

5 PM - 1950s On scholarship and moral ambiguity

“We have a few minutes to wait for my appointment with the Dean where I hope to offer some useful insights to grow the college’s Core curriculum.”

“Why?”

“When I see the range war between the Hatfields on the political right and the McCoys on the political left I’m convinced we have returned to the cultural conflict of the 1950s.”

“What conflict?”

“When Elvis Presley appeared on the *Ed Sullivan Show* in September 1956, it represented a face-off between forces diametrically opposed each other. Traditionalists were outraged at Elvis’ libertine behavior and wanted the TV camera to show him only from the waist up. Others, feeling liberated from artificial and, in their opinion, unsubstantiated constraints, wanted Elvis from tip to toe, including the swiveling hips and legs.”

“That’s a funny analogy.”

“It might be funny except every so often the belief recycles through popular culture that liberal ideas lead to libertine behavior. It doesn’t have to be true. They only have to believe that it is.”

“Behavior matters to me. I read the Bible as a Christian. I read other books as a Christian. I live my life as a Christian.”

“Go ahead. Read the Bible as a Christian; Interpret other books as a Christian; Read the whole world as a Christian . . . but, to be fair, sift your Christianity, Judaism, or Islam through a lifetime of human experience. If you don’t, you’ll risk confusing what it means to be Christian with someone else’s shallow interpretation of it infused in you.”

“So who was right: the traditionalists calling for yesteryear or those willing to shuck the encumbrances of the past?”

“None of the above. Just like now. The world in the 1950s was changing too fast. Fear and lack of institutional trust led some to feelings of helpless desperation. The election of 2008 has similarly been a hope against hope that things would work, absent any reason to back up the hope. The 1950s were as unhappy a time as today seems to be.”

“Do you think we are reliving the 1950s?”

“Today’s newscasts remind me of 1950s newsreels. For all that technology has changed, artificial, contrived newsreel content remains the same. NPR just aired an anecdotal interview with an Iowa caucus member who was interviewed probably because she could be found in an Iowa telephone directory. NPR presumed she had a prescription for what was needed for the Republican Party. Clichéd generalities that waste today’s air time are no more useful than filmed newsreels of prancing 1950s starlets or model boats towing squirrels trained to water ski. After that, NPR’s Mara Liasson spouted irrelevancies about energizing the party base, musing whether anything would flummox the—and note the favorable adjective ‘unflappable’—opposition candidate. That’s entertainment that displaces news. More frightening, it passed unnoticed by listeners. News is not about speculation on keeping a vice president candidate under wraps, or about a vice presidential candidate’s influence on poll numbers, and certainly not about criticism that a vice presidential candidate didn’t finesse an Iran-Israel question better. People should be outraged when editors prefer crap to reliable content that equates to news you can use.”

“Did such things matter back in the 1950s?”

“Well, look at the sweep of time. Patterns in what has happened across history—even in literature—can be mined for value. Literature is a shortcut to experience—allowing a reader to ‘live’ an experience as if it were one’s own.

“Modernism in literature was murdered, the first blow struck by World War I, but the final blow was long coming. In a sweeping

arc, Modernism in novels reflected the last of the 19th century's technological advancements in energy, travel, biology, psychology, and brute mastery of science, only to have the 'march of progress' hammered by the brutality of war. Meanwhile, the signal scream of Post-modernism, the despair that replaced Modernism, took 50 years to cry out, even though that's not a long time to penetrate the masses."

"Which 50 years?"

"Edvard Munch created *Skrick* in 1893—we know the painting as *The Scream*—but it reached from the late 1890s when Nietzsche died to the late 1940s and Sartre's post-war existentialism before the sentiments expressed colored the 1950s. Post-modernism essentially gave up on Modernism's search for meaning, and often poked fun at the quest. Post-modernism was the exasperated 'I give up!' for Modernism's lack of success either defining the world or saving it from itself. Reacting skeptically, authors faced the Elvis dichotomy and either retreated to familiar neoclassical traditions or gave up on traditions altogether.

"Post-modernism is a perfect example to wonder where the gain is if, for all its lessons, a body of literature does not bring home the fabric of society clearly enough for readers to accept and own enough of it to live by. What matters the excellence of style, the depth of character, the drive of narrative, the tension of conflict, the emotion of phrasing, if in substance the lessons for life are missing. Conversation alone—content alone—should be enough to reaffirm the essence of society."

