LETTERS TO A FRIEND

Our uncertain entrance upon a new millennium, an era everyone hoped would bring peace, has been dominated by new and unprecedented threats. The passages collected here from letters to a friend evoke memories of a quieter time. The distance of thirty years has ripened these reflections. They contain, I think, reassurances that are especially welcome today when friendship is more prize-worthy than ever.

-- Juan Arturo Madero Blanco
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Prologue

“When I look back now over the discussion you and I have been having ever since daybreak until this very moment—and it appears to me not without some divine inspiration—well, it’s come to look, to my eyes, just like a kind of poetry. It’s probably not surprising that I had such a feeling and to have been immensely delighted at the sight of my own speeches, brought together, as it were; for of the many discourses I have listened to or learned about, whether in verse or in a loose flood of prose like ours, it’s these that I find the most satisfactory and especially suitable for the ears of the young.”

Plato, Laws VII, 811cd
I – The world of nature opens its beauty among friends.

Autumn

We headed back this morning through the fog-shrouded, sleepy browns and tans of the countryside. I tried hard to squeeze the most thought and prayer from those four days. The atmosphere was perfect—mild days and chilly nights, and a steady cloud cover that made possible long afternoon walks without the contrast of sunshine and shade. One afternoon I penetrated woods and ravines I’d never explored before, crossed a brook on a fallen log, and found a little pine forest guarded by almost impenetrable thorn bushes. If it weren’t for the steady sound of traffic in the distance, I could easily have lost my way.

In spite of nature’s slow decline outside my window, the world is glorious this morning, its mantle all copper and scarlet, bright yellow and pale. Still no frost, and flowers keep ignoring the certainty of an imminent icy death. How good it would be to take a walk through a forest this morning, far from cities, but here I am—taking the most enjoyable “walk” of all—a chat with you.

We finally had a hard freeze, and the last leaves are down. The campus looks to be on the verge of winter again. It’s quite striking, each year at this time, how barren and even forbidding it looks, with so much grey and black on all sides. But it does the good service of making interior joy all the more joyful.

Water

It’s raining steadily tonight. I enjoyed walking home through it—looking down at the wet leaves and the reflections from the street lights, hearing the drops fall on the leaves, savoring that damp but fresh smell. A student across the street was softly singing a soul tune. The note of melancholy didn’t affect me for I love rainy evenings. The rain cleanses the grime from the city’s face; it makes the people wet, too, and may work just as well on grimy souls. The rain continues, so I’ll hurry to bed before it stops. Lying there listening, the rain
turns into praise of God with those tiny sparkling creatures chanting His goodness.

With a glance now and then at a couple far out on the end of the pier, their feet swaying over the incoming waves, I must have sat on the beach for two hours, reviewing some notes. Delightful. The air was clear enough to give a sharp line to the horizon. There was a bit of wind, but a fair number of sailors were out, for the season will soon be over.

We walked over to the lake yesterday evening to talk as we watched the incoming waves, dark and mysterious. I spoke of how you taught me to learn from the sea and how it had helped to mature your insight. I hope you still get down to the shore once in a while to maintain your balance and keep the job from consuming all your time and energy. The sea is a great balancer for a man who is overwhelmed by an occupation or feels too close to some responsibility. It’s so important to maintain perspective.

Driving along the lake to a meeting this evening, dark, low clouds blew in from the choppy water with breakers splashing white foam, the trees swept low in a light rain. That wildness made me think of you. Are you glad to be living again by the sea? It has called you back to itself—and to yourself, too, I trust.

I’m starting to realize something you’ve known all along. We all need periodic refreshment—like your return to port from time to time during those Vietnam days. My weekends are like that—a recharge, a refueling at home port—so that on Monday morning I can go back out to sea, with its unknown, unexpected challenges. A beautiful arrangement! What’s it like for you now, working through the weekend—no homeport for refueling? A man cannot stay at sea indefinitely without meeting sterility and isolation.

II – Friendship gives new insights into people.

It’s All There.

It was a chilly but sunny day. I found a spot sheltered from the wind and with good exposure to the sun. This time it was a book about the ancient Celts, your ancestors and mine. Here’s a nice passage: “Folk of a Celtic type
exhibit the same characteristics—vanity, talkativeness, excitability, fickleness, imagination, love of the romantic, faithfulness, attachment to family ties, sentimental love of country, religiosity easily passing into superstition, and a comparatively high degree of sexual morality.” The author omitted an important detail: We Celts inherit a large capacity for fermented beverages. But it’s OK because it “runs in the family.”

I spent some time today at the beach, sitting with my thoughts in the sun, conscious all the while of the people around me. An older woman in a yellow dress sat beside me to rest. She put down her satchel and tuned her portable radio to the news. It was interesting to note the expressions her face registered with each report.

When the lesson ended the teachers watched a Peanuts film with the kids, one I hadn’t seen before. I was struck by the cartoonist’s artful success in placing twelve-year-olds and doctors of philosophy on an equal plane of rapt attention and simple enjoyment.

The concert tonight featured Spanish singers and dancers. As always the most enjoyable part was simply being there with so many ordinary, everyday people.

Waiting at the bus depot downtown this morning, I realized that what goes on in waiting rooms is deeply honest. The people are simply themselves. They are waiting, and there’s nothing about it to conceal. If they happen to be attractive, it comes through so cleanly. If they aren’t, they don’t mind if people see it. What a good lesson in honesty to watch people in waiting rooms!

Remember our janitor, Mr. Moody? When he saw me heading for class in a new suit and bright tie, he felt compelled to go on about it, pulling at my sleeve to feel the cloth: “Pess, yo sho looks smaat; ah means yo sho looks smaat!” What a rich personality!

**Home and Family**

It’s relaxing just to sit here late like this, hearing the age-old chorus of crickets. In this climate they seem more insistent in August and bring back to mind so many summers back home. Down there the locusts would also be
starting their swaying chant about now. I doubt if you've ever heard them, since they don't come very far north. I miss them. We used to sit on the porch on sultry August evenings and just listen to them sing: ooooooeee, ooooooeee, oooooooeee. As long as that kept it, we realized everything was all right. I think I could write forever about life in those undulating Missouri hills, and the essence would come out on every page. You really do have to go there—in August—to feel it. That's it for now; cricket-memories are great for sleeping.

What excitement tonight! Back in the old homestead: television blaring a game tied up 4 to 4 in the 13th, one of the kids on grandma’s electric organ, ten or twelve youngsters expressing their independence (traditional in our family) at different decibel levels while their moms shout for quiet so they can get some visiting in (even more traditional). Grandma is already laid out on the couch, but with a smile on her face. Greatest show on earth!

We got in after a nine-hour ride. The trip was a fine exercise in flexibility—it can get to be trying after sitting for a few hundred miles on mashed cocoa puffs. And those endless verses of little girl songs! They kept up a competition to see who could get closest to me, and told me I was their favorite uncle because I never get mad at them.

Another day of flexibility: tying shoelaces, wiping hands, lifting in and out of cars, wiping tears away, deciding whose turn it is, finding a lost ball, kissing little mouths good night. The older boys taught me the starting position for wrestling, and it was not long before I was taking on three of them at once. One of them is a Little League star; he had to show me how well he could catch anything I threw at him. After viewing recent home movies, the five oldest took turns leading the decades of the Rosary—the only time all day when there was a semblance of peace and quiet.

After supper we took the four little girls to a carnival. The faces of the attendants were a mix of patience and boredom. Imagine watching a ferris wheel revolve thousands of times, helping chatty people on and off! Putting up with exhaust fumes and canned organ music, the same tune over and over and over! Back home, my youngest niece fell asleep in my lap while I was reading to her about a giraffe that kept losing its orange hat with a green feather.

This is “having roots”: Helping dad repair the porch swing on which he courted mom, and which his grandsons just broke by swinging too high; pushing the fifteenth nephew in the stroller I was pushed in as an infant.
This evening we visited with some of the old folks at a wake. It seemed as if they had been waiting there for years, still as solid as granite; they already seemed ancient when I was a boy. The wrinkles and white hairs just go on multiplying. Coming to wakes seems to them an important responsibility—part of passing the torch. Some day not far in the future they'll all be gone, and I'll be the torchbearer—with wrinkles and white hair.

I've told you some things I've learned from the old people, but not yet what the little people have been teaching me. Consider these as a starter: spontaneous affection, genuine expressiveness, openness and sincerity, acceptance of things as they are and what it means to be dependent, sharp experiences of joy and sadness, what a little it takes to fill one's mind and occupy one's attention (a ball, a sand pile, a piece of colored plastic). Should adults even try to see things that way? But how else to interpret that famous warning, “Unless you change and become like little children...”? What did He mean by “become” and by “like”?

Here’s a start: Children aren’t “philosophical.” They can’t reflect on their childhood or their future, or learn anything from their experiences by themselves. They cannot appreciate their individuality, and all that goes with it. If we don’t reflect on it, how could childhood profit? How does the proverbial innocence of a small child reveal itself?—in passive docility or in active self-assertion? How about a child’s spontaneous trust?

Why do teenagers resent the idea that they were—and still are—little children, if childhood teaches so many valuable lessons?

Yesterday there was so much excitement watching the Apollo landing, even having meals TV style. The little kids, even the teenagers, were so blasé about the whole affair. Maybe it’s because they’ve taken so many “space flights” already in their imaginations that they can’t see why it’s such a big deal for two men to be walking around on the moon. It’s all so familiar to them—just like they expected it! They’ve already “been there and done that.”

Every time I leave home after a short visit the sense of omission is overwhelming: the things that could have been said and done; the ingratitude for good things said or done to me and passed over in silence; inconsideration of the feelings of others; abrupt and thoughtless reactions to the opinions and
comments of others. The worst part is that now it’s too late to correct any of that. It can’t be done over. The opportunity was there, and now it’s gone.

How much of a person’s identity is enclosed within a natural relationship: son, and all it means; father, and all it means; brother, and all it means; and the same with uncle, nephew, grandson, grandfather. Is the personal insecurity of many these days due to having replaced those relationships with artificial ones of their own making?

It was dark by the time we wound our way up the shore of Lake Ontario to Hamilton and then west to London. Eventually we reached the large brick farmhouse, more than a century old. It was so dark and quiet out there in the country, but what a warm and enthusiastic reception! There are eight children, all still at home. The last visit was a dozen years ago, so you can imagine how much his aunt appreciated this long-anticipated visit. The conversation was in Dutch, so the rest of us had to figure out what was going on the best we could. They served us huge bowls of soup with homemade bread and cheese. We couldn’t get to bed until midnight.

Six years ago the oldest boy had to have major heart surgery, and it consumed everything they had. They are still trying to recover financially. The father has a second job in a factory. The near tragedy brought them closer together, and it was a joy to spend a little time with them. In spite of the many differences of nationality and background, I found this family strikingly like my own and yours.

Characters

First impressions: An open face, a genuine smile, a trace of mischief around the eyes, a simple heart. Some details about him remind me of you, especially the playful streak that keeps him from getting “too involved” at school.

As I get a little beyond the surface, what a plucky and spirited fellow—real depth! While he was with his relatives, there was a special sparkle. I called it to his attention, and he responded that I was seeing his “true self,” something academic life inhibits. Competitive pressures run contrary to his natural sense of warmth and generosity. I haven’t met many people so genuine.
As we begin to exchange insights about “serious” matters, I can see why he dislikes crowds of drowsing people and prefers small groups. Very little gets past him in a philosophical discussion. By applying what he assimilated at home, he has already formed definite views about life in our country, especially things that require urgent attention (like decaying respect for the value of human life).

He’s a quick little guy, and strong—like you, a natural athlete. His spirit, too, is much like yours. Yesterday I got a sense of what troubles him “down deep,” and he responded well to words of encouragement (veiled behind playful teasers).

Today he asked some “personal” questions for the first time since we met. I was only helping him with vocabulary.

He decided to save the front page of today’s paper to keep as a memento—“no violence, for once.” I just walked over to the lab with him to check on his “ridiculous reactions.” He is good company and teaches me a lot about being human. At lunch he was faking discouragement over his recent experiments with the comment, “Apparently I’m one of those who is pushing back the frontiers of science, instead of forward.” After lunch, someone observed a hole in one of his shoes. Said he: “Everything has its purpose; the hole tells me which is my left shoe.”

Since he takes kitchen duty almost every evening, he has acquired a new interest in TV commercials for different detergents, noting well which ones have double active enzymes and lemon additives. The milk turned sour over the weekend, so we opened some Pet Milk for morning coffee. At first he was a bit edgy about it, assuming that “pet” meant it was for dogs and cats.

