

7 AM - On footprints in literature

“Let me get the car door for you. . . . Thank goodness for heated seats and dry roads.”

“I’m with you! Who would think the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November could be so cold already. Here, I’ve got the radio.”

“. . . and welcome to NPR Radio News. Today is the day that 200 million potential voters may go to the polls to choose the next President of the United States. This will mark a turning point in the direction of the country. It may mark a watershed. . .”

“It’s funny how newscasters from every network feign breathless anticipation when the rest of us are so sick of the campaign our emotion is relief.

. . .

“Look at that bumper sticker—‘Peace: Give it. Get it.’ Now they hold Clement Atlee’s appeasement up as heroic! I swear, for this generation, history begins at dawn.”

“People are lazy. They readily resort to clichés to avoid having to think.”

“You know, sweetheart, . . . even the 15-minute drive to work is less satisfying. The drive used to be an opportunity to catch up on the world. Now it’s an exercise in frustration, reaching to punch the radio button every time a network forgets the purpose of journalism.”

“That’s why I plug in my iPod.”

“What used to be news has turned into story time. Pull some talking head off the street to grant them 15 seconds of fame to reinforce the producer’s preconceived notion of news. They

highlight anecdotal trivia—the angle that’s significant only because it’s different.”

“Then why do you listen?”

“I listen until they abuse journalism, then I punch the button. Some faceless Middle American finds himself in a newscast simply because he’s foolish enough to feel that a candidate with strong religious beliefs would not be able to deal pragmatically with a foreign leader—I punch the button.

“A newscaster reads that a candidate joked on a nighttime talk show how he used to be on *Time* magazine covers. When such non-news elbows aside real news, I punch the button.

“Let one candidate fire unchallenged broadsides at the opposition on the air. Do newscasters not recognize it? Is it intentional? Do they not care? They play back a recording in which one candidate doubts whether voters know enough about his opposition, but they fail to report the accuser hasn’t been forthcoming about his *own* past—the only defense is to punch the button.

“Some still worries on the air that ‘swift-boating’ might happen again where people tell ‘half-truths and outright lies.’ That’s when any reputable journalist would explain that such a view of swift-boating, while popular, is inaccurate. Real swift-boat accusations were rhetorically sidestepped and never refuted and the candidate originally ‘swift-boated’ still hasn’t released military records promised years ago that would prove whether the accusations were half-truths or lies. Until that happens, newscasters have unprofessionally kneecapped a candidate at the expense of the listener—punch the button! Five minutes seldom goes by on the drive to work without at least one button punch.”

“Why do you listen at all?”

“I’m drawn less to the news than to the journalism behind it. Journalism fits between you, as an individual, and society as a whole. Few seem to notice that if journalism is warped, the other two may be dangerously threatened.

“That’s not at all clear.”

Reporting like this does not live up to the obligation news has to improve the mental map of reality one needs to plan for a better future. These highly educated talking heads—these credentialed morons—have been schooled only to give me what I don't need.

“At least I know the difference between news and blather. Most listeners never learned to protect themselves from charlatans gussied up as experts. Radios drone on while few are equipped to resist.”

“But what does it matter?”

“More than you realize. Journalism is like the canary in a coal mine carried to warn miners of danger, and this bird is dead, expired, spent, shot, kaput.”

“Even if it were dead, what would it matter?”

As the middle ring of three concentric circles that share the same characteristics, I can show that what is essential for journalism is essential for the other circles that represent individual and society. If one fails, the other circles are at risk. It matters because my quality of life hangs in the balance.

“Not to put too fine a point on it. I'm not willing to buy into that simply because you say so. You're going to have to show me with enough clarity that on my own I am compelled to agree.”

“I wouldn't have it any other way. In fact, that's the only way we'll pull ourselves out of the pickle the last century has put us in.”

“But, not now. I have to get to work. Have we time to stop at the coffee shop before you drop me off at school?”

“For you? Anything. I was saying that so little journalism lives up to its promise and so much more journalism fails. That's the same situation one finds with coffeehouses, blogs, or classrooms. It ought to matter to good citizens to discover qualities that distinguish successful coffeehouses from others, or, similarly, blogs or classrooms. Blogs can be either community smart or community dumb. I spend several sessions a day on the *Just.ASecond* blog. What sets that blog apart from echo chambers

is that when commenters at this blog smell a rat, they call it out the way the classically educated used to challenge for evidence centuries ago. Commenters at other blogs cover up flaws or shut down criticism of the party line by any means, and dare call that 'winning an argument'.”

