

6 AM - On the fog of consciousness

“Morning, sweetheart!”

“Morning, dear. What are you doing?”

“Looking out over the lake, thinking about today... thinking, in a way, that we have been betrayed by politics, journalism, philosophy, history, ... and literature.”

“Hey! Literature’s my job not yours.”

“Literature represents many things. For you it’s a tool by which you teach English.”

“... a tool by which I help students learn how to learn.”

“I see in it a means to telescope past, present, and future, a tool to pass on life lessons. I look for reflections that illuminate the collective mind.

“Novels, for instance, bring to consciousness a sense of time and one’s place in it:

- Dickens’ *David Copperfield* begins, ‘... I was born on a Friday, at twelve o’clock at night. It was remarked that the clock began to strike, and I began to cry, simultaneously.’
- Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* has each hour tolled by bells of the Palace of Westminster.
- James Joyce’s *Ulysses* works Leopold Bloom for one June day.
- Salman Rushdie starts *Midnight’s Children* with Nehru’s famous declaration that ‘At the stroke of the midnight hour, when the world sleeps, India will awake to life and freedom.’

“Me? I ponder the impact of Rushdie’s next sentence, ‘A moment comes, which comes but rarely in history, when we step out from the old to the new, when an age ends, and when the soul of a nation, long suppressed, finds utterance.’ Today *is* such a moment and I wonder who else, if anyone, can see it.”

“What prompted all this?”

“Voters are poised today to elect a fantasy that follows a century of unintended consequences. I doubt the election could turn out otherwise, looking at my generation.”

“Why your generation?”

“For all its potential, my generation has not fulfilled its promise. Hell, the whole 20th century has not fulfilled its promise! My generation lost its bearings and its traction in a century of chaos, and the opportunity to make a difference has passed substantially unnoticed?”

“Why do you think so?”

“I read a novel once about a person whose life fell apart so completely that rather than end it all he gave in to chaos. Leaving things to chance is the modern day equivalent of astrology or reading entrails. A stranger found the man sitting catatonic and unable to move on a train platform. To help pull him back from the abyss, the stranger counseled that everything was therapeutic, anti-therapeutic, or irrelevant. The book charged *you* to determine which of the three. *You* make life work.”

“How should one work out of a world that seems in chaos?”

“We can only understand the world around us as best we can. We recognize from experience what has not worked. We deduce what matters, and we decide to will ourselves to work.”

“That’s easy to say but it doesn’t convince me to work.”

“You know enough to convince yourself already, but don’t quite see that clearly.”

“Why not?”

“People give in to chaos by default. They check out. Despite schools’ best intentions, they get distracted, urged on in one direction in the classroom, when another direction would work better. Each of us, independently equipped, makes things work, but we have not yet the tools, the skills to use them, or the habit. Above all, the understanding to motivate us—the reason why—seems to elude us.”

“What makes you think so?”

“Look at politics, news, and literature. People spend more time unconscious than engaged.”

“How can you look at literature and believe that people are unconscious?”

“Literature is like a flashlight pointed into a dark room. Where the flashlight gets pointed, the room appears lit. But is the room lit or only illuminated temporarily by flashlight? Is the flashlight bright or dim? Does that flashlight project a subset of colors or the full spectrum? Illumination asserts consciousness to a degree and for a moment, but everywhere else unconsciousness reigns.”

“How can people know if they are unconscious?”

“They don’t. Where is the edge of consciousness? Sleep and awake change for each other with no discernable boundary. Day and night fade unnoticed into each other. Vision—acutely sharp in one part of the eye—vanishes silently in another. The eye, personal consciousness, and the fog are so very slippery—impossible to touch. Edmund, in Eugene O’Neil’s *Long Day’s Journey into Night* described it, ‘Seeing the secret, are the secret. Then the hand lets the veil fall and you are alone, lost in the fog again, and you stumble on towards nowhere, for no good reason!’”