Today we engaged in a wondrous game of international intrigue—the dispatch of “contraband.” Last night he boxed up his books and notes, borrowed a push cart from the custodian, and got everything ready to put aboard a vessel preparing to depart for the long trip across the sea. He had arranged with a friend who works at the port to “smuggle” the boxes into the captain’s cabin where they might ride freeboard. It was quite a mysterious operation. We successfully drove past the port entry, he dealt with his contact,
and they got his gear aboard. I wasn't permitted to help, for fear of arousing suspicion. He was very happy to have that murky business over—and to have stepped on native “soil” in the process.

We celebrated by visiting a hippy hangout. It took a long time for the waitress to deliver our pomegranate nectar, so he asked her if that was because our hair was too short! When we reached the campus and passed the outdoor stage, he climbed up and began to rehearse a farewell speech he won't be giving. He was eloquent, and I a bit embarrassed.

After dinner I walked over to his lab to surprise him and walk him back. He was delighted at the opportunity to show me his experiments. So few days left now. I spotted a flask the color of burgundy and exclaimed, “You've succeeded in converting chemicals into wine!” (It was only a cobalt hydride solution.) I enjoyed watching him work, and he was glad to have an audience.

Bright and early we went to the bank so he could close his account. As we arrived, he noticed that a red carpet had been placed on the sidewalk—no doubt in anticipation of his arrival. He even expected a speech of gratitude for his business. He wanted me to stand by with tears in my eyes. It didn't quite work out that way. And there wasn't even an attempted holdup while we were there.

III. Friendship reaches the recesses of a human being.

What's in a Man

I weighed your conjectures about him; on this point, you're wrong. Here is a man with a vision of a perfected humanity, who sees so many people rejecting that vision without even making an honest effort to look into it. Here is a man who is painfully aware, not only of the shortcomings along his path, but also of his own unworthiness to follow it. I'm glad we agree that he's a great man. And don't men always suffer in proportion to their greatness?

These new times are not “ordinary times.” They won't let anyone survive who isn't a moral hero—maybe even one who isn't prepared for martyrdom. The old civilization was based on values, ideals, and accomplishments of Greek philosophy, Roman law, and Christian virtues. It has endured for two
thousand years, and now it’s being put to the test again by irrational, even savage forces that burst their bonds now and again in the course of history.

Are you and I ready to help stem the tide (a trite expression, I know) and perhaps even lay some foundations for the reintegration of what is left after the fury of naked instinct has been spent? Will we be able to make the heroic sacrifices of the pleasures and comforts of an “ordinary life?”

An insight that came while removing sweat socks at the gym: All incorrect views of man start with one of two basic errors: 1) Man’s spirit is only a function of the body. 2) Man’s body is only a function of the spirit. The first mistake (materialism, mechanism) was made by Hobbes, Hume, Rousseau, Smith, Marx, Mill, Freud. It lets our physical instincts, needs, and reactions determine our ideas, ideals, and interests. Hence the only thing we have to do is satisfy the body and we’ve satisfied our human obligations.

Certain Neo-Platonists and later Kant and Hegel made the second mistake (idealism). Declaring “it’s all in the mind,” they thought that’s the only thing we really have to attend to for us to have satisfied our duty.

To avoid both errors, we have to begin by respecting soul and body for what each one is, recognizing how they make reasonable demands on each other. It is by giving to the body what belongs to the body, and to the mind what belongs to the mind, that we are on our way to satisfying our human obligations. There you have “sweat sock philosophy,” lesson one.

Lesson two: Thoughts while breathing industrial pollution. Here’s proof that “modern man” is a materialist. Garbage dumped into the air is probably more injurious than garbage dumped in the yard. But since we can’t see or touch the first kind, we tolerate it. The second kind can be seen and touched, so it is intolerable!

A leading question: What would life be like if every man took as much care of his heart as mission control does of a spacecraft?

Today’s reflection is on hard and soft. The best combination of all is hard-soft-hard (a hard head, a soft heart, a hard physique). The worst is just the reverse: a soft head, a hard heart, a soft body. I know someone who seems to be all hard. (I’ve never met anyone who is all soft, but I came close once: hard-soft-soft.)
We just watched a great film: “Why Man Creates.” What genius, to pack into twenty minutes the entire cultural history of mankind! There’s so much in it, you can’t catch everything in one or two viewings. It’s heavy on symbolism, but not without a touch of humor.

There’s a story going around about a deaf mute who suddenly began to hear and speak correctly. As I listened to it, I began to recognize deafness and muteness in myself. Don’t we all listen well to what we want to hear, but not so well to what we’re afraid of hearing? Maybe we shut some things out all together because they would demand a hard sacrifice if we heeded them.

Again, we say well what we want to say, what pretends to flatter our intelligence in the ears of others. We don’t say so well what it’s hard to say, but what someone else may be better off for if he heard it. And sometimes the tongue falls completely silent; truth can be harder to pronounce than it is to hear. So listening and speaking are two human skills with a wide frequency band. How can I widen mine to the full range? But the more I will hear (what ought to be heard) and the more I say (what ought to be said), the more I’m going to suffer. And yet, while a deaf person cannot hear insults, neither can he hear a symphony. And while the mute person cannot curse his neighbor, neither can he sing alleluia.

Has anyone ever succeeded in listening and speaking as much (and as little) as he ought? Is there anyone not in need of a cure for deafness and muteness?

A thought: “Modern Man” is afraid to face the reality of himself. He wants nothing to obligate him—no commitments, even the ones he himself once made. But pretending to want self-realization, he uses that as an excuse for self-indulgence. “Modern Man” needs to learn that our good cannot be found by withdrawing into ourselves. It has to come from outside. Who has ever found his way to God, to happiness by himself?

IV. Friendship helps us to know where we are.

On Traveling the World

It’s five ‘til eleven at night here; five ‘til ten in the morning there. If the trip did take 28 hours, you’ve just arrived. I hope the atmosphere was clear
enough for you to get some great views of cities, coastlines, islands, and deserts. Today you crossed over the oldest inhabited places on earth, the “cradles” of civilizations and religions, the scenes of mankind’s greatest triumphs and greatest disasters. I await your reflections with keen interest.

By general consensus, our little trip was a fine one—many wonderful experiences crowded into three days and nights. We kept the cost low—only $50 for gas and tolls, $30 for food (shopping for things and putting them together ourselves). Good times were many—songs, jokes, witty comments. We learned things about people and about our country—and about each other. Not only did I gain new insights into my companions, but also into human nature itself.

We resolved to make another trip at the next opportunity before they go back to their countries. No one brought along books. It was just being with each other and enjoying each other’s companionship.

On television tonight we viewed pictures of Mars from 1200 miles out—as relayed by the Mariner probe. It looks as barren and forbidding as our moon. I would like to hope that there’s only one peopled planet, and I’m glad it’s physically impossible to get around our solar system (so far, anyway). If there are intelligent beings somewhere else, it just wouldn’t be right to mix.

“Our world isn’t in good shape,” he began. “But don’t get me wrong; I’m not pessimistic about it. It’s always had faults, in every century. But the present moment really is grave, because most of the trouble today is inside people. Many who could and ought to be teaching the truth are teaching something else while others feel free to attack the very sources of life and its fundamental institutions…. So what are we to do?” he concluded. “Love and serve what ought to be loved and served. Otherwise it will be easy to pick up the crookedness of our environment—by osmosis, as it were. The best defense is to warm it up, especially within the home.”

What do you think about when you take a break and look out over the city and the river and beyond? In the subway and on the street? Have you considered what impact living in a big city might be making on the people who live and work there? Does the thought occur that it might be good to break away and get off to someplace else?
What’s under these questions, I think, is wanting to know if you’re becoming a different person than you were here in school, whether your new environment is changing you little by little, and in what ways. Do you evaluate familiar things differently? Does your life seem to be under control, or is it slipping away to meet the demands of new circumstances?

This morning I gave some thought to the question of environment—how it works on us, and whether we can work on it. Take for instance, the well-publicized eroticism, the moral sickness that seems to have a grip on our country. How do we steer clear of it? Is there anything we can do to counter it?

We were having a beer before going to bed, and I stayed a little later than I wanted to because one of our friends had something bothering him. It seems he is saddened by the triviality and lewdness of conversation among his colleagues, and by the apparent lack of his success in attempting to raise the tone.

It’s easy enough to reply that they’ve spent years cultivating what strike us as bad habits, and so we can’t expect a quick improvement. My suggestion was to focus on the younger fellows, patiently and with diplomacy, indicating some alternatives to whatever it is they are getting into. No one can abandon a thing without having something else to put in its place. To work on one’s environment with some prospect of improving it—a great challenge!

More insights today from C. S. Lewis: “The long dull monotonous years of middle-aged prosperity are excellent campaigning weather for the Tempter…. Prosperity knits a man to the world. He feels that he is carving out his place in it, while really it is carving out its place in him…. The creeping death of this worldliness takes time—assisted, of course, by pride, which teaches a man to describe it as good sense or maturity.”

It made me think about so many who leave school to make their way in the world, and the dangers to which they expose themselves for the sake of gratifying ambition.

Our America

The President finds our country “over-populated,” and he suggests (in a message to Congress) that couples limit their families to two. Kind of a stupid
move, it seems to me—both his for making it, and those who would act on it. I've flown across this country and have concluded that we still wouldn't be “over-populated” if we had ten times our present population. When the President flies between Kansas City and San Francisco, he should look down and see what is really there—or rather, at what isn't there: vast stretches of nearly empty land which we have (or soon will have) the technology to turn into a paradise, if we want to.

Maybe what the President meant is that our country is “over-congested,” or that the population isn't well distributed. And that’s for sure. But only in a few places does that happen—and it’s because the people want to live close to each other! What we need are sensible inducements to redistribute ourselves, not to start despoiling ourselves of our greatest resource.

We stayed up late viewing scenes of the splendid dinner in Los Angeles in honor of the astronauts. “Everybody” is there, from the President on down—about 1400 people—a real Hollywood spectacular, with herald trumpets and all.

The day started with a huge parade in New York, and this afternoon one in Chicago; the paper said two million watched it. Among them were several of us. We had to bring sack lunches and get there four hours early to be sure of a good view. I went along mostly to get some sun and watch the people. Also, it may be “something” to get a glimpse of the first human beings to visit the moon. (But the moon?)

The streets were decked with flags and banners, and when the celebrities reached us it was bedlam. Fireboats shot towering plumes of red-white-and-blue water, lights flashed and bells rang. Fireworks burst overhead, and a blimp dropped myriads of little flags on parachutes. The office buildings disgorged a blizzard of confetti. The crowd roared so that we couldn’t hear the band. (All this for the moon?)

There was the usual assortment of characters in the crowd and people speaking various languages. A couple of grim-faced young women tried to put up a sheet painted with slogans against war, but the crowd objected and they left in a huff. A high school boy was caught by a cop in the act of removing one of the big welcome signs that were clipped to all the lamp posts. The crowd persuaded the cop to let him take it. An older woman had a dozen little kids all tied to each other and to her with a rope. Our Mayor, of course, was right up there presenting the space heroes with a “little momentum” of the city. (Maybe
all this wasn’t for the moon, after all, but for modern technology.) [The date was Aug. 13, 1969.]

Our visitors are amazed at the crudity and poor taste they encounter in many Americans, even professional people. It has been revealing to learn how far ahead of us some small countries are, even in welfare for the unemployed, handicapped, and elderly.

For one thing, Europeans have been raised in a more disciplined tradition, and it seems to come naturally to them. Our friends think that if this country manages to hold together it will be due to continuing importation of disciplined, intelligent, and efficient professionals. They suggest that the disintegration of so many families and schools will make this increasingly necessary. Interesting thesis: Europe’s “brain drain” as a means of keeping American technology vigorous.

At dinner tonight we considered a peculiar failing our visitors have noticed in us: our inability to see what we are doing in a detached light. We tend to get so wrapped up in our work that we lose the ability to evaluate it from an objective vantage point some distance removed from the work itself. An instance might be the willingness of young professionals to hand over their lives to an employer, making incredible personal sacrifices without realizing that this is draining them at such an alarming rate that they will be wrung out and used up in four or five years. I hear of “team efforts” requiring whole nights or hundred-hour weeks in “crash programs” to “close deals.” No time for recreation or for family. When the company discards the victims at age 33, or they fall off by themselves before that, what’s left for a productive future? Is this what is meant by “good business?”—consuming the 15- or 20-year potential of a man in four or five years and thus having to pay out no retirement checks, exploiting an endless pool of bright, ambitious, dedicated young professionals?

Why can’t young Americans entering the career they have spend so much time and money to achieve keep a common-sense perspective and limit in advance the kinds of demands allowable to an employer? If “everybody did it,” it would be effective (isn’t this a country of “what everybody does”?). Isn’t there a law of the conservation of energy? People don’t have an endless supply, nor is it self-regenerating. Isn’t it “better business” to stretch out loyal employees for a long and productive contribution by recognizing the natural proportions in a balanced human life? Besides, isn’t there something called justice? Don’t
people contract with employers for forty hours of honest work each week? Haven’t we advanced beyond the early days of capitalism when the sweatshops of Birmingham and Manchester did not know such things as minimum hours?

