

lative delegate; for our legislatures decay. But we ought to discourse less, in a vague ideological fashion, about some fancied future perfection of society: some sprawling "global village", perfectly democratic, in which everybody will be precisely like everybody else. In such a utopia no freedom at all would survive; and humanity would expire of boredom and license.

In the twenty-first century, doubtless the word "Democracy!", shouted as an ideological slogan, will continue to echo through the world; but anything much resembling genuine democracy as a political form will be difficult then to discover, perhaps even in Europe. In one form or another, nevertheless, the American democracy probably will endure. Whether it survives as a polity of friendship, or as a pseudo-religion masking decadent appetites, must depend upon the moral convictions of the American people.

"Politics is the preoccupation of the quarter-educated," George Gissing wrote near the end of the nineteenth century. To that aphorism we may add, near the end of the twentieth century, "Democracy is the preoccupation of the half-aware." What our age desperately requires is not more mediocrity, but more elevation of spirit, awareness of the eternal source of truth. That failing, order and freedom and justice fall into ruin. It was said of the Romans that they created in northern Europe a wilderness, and called it peace. Let it not be said of the Americans that they created in the world one enormous boredom, and called it democracy. Even though American aircraft have saturation-bombed Mesopotamia, the cradle of civilization, it is not yet too late to return from political *hubris* to political prudence.

From "The Politics of Prudence," Russell Kirk (ISI Book)

## An Exhortatory Epilogue

### *May the Rising Generation Redeem the Time?*

Spiritually and politically, the twentieth century has been a time of decadence. Yet as this century draws to its close, we may remind ourselves that ages of decadencesometimes have been followed by ages of renewal.

What can *you* do, young men and women of the rising generation of the 1990's, to raise up the human condition to a level less unworthy of what Pico della Mirandola called "the dignity of man"? Why, begin by brightening the corner where you are; by improving one human unit, yourself, and by helping your neighbor.

You will not need to be rich or famous to take your part in redeeming the time: what you require for that task is moral imagination joined to right reason. It is not by wealth or fame that you will be rewarded, probably, but by eternal moments: those occurrences in one's existence during which,

as T. S. Eliot puts it, time and the timeless intersect. In such moments, you may discover the answer to that immemorial question that now and again enters the head of any reflective person, "What *is* all this? What is this world that surrounds us, and why are we here?"

You and I are put into this present realm of being as into a testing-ground—into an arena, if you will. As Stefan Andres expresses it, "We are God's Utopia". You and I are moral beings meant to accomplish something good, in a small way or a big, in this temporal world.

The Roman Stoics taught that some things in life are good, and some are evil; yet that the great majority of life's happenings are neither good nor evil, but indifferent merely. Wealth is a thing indifferent, and so is poverty; fame is a thing indifferent, and so is obscurity. Shrug your shoulders at things indifferent; set your face against things evil; and by doing God's will, said the Stoics, find that peace which passeth all understanding.

Such counsels, classical and Christian, will not guarantee your winning any of the glittering prizes of modern society: for those too are among the things indifferent, and some of them among the things evil. Why should we be guided by such counsels? Because they are derived from true authority, the common sense and ancient assent of mankind, what G. K. Chesterton called "the democracy of the dead". As John Henry Newman wrote in 1846 concerning Authority, "Conscience is an authority; the Bible is an Authority; such is the Church; such is antiquity; such are the words of the wise; such are hereditary lessons; such are ethical truths; such are historical memories; such are legal saws and state

maxims; such are proverbs; such are sentiments, presages, and prepossessions." Believe what wise men and women, over the ages, have believed in faith and morals, and you will find a firm footing on which to stand while the winds of doctrine howl about you.

What *is* all this—this confused world of glittering material things and of appalling personal and social decay? I have found it to be a real world, its vices notwithstanding: a real world in which one still may develop and exercise one's potential virtues of courage, prudence, temperance, and justice; one's faith, hope, and charity. You will take your tumbles in this world, Lord knows; but also you may enjoy your triumphs. It is a world in which so much needs to be done that nobody ought to be bored.

All this creation about us is the garden that we erring humans were appointed to tend. Plant some flowers or trees in it, if you can, and pull some weeds. Do not fancy that a sorry policy of Looking Out for Number One will lead you to Heaven's gate. Do not fail to remind yourselves that consciousness is a perpetual adventure. Do not ignore the wisdom of the ages, the democracy of the dead.

