

On Viewing Learners as Spiritual Beings: Implications for Language Educators

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This article, first presented as a plenary address at the CELT 2007 conference at Seattle Pacific University, explores the implications of challenging reductive understandings of learners in language classrooms and working instead with a conception of the learner as a spiritual being. Some reasons why it has been difficult to frame a place for spirituality in accounts of the language learner are described, and an example is examined of an attempt to design a sequence of classroom learning in the light of a concern for students' spiritual growth.

The theme of this paper is the relationship between the often reductive ways in which the field of language education envisages students and the ways in which we design our ways of teaching and learning. What, if anything, would follow for the activities of the language classroom if we could articulate a robust account of how learners' spiritual growth might be part of what is going on?

I propose to do three things in what follows. First, I am going to relate a story that raises a pointed question about how we see students. Then I am going to suggest some ways in which our intellectual and professional practices keep us from answering the question well. And finally, I am going to describe a teaching sequence from one of my own courses as a sample, provisional effort to answer the question in my own teaching.

A Story About How We See Students

The story comes from a math classroom. I'm going to narrate the start and the end of the story and then return to the middle. I got the story first hand from a colleague, Jim Bradley; here is the first part in his words.

My students were leaving after the first introductory statistics class of the spring semester, but one young man stayed behind to talk. Brian was a Social Work major and told me with some conviction that he did not want to be enrolled in statistics. He did not like mathematics. He was only taking this course because it was required and every effort on his part to get the requirement waived had failed. Furthermore, he was a second semester senior and he could not graduate without completing this course. ...

His manner intrigued me – he seemed to be challenging me but he also had warmth, openness, and an obvious intelligence I found appealing. Thinking that this would relieve his anxieties, I explained to him that basic arithmetic plus some of the skills students normally gain in a year and a half of high school algebra would suffice. He replied, 'I'm not sure I can do those things'. I invited Brian to stop at my office the next day – I had a diagnostic test that would help the two of us identify more specifically which (if any) ...mathematics skills...he might lack.

The test began with addition of whole numbers – problems like '6 + 8 = ?'. That was the only section of the test on which Brian was consistently able to give correct answers. For example, one question asked '4 - 7 = ?'. Brian wrote zero as his answer. His explanation to me was that if someone has four things and tries to take away seven, he certainly wouldn't have any left! (Smith, Shortt, & Bradley, 2006, pp. 3-4)

Like all good stories, this one starts with a problem – in this case a student in a math class who not only openly does not want to be there but has serious difficulties with the material – there is lack of both motivation and prerequisite skill. Like all good American stories this story also has a happy ending. Here it is, again in Jim's words, picking up the tale about a week later:

He earned a 69 on his first statistics test. It was barely a C, but it was a passing grade. He earned a 95 on the second test and a 99, the highest grade in the class on the third test. ...by the end of the term, he demonstrated mastery of the entire elementary school arithmetic curriculum plus a year and a half of algebra. ...he finished with a B+ in the course and graduated as an Honor's student in the Social Work program. (Smith, Shortt, & Bradley, 2006, p. 4)

This is teacher-of-the-year material. In a matter of about four or five weeks, my colleague brought this student from inability to handle very basic mathematical concepts to the top of a college level statistics class. What happened in between? I have been asking that question to number of Christian teacher audiences over the past year. Suggestions

have included tutoring, remedial instruction to fill in missing concepts, making connections with the student's interests, giving him a better self-image as a math learner, reassuring him of his ability to succeed, and so on. Almost all have focused on building cognitive capacity or helping the student to feel better about learning. Here's Jim's account of what actually happened:

I replied, 'Brian ...How did you ever get through elementary school and high school with this many gaps in your understanding?' He thought for a long moment and replied, 'When I was in first grade, one day my teacher held my arithmetic homework up in front of the class as an example to the rest of the class of how not to do the assignment. I was so angry at her that I vowed that I would never learn mathematics for the rest of my life.' I was stunned. I said, 'But you had to complete arithmetic and at last some algebra to graduate from elementary and high school'. He replied, 'I just memorized skills long enough to get through the tests, then I forgot them'. I said, 'Brian, what your first grade teacher did to you was a terrible thing. This may sound strange to you, but you need to forgive that teacher.' He looked at me like I was a creature from another planet. 'I'm serious', I said.

