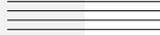


E I G H T E E N P O L A R I T I E S
F R O M W I T H I N T H E S E L F



F R E D E R I C W I L L

Adventurousness and Cautiousness

Twenty years ago I made a list of the places I want to visit before I die. There remains from that list only one place, Zaire, and every day I think about taking a trip there, or about ways to combine a visit to Zaire with other, more routine visits, like those to Nigeria, where I spend part of each year. I call my travel agent or try out possibilities on Expedia.com. I make notes on what I learn, compare prices, check my calendar. In the end I always abandon the plan, due to war conditions in Zaire, but making the plan satisfies me too. It does more than satisfy me. It makes me feel alive. It makes me feel adventurous. I feel I have satisfied a need. Was my need simply to think about taking a trip? Or am I truly adventurous? Do I truly want to go to Zaire?

I am fascinated by the borders between countries, and having lived many years in the northeastern region of the United States, I have often been near, and sometimes across, the border into Canada. I become excited as I get near that border. The landscape on the other side seems magical. It is as though I have crossed into another personality of myself, and see the world new. I have to

think, in this case, that the very notion of a national border is simply in my mind. After all, five hundred years ago North America had no national borders.

At the same time, I am unable to pass a vehicle in front of me, because of my fear of cutting out into the open where some unseen vehicle might run into me, or where I might lose control and run off the road at the opposite side. Because of this cautiousness I often find myself – and my angry passenger – sitting behind trucks and delivery vehicles. I create unexpected hazards around me, driving too slowly to keep up with the traffic flow. I am so cautious I put myself in danger. Being too cautious can mean running an unnecessary risk. Is it good to be cautious?

There is a fine line, in writing, between throwing caution to the winds, daring every metaphor, and playing it close to the chest, weighing every syllable. Great writers are often able to walk that line with aplomb, keeping you on your toes but maintaining your confidence. When Hart Crane refers to the sunrise as a “great wink of eternity,” he blazes into an upper atmosphere of language while speaking to a basic human awareness. The way James Joyce destroys all syntax in *Finnegans Wake* assures us that he has a firm hand on the rudder from start to finish.

Carefulness and Carelessness

I once translated a long and difficult epic poem by an early modern Greek poet that attracted some attention in literary circles, with the result that I was invited to read from and talk about my translation at a gathering of Hellenic intellectuals in New York City. I was flattered, agreed to give a reading, and in the next weeks spent some hours reciting to myself from the poem, in my translation and in Greek, so that I would be prepared. I was, I thought, being careful. But my preparation turned out to be inadequate. I had not read the Greek out loud to native speakers, and my pronunciation was only fair; I had not mastered the references in the text, which my listeners, whom I underestimated, knew very well; I had not prepared my own historical introduction sufficiently. The result? Because of my lack of care, I was unprepared and embarrassed. I determined never to undertake such

an experience again without full preparation. I determined to be more careful.

When I first went to Greece, I worked in the American School of Classical Studies in Athens. As a group, we students visited many ancient Greek temples and were particularly awestruck by the Parthenon and the Temple of Zeus at Olympia. Each of these temples is surrounded by an extensive frieze depicting mythical action. On the inside, that is backside, of these friezes, where no one could see it, the workmanship – marble polishing, corner shaping, interface carving – is as precise and careful as on the front, where it is visible to the worshipper. You might say that no corners were cut in the making of these friezes.

When I was a youngster I joined some preteen friends in climbing down Sunset Crater in Arizona. The sides of the crater are made of chunky lava, some of it resembling large pieces of coal, much of it slurry and rubble, and all the lava pieces irregular in shape, so that the descending surface was highly irregular. The group of us started climbing down at different speeds, and I made the mistake of taking the lead position. I went with the flow, the wind in my face, yelling and shouting with the others. But there came a point when the braking motion I made with my knees was no longer sufficient. Irregular chunks were causing me to slip. In a split second my body was flying out of control, and though I still tried to brake it, nothing helped, and I tumbled head forward, eventually rolling over and over for at least a hundred yards, until I came to the base of the crater. I was badly bruised. I had been very careless; I should have started out more slowly and cautiously, I should not have tried to lead the pack, and I should have stopped when I felt I was getting out of control.

The other day I parked my car in the driveway of a local college building. It was difficult to back out, because there were cars parked on the other side of the not very wide street. Thus it was necessary to make a sharp reverse into the street, while paying due attention to the cars parked there. In making my reverse turn the side of my car lightly grazed the passenger side of one of the parked cars on the other side of the street. I got out at once to check, and for a minute thought I saw nothing on the side of the other car. But I think I was trying to see nothing. On a second look I discovered a faint hairline-thin mark across the side of the car

that was parked behind me. I had been careless, not *very* careless, but careless enough. And that is enough.

Responsibility and Irresponsibility

I have often acted responsibly. I responded immediately to the request of a gay friend to take him to the hospital where his lover was to meet him. I was glad to take him to meet his lover, and to help him out, though I am very uncomfortable with the field of gay behaviors. I am not in tune with the gay lifestyle. Furthermore, the trip came at a difficult time for me; I had to get up very early; it was raining heavily; and I was not feeling well. However, I made a conscious and immediate effort to do the right thing, and to be useful to my fellow human being. I believe I acted responsibly, to the best of my ability. I felt good when I had completed this mission. I felt in charge of myself. I felt I had the power to do new things people might ask of me.

