

## **Making the Intellectual Accessible**

Dr. Charlie Huenemann, a Philosophy professor in the Department of Languages, Philosophy, and Communication Studies at USU, describes his initial captivation with philosophy: “I had a great high school humanities teacher, Jim Holt, who brought interesting guest lecturers to our class. One day he brought a philosophy professor from a local college. I didn’t even know there were philosophers—I thought they had gone out of style with Zeus and togas. The more he raised philosophical questions, the more I was hooked! I went on to major in philosophy, and have kept at it ever since.”

Dr. Huenemann explains the excitement of big: “the thrill you get when in conversation with somebody else where you are just on the same wave length and talking about some great ideas [that] you forget who you are and where you are and what time it is. You leave this world and enter into another world of ideas.” To Huenemann, the excitement and exploration of big ideas is not self-sustaining. In addition to this excitement, one must also be willing to develop discipline and focus. Huenemann furthers this idea by explaining, “most professors get into their disciplines because they are excited by ideas and sadly to some extent their youthful enthusiasm gets beaten down—through graduate school and getting tenured. You must learn discipline and focus. You have to learn to be very critical. Enthusiasm is not enough; you must develop critical skills. After you have developed these skills you have to rediscover that enthusiasm that got you started. Then you have the enthusiasm plus the critical skills. This is when you can really do something fun and exciting.” Huenemann has been able to rediscover the enthusiasm that got him started and now with critical skills he can reenter the world of ideas by writing for both scholarly audiences and those who express interest in philosophy.

Dr. Huenemann meets people who graduated many years ago who say, "I wish I could go back to college because I would get so much more out of the classes." And so he thought that by writing books or essays on these sorts of things then it is like some of the readers get to go back to college—without the tedious things like homework, papers, and exams.

What he tries to do with his writing is show how fun it is to explore without getting hung up on the answers. Huenemann states, "it's good for scholars to make their understanding available to a larger audience." He does this by writing *Huenemanni*, a blog that he created in 2007. The name came from two former students, Mike Howsden and Nate Harris, who jokingly said they were his follower—"Huenemanniacs." The name stuck. He also contributed articles to 3 Quarks Daily over 2013-2015. Huenemann's other writing endeavors includes writing short books for bigger audiences.

Some of the main messages from Huenemann's short books include: the truth is always complicated and there are never any simple answers or solutions. He expounds upon these ideas by stating that, "if one is patient and willing to take some delight in the complications it can really be fun, interesting, enriching, and nourishing. In short, the journey is more important than the destination. Just trying to understand things is in itself a great joy without rushing to some answer." These are the messages that Huenemann's books contain. He might create an ongoing series that takes philosophical ideas and makes them better known, entertaining, and interesting.

In addition to his scholar at large project, Dr. Huenemann has been researching the Scientific Revolution and the prominent figures of that time: Newton, Galileo, Descartes, and Comenius. He is intrigued by the confusion between science and magic. For example, Newton, who is revered as a brilliant physicist, was also studying alchemy, astrology, and the book of Revelations in the Bible. To Newton, his areas of studying fit together. To Huenemann, this

approach to understand the human experience is “sometimes amusing, sometimes bewildering, and sometimes just fascinating.”

To reconstruct the ideology of the 1640s, Dr. Huenemann is researching how Descartes and Comenius influenced the scientific revolution. The approach Descartes took was to understand science by removing it from religion. Socially and politically, Descartes was inactive. In many aspects, Comenius countered Descartes’ approach; Comenius was strategic and clever. Instead of withdrawing from the public, Comenius built connections with people of influence. Through connections, he intended to create universities with research programs. Paradoxically, Descartes’ vision of separate disciplines became more prevalent and Comenius, and his vision of mixed disciplines, were mainly forgotten. The irony of this result is a focal aspect of Huenemann’s research.

In retrospect, Huenemann identifies these two major obstacles in his writing and researching: being overly concerned with what others think and the development of epistemic autonomy. The first obstacle must be placed into perspective; it is helpful to consider the intended audience, but being overly concerned with how receptive the audience will be can become debilitating. To further this idea, it is important to note that the lack of interest in a topic should not influence one’s decision on what to research.

The tendency to be a part of one’s academic discipline by tuning one’s research to current trends should be replaced with epistemic autonomy—the ability to think for oneself. Huenemann describes how one can develop epistemic autonomy, “by spending a lot of time writing without anyone other than yourself as an audience. And that is a way to really discover what it is that you really think and value. If you do not have this epistemic autonomy, then you will never overcome

the fear of not fitting in and you will never rediscover that passion and enthusiasm that got you into the field in the first place.”

Dr. Huenemann offers this advice to anyone who aspires to educational pursuits: “I think that it is important for students and scholars to not be so focused on their own narrow lives. Meaning that rather than ask questions like: what is this going to do for my career, how is this going to help me complete my major, or what kind of job will this get me? Instead of asking these questions, they should open themselves up to the broader human questions of existence and experience. You can sum this up with this: do not take yourself too seriously; your life is really not that important.... You will end up having a more meaningful life by not focusing on your life but instead by focusing on ideas and feelings.”

*by Catherina Aust*