

Not Everyone Can Handle the Truth

When it comes to arguing over differences on an important point, “saving your breath” on someone isn’t always an act of dismissiveness. In some cases, it’s probably an act of wisdom.

The democratization of intellect in America has created the impression that almost everyone should be capable of rational discourse. After all, we live in a time when people go to school for longer, have access to more information, and have more forums for expressing their views than ever before.

But the idea that everyone should be capable of rational discourse is not realistic. Rationally discussing things with others—even those with whom one may disagree—requires a mutual interest in truth. And in our time, as in all previous times, experience shows that those actually interested in seeking and serving truth rather than their opinions are a minority.

I was recently reminded of this when re-reading some of the works of my dissertation subject, John Henry Newman. In his [*Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*](#), he mentions an interesting phenomenon called the “Disciplina Arcani.” Latin for “the discipline of the secret,” it referred to the early Christian practice of not speaking about the highest dogmas and mysteries of their faith to unbelievers. They saw it as [fulfilling](#) Christ’s command in the Gospel of Matthew to “not give that which is holy to dogs [and] not cast your pearls before swine.”

But it wasn’t just Christians who followed this rule of not casting “pearls” of truth before swine. In his famous 1936 essay [“Isaiah’s Job,”](#) Albert Jay Nock reminds us that the great thinkers up until about the 18th century primarily addressed their works to a minority of people he called “the

Remnant"—“those who by force of intellect are able to apprehend [the principles of the humane life], and by force of character are able... to cleave to them.” Those who could fulfill neither of these criteria were referred to as “the masses,” and constituted the majority of people at any given time.

What is affirmed by both sacred and secular sources is this: An aptitude and openness for truth is not a birthright of all men and women. And it's not something that comes through osmosis while attending schools for 13+ years.

Openness to truth is a more rare prize that usually only comes from proper training and discipline. It comes from developing the right intellectual habits and skills under wise guides and through the practice of virtue. And even when one has become open to truth, it's a quality that must be carefully cultivated, and will leave you if you neglect it.

To all of those who think the above sounds rather elitist, well, it should. The truth usually is.

—