

### 8 AM - 1880s On modernity and self-doubt

“Before this the managers meeting, and before we get today’s newspaper out, someone half-joked this morning, ‘I don’t mind meeting, so long as you don’t talk politics. Some of us disagree with what you say.’

“That remark hit me the wrong way at the wrong time. I don’t mind someone disagreeing with an editorial I wrote. That’s no problem. The problem is that people don’t know how to disagree. A recent letter against an editorial listed half a dozen concerns, and not once did its writer identify and counter a single substantive point the editorial raised. That letter asserted the previous President was a fool. Even if I concede the last President was a fool, that point is not germane. The editorial was not about the last President. A letter that doesn’t correct an editorial where needed fails to move the discussion forward. Writers who talk past each other fail society because they never learned how to disagree or never learned why they should.

“Argument is a learned craft. An argument should restate clearly and cogently the strongest case for the argument you wish to counter. If you don’t, you don’t care to be correct and would rather win by any means necessary. That’s selfish, small, anti-social, and today’s everyday habit.

“To argue, make the clearest statement. Then explain why a premise does not stand up to scrutiny, or explain why the conclusion does not logically follow. Don’t waste time saying you disagree when you are not in a position to explain how or why.

“I am not wedded to *my* ideas. I am wedded to sound ideas. I want to know where I might be mistaken. I need to know to make decisions based on the best information available. Michel

de Montaigne invented the essay as a literary form in 1585 and would run to embrace truth from others when he saw it coming.

“The problem is systemic. People used to learn to discuss in schools, once upon a time, when it was taught in the seven Liberal Arts as the *Trivium*—Grammar to put your thoughts in order; Logic to see if those thoughts were consistent; and Rhetoric to explain those thoughts clearly to others and analyze their replies. You’ve heard stories that people in the Middle Ages would argue how many angels could dance on the head of a pin? Well, they didn’t care how many angels could dance on the head of a pin. They cared to exercise skills used in discussion. They prepared themselves to recognize any fallacy thrown at them calling *Distinguo!* when they detected one.

“To come to understanding? Why should people bother since schools seldom test for it? Too many want to stop discussion, not participate in it. For them, winning is what matters. They want to put you down, shut you up, and get you to give up. That’s uncivil. If you don’t recognize it—if it doesn’t bother you—you don’t care!

“But you should care. How should I feel about people who don’t understand how serious a problem this country is in? How should I feel about people who think it’s a game? ‘Hey I voted for this candidate because the candidate is cool!’ Well, the economy of this country is collapsing. Power looters talk down the economy to win an election because they either don’t know the mess they are creating or don’t care. Businesses are not going to be able to afford to advertise, and if they don’t advertise, then the newspaper won’t be able to pay your salary.

“Now, I seldom talk about such things. My job is to keep my balance and my sense of direction. I apologize for the rant, but I live this problem day and night. I arrive here early in the morning and leave here late at night trying to shape this newspaper so it can survive this manmade economic tsunami. And I’m going to keep on trying. But I’m fed up with people who don’t know what they are talking about, who don’t care, and who don’t know the consequences they risk.

“You want to know how much I care for this newspaper, . . . for

this community, . . . for you? I don't have to work for this company. I could shut it down, close it up, and live comfortably enough off what's left after liquidating. But that wouldn't be in the best interest of a community that deserves a quality local newspaper. It wouldn't be in the best interest of the people employed here. And it wouldn't be in the best interest of the businesses that advertise with us.

"This newspaper has a future. When you hear people suggest that newspapers are dead, they make the same ignorant overgeneralization that underlies racism—the same sweeping misreading that believed Iraq would become a quagmire because *Sunnis* and *Shia* could never work together. The last election in Iraq was at least as peaceful as what we have around here, with fewer deaths than any run-of-the-mill week in Chicago. Those pundits failed to disaggregate into functional parts. There is no unified whole when all politics is local. Liberty that people yearn for is felt at the personal level.

"Similarly, pundits fail to disaggregate newspapers into national, regional, and local. There is no substitute for what our newspaper does at the local level. People don't want to attend the city council meeting but they need to know what affects them. And even if they attended the high school football game, they want more detail about it and to relive the picture of the great catch. They want to know what gatherings are scheduled or the details of the burglary down the street—all from a reliable source.

"The money subscribers pay for each newspaper does not cover the cost of the newsprint it's printed on, added to the cost to deliver it. For 150 years, advertising is what we have used to cover the rest of the expenses—to pay for reporters, editors, heat, light, and insurance. Advertising pays your salaries. Where this economy is headed threatens our operation. When the velocity of economic transactions slows down, businesses can't afford to advertise, even if that is precisely the time they should, to elbow for market share and a larger piece of the shrinking economic pie.