Apparently this distortion of work and abuse of good intentions, this invasion of legitimate private and family life has so deeply infected contemporary American civilization that it has come to be accepted as “standard operating procedure.” It is nevertheless a distortion, an inhuman violation of what is right and proper for a man to do with his life. Or how does it look to you, young professional?

We Americans tend to be so formal, so grim! When the characteristic American seriousness and drive are hitched to a high and worthy ideal, a distorted personality must result if there isn’t a great and continuing counter-thrust in the direction of fun and games. Every once in a while somebody has to “make us” learn to relax again!

Some practical wisdom from this morning’s table talk: We were considering reasons why the “fabled” American economy doesn’t seem to be functioning as well as it should be, given our abundant resources, knowledge, and experience with systems, procedures, and techniques. Here’s one theory that emerged: It traces our economic ills to a widespread attitude about rendering service. The more salaries increase and the better life becomes, the less willing people are to put themselves out for a boss or for customers. In consequence, real productivity declines even as the work force increases and systems and tools become more sophisticated and more capable of efficient operation.

**Cityscape**

Today I took our visitors for a long ride via public transit after planning a route through the most varied neighborhoods and districts of the city. They couldn’t get over the vast and powerful signs of poverty in such a supposedly rich and prosperous country.

Today we had a philosophical discussion on the impact large cities have on people. Briefly: We concluded that cities bring out the best in people, and also the worst. I think this is a predictable response of Mother Nature: She wants people to live at least part of their day in solitude and at a psychological
distance from others. There has to be a large enough interval between human beings to keep “nerves” in equilibrium. When people start getting on each other’s nerves, it’s easier for meanness to occur. But for real creative work, other talented people must be close by, at least for inspiration.

Yes, I may be underestimating the human capacity to adapt to all kinds of environment. But you must admit that it is activated only when a person is aware of a special situation requiring adaptation (your case if you had to live on a farm). A man at work in one-sixth G will be reminded of it at every turn and will perform marvels of adaptation, with practice.

But how many city-dwellers are even slightly aware of what the environment is doing to them day by day, slowly, imperceptibly? Thus they cannot suspect the call to adapt, to build defenses against something they don’t even see as a threat.

This may sound surprising, but I agree that a big city is where you belong—in part because that’s what you’ve trained yourself for. Still, you must not let yourself become indistinguishable from the city. You belong there just as a star belongs in the night sky. If the star let itself be absorbed by the surrounding darkness, it would lose all its uniqueness.

If you were not in the city, you wouldn’t be noticed; stars aren’t seen in the daylight. You have much to contribute to the other city dwellers by letting them see you—especially the young people. You have to be a star of the first magnitude in the city sky. But all that promise will drain away the minute you let the spirit of the city capture your soul. It will draw you into itself, neutralize you, even defile you. You have to stand out by finding a source of continuing sustenance—star food. And you know where to find it.

It was warm enough to lie still on the patio, looking into the face of the night sky; the stars were unusually sharp. Directly overhead there was one in particular with a special pale blue brilliance. I fixed on that star for what seemed a long time as all the others gradually disappeared from peripheral view. I recalled that our Mother is called Star of the Sea. She is also a singularly bright Star in the black expanse of the biggest city.

Coming home today with the commuters, for once I didn’t read. I just let the passing city impress itself on me. I also noticed its reflections in the eyes of my fellow passengers. I tried not to let my anti-urban prejudices get the upper
hand, but it was, in sum, a most depressing experience. Penetrating writers have concluded that city life is directly responsible for human decay, the degradation of human values—Rilke, Coleridge, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Blake, Ruskin, Wordsworth.

“Cities seek their own,” wrote Rilke, “not others’ good; they drag all with them in their headlong haste.” I think I must have been feeling, with him, “the deep anguish of cities grown monstrous.” These thinkers seem to have agreed that the truly good life is impossible in a big city because of its relentless competition, the stony grip of machine existence all too ready to discard individuals who don’t “fit in.”

On the other side, writers like Voltaire, Adam Smith, and Fichte were pro-city, but I don’t find their reasons persuasive. Voltaire craved the greater opportunity to indulge sensual desires (and maybe, were he truthful, plenty of hiding places). The other two praised the greater opportunities for superior individuals to amass wealth.

When our Friend wept over a city, I doubt it was because of slums or overcrowding—at least not directly, unless one wants to argue that they were contributing to the infidelity that concerned Him. That city had failed to take sufficient interest in the things of the spirit; it was unable to recognize “the time of its visitation.” Like the beggars, He was a poor man with nowhere to lay His head, but the absence of material means was never a big issue. It was the bent lives and corrupt hearts that got to Him—they tended to be rich men. No wonder He loved to walk the roads of Galilee.

I picked up the phone tonight and spoke with a man who just needed a willing listener. The caller has a bad heart and stays in most of the time caring for his aged mother. He can’t get out to look for work, and gets bored and lonely. How many like him in this city?—in every city?

On the way to class this morning I passed an older lady on the steps of the el platform. She was making her way very slowly, all bent over. The thought flashed through my mind to offer her my arm, but I passed on up the steps with the rest of the crowd. I would never have missed that opportunity back in my hometown. See what the city has done to me?

No day seems to be without an “incident.” This morning some kids on the playground came to the door wanting a drink of water. I let them in, and they made off with half a dozen sack lunches the students had brought with
them. This “small town boy” is completely without the wits to deal with city boys. When I was their age we were put to bed at 9, but these kids roam the streets even at midnight and past—and then yawn all through class!

Last week one of the residents witnessed a beating and robbery on his way to work, right on bus. It turned his attention to another necessity of life here—judo.

Today he got his turn for action. Two fellows in their late teens grabbed him as he got off the subway downtown on his way to work. He had the presence of mind to pull off his belt and start swinging it. He managed to break free—still with his wallet and his watch. He only suffered a couple of deep scratches, and a rip in his trousers. But he was powerfully frightened. He decided to quit that job, and has picked up something temporary nearby before he gets back into school full time.

It was a clear night and not too cold; the stars grew more brilliant the further we got from the city. I was so happy to be leaving for a little while the smoke and fumes of “progress.” And what a “sleeping night” it was in that pure country air. How I long for the day when I can live in a smaller place where the country is close and monster cities far away.

It was still raining when we reached Pittsburgh, but visibility was fairly good. First we drove through some of the nicer residential areas in the north end, enjoying the views. Crossing the bridge over the Ohio, I pointed out some landmarks. South of the Monongehela we drove up and down the hills, taking pictures from the vantage points. Under the overcast, the city looked worn and dingy, in a kind of romantic way. The others found some resemblances to European cities. By the time we passed on to the east, it was dark.

When we reached the farm, I went out for a short walk, trying to taste the solitude. We agreed that it would be so wonderful to spend more time in a place like that, far from city noises and distractions.
V. Friendship opens new windows on life.

What We Are Here For

These are happy days. Life is different with school in recess and you away. We’ve made some progress in living each moment as it comes, challenging the shadows and untested suppositions, and getting involved in the lives of others. Somehow this takes much of the pain and uncertainty out of tomorrow and the next day.

What passes for philosophy in “the good” universities and scholarly journals these days is a motley collection of sterile exercises in logical and linguistic analysis—diversionary tactics that prevent a close brush with truth—the whole truth about the things fundamental to life. Professional “philosophers” (still the same Sophists Socrates knew) get so occupied with “problems” of their own making (e.g., is there anything at all we can know or pursue knowledge about?) that they miss the whole point.

How novel it would be to let the heart, the affections play a part in philosophizing—not reducing it to feelings and sentiments a la Rousseau, but bypassing the intellectual barriers that are preventing philosophy teachers from exploring things that relate to the real experiences of their students.

How impoverished we have become in a society of truthless scientists and technicians, truthless politicians and lawyers, truthless businessmen and merchants! Life without principles is the result. They pass from truthless to untruthful. All that’s left is routine and often purposeless efficiency. People lose their creativity, fall into “systems,” and stop living a human life.

Is it possible that something right can be said about people whose rule of life is dictated by the art of compromise? Is there a form of compromise that does not exchange principle for expediency? Or have these people surrendered to the imperfections of life or adjusted to them too readily?

Maybe there is something right about compromise, as you say, when it’s not just a matter of undoing people’s minds but of recognizing and dealing in a practical way with the real inadequacies of daily life. Aren’t most compromises
necessary concessions to our need for organized life among so many who are not and never can be "philosophers"—meaning, for the moment, persons who consciously maintain and live according to principle?

We took a fine walk along the lakeshore today. Fresh east wind under thickening clouds heralded tonight's rain. In those misty conditions the surface fluctuated between light turquoise and gray, and there was a soft glow about it. Lungs full of clean air; heart full of thoughts about our recent discussion of "realism."

We considered this description of "realist": one who never strives for anything clearly beyond reach. But how do we know "clearly" that something is out of reach? How do we know how much we can really accomplish when circumstances require unusual effort? Many examples came to mind of people who are steadily extending their reach into areas that hold sufficient interest to sustain their efforts.

It may be that I'm not as shrewd as you businessmen when it comes to calculating realistic goals. Does a "sixth sense" come with the M.B.A.? Is it justifiable to wait for any opportunity to come along? Or is there a way to select among them the ones most likely to achieve the goal? The opportunity I would really benefit from may never come—unless I go out and search for it. To some extent, don't we make our own opportunities?

At this point, we came upon a young Asian couple with an infant in arms—maybe its first outing. As they were taking pictures, I volunteered to take a family picture. This delighted them. As we walked on, I thought: That's realism! You start small, as each of us did (what a big deal my parents made of my first outing, which was also recorded on film).

Every day I try to "start small" and then advance, a little at a time. When the next day comes, there is another small beginning, and so on day after day. Following this method, a teacher is always at the beginning of his career—even if he's been at it a dozen years (my case). Does this mean that for a "realist" there is no advancement?

The story of the widow's mite touches on this: Whoever gives God all he is and has—little though it be—He will value it more than large amounts rich men (in talents, virtues, resources) give back to Him out of their surplus (what they don't need to live on). It is much harder for them to "give it all back."

What, then, is greatness? You are looking forward to the day when you can give a lot of yourself to a wife, children, and a job (in that order, I hope),
and in doing so you will be “making strides,” as other men measure these things. But on that scale, when a teacher gives himself to his students, it doesn’t count for much. We can still ask, who is really greater? And who is more “successful”?

What is success; what is greatness? How do we measure the small and the large? If someone could succeed in giving it all to God, couldn’t he still amount to something in the world? I would argue that this attempt is not only “realistic,” but obligatory. (So far, I admit, I’ve made little progress!)

Realism. You used to tell me: “You have a great deal to give others.” Were you speaking realistically? I know I lack your ability to reach quick and correct decisions about each move along a career track. Is there another way to advance, and what capability does that require? That must be the one I’m looking for.

Today we considered whether a realist is able to fail. A tentative answer: “Sure, if he’s got no substance.” (Now we have to ask, “What is substance”?) Suspecting a subjective motive behind that question, he added, “But don’t worry about it; you’re not a realist.” Our friend keeps insisting that I’m an “idealist”—meaning, I suppose, the opposite of a realist; that is, one who does strive for things beyond reach. Perhaps that is true if an idealist is one who spends himself to help others become the best they can be (and not just better) at whatever is important. He also affirms that whichever we are, we’re set in it for life: Neither realist nor idealist can “change his stripes.” Well, if that view is part of the “realist” outlook, I surely am not one.

Once I cited several instances where people did undergo fundamental conversions, radical changes in outlook and direction, including some in my experience with students. But this didn’t even put a dent in his pragmatic skepticism (which is really what I think he means by “realism”).

Yesterday’s Ballgame: Some Incomplete Lines on Life

Yesterday we came across those famous verses of the Bible, which I paraphrase: “There’s a time to be born and a time to die, a time to build and a
time to tear down,”—a time to start and a time to quit. There’s a certain wisdom in knowing which one is “at the plate.”

They say that farmers no longer account for a very significant percentage of the population. I suspect, however, that farmers who are farmers because they want to be farmers, know that something else counts more than numbers and influence. Open land and open sky, for instance. Wide horizons rimmed by blue hills. Clean air and clean water. I think farmers have more to teach us about life than city folk do simply because they have a more profound sense of distance and perspective.