Those of us who aspire to conserve our inherited order and justice and freedom, our patrimony of wisdom and beauty and lovingkindness, have a hard row to hoe nowadays—that I confess. Many voices have declared that life is not worth living. A multitude of writers and publicists and members of the class of persons commonly styled "intellectuals" gloomily inform us that we human beings are no better than naked apes, and that consciousness itself is an illusion. Such persons insist that life has no purpose but

sensual gratification; that the brief span of one's physical existence is the be-all and end-all. Such twentieth-century sophists have created in the murky caves of the intellect an Underworld; and they endeavor to convince us all that there exists no sun—that the world of wonder and of hope exists nowhere, and never did exist. Plato knew just such sophists in his day.

These doctrines of despair, you of the rising generation must confront and refute. Redeem the time, redeem the dream—in ways mundane as well as ways spiritual. Let me turn to the art of worldly wisdom.

What of practical politics? How does one who hopes to conduct a conservative defense of the Permanent Things contrive to forge ahead, politically, in the sprawling American democracy?

Why, ordinarily it is simple to make one's way in the American political structure. American political parties could not function without volunteers. Offer your help, and you will find it gladly accepted, such as you being needed urgently; you may find, indeed, that a number of your fellow-volunteers are rather peculiar people, almost Outcasts of Poker Flat, but welcome in a local political organization (if not welcome in a great many other circles) because, whatever their peculiarities, they are willing to work for a common cause.

If you become an intelligent and adept volunteer, you will be made much of by the party leaders and faithful, and will be advanced in your responsibilities. You may be asked to become a delegate, whether elected or appointed. If chosen delegate, arrive early at caucus or convention. When

the meeting commences, endeavor to sit at the chairman's right hand; then others may take you for his right-hand man. There flourish many little arts by which one may gain ascendancy over the minds of one's political colleagues. But the great necessity is to have acquired previously a fund of knowledge and some mastery of rhetoric—and honest principles. That is why I sometimes advise undergraduates not to expend their time in street demonstrations, but instead to *study*. If Karl Marx, instead of reading books within the British Museum, had spent his days parading round and round the exterior of that building, a placard "Down with the bourgeoisie!" tacked to a sandwich-board over his shoulders—why, had he been so foolish, the world would be better off today.

Practical politics aside, if you should resolve to take a vigorous part in restoring the American Republic, choose your vocation accordingly, so that the work by which you gain your livelihood, and the work by which you help to redeem the time, may coincide. Take to the law, if you can endure the boredom of our law schools nowadays. Or take to serious journalism—or, for broader and more immediate influence, to television and radio. You may accomplish some reform of the American mind through book-publishing. Supposing you possess fortitude sufficient to fight your way through our graduate schools, aspire after a college professorship that might enable you to counteract the professors of the Academy of Lagado. Or take to pedagogy, if you can surmount the dull obstacles to certification as a teacher. If you feel a religious calling—why, in no way might you accomplish more to restore meaning to lives in

the twenty-first century. The best way to rear up a new generation of friends of the Permanent Things is to beget children, and read to them o' evenings, and teach them what is worthy of praise: the wise parent is the conservator of ancient truths. As Edmund Burke put it, "We learn to love the little platoon we belong to in society." The institution most essential to conserve is the family.

If we aspire to redeem this age of ours, so far gone in decadence—well, we have no time to lose before commencing our endeavors. Fixed to the walls of the entrance-hall of my Italianate house, called Piety Hill, are masks of the archaic god Cronos, in his role of Time the Devourer; his half-leonine, half-human countenance bares his fangs, so dreaded by the old Greeks. Those grim masks serve to remind me daily that the night cometh when no man shall work.

Yet Time is not a devourer only. With proper use of the life-span allotted to us, we may do much to redeem modernity from vices, terrors, and catastrophic errors. With Demosthenes, I beg you of the rising generation to take thought. This point was well put by Orestes Brownson, in 1843, speaking at Dartmouth College on "The Scholar's Mission".

"Ask not what your age wants," Brownson said, "but what it needs; not what it will reward, but what, without which, it cannot be saved; and that go and do; and find your reward in the consciousness of having done your duty, and above all in the reflection that you have been accounted to suffer somewhat for mankind."

Many among the rising generation have not known a

tranquil and confident America. They scarcely can imagine a time, not many decades past, when it was the diversion of families or couples to stroll in an evening in New York's Central Park or Detroit's Belle Isle Park or Los Angeles' MacArthur Park. Families and couples do not venture to stroll there now. Most of the rising generation have experienced little of continuity and stability; the expectation of distressing change has been greater far. Yet many of them sense that much remains to conserve, and that much ought to be restored.

In the later 'Sixties, some of the rising generation fancied it amusing to pull down what earlier generations patiently had built up. In the early 'Nineties, I trust, many of the rising generation will find it satisfying to restore and redeem their patrimony—so to save the world from suicide.