"The campaign strategy for politicians out of power has been to

scare people into a business contraction that would stampede voters to help them win the election. Hell! Not just win the election, but win by such a commanding majority that they could rule without opposition. And that could just happen in the election today.

"Like with their housing fiasco, they didn't try to kill their gravy train. They just wanted more gravy. Did they know the consequences? Do they care?

"It's like the frog and the scorpion who asks the frog to carry him across the river. The frog refuses, worried the scorpion will sting him. The scorpion claims he'd do no such thing; that to sting the frog in the middle of the river would kill them both. The frog accedes. In the middle of the river the scorpion stings the frog. As they sank, the frog cried out to the scorpion to ask why. The scorpion confessed that it was his nature.

"We seem to be headed for the biggest economic collapse seen in our lifetime, and it needn't happen. Now, I may be wrong. If so, show me where. I want to know. I need to know. And so do you. But stop the useless crap that passes for rebuttal. They are right in their own mind because their convictions are their own. Nietzsche understood that convictions are a greater threat to truth than lies.

"In the 1957 movie *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, Colonel Nicholson led fellow prisoners of war to construct a train bridge across the river to demonstrate the caliber of British engineering, resolve, and character. As allied commandos try to blow up his completed bridge, he recognizes too late that in folly and fullness of himself—in his hubris—he had aided and abetted the enemy war effort. 'Oh my God, what have I done!' With collapse of our economy near at hand—whether permanent or temporary we do not know—shallow thinkers from a new generation are about to admire their own bridge of folly. In their economic ignorance, they never learned Margaret Thatcher's observation, 'Socialism works fine until other people's money runs out.'

"Now, I'm going to try to keep this newspaper afloat. We need to change how we operate to run as efficiently as we know how. Efficiency is a concept that over 200 years has lost its meaning.

In 1776 in *On the Wealth of Nations*, Adam Smith explained where wealth comes from. Using the manufacture of a seamstress' simple straight pin he showed that had you to do all the work from mining iron, smelting steel, and shaping the pin you couldn't produce ten pins a month. By specializing tasks—division of labor—efficient workers could produce thousands of straight pins. Wealth is simply increased productivity for the amount of labor invested. Our company and our country use division of labor to produce goods and services efficiently, and the wealth we take for granted is the ability to select which goods and services we want, without manufacturing them ourselves. Wealth is not a zero sum game. Wealth, once created, works to the advantage of everyone.

“In this newspaper we create this wealth by doing our jobs. Should workers devise a way to get their job done with less work, the extra time and resources they free up to create other goods and services is new wealth to be shared by everyone—by readers who may buy a newspaper for less, businesses who may get more advertising for their dollar, workers who may get pay, benefits, or even just keep their jobs, owners who get return on their investments. Creating efficiency—creating wealth—is the job everyone is hired to do, and competition is what encourages everyone to create new wealth. Maximum gross domestic product (GDP) represents the greatest wealth created when everyone at a company or country is working with the greatest efficiency.

“You have to be part of the solution for this company and part of the solution for this country. If you aren't, you deserve the lower quality of living you will have created. This newspaper is important to the community, to advertisers, and to the employees who depend on it for a living. If you object to the politics we editorialize on, then, for God's sake, explain why, in a manner that moves the discussion forward. We just might agree with you. But, filling the air with noise or telling us to stop talking is uncivil.

“Now that the roots of liberal arts, the *Trivium*, have disappeared we are losing most of the plant that grew from those roots.”

“Isn't that a bit overstated? We have excellent schools, well funded, with certified, professional teachers. We are well-schooled.”

“Absolutely. We are well schooled. We teach subjects very well, test thoroughly for those subjects, and meet exacting standards. But suppose the meat is missing from the stew. If we don't know what we don't know—and care less about learning—we become dangerously exposed. For the most part, we remain uninterested in what we used to know. Comfortable where we are, we are reluctant to consider whether we should know more.”

“What does it matter?”

“Few recognize that our just-in-time culture is tenuous. We expect fresh cold milk in the grocery store every time we go there. Most of us don't have an emergency stock of food and don't know how to hunt, fish, or grow food. Learning intensive gardening techniques and other skills put me in touch with nature, helped me relax, gave me emergency skills just in case, and the vegetables taste wonderful.”

“You sound like a survivalist.”