"You speak against what has happened in literature, and then you use it. I'm not sure how you can do that."

"It's like archeology or anthropology. I am not criticizing so much as observing to understand it better for my own safety's sake. They were of their time, and could not have acted any differently. We are of our time, and if we *don't* learn how their time came to pass, ours will never improve upon it. To learn to look at literature with a sharp eye is to learn to look at life as clearly, and at others who would presume to live your life for you."

"So what about the 1950s?"

"The 1950s wallowed in the depths of negative self-consciousness. In the destructive feedback loop that festered after World War II and the existentialism that followed it, the self-consciousness about self-consciousness spiraled disastrously downward. Samuel Becket's public showing in 1953 of *Waiting for Godot* represented an agonizing milestone of Post-modern hopelessness. It was as if literature gave up. Samuel Becket moved beyond James Joyce to represent, not contemporary thinking, but the failure to think how to better the human condition. William Golding, in *Lord of the Flies* in 1954, wonders if society is a natural human characteristic or if culture, created by man, contains the seeds of its own destruction."

"Self-reflection follows every war."

"Yes, it does, but post-World War II doubt became doubled, redoubled, and doubled yet again. We had been forced face-to-face with how little we knew. Philosophy, History, Religion, Literature, Art, and Politics had failed to live up to the potential promised by academics. How frightening that people were left without tools to cope."

"How did those institutions fail to live up to their potential?"

"Philosophy had become a search for absolute answers until philosophers like Ludwig Wittgenstein furthered Immanuel Kant's understanding that reason had limits. In Philosophy, language, abstracted from experience and inserted into metaphysics, became non-useful. Philosophy, which was initially meant to be a means to knowledge and a guide to living, engaged in a quest to discover Ultimate Truth and came up short. If there was no Truth, where could one turn?"

"Meanwhile, History learned too much about itself to trust itself. A hundred years earlier, Dickens, in *Hard Times*, had challenged reliance on facts, facts, and facts alone. Even if consensus on salient facts could be reached, no adequate mechanism seemed to exist to achieve consensus on how to weigh one set of facts against others or to interpret what those facts might mean. To those in the 1950s, society based on History would be built on as

slippery a foundation as professional Philosophy. Neither could people turn to religion as each religion appeared caught in a range war with every other religion over which owned ultimate knowledge, relegating others to mere superstition. No religion was able to legitimize itself over any other.”

“How did that apply to the 1950s?”

“The centuries that had gone before had tried different successive approaches to governance and had not delivered results. The most recent century, the 20th century, in its turn, had precious little to offer. In the resulting political vacuum, obsessive order on one side and anarchy on the other were sucked in to culture in the middle of the 20th century, with each trying to wrestle the other into submission.”

“Children of the 1950s would not have cared about anarchy or order.”

“Every Saturday, children would pay 25 cents at the movie theater to watch the highly stylized, almost fictional five-minute newsreel that preceded two cartoons, a Hopalong Cassidy or Gene Autry the singing cowboy two-reel horse opera cliffhanger, topped off with the artificial Puritanism of a Hollywood-approved feature. Every Sunday meant church and Sunday school before driving the USA in our Chevrolet to visit grandma and grandpa for ice cream.

“If history seems cyclic, it may be that parents, like those in the 1950s, try to protect their children from the horrors of war they had been forced to live. Insulated from the horror, children become distant from the consequences and susceptible to let down their guard. They papered over the pressure with a culture of pretend.

“My parents distanced themselves from World War II’s wartime memories, but—and bless them for trying—while they protected their children from what they lived through, weeds grew that later would clutter the garden. Couched in a protected environment the children’s view of the world remained incomplete. There are people out in the world who want to kill you for greed or for another small reason. Overly-protected as

children, those students grew up to become teachers who would perpetrate their flawed reality on the next generation of students and that’s made the distance from the reality of war become greater still.”

“Does the death of Modernism matter?”

“Everyone was set adrift in a storm-tossed sea. Everyone *is* adrift in a storm-tossed sea. That’s not only *worth* knowing, staying afloat *depends* on knowing that.

“Modernism’s concerns are as relevant today as they were in the 1920s. Modernism was concerned with humanity, no less than the early development of the novel was, for instance with pre-Victorian Jane Austin, trying to address the proper relation of one to one’s surroundings and culture.

