

A Real Man

A good friend once said that even in the face of the most depressing situations, we have a duty to be optimists. Life's an attitude thing. It becomes what you make of it. His defining example was the two little boys who, when led into a playroom, saw only a miserable pile of manure in the corner. The first little boy burst into tears because he didn't see any toys. The second burst into leaps of joy, and ran around the room shouting, "With all this manure, there's got to be a pony somewhere!"

Alright, so most of the time, it works. Any situation can be turned to the better. At the extreme, though, mere optimism is a bore. It becomes a determined cheerfulness. The kind of fatalism we see in the person who is happy he got a flat tire and missed his appointment, because otherwise he might have continued on and been killed in an accident.

Most annoying of all, perhaps, is the sort of person who refers to every problem as "a challenge." There's something eerily unreal about these people; smiling, pure-bred positive thinkers who strike us as never really having thought at all. For them, nothing is ever deeply wrong. Cosmically wrong. Or cosmically right. It's just temporarily out of order, and needs to be fixed.

That's why rarely these days do we ever see a true fit of pique or sustained bloody outrage. I don't mean those too frequent and ridiculous shows of indignant emotion seen everywhere for the sake of some injured personal feeling, or on account of some perceived sexual or racial slight pawned off as an offence against humanity.

I mean the kind of booming, articulate, forceful, scolding display trotted out in colourful language, that sets things straight, and no fooling. You know, the kind that used to flow from supremely self-confident people - a legendary grandparent, perhaps, or the sort of teacher who marked you indelibly for life.

The headmaster of our school, the Reverend J.A.M. "Rusty" Bell, was that way. We could see it coming from a long way off. He would stride purposively toward the assembly hall in his flowing academic black gown, his head tilted forward, cheeks already somewhat reddened by the urgent preoccupations of his mind. A kind of pre-emptive wariness would flow over the mob of students, and a great wonderment, too. Somewhere, deep in the soul, each of us silently braced ourselves for the spectacle to come.

And come, it did. After our noisy lunch. As if merely from the rustle of his robes, the very moment Rusty Bell stood up a great silence fell upon the room like a stone. In that brief moment between his standing and his first words - not loud necessarily, but always having that boom of reasoned moral authority - the minds of all three hundred students and our teachers seemed to snap to attention. In his impressive way, he was about to take some event of misconduct by a

student (or perhaps by the whole school) that we had hardly noticed and in the burning adjectives and searing imagery that flew from under his thick red shocks of hair, and flashed from his genuinely pained eyes persuade us, without a doubt, of our wrongdoing.

Afterward, there was always a general sense that things would be alright for a while, because he had straightened them, and us, out. For here was a man who knew what he thought, and why he thought it, and said so unerringly and impressively. He was a grounded man, rich in bias and prejudice, not in the narrow modern sense that he sought to offend, but in the traditional sense that he knew what he stood for. A man, he felt, ought to be biased in favour of what is good, and against what is bad. And a man without prejudice, in the sense of knowing what he thinks about things most serious, and able vigorously to defend them, is rudderless, without thoughts at all. A weakling.

And he knew, too, in contrast to the modern gospel, that a man's personal preferences, or "rights," were utterly secondary to the lifelong job of grasping the truth. In other words, and paradoxically, he gave the sense of being planted deeply in the soil of a rich personal life, precisely because he made personal preferences secondary. Rumour has it that a few days before the end, he read an extended and fiery riot act to a stunned hospital staff on the miseries of technology and modern dying, disentangled himself from wires and tubes, and dragged himself home to expire in his own bed.

Alas, those days are over. As the Bard put it, ours is a weak, piping time of peace, in which we worry most about offending, because we cannot agree on what is truly offensive. Therefore anything may be. Our deepest fear is that someone will dislike us for our convictions, so we arrange to have none. Publicly.

Of course, most people still have wonderful private fits, mostly in their minds, long after the event that provoked them. Often it's in the form of an imaginary debate while driving alone to work. Our absent opponent withers before an onslaught of exquisite, highly persuasive argument we didn't quite manage in reality.

You can see such people, their mouths motoring away behind the window of many a passing car. Sometimes their heads actually nod in self-agreement. Sometimes they will even take both hands off the wheel at once and wave them in the air to make a point. Sometimes they suddenly look at you, and you know you've been caught at the same thing.