

Finish Up Strong

Here's to a New Year!

2023 had moments for us, along with the tribulations of age, and we look ahead to 2024 with anxieties about both private and public life. But in lieu of a more conventional recapping about who's been up to what here, I want to share some reflections for the new year and beyond, for I find this time of life disorienting, feeling at once withdrawn yet still capable. Established intentions give way to inchoate replacements, creating the dither of advancing age. So here's an anonymized letter to friends and anyone else who might care. It's an effort to snap into focus. . . .

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Your querying Max for more about the project I'm starting coincides with my sense that I need a kind of prospectus, a memo about it for myself and others, in part to keep my intentions from wandering, as they are prone to do, especially as it will be a long-term effort. As you know, I've published my work over the years in ways that have been, shall we say, idiosyncratic. I've resolved to try to revise it into a more accessible form while I still have some wherewithal to do so. Most simply, that's the project. But we naturally ask, "how, what, and why?"

I've been living my life with the sense that I can and should achieve a purpose through it, one that I can and should give to it, even though I'll never be sure what that purpose is, or whether I'll fulfill it, and finally whether doing so would actually have the meaning I hope it would have. We all live in purposeful ignorance, for we live by acting on ad hoc intentions that address an unknowable future that result in many partial failures and some incomplete successes, all somersaulting on until a final failure, death. As age advances, I've got to keep doing that, still unsure where I'm going but sensing movement looking back, a sense of something to work with in what's taken place as I wonder what I can and should do next.

In looking back, I pause, now and then, on my experience in boarding school, Deerfield Academy in the mid 1950s. Memories of Sunday evenings, sitting uncomfortably on the commonroom floor, with all the other 450 students, to sing several hymns and songs, and to hear the headmaster, Frank Boyden, then a wise old man, talk about the past week, the one to come, and his genial sense of life. He could talk at once to all of us with his words

having personal meaning to each, to me then and now in living memory. When he sensed a letdown, he would deftly rally spirits, concluding that whatever happens, "however it goes, finish up strong." That struck me then and after disappointments and some success, the resolve to finish up strong still sticks with me. That's my project now.

OK. As he said, "finish up strong" — that's a good intent. But what do I want to finish up, strongly? That's a hard question, especially when it comes late in a long life, for aging narrows the horizon of possible purpose and diminishes the energies available for exploring it. If I didn't succeed in fulfilling my purposes well at the height of my abilities, how can I finish them up strong now in my declining years? I think we all face that question as we start to grow old.

Let's venture an answer to it by noting how tradition has long likened advanced age to a second childhood. Yes, dementia has similarities to infancy, but I suspect the wisdom of tradition suggests something more universal and significant. What do children do? Even in cultures where the primary mode of education takes place through immersion in the flow of adult activity, the child engages in the activities as a participant observer, taking part unobtrusively and standing aside at moments when the activity becomes intense for the adults conducting it. We too loosely describe this participant observation as something in which the child learns by doing.

Children inhabit a world poorly demarcated by boundaries; the here and now easily becomes any time at any place. What appears to be learning by doing what's immediately taking place fails to recognize the agency that children exercise in the process. That agency works by removing the activity from the here and now and contemplating it in a realm of possibility. The child does not feel existentially responsible for the success or failure of the matter at hand; the child feels responsible instead for understanding close up how a person can and should do the activity, not necessarily mechanically replicating what she sees the acting adults doing here and now. The adults control what they are doing by the imperative of success or failure in the outcome of their action. The child controls her participant observation by the imperative of understanding how the actor can and should do the activity in question, independent of the immediate time and place. Because the two are not identical, the child can come away from the experience with an understanding of its potential purpose and practice, and with that an ability in carrying the purpose out which excels, or falls short of, or simply differs from the examples observed in participation. Through all education, the child, all of

us, form our independent sense of what can and should be, enabling us to measure actualities against the possibilities of hope.