“Me? I believe that if you’re going to use your wits to manufacture something from nothing, you ought to create something that works. It had better travel across culture and time and be easily accessible and compelling.

“Post-modernism—PoMo—blossomed in the anything-goes 1960s where an author’s creation became merely a score, open to interpretation by anyone who, by right of his or her own individuality, claimed *ipso facto* qualifications to give a ‘valid’ interpretation of the work. Words and objects no longer seem to matter. Reality and fiction moved closer to each other.

“PoMo pre-occupied itself with self-reference in a superficial way. Self-reference turned away from intense examination of the protagonist’s engagement with society. For authors in this style, self-reference applied to the form of the writing rather than thinking about thinking or the ideas within. Post-modernism certainly wasn’t a triumph of style over substance. It wasn’t a triumph at all, but the failure of substance. Two generations of failure left us to clean up after the third. My generation missed its opportunity to take 50 years of aimless Post-modernity and force it to face itself in the mirror.”

“What would you have them face in the mirror?”

“These children, protected for the best of reasons by their parents, whose dreams discounted reality and colored the reality

of later children and whose hopes for change ought to be honored, can only honor those hopes if they recover the past.”

. . . “The Dean will see you now.”

“. . . Thank you for meeting with me about the college Core course content. Academic deans are very busy and it is kind of you to take the time.”

“We think constantly about the goals of college education. Every ten years or so we re-evaluate Core courses and we are engaged in that process now. In my opinion, Core courses should advance both confidence and humility.”

“I agree. The question is how to become more successful at it. Education can be misused, as anyone who considers Chinese Chairman Mao Zedong’s pseudo-educational indoctrination can attest. In our own time, we fail to use teachable moments like the mistaken Duke University lacrosse scandal, Yale’s handling of Danish Islamist cartoons offensive to Islamic fundamentalists, Harvard’s distress at president Summers’ remarks to research gender in science, or the New York *Times*, even with its ombudsman.”

“That doesn’t speak well for academic success.”

“Our experienced and engaged faculty is a generation removed from students taught by the previous generation of faculty that likewise did its best. If, in the long string of history, after so many valiant cycles we are still not as successful as we need to be, then who can point out a reasonable explanation, uncover a more useful goal the a path toward it, and motivate others to achieve it?”

“That’s every professor’s job, of course.”

“Certainly professors are encouraged to seek wisdom wherever they can find it.”

“That doesn’t always happen.”

“No one likes to have a mirror held up to self and work, particularly by one who is not one of them, but only a product

of their work.”

“That’s a gracious way of phrasing it.”

“It is an interesting challenge to a mature faculty, fully engaged in doing as much as they do now, to ask them how useful and necessary ideas can be made more accessible.”

“We challenge ourselves every day. We read, research, undergo self-evaluation by our peers.”

“Education at all levels deserves to be more effective—working better, not harder or longer.”

“We can always do better.”

“Each subject has opportunity: English has literature to reinforce tools for thought; History has the record of people convinced they were right when they were mistaken; Professional Philosophy has shown instances where ultimate answers cannot be found, and that the best we can do is focus elsewhere.”

“The Core curriculum is designed to foster inquiry.”

“Without an ‘Ah, ha!’ or *eureka* moment, those empowered to make decisions won’t realize that something different needs to be done, that it can be done, and, that a plausible path can take us there.”

“How do you make accessible something as nebulous as character?”

“Superior educators struggle with how to bring about the good character they wish to see. Current courses do address individual subjects well, but professors at a public university recently lobbied to reduce the number of Core courses in favor of more professional training. That suggests they do not see the value of Core courses, or how to successfully implement them.”

“Core represents the faculty’s best reflection on materials crucial for an educated person to be exposed to, if not fully cognizant of. It reflects faculty judgment that such and such a background is an important common fabric for all educated persons and the common background for subsequent development of diverse skills and knowledge.”

“Some course needs to shoulder responsibility to address where useful tools meet the simple daily problems of living and the problems of society.”

“Secondly, Core should leave at the least an imprint of that which tends to bind and unify—in the face of later fragmentation of experience and activities.”

“A common frame for subsequent development is essential and education should bind and unify society. But those lobbying show little consensus how to address essential understanding that is missing.”

“What would you consider missing?”