'Your hurt feelings and your anger toward your first grade teacher are an obstacle to your learning. If you want to get through statistics, you'll need to forgive her.' 'Well', he replied, obviously unconvinced, 'I'll think about it'.

I ran into Brian at a campus social event on Saturday. I asked him, 'So have you taken any steps toward forgiving your teacher?' 'Nah', he replied, 'I haven't thought about it'. I was irritated and said probably too forcefully, 'I wasn't kidding. ... I'm going to be blunt with you. If you don't forgive that teacher, you won't be able to pass statistics. And if you don't pass statistics, you won't graduate. If you won't believe me, at least pray about it. See if God thinks this is important.' Brian's face looked very pale. 'OK', he said, 'I'll do that'.

Brian was at my office door when I arrived on Monday morning. He said 'I did pray about what you said and I think you're right. But I also think I'm going to need a tutor to help me get all that arithmetic and algebra I didn't learn.' 'Of course', I replied, 'I'll arrange one for you today.' (Smith, Shortt, & Bradley, 2006, pp. 3-4)

I find myself wondering how many math teachers would have thought of forgiveness as a possible prerequisite for learning statistics – and therefore how many would have failed Brian. I also find myself curious about the fact that of the several hundred Christian teachers with whom I have discussed this story, only one suggested, and humorously at that, that prayer might be a possible response; cognitive and affective categories were by and large the only categories deployed to deal with the puzzle. And I find myself asking again a question that provides the thread of this presentation – what might it mean to view our students as spiritual beings?

What Might It Mean to View Our Students as Spiritual Beings?

This is the question I want to explore here, and while my colleague's story raises it in vivid manner, I want to push the question a little further than his tale takes it. Rarely does a semester go by when I do not receive a salutary reminder that students are more complex in their needs and experiences than the impressions of them that I form. It is healthy for me to remember regularly that a student is, as Comenius put it long ago, "not a block of wood from which you can carve a statue," but rather "a living image, shaping, misshaping and reshaping itself" (Comenius, 1953, p. 24). What I have in mind here, however, goes beyond attitude. What I want to know is, if I insist that my students are inspired creatures, does that starting point only affect my quota of kindness, or does it reach deeper into the processes of my classroom and change my actual approaches to teaching language? (see Smith, 2001, 2002, 2006)

I think there are at least three major factors that make this a difficult question to ask and answer well. These are the images of personhood embedded in the disciplinary discourse of language education, in the pages of the average language teaching text, and in our own theological accounts of spirituality. I suggest that all three of these areas make it difficult for us to think well about the language classroom. Let me look all too briefly at each in turn.

First, the last hundred years of scholarly inquiry into language learning have offered us a string of reductive ways of seeing learners. We find in the early part of the century visions of learners as essentially logic circuits exercising their rational capacities on grammatical puzzles. A little later, learners are complex biological machines responding with programmable behaviors to stimuli from the environment. This mind-body dichotomy gives rise to rebellions in the name of the learner as an autonomous center of self-esteem whose positive feelings are the key to authentic learning. More recently we have added the learner as a social agent, who needs to negotiate meanings and services in a

predictable range of social and cultural settings, and the learner as a cluster of identity traces—gender, race, social class—that together take shape as a site of struggle within the circulation of power. Each of these shifts has taught us things, and certainly none are irrelevant—our statistics student in the story with which I started does indeed need rational abilities, effective habits and motor skills, emotional stability, and some social skills in order to succeed, and he has clearly been deeply affected by an abuse of power. I suggest, however, that even taken together they do not provide what from a Christian perspective might amount to an adequate account of what happened, or of what a person is. As I have argued elsewhere (Smith & Osborn, 2007), categories such as the spiritual and moral are consistently either ignored, marginalized or reduced to some other category, such as the affective or the political. I am over-simplifying for the sake of speed, but I suggest that it is broadly true that the discourse of our discipline has not given us a cogent language for talking about these matters.

If we turn to typical teaching texts we find parallel reductions at work. Any language teaching text teaches a doctrine of personhood in at least two complementary ways. On the one hand it offers a representation of people who speak the target language and sketches parameters of normality within which they are assumed to operate. *This*, each text suggests, is what people who speak this language are like. On the other hand, any teaching text also projects certain behaviors, interests and attitudes for learners of the language, through the things it asks them to do, to say, to see, to hear and to think about. It encourages learners to talk about this and not that, to see this and not that as important, to picture themselves engaged in this future action and not that. *This*, each text suggests, is what people who are learning to speak this language are like.

