

12 AM - On the dawn of a new day

“It’s 12:01 AM. Good night and good morning, dear. Welcome to a new day.”

“Thanks, sweetheart. Same to you!”

“You seem lost in thought. What are you thinking?”

“About Virginia Woolf, and how literature seems to have failed over the last 100 years.”

“Woolf wrote beautifully, but she was too much of her time and not one of my favorite authors.”

“Nor one of mine. Woolf penned a spectacularly dramatic phrase in the 1920s. That sentence—that on or about December 10, 1910, the world changed—changed the world. Steeped in the literary tradition as she was, the date was as good a date as any to set as the pivot point for Modernism.

“Her point was that previous literature might have been excellent, but that it had not done enough. Modernism represented the dissatisfaction with literature’s representation of consciousness that failed to deal with the intra-personal problems of the day. Writing in the 1920s, through the lens of the postwar melancholy after World War I and the pointless loss of a generation of humanity, she and other writers like James Joyce, Thomas Mann, Herman Hesse, J.R. R. Tolkien, E. M. Forster, and T. S. Eliot—all great writers, paralleled a similar group of contemporary philosophers. For all the wealth of literature that was created in its name, Modernism did not succeed.

“An equivalent period of intellectual dissatisfaction followed World War II, ushering in the Post-modern period that mirrored the existential philosophies of Jean Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and another equally disaffected generation. Post-modernism, in the next century, remains on the table, not dead

and never fully replaced.

“Despite its striking inconsistencies, the pretender that might have pushed aside Post-modernism was Post-colonialism. Post-colonialists like the 1970s’ Edward Said dared to assert that cultures stand apart, unknowable, relative, and unchallengeable, a posture that attempted to define out of existence critics who disagreed with them. Post-colonialism had a passable chance of bluffing into submission those for whom history begins at dawn—those unfamiliar, for instance, with Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick*, who overlook its assault on literature, morals, and old-country cultural habits a good 125 years before Said took pen to paper.

“But Post-colonialism fails because back in 1923, when in *Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown*, Virginia Woolf made her claim that in 1910 the world had changed, she concluded that literature is about the written representation of character.”

“Why does that matter?”

“Because representing character allows mimesis. Mimesis—imitation—is a way to learn, if you discover what to practice. Given the chance, character representation can help build character. Finally, today, literature and the people who read it may be ready for what Woolf wished into existence in 1910.

“We are primed for change. The foundations have been laid—need represented by failure of previous systems, new metaphors in thought, accessible examples to represent them. It took 100 years for perspective to leap into common use in the 1300s. Today, after simmering for some 100 years, the concept of time and your place in it—the tool of recursive thought—the situation may be ripe. Stendhal, Tolstoy, and dialectic rethinking have helped prepare for the common use of a new pattern of thought. Metaphors like Edison’s film strips, Einstein’s relativity, audio/video feedback systems, and M. C. Escher’s art encourage it.

“Punctuated by a century of missteps, one can look back and conclude that on December 10, 2010, a hundred years after Woolf’s pivot point, the world actually can change.”

“You’re going to have to help. Tie it up in a nice bow for me.”

“No, you tie it up in a bow for me. Be Sherlock Holmes, the world’s greatest detective. What was Holmes’ famous precept?”

“When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth.”

“Fine. *You* manufacture society from that. First, review what not to do. To make a difference in the world, try to avoid the mistakes of those that have gone before. Start with the easy ones. Is science enough?”

“Science was the hope of the Enlightenment—that if we can understand nature we can control our destiny.”

“Understanding nature has put tremendous power in the hands of people who learn to use it. Unfortunately, some people who learn to use science misuse it. Useful as it is, science is not a society-building tool.”

“As long as we have put science in its place, let’s get rid of magic, too.”

“Fair enough. Magic is the notion that if you do some secret dance, that somehow nature will do your bidding. That’s foolish on the face of it. Enlightenment did us a favor by ridding the world of a great deal of magic and superstition.”

“As long as you are weighing the Enlightenment, the ‘philosophes’ of the time weren’t the answer either.”

“Give 2500 years of professional philosophy credit for reaching the conclusion that it can’t reach the conclusion. If Gödel and Wittgenstein did nothing else, they did show us that ‘absolutes’ or natural law can’t be shown to be absolute. Tossed as we are on the stormy sea of reality, no one will ever build a solid foundation that reaches to bedrock underneath the water.”