“Essential thinking techniques, the humility that comes from thinking about thinking, and a handful of simple wisdoms that have been passed down from the greatest minds in history who turned their intellect to the simple daily problems of living.”

“Specifically?”

“Classical undergraduate college education used to consist of the first three of the Seven Liberal Arts, known as the *Trivium*—Grammar, Logic, and Rhetoric: Grammar to put your thoughts in order, Logic to see those thoughts were consistent, and Rhetoric to convey those thoughts to others and back. As Dorothy Sayers, reminds us, we taught students to think, and then practiced on subjects. Now we teach subjects and hope they learn to think.

“That leads to the second concern of hubris. We often think we are right, not because we *are* right, but simply because we *think* we are right. As a habit, people will concede greater beauty, strength, or speed, but no one will concede better judgment.

“That suggests a third concern where, in a way, we lose consciousness. Consciousness is a sometime acquired trait. Think of it as recognizing you were unaware when peripheral vision vanishes. Or, if you walk into a room, shine a flashlight at one corner and then other corners, when you leave the room, can you tell if it was lit? Consciousness is ours only when we have it and no one considers that it might ever go missing.

“Fourth, when it comes to character, Socrates felt it could be taught, not like geometry, but in a way he did not, or could not, explain, perhaps because of the limitations of his ancient Greek. But we have new metaphors, tools, and language that can reach beyond Socrates to make accessible concepts he could not.

“Fifth, a handful of simple wisdoms help make character more accessible because, rather than teach fixed virtues, they encourage dynamic process to which Socrates could only allude. As the kids connect language and thought, they are empowered and motivated by simple wisdoms that underlie their conversation:

- A sense of time and their place in it
- A sense that the mental map of reality could be more accurate
- A sense that they might sometimes be wrong
- A sense that others live as acutely as they do
- A sense that they are responsible for themselves
- A dynamic recursive process of thinking about thinking

“Traditional education is very good at what it does, but what it does well isn’t all we need. We have little leeway anymore.”

“Why not?”

Over 2500 years, the conundrum of how one should behave has thrown us into a downward spiral of moral relativism that resigns ethics to ‘might makes right’ because religions are ineffective outside their believers and so-called natural laws are culturally dependent and cannot be proven to be absolute.

“If students of today are to escape from moral relativism to establish minimum standards of behavior then they have to work within today’s constraints of language but go beyond those that limited the brilliant Socrates. Fortunately, they can. Where Socrates had only the word *polis*, today’s students can differentiate *polis* from ‘city,’ *polis* from ‘culture,’ and *polis* from ‘society.’ For their own safety’s sake they must.”

“You challenge Socrates?”

“Our language lets us see more clearly than he could. Socrates’ notion was that if one looked at the society that mankind created, one could project backward to gain insight into the make-up of an individual. The single word available did not

differentiate between culture and society, which led to notions about the individual that do not follow. But the converse, notions deduced about the individual, provide insight about society.”

“How is society different than culture?”

“Society occurs at any edge where two individuals or cultures meet. Society requires no religion, no shared experience, and no natural law. Society can be built projecting forward, in an exercise like linking two ships on a storm-tossed sea. One ship uses a Lyle Gun to send a messenger line between ships that the second ship uses to return a stronger line. The process is repeated until the ships are lashed together.”

“What has that to do with society?”

“People are like ships, alien and alone on uncertain seas. Every individual is essentially alone, adrift in a stormy sea of sense experience, with only the pattern-recognition skills with which one was born, and the rationality developed over time. Yet, from simple threads fashioned from humility and a shared sense of need, a sturdy fabric can be fashioned between individuals, to stand independent of their cultures, to lift them above the rest of the animal kingdom and embrace a peaceful process of problem resolution.”

“What sort of ‘messenger line’ is practical?”

“This one: Can you recall an instance from your personal experience when you thought you were correct but later events painfully proved you to be mistaken?”

“I suppose I can.”

“The recollection makes it clear that your decisions were based not on reality, but on a mental map of reality, susceptible to errors, that you had created and refined. That is humbling. If you can’t know when you might be mistaken, any plan for your very best future requires a mental map of reality more accurate than you alone can make. If sometimes you think you are correct when you are mistaken, it is better to discover that before a harsh lesson from reality brings you back to reality.”

“But how can you discover that?”

Fortunately, as alone as you are, others are in a similar circumstance. Others, just like you, have something to gain from society, if they can recognize the need and make society happen.