The texts most readily available for the languages that I teach are usually populated by stock photos or cartoon depictions of anodyne individuals with what are taken to be average interests and qualities. Their lives consist largely of shopping and engaging in other minor economic transactions, taking vacations and engaging in leisure pursuits, eating, drinking and visiting the doctor. These are all valid activities, but when they form the whole they fall short. By and large, the people depicted do not suffer, do not die, do not face difficult moral choices, do not mourn or lament, do not experience or protest injustice, do not pray or worship, do not believe anything particularly significant, do not sacrifice, do not hope or doubt. They represent a consumer culture to which we have become all too inured, and from which many central human experiences have been quietly marginalized in such a way that to introduce, say, the language of prayer feels awkward and clumsy, like bringing in a character who does not fit the genre of the story one is telling, like having Little Red Riding Hood suddenly appear on the bridge of the Starship Enterprise.

The third problem is theological, though it stems from some of the same causes. To put it bluntly, popular theology has also fallen short in the task of giving us a conception of spirituality that might be robust enough to join the educational conversation. We commonly, in defiance of biblical theology but in obedience to post-Enlightenment norms, think of spirituality as the opposite of the material and the mundane, or as synonymous with the devotional or sacred. “Spiritual” activities are then understood to be activities such as prayer, Bible study and religious meetings. If we think thus of the spiritual as one side of a split between the sacred and the secular, between the immaterial and the mundane, then we are likely to think of the spiritual moments in class as the moments when prayers are offered, or when Bible verses are included in learning materials, leaving the rest of the processes of the classroom to be assigned to the “secular” category. This model is clearly visible in many attempts at Christian curriculum, including many examples of what is termed Bible-based ESL. In such instances most of the everyday processes of teaching and learning remain essentially unconnected with the brief moments of escape that are designated as spiritual, and the spiritual remains essentially unconnected with the daily stuff of life. This and the other tendencies mentioned become mutually reinforcing in modern Western contexts: a view of learning that marginalizes the spiritual and a view of spirituality that see itself at the fringes of the mundane conspire together to prevent fruitful interaction between faith and pedagogy.

I have no time to elaborate a theology here, but let me at least sketch some necessary considerations. Pointing to the dignity accorded to simple bread and wine from the earliest days of the church, Zizioulas (1986) states that “unlike ancient Greek and especially Neoplatonic attitudes to spirituality, the patristic mentality, based on a eucharistic approach to life, stressed that being ‘spiritual’ meant accepting and sanctifying the material world and not undermining its importance in any way” (p. 35). The apostle Paul is comfortable speaking of “spiritual bodies” (1 Corinthians 15:44), a phrase which can only be deeply puzzling if the spiritual and the material are held to be opposites, and he further urges us: “offer your *bodies* as living sacrifices, holy and acceptable to God, which is your *spiritual* worship” (Romans 12:1-3, emphasis added; see similarly Romans 6:13; 1 Corinthians 6:13, 15, 19). Taylor (1989) thus argues that the Christian spirituality of the Reformation lies at the roots of the modern affirmation of ordinary life as a locus of personal significance. By denying a hierarchy of callings in which sacred clerical vocations brought an automatically closer proximity to God, the Reformers were “denying the very distinction between sacred and profane and hence affirming

their interpenetration” (p. 217). Taylor (1989) goes on to argue that

As a result, certain of the original potentialities of Christian faith ... were allowed to develop. The crucial potentiality here was that of conceiving the hallowing of life not as something which takes place only at the limits, as it were, but as a change which can penetrate the full extent of mundane life. (p. 221)

This view, which, by the way, I have just drawn from an Orthodox theologian discussing the early church and a Roman Catholic philosopher discussing the Reformation, understands spirituality neither as an escape nor as that which is left over or inserted when our everyday human tasks have been given their due. If spirituality is seen as a residue, the result is seeing such everyday tasks as in themselves spiritless, and perhaps longing to be released from them so that we can pursue what we call “ministry” instead. A more biblical and theologically adequate view of Christian spirituality sees it rather as expressed in a growing patterning and orientation of the whole of life (heart, soul, mind and strength) after Christ, who is the image of God (Mark 12:30; 2 Corinthians 4:4) and who came to reconcile, in Paul’s words, “all things, in heaven or on earth” (Colossians 1:15-20). Other spiritualities orient and pattern life around other spiritual sources. I grant that there is much more to discuss here, but for now I simply want to suggest that when the spiritless view of the self that has tended to shape our disciplinary discourse and teaching materials goes alongside a theology that can only imagine the spiritual in terms of adding prayer and Bible verses to whatever educational practices are current, we are in deep trouble.