Our globe is our responsibility, as human beings. I say this now, but I did not say it before. I was before and am now a theist, and count on God to pick up the pieces and run the show. I now feel that God includes our concern for our planet among his careful plans. Is it possible that we are being tested by the gift of an inhabitable planet and asked to perform well on it? Why do we grow in certain kinds of sense of responsibility? Can aging, as well as an increasing understanding, be the driver? Can it be that, as we age, we rediscover the potential wonder of this world that so amazed us when we were children?

On the other hand, I have been irresponsible about paying bills. I can remember being overdue in paying utilities bills, and then, when called about it, getting angry with the caller, as though the caller were responsible. There was really no one on the other end to be angry with. (My anger could, of course, have been directed against the Allied Utility Company of the Midwest, but it is not really possible to direct personal anger against such a corporation.) I was in fact angry with myself, for being irresponsible about paying my bill. How can I be sure that I was angry with myself? Because when I hung up the phone I felt confused and directionless — I did not have the clear feeling of action you get from

righteous anger. I felt I had been talking to the wind and could better have spent my time making a schedule for bill paying, and being sure I had the cash to make the payment.

When I lived in Amherst, Massachusetts, I used to read in the Amherst College Library. One day I was reading an annotated edition of a play by Aristophanes, when the bell rang for the library closing. There were few patrons in the library and we all made our ways to the exit. In gathering my papers I stuck the volume of Aristophanes in my briefcase. When I came to the exit door no alarm went off, although I had not checked the book out. I walked out into the early evening with the book in my possession. It is still in my possession. Am I waiting for a deathbed confession? Why don't I just mail the book to the Amherst Library, and ask them what I owe? I could. But I am busy. And sometimes I am irresponsible.

I was a mediocre young father, though as I age I become better, and like the job better. Caught up in the struggles of marriage, and in my own early career development, I found it hard to pay the needed attention to my several young children. I did not put those children first because in conflict with my wife I absented myself from the family hotbox on more than one occasion. I was an absentee father when I should have been diapering. Can I say, today, that I regret this irresponsibility, or the motives that led me to it? I am not sure I can. *Regret* seems the wrong word. I played my hand as I could, left no corpses on the barroom floor, and carry somehow my old sense that, as Julian of Norwich put it, "all will be well."

Humility and Pride

I value humility. When I recognize what I cannot do well and what I can do well, I make life easier for myself. We recently had a chipmunk in our house, running around the kitchen. I bought a Havahart trap at the hardware store, brought it home, read the instructions, and tried to set it up. As often in the past, I found that I was lousy at following instructions. That evening I discovered that the chipmunk had stolen the peanut butter from my poorly set trap, and escaped. I humbly accepted my limitation and called

a handy neighbor, who immediately set up the trap correctly. He was superior to me in this skill. We caught the chipmunk that night. My humility had led me to a quick solution, one I might have rejected in the past, through a proud desire to show that I could meet all household expectations on my own.

In the mornings my wife and I go to the gym. She does the treadmill while I walk, stretch, and do weights, in that order. By the time I get to the bench press I am pretty tired, and usually just lie on my back and start to lift, without checking the settings on the press. Almost invariably I am brought up short. I can't lift anything. I turn over, check the settings, and see that they are pegged at a weight three times what I am able to lift. Then I realize that the skinny Herb, with whom I have just been talking, and who seems to me like a withdrawn string bean, is the one who has left athletic me in the dust.

Yet I am proud of a few of my skills. I have a natural sensitivity to the pitch, implication, and resonance of words. When I read poetry I can find the inner rhythm of its words. When I write poetry I have a pretty good ear for the way words relate to one another. I am proud of this ability, though it is a gift and not something I have worked hard for. I am happy to be proud of this gift. My pride in it stimulates my participation in the world of language arts. But this very skill has its downside. I get caught up in the sounds of language, sometimes, and am not analytical enough about its meanings. Rather than hone in on the point of speech or a sentence, I concentrate on the sound of the sentence. What I am proud of is also a component of my limitations. My pride and my humility need to include each other.

I am proud of my children. Like me they are not great figures of history, and yet they are my fullest investment in life. I hope to die before any of my children, so that they can talk and act me into a generation beyond their own. But what kind of pride is this, in other persons? How can I be proud for someone else? Am I proud because of what my children declare about me? It seems so. But how do I know what they think about me? How can I base my pride on this ignorance? And if I can't do that, on what is my pride in my children based? Simply that I have been able to father them? That seems a low bar. Am I then simply proud of being proud of my children?