“So where do you do your research? How do you check things out?”

“It may not come to mind, driving through Rome, that this small city in central New York would have been Goldilocks' perfect city—not too big and not too small. Larger cities have economic engines that mask the underlying health of the community, able to temporarily suck in wealth from outside its own local resources, or use political sway to make growth happen. Walking along Broadway, Park Avenue or High Street, you'd never notice an unhealthy economy. Both mask underlying rust. On the other side of Goldilocks' choices, a backwater village hardly has an economic engine to speak of. It's part bedroom community for a semi-distant city, part subsistence farmer, and part welfare scabbler.

“Rome is a well-equipped research lab. Large enough to have an economy, small enough to see that economy work—or fail to work—and to recognize the perturbations that set it off kilter. The people who live here have enough latitude to be interesting—the way they act, the way they think, and the way they don't. You can see people get into their own way, and observe when they never notice.

“I'm very lucky. A newspaper publisher in a community the size of Rome has the opportunity to study society. I get to learn what works and what does not, and, if we're lucky, we can learn how to do better.”

“We're both very lucky.”

“Let me get the door for you. You normally go to the other coffee shop, don't you?”

“Yes. Different clientele, I'm sure. Who are those people?”

“The regulars. They sit in the corner each day and sell themselves to each other by what they say.”

“Do you talk with them?”

“Talk with them? I’ve tried. They don’t want to improve; they want to be validated. The coffee shop version of geese, they honk at each other for entertainment and to justify themselves through each other. When I walk in they raise their voices to be theatrically loud and pretend I’m the audience. I seldom respond.”

“Anything in the newspaper last night?”

“Never is.”

“You’re right. That doesn’t call for a response.”

“Maybe they’ll print some good news tonight.”

“Are they always that unkind?”

“Not always. They’d be embarrassed if you brought it to their attention, . . . if you could get them to see it at all. There is meanness under their laughter they choose not to see.

“. . . Good morning. Medium coffee, please. Leave a little room for cream, please.”

“Same for me, thanks, and a bagel with butter?”

“Oh, more theater from the counter crowd...”

“Them people get you every time. To them you’re low class and nothin’ but dirt!”

“Them people?”

“Not us. Whoever the target for today might be. Often as not they make class distinctions. ‘They’—whomever they might be—always seem out to get people because of their class. ‘Class’ is a convenient target because class doesn’t sit on the next stool to contradict you. ‘Class’ provides an excuse to stop thinking. ‘Class’ let’s you never discover the real reason. ‘Class’ lets you stop helping yourself. ‘Class’ lets you give up.”

“I *seen* that...”

“Ow! ‘I *saw* that’—‘*seen*’ hurts an English teacher’s ears.”

“Yes, they address everything of import with carelessness. Lazy language is as characteristic as always finding the other guy the

fault for your problems. It’s a sign of institutional rust.”

“. . . Come *on!*”

“Even where language is correct, pronunciation sends signals. The lazy ending where the ‘n’ the tongue never reaches the roof of the mouth? ‘Come on’ becomes ‘Come ah’ where a nasal ‘ah’ that obliges the listener to decode further to add the final ‘n.’”

‘Come *on*’ is a pseudo-judgment that says, ‘I’m smarter than those assholes and could clean things up if they only put me in charge.’ ‘Come on!’ plays Monday morning quarterback. Pundits like him telescope time for the luxury of making judgments after the fact. Without fail, the pundit and fawning sycophants gather every morning to validate their own existence.”

“Be sensitive about the way they speak.”

“Is he to be sensitive to how I listen? How did he come by his habit? Is it by hardship, by nature, or by laziness?”

“. . . *Aaaaay!* . . .”

“That’s how they greet, buddies, friends, and toys they want to play with. It’s lyrical. It’s musical. ‘Aaaaay!’ joins other phatic utterances they sing back, more for sociability than for information. They’d call it good-natured fun—Naïve and good-hearted on the surface. ‘It was a joke!’ is what bullies say when caught. They can’t be wrong, and underneath the surface, they’re desperately insecure.”

“Give them a break! Everyone has a reason for being who they are.”

“That’s a sentence an enabler would use. Everyone has a rationalization for their own misbehavior they are aching to get away with.”

“Does it matter?”