“That’s eerie.”

“Like this dreary November morning on Lake Delta where autumn fog waters down the ultramarine blue and burnt umber landscape. Unconsciousness is morning fog that never visibly drifts in, but appears unannounced, undiscovered before dawn.

“Look at all the geese. Canada geese and snow geese paddle together, culture and society overlapping although they neither know nor care. No matter. While they defend their territory, mate, and have children, their mastery of Mother Nature isn’t enough to destroy us all. Humanity, on the other hand, knows too much of one thing and not enough of the other. Jacob Bronowski warned, ‘you cannot possibly maintain that informed integrity if you let other people run the world for you while you

yourself continue to live out of a ratbag of morals that come from past beliefs.”

“Are the geese conscious? Near the shore some geese drift slowly across the water, showing no purpose, effort, or direction, like a droplet of ink aimlessly spreads in still water. Leaderless, each goose inclines one way or another on its own terms as its senses integrate the inclinations of other single geese that, in turn, recursively integrate the senses of other geese spread across the sea.

“Following unplanned notions, geese drift this way, or that, or stop altogether in swirls and eddies, at first tentative, that wash into slow waves along the water until one certain pivot point that individuals generate a collective mood of spotty commitment. Wings stretch almost into a flap that dies out one time or breaks another time into to the urge to lift off in unison into the fog and out of it.”

“That’s lyrical, but what’s your point?”

“It’s not at all random. While I’ve been watching, two birds peeled off a smattering of geese almost asleep near shore, and then a third joined them to slowly swim the full mile to the middle of the lake, leisurely stroking toward others. Far from Brownian motion, it’s purposeful. The pivot point to move or to fly is never detectable until it happens, but when the instant arrives, decisions come hard and fast. Swirls of wings shade the sky as geese close ranks, then drift apart like the cream in unstirred coffee drifts across its surface. People act like that. You have to look to see it. How people act is scary because they think they know what they are doing, but they seldom have enough skill to check.”

“So I’m wasting my time, trying to teach?”

“Far from it. You’re one of the good ones that understand the art of teaching. You go beyond the pedantic, professional curriculum standards that the state grinds out. Schools teach and test to those standards. But you, you are an outstanding teacher of English and don’t settle for that, either in what you teach or how. The state neither requires you to teach your way nor

encourages you to do so. Their standards for English Language Arts never mention the word ‘think.’ They might argue it is implied, but thinking is central to what you do, because you know your art. You don’t teach ‘English’; you teach ‘Tools for thought.’ You know you can’t pour that wisdom into your students. You care for each student, show that you care, and nudge them toward their own individual success because by yourself you can’t make them succeed.”

“Thanks for good words, but you don’t give the state enough credit. It’s buried down in the detail and good teachers work on it all the time.”

“No doubt good teachers do, whether it’s in the curriculum or not. The curriculum is primarily designed to foster general knowledge. It wasn’t until after schooling was finished, I stumbled on a pivot point that caused me to see things differently. My point of view changed. My consciousness changed. Facts hadn’t changed, but my awareness had. You do it intuitively in your classroom. How do we bring your colleagues along?”

“When did your consciousness change?”

“It’s a long story. Let me explain while you get ready for work. Fog today mirrors the billowing drifts decades ago across a Canadian lake in the Kipawa Reserve one cool morning as our canoes pulsed through the mist. That’s when it started.

“Canoeing was hypnotizing. Each return stroke of the handmade paddles streamed a beaded necklace of water across the trailing edge of the blade in an arc that softly marked the calm water. Underneath the bow, the wooden keel of the canoe surged and gurgled quietly at each power stroke. Dampness on the thick red and black checked Woolrich shirts, steamed away from the heat of teenage muscles that worked to find their pace, their place, and their purpose.

