Something about the last Eight Weeks

Knowing is not a problem of the world at large, for things-in-themselves do not demand, nor desire any explanation. Knowing and understanding is a problem of man, one which he must solve for himself. As a child, each and every one of us has been perplexed by the notion that we are always thinking, always dwelling on *something*. “Even when I am not thinking,” we would say, “I am thinking about not thinking.” At that age, there seemed to be answers to all of our questions. Sessions of asking, “Why?” were followed by sessions of asking, “Where?” and although we remained skeptical of stories about the stork, and the presents under the tree, we remained confident that in time, those few questions for which we had no understanding would soon be resolved and our hunger for answers, satisfied.

As time progressed, however, we dipped our toes in muddier waters. The middle years of childhood, before “wisdom” had come our way, were marked by simple answers to increasing challenging questions. We let ourselves accept that things were the way they were simply because that is the way that we perceived them to be. We started to recognize the value of our own intuition, and began to understand our experiences by applying this intuitive process. We had come to understand and know ourselves by understanding our relation to the people and things around us, and the experiences that we shared. More so than ever, we committed ourselves to an identity and a train of thought and theory that often manifested itself in messy hair, costume jewelry and bright colored clothing that often didn’t fit, despite a more sophisticated foundation. It was enough for things to just be.
It was not long, however, that we were once again pulled aside and reminded of the value of questioning everything. We were taught that it was by questioning that science and modern technology had brought the world to where it stood then, and that is was these same processes that would allow for the advancement of humans in overcoming disease and the eradication of global suffering. In a few short years, it seemed as though the pool of the unknown had grown from the size of a puddle in the front lawn after a brief afternoon storm, to the size of an expansive ocean spanning between continents and poles. As though we presented no experience in the area of “knowing,” the methodologies that we had struggled to develop in our early youth were stripped and rebuilt, and learning right from wrong had once again turned into being told right from wrong, leaving little room for thought and reflection. Any alternatives we offered to reaching the true and correct were struck down, and laughed at, and we were shown the accepted structure for thinking and understanding.

Another half a decade later, I have been asked to make sense of this thing called knowledge. In a way, I have been asked to know knowledge, to understand it, and write about it. I questioned this very act, for in a time of omnipresent disagreement, who am I to offer my experience and expertise? What value can be attached to the things that I claim to know, and is that value based on how I came to know these things, because it is coming from me, or because I emanate some other quality that gives my knowledge some form of authority and validity? How do we discern whom to believe? In a world where we lie at the brink of a transition from modernity to more reflective and qualitative ways of thinking, how are we going to decide who will be responsible for managing knowledge and packaging it for delivery and distribution to the masses?
Questions of authority are ones which lie in culture and nurture, subject to change and influence with time and intervention. What a culture comes to value will ultimately decide how processes are run socially and politically. Our social and political values are instilled in us through institutions from as early as we participate in them. For this reason, change is a lengthy and gradual process, subject to rejection and lag upon acceptance. So, while change may not be evident, its presence cannot be denied, for it may exist in the margins, making its was

I feel as though this is the point at which we stand in the balance of the authority of knowledge in contemporary academic culture. In an age where numbers, rationalism and the scientific method seem to have a monopoly on the authority of knowledge, it is difficult to ascertain the degree to which the system is open to change. I would argue however, that science, technology and the scientific process of thought and reason are leading to their own demise, and paving curving but stable road for other lines of thought to emerge. By pushing further and further in an effort to know and understand some piece of information, what the scientific process seems to be accomplishing is demonstrating more and more how for some things, there is no proof that will hold true as part of the standard reliable and repeatable framework. Perhaps what that goes to show is that the only way to find truth with logic is to have already found it without, for even in the scientist’s mind, there are few questions that are not hypothesized. Theses are not formed from results in the sciences, but rather, hypotheses are potentially validated from the results.

