickly rejected the doctrine of predestination itself. No one seems to have gotten around to replacing it with anything in particular, which is just as well. The sola gratia of which it is a radical statement still survives. If predestination can be seen as gloomy, as making God a tyrant, then free will can be seen as harsh and constraining, as making God another kind of tyrant. When they have this character, they are both incompatible with reverence for the divine grace and nature, and to be held in abeyance on these grounds. It seems to me only reasonable to assume that both doctrines are in error, and that truth, if we ever approached it, would lie in rescuing the best implications of each from its own worst
implications, then combining them, which is probably impossible because they actually express quite different conceptions of time, causality, and perhaps of God as well. Think of classical physics and quantum physics, which are also irreconcilable, neither of which is nor will be discredited by the fact that they have so far resisted reconciliation. In the words of Wallace Stevens, “the squirming fact exceeds the squamous mind.” That is what makes it all so wonderfully interesting.

It is very Calvinistic in me to be so comfortable with metaphors and analogues from the physical sciences to consider how we think, how we know, how we find our way to the places where understanding falters. I find these failures very liberating. Knowing nothing about time, I think we mortals may as well assume we do in fact know nothing about causality. At this point we do have enough insight into the finer textures of reality to assume that the primary constituents of reality are, to our minds, exotic in the extreme. Why a human mind, a human life, unfolds as it does, what forces lie behind historical tides that lift us, strand us, overwhelm us—who can claim to know? Then again, who would presume to know how we appear to God, what he finds to value in us? There is the matter of hell, not easily dismissed, since Jesus speaks of it. A problem, all the same. By my lights an appropriate reverence for God, for this shining garment of reality in which he is revealed and concealed, for the unique and deeply sacred mystery of his dealings with any person—an appropriate reverence for these things is not consistent with the idea that we can judge those other souls it has pleased God to make partakers of this great mystery, the great sacrament, Being itself. I don't know what to make of hell, but clearly it means that what we mortals do has an eternal significance, and this is certainly consistent with a posture of reverence toward this world, with all its sins and afflictions.

I have read that certain physicists, grappling with what is apparently the anomalous weakness of the force of gravity, have posited the existence of another universe, whose influence is felt by ours. Earth's gravity, they say, could be a consequence, a sort of shadow effect, of that other reality. Such a notion might never be accessible to any sort of test, but I think it serves very well as metaphor. Anomalies in our thinking might simply mean that we have no conception of what is in play, what other universe of intention, presence, passion, and grace liberates our limbs, lightens our burdens, softens our fall, permits a weightiness that is not entrapment. The physicists remind us every day that anomaly is very much to be respected, and that knowledge proceeds by conceding the existence of reality beyond our knowledge—“dark energy” being one striking recent example. I feel that reverence requires a somewhat greater humility relative to the nature and the will of God. So I explore along the lines of imagination, memory, intuition, learning what I can by the means that are given to me.

As I have said, I am not of the school of thought that finds adherence to doctrine synonymous with firmness of faith. On
the contrary, I believe that faith in God is a liberation of thought, because thought is an ongoing instruction in things that pertain to God. To test this belief is my fictional practice, the basis for the style and substance of my two novels and the motive behind my nonfiction. This might seem to some people to be paradoxical, a religious belief in intellectual openness. This would seem like a contradiction in the minds of religion’s detractors and also, apparently, in the minds of a significant number of its adherents. I think of Wallace Stevens’s “the mind in the act of finding what will suffice.” I think of Theodore Roethke’s “I learn by going where I have to go.” Calvin called the universe a school in which we are to be instructed. This feels deeply right to me. And I think of Paul’s saying, “It is for freedom that Christ made us free.”

How to have a meaningful imagination of freedom is a problem I have pondered for a very long time. When I was a sophomore in college, taking a course in American philosophy, I went to the library and read an assigned text, Jonathan Edwards’s *Doctrine of Original Sin Defended*. There is a long footnote in this daunting treatise that discusses the light of the moon, and how the apparent continuity of the moon’s light is a consequence of its reflecting light that is in fact continuously renewed. This was Edwards’s analogy for the continuous renewal of the world by the will of God, which creates, to our eyes, seeming lawfulness and identity, but which is in fact a continuous free act of God. I learned later that there is in fact no scientifically describable reason for the ongoingness of things, the replication of the world as the world in every moment of time. Edwards’s footnote was my first, best introduction to epistemology and ontology, and my escape—and what a rescue it was—from the contending, tedious determinisms that seemed to be all that was on offer to me then. I doubt it would be different now, though quantum theory has given us a century to absorb the fact that existence is saturated with virtual or potential reality, a fact which should at least clarify by complicating our sense of our circumstance. But a primitive determinism seems to be as prevalent as ever. For some years my antidote has been *Scientific American*. The determinism of the moment is the new genetics, but it looks more and more as though inferring human character and behavior from the genome would be like inferring the works of Mozart from the keyboard of a piano.