“And what about religions?”

“The Enlightenment did a lot to promote religious toleration, and people who share particular religious beliefs share a framework for dealing with other believers. However, religions

can’t provide a framework for social interaction because they have no influence with non-believers.”

“So far we have rejected science, magic, professional philosophy, religions. What’s next?”

“For goodness sake, let’s sink political institutions and the people who make their living posturing with them. After 2500 years of watching them not work, their flaws are obvious.”

“Then toss in political science, too. No savior of society, the truths they claim are trivial in the scheme of things.”

“Academic studies like civics and social studies are vehicles for producing docile, compliant subjects, not society.”

“If you are going to reject certain academic subjects as saviors of society, other subjects belong in the dustbin along side them, including psychology, and sociology.”

“To be fair, those subjects can have practical value. They are helpful within limited scope.”

“You left out history.”

“There is a lot to be learned from history, but, like hamburger, history can be cut many different ways and still be hamburger. No one version of history can serve as the basis for society. Society needs a stronger foundation.”

“Is there one?”

“We’re not through eliminating the impossible yet.”

“Okay, how about Rhetoric?”

“Talk about double-edged swords! It’s useful, but charlatans wield one edge to confuse and obstruct the other. Rhetoric is an undervalued tool, but its only a tool, and not a vehicle to establish society.”

“Literature hasn’t been successful as a builder of society either.”

“We’re getting to the bottom of the barrel, aren’t we.”

“Is it hopeless?”

“I don’t think we’ve been looking for tools in the right places.”

“What other places are there?”

“In your head.”

“Your grasping at straws.”

“Actually, I’m serious. Outside of oneself, all we know is ephemeral. Factual knowledge is not sufficient. Faith is limited to those who believe. Schooling has reinforced the inadequate. Governments abuse others. “When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the case.”

“What remains?”

“You do.”

“How so?”

“If we’re going to manufacture society, it’s going to have to start with you and you alone.”

“I thought we weren’t going to resort to magic.”

“I’m serious. You have the tools in your head to manufacture society . . . and convince others to do the same so they might join with you.

“You can recall your own past experiences. You can recognize patterns that repeat. You can project consequences into the future. That is useful.

“In the end, it is not one goose that turns the tide for the flock to lift off, but one goose starts the tide turning. Whatever one feels about today’s election. This is going to propel us forward.”

“You think we can pick up the pieces of the last century.”

“Adam Smith said that history serves better to warn of what hasn’t worked than about what has. Let’s not remain oblivious to history. Our generation was connected but unconscious. Capable of pinpoints of penetrating insight in books and in film, even collectively perceived and appreciated, but, as Eugene O’Neill advised, then the hand lets the veil fall, and you are lost again. The movie can be conscious and the actor not. Or the character can be conscious and the actor not. Or the actor can be conscious for an instant or in only one way.”

“But how does one grow more able and more alert?”

“Let’s inventory some authors:

- Richard Mitchell explains a casual approach to language warns of deep trouble.
- Julian Jaynes shows, from clues in writings throughout history, that people can learn to think differently than they previously thought, and that consciousness—a sense of self and the spatialization of time—is an acquired trait.
- Douglas Hofstadter reveals recursion and other better tools that today are available to refine our processes of thought.
- Better tools can help sift wisdom from the great thinkers of the past who turned their keen intellects to address the simple daily problems of living.
- Acquired wisdom reinforces stable processes with built-in self-correction to understand the world around us and, from there, to help plan for the future.
- Using those processes, people can manufacture a mutually useful ethical system.
- Such an ethical system helps determine minimal behavior that scales over the entire range of society—individuals, small groups, states, and nations.

“If we are in deep trouble, there is reason for optimism. The grace of which we are capable lies in our humanity, not in our gods. We shoulder responsibility for our lives. With tools to help, we are in a race for civilization.”

“Is there a reasonable alternative?”

“The alternative, cultural relativism, leaves no basis for planning, action, or peaceful problem resolution other than an inadequate exercise of Machiavellian power. Philosophy, when it’s not sidetracked by questions about what can we know, asks the good questions how should we behave and how should we govern ourselves. Montaigne summarizes the issue as *Que sais je?* or “What do I know?”