Caught between these various secular and Christian reductions of the self, I find myself as a teacher encountering experiences such as the day very early in my teaching career when a 12-year-old student raised her hand mid-way through a French grammar less to ask a question. Expecting a question about verb endings, I wandered over, secure in my professional competence, only to hear her ask: “Sir, are you afraid of dying?”, and to hear her friend follow up with the comment: “We are, we talk about it all the time.” More recently, I find myself opening the daily newspaper and reading about medical studies that have identified gratitude and forgiveness as factors contributing to the physical healing of heart disease. So, back from the theoretical digression to my question: how would I *teach* differently if I believed that my students were spiritual beings?

This remains a live question for me, not one that I have neatly answered and am ready to roll out as a 5-step program with mailings and franchises. Part of what I want to do is recommend living with the question. I do, however, hope to avoid the frustrating speaker’s habit of gesturing dramatically over the horizon but making few suggestions as to how to get there. In the space that remains, I would like to describe a two week segment from my intermediate German class, not as a model of perfection, but as a fallible but concrete sample of where the question could lead.

A Two Week Unit Using Adaline Kelbert’s Story

The class syllabus includes an early review of the present perfect tense. There are scores of ways of going about this. If I’m looking for an easy life, the easiest option is to go with a current textbook such as *A Practical Review of German Grammar* (Dippmann & Watzinger-Tharp, 1999). This offers a brief description of tense formation (kicking off with the example sentence “I paid the bill yesterday”) and then proceeds to a series of exercises. These start out rather abstract (students are urged to “form the past participles” of 32 verbs) but soon show some attempts to engage “real life” situations — we learn that Herr Roth has sold his shares, that Herr Zimmer collected his check yesterday, that Herr Lenk may have ignored Frau Kern’s advice (about what we are not told), that the Baumans have gone on vacation and paid a lot for their hotel, and that Kurt has always driven his car too fast. Finally, students are to “write a paragraph [describing] events chronologically from the current year.” The chapter has a certain businesslike efficiency, and the examples are valid as far as they go, but as usual I am faced with a remarkably narrow slice of life, and little to excite significant reflection.

I still use the grammar book for now, in the background, but have added the life story of Adaline Kelbert, an unknown Hamburg housewife who was a friend of a friend. I have transcripts and audio recordings of interviews with her and a collection of family photos (from Baker et. al., 1996, from which the quotations from Adaline Kelbert below are drawn and translated from the German; I discuss this teaching unit in more detail in Smith, et al., 2007). Here is a brief summary of her story. Born into a German speaking family in Wolynien, near Kiev in 1903, Adaline grew up on the family farm until in 1916 the family had to leave because of the First World War. Travelling a vast distance eastward, they eventually found hospitality in a Tartar village near Omsk. Their hosts had a two-room log house, and gave up one room to the refugee family. As Adaline later recalled:

They gave what they had. Each person could break off a piece of the bread and a spoonful of milk was poured into the tea...

After a while the family moved on to a German-speaking Mennonite village nearby in search of work. Here things took a turn for the better:

There was also a German church. ...we got...an old house there...and we had work there, and it was an old house, we lived well there. And there we went to church. We could buy milk there, and there was bread everywhere. And we went to church there.

In 1918 the family returned home, finding their house empty but intact. Adaline married a young man from a neighboring village in 1923. In the ensuing years they faced increasing demands for crops from the new communist authorities, until finally in 1930 they were told that they must forfeit their possessions. One evening, men came and took everything, including the livestock. Adaline's husband was imprisoned for 5 years for unapproved trading, and then the house was demanded.

