

21 March 2021

Dear Friends of Elmwood,

People can be put off by people who like to read. (Not you, of course. You're reading right now.) Maybe the *zeitgeist* is shifting, but in the world that formed my 'formative' years, this was certainly so. Even at school.

Two Cheers for Elitism

Having mastered a three-syllable word, a child could be ridiculed for using it correctly out loud, then beaten up at recess. Certain kinds of ignorance were roundly celebrated. A sneering aversion to the contents of books was one of them. ('That's just *book*-learning! I've got no time for that!'). So was skill at courtesy and formality ('I don't even *own* a tie'), or an ear for 'classical' music ('boring...where's the beat?').

I heard a similar kind of 'bragging about one's own ignorance' when I lived in England many years later.

Back then, the collective psyche of the English was smarting, still, from the loss of their Empire and steep decline on the world's stage. This was further complicated by their delicate sensitivity to the arcane rules and antique signals, unknown to me (at first), that both regulated and indicated one's 'worth' in their disintegrating class system.

America they knew but loathed. Because its Empire had displaced theirs, they ridiculed it. They knew little about Canada and loathed it a bit less, since it was only 'America-lite'.

It was an occasion for boasting, I noticed, if they could openly declare their ignorance of this or that feature of North American life and culture. "Of course, I know nothing about *that*, hah!" This was said with obvious pride.

Perversely, though, it was a point of ridicule for *me* if I exhibited a comparable ignorance of some feature of British life and culture. "Don't tell me you've never heard of *that*, hah!" This was said with obvious disdain.

No wonder Britannia 'ruled the waves'. There was no winning with those rules. 'Clever, innit?' But I digress – pleasurably, I trust.

Looking back, I can see that the 'underground' culture of my primitive boyhood displayed deep-seated anxiety about education in particular and the unfair distribution of 'social power' in general.

Books were for eggheads. If the eggheads' rewards were 'high marks' and praise from a teacher, they'd just have to be beaten up for it at recess. Why? Because to know about things arbitrarily deemed 'brainy', and to be *seen* to know about them, could only be interpreted as 'showing off', an evil grasping for that 'I'm-better-than-you' kind of elitism. It had to be punished.

Affluence outscored egghead-ism on the 'elitism-meter'. Oddly, though, the 'elitism' of *wealth* was praised and admired in the world of my childhood. It still is, isn't it?

Our culture still has big chips on its shoulders, but only about certain kinds of intelligence and some kinds of 'elitism'. If the boy who uttered a three-syllable word could also skate circles around everyone else, and he had a good slap shot, all would be forgiven. We celebrate 'sports elites' in our country, don't we? Pop stars also.

Some elites are OK, it seems. But other kinds of 'intelligence' we fear; and fear is reactionary, a breeding ground for hate.

That word 'elite', by the way, comes from the same root as the word 'elect'. Elites are members of the elect, the 'chosen ones', in other words. But chosen for what? And chosen by whom? The masses? Other elites? God?

"Who do you think you are?"

In one of his stories – a thin disguise for his own life, I suspect – Garrison Keillor describes sitting around the supper table as a small boy. As always, the day's mundane happenings filled everyone's talk.

"But dreams we didn't discuss," he says. (He means *daydreams*, as in 'one's hopes and dreams for the future'.)

"Dreams were embarrassing in normal conversation, especially big ones. But once, just to see how it would sound coming out of my mouth, I said I was going to college someday. 'College' rhymes with 'knowledge'. I was ten years old and words were as good as food in my mouth. I chewed my food so fast so as to clear the way to be able to say more. 'I'm going to college,' I stated.

"My sister laughed: Who d'ya think *you* are!"

Hurt and deeply deflated, he didn't dare mention that his other bigger dream was to go into show-business one day. I wonder if he also learned never to share his 'dreams' out loud anymore?

Most of us have had to face our own version of this. Our deepest interests and desires very often align with our deepest vulnerabilities, those 'sensitivities'

that are really a kind of intelligence. It's 'us'. And it's precious. It's also where we're most easily wounded.

Few children have had time enough to develop the resilience they need to resist such ridicule and bear the consequent loneliness – never mind the occasional 'beating up', all for the 'crime' of expressing and being themselves. What adult has enough resilience, for that matter?

When we're ridiculed for 'showing off' our eccentric desires and interests, our gifts, skills, and unique forms of intelligence, we may react by renouncing them altogether, just to keep our places on the social ladder, or just to deflect the pain of it. By adulthood, we've woven a false self, haven't we? We wear it like a parka now. It smothers and hides our real self from the real world. We may even hide it from ourselves now.