For every scientific study, there seems to be another that contradicts it. From each question, there arises an answer, and three more questions. The same methodology that taught questioning and critical analysis as a means of reaching conclusions, there has
arisen questioning as a means skepticism. The desire to know uncertainties has come to mean an inability to know any certainty. The concept of knowing comes with suitcases, packed with doubt and unsure-ness. To know something according to modernist ways of thinking no longer means being sure of something. We are moving closer and closer to the we cannot know and farther and farther from the things which we think we can. In light of all of this, boundaries and limits are being formed, and the public as well as academia has been offered a glimpse of how boundaries should be approached in each and every field. We are moving from an age of the acquisition of knowledge, to an age of the study of unknowability. This very acknowledgement of unknowability can have drastic effects on life as we know it, for it suggests that there is room for compatibility between faith and reason.

Vast majorities of the people in the world have faith, or believe in some power that is greater and more powerful than they are. Different societies have different ideas of what this or these beings may be, if it is, or they are beings at all, and how it, or they are manifested in our quotidian. One of the great knowabilities, or unknowabilities of humans has been this faith and belief, something which seems to have developed in parallel across the globe, suggesting a psychic unity of mankind, or perhaps, a psychic unity of mankind’s interests. Whichever it may be, reason and faith were confronted by a struggle that has driven religion out of the realm of truth, and placed it in the outskirts of day to day life, like some sort of fiction, or story, or something that we look to in times of natural disasters. If it were not for reasons of sensitivity, works of scripture could be seen shelved alongside Danielle Steele novels at the checkout counter in order to accurately represent an academic viewpoint about truth the contain.
But this no longer has to be the case if we realize that there is a plurality in knowing, and part of that is not knowing. By realizing that there are areas of life which are experienced, and some which require no explanation at all, we will give ourselves an opportunity to find more meaningful relationships with the world around us, and come to know it in a different way, one which has no thirst for explanations.

One of the most difficult things about writing about knowledge, is that our language does not support writing outside an academic realm of standards, and words that can be understood in very different ways in the vernacular come to mean very specific things which do not necessarily portray the intended message. I have struggled to formulate my ideas, and I fear looking back at what I have written, knowing that I will run across paragraphs that do not belong, sentences that need to be moved, and words that may be misspelled. As messy as my thought may be on paper, however, I have a pretty good notion of what I’m trying to say.

The things that I have learned over the past eight weeks are not solutions to problems, nor answers to questions, but rather, a little insight on how to live. I have learned to avoid telling people who are not from the east coast that I am going to medical school, for they will surely display some lever of concern for me. I have learned that if I ever plan on moving to Boulder, that I will leave the SUV in the garage, and never wash it either. I know to watch for content free statements. Most importantly, however, I have learned that I do indeed have an open mind, that in eight weeks, I can change my mind about a lot of things, and that there are value systems I have never even considered. I have learned that acknowledging the limits of knowledge does not offer that our future lies in the hands of naive realism, and despite games of pessimistic probability, a little faith and intuition here and there can’t hurt. Phew… Is that five pages?
That was a joke. I think I could sit down and reflect, dwell, as some wiser than me may call it, for pages and pages. I will not feel forced to produce a piece of writing that starts with some premise and reaches some conclusion by systematically offering some sort of proof. I will feel comfortable about unrefined ideas, and unrefined transitions, and I will not be driven by accountability, for with each word and with each sentence, I will feel as though I have grown, and the times I described at the start of my paper will appear to be farther and farther back in my memory. Understanding limits and knowing when to stop are suddenly making much more sense to me. This paper has reached it’s utilitarian limit… forcing me to write more would jeopardize my presentation, and waste your time, whoever you are that is reading this. Perhaps, all these things could be better explained over coffee (and tea) at Buchanan’s.

To all of you who end up reading this…

I struggled in deciding what this paper was going to be like… a journal? a response? critical analysis? I hope that it has touched on what you may have been hoping to hear about.

The truth is that my experiences over the past eight weeks has been one of the most influential of my tender 20 years. While we all joked about walking away with circles of thought to last for a lifetime, I have discovered a new way of thought, and a better grasp for how I actually view a variety of issues. I would like to thank you for the time and dedication that you each devoted to us 13 seemingly free-spirited
undergraduates, and I would like you to know that you have all greatly impacted our lives. Thank you for letting me be a part of this experience. It’s been grand.