Creativity and Imitation

I recently created a long work of poetry based on the little I know about the mass murderer James Eagan Holmes, who opened fire in a Colorado movie theater, killing twelve people and injuring seventy more. Though I know only random journalistic bits about Holmes's life and deeds, I found in those bits the germs of an extensive mini-epic about the drama, danger, and folly of life in our times. For me many things came together as I reviewed his story: aspects of our indifference to human life; the problems of personal identity in our time; the potential of madness and violence among us; and, woven through these themes, input from my own life as I live it, a life not entirely immune to the madneses of our time. I was able to generate a global vision from the Holmes story. It was a creative achievement, which spoke about our time and our places in it.

On a smaller scale, I am a creative dresser. I choose my tie and shirt each morning with what seems to my wife like reckless abandon, but is actually a creative throw of the dice. Without examining my tie rack I stretch out my hand and take the first color I touch, then move across the walk-in closet to my shirt hangers. I pick my shirt by the same aleatory method. Then I step into the bedroom, put on my shirt and go to the mirror. There I attach the tie. Sometimes the color and pattern combinations that result from this method are startling – purple on green, stripes on circles – and yet I never fail to attract positive comments. Being creative is often a question of luck and daring.

But there are times when that daring has deserted me. When I was a student at Harvard, where I was to remain for only a year and a half, I found myself surrounded by young men of my age, many of whom came from wealthy and socially pretentious families and prep schools. I came from a middle-class academic family and had never thought of myself as privileged. I was temporarily overwhelmed. I copied aspects of these youngsters' dress (sporty jackets), speech (a faint tinge of a British or Boston Brahmin in my accent), and attitude (offhand amusement at "vulgar" behavior). I was, I thought, careful not to overdo these style tweaks, for I gathered that a true gentleman creates a seamless blend of such characteristics. I felt good inside, and in fact set a high personal

bar for accomplishment at the time. But when I got home to the Midwest, people made fun of my unnatural behavior.

When I was in graduate school, devoting all my time to my books, I formed a friendship with a highly intellectual colleague, Marcel, who was what we considered an existentialist. He lived his studies through discussion of them, through exercise and sports, and through his big refusal – to let the struggles of the mind push aside the whole living context of the person. I was impressed. I lived his thoughts for a long while. I ate like him, fast but savoring what I ate; read like him, fast but quick to question the reality of what I read. I copied his view of life for a while. I was a copycat, but I gained from it, eventually finding my own style.

Standing Fast and Giving Up

I have long been committed to writing at least three hundred words of prose a day. I don't remember the origin of this commitment to myself, but I have remained (with rare exceptions) faithful to it for decades. The demand involved is not that arduous, and the quality control, day by day, is often fairly slack, but standing fast to my decision for so long has meant an abiding commitment to the act of writing. Has it helped me become a more skillful writer, or simply a more prolific one? I believe that it has encouraged in me the habit of writing carefully, which is indirectly a contribution to writing well – or as well as one can. One should not, however, confuse the results of standing fast with the virtue of doing so.

I walk three miles each morning on the track. I am doggedly faithful to this routine, though at times I would gladly stay in bed. I don't do this to feel good about myself when I have completed my assignment, but because I am determined to stand fast to my challenge. Sometimes I cheat, stopping to have a conversation, but when that happens I usually punish myself by adding a little to the total distance I require of myself. Am I trying to punish myself, in the whole exercise? Well, yes, to some extent. I am punishing myself for being determined to punish myself.

To be called a quitter is humiliating, and I have deserved to be called a quitter. What else is divorce? At marriage you promise to

love and care for another person till death do you part. It is a serious commitment. It sounds easy at the time you say it. For some it is not. I am an example. I have given up. Can quitters ever redeem themselves? No, although they can beg forgiveness from a higher power if they believe in one. Marriage is the unique opportunity to commit one's life, and bad thinking or weak intentions are no excuse for messing up this opportunity.

Sometimes I stop talking creatively with my wife, when we are in the middle of a discussion. I don't get angry, I just opt out. Figuring out, for example, whether we can afford a trip to Mexico becomes too conflict laden – though it is resolvable – and I simply go into a silent mode and say nothing. Episodes of giving up are usually followed, in me, by a shorter or longer period of sulking. We come back to the Mexico issue in a day or two, and it gets resolved rapidly. Meanwhile, though, I have sacrificed any confidence I had that I can rationally move a family discussion toward a conclusion.

Seriousness and Playfulness

When I was an undergraduate I had an elderly neighbor who was very serious. (At least around me; surely he had another side to him.) He was a world-famous scholar of folklore, loved to talk about folk- and fairy-tale motifs from around the world, and had written large volumes which were classic studies of folklore themes and motifs. To hear him talk about this fascinating branch of world literature, which springs from the longings, dreams, and hopes of the various cultures of the world, was to hear a serious man expound on his life's work. If you tried to sidetrack him with, say, a particularly snarky twist to the Trickster legend, he would relate your digression to still more complex side issues in folklore science. He would not be distracted. He was serious but not humorless, for in trumping your queries with further elaboration of the world folklore schema, he would do so with a twinkle in his eye.

Like many people I have an annual physical exam. I am always concerned about the results of such an exam – aren't we all? – and as I wait in the doctor's office, I become serious. I may laugh with

my wife or the receptionist, a friend of mine; I may joke about the weather, but I am solemn inside. I have tried to adopt a *che sera* attitude toward aging and even death, but often I am just whistling in my own ears to keep the heartbeat down.