One consequence of Edwards’s ontology was that God must be thought of as free, active, and at no remove from the universe we experience, nor from any least aspect of it. I was aware at the time of attempts to rescue God as a hypothesis by setting him outside a world he had designed to function autonomously, obedient to its own laws. That is to say, God was thought of as marginalized by a determinist reality. I hated this on aesthetic and other grounds and I absolutely could not think my way past it. Then, by grace of that footnote, I realized that I could think of God as present and intentional, and of reality as essentially addressed to human perception—perception being then as now my greatest interest and pleasure in life. It might seem strange to have been liberated by a defense of the doctrine American Protestantism has generally considered unbearably repressive. But that was a memorable day in my interior life. I left the library
thinking differently than I did when I entered it. I left persuaded that all experience is profound, and worthy of all the attention it can be given. That by its nature it is accessible to being perceived rather than merely seen.

Maybe not coincidentally, I now consider original sin both radically compassionate and, as doctrines go, fairly verifiable. This is not to say that I would follow Edwards in tracing our condition back to an actual Adam. It is to say, rather, that we do all err and fail, are in some degree helpless against our human weaknesses, and that we owe ourselves and one another a chastening awareness of this fact, and forgiveness on just these grounds.

Edwards's sermon on Christian charity suggests that he had arrived at the same conclusion. As, for that matter, Calvin did before him. I find the doctrine of universal fallibility a great help in arriving at a reasonable set of expectations, thus avoiding the kind of scorched-earth judgmentalism that has gone so far toward emptying the landscape of institutions, ideals, and individuals who can make some claim on our respect. Honor everyone, said the Apostle. He also said that we struggle constantly with ourselves, and defeat ourselves: "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate." If this was true for Paul, how much truer for the rest of us.

All this is to say that I do in fact adhere—selectively—to classical tenets of Christianity, not because I think I ought to but because I find them to be of great value—my thought and my experience return me to them and affirm them. Which classical tenets? Well, those I find in Augustine and Chrysostom through Luther and Calvin to Jonathan Edwards—having enough respect and enough compassion for all of them to admire what is beautiful in them and to regret their errors, which are important in every case, as history testifies. For reasons both theological and human, the errors of these old worthies neither surprise me nor discredit them in my eyes. That their errors seem so often to have made a stronger impression on history than their insights is a judgment on those of us who follow them.

Religion has the distinction of being the most intensely private and individual and at the same time the most nearly universal of human experiences. I speak here of experience rather than, say, systems of belief, because the word "belief" places religion in the realm of hypothesis, as if one were to say, on the basis of authority, observation, and reason I take a certain account of the nature of existence to be true. It is at the level of belief that religion is confused, sometimes successfully, because there is an important similarity between the language of belief and the language of any other kind of proposition about the world. When an expression of belief is understood in this way, as a sufficient account of the weight of meaning that lies behind it, it can seem vulnerable to refutation.
Paul speaks of "thoughts too deep for words," of "things that cannot be told, which man may not utter." In both instances he is speaking of deeply interior encounters with the inexpressible. There is nothing obscurantist here. We know that the phrase "my child" is charged with meaning we could not put into words. Certain scientists might translate it as "the most proximate carrier of my genes and likeliest ensurer of their survival, toward whom I am therefore capable of something that looks and feels like altruism but actually isn't." But most of us feel the insufficiency, not only of this language but also of language itself, to any deep feeling. Then how much more, as the old rhetoricians used to say, is the art, music, and literature of Christendom very largely driven by the hope of expressing some part of that weight of meaning. I can't refute the notion that my attachment to my children is mere biological self-interest, cleverly disguised as love in order to deceive—what?—some biologically extraneous better self who would frown on self-interest? That seems a bit inelegant. My point is simply that language, lovely as it is, is the merest scrim on reality, never by any means sufficiently descriptive and entirely capable of going off on its own and making apparent meaning and logic where none exists. Insofar as belief is dependent on, sustained by, communicated through language, it is profoundly vulnerable to being taken for that to which it only refers, by detractors and also by adherents. It is even vulnerable to being what its detractors take it to be.