Then I went to the authority: where should I stay? I said: "I have four children." I said: "Where am I supposed to go?" A dog was better off than I was. "There's a tree over there, you can settle under it," he said. At the end of November. ...I said: "But I'm afraid. They keep coming to look for everything."

Adaline and her four children moved in with her sister-in-law. Her husband was sent to work in Dnepropetrovsk, but ran away and returned to Wolynien, living nearby in hiding for some time. In 1933 and 1934 failed crops drove the family to migrate to Odessa and back. Late in the Second World War the German army arrived in town, and deported the German speakers to Germany. In January 1945 the Kelbert family thus found themselves in Thuringen, but the husband and two sons were conscripted into the German army, while Adaline was put on a train that deposited her in Hamburg. She lived in a local school, writing letters to try to trace her family. Her husband and older son returned in the summer of 1945 — a younger son was lost. They settled permanently near Hamburg. Reflecting back on her story, Adaline is remarkably positive about her experiences, commenting:

We always had this, when we were fleeing, this trust, there is One there who cares for all our cares ... and when things were still so dark, some spark was always there, that gave one comfort and new courage again.

As I have adapted this story, which originated in the Charis curriculum project, for my own classroom use, I have chosen to begin with the photographs. They provide extended oral practice and vocabulary building as students describe and speculate about each image both in pairs and as a class — what do you see? What is going on? How do you know? What will happen next? Beyond this linguistic value, the photos also give me pictures of real people with complex histories. The combination of faces and narrative is intended to evoke empathy, a response not invited by many of the images in regular textbooks. And using real faces and concretely historical narrative makes the language of faith seem much less like an alien intrusion.

I have been learning the unit's rhythms — the first time I used it I showed too many photos too early, and the momentum sagged as we got into several days of reading activities; now I drip-feed fresh images and fresh episodes of the story over several days. Reading, listening and oral renarration activities allow us to move beyond initial impressions to a more detailed grasp of Adaline's experiences. This becomes an explicit rationale for focus on form. I remind students periodically that the reason we need to step aside and work on specific language points, including the formation of the past tense, is that if we do not, we risk misunderstanding and thus disrespecting what she has to tell us. Grammar can serve respect, and not merely grades, and learning a new language is as much about acquiring the humility needed to *hear* voices well that were previously marginal to us as it is about enhancing our abilities to *speak* in our own voices.

Opportunities for Spiritual and Moral Engagement

As the story unfolds, it offers hooks, affordances for spiritual and moral engagement. I will describe four.

First, there is the occasion when Adaline's family was taken in by a Tartar family living in a two-room log cabin near Omsk. This is clearly a vivid memory for Adaline - eight decades later she describes in detail how mealtimes worked and what was eaten and drunk. We also hear in her comments an undertone of disapproval of the lack of farming competence of her semi-nomadic hosts, alongside gratitude that they provided a temporary refuge after her family had been turned out of previous villages. The underlying themes of displacement, vulnerability, cultural unfamiliarity, prejudice and hospitality all continue today to characterize cross-cultural encounters the world over, encounters that all too often do not take place in the comfortable transactional contexts implied or portrayed by textbooks. When we reach this part of the story, I ask students how many rooms their parents' house has. Answers vary, but all are many times

higher than two. Now imagine this, I continue. You are at home with your parents and there is a knock at the door. On the doorstep you find a family who are from a different ethnic group and have very limited English. It appears that they need a place to stay for a while. How many of you think that the visitors would be invited in? The result is the uncomfortable realization that few of our relatively prosperous families would open up their capacious homes — positive responses have never passed 20% of the class. Since I teach Christian students, I point to the disparity between the Christian ethics that we claim to espouse and our behaviors — Jesus listed welcoming the stranger as one of the differences between the sheep and the goats, heaven and hell, so what is it about our cultural location that keeps us from taking his words seriously? I carefully frame this as a challenge from Adaline Kelbert's experience to "us" — myself explicitly included. I sometimes briefly narrate some of my own halting attempts to practice hospitality in the face of need. My aim is not to moralize, but to model an openness to receiving ethical and spiritual challenges from the lives of members of other cultures, a spirit of teachability in the face of the other and a willingness to acknowledge my own falling short.

