Questions in a Quiet Moment

— REBECCA BAER PORTEOUS —

"What does it mean to lead rich human lives? How can people find a way to lead lives of meaning and purpose?" As a Christian, I knew that there were answers to such questions. But where did they fit into the secular university?

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Following graduation from Harvard College in 1987, Becky studied in Zimbabwe and returned to teach sections for Robert Coles' course "The Literature of Social Reflection."

Rebecca joyfully led "dumpster diving" excursions while at Duke and Harvard, because she sees the creative redemption and recycling of that which is wasted or rejected as a symbol of God's work in the world.

"As a child hearing the Bible read aloud by my parents and Anabaptist grandparents," she remembers, "I had learned that wisdom was central to life, something to be sought and valued." Her reflections arise out of this memory.

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Sometimes in a quiet moment I sit and look at the basket on top of my small bookcase. It is filled with pieces of shattered bottles, cracked dishes, broken glass bangles, shards of a clay cooking pot, and a ceramic ring around a defunct spark plug. People often laugh when they come in and see these baskets—several around the room—full of fragments.

As I sit quietly, the broken pieces tell stories of men and women whose lives, like these fragments, were shattered. The first piece of glass in the collection came from an urban housing project in Cambridge, Massachusetts—a broken medicine bottle, recalling to my mind a young black girl with sickle cell anemia who lived in the project. Her life was painful and hurt-filled, with only tenuous hopes for the future. Another fragment used to be a Limoges salad plate, borrowed from friends and carelessly dropped, like a friendship fallen apart by careless handling. The glass bangles came from India—fragile, delicate objects that shattered easily but were cheap to replace, like the lives of some impoverished Indian wives, burned or killed for larger dowries. The spark plug is from Mamelodi, a township outside Pretoria, South Africa. As I hold it, I reflect on the brokenness of those without power in a society in which some are powerful—comfortably successful in the modern world with its technological conveniences—the way I am, at home with my own car, a bank account, and an income. Then I pick up a piece of a Coke bottle and think about lives like mine. Two undergraduates I know of at Duke tried to kill themselves this semester. Despite consuming more than 250 bottles of “the real thing” per person per year, we “successful” ones here in America often end up broken, too, forgotten, used up, exposed, and shattered, like the remains of the Coke bottle lying on the street.

The sad thing is how much of our brokenness we carry inside ourselves. Inexplicably, we can find ourselves hurting the very people we long to love. Unable to keep commitments we once desired, we can become bored with and angry at the people we so desperately wanted to spend time with or be married to. We can run in fear from what we truly would like to say and have been longing to do; we complain, we are bitter and disappointed with our lives, but unsure why. “I do not do what I want, but I do

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the very thing I hate," the apostle Paul wrote almost two thousand years ago, and which of us wouldn't, if we were honest, agree with him at times? Although we have learned how to get our acts together, to lose ourselves in our work for the sake of success, to consume, to be entertained, in quiet moments we find ourselves like the baskets, full of broken pieces, of splintered memories, of shattered hopes.

Such moments lead me to a cascade of questions. If there were no God, nothing beyond ourselves, how could there be hope? How could we be anything but trapped in a destructive reiteration of the things we hate yet nourish within ourselves? I have often thought that from a strictly atheistic point of view, there can be nothing but material determinism. Tightly linked causal chains. Every action leading to a reaction. Each action a mere response to stimuli. And the stimuli themselves only responses to other stimuli. Without God, without the possibility of something breaking in and freeing us from ourselves and the implications of the destructive choices we have often made, the ways we have felt and acted, how could there be anything but self-created hell? Who of us could really bear to face honestly the consequences of all the ways in which we have lived in a world without forgiveness, without mercy?

As an undergraduate, I wondered: If our lives are determined by impersonal causes, if there is nothing transcendent, why do people sometimes have passion for their work? What motivated people to paint, to teach, to create, to passionately and unceasingly devote their lives to such projects? Why, for instance, did the great novelists take such pains in writing? I was frustrated and disappointed with my English professors for focusing only on the historical background and the stylistic analysis of novels and poems, avoiding discussions about the questions and the thoughts that had impelled authors and artists to write and create. What did they want to say?

In my junior year I switched concentrations to social studies. Karl Marx particularly intrigued me. I wondered what it was that would have inspired a man to devote his entire life to writing, living in poverty and insecurity. At the heart of Marx's more philosophical writings, I found a man asking: "What does it mean to lead rich and purposeful human lives?" As a Christian, I knew that there were answers to such questions. I had learned to ask questions, because I believe that, by God's grace, truth is revealed, not exhausted, by investigation.

But these questions were not addressed in the classrooms. We were asked to understand and re-present Marx's view of history, Rawls' original position, Freud's understanding of humans as sexually motivated creatures, but few professors ever asked us whether or not we considered these views to be true. Classes on human nature, morality, and society systematically

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eschewed metaphysical questions, even though the theorists under study had themselves often been driven to write precisely because of their desire to answer such questions. What does it really mean to be a human being? This question had been excluded a priori, dismissed as nonempirical and relative, unworthy of academic consideration because the answers were ultimately seen to be purely subjective and emotive.

The "knowledge" one could acquire through the political, social, or natural sciences was often limited to a catalog of observed phenomena, information that would lead to the development of models with predictive capacities. It was enough to describe such a world empirically, suggest how it works and what tinkering with it in a particular way might do, but it was wrong to ask what made a truly good life, not just for Aristotle in the Athenian polis, but for us, now, today.

Over time I became deeply disturbed by many of my classes. A mental world that never asks metaphysical questions, the questions of wisdom, no longer is open enough to ask whether or not there is a God.

Was Sartre right that there is no God and therefore no good and no bad, no moral truth about anything at all? A student who is never challenged to ask such questions, never allowed to think that there might even be true answers to such questions, may be a student radically divorced from the possibility that a God exists, and that in knowing a loving God, we might find the purpose of human existence, and that in experiencing his love expressed in Jesus Christ, we might find a hope for life.

A few years after graduating, I returned to Harvard as a summer school proctor and was struck by the spiritual confusion and hunger I encountered among students. One woman was desperately seeking God from a Christian background but frustrated again and again that she could not *see* God. Several other students had been asking searching questions about what they ought to do with their lives. I challenged them to consider that they would not be able to answer their questions about what they ought to *do* until they had answered the larger questions of who they ought to *be* and *why*. Most people, most career counselors and young people, seem to avoid these ultimate questions facing each of us. Martin Luther King Jr. put it simply: "A man is not a man until he's found something worth dying for."

In the midst of my own brokenness, and the brokenness around me, I have found an answer, a light, and a powerful healing hope that brings forgiveness, a hope that brings wisdom and life. I have found food for an intellectual hunger, an emotional hunger—a hunger and thirst for righteousness that becomes an energy with which to seek, to serve, to celebrate, to worship, and to know.