

THE PERSISTENCE OF LIBERTY

Excerpt

CHAPTER NINE

Waiting for Change

*Everywhere I go, I'm asked if I think the universities stifle writers.
My opinion is that they don't stifle enough of them.*

— Flannery O'Connor

Someone has said you can tell a good deal about the character and habits of a country by watching its waiters. It's impossible to name a country where there are none, though at any given moment yours may be nowhere to be seen. True, many and various persons are called to wait, and there undeniably are differences in how a single waiter may perform from time to time. He may seem to prefer certain patrons to others. By and large, however, there are revealing national tendencies that may be observed.

Solemn professionalism, for example—the *métier* of the French waiter—has been mistaken for arrogance. He is only manifesting his skill to raise your enjoyment to a standard far beyond what you could imagine or desire. By contrast, Hungarian waiters work in pairs, to assure adequate service and provide the constant threat of music at the table. In Italy, you can always press the waiter for his candid recommendation, which he will offer by pulling up a chair and joining your party to be certain everyone hears his suggestion and complicated rationale. It is getting harder to find an English waiter in London. When he does appear, he is either the obsequious sort who thanks you with every service he performs, or the kind that accepts your declared wishes as if you had just given him the correct answer to the *Times* crossword. He then thanks you smartly for your help.

At length, one comes to the American waiter, who embodies a paradox. It is an American enigma of one independent, self-reliant adult performing personal and rudimentary services for another, equally capable adult who allows him or herself to be served. Equality, in fact, is at the heart of it for those who take the part of the American waiter. It is accept-

ing one role today with full knowledge that roles may be exchanged, duties and stations reversed, perhaps as soon as breakfast tomorrow.

Self-reliance is deeply burrowed into the American mind. There is confidence in a capacity for individual regeneration, and no limits have yet been reached for the American traits of sagacity or silliness, magnificence or miscalculation. Immutable self-reliance vests this fluid process of regeneration. For more than a hundred years, regenerative capacity has led to inventing the self over and over again. Donning the professional habit, the spirit is pulled through the sleeve and somehow dresses the self, anew. This is the great testament of self-reliance. But dependence upon the pragmatic self simply leads to mourning that vanishing side—recalled as the genuine, authentic, erudite self—well-prepared and cerebrally balanced.

One curious consequence of missing the erudite self is substituting over-education. It has spawned another phenomenon entirely, called by some the arrogance of credentialing. This creates problems. For on the one hand, gaining credentials supports individual achievement, but on the other, it erodes the virtue of self-reliance through the emptiness of hierarchy and fatuous security of a certificate. What's worse, in a sufficiently robust economy, the confused over-credentialed professional may well be delivered into an imaginary state of grace.

The stubborn proof of this is all around. During the early eighties, a prosperous New England community faced yet another labor strike by their school bus drivers, whose permanent addresses often were not known, let alone their credentials. Rather than give the striking scoundrels any satisfaction, a dozen reproving mothers took over the duties, driving their children to and from school for the remaining term of the labor contract. The town newspaper observed that it was the first time every bus had a driver who held at least one master's degree.

One or two of these mothers no doubt had waited tables in graduate school. Far from immune to this condition, women have also been drawn to American educational wanderlust. By 1985, the number of doctoral degrees conferred upon women at US universities exceeded that for men. Pursuit of a doctorate at that time had involved about ten years, on average—ten years of income foregone, self-reliance delayed.

Advanced degrees in the physical sciences have consistently taken the least time to achieve, and perhaps not surprisingly, education doctorates take the most time. Explanations for this have diverged. Some authorities feel physical scientists are more easily satisfied, or more disciplined and trusting—and less imaginative, overall. This may be evidence that it is easier to learn than to teach, and hardest of all is preparing another to teach, with or without them having learned. Possessed of a remarkable facility for learning and little interest in teaching, philosopher Immanuel Kant is reported to have charac-

terized the academic lecture as that process by which the notes of the instructor are transposed into the notes of the student without passing through the mind of either.