“Look, they are, if not good people, trying to be good people, within the limits of their training. They’d be anguished to come face-to-face with their limitations. All they want is coffee and collegiality. Can I begrudge them that? No. But, should moral

relativism excuse them from becoming who they can become? Should it obstruct square dealing with others? Should experience justify bad behavior or simply explain it? How should one respond to people who do not understand and do not care to understand because it would interfere with their cocoonishly comfortable model of reality? Don't mess with their security. Their defense requires a prickly response as if to say, 'Don't threaten my small world. Security is all I got. It's all I think I got.'"

"Don't become a language bigot."

"Language is the symptom of carelessness; attitude is the problem. Dizzy Dean, 1930's baseball pitcher turned broadcaster, was known for butchering language on the air: 'He slud into third base' or 'He shouldn't hadn't ought-a swang.' Perfection isn't the goal. Why be prissy and pedantic when it's attitude that matters. Dean was not careless. He didn't hide behind language or use it as a weapon. 'Let the teachers teach English and I will teach baseball. There is a lot of people in the United States who say isn't and they ain't eating.'"

"But these people are not evil. . . . Thanks for the coffee."

"You're welcome. . . . Let me get the door. . . . No, they're not evil. They take care of their spouses and children, work in the community, and go to church. Are they intentionally damaging? No. They are good people who hurt people unnecessarily—a few instigators, but more just tolerate the misbehavior, enablers, destructive because they leave bad behavior unrecognized, unlabeled and unlaughed at. With content devoid of meaning, they run for protection at the coffee counter or water cooler at work, hiding their fear and anger, seeking comfort in company, lashing out at everyone else—eager to blame other people and put them down. Martin Heidegger, the philosopher, called it finding 'humor' in the cheapest tricks while never looking in the mirror."

"Give the coffee counter culture credit; they have a community cocoon of sorts. If it goes nowhere else than that, it's useful to them."

"You're right. I can see that. For them it is important—Hell, more than that, it is critical to their sense of self—to believe they are right. To be validated is worth more to them than to be right. They resisted learning back in school where no one convinced them that is in their own long-term best interest. Perhaps no one tried or explained why. Perhaps no one cared. Perhaps no one knew how."

"You paint education with too broad a brush."

"No, not everyone. Paint should stick only where it's needed. School isn't wrong; it simply isn't right enough. Within the straight jacket of traditional subjects, it teaches very well. You are a wonderful teacher—and you can pick out others equally good—but so many teachers, administrators, and government education hacks would fill a student vessel with knowledge rather than enable them.

"This coffee counter class contrives jocularity at others' expense to represent themselves as better than thou. It's a thin veneer like that painful last line of *Long Days Journey into Night* before the curtain falls, and 'we were so happy for a time.'

"Sadly, such desperation labels both perpetrators and victims. Their uncomfortable laugh masks that the political class uses them and busily picks their pockets."

"Hasn't that always been that way?"

"Coffee houses have a 400 year history. Some work and some don't. Some liberate and some imprison. What sets one apart from the other?"

"Back in the 1600s, for the most part, schools were for the special classes—the wealthy and the religious. In the 1700s communications were sparse and slow, journals were expensive, and most people didn't read, but still they were hungry to know of the world. Men went to coffee houses and women created salons. By the late 1800s, Victorian and French salons would invite celebrities like Oscar Wilde to stimulate and puncture conventional wisdoms in salons.

"But by the 1910s and 1920s coffeehouse efforts to decrease entropy were challenged. People tend to think of entropy as

disorder when a tendency toward miss-order applies equally well. Seen that way, Hitler and your neighborhood talk show or politician share the same distasteful tendency. People can be dangerous when they do not appreciate what is at risk.

“The world of the 1920s was quite uninhibited. Prohibition in the United States was flaunted. Suffrage expanded. KDKA became the first commercial radio station on Pittsburgh. Linotypes, invented in 1896, churned out copy for books and magazines at an astounding seven lines per minute, which put more people in touch with affordable literature. Dance, dress, and customs were liberated.”

“So, are we talking cause or cure? The freedom that was as much the cure of problems might be the cause of more.”

“Exactly. Is the host obliged to educate with opening monolog jokes on the Tonight Show? Salons in the 18th and 19th century were where stupid ideas went to be laughed into oblivion. TV monologues, *Saturday Night Live*, and *The Daily Show* are where stupid ideas go to be laughed into legitimacy.”

“Where is your respect for the patrons at this coffee counter?”

