

JEFFERSON EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

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This, That, and the Other – II



“Landscape with the Fall of Icarus” attributed to Pieter Bruegel the Elder

This is going to be a **Book Notes** of “notes” – three to be precise. Right at the outset, however, I want to thank my editors, Pat Cuneo and Ben Speggen, for both their forbearance and for running several **Book Notes “Classics”** for me,

as my wife Judy and I dealt with a bout of Covid that consumed most of January. Combined with running the *Book Notes "Classic"* series "A-caroling We Will Go" in December, it's been almost two months since my last "**Note.**" Trying to get back into the rhythm of these weekly musings, today I want briefly to look at three topics, each of which deserves a more in-depth treatment. For now, however, some passing comments.

Note #1: *What is the purpose of a higher education?* I asked that question last fall and, quite honestly, was not swamped with replies. In fact, I think I only received two or three and they were short and to the point. All three asserted that the purpose of a higher education is to prepare one for a career. Given the background of most "Jeffersonians," I found the answer both disappointing and surprising – the surprise was the disappointment.

You have probably guessed that I do not agree.

I don't.

What prompted this return to that old question has been the numerous questions I have been asked about the wretched performance by three presidents of "elite" universities before Congress last fall when none of them could provide a simple, clear answer to the question whether or not advocating genocide was protected speech on their campuses. That none of them could muster the courage to say that advocating the slaughter of innocents was not protected speech on their campuses betrayed both a breathtaking moral opacity and a shocking lack of courage.

It also exposed what happens when *the purpose of a higher education* succumbs to political pressure from both the right and the left while simultaneously losing itself in mere job training.

I believe the purpose of a higher education is, yes, to learn how to earn a living. But if that is all it does, then it fails those it presumes to "educate." For I believe the purpose of a higher education is also to help students learn how to live a life.

The purpose of a higher education is both practical and moral.

But it is the moral that makes it "higher."

Although I can't at the moment find a source to document the quote, I have, for many years, quoted T. H. Huxley, the great 19th century philosopher of science, who said, (I am paraphrasing here), that the purpose of all education was ultimately moral. It was to teach one what ought to be done, and to instill the courage to do it when it needed to be done whether one wanted to or not.

There are two loaded words in that paraphrase – *ought* and *courage*.

The question immediately arises in a polyglot, richly diverse society, “What is it that one *ought* to do?”

“Ought” is a moral word, for it implies duty or correctness, i.e., it is one’s duty to do the correct thing, the right thing. Which immediately asks the question, “What is the correct, the right thing to do?” At a minimum, cutting through the clutter of competing “isms,” it is, as almost every code of ethics in the world begins “to do no harm” and, as almost every creed in the world exhorts, “to treat others as you’d have them treat you.”

Which brings me back to the three presidents who couldn’t find the spine – the *courage* – to simply say advocating the slaughter of innocents, which clearly violates both of those moral precepts, was not protected speech on their campuses.

Note #2: *How did we come to such a pass?* Those on the right howl that it results from political correctness on college campuses that privileges a sort of moral relativism that reduces even the leaders of “elite” institutions to mere tongue-tied babblers of finely grained legalisms threading ever shrinking needles as they seek to avoid offending anyone and in the process offend almost everyone. Those on the left shrill – well, it is hard to know what they shrill – for when anything goes, to mangle Cole Porter, one effectively stands for nothing. And, standing for nothing (or everything all at once which amounts to standing for nothing), they find themselves neutered and incapable of standing for anything, including the condemnation of evil.

And if the slaughter of innocents is not evil, then nothing is.

All of this makes me think of our seemingly unending culture wars, which are really arguments about America’s foundational values –the “*oughts*” Americans ought (there’s that word again) to uphold. So far, the disagreements are arguments and not “wars,” although violence continues to simmer just beneath the surface. It has become a cliché to quote the Irish poet William Butler Yeats’ “The Second Coming” that “the center cannot hold” and that “things fall apart.” In her excellent ***Democracy Awakening: Notes on the State of America***, historian Heather Cox Richardson says that the American center is being torn apart by adherents at the extreme right and left of American society.

What is the *center* that is not holding?

As evidenced by the babbling presidents of “elite” universities, it is the American genius for compromise and consensus around foundational values. It is forgetting Benjamin Franklin’s wise advice that for a society of competing interests to survive, it requires that its members remember the wisdom of the “joiner” (a carpenter) who, to make a smooth and secure “joint,” needs to pare a bit from this side and a bit from the other side so that both sides smoothly meet creating something both larger and stronger than either separately.

