

## The Virtue of Stupidity Or, Avoiding Ignorance

by

Todd F. Eklof

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The American scientist, Victor Weisskopf, of Manhattan Project fame, once reminisced about working with the great quantum physicist, Wolfgang Pauli, "It was absolutely marvelous working for Pauli." He said, "You could ask him anything. There was no worry that he would think a particular question was stupid, since he thought *all* questions stupid."<sup>1</sup> At first glance this sounds kind of like the old one-liner, "He's not prejudice, he hates everybody." But I would like to go on record as seriously supporting this whimsical opinion that *all* questions, at least those that are genuine, *are* stupid. I realize we've all been taught since grade school that "there's no such thing as a stupid question." But I would like to argue that if a question isn't stupid, it isn't a question!

Of course, we're told there are no stupid questions as an effort to encourage us to speak up even at the risk of sounding foolish. But not asking a question is ignorant, not stupid, because by not asking it we are simply disregarding something obvious. Ignorance is the loathsome practice of neglecting facts that are staring us right in the face, like the three monkeys who speak, hear and see no evil by intentionally covering their mouths, ears and eyes. It is only in asking questions, on the other hand, that we demonstrate the glorious Virtue of Stupidity.

I call Stupidity a virtue because I consider it our divine obligation to practice being stupid. Stupidity is a spiritual discipline! Stupidity is the work of seekers and explorers, of philosophers and sojourners, of prophets and angels. There's a wonderful line in the New Testament that talks about the dealings between God and humanity as "things in which angels long to look."<sup>2</sup> The Greek word translated here as "long to look," *parakuptō* is more literally translated "to stoop around" or "to bend over." If you can imagine a group of curious angels gathering around humanity and bending over to inspect us, then you understand the imagery of *parakuptō*, "things angels stoop over." This relatively rare word is used only three other times in the New Testament, once in the *Letter of James*,<sup>3</sup> once in the *Gospel of Luke*,<sup>4</sup> and once in the *Gospel of John*.<sup>5</sup> In James it is used in reference to those who "look into" God's law, and in reference to those who "looked into" Jesus' empty tomb in the two Gospels.

I wonder how many believers ever really look into what they consider God's law with the humble curiosity of angels? I wonder if Chief Justice Roy Moore ever stooped over and curiously inspected the Ten Commandments he refused to remove from his Alabama courthouse last year? He showed his ignorance in ignoring a court decision ordering him to do so and by ignoring the beliefs of those entering his court that might honor a different faith tradition. Yes, Judge Moore might be ignorant, but he is not stupid! If he were stupid, he would have shown some humility toward his own ideas and the ideas of others. If he were stupid, he would have been willing to bend a little like the angels who long to look into the ways of God and humans, and like the genuinely faithful who lower

themselves to understand the ways of God.

Similarly, *parakupto* is used in the Gospels in reference to the reaction of those who discovered Jesus' empty tomb. When Peter was informed about Jesus' missing body, the author of Luke tells us he "got up and ran to the tomb; *stooping down and looking in*, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened." The Gospel of John differs only in that it tells us Peter was outrun by another disciple, "the one whom Jesus loved," who also "bent down to look in" the empty tomb. Although the authors of these two stories obviously disagree about who got there first, it is interesting that they both chose to include the humble posturing, the stupidity, of their respective disciple. The point being that Jesus' followers fell stupid before the empty tomb, symbolically humbling themselves to figure it out, intellectually admitting their bewilderment. Yet how many Christians since have held to their belief in the actual and historical resurrection with the same ignorance and rigidity demonstrated by Judge Moore? Holding to the literal truth of what must surely be a figurative symbol not only forces its adherents to ignore scientific facts and simple common sense, but causes them to miss its deeper spiritual lessons of hope and justice altogether. Like his original followers, it would do Christians a great spiritual service if they fell stupid before the empty tomb; if they humbled themselves before the resurrection doctrine; if they stooped down to look into a greater meaning of the empty tomb.

As we have seen, then, Stupidity, literally denotes a certain kind of posturing. It's very root means *stoop, bend down, or lower oneself*. Thus, when we practice the Virtue of Stupidity, we practice humility. Stupidity is the willingness to look foolish, to appear awkward, bent, even twisted, before others in the light of our questions. Stupidity is an admission of naiveté, an act of willful curiosity, and a demonstration of our devotion to truth. In this way, by humbling ourselves, by taking a position that is considered less than upright by others, we honor our stupid questions and, in so doing, bow before the Divine Mystery itself. This is why the Virtue of Stupidity is a spiritual practice, because it enables us to face the Great Mystery the only way possible, through humility, through the admission of our own uncertainty and unknowingness.

In Islam the word *mosque* means "place of prostration," which is another way of saying mosques are places of stupidity, places of mystery, of deep questioning and humility. I like the notion of the mosque because it implies that wherever we are able to prostrate ourselves becomes sacred space. Such posturing, however, isn't only physical, and, in fact, must always demonstrate one's spiritual and intellectual attitude to be truly meaningful. To come before that which is divine we must become mystics, by giving into the Mystery, into our stupidity, in order to recapture the sense of awe that has been too long absent in Western spirituality. Toward this end we ought to consider that the root in the word "humility" is the same as the word "human," *humus*, which means "earth." In other words, the very essence of our humanity, of what it means to be human, is in our ability to get close to our earthiness, close to earth, and close to the Earth itself by lowering ourselves towards it through the Virtue of Stupidity.

