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Faith, Science, and Art (Work Station Two)

Gary B. Swanson

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Gary B. Swanson

On the dust jacket of a recent book by Jonah Lehrer: “Science is not the only path to knowledge. In fact, when it comes to understanding the brain, art got there first.”¹

Only in his late 20s, Lehrer has written for the *Boston Globe*, *Nature*, NPR, and *NOVA*. He’s a graduate of Columbia University and a Rhodes Scholar. And he has worked in the lab of Nobel Prize-winning neuroscientist Eric Kandel and in the kitchens of *Le Cirque 2000* and *Le Bernardin*.

His first book, *Proust Was a Neuroscientist*, posits that gifted artists have often anticipated truths that science has sometimes taken more than a century to confirm. Each chapter of the book describes an insight that a painter, a musician, an author—even a chef—described or represented in his or her work: e.g., Walt Whitman, the substance of feeling; Paul Cezanne, the sense of sight; Igor Stravinsky, the source of music. Then the chapter explains how brain

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science has verified the artist’s observations.

In doing so, Lehrer demonstrates one of the significant limitations of science. “It is ironic,” he says, “but true: the one reality science cannot reduce is the one reality we will ever know.”²

What he is saying, of course, pertains to the abstract and sometimes ineffable qualities of life that cannot be quantified. They cannot be measured. They cannot be duplicated in the science lab.

And here is where religion and art have something elemental in common: each constitutes a search for truth utilizing tools that materialist science rejects. And when the two are utilized together—as God intended them to be—they convey profound truths that science simply does not care to investigate.

Consider, for example, the tabernacle that God commanded the Israelites to build during their 40-year detour in the wilderness. He was seeking to provide a way in which His people—an obstinate, “show-

me” bunch with no patience for abstraction—could come to understand the nature of His love for them and respond in kind. What do you do when you’re trying to convey spiritual concepts like justice and sacrifice to an estimated rabble of more than two million souls who are seemingly fixated on a literal golden calf and the “flesh-pots of Egypt”?

In today’s parlance, God could have used “shock and awe.” But He knew that you don’t truly win hearts and minds in this way.

He could have also deployed His priests in a comprehensive and systematic program of religious instruction. But this was not a topic of definitions and diagrams, of facts and formulas. It was far more than $A + B = C$.

With all the possible approaches at His disposal, God chose to represent His love to His people through the utilization of the arts. “The making of the Tabernacle,” observes Francis Schaeffer, “involved almost every form of representational art known to humanity.”³

The most immediate and obvious of these would have been the visual

arts. Browsing through Exodus 25–28, the reader glimpses the exquisite workmanship that went into the appointments of the sanctuary. Basic raw materials included gold, silver, and brass. From these were fashioned cherubim, flowers, loops, clasps, sockets, and rings. There were 11 curtains of goatskins, ram skins, and badger skins and a veil of blue, purple, and scarlet thread. And all this was supported by a structure of acacia wood.



And God knew exactly who He wanted to oversee the creation of all this beauty: Bezalel, of the tribe of Judah; and Aholiab, of the tribe of Dan. He said he

had filled these artisans with “wisdom, in understanding, in knowledge, and in all manner of workmanship, to design artistic works, to work in gold, in silver, in bronze, in cutting jewels for setting, in carving wood, and to work in all manner of workmanship” (Ex. 31:3-5, NKJV). These capabilities were a divine gift. These artisans were ordained for their holy work.

Taking about half a year to build, in its completeness, the tabernacle was, in a real sense, a three-dimen-

sional stage in the round. It was “the example and shadow of heavenly things” (Heb. 8:5, KJV). Every physical property on this stage of about a thousand square feet had a meaning beyond itself. The laver, the table of showbread, the candlesticks, the altar of incense, the ark of the covenant—each fulfilled a specific function in the service, but it also represented something that transcended mere gold and acacia wood.

And the tabernacle also involved performance, theme, and story. In a sense, the sanctuary service was theater. The daily service was Act 1; the yearly service, Act 2. What the priests *did*—every movement, every act—each demonstrated a profound truth. Each of the details that God prescribed in the constructing of the tabernacle and the conducting of its services had meaning beyond itself.

“In the ministration of the tabernacle, and of the temple that afterward took its place, the people were taught each day the great truths relative to Christ’s death and ministration, and once each year their minds were carried forward to the closing events of the great controversy between Christ and Satan, the final purification of the universe from sin and sinners.”⁴

Interestingly, Ellen White describes in aesthetic terms the role of God’s church throughout history. Especially in the darkest of times, she says, it has been “the theater of His grace.”⁵

“Good writing,” says author John Ciardi, “is as positive a search for truth as is any part of science, and it deals with kinds of truth that must forever be beyond science.”⁶ The same assertion could be made for any of the arts, and especially of those that are searching for spiritual truth.

It could be observed, of course, that this was written by an artist—not a scientist. What other viewpoint could you expect from a writer, after all? But in the search for truth, as Jonah Lehrer clearly asks, where should we be looking for “the only reality we will ever know”?

REFERENCES

- ¹ *Proust Was a Neuroscientist* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2007).
- ² *Ibid.*, p. xii.
- ³ Luci Shaw, “Beauty and the Creative Impulse,” in Leland Ryken, ed., *The Christian Imagination* (Colorado Springs, Colo.: Shaw Books, 2002), p. 96.
- ⁴ *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 358.
- ⁵ *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 12.
- ⁶ John Ciardi, “What Every Writer Must Learn,” *The Saturday Review* (Dec. 15, 1956), in Leland Ryken, ed., *op cit.*, p. 314.