“One could easily perform a thought experiment in a classroom to deduce minimum requirements for behavior in society that are humility and reciprocity:

- The understanding that you just might be wrong, and
- A sense that others live their life as acutely as you do.

“Society is created by individuals for their benefit. For society, humility is as essential as humility is important to the individual. It represents the continuous and everlasting opportunity for improvement.”

“But is it practical?”

“You need no more proof than your own experience. Governance with institutionalized doubt has been tried in one form or another in ancient Greece and today.”

“They were not successful then.”

“Those governments were instituted for other reasons and when they fell they were undermined by the lack of understanding of its underlying advantage.”

“Then why were they instituted?”

“Instituted as a check on consolidated power in Athens, their faith in democracy was based on one person—one vote and majority rules. Instead, the strength of democracy is that it codifies humility into a permanent appreciation that there might be a better way. It represents a commitment to freedom of speech because the least of us deserves the opportunity to convince the rest that, whatever the present decision, there may always be a better way.”

“Democracies are susceptible to tyranny of the majority and to buying votes for political advantage.”

“Every form of government can become tyrannical. In a democracy, the capacity to make individual decisions matters.”

Democracy assures the ability to call “bullshit” in front of an audience tuned to judge the accuracy of the argument. Brought to consciousness by the charge, individuals choose to laugh into submission one side or the other. And, in the end, the penalty for bullshit ought to be to be ignored.”

“Free speech is enshrined in the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence.”

“Only the timid justify with the parchment of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence rather than the principle behind it. Society depends on the liberty to laugh at any stupid idea put forward by anyone else who chooses to speak. It is not law that protects the laughter, but simple good sense open to anyone who cares to work it out. For those unable to work it out, then your ‘friend-or-foe’ indicator should flash in warning.

“To prepare for times of warning, a representative democracy, when supported by an education system that actually works, is able to put forward candidates with enough character to stand up to a misguided crowd long enough to educate them about what matters. But we are only just learning what matters and how to make it accessible to everyone so we can incorporate into Core classes such wisdom that students can discover and use to inoculate themselves.”

“And if we don’t see it or do it?”

“Mother Nature will not care. But we do—for ourselves and our children. Among the things that distinguish between ourselves and others of the plant and animal kingdom are the skill to communicate complex ideas to each other and the potential to project the ramifications of plans for the future. If we do not exercise these, we revert to the level of others in the world of nature—governed by the rules nature requires and nothing more. Be human or be no more than an animal.”

“How does one make the choice?”

“Most other animals are outside the framework of morality. Morality is purely a creation of thought. A seal that snips off the fins of a fish, leaving it a terrified, living, helpless toy to be batted around until boredom and hunger make it lunch, has no

conception of good and evil. Good and evil don’t exist in the world of seals and fish; life is simply the way things are.”

“That is stark, but not everyone will be convinced.”

“No compelling reason in the laws of nature or mankind will irrefutably justify morality to any and all men. One who chooses to act by the laws of the lion need not even consent to listen to the arguments in favor of morality. He need not choose to heed anything but that which compels itself to be heard by the laws of nature, if even that. People cannot be forced to join together under the protection of a moral umbrella; we can only encourage them to do so by presenting its advantages and encouraging them to develop the thought processes necessary to weigh them. Our own best interest demands we help as many as possible to become so thoughtful they clearly understand such things. Our security depends upon it.”

“I can’t see people lining up and signing up.”

“Protection under the moral umbrella is not so much explicitly subscribed to by an individual as it is rejected by an explicit act. The minimums of society are few. Restriction of the freedom of communication, such as muzzling free speech or press, or hostage taking amongst the diplomatic community casts one out from the umbrella’s protection to put them at the mercy of the laws of nature. By such action one opens oneself to any response in the arsenal of the laws of nature we may choose to take. He has chosen the battlefield, not us. We, in turn, are subject to the laws of nature in our response. We need not reply using the standard of the moral umbrella the offender has rejected, although we may choose to do so. Pacifists and generals of quality understand that war is a nasty place to be and should be avoided, if possible. But those of us who understand morality reserve the right to protect themselves by any means necessary. And one might survive or both might die. Nature does not care.