Experience, unlike belief, and by way of contrast, befalls us. Granting that it is modified by culture and circumstance, experience is as near as we come to a frontier with autonomous reality, with being that is not ourselves. "Consider the heavens," the Psalmist says, and so humankind seems to have done always and everywhere. And then we have asked, "What is man?" I hope the archaism "man" does not offend. What is a human being? What is humankind? What is a mortal? There is a loneliness in the old language, an Adamic singularity, that seems to me worth preserving in this context. This primary intuition of the strangeness of it all, of our single selves as unspeakably fragile and brilliant observers of a grandeur for which we have tried through all our generations to find words, this is the experience that seems to me to underlie religion. Belief might perhaps be thought of as the daylight that obscures celestial light, those stars and galaxies that let us see the sprawl of the universe. It is the bright cocoon of atmosphere that allows us comfortable words such as everyday, quotidian, diurnal.

Please understand, I have only praise for daylight. Like the continuity in Edwards's endlessly new creation, it is providential, liberating, and enabling. And, enclosed in the firmament of cloud and atmosphere, we can have a feeling of relative significance that the endless reaches of space and the uncountable stars might well deprive us of. Daylight creates a conditional definition of the human world which we find sufficient for most human purposes. Likewise, our beliefs and our hypotheses give us words that serve beautifully, for most human purposes. And beyond the one and the other, the radiant sky and the venerable doctrine, there lies, in effect, everything. The brilliance of humanity as perceivers of creation allows us to entertain the notion that there is a measure by
which we are important to it, even central to it. This is to say, our capacity for awe is the lens through which creation passes. What we call reality is an undiminished roar; unimaginably potent and volatile. Only the strange, edenic calm of Earth has allowed us to know this. By analogy, I would suggest that faith and belief are a divine reprieve from a truth too great for us, a calm by grace of which we can know and sometimes do know such truth as is accessible to our astonishingly great—yet starkly limited—capacities. So reverence should be thought of as prior to belief. It is the human predisposition, perhaps as universal among us as any other, to sense the grandeur of the event we call being, to consider the heavens, to ponder the cunning of a hand.

I would propose also that reverence is the great corrective to the tendency of belief to warp, contract, harden. This is true, I think, because reverence is a kind of awe, and awe is a kind of humility. I do not use science to argue for the existence of God, but as a Christian I read about quantum physics or string theory assuming that I am learning about God’s creation. I find that a sublime, even exuberant freedom is everywhere apparent in the workings of the physical universe—everywhere except within the little Eden of reality scaled to our perceptions, a virtual island of apparent lawfulness which, like the calm of Earth, has allowed us to learn to see beyond it.

The notion that science will progressively close the sutures of knowledge until the project of understanding is effectively seamless is archaic. It shows absolutely no sense of the astonishing event we call reality, no reverence for it. The most spectacular achievements of science in the last 100 years have not closed gaps but opened chasms. The fact that science grows from the same human engagement with the cosmos that also inspires art and religion does not mean that it is in competition with them. A proper reverence for God’s creation should discourage this idea as effectively as should a reasonable awareness of the tendencies of modern science. The light of being passes through the prism of consciousness and yields a spectrum of responses, no one of which has a claim to being more authentic light than any other. If I seem to demote religion to an equality with science and art, it is because I consider religion to be another precious and fallible human response to, or interpretation of, that more primary awe, and also because I believe the whole saga of human existence is a sacred narrative, full of error and tragedy, as sacred narratives tend to be. There are those who believe our awareness of the fact that we circle a gigantic fusion reaction at appalling speed on a globular mass of indeterminate origin takes the mystery out of things. I beg to differ.

Like the expectations we bring to the universe from our very limited and particular knowledge of it, belief also forms within the limits of what we know. Reverence tells us that truth always utterly exceeds what we know or can know, even if that knowledge comes to us as revelation. This God with whom we have to do, this God whose thoughts are not our thoughts, claims from us, I believe, not static and confident belief but active and humble attention. Of course one is not attentive to a God in whom one does not believe. Neither is one attentive to a God he or she presumes to know sufficiently already, by dogma or by rote. There are many
people whose sense of wonder, whose reverence, is offended by the proprietary claims of the self-declared religious. If we were to put this in terms the New Testament has given us, I think we would know where to find the Pharisees.

There is so much anxiety now, in certain quarters, about threats to religion from secularism, science, militant atheism. In other quarters there is a fear of religion itself, religion which seems suddenly distrustful of the survival of the ancient human tropism toward the sacred, or, to put it another way, distrustful of God's ancient, loving bond with human beings, and seeks to enforce at least the outward behaviors that have expressed human attraction on the one side and divine love on the other. This anxiety is entirely too common in the history of Christendom, but rather rare in American history, I suppose because of our notorious individualism, for which we are far too seldom grateful.