Since long before Theodore Roosevelt beat the idea to death, there has been a national article of faith that history is not kind to idlers. Schooling may be unreflective and bereft of thinking, but it is based on the idea of keeping busy. Education these days is not so much a matter of preserving our scientific and cultural inheritance as it is honing skills that will make for a productive time in industry. Many a student has been nurtured by soft, collective capitalist consciousness.

The truly learned muse as to whether the shared sense of value naturally occurs as an active or a passive state. They see little hope of redemption for the somnolent student who interrupts to ask the teacher whether Richard III personally resented Shakespeare's portrayal of him. Today, everyone has an equal opportunity to neglect his or her education.

By the same token, most have known persons who fully realize themselves as a reference work. These few look to increase mental weight by adding factual calories. They demonstrate intellect through a multitude of connections that appear obscure to everyone else. The word *Yggdrasill*, for example, seems a curious and shadowy, ancient thing. Yet those who took the right courses quickly see the contemporary relevance of the "world tree," the great ash with its roots in the underworld, the axis on which the heavens pivot.

Etymology is an especially good example of a more general failing—namely, the endless pursuit of factual trifles for purposes of intellectual intimidation. The chief by-product of schooling in the Middle Ages, this form of scholastic tyranny offers both entertainment and fulfillment.

To follow a word that has blossomed in English back to its seedpod in the germinating ancestral vernacular is to unearth an easy addiction. Words on loan arrive on the wind from all directions. Take, for example, *tempo* (Italian) and *tempura* (Japanese). The Latin *tempus*, meaning time, has the plural *tempora* and is the progenitor of the Italian for time, *tempo*, which in turn wafted into the English language as a musical term. When the Portuguese became the first Europeans to visit Japan, it was noticed that they would substitute seafood for meat during Lent (in Latin, *tempora quadragesima*, "the times of the forty"). Completely neglecting the obscurity of the catechism, the Japanese eventually saw that *tempura* referred to fried seafood.

These misadventures are so remote and time-consuming that it's hard to stop. *Mahatma* comes from the Hindi and "atmosphere" from Greek roots. The Indo-European root *atmen* has the meaning "breath" and is seen in German *atmen* as "breathe," Sanskrit *atman* as "soul" and the Greek *atmos* as "smoke" or "vapor." *Maha-atma* is contracted in Hindi

to *mahatma*, meaning “great soul.” “Atmosphere” thus became the enveloping space that holds all essences, the “air-sphere.”

It turns out that the antidote for this debilitating affliction is also provided by institutional education. The cure is *empirical subject matter*. By applying mnemonic devices to the body of scientific knowledge one may vanquish an otherwise enfeebling obsession. The commendable result can be the crisp recall of all twelve cranial nerves, remembering the first twenty digits in the decimal expansion of π , or reciting the astronomical designations given to the spectral types of the main sequence of stars.

Diversity in how to become self-reliant ensures that the bottom of the well of impractical education can never be plumbed. It is part of an ancient inheritance and an all-around worthy thing. Even so, it is helpful to have the occasional reminder that anything that can be taught by one to another is relatively inconsequential. The prize of self-discovery is not won without effort. Bedeviled by the state of evaporative education, the merciful end is the award of a degree, which gives no benefit to those few who thought they had pursued something else. This suggests it would be better to do away with teaching and training if what the student really is after is thinking and learning.

Yet education persists. Imagine a *Parable of Forty*, having nothing to do with Lent and Japanese seafood but illustrating how far education has come in two or three millennia. Forty was once the life expectancy for a healthy human who was able to avoid war and other hazards. Life spans have been extended dramatically, despite continued conflict and many an unusual entree served by the wait staff. In developed economies, forty is now often the age at which one’s education either is finished (not to imply complete) or otherwise deferred.