What are the two sides in America’s current culture war, America’s current argument about foundational values? In a future **Book Note** – maybe next week examining Richardson’s **Democracy Awakening** – I am going to do a deeper dive into that question. But for now, a recent **New York Times** article by Thomas Friedman reminds me of my **The American Tapestry Project’s** core observation.

Friedman argues that in both the current Middle East struggle between Israel and Hamas and in Russia’s invasion of Ukraine one meta-plot explains both. [1]

On one side, Friedman says, are Resisters who reject the future and seek to restore the past. On the other side are the Inclusives who embrace the future seeking to bridge differences and bring all together in a better, newer world. As he says, Ukraine wants to join the pluralistic West, while Russia wants a restoration of Czarist hegemony. In the Middle East, Israel wants to join the Arab east, while Iran and Hamas oppose it.

He says the contest is between those who resist the future and those who embrace it.

Similarly, Richardson says the contest in America is between those who believe in an old, discredited vision of America as an authoritarian, hierarchical society dominated by white males and those they condescend to deem honorary members of that exclusive club. They are Excluders. On the other side are those who believe America is an ongoing experiment in democratic, self-government of, by, and for the people. They are Includers.

Resisters and Includers.

Although I believe the American story is a tapestry of America’s many stories, over these past several years developing the project I have come to believe that in the tapestry of America’s many stories there are two meta-threads coloring and shading all of the other threads. At first, I called one thread the Essentialist story and the other the Existential story. The Essentialist story holds that America is a society created by and for white people. But not all white people; primarily, it is for land-owning white people and white males in particular. The

Existential story, on the other hand, sees the American story as the unfolding of an unfinished story of America continuing to mature and grow as it seeks to perfect its experiment in self-government while simultaneously expanding the definition of the “We” in “We the People” by extending the blessings of American freedom to both men and women and an ever increasingly Inclusive mix of all its people of various hues and ethnic origins.

Now, I think that metaphor needs clarifying and expanding, for the essentialist story is a Resister’s story seeking to thwart the future by freeze-framing America in a past that never quite was and can never, no matter intensely some might yearn for it and others falsely promise they can make it happen, be brought back. The Includers’ story, however, continues to brighten the future with its promise of extending American freedom to all.

Resisters and Includers? On the one hand, authoritarians, who want the freedom to tell you and me how to live while denying us the right of free choice; on the other, Includers who know that freedom doesn’t mean anything unless it includes everyone having, as Milton Friedman says, “the right to choose.”

So, while some on both the right and the left attempt to tell us how to live, that center struggling to survive believes that everyone should have “the right to choose.”

The right to choose what?

Where do you learn that?

Note #3: Well, we can learn it at home (but often don’t); we can learn it at church (but often don’t); and we can learn it at school (but often don’t). I’m not a sociologist, so I won’t speak about home life; I’m not a theologian, so I won’t speak about church life.

Although it sounds pretentious to say “I’m an educator,” I have spent over a half-century in *higher* education and going on three-quarters of a century in education, if you count my own from kindergarten to graduate school. So, to paraphrase the guy in one of those insurance company ads on TV, “I know a thing or two” about education.

As I said earlier, a *higher* education is both practical and moral.

Where do you acquire education’s moral component? It’s not, although it could be, in education’s practical curriculum. No, you learn how to choose, you learn how to live one’s life, in the arts and humanities.

The humanities are by definition about what it means to be human. Literature, art, and music, if they are about anything at all, are about being human and learning to *see* (and *hear*).

In a recent column, frequent JES visitor David Brooks asks, “Does consuming art, music, literature and the rest of what we call culture make you a better person?” He answers his own question by first appealing to authority (the weakest argument) when he says Aristotle thought it did, but then he confesses that he “cling(s) to the old faith that culture is vastly more important than politics or some pre-professional training in algorithms and software systems. I’m convinced that consuming culture furnishes your mind with emotional knowledge and wisdom; it helps you take a richer and more meaningful view of your own experience; it helps you understand, at least a bit, the depths of what’s going on in the people right around you.” [2]

Where do you do that? In the humanities, for as Brooks continues, we “rediscover the humanist code. It is based on the idea that unless you immerse yourself in the humanities, you may never confront the most important question: How should I live my life?” [3]

How do the humanities and immersion in art do that?