Farmers are closer to the clouds and to the sun. Both storm and calm mean a lot to them. They meditate more often on the passage from winter to spring and from summer to fall. They know from daily experience how dark darkness is, and how light light is. In short, they touch the natural mysteries of life all the time. They know why things live and why they die. They know when a living thing gets sick and can’t be cured. They’ve learned to accept loss with a calm heart. They have confidence in their stewardship, as they bring substance and sustenance out of almost nothing. They know what they can fix and what they can’t fix. They know how to benefit from solitude when it comes, and how to help a neighbor in need—and when to let him alone in his solitude (the proverbial Vermonter!).

Best and wisest of all, farmers can tell the difference between the flowers and the weeds of life.

I liked your fine distinction between a catalyst and a stimulus, as it relates to my work with freshmen. Your advice was well taken: Find a way to identify with them, to let them see that we are all of the same “stuff.” Very good. A poor image is like an opaque screen that keeps light from passing through. This evening I saw how this applies to our continuing reflections on “straightening lives.” Let’s call it, “Chapter Two – Mid-Course Corrections.”

A three-second “burn,” they say, is all it takes to correct the trajectory of a space vehicle. And if it isn’t made at just the right instant, the destination is likely to be missed. In his space trilogy, C. S. Lewis suggests that our lives are like those trajectories. Between “lift-off” and “spash-down” many risks, many opportunities, and possible obstacles have to be considered along with the permanent laws of motion, resistance, and thrust.
Making “mid-course” corrections in life isn’t so simple as it is to make them in space. It takes much more than a slight, well-timed application of energy. Yet the need for such corrections has far heavier implications in the case of a human life, given its destination. And it is likely to take far more than three seconds to make a crucial “burn.”

From what we gather, a long voyage through space cannot be successful without a number of mid-course corrections. Would you agree that the same is true for a human being?

Notice this, too: A space vehicle benefits from complex control systems and hundreds of specialists keenly intent upon the mission’s success. On a manned mission, it is high adventure and continuous challenge for the crew to make each calculation, each maneuver. Can a person count on such concentrated assistance? How many others are strategically placed to provide critical help along the way? Some people—many in our culture—try to control their mission with no assistance at all, if they can get away with it!

True, there is a big difference between a vehicle’s lack of intelligence and our own wits. Even so, how many possess the wisdom and objectivity needed to guide their life’s course? In my experience, self-guidance can result in errors, even fatal ones. How can one even be sure when such a correction is needed?

When a craft is flown with the aid of systematic controls, the pilot has to let the instrument panel tell him what to do. In our case, those “instruments” contain the data of human experience which have passed through the “computer” of the mind after due deliberation by the heart. If we are attentive to them, those instruments can tell us, more or less, when and just what kind of correction is due. In practice, I admit, the great majority of our corrections are self-generated. But it takes great wisdom to find the right combination of flexibility and adaptability needed to carry out a successful “mission.”

Most of us don’t like to admit that our lives need occasional corrections. Almost instinctively we engage in the fine art of self-justification. Many students won’t even admit that they have a destination, much less that they share one in common with all their fellows. They live like moral gypsies, wandering about day after day with the vaguest of notions about where they are going. In lives like that, the notion of mid-course corrections is irrelevant and even meaningless.

Better off are those who do plan a course, a trajectory toward some (possibly negotiable) destination, and even realize that corrections probably will become necessary as better information arrives in “mission control.” But it is
so easy to keep postponing a correction in the hope that “things will turn out somehow.” The crucial turning point may be missed.

I for one, treasure your advice when to “thrust” to the right, when to the left, and when is “the acceptable time!”—especially when the “burn” is tough to make.

The latest mission returned exactly as planned, but on arrival the astronauts had to be decontaminated. A thought: Doesn't that explain the need for purgatory—the decontamination chamber after a mission through life.

On ballgames: It’s easy to be a good loser when your team isn’t playing.

Yesterday’s Ballgame, part I: Yesterday’s life in not today’s. Each morning it begins anew. Every day is a new life. Something in us dies while we sleep; something that was never there before is born in us when we wake.

Yesterday’s cheers are heard no more. And yesterday’s tears have dried. What is over is gone forever. What is important is to start again with the new and unique opportunities and challenges of this day. A new world waits to be discovered.

Yesterday’s people are not today’s. Everyone has to be met again. Partial memories of what they were must not cramp today’s newfound acquaintance. Everyone is fresh and shiny, clean again.

Yesterday’s time is not today’s.... [You work this one out.]

Yesterday’s sea....

Yesterday’s....

Part II: Where are yesterday’s clouds today? And yesterday’s butterflies? Where are yesterday’s songs now? And yesterday’s pains?

Where are yesterday’s...?

Where...?

**Working on Heart**

Often people speak of where their mind is when they really mean their heart. It’s not out of the mind that the real matters of life spring. A man doesn’t live by his knowledge. Real life springs from hearts well kept. (Evil from hearts ill kept.) A man’s goodness is found in his heart. From there he
communicates it to his other faculties. When the heart is good, the mind is good, the conscience is clear, the words and the works are all good. Our treasure proceeds from the heart: “Where a man’s heart is, there is his treasure.” A man’s estate is nothing in comparison.

The good housekeeping or “custody” of the heart is our main business in life—maybe our only real business, the only thing worth being busy about. Good heart-keeping means having right aims, the right means, the right measure, tone, and degree. All is right when the heart is right; all is wrong when the heart is wrong.

And yet there is nothing men are more careless of, more reckless with. It’s too easy to think: “Where my treasure is, there is my heart.” There is no greater, more harmful falsehood than that.

How often do you ask yourself: How is my heart today?

This from a man who is the finest expert I know in matters of the heart: “You Americans work too much; you are too concerned about your work and not enough about the people you work for and work with. People are infinitely more important than your business. If you don’t see it that way, then there’s not enough love in your house and in your heart! You’ll keep putting yourself ahead of others. What’s the message I want you to take back home with you? Just this: More heart!”

Someone objected: “But what about the environment in our country? Nobody lives like that?” His simple reply: “You can dominate it by creating your own environment with the affection, the warmth of your heart. Try it!”

Mind if I get a little personal? Can it be that you’ve given your heart whole and entire to “the office”? Do you leave work (if you ever do “leave” it) with a sense of contentment? How does the office compare with the friendly environment you knew here? You seem a little “restless,” and even a bit “old.” Do “philosophical inspirations” come as often? How about your famous generosity? Any promptings in that direction lately?

And what about “Him?” Is He as much “there” for you as He was here? Do you chat with Him as often? Drop in for short visits?

For what do you struggle each day? What’s worth the most? If you’re reading this, I’ve stolen your heart for a few minutes of reflection. Good!

Just one thought this time. It was proposed for our reflection at the beginning of last week’s retreat that life isn’t simply a matter of “heart,” but of
kinds of heart: a young heart, a free heart, a strong heart, a clean heart, a new heart. And ending with “the Heart on the Cross.”

For two years you gave me a push toward those kinds of heart. You served as His “accomplice” in all those ways (not that it was what you had in mind). Now the question is: Where lies the path ahead? And that leads to another question: How do I keep up the pace?

Maybe the most important thing about heart is readiness, eagerness for anything, for any sacrifice.

The Heart Speaks of Wisdom

Some wisdom this morning from the Book of that title, which I paraphrase: The most important thing is to secure the heart, since it contains the wellsprings of life. And it asks which we will allow to capture ours: wisdom or folly.

We are to put ourselves on guard against Folly, for even the strongest have been her victims. She goes on the prowl and never rests. Her tongue is smooth; the play of her eyes can captivate. But her arms are chains, her heart a net. “Let not your heart wander into her paths, stray into her ways, for they are more bitter than death.”

But if we submit ourselves to the “strong conflict,” we will discover that Wisdom is even mightier. Her principal weapons are discipline and correction. “Write these on the tablets of your heart. Bind them ever to your heart” in obedience to instruction. “Blessed is the man who keeps the words of Wisdom and treasures her principles. He who finds her finds life.”

More from old Solomon: “I labor not for myself alone, but for all who are seeking wisdom.” Those words recalled to me our conversation about the relation between wisdom and maturity, the ability to accept responsibility and to be held accountable for it. Now an additional question:

How to recognize someone who is seeking wisdom? And then, if I find such a seeker, how do I “labor” for him? And what instruments are adequate for such a noble service? Might the best way to aid someone’s search for wisdom be the very modest one of just going on quietly with one’s own work in the presence of the other? Someone who is open to the quest will detect a special element in the attitude of that quiet worker which will move him further along. Or how does it seem to you?
As we can tell something about a man from his appearance, so can we tell a thinking man by the look on his face. As a man’s clothing often tells you what he does, the way he walks says much about what he is. One man keeps quiet because he doesn’t know the answer; another keeps quiet because he knows it isn’t the right moment to tell someone the answer.

Our custodian, Mr. Moody, asked me to wish you well. When I suggested that it was a really good evening to go fishing, wasn’t it, he got excited. He loves to sit there for hours with a pole in hand, mulling things over, I suppose. There’s a fundamental wisdom in that.

With you in mind, I’ve been thinking about the obligations Wisdom imposes on her friends. If they are learning from her a deeper understanding of life and of lives, they must have a clear vision of where they are headed and of the common destination awaiting everyone. From that will come a beneficial influence on someone else’s course of action.

A reflection on “the seat of wisdom”: Mary’s fruitfulness, the fertility of her wisdom is the source of her hope of life and virtue, and of her knowledge of truth, her merciful forgiveness, the grace which enabled her to follow the way. It is the source of her pure love. How promising for us, her little children!

Sometimes the liturgy attributes to Mary these words spoken by Wisdom: “The Lord possessed me in the beginning of His ways, before He made anything. I was there from of old, before the earth was made.” Wisdom goes on to describe the acts of creation she witnessed, and then concludes: “Now, then, my children, listen to me. Blessed is the man who follows my lead…. Blessed is the man who listens to me, who stays alert, watchful every day at my gate, waiting there for my instruction. Whoever finds me finds Life and shall receive salvation from the Lord.”

How very much we should dispose ourselves to be the pupils of such a Mother!

Paul summarized a large body of doctrine when he told his Corinthians: “Wisdom is the learning of the Spirit.” For him there are two kinds of learning—the learning of the Spirit (spiritual knowledge) and the learning of the flesh (sense knowledge). Sometimes that is called “worldly wisdom,” which seems a contradiction in terms. We need, of course, both kinds of learning,
but they don’t get along so well together: “I see another law in my members,” Paul said in a difference context.

The two learnings can’t simply go their separate ways; they are engaged in a combat for dominance within the man. This would mean that everyone we meet is tending in one of two directions—spirituality or sensuality. No “peaceful coexistence” there! And it seems that the final outcome of this struggle is always in doubt.

VI – Friendship teaches what to do and how to do it.

Putting Wisdom to Work

The reading for Labor Day put it quite simply: “Wisdom renders to good men the wages of their labor.” She conducts them along a productive path, protects them from the day’s heat, and covers them at night with starlight.

As I looked up at the stars tonight after a day of thesis, lightning began to flash over the horizon, and in a remarkably short space of time, a bank of clouds spread across the sky. What happened to that promising starlight?

Doesn’t this happen to so many good workers, I wondered. The voice of wisdom is easily obscured by competing voices, and it becomes so easy to wander off the path of truly productive labor.

This seems like a difficult topic to pursue—the impact of wisdom on work—but it would be worth the effort. The Wisdom of God was the original Designer of the universe, with its stars and planets and people. No work can transcend that. We’re all somehow a part of an ongoing divine labor, even if we have a boring task to do each day between 9 and 5. This thought puts the whole thing in perspective—not only the way we approach our work, but also what the people around us, our colleagues, are doing. Hence my eagerness to help young people put a little more wisdom into their work.

Everyone’s work contains within it a universe of meaning—as each atom (I am told) contains within it a universe of energy. When we get beyond surface appearances (which satisfy the unwise) we come into contact with the larger and richer reality within, layer after deeper layer. Only One who is all-wise can
see all the way to the core, the innermost chamber containing all the universes that can be.

All of this is but a start in working through the relationship between wisdom and work. Only if we exercise the habit of contemplation (as Aristotle observed) can we expect to find the whole work of creation in our ordinary daily tasks—and with that, the underlying principle of unity. Eventually we realize that we are only God’s collaborators, doing His work our way, or better, allowing Him to do our work His way (like a penman guiding his pupil’s hand). As that old prayer has it: “Let all our works begin with You, and through You be brought to completion.”

It has gotten too late to carry this any further now—a reminder that we are still in time, with all its liabilities. At least it has become clear how very essential it is to explore the wisdom of work, and to find within it the secret of success and happiness. Put this on your shingle: God and I, Inc.—Partners in the Greatest Enterprise of All.

How I wish I had the intelligence (sorry, the heart) to understand this and the words to explain it!

**Is There Virtue in It?**

Green, green fields and woods in the rolling hills of northeast Missouri pass us by, stimulating reflection on some true-life experiences.

