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# Academic Studies and the Love of God

JEANNE HEFFERNAN

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From time to time, often at the beginning of a semester, those involved in academic work wonder what it's all about, wonder what a university is for. Elaborating a sufficient answer to that question could be a life's work. Yet a partial answer seems within grasp, and that partial answer is found in a rather unusual place: the writings of Simone Weil, twentieth-century French philosopher and Christian mystic.

Weil's remarkable little essay entitled "Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God" reminds Christian academics, especially those who teach in Christian schools, what it's all about. Now while Weil directs this piece to students, its insights apply equally to faculty, though in an unexpected way. The essay does not shed light on various problems that vex academics, such as the proper balance between teaching and research or the pros and cons of a core curriculum; rather, it addresses something far more fundamental. It dares to identify the very *raison d'être* of academic work. Weil's essay thus has particular relevance today for students and faculty who are pressured to treat their enterprise as merely a means of career advancement.

To those who would reduce their studies in this way, Simone Weil presents a radical challenge. The challenge emerges in different ways throughout the essay. Weil would clearly reject the careerism found so often in the modern academy. In contrast to those who would degrade academic work by rendering it instrumental, she extols it, using powerful biblical imagery. It is, she insists, "one of those fields containing a pearl so precious that it is worth while to sell all our possessions, keeping nothing for ourselves, in order to be able to acquire it"<sup>1</sup>—encouraging words to those who spent nearly a decade in graduate school and sold their earthly belongings to do so.

Yet Weil's account of the value of school studies is paradoxical. Academic work is not valuable in the first place because it reveals our talents or produces socially useful information, or even because of the intrinsic worth of learning—though Weil does not deny the value of any of those things. Rather, academic work is most valuable because it is a "road to sanctity."<sup>2</sup>

Lest we feel self-satisfied, having taken up this work, Simone Weil quickly adds that in order for our studies to truly be a road to sanctity, two conditions must obtain. First, in the course of our work, we must examine our mistakes carefully and candidly, so as to cultivate the virtue of humility. When we face our stupidity squarely, she insists, "a sense of our mediocrity is borne in upon us with irresistible evidence."<sup>3</sup> And this prepares the way for humility, which in turn prepares us to live in the truth.

If the first condition weren't a tall enough order, the second is even more challenging. For our studies to have genuine value, they must be approached with one purpose: to increase the power of attention with a view to prayer. Even the desire to do the work well is secondary. For Weil, a Christian conception of study, of research, of academic work, has the singularly deep purpose of cultivating the faculty of attention. Insofar as our studies develop this faculty and are pursued in a spirit of humility, we are rightly disposed to the proximate object of our inquiry, that is, our subject matter. Attention is a state of readiness and openness that enables us to encounter, or be encountered by, the object of our attention. In this sense, attention "consists of

suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty, and ready to be penetrated by the object. . . . Above all our thought should be empty, waiting, not seeking anything, but ready to receive in its naked truth the object that is to penetrate it.”<sup>4</sup>

But does this effort have *theological* meaning? Simone Weil thinks it does. As she explains:

The solution of a geometry problem does not in itself constitute a precious gift, but the same law applies to it because it is the image of something precious. Being a little fragment of particular truth, it is a pure image of the unique, eternal, and living Truth, the very Truth that once in a human voice declared: “I am the Truth.” Every school exercise, thought of in this way, is like a sacrament.<sup>5</sup>

This attentive, patient openness to the truth of our subjects prepares us for an encounter with the author of truth, the living God, in prayer. You might say that it prepares us to honor the first part of the Great Commandment. In so doing, academic work also prepares us to honor the second, inasmuch as the very substance of human love consists, for Weil, in attention. In a truly loving encounter with our fellows, “[t]he soul empties itself of all its own contents in order to receive into itself the being it is looking at, just as he is, in all his truth.”<sup>6</sup>

In short, Simone Weil has something very important to say to us as we ponder the meaning of academic work. What she has to say is at once challenging and consoling. She challenges us to look at the meaning of the academic enterprise in a radically different way: as a road to sanctity that demands nothing less than a *kenosis*, an emptying of self. She consoles us in noting that the value of our work cannot be measured by the standard indices of success—articles published or promotions received—and does not depend finally upon its accuracy (a consolation to students and faculty alike). Academic success is found, rather, in the effort of patient attention that our studies entail. Here Weil reassures us, “Never in any case is a genuine effort of the attention wasted. It always has its effect on the spiritual plane [and] will bear its fruit in prayer.”<sup>7</sup> In this light, we would do well to place our work in a context of prayer—the only context, according to Simone Weil, that gives our studies meaning.

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#### NOTES

1 Simone Weil, “Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God,” in *The Simone Weil Reader*, ed. George A. Panichas (New York: David McKay, 1977), 52.

2 *Ibid.*, 47.

3 *Ibid.*

4 *Ibid.*, 49.

5 *Ibid.*, 50.

6 *Ibid.*, 51.

7 *Ibid.*, 45.