“Nine canoes cut through the morning fog as two oarsmen each stroked in unison towards a rare sandy beach among the boulders and small firs visible in the distance on an island that would mark the midpoint of a month-long trip through the

lakes, rivers, and rapids deep in the wild. Like geese caught up in their flying ‘V,’ after thousands of strokes, over hundreds of miles, over many days, easy familiarity came to a canoeist’s stroke. Stroking made sense at level within level within level. Repetition helped sternmen meld with bowmen. Harmony established itself in the flight of nine canoes. Goals became intuitive as the prow of each canoe, with each J-stroke, consistently pointed within degrees of the faraway tall tree on the island.

“In the quiet bay of the island, a single-engine, high winged pontoon plane drifted, ready to deliver another ten days of stores for the final leg of the trip down 100 miles of river rapids back to civilization. It was not to be a dangerous trip, but one worthy of care. Last year a canoeist had been killed for not respecting the river.

“So far, every day but today had been damp with late August rain. It was cool, but the sun would soon burn off the fog. There would be no 20 miles of steady paddling today. Today was for drying out, fishing for Walleye, soaking up the heat on a sunny rock, and eating a bonus meal of fresh food just flown in.

“Oatmeal steamed in the aluminum kettle in the early flames of the morning fire as cooks wrestled to fold aluminum reflectors of the baking oven into shape before placing it beside the glowing coals. From his handmade green canvas canoe pack the counselor pulled something special to celebrate the midpoint of the trip—a chocolate cake mix.

“With cake batter slowly rising beside the coals, the counselor called a meeting. ‘Each person will get one piece of cake. There will be an extra piece left over. To give everyone a fair shot at winning the extra piece, I’ve got a puzzle. The first to solve the puzzle wins the extra piece of cake.’

“Now listen up! Three people are sitting on chairs in a circle. Each one holds a cane and each wears either a white or a black hat. They cannot see the color of their own hat, but can see the color of the hats worn by the other two. Instructions call for each person to tap the cane if they see two white hats or see a black and a white hat. They should not tap if they see two black hats.

When you figure what color your hat is, stand and explain how you got your answer. On the signal to begin, three canes began tapping. Tapping continued, and then continued longer, as the three looked at each other. Some time later, one person in the circle stood up and said, “I know the color of my hat.” What color was his hat and how did he know?

“Well after the cake was cooked, cooled, and frosted, more than an hour later, a young canoeist finally spoke. ‘I think I have the answer.’”

“What was the answer?”

“I’ll tell you tonight if you haven’t figured it out by then. But here’s a clue. The puzzle demands you think for yourself and also project what others might think. It demands you project different possibilities into the future and consider alternative consequences. It demands consciousness of community over time. That’s a subject that might only rarely be covered in school, but it should be covered if society—civilization, if you want to call it that—depends on the answer.

“Hell, I was out of school 20 years before I found someone else who spent as much time on his thinking as I spend on mine. Everyone thinks they think about thinking, but Michel de Montaigne, in *Essays*, disputed that presumption 400 years ago. He said, ‘There never was street-porter or a silly woman who was not sure of having as much sense as was necessary. We readily recognize in others a superiority in courage, physical strength, experience, agility, or beauty. But a superior judgment we concede to nobody.’

“Montaigne calls us to task because we believe if only we had turned our thoughts that way, we should ourselves have found out as well as they; that whoever should be able clearly to discern the height of another’s judgment, would be also able to raise his own to the same pitch.

“Montaigne was talking philosophy, but not in the popular sense as Philosophy has come to be known. Capital-P Philosophy is rigorously engaged in doing a different job.”

“Things like the ‘Mind-Body Problem?’”

“That’s their job. My job is to consider what to know, how I should act, and how to deal with others. Philosophy, with a lower case ‘p’, represents the way Seneca wrote in *Letters from a Stoic*, dealing with the simple daily problems of living—ordinary, practical wisdom, accessible from classical thinkers, if we only dared to look.