“They respect neither themselves nor me. My position does not exercise judgment about respect. I simply choose to keep my distance where we are unlikely to have a positive effect on each other. I suspect they are afraid. School has left them fragile and they protect their wounds with bluster and distance.”

“Then shouldn’t you help them?”

“Preach to the unwilling? Impose myself on them? So long as they do me and no others harm, I wouldn’t presume to invade their security. The coffee counter is full of insecurity. When I don’t banter with them they wonder if their ideas are good enough. It’s not their ideas, but how they choose to use them. Their ideas float on the surface to serve as entertainment.

“Confucius had it right, ‘To fail to speak to a man who is capable of benefiting is to let a man go to waste. To speak to a man who is incapable of benefiting is to let one’s words go to waste.’ A wise man lets neither men nor words go to waste.”

Sanctimonious and small has no place, even in coffee houses. Addison and Steele relished the 1700s coffeehouse, as a home for worthy citizens who lived more in a coffeehouse than in their shops. Businessmen berated today were respected then for their character and their zest for the fullness of life and company to be found in a coffeehouse. Let’s reclaim the coffeehouse as a haven for civil people, the way Addison and Steele saw it.”

“So what does distinguish a coffeehouse from a coffeehouse, a blog from a blog, or a classroom from a classroom?”

“Fear. Arrogance is an inadequate defense put up by people who dare not face more pain, which is an attitude that creates more pain. They are the gullible.”

“Who are the gullible?”

“The gullible are those for whom learning is by rote. ‘Facts’ matter more than learning how to detect them. ‘Faith’ matters even when it is at odds with experience. It’s where ‘think’ is omitted from learning standards, where words change meaning without consequence, where tolerance suspends all critical yardsticks and where history begins at dawn.”

“You have just indicted almost all of our institutions.”

“If I wished to defeat society, I would patiently poison the well to weaken the next generation at the roots. Dull the roots and who will notice but the elderly whose warnings carry little weight.”

“How do you overcome such creeping doom?”

“Use their own intellect against their own obstructions”

“. . . that journalistic college education doesn’t work for you!”

“Oops! More entertainment. Let’s go. Sophomoric coffee house theater never ends. So far, we’ve been assaulted by the media, lectured by bumper stickers, derided by coffeehouse clientele, and we have yet to arrive at work. Pretty sad considering no one seems to recognize how important today is.”

“You mean as a Republican or a Democrat?”

“Goodness, no! We’re at a pivot point in how people choose to see the world.”

“And you, Carnac the Magnificent, are the special dude who can see that.”

“Laugh if you must, but I am acutely aware of what I see.”

“You sound almost reverent.”

“I suppose I do. But when each new century attempts to climb out of the mess left by the old century, and to avoid the mistakes of the past, they destine themselves to make new and greater mistakes.”

“How do you mean?”

“Look back on the centuries gone by. The 1500s ended with the awareness that organized religion had simply become politics by another name. Reaction to that fostered the rise of humanistic awareness of the world around us—consider Francis Bacon, Cervantes, Shakespeare, and Galileo.

“In the 1600s, religious wars of the previous century were supplanted by absolutist rulers in the hope that would lead to a better, more stable society. Along the way, rudimentary science, art, and philosophy offered a foothold for the secular empire in the century to follow. For that, consider Bacon, again, René Descartes, Hobbes, and John Locke.

“When secular autocratic empires of the 1600s didn’t live up to expectations, the 1700s represented the next great hope that science and reason would overcome superstition, prejudice, and dogma and would lead to a better society. Intellectuals that blossomed then included Edmund Burke, Denis Diderot, Moses Mendelssohn, David Hume, Voltaire, Immanuel Kant, and Adam Smith.

“When reason proved not enough, the 1800s turned to industry and commerce as the next great hope for better society. It turned out that while education matters, facts and reason were not enough. Hegel championed human will but Arthur Schopenhauer warned people not to forget their hidden drives.

“By the 1900s, superstition, prejudice, and dogma fought back,

consolidating power using clichéd notions to drive the masses. They harnessed communications, technology, and social institutions to grab for power in a way the great hope became the great hype. Chaos, it turns out, is not enough and neither is regimented schooling. Our 20th century deserves to be called the pathetic century. It became known for consolidation of both industry and governments into large institutional dinosaurs. Ironically, the election of 2008 was not to be the beginning of hope and change for the new century, but the last wheeze of spent dogma recycled from decades earlier.

