

“Well Examined Lives”

#1

“Philosophy begins in wonder,” says Socrates in one of Plato’s later dialogues. But this wonder does not mean idle curiosity, he adds; rather it’s the seriousness of purpose of a puzzled mind, disquieted enough that it sets out on a philosophical journey-- a life of questioning and searching for truths.

Socrates liked to compare himself to a midwife (his mother was one).

“Only, I help others to give birth to ideas,” he said. Once born, these ideas can then be examined to see if they are healthy and good, or defective and stillborn. But always, it is through dialogue and discussion and asking difficult questions that we can proceed. This is the crux of the Socratic method, as it has come to be known. If we are complacent or think we have the answers we will not set out on this journey.

#2

At his trial in 399 BC, (where he was charged with not believing in the gods of the state and corrupting the youth of Athens) Socrates posed his famous challenge to us: that “the unexamined life is not worth living.” This simple statement set the stage for the development of Western thought, affirming the importance of self-knowledge and individual responsibility for our lives. Yet Socrates was put to death for his quest. His accusers thought he had dared criticize the values of his city too far, and worse yet, he refused to be silenced. They gave him the option of silence as an alternative to the death penalty. If only he would promise to keep quiet from then on, and stop his questioning, they would let him go. But Socrates refused to be silenced. He was willing to die for our right to free inquiry; to question without fear of authority, and to examine the values and beliefs by which we live.

#3

When I first started teaching my Environmental Philosophy course in 1990, some people were surprised and asked what was philosophical about environmental problems.

Environmental science yes, but philosophy? And yet at its basic level the way we relate to our world is a moral issue—it entails fundamental value judgments we make about ourselves as individuals and as a species, about other lives beside ours, and about nature as a whole. While some environmental problems can be solved with new technologies (development of solar energy for example), technology itself cannot address the heart of the matter, which involves human purposes; the “ends” we seek for ourselves, and the values we uphold. In this sense, environmentalism requires us to rethink our relationship to the world and to honestly examine who we are.

Following are some environmental thinkers who, like Socrates, questioned some of our basic values, in an attempt to change our way of looking at the world—and ultimately at ourselves.

How do we make our choices? Do we take things at face value or are we able to reflect critically and make informed decisions? The true sign of an educated person is that she chooses deliberately and for the right reasons. Clearly the culture in which we live affects us—often in subtle ways that we are not even aware of. We think we are free when we are most in bondage to external forces.

Some of you are familiar with the Allegory of the Cave in Plato's Republic, where Plato compares us all to some strange prisoners in a cave. He describes a group of people chained in such a way that they can only see the cave wall in front of them on which images are passing. A fire burning behind them and objects carried by other people are the source of these images the prisoners are watching. However the prisoners have no clue that this is the case and take the images for reality. They spend their lives caught in a world of illusion, ignorant of the big picture of what is going on. They may even become content in their state of shared ignorance and never desire to leave it.

If a prisoner gets free, turns around and begins her long journey towards the light outside—each step of this climb will be slow and painful. It is easier never to set out, never to question what is given. Seen this way, the allegory is an inner journey of awakening and stages of discovery. The ultimate goal, according to Plato, is to see the sun outside, representing light and clarity, truth and knowledge.

How to apply the allegory to our lives is a daunting challenge. What are the shadows we face on our cave walls? And how do we go beyond them?

Among the several interpretations that can be given to the allegory, one is clearly the educational interpretation: that through education we rise from the confusion of our everyday opinions to the light of knowledge and true values.

#8

Last year I received a card from a graduating senior who had taken a class with me that spring semester. She was "ecstatic" that she took the class, she wrote, it had "awakened her to the world of ideas and kindled a passion to seek a truthful existence." "In a search that shall never cease," she promised. She was ready to set out on her journey of "exploration" as she called it, and only hoped that she would not crash into "unexpected icebergs of complacency." I find her phrase "icebergs of complacency" a perfect expression to help me sum up.

#9

Do we ever get out of Plato's cave? I don't think so. Full enlightenment is an ideal to be approached but it cannot be attained.

But there are many ways of fighting the darkness in the cave.

We have an obligation to see false assumptions, harmful prejudices, and call them to question wherever we find them. In each of our lives there are moments when a curtain opens, we are able to see some truth we have not realized before, a sign, a token appears which when pursued becomes the source of a break through experience, an epiphany. We ask the question: Why? And everything changes.

The issue is: do we have the courage and the intellectual stamina to accept the challenge? Or do we pass it up? Saying to ourselves: “another time,” “let someone else do it.” There are always excuses available. The blue light of television flickers on the cave wall beckoning us to easier lives.

I chose an environmental question, how we relate to our world, as an example to show the meaning of the Socratic quest for living self-conscious, meaningful lives. Any other question would do as well.

“Philosophy is relearning to see the world,” wrote a contemporary philosopher. As such, it is “everywhere.” When we take our lives seriously and start asking questions, anything can become subject matter for philosophical analysis. In this sense we are all philosophers.

We will always have elements of ignorance in our lives. The images on the wall keep shifting—as some old ones are erased, new ones appear.

However we can light parts of our cave with bulbs and achieve partial truths. A few lit bulbs at a time might be all we can expect realistically. Only the god is wise, Socrates says; the rest of us search for wisdom as an ongoing life process. That is the human condition. But the search is what gives meaning and value and dignity to our lives.

I salute you wonderful students and wish you wonder filled and well examined lives.

May you never become complacent.