After the River comes mile after mile of Illinois flatland. Straight rows, some straighter than others. Straight lives, some straighter than others: Cornfields and justice; cornfields and sincerity; cornfields and purity.

Then rolling Illinois farmland, mile after mile. Does it take more effort to plough rows that follow the contour of the land? Some rows are more faithful than others. Some lives are more faithful than others. How much ongoing effort is required to shape one’s life after a model? Some shapers are more faithful than others. Cornfields and heroes; cornfields and Him.

Snoopy got “rookie of the year.” I spoke to someone about the coaching you’re giving me and was told: “You’ve been coating your idiosyncrasies with virtue for so long that we’ve come to accept them; finally someone has exploded your little scheme!” What a revelation! Still the “rookie!”
Insight: It’s bad policy to keep at something you’re not sold on. If it’s wrong to keep at it, then quit? Not so fast! It still might be right, and it’s time to call in virtue to see if it can sell you on it.

What if you can’t tell if it’s wrong or right even then? Consult the sources!

Soundings: Which is preferable: to do what you believe in, or to believe in what you are doing? Your answer:__________________. Mine will follow.

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My answer: It’s better to do what you believe in because a right intention has to precede a right action. To do what you believe in is a good definition of sincerity. If you turn it around the other way, you risk falling into the logical fallacy of rationalization. Back to you.

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Some questions and answers about everyman’s life struggle: When is it right to stand your ground, and when to yield? Sometimes, in some things, there has to be a good fight. At other times the right course is conciliation. But what about that vast area in between?

Some only fight what demands to be fought and yield in everything else. Others only yield when they are forced to, and fight in everything else. When we should fight, it’s a struggle to fight; when we should yield, it’s a struggle to yield. Where does the strength to struggle come from? The root of the word virtue is the Latin for man (a male human being). Virtue is manliness, virility, especially the virtue of courage (the Greek andreia, from aner, male).

To struggle at the wrong time in the wrong way is a defect of virtue, a deficiency. It’s another defect not to struggle as hard as we ought to—whether in resisting or yielding.

Break time for some practical applications…. Practical illustrations…. Resolutions!

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We should expect to encounter resistance when putting resolutions into practice. That’s a sign that the nail is being driven into solid wood and not a marshmallow! Age-old practical wisdom.

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From C. S. Lewis: When a man discovers that he is deficient in courage, he is discovering at the same time the whole moral universe: “The undisguisable issue of cowardice or courage awakes thousands of men from moral stupor.” (“Moral stupor,” what an apt depiction of so many students these days!)
This contest may account for the many hazards God has so generously bestowed upon His world, for they force us to confront the issue of right and wrong. If that’s true, courage is not just one of the four cardinal virtues, but the form and testing ground of every virtue. Lewis: “Chastity or honesty of kindness which yields under pressure will be chaste, honest, or kind only on condition.”

More Lewis (from *A Grief Observed*): “Who still thinks there is some device (if only he could find it) which will make pain not to be pain? It doesn’t really matter whether you grip the arm of the dentist’s chair or let your hands lie in your lap. The drill drills on.”

**Taking Humility Seriously**

On a recent hot evening, someone called attention to a small bird perched on a low branch with its beak open, panting—another indication that animals and men have more in common than we would like to admit. You know that famous passage about our Father’s care for His creation. To press the point home, we find a comparison which gives me pause every time I come across it: “You are worth more than many sparrows.” What a powerful lesson in humility! Only God could have thought of it. Imagine comparing Napoleon or Mae West to a sparrow—even “many sparrows”? Pascal must have relished that line as he was developing his reflections on the human extremes of high and low.

I’ve was asked to relate my recent teaching experiences and observations to a Dictaphone, as material for an article about our summer program. The playback was painful: Why is it such a humbling experience to hear one’s own voice as it sounds to everyone else? How could that voice be mine?—so stuffy and formal, almost lifeless.

If we were accustomed to facing and admitting our limitations, ever deflating our self-image (so much of it fabricated), we could see the real self and its possibilities for helping others more realistically. It’s all a matter of observing the right dimensions.

Last night’s talk developed the theme, how to discover the reasons for our ineffectiveness in the eyes of others. This followed the previous talk about
laboring under a mistaken notion of perfection. Bogus humility—a sin against justice—seems to lie at the heart of both topics. True humility is simply understanding rightly one’s strengths and weaknesses, and acting accordingly.

The humble man looks at you straight in the eye because he knows what he has, whose it is, and where he got it. He habitually levels with everyone.

What a daunting task of rehabilitation lies ahead for the man who is called to help others become better human beings. Still, we have to be about it and give it all we’ve got. How often men come to their finest hour without realizing it.

VII – Friendship makes us reach higher.

How to Be Rich; How to Be Poor

The last talk in the series brought to mind something we’ve often touched on: the virtue of big-heartedness. It was presented as the predecessor of generosity toward God and our companions. Without it one is apt to miss the golden opportunity when it comes.

A virtue closely related to big-heartedness is magnanimity—the capacity for undertaking big jobs that are within one’s capacity.

It’s evening. The Philadelphia is playing in the background. I’m still reflecting on a point I came across this morning: how readily a materialistic spirit can take over the heart little by little, by imperceptible steps, until it becomes so dependent on certain things that it places all confidence in them. In theory it seems so obvious that the way to avoid this is by steady, small steps that detach the heart from anything at all, just for the practice of keeping it unencumbered.

You may remember our conversation about hidden attachments. After class we found a quiet place to do a little sipping, and paused again on the way home because the Grant Park Fountain was in full color. You became rather insistent that “material values” must never be allowed to obscure our vision of “the important matters.” Now that you are rubbing shoulders with young men in hot pursuit of material goods, how do you resist their pull? How evident is it in their speech and conduct? Do they openly profess materialistic goals? Or do you just read it in their faces? Or is it completely hidden?
The Battle Against Defilement

Are most people aware of this? It is more difficult for married folk to live chastity than it is for a single person. In the first case, the struggle to lead a life of virtue is exposed to numerous compromising situations (rhythm, pills, periods, pregnancy); the result is that a married man often has to deprive himself, while the celibate individual does so as a matter of course—no ifs, ands, or buts.

Permit me, old friend, one daring indulgence before moving on. But you brought it up! A man like you is out of place, you wrote, in a place like this “unless it’s his objective to remain celibate.” Lest I offend your sensibilities, let me reply in the person of your alter ego.

In the first frame, Snoopy lies atop his house thinking to himself: “That girl-beagle I met at the Daisy Hill Puppy Farm is really something.” Then as we move from frame to frame: “I wonder why I liked her so much? I think it’s because we teased each other” (he is sitting and has a smile on his face). “We laughed a lot, and we teased each other.” “And then [he is bouncing up and down] there were those soft paws...Wow!”

Next day Pattty is approaching Snoopy, who is wearing his dish as a hat: “Hey, it’s Snoopy, that funny looking kid with the big nose.” “Hi, Snoopy! How’s the ole’ shortstop? How’ve you been?” Snoopy continues on past her with his composure intact. Then in the last frame, he looks at us knowingly, “When you’re selected by the Head Beagle for a special assignment, you have no time for girls!”
First day of summer—St. Aloysius day. The first prayer said: “Let us who have not imitated him in his innocence, imitate him in his penance.” Never have so few words said so much. The first reading goes on: Praise the man who could have done evil things, but didn’t, and calls that a thing to be marveled at. The Gospel adds the finishing touch: the “great commandment” to love God above all things (whole heart, whole mind) and one’s neighbor for His sake. Has anyone (even St. Aloysius) ever truly fulfilled that lofty ideal?

Do you remember the passage in the Pensées where Pascal explains why the heart goes before the mind? He understood what we enlightened men so often disparage—the beauty, the sublimity of innocence and the ongoing victory it is to maintain.

What do you understand by “innocence?” Its first meaning is usually confined to early childhood. But there can be no merit attached to it in that case, because little kids can’t be otherwise. To me its best meaning is: the pure goodness that results from a fight against great evil, and the bigger the odds, the greater the beauty.

And as its contrary I wouldn’t put an acquaintance with evil, but acquiescence in it. The painters who show us a girlish, milk-white, anemic Aloysius are not just off base but clear out of the park. The real Aloysius worked in the filth of a plague-stricken ghetto. I venture to add that he knew the “seamy side” of urban life inside and out—even better than you do, I’m willing to bet! And what’s more he was tough enough to beat the likes of you at arm wrestling—and quite a few other things. May you write your middle name proudly!

The subject of defilement versus spotlessness crept back into my thoughts today. Have you by now come to see in yourself the steady and sure virginity I detected shortly after we met? That became the very basis of our friendship. I saw in you a connatural grasp of what it means to be undefiled in spirit, chaste in heart, inviolate in character.

The impulses of our bodily rhythms have a certain bearing on morality, but we oughtn’t to get too caught up with them as if that’s all there is to it. The body, after all, is transitory, and all its humors have a very short half-life. What counts is spirit, heart, character. True, the body can get the upper hand momentarily, but it quickly turns “wimpish” again. Why make a big deal of a sore throat, a craving, a bruise?
Life is not in fibers or corpuscles, hairs and bumps, wrinkles drawn over a bony frame—appurtenances, at best. If that were Life, we might as well have been toads! The body will never carry us to the stars, but we can quickly reach them in the spirit. By their light, we can look within ourselves and find true virginity, the rich undefilement that the Creator placed there for us to nurture—for Him to nurture with His own Life of grace.

What can be better for the clean-cut Coast Guardsman—in spirit, in heart, in character—than to stay whole, integral, unspoiled. Keep shining clear in the city sky and you’ll stand out like a star, the model, the image of what is possible even there. And not only what is possible but what is worth every effort. Your environment wants to consume and devour, madden, spoil, sour everything it touches. It’s the impure spirit that breeds impurity. It has invaded so many sacred precincts today—home, family, school—even churches.

Again, bodily imperfections, even defilements, do happen—always and everywhere—but don’t mind that! They’re easy to wash off. But do mind the defilement that penetrates and indelibly stains hearts that are—that were—virginal. How to do that? By concentrating on the stars (for they are virginal). By letting the sea invade you (for it is virginal). Stay especially close to the Star of the Sea, the Virgin of Virgins.

To remain ever virginal is to remain ever simple and wise, pure in thought and will, and to grow ever younger. The Virgin’s mystery lies in the absolute fruitfulness of virginity. All richness, all fertility presupposes undefilement. I think I could go on forever speaking with you about this because you understand.

You wanted to go further into the relation between spirit and body. It’s simple: A man “reaps what he sows;” if he sows flesh, he reaps flesh (corruption, decay). If he sows spirit, he reaps spirit (renewal of life). Recall the passage where the Pharisees are defending their complicated rituals pertaining to external purification. Our Friend points out what ought to be evident: What really matters is where a man’s heart is, not whether he has recently scrubbed his hands and his dishes. Impurity is inside, in the deep recesses of the heart. There’s the source of every form of sensual indulgence.
C. S. Lewis describes that sort of defilement as *bent*. A body may be bent, too, but what is fatal is a bent spirit, a spirit turned away from the right way. It necessarily reaps what it sows. The younger James summarized the only relevant task: Keeping the heart unspotted is what makes the man pure. But you have to *act* on it, he insists; otherwise, you are deceiving yourself. That’s how to give evidence of your wisdom in the eyes of all.

See how this ties together? To keep the body consistent with the spirit—in life, in deeds—is the achievement of practical wisdom, and the reward is the pearl of great price, the treasure of an undefiled heart.

**There’s More to It**

Celibacy, properly lived, isn’t the sterile selfishness of the bachelor who doesn’t want to complicate his life or risk his equanimity. It has to be lived with the sense of dedication of a Plato, of an Aquinas. Dedication to what? To uplifting others, to communicating itself. It also has to be lived with freedom, which also propagates itself. It’s the fullest possible response to the deepest needs of human nature—deeper by far than the desire for physical propagation.

Surely you’ve observed that many of the wisest men of all time embraced celibacy—sometimes even in the married state; *embraced* it, I say. A heart not given to any creature, not compromised even by a lesser good, is a heart completely reserved for the work of wisdom. Isn’t this one of your simple “two plus two” lessons?

You have it within you to go all the way, as much or more than any man I’ve met. “All the way” means a willingness to give everything, total self-giving to the greatest demands and responsibilities. That, you say, seems like too much of a “sacrifice,” and one that lies beyond *your* “power.” Of course it does!
Mine, too. Everyone's. But if you take it a day at a time—as you have been doing for the past two or three years—it is plain that it is possible because you've done it and are doing it now. And as the rewards become more evident and the dividends accrue, it gets less “impossible” with each passing day. The goal becomes clearer and more accessible the more you give yourself to its accomplishment, and the more of its fruits you begin to taste. But the alternative way of life recedes, pales by comparison as the disproportion with its own goal becomes ever more apparent.