Democracy is based on presumptive respect for the value and integrity of any other life, and of one's own as well. These anxieties among the religious are and are felt to be suspicious and hostile, that is, profoundly disrespectful or irreverent. They treat private convictions as public problems. If I permitted myself the use of such language, I'd call that un-American. And they create what they claim to fear, a population increasingly alienated from the institutions of religion. A friend of mine whom I think any pollster would call secular, with my friend's strenuous encouragement, was pondering the offenses of the self-declared religious. He said, "God must be so angry!" It should never be forgotten that 90 percent of the American population believes in a personal God. In a population as diverse as ours, that degree of consensus about anything could fairly be called miraculous. Our first care should be not to offend.

As I have said, we make some very harsh judgments about our own population, really rather contemptuous generalizations about materialism, secularism, individualism in the negative sense, and so on. We hear constantly that we are rude, ill-educated, incurious, obese, and, in important numbers, deeply hostile to Christmas. I have traced this caterwauling back as far as Brooks Adams, though it seems to be foreshadowed in at least one book by James Fenimore Cooper. We are forever about to fall off one cliff or another, to sink into oligarchy or mobocracy, to become theocrats or suppressors of religion, to become postliterates or to lose ourselves in the wordy labyrinths of the blogosphere. The characterological syndromes by which we are afflicted are without number, and there are more every day. I have been tired of this for a very long time, and it has been getting worse for a very long time. Of all the privileges and mysteries that should inspire gratitude and reverence in us, the first should certainly be the fact that we live among these images of God, these spirits who haunt our cities and towns as surely as they ever haunted Eden.

It is true that there are motes in every eye at very best, and that some of the lives that pass among us are tragic or frightening.
But nothing in scripture suggests that Cain was any less an image of God than his brother Abel, or Judas any less so than James, the brother of Christ. This impulse to mass disparagement cheapens everyone’s experience of life. It is an appalling presumption to think we know enough about anyone to be dismissive of him or her, and the presumption is only compounded when it is generalized into scorn for the population at large, or for one or another segment of it. Putting aside the fact that any lesser consideration, let us say patriotism, would seem to be poorly served by disrespect for the life, the literal flesh and blood, of the nation to whom one claims loyalty. Or let us say culture, which is warped and curtailed by contempt for the minds and imaginations to which it is addressed. Or morality, which can have no firm basis other than in self-respect and mutual respect. Or religion, which too often turns so cold an eye on those it takes to be its erring neighbors that any claim it might remember to make about loving them is a laughable hypocrisy. Or economics, which can prattle on about rational choices as if history did not exist to tell us that everything is far more complex than that. Putting aside all these lesser considerations, the great fact is that we are privileged to live briefly among these unfathomable creatures whom God loves. Whatever language of disparagement we are encouraged to find for them, the overwhelming primary fact is the sacredness God has invested in them in giving them his image. We see and do not perceive. In this very crucial regard, we are not reverent. Language has sprung free of the burden of deeper reality, and religion has, in too many cases, sprung free of the discipline of reverence.

For the whole of my adult life I have been interested in theology and the study of scripture. I have also been interested in literature, and, from time to time, in writing essays and novels. Theology is often disparaged as an intellectualization of what should in fact be a matter of experience and conduct or action. If I cared at all about the low regard in which it is held, in the churches not least, I’d have abandoned it and deprived myself of more than I can say. The habit of disparagement is coercive, destructive, impoverishing, and profoundly entrenched. Theology, like intellectualism itself, is beautiful if it is done well, and the beauty of it has fed my soul, and has shaped every piece of work I have put my hand to.

Every culture is damaged by turning opprobrium in bad directions, and this one is, too. We tend to generate a kind of aggressive consensus, intent on establishing its own virtual universality. And one area of enforced consensus is the disparagement of thought, especially thought of a kind that will never generate patents or create employment. Sometimes we disparage ourselves on these grounds—Americans have no interest in ideas, we say. Americans are anti-intellectual. And then, perversely, we seem to make every effort to ensure that this will in fact be the case. The consequences include a progressive loss of awareness of the richness of human experience over time, through history. They include also a failure to cultivate the enjoyment of the individual experience of consciousness. This loss of awareness is a loss of the sense of reverence toward ourselves and toward humankind, who are, in the words of Jean Calvin, “the loftiest proof of divine wisdom.”

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