“Kurtz’ monologue in *Apocalypse Now* is brilliant even though neither Francis Ford Coppola nor Marlon Brando may have understood the insight that one can be willing to temporarily set aside morality to fight those who undermine it. Morality is the creation of those who choose to live under its protective

umbrella and, in so doing, lift themselves just a fraction above the law of the jungle lived by the animal kingdom. Those who by their actions choose to reject living under the umbrella's protection can have no expectation that morality will protect them when society turns around on them. Do not underestimate the value of the umbrella. Robert Bolt's Thomas More explained in *A Man for All Seasons*, 'And when the last law was down, and the Devil turned 'round on you, where would you hide, Roper, the laws all being flat? This country is planted thick with laws, from coast to coast, Man's laws, not God's! And if you cut them down (and you're just the man to do it!), do you really think you could stand upright in the winds that would blow then? Yes, I'd give the Devil benefit of law, for my own safety's sake!'"

"Morality is not abstract. It is integrally tied up with the immediate practical protection of my own life. My proper concern is my own life. Your proper concern is yours. The future safety of any individual is integrally tied up with convincing as many other people in the world as one can the value of living under a moral umbrella that is equitable and valuable for wellbeing, and by actions that decide under what conditions they will be treated. Our own best interest is to encourage the kind of thoughtfulness to understand the ramifications of individual actions."

"But why should I buy into this?"

"Looking at society this way sets up a practical, culturally independent 'friend or foe' detector to identify behavior that would undermine society. More to the point, society is put at risk when doubt is replaced by certainty."

"But truth matters."

"You can't know what is true. You can only discover if what is asserted as true does not match patterns of experience. Philosopher Karl Popper explained that science is not about deciding what is true, but embracing a continuous process to identify and reject what is demonstrably false. Phrased another way, society is at risk without the freedom to say something someone may not care to hear. That said, the freedom to offend

does not imply the necessity to do so or determine the form it might take."

"How can this be taught?"

"Journalism is the perfect vehicle to make these essential concepts accessible, and is a division of labor that, for usefully serving individuals and society, would have pleased philosopher Socrates in ancient Greece, sociologist and historian Ibn Khaldun in the Islamic empire, and economist Adam Smith after the modern industrial revolution. As a surrogate for the individual, journalism fits neatly in a concentric circle between the individual and society.

"That which is important to the individual is equally important to journalism and to society. Therefore, developing the skill to detect bad journalistic habits identifies similar misbehavior for individuals and society. Studying journalism exposes "gotcha" techniques, style over substance, ignorance, misuse of statistics, gullibility, historical amnesia, double standards, misrepresentation, misplaced tolerance, misplaced judgment, silence, politics, overused and underused language, rhetorical games, and logical fallacies. Similarly, the purpose of a discussion is not to win, but to come to understanding."

"What takes this from being only interesting to being compelling?"

"Dorothy Sayers, the 1930s mystery writer and medievalist said, 'For we let our young men and women go out unarmed, in a day when armor was never so necessary. By teaching them all to read, we have left them at the mercy of the printed word. By the invention of the film and the radio, we have made certain that no aversion to reading shall secure them from the incessant battery of words, words, words. They do not know what the words mean; they do not know how to ward them off or blunt their edge or fling them back; they are a prey to words in their emotions instead of being the masters of them in their intellects.'

"It is too dangerous to be ignorant about judgment in our age. As Jacob Bronowski noted, science has put such power in the hands of anyone who cares to learn that an iron box will no

longer protect your valuables nor an iron door protect your family. We are in a race that there is no guarantee civilization will win. Happily, civilization has a better chance today than ever before, because all it takes to inoculate people to defend themselves is a change of mind. All it took for the villagers to see that the emperor had no clothes, was a change of mind.”

“You are asking us to do something completely different than we currently do.”

“The core of Core is not knowledge, but embracing the process by which we become compelled to engage in life-long learning and the tools by which to proceed.”

“So are you going to be the one to tell schools they are teaching the wrong subjects?”

“They are not the wrong subjects; they are subjects from a point of view that gives students little traction. “

“Traction?”

“Students see little in it for them. Across all grade levels and subjects, current courses already contain teachable moments to which simple wisdoms easily attach. Simple wisdoms refine processes used to make decisions. Process matters because, as Robert Heilbroner pointed out, when you master logic, logic masters you. It becomes compelling and unavoidable. When you understand that two plus two equals four, nothing will entice you to believe it equals five.”

“Can people change so dramatically?”