To grasp this distinction more fully, let's attend to the powerful description of hope that Václav Havel, the Czech statesman/playwright, expressed:

Hope I understand above all as a state of mind, not a state of the world. Either we have hope within us or we don't; it is a dimension of the soul, and it's not essentially dependent on some particular observation of the world or estimate of the situation. Hope is not prognostication. It is an orientation of the spirit, an orientation of the heart; it transcends the world that is immediately experienced, and is anchored somewhere beyond its horizons. . . .

Hope, in this deep and powerful sense, is not the same as joy that things are going well, or willingness to invest in enterprises that are obviously headed for early success, but, rather, an ability to work for something because it is good, not just because it stands a chance to succeed. The more unpropitious the situation in which we demonstrate hope, the deeper that hope is. Hope is definitely not the same thing as optimism. It is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out. . . . (Václav Havel. *Disturbing the Peace: A Conversation with Karel Hvížďala*, Paul Wilson, trans., New York: Vintage Books, 1991, p. 181.)

I think that all education consists in the process through which people form their hopes, their convictions about what makes sense, regardless how it turns out, and that they then undertake living action in view of those hopes, recognizing the difference between actualities and possibilities, what can and should be. The imperative to achieve success and avoid failure in the matter at hand controls adult action, whereas the aspiration to act inspired by possibility, what can and should be, controls education, the formation of hope.

We can easily see the characteristic state of mind in childhood as one in which the child concerns himself primarily in figuring out what makes sense, regardless of how it turns out. Children live in wonder, full of fantasy. When asked what he wants to be, a child responds after a brief, somewhat startled pause with "oh, a fireman" or some other rather conventional role, equally unprepossessing, as a polite finesse of the adult's doltish question, protecting his purview as a child of living freely in the world of what can and should be.

We can also understand an adult state of mind preoccupied with anticipating what stands a chance of succeeding in the immediate matters at hand, for as a person comes of age the matters at hand take on a consequentiality for the actualities to be enjoyed and suffered in both the private and the public sphere. The Latin roots of *adolescence* suggest a process of ripening into adulthood, which involves circumscribing the child's concern for what can and should be within the more stringent sphere of what will succeed and fail under the immediate conditions.

Maturity involves a prolonged condition characterized by having to live and work by taking action subject to the discipline of success and failure for oneself and the larger communities within which one lives. As a person becomes elderly, he does so having accumulated a storehouse of experience, coping with the immediate actualities of life. But the field for continuing in the adult mode narrows; the time for engaging it shortens; the significance of matters at hand wanes away: our second childhood comes upon us by surprise. Children and the elderly share a looser sense of the present, anchored in it, but easily able to distance themselves from it, setting aside the need to cope with immediate questions, engaging in the-once-upon-a-time and musing on what was and what possibly might be. Children and the elderly share a heightened capacity to hope.

For the elder, agency entails using acquired experience, not as an adult, trying to predict what will succeed in order to put that into action, but once again as a child, standing aside from the main streams of action, seeking to understand what can and should be done in the realm of possibility, hoping for what might elevate the height of aspiration to something fully worthy of fulfillment. We can imagine the elderly in this way helping children give substantive backbone to their free-floating hopes and helping adults resist crass expediency in making the actual decisions they continually face. That's our hope -- we can and should hope the elders will wisely energize the uses of hope in the shared life of persons and their polities, now and in times to come.

But isn't that a stretch, a meaningless fantasy? In contemporary life, we the elderly have no characteristic function in the social whole. At best, we exist to enjoy a kind of passive retirement, filling up the time before disability or death with experience for the sake of experience -- an exciting and endless bucket list. Expressions of hope, the simple possibility of what would be good, carries little weight -- sound prediction wields authority, for it discloses what will succeed. The bitch goddess, success, has long usurped the lifespan. The successful and their hangers on persist in their positions of power long after their creative powers have waned and the not-successful too-often fall in

hopeless despair to an early death. Within the current educational system, channeled by parental anxieties and expectations and a pervasive culture of external assessment, the young don't form hopes. They submit to well-calibrated preparations for trodding the course of life-expectations predicted as appropriate for each. The old step aside, occasionally seen, rarely heard. If there is a discussion of hope, it takes place as the moguls of the media sense that it might be another residue of thought ripe for turning a profit as a mindless commodity.