“When philosophy gets beyond questions of truth and its own fallibility, the discipline does help, within its limitations, to deal with the world as best one can. Mandeville promoted self-interest, Hume believed reason was imperfect but helpful. Adam

Smith championed the impartial observer developing ethics. Montesquieu advised liberty over order. Thomas Reid said that workable ethics needed a common framework. Hobbes determined the individual was the precursor to society; Kant encouraged reciprocity and insisted that lies to others are always wrong. Voltaire advocated reason to temper religion. Hegel recommended a continuous dialectical process. Schopenhauer warned of the power of intuition underneath reason. Mill emphasized the liberty principle and considered the individual the most important contributor to happiness. Rorty encouraged people to follow Kant and think for themselves. Karl Popper advocated science to prune away what doesn't work.

“Over its history, philosophy asks the question, if you are alone in a storm-tossed sea of sense experience, is there a way to stand independent of culture to create society. Then, if one can create society where any two individuals or any two groups meet—then what are the minimum requirements for society, and how can one be certain?”

“The answer is a resounding ‘Yes!’ We can create society. Where there is no shared experience, people with unique individual experience can still arrive at identical conclusions. Even though experiences are different, independent deductions reflecting on these experiences, are in important ways invariably the same. While not demonstrably universal, they might as well be so. Two come to mind:

- Experience shows anyone that sometimes they think they are correct when they eventually discover they were mistaken.
- Experience teaches one to doubt what one ‘knows.’ This is what we call humility.

“The fallibility of the tool we use to sense the world helps us recognize the personal advantage of engaging with others to more accurately map what we sense and deduce, the better to plan one’s future.”

“Does absolute perfection—provability—matter?”

“The search for ultimate perfection can’t matter enough to cause you to give up if you can’t reach it. Build for stability. Figure how to tie to others without shared experience into a frame of

reference—communication—that will work equally well for anyone willing to buy into it. The task is to make buying into it open, accessible, easy, and compelling, because the other alternatives are annihilation or military standoff.

“Beyond recognizing the value of society and convincing others of it, the third stage is to manufacture a protective umbrella for society that shows the advantage of peaceful problem resolution. That is what puts mankind—at least potentially—above the rest of the animals to reduce the uncertainty of the law of the jungle for the segment of humanity that consents to the process by their actions.

“To be able to project different futures, some of them unworkable, helps one learn to value society. Dreams with the potential to work can translate into a real and solid foundation. So apply yourself. Determine what works and what doesn’t, figure what’s needed, and understand why. We can celebrate today at the same time we take notes and check the record to protect ourselves from doubletalk, newspeak, and half-think: Don’t tell me what you believe in; show me why you believe it.”

“Respectful exchanges with others revere life, conserve resources, and integrate economy to maximize the ability of individuals in society to cope in the natural universe.”

“That’s trite.”

“The Greeks valued liberty, and for that liberty were willing to sacrifice everything rather than give up. Too many today would casually trade in liberty for the empty promise of security and the certain slavery of a free lunch, never appreciating its true price. Ours is a generation so free that it has lost the meaning of freedom, the reason for freedom, and the will to reach for it. As surely as people who have no liberty yearn for it, the people who have liberty handed to them lust for absence of risk.”

“Politics wrestles with the question, ‘Is there room for the individual in society?’”

“That question was put to bed a century ago, and certainly put away during Reagan’s confrontation with the Soviet Union. After years of dullness and lack of vigilance, the question has

been resuscitated. Rephrase the question and people become uncomfortable: 'Is society a user of people?' and 'Should individuals be suppressed for the advantage of society's powerful?' Individuals need to carve out space in a dominating society. Technology has blinded you; you are connected but not social."

"Philosopher Erik Erickson asked the meaning of life. What do you say to everyone who asks?"

"Tell them, 'You selfish, egotistical bastard! You sit there, surveying the world from a very pretty perch, indeed, provided you by everyone who has ever gone before. And you dare to break the gift they have given you. You contemplate abstracts self-indulgently, complain how hard you have it, and that there is nothing to live for, when you cannot see the gift you have been given. You rush to escape, into drugs, alcohol, television, hedonism, small talk, self-pity—anything to stop looping in your head or facing the reality of the meaninglessness of it all. Oh, the horror! Well, grow up! You may not find meaning, but meaning can find you. Your job is to get out of bed, no matter where that bed may be, and say, 'Damn! This is a wonderful day, and I'm going to make the most of it. I am going to laugh, cry, and work myself until I'm happily tired. And, by God, when I die, someone will be able to look back on what I have done, and say thank you for clearing my path just a little more.'