As I have asserted these past several years in numerous ***Book Notes***, the humanities and art make one more ***present-to-the-present***. They help one, to borrow a phrase, *to be here now*.

They don’t teach us, for it can’t be taught, but if we pay close enough attention (Brooks says “attention is a moral act”) they help one learn how to *see*. [4]

See what?

The life going on all around us, what it might or might not mean, and where we might or might not fit in the swirl that is life itself.

More often than not, we’re not paying attention. We’re coping; trying to get through today. It could be true that we miss most of our life because, as John Lennon said, life happens while we’re busy making other plans.

Or, as the poet Jack Gilbert, mourning the death of his wife Michiko, said in “Highlights and Interstices”:

Highlights and Interstices

We think of lifetimes as mostly the exceptional

and sorrows. Marriages we remember as the children,
vacations, and emergencies. The uncommon parts.
But the best is often when nothing is happening.
The way a mother picks up her child almost without
noticing and carries her across Waller Street
while talking with the other woman. What if she
could keep all of that? Our lives happen between
the memorable. I have lost two thousand habitual
breakfast with Michiko. What I miss most about
her is that commonplace I can no longer remember. [5]

And sometimes, trained by our ever so practical education and going about our
ever so practical lives, we miss the really big things as the poet W.H. Auden
reminded us in his "*Musee des Beaux Arts*":

from *Musee des Beaux Arts*

About suffering they were never wrong,
The Old Masters: how well they understood
Its human position; how it takes place
While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along....

In Bruegel's *Icarus*, for instance: how everything turns away
Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may
Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,
But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone
As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green
Water; and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen
Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,
Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on. [6]

As I have said many times these past several years, explication can wreck a
poem. But a few comments about Auden's "*Musee des Beaux Arts*." In
November 1938, Auden was visiting the Museum of Fine Arts in Brussels when
he saw Pieter Bruegel the Elder's "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus." It caused
him to pause and reflect on humans' indifference to the suffering of others. They
either don't notice, or they notice and are too busy to care, or they simply don't
care.

In this particular poem, he elevates human indifference to the suffering of others
to a grand level, for, of course, Icarus is the character in Greek mythology who
stands in for the vanity of human wishes. Icarus is the metaphor of that double-
edged aspect of human character that is both humanity's glory and frequently its
undoing: that our grasp often exceeds our reach. But grasp we must, for it is in

our nature. It is our willingness to reach for the stars that has propelled us from a not particularly important species on the African savannah to global domination. It is our willingness to take chances, it is our willingness to take risks that is the root of our success. But sometimes it can kill us, as in the story of the boy Icarus who fashioned waxen wings to fly to the sun only to fall back to earth and drown in the sea when the sun melted his wings. The indifferent ploughman, busy with his daily task, may or may not have seen the wondrous sight of a boy with waxen wings falling out of the sky. Regardless, he ploughed on, which in this sentence is both literally true and a metaphor.

The moral in the tale? Oh, I don't like the sound of "moral," but the insight available if we stop, watch and *see* is that we must be daring, we must be risk takers if we are to succeed, but in taking the chance we might fail and fall into the sea, literal or metaphorical. Oh, also don't be surprised if no one notices nor particularly cares.

But chance it, we must.

Oh, well, that is enough for today.

Who do you like in the Super Bowl? I like Kansas City if only because it will drive the MAGA crowd crazy to see Taylor Swift celebrating with her beau Travis Kelce! Taylor Swift as an agent of the deep state – really? Get a grip!



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End Notes

1. Friedman, Thomas, "A Titanic Geopolitical Struggle Is Underway," **The New York Times** (January 25, 2024) available at [Opinion | A Titanic](#)

[Geopolitical Struggle Is Underway - The New York Times \(nytimes.com\)](#) accessed February 3, 2024.

2. Brooks, David, "How to Save a Sad, Lonely, Angry and Mean Society," **The New York Times** (January 25, 2024) available at [Opinion | How Art Creates Us - The New York Times \(nytimes.com\)](#) accessed February 3, 2024.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Gilbert, Jack, "Highlights and Interstices," in **Collected Poems** (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012), p. 176.
6. Auden, W.H. "Musee des Beaux Arts" in **The Norton Anthology of Poetry**, Eds. Arthur M. Eastman, et. al. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1970), p. 1076.
7. Auden, W. H. "September 1, 1939" at **All Poetry** available at [September 1, 1939 by W H Auden - Famous poems, famous poets. - All Poetry](#) accessed January 29, 2024.

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