But I've learned this much. Reading books doesn't make you 'smart'. If my love for books and reading has taught me anything, it's just how smart I'm *not*. So, that's not the point.

Christianity taught me a better way to be. That *is* the point. I don't think I would have learned it anywhere else. I suspect this is a reason to trust that Christianity may even be 'true'. But I *would* say that, wouldn't I?

It's predicated on the belief, not the 'fantasy', not 'magical thinking', not 'projection' (though God knows we do those as well), but a trusting belief that can only be tested in the risks of experience. My testing confirms it. So far.

The belief goes something like this. There is an infinite, conscious love who is *not* one more item of the world alongside all the others (this is why natural science knows nothing of it), but who holds the world, and all creatures within the world, in being. We share the 'image' of this conscious love; a love that desires to consort with us, and does, though we may never be aware of it.

No parka is thick enough, no dissembled self is false enough, to fool this conscious love. God sees and knows us already.

So, honestly to answer the question, "Who do you think you are?" is a voyage of discovery entwined with our discovery of God. If you're stuck for a purpose in life, this may be a good place to start. For when we risk that voyage, and when we risk being true to what we *truly* think, feel, know and love, we do come alive at last.

In the meantime, to hell with boasts of ignorance. And to hell with bullying fear. Even our own.

The Soul of Clare College

I began with a word about books, so let me finish with one. Also, I've been rather hard on the English in this letter (not that they'd notice or care), so here's a happy tale from my time in that 'green and pleasant land'.

I spent many hours of my life in England trolling through used book shops. Many of them are gone now. But they were thick on the ground in *every* University City back then.

One day, I scooped up an armful of used volumes in a dishevelled bookshop that sat in the shadow of Sidney Sussex College, on the grounds of which, incidentally, the severed head Oliver Cromwell lies buried in a location known only to the Master (i.e., 'Principal'). This knowledge has been passed down, over the centuries, from Master to Master, each time with a stipulation that it never be publicly revealed. Which it hasn't. But I digress.

I still have those books, of course. The name of their previous owner is neatly written, in fountain pen, in the upper right hand corner inside the front cover: 'Charles Parkin', it says.

Charles Parkin was given to 'marginalia', as I am. He underlined parts he deemed important or interesting. He made little squiggles or stars in the margins. Sometimes he'd draw a 'question mark', indicating 'I don't understand' or 'this author is out to lunch again'. Sometimes he wrote a few words of praise or counter-argument. Sometimes he doodled.

Some of his books still had old ticket stubs from the theatre inside them. He'd used them as bookmarks. On the back of one he wrote two phone numbers.

Who was this man? I was starting to like him. I suspected he was a venerable, doddering academic who'd recently retired or died.

I asked the owner, the next time I was in that bookshop (which was a lot), "Who's Charles Parkin?"

"What do I care?" he grunted. Ah, customer service, English style!

But about six months later, browsing through the philosophy section of 'Heffers', the main bookshop in Cambridge stocked with new publications, I plucked from the shelf a book about the ancient philosopher Aristotle. It was written by an eminent American philosopher, Jonathan Lear. He'd spent the previous year on sabbatical in Cambridge, writing this book.

I scanned the Preface. Towards the end, as I stood there, I hit upon these words. (This is a bit long, but I think it's worth it.)

“There is one person I do want to say goodbye to, but I can’t. Charles Parkin, the soul of Clare College, died suddenly of a heart attack in the fall of 1986.

“He was one of those modest men who knew everything and published nothing. He loved the people he knew and remained a bachelor living in College rooms. The world did not know him, and the students and Fellows of Clare loved him.

“He was an historian of political thought, but his interests spanned the world. When I first arrived in Cambridge, we would spend evenings looking at bacteria under his microscope, photographing craters on the moon through his telescope, sitting quietly and listening to recordings of trains pulling out of various European stations. And we would discuss Aristotle.

“Just after World War II, Charles contracted tuberculosis and spent two years in a sanatorium just outside Cambridge. It was in this period that he had an epiphany in which he felt he really understood the identity of subject and object. He once told me that he thought the rest of his life was an attempt to recapture that moment. I think he would have liked this book.”

For a reason I still cannot fully fathom or articulate, I was tremendously moved when I read these words decades ago. I am all over again now. Because I bought that book too, of course.

Yours in the faith,
Andrew