

A LITTLE LEARNING
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Oh, how I admire Alexander Pope! But there is are two lines among his poetry I disagree with,

“A little learning is a dang’rous thing
Drink deep, or taste not the Pierian spring.”

I wouldn’t disagree if Pope had used the word, wisdom, in place of learning

In my younger days I aspired to be a Renaissance Man in the mold of da Vinci or Benjamin Franklin. I suppose that the wish to be a Renaissance man is akin to the wish to be self-sufficient and capable. I still do, though it is my increased wisdom that humbles me and shows me the futility of my dream.

I don’t even know if wisdom is the right word. Thoreau might have been right on when he wrote, “Age is no better, hardly so well, qualified for an instructor as youth, for it has not profited so much as it has lost.”

Surely, humility comes with age. I have declined too much to maintain my youthful exuberance, confidence, ambition, and illusions. I see the inevitable better now that I am too obvious an example of it.

What has grown in me, as ego and ambition have subsided enough to allow me some vision, is an astounding sense of admiration for the various manifestations of human accomplishment. And it is particularly in those areas where I have at least a little learning that my humility is most profound.

I have seen this humility in others. We curse our computers and cell phones when they take a few seconds to perform tasks whose monumentality we have no notion of. Some years ago, I introduced the topic of scientific chaos to high school students. I gave them the simplest equation that possesses chaotic nature. They had to plug a value in the equation to predict a new value, then use that value to calculate the next, and repeat the process 15 times. Once they caught on, they could do a calculation in about 20 seconds, so the exercise took roughly 5 minutes.

I then took them into the computer lab where a simple program did and graphed the same calculations. When you hit any key, the program made the next calculation and if you held the key down, successive calculations appeared almost instantly.

You cannot believe how profoundly this simple demo impressed every student. What was it that rendered them open to being impressed? It was a little learning. For the first time they could compare their calculating speed to the computer's.

Back poetry and learning. For years I've written poems when the fancy struck me. I attained a certain skill at writing rhyming roasts. Other times my poems roused at least my own deep feelings. Despite little formal knowledge of poetic structure, I sure do recognize many great poems and that I could not have written such poems – for example, Pope's poem, *A Little Learning*.

How about swimming? In most short distance Olympic swim races, the swimmers are largely bunched. If you have no learning of swimming, you cannot appreciate how fast they swim. But all you need is a little learning to appreciate their incredible speed. I was a mediocre competitive swimmer when world records were much slower than now. My son was far, far better than I. And Olympic swimmers are far, far better than he was at his peak. So, I am awestruck.

It's the same with running, where I was pretty quick! I sometimes ran with Ron Blomberg, who played for the NY Yankees. When we did sprints (and he didn't run all out) he zoomed way ahead of me. I knew the Olympians would have left Ron in the dust. That was the clincher. For the first time I realized my dream of making the Olympics was absurd.

It goes on. In science and math (my profession), I could see the works and thoughts of those with the ability, clarity, and courage I lacked to venture into new areas, find order amidst the chaos of nature or, in the case of one of my professors, Edward Lorenz, diagnose chaos amidst the order of nature.

The scanty skill I have as a pianist after years of effort, is dwarfed by that of my son and one of my brothers, and which, in turn is dwarfed by pianists such as Vladimir Horowitz or Evgeny Kissin. That has magnified my admiration. I have no ability to compose music, but my knowledge of the pieces I play allows me to glimpse the variational genius of Bach, the harmonic and melodic genius of Schubert, the technical genius of Chopin, the innovations of Scott Joplin.

Even as a child, my little knowledge enabled me to see when others were way ahead of me, and seeing that always opened my eyes to more distant, higher peaks. Three friends, one in math, one in social science, and one in music I plainly saw were dimensions ahead of me in their fields. That vast distance gave me some perspective.

Sometimes you don't see. I had no concept whatever of what goes into constructing a symphony, and learned with amazement from the fantastic concert-lectures of Leonard Bernstein and Leon Botstein. There I could not extrapolate at all. But there I had no learning at all.

So, where you don't see beyond yourself is either where you have no learning or where your ego interferes to cloud your view of reality. Despite being laden with ego, any area where I have attained a little learning has been enough to allow me to see at least those people that are way beyond me. In conclusion, I would have whole heartily agreed with Alexander Pope had he written instead that a little mind is a dangerous thing. But perhaps I have, after all, drunk deeper from life's Pierian Spring than I have given myself credit for.