My poems are sometimes playful. When I say *playful*, here, I mean rich with slack, with room to find out what they themselves are, unhinged from conventional language expectations. Sometimes I write nonsense, in this same spirit of play, and in the spirit of the British nonsense writer Edward Lear. Sometimes, though, I write nonsense which is threatened by a kind of madness:

Tenr, sine cosine,
 Royld, we seed . . . r'own text.
 Pleez, til weak, dray stalls.
 Did'cha, n'reen? It seild?

This beginning of a poem is play, I feel. But like much play it contains in itself a reminder of the dangerously volatile in human experience. I am being playful here, wild and playful, but at the same time reminding myself that the conventions of language are arbitrary, and the threat of the unconventional is ever present.

My granddaughter makes me feel playful. When she comes into the house she draws funny caricatures of me. When she stays for the night she makes me watch the video of *Frozen* with her. When she goes home with her mom she high-fives me. All these spontaneous pleasures make me feel good. When she has gone home my wife and I giggle, thinking about her, and wonder what she is doing. She gets under my skin, and I look forward to seeing her again. I cannot say the same for many of our guests, or even of my friends. They mirror me back, immersed as I am in adult life. I miss my granddaughter.

Idealism and Realism

I am an idealist; I think things will work out for the best. A good friend recently died. I visited him on his deathbed and saw his body failing. A realist might have thought, *Flesh and blood fail, death and the graveyard are all that prevail*. My thought was, *What my friend and I have understood from knowing each other will*

contribute to the world's stockpile of values and truths. We will meet in the place where world-governing ideas and truths reign. I will follow him in death, but our deaths will be a new beginning for each of us.

Despite the many mistakes I have made, especially in my relations to other people, I have retained a sense of what I should do. Like perhaps all other human beings, I have a regulating conscience, which supervises me even in bad times. That conscience is the repository of my ideals. I know that I live in an age when values – our sense of goodness, truth, beauty – are either being reinterpreted or dismissed as irrelevant. But I know that such dismissal is false. Without values one cannot even know that there are no values, because value trumps value dismissal, and is the very standard by which the dismissal of values could be conceived.

Though my philosophy of life is idealistic, I go through daily life as a realist. I may think that my soul will live forever, but I am realistic about my body. I used to refuse to take a nap in the afternoons, afraid it would give others the impression that I was getting very old. However, the urge to nap is a little stronger now than it used to be, and every once in a while I give in to it. Later my wife might say that she heard me snoring, and I'll look at her as she says this, worrying that she might be thinking I am on the way out. But I don't see that in her eyes. Or hear it in her voice. Each time this happens I grow more relaxed about doing what my body suggests I do. I grow more realistic.

I used to think that aging would be discouraging and uncomfortable in itself, and yet I find that each age carries, within itself, a view of the world appropriate to it. From within aging, as from within childhood or middle age, one has a view of the world appropriate for one's capacities at that point in life. As I age I expect less of myself – and get less from myself – which is a benign provision of evolutionary biology, to keep us from chafing at our years, though the biology can do nothing to minimize the limitations imposed on the body as essentially corruptible matter.

Confidence and Insecurity

I am confident of my ability to write. When I went to Harvard, I was faced on my first day with a theme to write. (The purpose was

to help place me in the right section of English.) I have forgotten the topic. It involved some question of how I would handle a particular problem in life. I wrote my head off – I fantasized, I science-fictionalized, I gave metaphors their head. It did not please the examiners, who placed me in the elementary writing course. I was not humbled because I had written out of confidence, in the only way I know how. I have since given greater effort to writing to spec, meeting the precise challenge presented to me. But still I write from strength. I let it go. I am confident, though it be the confidence of a chicken about to cross the road.

I am confident of my ability to relate to most people, of most types. By nature I am simple and curious, though mentally I am subtle and sometimes over-refined. People tend to like me. I have only a few close friends, but I am able to establish good working relationships with almost anybody. Will Rogers said that he had never met a man that he did not like. I feel the same. And armed with that attitude, which is admittedly naive, one attracts people who are eager to tell their life stories. Are you one of those people?

When I was still a preteen, my mother arranged for me to take dancing lessons. Once a week she escorted me to a dance studio downtown, where other boys and girls my age were gathered. I remember that I wore my first suit and had black highly polished shoes and white gloves to wear during the dance ritual. That ritual was where my insecurity came through. I could learn the basic dance steps, and didn't mind the practice dances with the teacher and a couple of the girls. My problem began with the lineups. The dozen girls lined up facing the dozen boys, and at a signal from the instructor, each of us boys had to cross the dance floor, go up to a girl, and formally ask her to dance. There was more – the actual business of taking the girl's arm and escorting her to the floor – but the agony of insecurity, for me, lay in *asking the girl*. Would she refuse? (She probably wasn't allowed to, but I didn't know that.) How would I bring myself to mumble the prescribed phrase about *May I have this dance?* I was deeply insecure at that point, unsure if I could move forward. I was afraid of being rejected.