Perfect chastity isn't a “theory;” it's a simple matter of fully dedicating oneself to a goal-oriented life work which can't be done with part of the heart, a work which begins in silence and ends in union. The ultimate end that makes it worth any “sacrifice” is the highest virtue of all—Charity, Love complete. Some men are called to such a complete practice of that virtue—and given the means to achieve it day after day—that it leaves no room for an “ordinary life” of giving and taking in marriage. You can count on both hands the number of young women (some of them even “attractive”) who are waiting to spend their lives with you as a married man. You cannot count the multitude awaiting the celibate man—waiting, that is, for you. For you I beseech the light to see that, and the generosity to go for it!

“What’s that about silence and union?” you ask. Let's back up a bit: Mankind has always supposed, and always sought, a way of life that leads to optimum happiness. That way, it seems to me, has to begin in silent work, pass through the wisdom of virginity, and end in the union of love: Silence—virginity—union. Work—wisdom—love. What this “boils down to” is that the undefiled life is the only path to perfect happiness. Give it some honest thought!

The question that really comes next is: What must I do to get onto that path and stay on it? Am I evading the question if I reply: My heart will lead me there?

Why do you think more married women keep their own name instead of becoming “Mrs. Jones”? It started with married movie actresses and others prominent in entertainment or athletics who wanted to be called “Miss Smith.” I can understand the idea of having a “career name” or “stage name” which is different from the matrimonial one, different even one’s original name. Some
male stars did that, too. But as I reflect on it, something deeper seems to be in play.

Could it be some inherent superiority of the single to the married life which makes it seem more integral even to people who would never admit this on principle? Maybe it’s because those who dedicate themselves to the single life (commitment to virginity, to celibacy) somehow provide society with a purer standard of human excellence by which the wedded life can be measured, as an ideal which ought to be held aloft—not that everyone (or even most people) should even attempt to fulfill it in their own lives.

According to this line of thinking, some of our social customs are informed by virginity as a model, as an ideal life, as a beacon by which to keep the powerful urges of sexuality in their place, so that these do not collapse into the socially disruptive abyss of uncontrolled self-gratification. It would also serve to keep the honorable sexual union (blessed by God) from becoming a kind of mutual adoration in which the beloved is confused with God (who is the ultimate Love of all hearts).

It is widely admitted that our society is sexually sick, drunk, or crazed. I see this as the necessary consequence of the failure of virginity, of perfect undefilement, to perform its indispensable social role. There is a growing need to campaign for marital fidelity, but even more necessary is a campaign for the virginal fidelity which wise and eloquent writers have seen to be the best form of sexual integrity and purity. That ideal requires a more potent witness in response to the greater need.
There was once an old prophet who thought the sharpness of his mouth was proportional to the dullness of his passions: “My heart has been inflamed, while the fire in my loins has subsided…. You have made my mouth a sharp sword; you have made me your chosen arrow…. Zeal for your work has consumed me.” The arrow goes more swiftly and surely to its mark the most cleanly it is released from the bow, the less the resistance of the string at the moment of release.

Just as you were the “straight arrow” that found me, so will you home in on many young men—if the string does not hold you back, if the fire in the loins does not deflect your aim. Natural-born leader, you have been given the sharpest mouth I’ve ever heard. May it not grow dull, may it fulfill its mission. Like the prophet, He has made you His minister according to His own designs. But it has to be your call whether to accept it or not.

**First Things Last or Last Things First?**

How to combine restlessness to achieve with serenity of spirit; how to be aggressive and urgent without losing peace of soul? There has to be a lot of trial and error, of course, and everyone’s experience will be unique. But the little image I gave you of our Crucified Friend will serve as your best guide. Mine is a constant reminder to put (and keep) first things first—urgently and peacefully at the same time.

Many thanks for that statement of your “personal philosophy.” It is your most successful attempt yet. But remember, I’m a teacher, and always have “just one thing to suggest.”
It is certainly necessary to have a “point of departure,” “a baseline,” from whence to proceed day by day in the world as it is. Without it one could not avoid inconsistency, aimless wandering, surrender to subjectivism.

But then you go on to say that if this baseline is converted into “a platform,” it will become “too constraining” and even “coercive.” But let me suggest that if it is to provide substantial guidance, the baseline has to be grounded on something, a standard which can serve as an objective point of orientation. Without that, how could anyone not get lost in “a sea of change and confusion”?

I know well your uneasiness with the quiet self-assurance you sometimes find in others. But if you penetrate beneath the surface—which friendship allows you to do—you should be able to distinguish between smugness and deep commitment to an ideal. Isn’t it possible to be sure of oneself without feeling superior to everyone else?

A great many historical examples might be cited. To be truly effective and influential presupposes some sense of dedication, recognition of a reliable source of meaning that may be taken (with good reason) to be firm and secure.

I continue to learn from you that a “platform” must be vigilantly safeguarded from blindness to the actual life experiences of real people in the real world. A lesson you may need to learn from me: Don’t let the possibility of self-deception drive you to the other side of the road in your zeal to preserve the fresh spontaneity which I agree has to be part of the picture.

What I mean is this: You’ll be able to fulfill your “philosophy” much better, and make those “deliberate, mature choices” with a single-minded determination to be “coherent” and to “have an impact,” if you ground it on this
firm foundation: what I’ve called the perennial Wisdom that has formed and guided countless great men before you. The “individuality” which is informed by a well-founded “collectivity” is surely more promising of lasting satisfaction and success than an individuality that isn’t much more than undirected spontaneity.

You think it a good idea to strive for “the best thing possible” in each situation by paying great attention to “the little things.” Certainly. For me, this works much like the knee bends: A few don’t require much endurance, but if you keep them up, it can get “a bit rough.” Maybe this confirms the adage that what matters most in character development is what seems least significant.

People brought slides to this evening’s get-together. I especially liked a set of close-ups, magnified many times, of flower petals, which were meant to illustrate the exquisite perfection of small systems. Someone observed: “Notice how the smaller things have the greater symmetry.” That leads me to suggest that in every aspect of life, it’s the smallest, least consequential detail that can bring us closest to perfection, that packs the most power to express perfection. Again, our friends the saints got it right: The greatest perfection consists in constantly performing the smallest duties with full heart and mind.

Who would suspect that dropping a coin into a parking meter could have more potential virtue in it than driving someone to church? Here is another instance where “wisdom” defeats the worldly “sense” that the greatest, most attention-grabbing events and accomplishments are the real stuff of life.

What seems so paradoxical to “the worldly wise” seems so obvious when you examine it in the company of the truly wise: What counts most is not what
is most apparent (the outside) but what lies inside and is therefore most easily overlooked in the rush of life.

VIII – Friendship Discloses the Meaning of Freedom.

The True Purpose of Life

My last letter worked a “revolution” in you? I don’t believe it! Isn’t it more like a restoration when a person is made aware—in the presence of recently formulated goals—of what has been in him all along without having a chance to express itself? It’s not that “late in life” for you to confront a challenge to consider whether those new goals are consistent with the course of your life.

Surely you don’t regard life as something quantitative, in spite of the determination of so many of our contemporaries to make it so. A man can spend thirty years at something which contains only a little of life. Then comes a conversion, and three years packed with far more life than the preceding thirty. There are some famous examples.

You and I know very well that life is qualitative; in fact, you are the one who used to insist on it! And in so many ways, your letters indicate a man who is still beginning his life. The best indication is your recognition that freedom makes it possible to live—not necessarily in an external, physical sense, for a man in chains can still be free. Life depends on freedom of spirit, not freedom of movement. To express freedom of spirit, or freedom of the heart, is the first free act.

It is also true that “the major problems of the world are those of the spirit.” But when you composed that sentence (in a restaurant, you said) did you have time to reflect on its meaning and savor its wisdom? Some years ago I chose to stake my entire life on that proposition. We wouldn’t be friends if we didn’t share it. We began to discover what we had in common when you expressed uncertainty about whether you would ever find answers to those problems of the spirit. But I am badly mistaken if there isn’t much that you can do to achieve that goal—or rather, not much, but everything. You have been given the best equipment to pursue those solutions of anyone I know.
So let me put it more plainly: If anyone was ever born with the natural endowment it takes to find—and to show others—freedom of the spirit, it is you. Not only can you keep from “falling victim” to the enemies of the spirit, but you also have what it takes to lead many others by the same path.

It doesn’t matter that you don’t see just now how this could come about. Take your time (it’s all you have, and there’s plenty more in reserve). Just let things take their course. The main thing is your realization that the purpose of life is to sustain the search for interior freedom and to taste the peace it brings at every step of the way. Never settle for anything short of that. You yourself have told me that the means are incidental to the end.

You also expressed some related thoughts about work, its dignity and necessity for life. We agree that the kind of work matters far less than one’s “purpose” in working. That, as you say, is “what is critical, and maybe the key.” It is that and more. It’s the whole thing. The specific content of one’s job may or may not be “irrelevant;” again, let it come about in its own time, in its own way. Your heart is still young, and there is, as I said, plenty of time!

How to Achieve Freedom

You always come to mind when I read Chesterton. In the account of his conversion, he mentions fear of making an irreversible commitment. He was afraid it might put him into some kind of mental or psychological “box” (to use your word). But he overcame that fear through study, by getting into the nature of the commitment to see what it really was and really meant. With that came a wonderful feeling of warmth and liberty; it expanded him, led him into a cosmos he never knew existed.

Words from today’s reading: “Whoever competes is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules.” Many applications; where shall we start?

Why not with this quote from thesis research: “Freedom of choice is the material, not the formal element in moral action; it is reason which gives it form and measure. An act is not of more value just because it contains a greater measure of freedom; on the contrary, to act solely to exercise one’s freedom and independence is apt to be a sign of moral weakness. Freedom of choice is prerequisite to moral action; it does not constitute moral action. Control of the free act by reason is the formal constituent of moral action. Thus freedom of
choice is *directed* in the nature of things toward an objective end; it cannot be left undetermined.”

And how would this do for a conclusion: “Parting with our last *claim* to freedom is the first act of real freedom; it becomes truly ours because we know it is *not* ours.”

**Rehabilitating Order**

While cleaning out bookshelves, I came across some little gems. One is a small book of readings “on the meaning and conduct of life from ancient and modern sources.” Thumbing through it I found an excerpt which puts eloquently a point I used to express so awkwardly when we used to talk about this: “It is the lack of order which takes away our freedom; the confusion of today reduces the freedom of tomorrow. What strength, what economy there is in order—material order, intellectual order, moral order. To know where you are going and what you want—that is order. To keep your word and your appointments—again order. To have everything ready, to have all your means under command—again order. To discipline your habits, your efforts; to organize your life; to distribute your time; to employ your resources, your talents, and your opportunities profitably—all this is order. Order brings light and peace, inward liberty, and free command. Order is power.

“First comes a true perception of order and a sense of the beauty and harmony of life. Then comes submission to it—because *you* want to. Thus order is the true well-being of free men.” From the *Journal* of a 19th-century Swiss scholar named Henri Amiel. Swiss? The people whose trains run on time? The people who have never been conquered? No wonder, with wisdom like that!
My student (Mike) brought up an interesting point in tonight’s tutorial (the reading course on liberty): that maturity and immaturity are not black-and-white categories, but stages on a continuum. Mill argues that liberty can be well used only by the “mature”—which would seem to exclude people Mike’s age. But he pointed out that when a man does mature (or reach what society considers “mature”), his attitudes and values will have been much influenced by the way his elders (parents, teachers) treated his immaturity. Therefore, he went on, it should be recognized that when a man is young he is potentially mature, and as a consequence is given considerable liberty, in keeping with his stage of development. If, on the other hand, he is confined to a kind of paternalistic limbo until he reaches the officially “mature” age, he may very well demonstrate his “maturity” by patronizing places labeled “adults only.”

Mike’s term paper is entitled, “Reflections on the Tension between Originality and Conformity in Mill’s *On Liberty.*” Maturity came up in that connection because it seems to be the necessary precondition for originality. Mill calls maturity the capacity for self-improvement through rational discussion and experimentation. He opposes it to the conformity of custom and tradition, which are all-important for the cohesiveness of any society but often opposed to the proper development of personal maturity. What would you have added had you been here tonight?

If Mill is right, we concluded, then liberty can be legitimately claimed by very few people all of the time, and by some people part of the time. Only those who regularly subordinate passion, prejudice, and emotion to reason can exercise freedom with full responsibility. To all others, freedom will be a burden from which they seek to escape most of the time. Mill says further that social institutions must supervise and regulate the conduct of those who are not mature (regardless of age) so as to keep them from harming others—even themselves. There you have the opinion of a man regarded as a great champion of liberty. Evidently he considered it a precious and rare commodity.