No *deus ex machina* acting in the historical process will change this situation. Long ago Thoreau observed how a pursuit of material wealth led most to lead lives of quiet desperation, wanting small, safe successes at any cost. And the inculcation of quiet desperation keeps strengthening. Technical rationality makes options multiply in every walk of life, vastly complicating the exercise of personal agency. Everyone turns to conventions, stereotypes, memes, brands, packaging, trends, ballyhoo, life-coaches, specialists, and authorities to cope with the complexities, to reduce their choices to a manageable scale, however hollow. All these coping strategies pertain to statistical aggregates, the manipulable cohort, or as we say with unwitting irony, the significant variable. Yet human lives do not reduce to their coping strategies. Flesh and blood persons live; "we have hope within us or we don't." To hope is not a coping strategy; hope is the value for which we choose to live, whatever the conditions we face may be.

To dismiss hope as a stretch implies nothing. Doing so simply calls hope what it is, for hope stretches us, often through the small gestures embedded in a trivial routine that spark a meaningful recognition. "The more unpropitious the situation in which we demonstrate hope, the deeper that hope is." Where hope is a many-sided, strong, and moving presence, complacency and a demeaning race to the bottom will not take hold. But who can and should give hope a many-sided, strong, and moving presence in these times so wrought by fear, anger, and portents of doom?

Why not the elderly? We are aware that the here and now, however propitious or portentous, is a finite, limited perspective. And we have had substantial immersion in the slow-acting, long-lasting trends at work in the culture in which all are now living, the trends that imperceptibly give possibility its actual substance. Who better can examine them for what is possible, *sub specie aeternitatis*, as the grounding of what can and should be. Possibility merits careful and thorough clarification by persons thinking for themselves, speaking to other persons engaged in examining their lives to find what each has within. We, the elderly, survive as a growing community of

persons, privileged in leisure and resources, enjoying the freedom to make public use of our own reason in all matters, our senses and abilities still strong, ripe with experience, with expectations open. In this situation, let's claim our second childhood and put it to good use. Nothing but our own dither stops us.

As we grow old and become more aware of impending mortality, I think we disengage from the imperatives of success and failure. As that happens, we can and should hold our heads high, with vigor, to finish up strong, expressing what we hope in the light of our life experience, what makes sense to each, what we feel can and should take place for no other reason than that we think, in view of our acquired experience, it is what we judge to be good. Hope sets forth possibilities without much attention to how they will become actual. Should what we hope for take place, it will do so through emergent transformations which cannot be controlled predictively by chains of projected if-then actions. "I alone can do it" is hopeless folly. Hope affects action through the incremental, collaborative effects of personal judgment, the cumulative increments of Yea and Nay registered in the flux of activity that constitutes the lives of each and all. But to sustain hope, persons must express their hope; our challenge now as we seek to finish up strong.

In this frame of mind, I want to claim my second childhood. I wrote most of my work with adult purposes, in an effort to succeed, to build a reputation, to get funding for big projects, to persuade educators, scholars and the public of a point of view. In my experience, the effort did OK with a lot of compromise, adaptations to what I thought was necessary for the effort to succeed. Parts did, parts didn't, but of course, that's as the here and now will always be, was a mixed bag, and I certainly can't turn it all that around now. But I can restate the work, not as something that will turn out well or even come to pass, even partially. But I can work to state it as something quite independent of success and failure, independent of time and place, transcending my possible experience, something that I think, without compromise, makes sense, something that's good, that can and should take place, something that might do so, sometime, somewhere, and whether or not it does or doesn't, good and desirable nevertheless.

Let's celebrate what human life can and should be!

\Robbie