

7 February 2021

Dear Friends of Elmwood,

Some pleasures never wear out. Their glory refuses to fade. Others decline and decay over time, until, finally, we're finished with them forever. What changed? Us or them?

Curb Your Enthusiasm

In Chapter 13 of his First Letter to the Corinthians, the so-called 'Hymn to Love', St Paul speaks words soaked in soggy sentiment at many a Church wedding (back when people had Church weddings). The reader, a nervous groomsman or bridesmaid, may be told to skip one of its sterner sentences, the one where St Paul soberly insists (or does he boast?): "When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I thought as a child, I reasoned as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things."

So there. Life is hard. Love hurts. Grow up.

But not so fast. Our childhood loves may call out to us still; not just the people and things that infatuated us back then, but the games that gave us pleasure, the songs and TV shows and books that 'called us to attention', even the household chores that secretly excited us, because they gave us a bit of autonomy and we were in a hurry to grow up.

Lego and Hot Wheels have been 'put away' and stowed in the cellar. I may never climb a tree, play street hockey, or use a slingshot again. I may never again know the thrill of Cutting the Lawn for the very first time. (I've made myself sad just writing those sentences.)

Still, in pensive moments, I might relive these childhood enthusiasms in memory, and fantasise what it might be like to *feel* that way again, to play that way again, and to revel in life that way again, without the grim garment of stern duty and jaded cynicism that enwraps modern adulthood like a straitjacket.

Something gets lost or 'put away' in the passage to adulthood; rather as Adam and Eve, upon their eviction from Eden, lost "the warm nude ages instinctive poise...the taste of joy in the innocent mouth," as W.H. Auden once put it.

Living 'East of Eden', as we do, must we curb our enthusiasm? Must we really "put away childish things" forever? Has their bright glory 'faded to black'?

Has the spirit that indwelt our childish enthusiasms been so curbed by parents, by schooling, by fearful religion, and by the rigours of adulthood responsibility, that pleasure itself has fallen asleep inside, waiting to be re-awakened “like a guilty thing surprised” (as Wordsworth says in “Intimations of Immortality”)?

But why must pleasure be *guilty*?

These questions, too, arise in pensive moments of reverie. Then duty calls, the moment dissolves, and I’m pitched back into the ‘real world’, feeling even more at odds with it, “no longer at ease with the old dispensation,” as T.S. Eliot says of the Magi on their return from Bethlehem.

Something stirred in my soul, a low voltage jolt of wonder and pleasure, an antidote to boredom. Boredom dissolves the instant something or someone seizes our attention and engages us.

The Fox and the Hedgehog

Novelty is a ‘go to’ cure for boredom. A trip to the Mall to buy *new* stuff excites our pleasure and interest. If a new pair of shoes brings a brief burst of joy, imagine how Imelda Marcos must have felt.

‘New and Improved’ is the clever brainchild of Madison Avenue. It counters the “But I already Have One” excuse. “Yes, you have the *old* version. But this one is New and Improved. It’s Thing 2.0.”

Novelty excels at the stimulation of pleasure in the organs of desire – body, mind, and feeling. Its effects are brief because novelty fades with familiarity, and familiarity grows with time. The constant manufacture of novelty *sells* because of the pleasure it promises – even more, the *anticipation* of pleasure. This displaces boredom, briefly.

“In advertising, everything is the way we *wish* it was,” said Jerry Seinfeld, with a satirical tongue placed firmly in his cheek. “I don’t care that it won’t be like that, because in between seeing the commercial and owning the thing, I’m happy. We know the product is going to stink, because we live in the world and we know that everything stinks. We all believe that, hey, maybe *this* one won’t stink. We are a hopeful species. Stupid, but hopeful. But we’re happy in that moment between the commercial and the purchase.”

He has a point. Advertising wants us to be happy, but not *lastingly* happy with our purchases, lest we say, ‘Enough is Enough’.

On the other hand, some things *do* bring true and lasting joy. We never tire of them. There are songs, books, people, games, movies, and vacation spots we’re

glad to experience again and again. We have favourite foods we never fail to enjoy, threadbare clothes we feel so 'good in' we wear them past 'wearing out'.

Strangely, these pleasures refuse to fade with time and familiarity. They deepen and expand. "If your things aren't making you happy," Jerry Seinfeld also said, "you're not buying the right things!"

(I sense St Augustine's ghost scowling at me now. He was certain that no creaturely things, people, or events could ever properly satisfy the deepest desire of the human soul. "Only God can do that," he said. Being in the 'God Business', I should be backing him up at this point, shouldn't I? Augustine's not wrong, but I'll try to keep this discussion earthbound for now. You're welcome.)

When we find our cure for boredom, or it finds us, whatever it may be, we're filled with fresh vitality. Nothing is better than this feeling. It's the feeling of being alive, and that's rather the point of life, isn't it? If we think we've found something better, it's just a higher, better, and stronger version of that same feeling.

Some find it in the pleasures of variety, in diverse experiences of a multitude of things. Others are drawn by the ever-deepening experience of just one thing. "A fox knows many things, but a hedgehog knows one big thing," said the philosopher Isaiah Berlin.

He'd noticed that some people seem to know a little bit about everything. They pursue their many passions the way honeybees collect pollen, darting from flower to flower, collecting a morsel from each of them. They excel at 'Trivial Pursuit'. They blurt out the answers on Jeopardy before the contestants can. They don't just love books or music. They love books *and* music – live concerts and Hollywood blockbusters, foreign films and theatre, world travel, dancing, cooking, gardening, learning new languages, and hiking. Also swimming and knitting. And stamp collecting. Pottery too. Maybe some tennis in their 'spare time'.

Many fine journalists are foxes. So are those who jump swiftly from one enthusiasm to the next, from one hobby to another. "Don't let's go to the same old diner," they plead. "Let's try the new one that opened last week." These are the foxes.

But hedgehogs, rather than knowing a little about an awful lot, know an awful lot about just one thing. Academics tend toward hedgehog-ism. One might be a world authority on 'French Painting between 1633 and 1637', another on 'Variations in Butterfly Wingtips in Southwestern Mexico'; but neither has any

idea what a spark plug is for, and no desire to find out. Students working toward a PhD have been heard to say, "I'm learning more and more about less and less. Soon I'll know everything about nothing!"

Hedgehogs will be found seated at the same table, in the same restaurant, eating the same dish. For they've *found* the one thing they love, and they'll never be finished exploring its pleasures, and never stop recounting them in exquisite detail, should you dare to ask them. Boring? Not for them.

When it comes to TV, men are foxes flipping restlessly through the channels. But women are hedgehogs. "Women want to know 'What's on TV?' Men want to know 'What *else* is on TV?'" (That's the philosopher Jerry Seinfeld again.)

I imagine, though, that most of us are hybrids of these two tendencies. We're 'Hedge-Foxes' who lean, by nature or nurture, in one direction more than another.

But look, I've run out of time and space again. If you're still there, I'd better not try your patience more than I already have. So, I'll cease this garrulous stream-of-consciousness and leap ahead to a hurried conclusion, for both our sakes, yes? How about this?

"Boredom is the enemy of vitality. Vitality arises from things that seize our attention, excite our interest, and give us much pleasure, both in their variety and in their depth. The secret to living well is to foster this vitality by un-curbing our enthusiasm. The secret to *aging* well is never to forget the enthusiasms of our childhood, and to recall with gratitude, often, just how good they felt."

That's too big to fit on a T-shirt, isn't it?

Yours in the faith,
Andrew