I have always been insecure about giving advice. By now I have reached a considerable age, and am of sound and thoughtful mind, yet I pull back from giving life advice to others, even when I know they are asking for it. This may be simple cowardice: the fear of

giving misleading advice, and being responsible for the consequences. But it is more. I rarely have a clear insight into others' minds, let alone into the actions they should take in their lives. To a small extent this lack of confidence seems to me to reflect a virtue: that I am reluctant to intrude on the dignity and independence of another person, even when that person has temporarily lost the path, and chosen me as a guide.

Success and Failure

I have long struggled with the problem of domestic messiness, especially as it develops around my work and writing space. For years I have laid plans to overcome this challenge, but they have never worked, because, I think, the stakes were not high enough. I was able to get by, even when I had to waste time looking through my papers to find what I wanted. With aging, however, I have found the solution I needed. I am forever misplacing my glasses. The inconvenience caused by this development has forced me to the realization that *I must put things where they belong, right away, or I am lost*. I am not sure why I have transferred this lesson of the glasses to the situation with my desk. It is as though there were messiness-neatness humors in my person, and as I build one or the other humor it draws the whole system with it. Medieval medicine in 2015! Perhaps I will not become president, but I may learn how to find a contact address I need when the telephone rings.

During the night I often awaken, go to the bathroom, then lie down again only to find that my brain is swarming with issues – worries, plans I need to note down, queries I need to be sure to act on the next morning. I have recently scored some successes in dealing with this habitual problem. I have learned to take immediate action when the problem sets in. I get out of bed, which can be difficult, go down to the kitchen and take an aspirin, check my computer, and riffle through the prayer book, and when I look up I find that fifteen minutes have passed, and my notes have been taken – I return to bed and sleep like a kitten. The secret is in doing what needs to be done *right away*, when the problem sets in.

I have always been unsuccessful at following orders or direc-

tions. When I am told to go in this or that direction, or to carry out this or that action, I am likely to find some way to make the expected action miscarry. Faced with directions for setting up a toaster oven, laying a trap for catching chinchillas, or repairing a toilet, I am likely to panic. This is an adolescent behavior, but it builds. A long accumulated sense of weakness in following instructions has made me under-confident at handling other directional challenges. I have areas of confidence. I can imagine, project, formulate something in language. But these areas of confidence don't seem to translate into the direction-following areas of my brain. Is there some self-discipline that would help me modify my weaknesses by blending them with my strengths?

I have failed on a lifetime basis to conquer one of my persistent problems, claustrophobia. Having been trapped in an elevator as a child has exacerbated this anxiety, but something more seems required to explain the lifetime hold it has had over me. To this day I refuse to go alone in an elevator – it's the *alone* wrinkle that puzzles me – to ride the Gateway Arch train in St. Louis, which carries one in a confined car high over the city, or to sit squashed in by other passengers in a railway car. I have tried to reason myself out of this weakness, but I have failed. Since I can manage my life despite this problem, I am willing to settle for one more example of my limitations.

Generosity and Stinginess

I am not a naturally generous person. I remember an occasion at a gas station in Oklahoma. I was filling the tank when a nicely dressed middle-aged man came over to the car. He said that he was out of money and didn't have enough to fill his tank with gas, which he needed to get home. My instinctive reaction was to refuse, and I did so. I told him I was sorry, that I had budgeted for my trip, and wouldn't have enough if I gave him gas money. He walked away quietly. I am not sure where he went or what he did. When I got back in the car my wife told me I had made a mistake. One should always go with the instinct to give, and the man who had asked for money looked like a decent person. I was humiliated. I searched inside myself for the source of my earlier reaction.

I was born during the Depression. I was taught to respect hard work, self-sufficiency, and frugality. I was not naturally generous. I felt miserable all the way home.

I am concerned with the immigration issue, which is a matter of intense debate in the United States. What attitude should we adopt toward immigration through our southern border with Mexico? I am for the most part both generous in spirit toward those who want to share in my country and dissatisfied at the way many of them are going about doing so. Not only am I a law-and-order person, on the whole, not only did my wife and I work hard and legally to manage her own immigration, but I find that many immigrants' attempts to circumvent the procedures of their host country are unworthy of prospective citizens. Hence I am both generous in spirit toward immigrants from the south and concerned that their actions should justify my desire to have them as fellow citizens.

In an attempt to maintain my self-respect, I give under a tithing system. I do this because it formalizes and strengthens my desire to share, and to combat my natural stinginess. Common moral value indicates that the giving in question is best done from the heart, with no expectation of return. However — as more than one wise person has hinted — giving can sometimes be/provide/prompt its own reward, and can thus set off, in the giver, a red alert: *Give not that ye should be rewarded*. It is my sense, possibly delusional, that when I am in a giving mode I *turn out* to be in a receiving mode. My ship comes in. My girl friend calls. My ATT stock goes up. Crazy? Noteworthy enough that I hunker down, and refuse to giving what ambition it might sport, to become a lottery.