“Not at all. Call it sensible perspective. I feel closer in touch with life and better able to protect my family and myself. I give thanks every time I take a hot shower or take something out of a cold refrigerator—but what really matters is the realization how tissue-thin society is and what we take for granted is in jeopardy if we don't protect it. It's dangerous not to know what one doesn't don't know and doesn't care to learn. Classical Liberal Arts sharpen our ability to recognize such things.

“The major institutions we use to guide us are rusting. Journalism reflects that unfulfilled potential. Darkness and dirt in the current campaign are disgusting, with a political class bent on winning at any cost—which means at our cost. Communication of every stripe has been corrupted. The press has been turned, willingly or unwillingly, into a political agent. Even the newest electronic communities, blogs, are used to poison, bludgeon, incite, and subvert.

“‘Astroturf,’ the purposeful insertion of lies or noise, gained

acceptability. Too many institutions on which we depend have been sold down the river with not even an eyebrow raised.

“I wish different things had been taught back in school. I received a solid education, but knowing what I know now I’d have been better prepared had I learned differently. David McCullough’s *1776* belongs in introductory college curricula and two chapters, in particular, deserve to be read in high school. The first chapter details contemporaneous accounts of deliberation among members of British Parliament about the impending war in the colonies. Consequences of action were considered from all sides. Similar questions face governments today. The chapter helps people anchor their place in time—their place in history.

“McCullough’s last chapter examines the factors that made a difference in the outcome of the war. Downplayed were geography, international relations, and weather, amongst others. What mattered most was Washington’s appreciation of why he needed to persevere. Washington’s character mattered, because character instills the courage to persevere. McCullough helps anchor in you understanding of the place of character in history.

“Should it be there? Should it be somewhere? History ought to be humbling. It ought to remind us of our failures. Since journalism is the tool that stands between us, as individuals, and the rest of society, when it fails, it warns that a lot more may be at risk.

“The press throws a lot of spaghetti against the wall each day, hoping that some content will stick. Not all content thrown is news and many journalists don’t seem sure what is or is not. A newspaper can be described as a box of four smaller rectangles arranged in two vertical columns and two horizontal rows. One box in the top row is what you think you *need* to know and the next box on the same row is what the editor thinks you need to know. Below that is a row that has a box of what you *want* to know next to a box of what the editor thinks you want to know. Needs are different than wants. Wants are entertainment and other such information like which celebrity is going out with whom and what is on TV tonight.

“Days after The September 11, 2001, World Trade Center collapse, gossip columnist Liz Smith confessed at a newspaper convention, ‘Gossip is a luxury we can no longer afford.’ It was a pregnant statement. No one seemed to notice that the ‘wants’ in the press have overtaken the ‘needs.’ If anything, the journalistic ‘talent’ has sharpened its elbows, dug deeper in the mud-wrestling pit, and tuned its blather to win three more inches of front page space or three more minutes of airtime. News be damned. And why not? There has been no immediate cost to ignoring legitimate news.

“Meanwhile, our newspaper fights against the tide, advocating whenever we can for Reliable Community News. Our goal is to be the indispensable provider of local news and advertising.

“The journalist is a surrogate, responsible to provide the reader what the reader would have learned had they been at the scene. Rather than make decisions, responsible journalists provide necessary details so one can make one’s own decisions.

“News should reflect the community back on itself. It helps people relate to others whose future they share. Without reflection, there can be no community.

“Where does one counter today’s ambivalence about the use of history? Any student should approach, ‘What have you learned from history?’ not from the facts acquired, but from what they made their own to guide them forward. Who asks those questions?”

“Not many teachers.”

“If you want to see fingerprints of the problem, the first place to look is in literature . . . in fiction . . . in the novel. Back in 1889, colonial exploration was both exploring moral complications and covering them up. The rush to control Africa was called “imperialism” by some, but that distorts the word “imperator” which was a Roman compliment offered to a successful general. Nevertheless, then, as now, power and greed were the heart of darkness. Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* explores both the slippery nature of storytelling and whether one had the ability to face up to it. The end of the book forces a hypothetical on the

readers, 'If there can be no end to imperialism . . . then perhaps there can be an end to some of the more absurd and self-deluded idealizations of it.'

"Conrad said, 'Faith is a myth and beliefs shift like mists on the shore; thoughts vanish; words, once pronounced, die; and the memory of yesterday is as shadowy as the hope of tomorrow.' He despaired, 'There is no morality, no knowledge and no hope; there is only the consciousness of ourselves which drives us about a world that . . . is always but a vain and floating appearance . . .'

"His fingerprint of fading consciousness smudged a whole century."

"That's the way it has been, but not how it needs to be."