“Is it too much to expect of this new century that superstition not be used on you by any politician or priest? The new century—the 21st—represents the small hope that individuals can reach sufficient awareness to inoculate themselves against usurpers in ways that necessarily lead to better society.”

“Where would the character come from to do that?”

“Where does character come from? We stopped looking for character more than 50 years ago.”

“Why would you think that?”

“It might take a century to explain. Not a century in clock time, mind you—the decades of the 20th century reflect the circumstances that brought us to our current. . . ah. . . opportunity. Along the way, we forgot how to pull a community together, not just across distances, but over time as well. We don’t recognize the golden threads that draw us all together.”

“Give me a hint.”

“Experience, language and practice all matter . . . and knowing how to look.”

“Okay. Explain how it makes a difference.”

“Footprints in the mind of a culture tell a fascinating story of the last century.”

“How does one see footprints in the mind?”

“Novels document what representative thinkers, acting as scribes, chose to put down on paper. They tell us as much about the

20th century as Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, passed down by generations of oral mythic tradition, tell us of the classic Greek era. The *Iliad*, for instance, was a chronology of external events and much less an exercise of the mind like the *Odyssey*, written much later. Similarly, the last century of literature is illuminating for what it might have taught us and did not. Heavyweights like Henry James and Joseph Conrad, around the beginning of the 1900s, carrying forward to the election today, have been engaged as if society has been in a century-long slow motion train wreck that has gone mostly unnoticed.

"At the forefront of literature of his time, James' *The Art of Fiction* championed authors' liberty. James was looking for something else and, with neither space nor time for him to ventilate, he left morality as an afterthought. As a sop for readers, at the very end, James suggests that good writers will always write moral fiction because good writers write according to their core values. With that throwaway remark, James granted the 20th century license to write pretty much anything. He diminished morality to be whatever an author says it is."

"Well should literature be moral?"

"Phrased using 'should,' your question turns morality in literature into a mandate, when, over that last century, it has been a marvelous opportunity underused as an excellent vehicle. In *The Americans*, James juxtaposed new American ideals next to longstanding European traditions in a clash that forced people to look at how they relate to each other, but he did not nudge them towards how to act. He presented American traditions as fresh, open to challenge, rough, and occasionally embarrassing, and European tradition, rooted in feudal times, as beautiful, engaging, and rusting from within. James exposed the weaknesses of both but left readers no further instruction."

"Do you believe you could take the last century, a decade at a time, and map literature in a way to reach useful understanding?"

"Yes, but someone else could take the literature, a decade at a time, from then to now, and come to the conclusion that ostensibly educated people might take *no* useful understanding

from that literature—first, because they didn't read it for that understanding, and, second, because much of the literature missed significant insights about society."

"It's brassy to assert that your way is more useful."

"Perhaps. But living in Rome, working in journalism, reading great literature, studying history, stumbling on wonderful books, rejecting pseudo-sciences, dabbling in philosophy, recognizing what does not work, and, in general, learning voraciously, all blend to reaffirm insights I call golden threads that extend all the way back to the earliest thinkers. I'm having a delightful time, because there may be a way out of this mess we are in."

"Oh, yeah?"

"Yes, and the first step is to recognize that the Augean stables Hercules was challenged to clean out in a single day represent as long-standing and intractable a mess as society finds itself in today."

"What makes the challenge so serious?"

"Jacob Bronowski warned that science has put such power in the hands of any who cares to learn enough to use it, that no longer can you insulate yourself from their actions."

"And are you so special that you would see a way out?"

"No. I see nothing that hasn't existed long before me. I'm just humble and happily encouraged to see some pieces to fit together. You talk of igniting the spark of self-regulated learning in your students. That's your job as a teacher. That's what happened to me. The spark makes me want to learn more; to learn enough to coach myself and others to make better judgments and better choices; to take these simple wisdoms and make them more accessible."

"Good luck! You are looking at people who are degreed but not educated; who may be professors, but who can go into any coffee shop and not see what is there to learn; for whom a coffee shop is no more than a place of personal approval."

"Bingo. You cannot be inquisitive and insecure. Be confident in your doubt. Laugh at it."

“Heh! Have a nice day! Thanks for the ride! And finish for me tonight how you think it might turn out.”

“Sure! Love you!”

“Love you, too! . . . Hey! Look at that red, white, and blue political bumper sticker! It says, ‘He’s no Messiah.’”

“Ah! There is hope for reality.”