"My Dad once said, 'I look into a mirror and see a young kid with wrinkles.' He was right in so many ways. There is no such thing as an adult. The word adult is a fraud perpetrated by language. We're all just trying to make our way. He was right that time catches up to you. And he was also right because, in his next breath he said, 'We don't do what we do for ourselves. We do it for our children. To give them a better place in which to live.'

"Uncertainty—that is what we are given. Certainly, we are alone, but we are also together. Sartre reminded us that, although alone, we still have those that we love on whom to practice loving."

"If society is so simple, why isn't it understood more easily and often?"

"Appreciating 'why society' takes more steps to independently deduce than it takes steps to see clearly once society's simple elegance is pointed out. Besides, as you have already seen, society is easily and often confused with culture.

"Once you *do* figure why society matters, you can sell the personal advantage society offers others, and, furthermore, you are armed with the tools and the courage to defend it against those who, resigned to living just the law of the jungle, would destroy it."

"How do you protect society?"

"To protect society, you need to know what it is and what it does. That arms you to detect and label behavior that would undermine it. The first weapon of choice is laughter, but every weapon in the arsenal is available to those who would use every weapon in the arsenal against you."

"Speak softly, but carry a big stick."

"Yes, keep the big stick but keep it sheathed if possible because you can't predict its unintended consequences. In the end, use the tools you've got. Books give you insight. Books give you perspective. Books give you hope. Books give you companionship. Books nudge you toward a way out. Books give you clues to what is wrong. I may criticize literature, but its limits, not its accomplishments. Literature was the way I became sensitive to patterns and the consequences of them. Without literature I would still be lost. Literature compressed enough experience into a concentrated point that we could manufacture a way to bust out of our limitations. We have every reason to hope. Just as Confucius' carvings on some ivory could reach out to touch someone 2500 years later, any insight recorded now can reach out to touch someone else in the unimaginable future.

"Congratulations! You get to disperse the creeping fog—now that you have learned to see it all through the last century in coffeehouses, work, journalism, art, education, character, individuality, politics, economics, advertising, history, academia,

religion, literature, language, community, and culture. Now, what do you do? You make your own hope.”

“I feel so alone.”

“I’ll be there. Remember what Tom Joad says, at the end of John Steinbeck’s *Grapes of Wrath*, “Whenever they’s a fight so hungry people can eat, I’ll be there. Whenever they’s a cop beatin’ up a guy, I’ll be there... I’ll be in the way guys yell when they’re mad an’—I’ll be in the way kids laugh when they’re hungry an’ they know supper’s ready. An’ when our folks eat the stuff they raise an’ live in the houses they build—why, I’ll be there.”

“He was speaking about justice that comes with society, without really being able to define it—real justice in a society of individuals, not activist whining. We are so much closer now, with literature that can nudge people towards understanding how to interact with others and why. It gives me hope that when others see why, I’ll be there.”

“Suppose others can’t see what you see?”

“That doesn’t matter. There were kernels of ideas Confucius understood that he had difficulty conveying to others of his time. What matters is to make the most accessible case for what one can see so others might discover how.”

“Imagine what it must have been like for Confucius to understand what could be done, convey it clearly, and not have it grasped.”

“He had the satisfaction of having tried to express himself to others, of having had his thoughts recorded, of recognizing that in some unimaginably distant future, those concepts might touch someone, and that fruit might blossom from trees nurtured by more receptive soil. He would have reveled in wonder at life itself and his life in particular.”

“Not disappointed at all?”

“Balanced. Not disappointed. Confucius may have been unsuccessful in marriage, in government, in education, in religion, but he succeeded at something he could hope for but

never know. He reached forward 2500 years to touch someone like me.”

“He would not have been disappointed?”

“No. A wonderfully happy and fulfilled person . . .”

“Sweetheart?”

“Yes?”

“I love you!”

“And I love you, too!”