“We think about the same things that occupied the keen minds of yesterday, but we seldom have the good sense to use their expertise. Neither do we think as well today as we might, and we seldom exercise the opportunity to think more clearly.”

“Let’s see. Your opinion is that I’m ignorant, bullheaded, unpracticed, and sloppy. That doesn’t encourage me to pay attention.”

“On the contrary, I admire what you do and the skills you bring to the table, complimented your potential, and suggested that if you look at things only slightly differently, you will be encouraged toward a happier life.

“French historian Fernand Braudel concluded that what we think about has not changed significantly over the last centuries, while Julian Jaynes’ investigations of literature deduced that *how* we think about what we think *has* changed. In *Structures of Everyday Life*, Braudel noted that if Voltaire were suddenly to appear in our living room, he would marvel at the absence of a smoky fireplace, but, on the plane of ideas, he would be able to carry on a conversation as if he had just walked in from next door.

“That was Braudel’s first great insight. The second was that the price of bread matters. He tracked the cost of wheat across four centuries of the Middle Ages, examining the quality of life. You are unlikely to consider that citizens of Rome of the first two centuries after Jesus probably enjoyed the most individual liberty, the greatest economic freedom, and greater freedom from external oppression than individuals at any other time in history, including today.

“Braudel’s day-to-day scope makes sense, but Jaynes, acting like a forensic psychologist in *Consciousness and the Breakdown of the*

Bicameral Mind, saw subtle differences in thought evident in literature over a longer period of time. The signature of the words used, for instance, demonstrated that the *Iliad* was written prior to the *Odyssey* because it was absent a sense of subjectivity, introspection, and awareness of awareness that later Greek's called *nous*. *Nous*, Aristotle's word for mind or reason, first appeared well after Homer wrote the *Iliad*. Braudel's Voltaire might well communicate ideas comfortably with us, but, over the longer scope, Jaynes believes newer metaphors let people think better now than before, even though not all of us have the habit, and not all of us who have the ability practice it all of the time.

"It's not that people can't think—of course, most can. Answers appear in their heads. It's that they haven't the habit—haven't the practice—to check their work. They'll say, 'I'm thinking now' and, of course they are, for a time, until the attention wanders, the wattage lowers, and the autopilot takes over.

"Richard Mitchell was a college grammarian who dissected the casual approach to words of those on his campus in a newsletter, typeset by hand, called *The Underground Grammarian*. He nailed to the page the sloppy habits of casual thought that led us to a sorry state where we are no longer vigilant. If I have mastered a metaphor and you have not, who's deeper in the fog? If I value metaphors and you don't see the point of them, who is deeper in the fog?

"Schools teach a lot, very well."

"Schools have little time to invest in such things, as they stovepipe subjects in a race to achieve uniform mediocrity in their test scores. Scores don't attest to enlightenment of individual students, but instead manage for those schools to keep bureaucrats at bay."

"What evidence have you..."

"Take misspent journalism as further evidence, where ratings are achieved not from excellence, but through popularity that earns either broadcast time, front page space, or suspect awards from peers. Take politics, where rhetorical ploys allow the practiced to dance through one question and a follow-up, abetted by

abdication of the press. Take work where just doing one's job has been raised to an art and labor agencies protect the incompetent.

"Hell, why stop there. Look at history, culture, and society where rust never sleeps."

"Is the cause lost?"

"Not yet. But to understand how close we might be, look across time. After all, people act according to their experience. Dr. Morris Massey lectured in the 1980s, 'You are what you were when...' making the point that what is important in your teen formative years remains important to you all the rest of your life. To be lost as a youth puts adults at risk.

"After too many campaigning days, today is a pivotal day, ... but what lesson will voters take from it, and when will that lesson penetrate? God help us all!

". . . Listen! Looks like enough individual geese have moved the masses to consciousness. There they go, honking into the air while we pull ourselves out of our own sleepy fog. Let's get on the road, my dear!"