Tonight we took up the relation between freedom and power, which led to a consideration of whether people can be free when power is organized bureaucratically—as we know it most of the time. Some related questions: How much room for individual initiative does freedom need? Do conflicting
individual interests diminish the freedom of the interested parties? Is intellectual advancement more likely the result of individual experimentation or of direction by the wise?

“We Can't Have Everything.”

A highlight of tonight's session was Mill's argument that freedom is only one of many human values, and hence it cannot be the sole determinant of our actions: “The extent of a man’s freedom to choose to live as he desires must be weighed against the claims of values such as justice, happiness, efficient organization. For this reason it cannot be unlimited.... We cannot have everything.” Furthermore, we may sometimes have to give priority to one of those other claims: “An indefinite expansion of the area in which a man can freely choose between several possible courses of action may not be compatible with the realization of other values. Hence, things being as they are, there may be occasions when the practical demands of life require sacrifice of individual freedom.”

As an example, Mill shows how the educational enterprise may require a measure of coercion: Because “the uneducated cannot be expected to understand the purposes of their education, it must inevitably work in such a way that the student will only later see the reasons for what his teacher does for him now.” If our lives were always governed by reason, there would be no need for coercion. But “things being as they are,” the many who are ignorant and immature cannot be freed from ignorance and immaturity without a good deal of coercion. Lots of hidden pits in there!

We Can't Be Anyone

You brought up a possible danger when one lives a tight schedule with its daily routine of one thing after another: “a cramped style.” Some people regard a schedule as a mold into which participating individuals are to be poured so that a standard product comes out. How can each person preserve
his own “style” in such circumstances, and with it responsibility for his part of the outcome? Perhaps by starting each day and every part of each day with an act of freedom: “I’m doing this because I want to; because I want to.” If we feel ourselves to be free, we will develop an unconscious resistance to every attempt in the direction of a standardized outcome. Living our individuality always results in a plurality of outcomes.

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Does “individuality” express itself by indulging what Mill calls “desires and impulses”? Don’t we have to distinguish among them degrees of nobility? Surely there is some reasoned limit to individual expression, just as there is to social control. Apparently Mill doesn’t see it that way. As a utilitarian, he thinks “morality” only pertains to social acts and not private conduct. This means that he isn’t for individuality, but for individualism. And with that we have slipped out of reason into ideology. Surely every reasonable man recognizes that he has more weighty moral obligations to himself than he does to society.

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Do you remember how you used to complain about restrictions and limitations to your individuality when you were in school? You longed for graduation so you could again live your own life. Now that you have been “liberated” from those former bonds, I suspect that new ones have taken their place. Right or wrong? Or would you say it is more a matter of the kind of bond, and that the new ones are more “human” and “natural” than the old?
Looking back at your days here, do they still seem as strange, unreal, unnatural, as you were sure they were at the time?

I remember how anxious you were to be on your own, but I suspect that you’ve also had to take on some things from which you used to be free. During your many years of institutional living (school, the military), you learned how to get around a good many of its inhibiting elements while profiting from—and contributing to—the companionship and mutual support it afforded, along with time-saving services. Isn’t it true that you eventually managed to be yourself—fully yourself—even in that “collective” setting? Wouldn’t you agree that a mature man can express his individuality under any circumstances?

It’s not easy to say which contains more value: the contribution living on one’s own makes to self-development, or the contribution one makes to the lives of others in an institutional setting while sacrificing a little of his independence.

Too bad you weren’t here tonight. We could have had a good chat about the theme of tonight’s talk: our need to notice and attend to the needs of those around us so as to resist the tendency to build our own lives in isolation from others. A couple of lines to support it: “You can’t truly live unless you are eager to make others happy at your own expense.” “The man who looks out for himself alone can’t possibly be a leader.” Application: Don’t be too hasty to “live your own life” if it means depriving others of a share in your richness of character, inner strength, drive and inspiration. What is a human life worth if
it’s not lived in communion with others? As the wise Aristotle observed in irony, a man who is content to stay by himself, who can make it perfectly well on his own, is either a beast or a god.

**On Similarities and Differences among People**

Why do thunderstorms never lose their fascination? We ultra-sophisticated, supersonic, moon-exploring human beings have less and less in common with the savages of old (we modern “savages”), but we still can’t do anything about lightning and thunder except behold them in awe, just as they did. It matters not at all to those atmospheric rumblings what lies beneath the rolling fury, whether they awaken a city of four million bourgeois or a tiny settlement along the banks of some creek. It’s the same display of power and energy played over and over for millions of years without end. Thank God for such an intrusive, unavoidable link with our primitive past! Thank God for thunderstorms!

You are wondering what got me onto that. Is a storm in progress?

As I looked through one of your India books, I noticed how much popular wisdom about matters of the spirit in that country over-emphasizes and oversimplifies them. The author says that Indians are no different from people anywhere, that they seek and enjoy worldly compensations as much as we do, and that they are just as troubled by the uncertainties and calamities of life. For some reason I’d like to believe that’s true. Perhaps the turbulence of the
spirit since time immemorial says even more about the permanent things than the turbulence of the clouds.

You wanted us to concentrate on what unites people of different faiths, not what divides them. The topic I'm currently dealing with in dissertation drafting is a debate early in our colonial history. First I treat everything the two sides held in common (the common ground, as we say), and then turn to their disagreements. This procedure, I think, will ensure proper perspective when I attempt to analyze and clarify the contending positions about the relation between political order and religious liberty. I can already see that their differences will provide more philosophical insight than their agreements. If I dwell too much on the common ground, I won’t grasp as well the underlying issues.

I’d like to hear your response to this proposition: Knowledge improves more by confronting the disagreements than by resting with the agreements. Indeed, I think that proposition lies close to the heart of my discipline of political philosophy. Every classic, ancient and modern, achieved stature because it exercised so well the fine art of criticism. This helps to explain why philosophers are always provoking quarrels and disrupting harmony!

Your motivation, of course, is a suspicion that most religious arguments are either superficial or the result of blind loyalties. Either they are fueled by ignorance or by passion. That is undoubtedly true. But surely it doesn’t mean that we must sidestep real disagreements among thoughtful and responsible
people about very important matters, especially if our aim is harmony and unity. There may be some real issues there, and not mere childish bickering. If this is so, then it must be a rather high priority to face up to those differences as calmly and objectively as we can, lest the harmony and unity we seek be illusory. That is, if we really want to get to the bottom of things.

You insist that more good is done in the long run by emphasizing the common ground. Mind if I press you on that? In India you were impressed that non-Christians were expressing the same great truths we hold. Might that impression have something to do with this: You’ve become accustomed to the way we treat those truths because it’s an intimate part of your life by now, while the expressions you encountered abroad seemed fresh and original. Further, would a devout Hindu or Muslim experience the same thing we did in approaching Christian literature for the first time? To receive the old truths in a new package is most likely one of the great values of cultural interchange (as we experienced it, for example, at dinners put on by various national groups at the university). I am all for an increase of international and cross-cultural understanding; more of that needs to be done.

But I think your reason for pointing this out so emphatically is that virtually all of the “crossfire” you’ve witnessed between sects and creeds is the result of plain old human weakness: intolerance, prejudice, stupidity, and plain cussedness—and not genuine study of the different ways in which those truths are held. It must therefore not be the basis for abdicating our
intellectual responsibility to discover what in fact underlies all the contention in the world.

Two items: Our Pakistani neighbors have hacked down the bushes and shrubs in front of the house they temporarily occupy, and for no apparent reason; no replanting is intended. The result is a bare porch surrounded by stumps. They must have a different standard of beauty—or maybe of safety? Or were there even religious reasons for it?

Observed today on campus: A large placard, “Revolution: Kill the Pig!” Someone had painted next to it, “Go Army!”

Enough said.

IX – Friendship Discloses What Links Time and Eternity

The Only Real Time Is the Present

Here we find the labor of a lifetime; St. Paul is speaking: “See to it that you conduct yourself with caution. See to it that you don’t act unwisely, but wisely—making the most of your time, redeeming it, because these are evil days…. Try to understand what the will of God is for you…. Let yourself be filled with the Spirit. Sing and make melody in your heart to the Lord. Always give thanks for everything, in the name of Christ, to God the Father.” What else is there to do? Who else is there but the Three Persons and Everyman? How, then, to begin? And what is it to “redeem” time—this time?
There is an unmistakable wistfulness about this evening, on this last day—after more than twenty years—of the Lord’s sacramental presence in this house. As we packed boxes this morning, I was in and out of the chapel just to say “Thanks!” and “Come back soon, dear Friend!” I spent an hour on my knees in the afternoon just “waiting on Him,” saying some final prayers in that little room and serenading Him and His Mother. I hope they liked it. It seemed important that someone be there, given the occasion, and everyone else was coming and going.

I looked ahead to the major celebrations and events of the coming months since He (and I) won’t be here to live them together. I even sang a Christmas carol—in August!—and an Easter Alleluia. (It’s a good thing I was alone; otherwise a man in a while coat would have been summoned to lead me away.)

Then I looked back over the past two decades (not a very long time, really) since He moved in with people who’ve since moved away. I tried to recall as many of their names as I could, thanking Him on their behalf for all His blessings and pardons and challenges, and asking His pardon again for the shortcomings that marred His stay.

I suppose this was merely an attempt to bring everything to a point, everything future and past, in this present moment. It was a kind of “going-away party” for me and for all the others. Something like that must happen when the last members of any large family leave the ancestral home for the last
time. It is like closing one volume of the family’s history so that a new volume might begin.

St. Paul again: “Brethren, look not to the things which can be seen, but to the things which are not seen, for the things which are visible are only temporal, while the invisible things are eternal. The outside of a man—like the visible things—gets older day by day and eventually decays. But the inner man—the heart—must be renewed day by day so that it becomes younger—to eternity.... Therefore, don’t faint under the burdensome things of the present moment. They may cause anxiety and tribulation, but if they are borne well they will contribute a weight of eternal glory far beyond their measure.”

**Where Time Touches Eternity**

Some reflections on time: Let us be alert, awake, vigilant for God’s interventions. Let us not put any obstacle in His way. Sometimes we live as if “our” time was ours. But how could it be? Have we done anything or spent anything to earn it? Was it not rather given, and given freely—for a very good purpose?

C. S. Lewis raised those questions while I was out and about today, and made this observation: God is eagerly awaiting us in eternity—where He lives. He wants us, therefore, to fix our attention on that point in time we call the Present. For the Present is where time touches eternity; it is all lit up with
eternal rays. You far surpass me in the ability to live in the Present this way. But I’m catching up!

Lewis says it’s not healthy for souls to be preoccupied with the future because it inflames fear as well as hope. Since the future is unknown, it makes us think in unrealities—that is, to live “out of this world.” The future is the temporal dimension least like eternity, even if it seems to point in that direction. But that pointing is illusory; the future is greedy to stay in time. It has an insatiable thirst for more and more time. Eternity is the last thing it wants. Time dreads eternity, because it means the death of time.

Nearly every vice is rooted in the future. Besides fear, there is avarice, lust, and ambition. Most of the virtues—take gratitude, for instance—look to the past, which is the well-preserved history of countless “Presents.”

But the Present has the best virtue all to itself—Love. For duty is the business of the Present. We give it our heart. (God does not want us to give our hearts to the future, lest we lose them in vanities—in suppositions and hypotheses.) When one is in perpetual pursuit of the rainbow’s end, he is never honest or kind or happy now. He consumes as fuel on the altar of progress every real gift the Present can give. Living for the future heaps up disappointment and impatience. It encourages hopes and then dashes them to the ground.

Only in the Present does all grace, all knowledge, and all genuine pleasure dwell.
“A Time to be Born and a Time to Die”

You remember the famous passage in the Old Testament that inspired the popular song, “Turn, Turn.” It mentions the word “time” in fourteen pairs of contraries, and then concludes: “God has made everything beautiful in its time. And thus has He put eternity into the mind of man.”

Probably the pair I need to heed most (the archivist in me) is this one: “...a time to keep and a time to throw away.” But this one, too: “...a time to be silent and a time to speak.” Many would dispute that there could be “a time to hate,” “a time to kill,” and “a time for war,” but according to this eternal wisdom, if there isn’t, then neither can there be times for loving, healing, and peace. They “go together,” as the saying has it. You can’t have one without the other; no hell, no heaven! The lesson seems to be that the negative uses of time serve the indispensable purpose of teaching us the positive wisdom of eternity: that every time—and time itself—ends. How different is earthly wisdom.

With respect to the first pair about birth and death, Maritain wrote a book, Redeeming the Time, by which he meant using it well while it lasts, giving each thing its right place in time. Life seems so precious because it is “forever” slipping away. We really can’t grab it and hold onto it. Too bad the hourglass has gone out of style; it was such a candid witness of the truth about time.