“In the early 1300s, painters learned to map three-dimensional space on two-dimensional canvas in a way that brought cataclysmic change to the way they saw the world and to thought and literature. Linear perspective—what we call point of view—changed the metaphors ordinary people would use, finding its way into the dozens of points of view Giovanni Boccaccio used in *The Decameron*.

“A similar cataclysmic change seems imminent as pressure from language, examples, and experience has built over the past century:

- Edison’s motion pictures look across time.
- Einstein’s theories expressed time relatively.
- Karl Marx used the dialectic to dynamically sight from the past, through the present, to the future.
- Computers and M. C. Escher’s graphics demonstrate how the mind thinks recursively.

“Compelling representations of time builds pressure to break loose from static Newtonian views to more useful dynamic metaphors in thought and literature.”

“Is such a change worth it?”

“Echoing Heilbroner, the courage to defend what is important springs from mastering why something is important. Herodotus believed the Greeks at *Thermopylae* found courage because they valued liberty so highly that they would rather sacrifice their lives to try to preserve it than live any longer without it. Socrates was a tenacious soldier during the Peloponnesian War because he understood his duty. Defending Little Round Top against all odds at Gettysburg during the Civil War, earned a grammar teacher from Maine, Joshua Chamberlain, the Congressional Medal of Honor.”

“Our professors are committed to their teaching what is needed.”

“Professors are committed to incredible depth and insight, which they then test with astounding precision: where were these words used in the readings; why were these quotations significant; write an essay on such and so. They test for, and show the course covers material that is fascinating, delightful, complete, in-depth, but nevertheless information, not news.”

“Information not news?”

“Elementary visitors to our newspaper learn information is true, but news adds context to plan your best future. If the core of Core in college leaves to chance that which you need to know to plan your best future, you go into the world unarmed.

“Professors *are* totally committed within their frame of reference, but it is not enough to test the pedantic learned as students sweat through their readings.”

“So, summarize for me, why should one choose a character-centered life?”

“That question really asks, ‘Why is a character-centered life in your own long-term best interest?’ In your own experience can you recall painful experiences that occurred because you thought you were right and later discovered you were not?”

“I can see that.”

“Point 1: Sometimes we think we are right, not because we are right, but simply because we think we are right.

“It’s possible for you to be wrong, even when you think you are right, because your brain—the tool you use to plan your very best future—decides what to do using not reality itself, but its very own internal map of reality. If that map of reality is inaccurate, you can get hurt.”

“I can see that, too.”

“Point 2: Your long-term self-interest depends on maintaining the very best map of reality to work with.”

“But where does that get me?”

“Other people can recall their own painful experiences, that even though they are different experiences from yours, will invariably lead them to the same conclusion.”

“And this means . . .?”

“Point 3: Those other people live life as acutely as you do. They have the same needs with reason to join together in society. Society becomes mutually beneficial so we can help each other refine our individual mental maps of reality.

“Language is the tool we use to maintain our map of reality, to check it, to refine it, and to represent it on paper so that tomorrow we can look back and see if it makes as much sense then as it does to us today.

“More than that, the *Trivium*—the first three of the Seven Liberal Arts—are what we use. Grammar is how we express our thoughts clearly. Logic is how we check our language for consistency. Rhetoric is how we express what we think to others and check

what others express to us. They capture our expressions of concepts to convey them over immeasurable distance and time to others.”

“So we establish that quality of language and its tools matter.”

“Point 4: Reading, writing, and conversation hone our skills used to better individual futures.

“Point 5: A sense of time and one’s place in it provides a check on one’s map of reality and decision-making.

“Point 6: Thinking about thinking is a powerful tool that needs to be harnessed to be constructive.

“These points are accessible to everyone across cultural and religious boundaries. Using them we can fashion virtues, a compelling framework for civilization, and a path to honorable decision-making.

“Point 7: people are responsible for themselves and need to take that responsibility.

“As children connect language and thought, they are empowered and motivated by Simple Wisdoms that underlie their conversation:

- A sense that they might sometimes be wrong.
- A sense that the map of reality in their mind could be better.
- A sense that other people live life as acutely as they do.
- A sense of the tools for thought.
- A sense of time and their place in it.
- A sense of the power of recursive thought.
- A sense that people are responsible for themselves.

“These are processes kids understand, admire and wish to emulate in a deeper way.”