I do not give money to beggars. I do not give money to nice-looking hippy couple beggars with a dog who catch my eye at an intersection, or to frightfully crippled people on urban street corners. I am besieged by demands on my small retirement income, and though I regret saying it, and though it seems self-contradictory, I have to budget my generosity in order to be generous at all. I give to institutions I know and respect, and on the whole not to people. Above all, following what my mother told me, I never lend money. It makes me seem stingier, I guess, that I also never borrow money. I am what my kids call tight-assed.

Impartiality and Bias

The current social issue of gay marriage is divisive in the United States. It pits against each other sharply opposed views of the nature of marriage, of the morality of homosexuality, and the social rights of non-mainstream partners. As many legal cases touching on the status of gay marriage have attracted attention, it is relevant to ask by what standards the judges involved in such cases make their decisions. Given the fact on the ground that judges have private lives and private feelings, how do they put those feelings behind them and judge cases involving gay marriage? How do they adopt a position that is fair when they rule? Do they simply rule “narrowly,” as we say, and avoid a statement of position? Can they be completely unbiased?

Parents of more than one child are occasionally asked which of their children they like best. This is an intolerable question: if they answer with the name of a child, they are accused of partiality; if they refuse to reply, or say *All equally*, they are accused of indifference to the variety of human types, one more congenial, one less congenial. I am, by intention, impartial to my children, and tease God by loving all my children as he does. However we all have personal preferences among our children, rooted in the history of our personal relationships. I cannot enter into, though, the mindset of those who banish, disinherit, or cast out any of their offspring, for indeed the privilege of conceiving consecrates its results.

In other matters I am more partial: I have a bias against business and a bias for education and culture. How stupid to have inclinations of this sort in a complex world that contains every kind of activity and need! However, as a child of the academic world, saturated in faculty family behaviors, I was long ago told by my mother that the academic life is the freest, most independent, and most thoughtful life possible, and that other types of life – business would be the example – were constricted by contrast, limited, say, to dirty work like making money. The results of this indoctrination play out absurdly in my present mindset. I am constantly critical of the academic world, which seems to me – sour grapes, no doubt – permeated with jealousies, backbiting, and obstacles to the imagination. Though part of it, I do not love it.

The business world, too, finds no way to charm me. I am left with no world to honor and glorify. Life is deeper than worlds, and the simplest “being here” is our best refuge.

I have a bias in favor of theism. I would like to name my religious affiliation, for I am proud of it, but that very pride offends the belief I work with. Theist sensibility, for me, seems to be the broad, indeed global, term to describe an attitude, archaically rooted in our species, that expresses awe at the creation and its maker. This attitude is natural, inventive, and reassuring, I think, because it springs from our human constitution. I am surrounded by people for whom the given world seems just that, given, and not created. They find their ways through that world, more effectively than I and my kind, and yet they miss out on the transcendence which defines, spurs, and creatively humbles us.

Kindness and Cruelty

I have generally been taken as a kind man. But I have learned that my kindness is intimately involved with my self-protectiveness, and is not quite what it seems. True it is that as I age and face the tragic mysteriousness of the human condition, I feel empathy for my fellow humans, and my care for them grows. Throughout most of my life, though, I have been kind enough – I spent hours talking with a friend in trouble – but also self-interested enough to avoid all kinds of conflict by being kind instead of critical. Example: to this day, when I read a friend’s fresh poem, I praise it. That praise spares me the risk that the friend will be angry at my reaction, and also saves me the trouble of a genuinely critical attitude. When I tell Joe his poem is good in order to encourage him, I may well be misleading him; on the other hand, if I slash in with a critical knife, he may abandon the idea of writing a poem altogether.

My instinct – like that of most people – is to help people in need. I help older people pick up their spilled groceries, younger people sort out their love lives, and fellow colleagues plan good strategies for professional development. All this I do from the heart. There comes a point, though, at which my inner monitoring device senses it has gone as far as it can go. I will help you pick up

your groceries but I won't pay your grocery bill. I will advise you on professional issues, but I won't spend the afternoon reading your article. Where is the boundary between kindness and withdrawal?

I hate cruelty to animals. My aversion is itself phobic and springs in part from the experience I had in Germany one summer, rooming in the home of a butcher, whose Schlachthaus was across the road. Herr Meyer was a nice man, as butchers generally are, and he cordially offered to acquaint me with the procedures of his business. I was inexperienced in the work of a slaughterhouse, and accepted his invitation to a tour. What I saw, as he took me through the stages of up-yanking, throat-cutting, and sternum-splitting, affected me badly. I considered it cruelty to animals, and still do. And yet I am aware that nature, red in tooth and claw as the nineteenth century had it, is not sentimental. It does not weep for itself.

Cruelty for its own sake, as in sadism, seems to me boring — though I have not experienced it firsthand. When I read the Marquis de Sade I thought, *Ho-hum, the body can only yield so many pleasures, the mind can only enjoy torture to a certain point.* The fact is that cruelty is sterile, gives birth to nothing fresh from itself, and is thus unlike kindness, which generates a taste for itself. Our contemporary taste for violent and cruel action in the media grinds its own boring gears, and leaves us feeling empty.