These exchanges, with or without direct reference to Christian concerns, are linguistically simple but have potential to be ethically and spiritually substantial — it does not require a long and complicated discussion of abstract ethical principles to provide an opportunity, entirely within the target language, for students to face such issues. Narrative and images make the issues concrete, and offer chances for students to compare themselves with Adaline Kelbert's summary of her experience at the hands of her Tartar hosts: "Sie haben gegeben, was sie hatten" (They gave what they had).

A second opening is created by Adaline's relish as she narrates the luxuries that became available upon the move the Mennonite village: work, milk, bread, an old house, and—repeated three times — the chance to worship at a German-speaking church. "Da haben wir gut gewohnt!", she declares, "we lived well there!" Discuss with a partner, I suggest, the five things that you would need to have in your life to be able to look back fondly on how well things were going. We can then compare lists. There is no correct answer, merely another opportunity for self-examination and learning from another. These discussions are brief - a matter of minutes. The students' language level does not make turning the class into a lengthy discussion of materialism and spiritual values a promising strategy. Each brief encounter, however, is a cumulative element in the overall experience of working through the narrative material.

Third, late in the story we consider a recent photograph of Adaline's living room showing shelves loaded with family photos, along with various other objects. We begin by talking about how the age of the person living here could be deduced from the picture. Then I ask what is most important to Adaline, aged 93 at this point? The inevitable answer is: people. There are many photos, but none show cars or other possessions, scenery or tourist destinations. This invites a further question. If people are likely to be the most important thing to you if you live to be 93, does that affect what you value now? Does it suggest any grounds for reflection on the choices you will make and the priorities you will set between now and then?

Fourth, after we have viewed the photographs, read sections of the narrative, listened to recordings, and practiced past tense verb forms, students are asked to find a local elderly person whom they can interview in English. Armed with questions about life history, trials endured and the presence or absence of faith based on Adaline Kelbert's narrative, students are to conduct an interview in English and bring the results to class. This is turned into both oral and written German narrative as students share what they have learned with one another and draft a piece of biographical writing based on their interview. Again, it is not only the linguistic gains and cultural comparisons that are of interest; my aims are complex, and include giving to some elderly people a chance to retell cherished stories to a fresh audience, and to some younger people a new chance to discover the benefits of listening to the elderly. Some students have learned of important episodes in the lives of their own relatives of which they had been ignorant.

Conclusions

These are a few of my attempts to teach on the assumption that my students are spiritual beings. This does not mean laying down language acquisition for an occasional prayer or devotional text. It means combining the processes of language learning with matters such as ethics, hospitality, failure, the nature of the good life, questions of value and the source of hope, responses to human need, cross-generational interaction. In the interest of full disclosure I want to openly note at this point that some students find the unit boring. Not all of them — many clearly find it deeply meaningful, and some have written to me afterwards that Adaline Kelbert has become a role model for them. But some appear unimpressed. That's why this is just one of various similar efforts that I am trying to build together over the year; I am finding that the student who lets me know on a survey that Adaline Kelbert left him or her cold may be the very one who is particularly challenged a couple of weeks later by work on Dietrich Bonhoeffer, or by Paul Celan's holocaust poetry, or by Xavier Naidoo's socially and spiritually engaged hip hop videos. This is not, I remind myself, a

technology that can guarantee predictable changes in students. I am starting, after all, from the premise that they are not machines, not docile information-processing mechanisms, but living images, shaping, misshaping and reshaping themselves. My dream is to find enough ways over the year of making linguistic and spiritually formative learning interwoven parts of the same experience that each student finds challenge and growth by the time we are done. And then a new group of students comes, and it all works a little differently.

I will close with some words of Bruner (1996):

Any choice of pedagogical practice implies a conception of the learner and may, in time, be adopted by him or her as the appropriate way of thinking about the learning process. For a choice of pedagogy inevitably communicates a conception of the learning process and the learner. Pedagogy is never innocent. It is a medium that carries its own message. (p. 63)

Bruner says two things here. You can't teach without assuming some vision of what a person is. And it matters what vision you assume, because your learners learn what they are as learners by the ways that you teach them. That is the mystery and responsibility of being a teacher. I suggest that our responsibility as Christian teachers is to find the courage and the insight needed to live not as those who add devotional decorations to otherwise unmodified teaching processes, but as those who design teaching out of a vision of learners that combines theological depth and spiritual engagement. I am nowhere near there yet, and don't expect to be soon. But it seems to me to be a worthwhile journey.

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