Although human beings are stupid by nature, we have become culturally ignorant. This

is to say, we have learned not to ask our stupid questions for fear of being shut out and ostracized by the rest of society. In our endeavors to always appear upright before others we too easily give up the birthright that allows us to approach life with our sacred questions, with humility and curiosity. This denial of our basic earthiness, of our *humus*, our innate humility, has led to economic, environmental and educational disaster. Instead of the justice and egalitarianism that ensue whenever we behave humbly toward others, we have fallen prey to out-of-control consumerism that is fast gobbling up all our spiritual, intellectual and worldly resources. Without the sense of awe that causes us to fall dumb-struck before the blessing of creation, we've put the entire planet up for sale. "Forfeit your sense of awe," Rabbi Heschel once said, "let your conceit diminish your ability to revere, and the universe becomes a market place for you."<sup>6</sup>

Furthermore, because of our overbearing consumerist lifestyles our entire planet is now dying of consumption. It is only in bowing before the Earth, in humbling ourselves before it, symbolically recognizing its divine blessing and mystery that it has any chance of recovering. In striving for technological and scientific superiority over the Earth, we have forgotten that we are only perfect when we live in harmony with the Earth. As Matthew Fox says, "The fact is, my friends, all creatures are imperfect—let us celebrate *that*. I think divinity purposefully matched our imperfections with one another, and there is glory and beauty within the imperfection."<sup>7</sup> Perfection happens only when all the components of creation are working together, not when one component blindly behaves as if it is superior to the everything else.

Fox also insists that "...we need to take back our souls from professional ordained... [ministers] who are not doing their job, because they themselves have been wounded in seminaries through reductionist education that has not taught them how to be mystics, even though they probably were as young people."<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately our seminaries aren't the least of our educational concerns. It also appears our children are learning to shut down their natural abilities to ask questions and think critically in cultural institutions that teach them to shut up and get with the program. As contemporary philosopher Lou Marinoff boldly complains, "...there is virtually no formal training in critical thinking offered to children, which would erect an edifice on these splendid foundations. On the contrary, they are daily bombarded by barrages of uncritical pronouncements, and daily immersed in a 'culture' in which even tabloid sensationalism needs dumbing-down because it is too esoteric for the mainstream. In consequence, their 'logical instincts' may degenerate to a point beyond which they are unrecoverable."<sup>9</sup> If, on the other hand, children were taught philosophy in school, they would learn to better develop the natural sense of awe each of us is originally born with. The study of philosophy, for which formal education was originally invented by Aristotle, would open children to their innate right to ask questions, to ask *stupid* questions, to their wonder, and to admit, without shame, "I don't know."

"So why don't we see philosophy for children in every American primary school?"<sup>10</sup> asks Marinoff. Because... "the K-12 educational system as a whole went through such a precipitous decline in the past thirty years that philosophically attuned children put it to shame."<sup>11</sup> He goes on to say, "If your factory is mass-producing potted plants, you don't

want any plants protesting—especially within earshot of the other plants."12 Teaching children to ask their stupid questions through the techniques of critical thinking, he says, "...turns them into miniature philosophers, who then become a potentially giant embarrassment for teachers—whose uncritical or ill-founded assertions are liable to be challenged—and a big pain in the posterior for parents, some of whose authoritative but otherwise senseless pronouncements will meet exactly the same fate."13

The point here is that in ignoring our questions, we have reached a level of spiritual crisis that is effecting our minds, our economy and our environment at such a fast pace that we are in immanent danger of destroying the entire world and, as a whole, are too ignorant to see it coming. I recall an experience of mine in the first grade when a substitute teacher was telling us about the Earth's ozone layer. In order to better understand its purpose, I childishly asked a stupid question, "What would happen if it got a hole in it?" The teacher responded by assuring me this couldn't happen. "But what if it did?" I persisted. In fact, after several failed attempts to get a satisfactory response from her, she finally dismissed my question as meaningless, since, in her mind, a hole in the ozone was unthinkable. As it turns out, if everyone had been asking this same stupid question back when they were too ignorant to see it as a possibility, we might have begun measures *then* to prevent the environmental damage that has *since* occurred.

Just as, in my innate childishness, my innate inquisitiveness about the world, I continued asking my question, even in the face of authorities who said my question was meaningless, we must all, in order to fend off pending doom, take up our role as prophets by asking the tough questions nobody wants to face. In so doing, we risk appearing awkward, bent over, stooped down, and, in addition to merely looking socially inept and out of touch, we run the risk of being called heretics because we choose to question those beliefs the greater culture tell us are unquestionable. Remember, the word *heresy*, simply means "choice," and the heretics are those who choose to make up their own minds. Stupidity falls under the classification of *virtue* precisely for this reason, because it is a choice. We must choose to be Stupid. In lowering ourselves, in admitting our lack of understanding and knowledge, in appearing awkward before and facing rejection and ridicule from others, in humbling and prostrating ourselves before Mystery, we practice a spiritual discipline that puts us in the company of angels.

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1 In *The American Journal of Physics* (1977).

2 I Peter 1:12.

3 James 1:25.

4 Luke 24:12.

5 John 20:5.

6 Fox, Matthew, *Wrestling with the Prophets*, Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, New York, NY, 1995, p.58.

7 *Ibid.*, p.42.

8 *Ibid.*, p.40.

9 Marinoff, Lou, *Philosophical Practice*, Academic Press, City College, New York, NY, 2002, p.292.

10 *Ibid.*

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid., p.292f.