Loyalty and Disloyalty

I have a desire to please, and therefore capitulate in many instances where manliness would require risking conflict. Certain events, however, trigger my stubborn commitment to a cause. In 1967 I was invited to teach for the summer at the University of Buffalo. I drove from Iowa for this job, but when I arrived at the dean's office for my first day of work, I was given a form to fill out. I read it carefully. It required me to sign on a line saying I was not, nor had ever been, a member of the Communist Party. I immediately objected. I had not been, nor was I, a member of the Party, but I did not want to be asked that question. It was an invasion of privacy. I remained loyal to my deepest conviction, that I should

not let myself be coerced. I was asked to wait. Deans and dignitaries met somewhere in the background. A few hours later I was told I could teach without signing. My refusal became the cornerstone of a legal case, which led to the final annulling of the loyalty oath.

When I speak to one person about another behind that person's back, I am failing in my loyalty to that person. But am I necessarily bound to be loyal to that person? Suppose I hardly know him or her? We are just names to each other. Am I then bound to be loyal? Yes I am. For the fact is that we are none of us are just names to one another. We are all living presences, making our way through the fascinating, difficult passage of life, and we owe one another respect. We owe one another loyalty because without having chosen it, we are all brothers and sisters in the blood.

I have traveled in foreign countries where I heard fellow Americans – it could as well be fellow Greeks or fellow Uruguayans – criticize their home country, attacking everything from domestic manners to foreign policy. This kind of careless criticism seems to me disloyal. To assess your country carefully should be permissible anywhere, nor should there be supervision of people's free speech. But to express casually critical views of your own country is disloyal, for you are a free citizen of your country, and could have left it. Socrates spent his whole life in Athens, and couldn't imagine turning his back on his home just to save his life.

When we have spoken ill of another, out of malice and not out of critical care, we are disloyal to a fellow human. We can feel that disloyalty under our tongues. We don't feel good about ourselves, or furthered in the quiet business of living. When we hold our tongues about another – even if our thoughts are malign – we are at least taking the direction of self-discipline, which is a step in the direction of loyalty to the human condition. Silence about others, though mute and brute, is a good first step toward avoiding the slippery slope of human disloyalty.

Liking and Disliking

I like Rick because we can tease each other. Why this is true is hard to answer. It's like the question of why friendship forms

between two people. The answer is elusive. I am twenty years older than Rick, and we seem able to amuse ourselves with jokes about how young I'm getting and how old he's getting. He now gets a senior citizen rate on the bus, and I razz him about that. I prance around the track to keep up with my wife, who is thirty years my junior, and he razzes me about that. The razzing works both ways. I find this rare. I share viewpoints with many of my friends, I enjoy the same things many other people do. But with most of my friends razzing comes dangerously close to home truths and is edgy. I mean, someone may really *not* be amused at the fact that he is slowing down and taking on love handles.

When I studied at the University of Indiana I majored in Classics. I had good teachers, but became especially acquainted with a Classics faculty member who was not one of my teachers. Aubrey Dillard taught me more than any of my formal teachers. He was a loner, a passionate scholar (of Strabo and the Greek geographers), and a tenacious student of the flora of Brown County State Park. Together we walked from one end to another of that park. We talked about the history of geography, the phalanges on the leaf of the oak wort, and the beauties of scholarship. We were drawn to one another, quietly delighted by certain complexities of the knowable universe.

I dislike a certain person in politics. I see him all the time on television, especially in this election year. He has a little moustache, rounded porcine cheeks, small eyes. I dislike him on the grounds of his appearance, and because his values, for society, are almost entirely commercial; he has little to offer his culture. The problem with this dislike, which is an easy emotion to feel, is that it is useless. If I liked the man, I would be more likely to understand him and make what I could of him for myself. Liking him would be advantageous. Disliking him means making him into a cartoon character whose peculiarities are thus hidden from me, and whose objectionable presence (as I see it) cannot be put to any use. This is another case of not liking being a way of not understanding.

I dislike myself when I review many of the foolish decisions I have made based on false pride, impatience, and desire. Even though these decisions led me into trouble and at times downfall, I pursued them, and once started had no power to turn back. Dislik-

ing myself, of course, is more complex than disliking a foe. When I dislike myself I dislike the self that chose to make the decision I now deplore. Am I not still that same person who made the poor decisions? In fact, is not that former stupid person precisely the one who is making the present judgment call? Can I then trust that judgment call?

Love and Hate

I loved my dog Biscuits as I have rarely loved anything. My wife and I talked about Biscuits when we were not with her, and when we were with her she ate from our plates. This was love powerful enough to justify self-sacrifice. My wife returned from Ivory Coast to Iowa to be with Biscuits during what turned out to be our dog's final days. Her vulnerability to pain and mistreatment – we think she was beaten – her unflinching readiness to support us, her patience in pain: what medieval saint endured more with higher good spirit? Was it a spiritual love we felt for Biscuits? It was like the love of God in the thought of St. Thomas Aquinas: all enduring, indifferent to self-interest, marveling at the glory of the other.

I love my parents. This is a love I used to question. It seems to me I had a very tepid relationship with my parents. We didn't hug, we didn't shout, we didn't set up value systems or monitor attitudes. What we did do was live quiet middle-class lives, friendly with neighbors and careful about bills, sociable but restrained, and provide for each of the three of us – I had no siblings – room and tools (books, primarily) to become as fully human as possible, in our own ways.