Our faculties keep diminishing by increments hardly noticeable (at least at our age), and in spite of the tricks of crafty artists, the process is irreversible. What a grievous error to think of life as something permanent, or
to imagine that we can somehow eliminate pain, suffering, killing, weeping, fighting, and even death! How much of the world’s substance is exhausted fruitlessly in the attempt! Those experiences are terribly necessary if we are to grow in wisdom and to live life as it truly is.

There is an obverse of that, too: A bad rap adheres to my old comrades, the Puritans, for wanting to banish rejoicing, embracing, dancing. But that, too, would be a lack of wisdom, for those experiences give us an encouraging preview of what eternal life will be. When we see a birth we are given a glimpse of the true Life and already begin to participate in it by anticipation, however imperfectly. For the clock that marks advance toward death begins ticking immediately.

I look forward to developing thoughts like these in the classroom, even if my “savages” flay me for intruding on their happy illusions, and a white-collar executioner is standing by in some administrator’s office. But no matter, it is up to me whether I do it well until the end comes for me—for it will really be a new beginning.

The other day we visited a church run by an order of monks who devote much of the day and night to Eucharistic adoration—a way of spending precious time that many of our contemporaries would consider a terrible “waste.” It was a little surprising to find several young fellows among them, people who have most of their lives ahead of them. But those men are reminding the rest of us that here we are only in the antechamber of eternity.
which awaits us a short distance ahead. They are beginning in time what we’ll all be doing for all eternity, just being in God—that is, if we are found worthy of it. (Imagine the awful contrary—just being out of God!)

Reflecting on this experience, I decided that you could live the monkish life better than I because you always do things to the extreme. Once you see a ball to carry, nothing can stop you. That also makes you the better candidate for eternal life. (But if you get lazy, I might be the tortoise that outpaces the hare!)

Those days retreating in the country were wonderfully fresh, clear, searching days. The schedule permitted afternoon walks along deserted lanes, a wide sky overhead while nature slumbered beneath barren branches. It was like falling into the ground to die—like that grain of wheat in the parable—for the purpose of harvesting later on a new, more vibrant life. The question kept coming up: What must I sacrifice now if I am to reap more abundantly then?

**What It Must Be Like to Die**

When 9 p.m. came, I decided to knock off and join the others for the last half of the college all-star game. But just then a Beethoven symphony came on, and I couldn’t resist it. As they always do when that Master is on the field, thoughts came crowding. The other day after a particularly stressful bout with thesis notes, a choir came on singing the Psalm “De Profundis.” I had to stop and listen: “Out of the depths I have cried to thee, O Lord. Hear my voice! Be
attentive to my supplications.... With thee there is merciful forgiveness. My soul will hope in thee.” Serenity soon returned.

Tonight the Beethoven made me see that death is something good to anticipate, even with suffering and anguish. You must have had such thoughts quite often off the coast of Vietnam. Do you still? I don't think death will be as traumatic as people imagine. There’s another Psalm: “If you should mark my iniquities, O Lord, how would I be able to stand it?”

I think it will be a tremendous sensation of release and joy, with lightness sweeping through the heart, suddenly stripping away all unfinished plans, concerns, projects—instantly evaporated—with nothing left but just to BE, to be what we've always been striving so unsuccessfully to do. It’s likely you’re going to experience that before I do; I think I'm to stay behind a good while longer....

The other day we were discussing the deaths of close relatives. A number of us have witnessed the death of a grandparent—so joyful, so peaceful, so full of anticipated repose. As this life ebbs, some even recall childhood May hymns. In a sense the eighties are a time for growing younger. Some pass away in a kind of masterful act, nobly done, as if they were directing a play, completely confident that it is about to end as written. Others prefer to recede quietly, even by themselves, if they can manage it. Nothing tragic, nothing to regret.
What Then?

As always, C. S. Lewis finds the right words: “In the end that Face which is the delight or the terror of the universe must be turned upon each of us, either with one expression or the other, either conferring glory inexpressible or inflicting shame that can never be cured or disguised.” He adds that for many, “the fundamental thing is how we think of God.” For Lewis, that’s a monumental error. “How God thinks of us is not only more important, but infinitely more important. Indeed, how we think of him is of no importance except in so far as it reflects how he thinks of us. It is written that we shall stand before Him for inspection.” It is “almost incredible and only possible by the work of Christ, that some of us, that any of us who really chooses to shall actually survive that examination, shall find approval, shall please God,” and even “be loved by God, delighted in as an artist delights in his work or a Father in his son.” This is what Lewis calls “a weight or burden of glory which our thoughts can hardly sustain. But so it is.”

If there is a “burden” here, it is an active one, a burden on us—to give our whole mind to God here and now, minute by minute as He asked us to, making sure, as far as we can, that He will “think well of us” when the day comes to behold Him face to face. But how many go from day to day either assuming that they look “pretty good” to God already, or don’t care what He thinks of them or even if He thinks of them at all?
Yesterday I recalled a bitter experience (it was another All Souls Day) when you, friend, laid into me for wanting to apply suffrages to the dead, and specifically, to your deceased friends and relatives. How vehemently you castigated me for presuming that there is anything we on earth can do for the departed. Upon recalling it, I decided to reflect on that stinging rebuke to see what I might still learn from it. May I enlarge upon the subject for a few minutes?

There is hardly a more commonplace request than “Pray for me!” Isn’t this an obvious derivative of the commonality uniting all human beings, especially when it is raised to the supernatural order in the Communion of the Saints? Why is it preposterous that one human being can make up for the deficiencies of another, seeing that we are all “in this together”? Why are substitutes allowed in a game, but not in the most important Game of all? Who else besides us can be of special assistance to those who were closest to us on earth, just as we were when they were with us?

As a skeptical empiricist, what bothers you might be how that could be accomplished? For me, it’s the simplest part: Given our common lot with all humans, we are simply doing for others what they would be doing for themselves if they could. And it is surely reasonable to hope that some fellow human will do for us what we would want to do ourselves when we are “out of the body” and no longer able to. If the same intention is present, the effect is exactly the same whether I’m doing it or my “sub” is. It’s simple “fraternal charity” lived to the full!
This is why I like to recall the names and faces of everyone I’ve known, especially in November. The same bond that unites you and me in friendship will continue to unite us when you’re there, and I’m still here. The same bond still unites you to your fallen buddies that united you when they fought by your side. And if you, why not also me, who have “met” them through you?

All those brothers and sisters of ours take keen interest in our lives and fortunes, too, and can see us more clearly than we can see them or ourselves. Life for them (both theirs and ours) is infinitely simpler than the daily reality we experience. It follows that they can do more for us than we can do for them. But what help we can give them is part of our training for the day when we’ll be the ones who are “out there.”

You recall the insight of C. S. Lewis about outer space, that it is incredibly richer and more real than earth’s atmosphere, with its complex and conditional mixture of particles and gases—“debris.” By extension to the spiritual dimension, the rich and simple, the really real existence of those who have passed beyond time and space is quite a contrast to the break-down lane where we find ourselves.

Sorry if those “few minutes” turned into something longer, but I thought it important to reopen a question you once settled by childish, simple-minded illustrations others used to make you turn off and tune out some fundamental truths. Very much depends on getting these things right!
Talk About a Happy Ending!

“Whoever lives with this life only in view is of all men the most to be pitied” (St. Paul).

Some of today’s thesis material fits into one of our earlier discussions. The author is making a distinction between people who focus on life in this world (who seek a partial and fleeting happiness) and people who focus on the next life (happiness forever). What characterizes the first group: 1) no commitment to a philosophical or theological position (“party line,” you would call it); 2) no uniformity of ideas and values; 3) variety of beliefs and wide range of choices; 4) many limited aims; 5) primary pursuit of personal goals; 6) nothing that commands loyalty. The second group: 1) commitment; 2) uniformity; 3) well-defined range; 4) one unlimited aim; 5) pursuit of the common good; 6) loyalty.

According to this simplistic distinction, someone bent upon improving things here and now feels more at home in the first group, while someone who always has the next life on his screen will be in the second. In real life, people overlap those boundaries. Insofar as they have legitimate secular interests (operating student residences or programs for underprivileged youngsters), they are first-groupers; but those interests can be motivated by a transcendent purpose that gives primacy to second-group concerns.

I think you’ll agree that both of these have their place. Mistakes happen when a person confuses one set of interests with the other. To deal with that, I think, is a large part of a teacher’s job, along with helping people straighten out
when necessary. Many refuse that kind of teaching, even when it’s backed by evidence provided by the social sciences on the basis of universal human experience. They feel safer by staying inside the “box” they’ve constructed to protect themselves from whatever lies outside. Meanwhile, they busy themselves putting up posters with brand names for different ideologies like “Liberal” and “Conservative.”

My work on this side of Life is simply this: To lead box-dwellers into the open and fresh air of philosophical inquiry by demolishing as many boxes as I can (gently, of course, and with all the irony I can muster). There is hardly a more dangerous mission in our time, but infinitely worth the risk if it helps even one young person get ready to cross over to the other side! What’s more, it’s likely to succeed—if I can just keep smiling.

He was unusually bright and sharp today. But now and then those penetrating eyes drifted off somewhere far away—just for a couple of seconds—then right back with me, the merry twinkle even merrier and more engaging.

**Postscript**

These “Letters to a Friend” were written from Chicago between July 1969 and December 1970 by John Gueguen (1933-) and sent to Jim Murray (1941-).
Outline:
(The numbers in parentheses indicate the number of passages referred to in the letters.)

Subject Index, Part I

Introductory quotation from classic work of philosophy/literature

Seasons/Autumn (1); Winter (1)

Walks/Forest (1)

Elements/Rain (1); Water (1)

Nature/the Sea and Ships (2)

Ancestry/Celts (1)

Friendship

Introductory (6)
Friendship in General (27)
Its Fruits (2)
Christian:
   Introductory (5)
   In General (10)

People

Introductory (1)
In General (3)
Family (6)
Children (2)
Specific Individuals (25+3+3)

Freedom

Life (3)
In General (3)
And Order (2)
And Commitment (1)
Maturity (4)
Bureaucracy (5)
And Coercion (2)
And Personality (1)
Individuality and Conformity (7)

Unity, Uniformity (1)

Similarity and Difference (4)

Contrasts (1)

**Temporal, Eternal**

Time/In general (1)
The Present Time (3)
Time/Eternity (2)
  Life/Death (4)
  Death (3)
  Judgment (1)
  Purgatory (2)
  This Life and the Next (3)

**Life**

In General (5)
Uncertainty (1)
Philosophy of (1)
Realism/Idealism (2)
Heart (6)

**Wisdom/Folly**

In General (4)
Maturity (1)
Character, Wise Man (3)
Obligations (1)
Work (4)
Struggle (2)
Virtue

In General (2)
Courage/Pain (3)
Humility (5)
Generosity (2)
Detachment (2)
Chastity, Innocence, Virginity/Defilement (16)
Serenity (1)

Planning (2)

Little Things, Perfecting Them (3)

Change, Conversion

Introduction (5)
In General (2)
Confession (3)
Repentance (1)

Man, Men

In General (2)
Great Men/Heroism (2)
Good Man (2)
Speaking/Listening (1)
Modern (1)

Traveling (2)

World/Environment (7)

Worldliness, Prosperity (2)

America

In General (5)
Work/Job/Rest (4)
Life (1)
Spirit of Service (1)
Race (2)
Poverty, Urban (1)
Improvement of (2)

City, Cities (10)

Subject Index, Part II
(Still to be edited)

Stars (2)

Advent/Incarnation (6)

Jesus Christ (3)

Religious Inquiry (3)

Religious Truth/The Church (2)

Religion/Revealed (6)

God

In Religion (2)
His Presence (1)
His Goodness (1)
His Power (3)
His Speech/Silence (4)
Union with Him (1)

Saints (1)

Quality/Tone/Style (1)

Christianity

Wisdom, Goal of Life (5)
Life, Perfection of (3)
Morality (2)
Formation (1)
Faith Commitment/Freedom (6)
Trust (4)
Love (4)

**Interior Life**

Introductory (6)
Supernatural Outlook (1)
Eucharist, Tabernacle (3)
Dedication/Lukewarmness (4)
Tenacity, Persistence (3)
Peace (2)
Prayer/Repetition (9)

**Apostolate**

Introductory (5)
Helping, Serving Others (5)
Words, Example (2)
Following Christ (2)

Education (7)

**The Teacher/Teaching**

Introductory (11)
Christian (32)
In the University (9)

**The Student/Learning**

Serving God with the Mind (2)
Books (1)
Study, Motivation for (4)
Scepticism (2)