

Why bother to think?

by [L. Gregory Jones](#) in the [November 15, 2000](#) issue

One of the central characters in Berke Breathed's wonderful comic strip *Bloom County* was a penguin named Opus. One day Opus decided he wanted to give up television and become more learned. As he walked up the steps of the "Publik Library," Opus announced: "Attention, dark world of electronic gratification . . . I would like to announce my intellectualization! No more tv! No boob tube-a-roo! 'Twas turning my noodle to video goo! Yes, there's something much better for smart chaps like me . . . From what I have heard, it's known as 'to read'! Books! I'll read books! Be they large or quite dinky! Straight from the shelves all musty and stinky! Faulkner! O'Neill! Twain and Saul Bellow! . . . I think I'll curl up with a few of those fellows! Yes, I'll soon be well-read! Such a fab thing to be! I've allowed plenty of time, at least an hour . . . or three."

Opus then stands bewildered in the midst of shelves of books that climb to the sky. The shelves appear to be closing in around him. In the last frame, Opus is back home, munching on a snack, in front of the television, as a voice from the television calls out, "Gilligan!" (*Bloom County Babylon*).

Many of us share Opus's experience. We begin with an enthusiasm for learning and thinking, but when confronted with the sheer magnitude of how much there is to learn, how demanding it is to think, we are tempted to revert back to the mind-numbing impact of *Gilligan's Island*. Then we face anew the question, "Why bother to think?"

One could offer a variety of plausible answers: the unthinking life is not worth living; the health of democracy depends on citizens' thoughtful engagement; we cannot really avoid thinking, so we might as well do it well; we want to try to make sense of the world and of our lives, and understand how our convictions hold together; we need to be equipped to challenge false ideologies, partial truths, and deceptions of ourselves and others.

All of these are worthy reasons, yet none of them may be sufficient to overcome the inertia cultivated by long habits of passivity and superficial reflection. I believe that

Chaim Potok offers a particularly compelling answer. In his novel *In the Beginning*, Potok writes: “A shallow mind is a sin against God.”

Why is a shallow mind a sin? In part, because both Jews and Christians have been commanded “to love the Lord your God with all of your heart, soul, mind and strength.” You cannot love God with all of your mind and leave it untended. As creatures created in the image and likeness of God, we are called to think, motivated by a desire to know and love God truthfully and faithfully.

We are called to think constructively, to make sense of the world around us, our own lives and our understanding of God. Our thinking is shaped by many of the questions that three- and four-year-olds typically ask: Is there a God? Where does God live? Why do people die? Is there hope for people after they die? Why are there people who do bad things? Why do friends do mean things to me?

Contrary to the presumptions of many skeptical academics, there are powerful and compelling responses to these questions. These responses have been shaped by the rich resources of our forebears, including such intellectual giants as St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas. They also require contemporary reformulation and reflection.

There are too many “religious” people who become religious precisely to avoid having to think. They simply want to accept everything “on faith.” They fall prey to the problem evident in the children’s sermon in which a pastor asked the kids, “What I am thinking of is brown, has a bushy tail, and gathers acorns every fall.” After a brief silence, a little boy raises his hand and says, “I am sure the right answer is Jesus, but it sure sounds like a squirrel to me.”

Unthinking religious people are sure the right answer is “Jesus” (or an equivalent), even before any questions have been asked. Such unthinking religiosity lapses into traditionalism, which Jaroslav Pelikan calls “the dead faith of the living.” By contrast, we need the vitality of thinking in connection to tradition, which Pelikan calls “the living faith of the dead.” Traditionalism may be tempted to ignore the importance of thinking, but vital traditions require careful thought precisely so that we can remember the past well for the sake of the future.

Further, we need to think to deepen our minds, in order to challenge and criticize our false gods and other sins. That is, we need to think in order to unlearn bad habits that have shaped and continue to shape our lives—such habits as cynicism,

fatalism, narcissism or prejudice. Thinking leaves us open to correction and growth, to continuing to see our horizons expanded and our lives transformed.

Ultimately, we ought to bother to think because our fidelity to God, and our human flourishing, require it. We need to learn how to think well, which involves both constructive and critical moments. We should not be overwhelmed by what we do not know, but appreciate what we can know as we cultivate a love of learning and a desire for God. After all, there are only so many episodes of *Gilligan* to watch.