I hate corruption, which diverts and undermines legitimate effort. Corruption counteracts all motivation. I hate destruction, which eradicates buildings, cities, and people in their process of evolving. I also hate the simple discouragement of people, as when a youngster is discouraged from trying for higher intellectual attainment. My brother-in-law, who belongs to a certain ethnic group, tried to prevent his children, whose mother belonged to another ethnic group, from speaking the mother's language. The children were frustrated and culturally confused. The obstruction of those children was not a global disaster, but it sprang from the

motivation that leads to global disaster. That is the motivation to deny, to block; the motivation of that Satan who, in Goethe's *Faust*, is *der Geist der alles verneint*, "the spirit that denies everything."

I hate myself when I think back on the way I conducted my life. Out of impatience and desire I made many decisive moves which hurt other people. I hate myself for doing so, but especially – because the moods and desires in question were real and also wonderful – for not having found other, less hurtful, strategies for extricating myself from discomfort and putting myself in the way of comfort. I had no understanding of the marital situation and the subtle social world it exists in. I barreled my way through intimate relations, confusing and fouling them, and put all concerned at odds with me.

Happiness and Unhappiness

I felt happiness in Tübingen, in 1957. My wife and I had driven into the city and slept at an old hotel on the Marktplatz. When we woke, early the following morning, we looked out onto a brilliant, sun-riveted scene. Everywhere were flowers and fruits on display for market day. The panorama of busy sellers and produce enthralled me. I have never been happier. Why was this sight such a source of joy? It has been for many years. Still, though, I remember the sense that morning that the world had just been created.

I am happy when I hear my wife's voice on the telephone. The familiar speech patterns and tones seep into me, and though I may be at some distance – say, from the taiga of northern Quebec to the cornfields of Iowa – I feel warm and at home in myself. What is this mystery of the voice? Plato said that the eyes are the windows of the soul, but the voice seems the very presence of the soul. You hear, before and within you, the whole vibration of a life, brought to the burning point of each single word. And you seem in this process, which puts you wholly in the other person, to have become newly your own self.

I was unhappy when I got divorced. Years of habit, planning, and child monitoring were replaced with an open future which, though in some ways bracing, was far too challenging and lonely. I was at my most unhappy on the night when my wife moved, with

our three children, to a house in a neighboring town. I felt utterly alone and without direction. But to my surprise I found, if not a direction, at least a strategy. I got in my car and went to Hardees. I ordered a chocolate frosty and read the local paper. I felt better. Was I *that* shallow? Was my unhappiness so easily dispelled? In the following days I discovered that I was not so shallow. I had covered my pain with a temporary cure. But from that time on it got steadily easier to discover the Hardees cure.

I am unhappy when I say the wrong thing at the wrong time. This unhappiness may not be fully deserved, as when I have simply misspoken myself, referring, as I leave the house or go to bed, to some point of conflict and dissatisfaction between me and my wife or a friend. Once I have made the mistake, there is no going back with palliative comment. "I didn't mean to put it that way, Joe," won't cut it after you have reminded Joe of a time when you nudged him out of the running for a raise. You have to live with your mistake, and build around it. There is no other way.

Courage and Cowardice

I am a writer, and customarily turn to the vitriol of the pen when confronted or harassed. On two occasions in my life, however, I have been confronted with alpha male force, and reacted like an angry bull. On one occasion, in Greece, I was harassed off a city street by a grain-wagon driver. On another occasion, just returning by boat to the United States from Europe, I was told to get the hell out of the way by a muscular longshoreman who was offloading baggage. In both instances I lashed out with anger and faced up to the guy who threatened me. I got off lightly. One guy backed off, while my wife pulled me away before the other guy got to me.

I have the courage to tell absolute truth, and in fact do so on many occasions. I have written numerous autobiographies in which I am very frank about uncomfortable passages in my life. In fact, since I have a confessional streak in me, I should perhaps not call my self-revelations courageous. But I do. Over and beyond what I freely state about my motives for confession, I confess that one of my life goals is to be brave enough to conceal nothing, so that I can account for myself, at least, when I pass on.

I am mentally cowardly on rare occasions, either when I fail to carry through a thought to the end or when I flee another's argument, which I fear may be stronger than mine. My physical cowardice seems to me instinctual and deep. A typical example is this: I was ten, and out with my mother, taking a walk. At the corner adjacent to our house we were accosted by a snarling boxer, who had slipped his leash and was determined to avenge himself on mankind. While my mother stood her ground and looked for a stick, I turned tail and ran. I was a coward.

When informed that I am swimming where once a shark was seen – I am a coward. I have no instinct for heroism in general, and least of all for this kind of situation. I want to be daring and influential when it comes to taking chances in the mind – climbing the heights in thought and writing, even in teaching. But even there I have no interest in being chosen for the *Guinness Book of Records*. I can appreciate the courage of many who risk all in nature, like Diana Nyad swimming from Cuba to Key West at the age of sixty.