

WAXING APHORISTIC

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Some of us write declarative sentences meant only, or mostly, as instructions to ourselves -- sudden insights or hunches like messages in bottles, except they're not in bottles. They're in notebooks, diaries, drawers, or stuffed in an envelope marked "This Is A Bottle." Some of mine get taped to my walls in no particular order, scrawled almost illegibly. It's not just writers who do this. Traffic cops and waitresses, landscapers and nurses, house painters and bricklayers, doctors and ad executives, all kinds of people suddenly have a thought that they jot down and keep somewhere. Or I may scribble a line in a novel or essay that doesn't stay put, it follows me around and repeats itself in my ear at inconvenient yet appropriate moments -- as though I didn't write it, it said itself somehow, and it wants me to remember. If I hadn't become a writer -- if I was still in one of those jobs I once worked: typesetter, vacuum-cleaner salesman (oh yeah!), hospital orderly ("The patient in 219's had an accident" means you're cleaning feces from unlikely surfaces, including the ceiling) -- I'm sure I still keep a notebook or have a drawer of torn scraps that I'd take out and ruminate over now and again. My father did so till almost the day he died, and he was (among other things) a cabdriver and wallpaper hanger.

Here's one of Pa's, one of his last, written not long before his death, which was a week shy of his 83rd birthday: "A man's sexuality is under attack beginning from the cradle. His dependence on the mother coupled with that innate desire in every mother to make of her son everything she may have thought an ideal husband should be. To be the molder of the clay within her."

So here are a bunch of scraps, in no special order -- fragments of an inner life that, like anybody's, knows no special order.

* Never say "I love you" when what you mean is "Good morning."

* There is no way to learn by fantasies. You've *got* to learn by experience.

* (Scrawled perpendicular to the above.) Fantasies teach only what you're frightened of, which they do by trickery, seeming to be about what you desire. If you have to fantasize about it, you don't have it; and you probably don't have it because you're scared of it.

* What is right or wrong about what you're doing will prove itself in the richness or poverty of whatever comes next. Life is always the judge. But people get consequences they don't deserve, for better and worse, so -- by what is life judging? Consequences meted out impersonally? I can live with that, provided I can get a little fun out of it. Let's don't ever underestimate fun.

* Guilt isn't responsibility. Guilt is wishful thinking. Guilt is hoping someone will forgive you. Hoping somebody will make it alright. Don't hold your breath.

* I suppose the only way to learn something important is through love, because love forces you to live through what you're learning. In love, you are your own consequence.

* Remember the Sufi tale that admonishes against looking for cause and effect in the same story. Cause and effect aren't linear. (Wrap your brain around THAT, Ventura!)

* You are forgetting how reality works -- that it rarely works though “important decisions.” Important decisions are almost always reactions. The real decisions, through which reality actually works, are usually so small we don’t even know they’re being made, we don’t take responsibility for them. (Perhaps the wise, the truly wise, can sense the importance of the small decision as it’s being made and infuse it with responsibility.)

* The song belongs to anyone who sings it.

* Your secret purpose, the one you don’t know about, is always the purpose truly being enacted. So it’s silly to explain your “reasons,” ‘cause you don’t know ‘em yet.

* The following note has another note attached which reads: “written at age 24, found decades later, is it still in me?” And the note goes: A sense of pity for everything living, a sense of the innocence of all things. I find myself in an absurd, chaotic, vicious time. I can’t help but look upon it as innocent of itself, like a beast.

* The strength of small words. All those words no one really knows the meaning of -- they’re very small. Love, god, time, you, me, I, they, is, was -- the smallest, biggest words!

* Friends are where your heart is. Lovers are where your psyche is.

* Never say “I love you” when what you mean is “Goodnight.”

* People are *lonely*. Everybody. I wonder if my deepest achievement is making a friend of my loneliness. When your loneliness becomes your friend there is very little left in life to fear.

* The older I get the more certain I am that absurdity is the key to just about everything.

* To say you need hope to live is to say you need an excuse to live. Hey, Ventura. If today needs tomorrow for justification, screw it.

* Rilke spoke of “the grace of the great things.” For a work to have the grace of the great things it must speak to what is great in us. It must find what is great in us, seek it out, wake it up, address it -- such that, in the very act of speaking to us, the work nurtures what is best in us.

* The violence of my artistic life is rooted in a tense, no-quarter-asked-no-quarter-given paradox: That, on the one hand, one must be open and receptive, tuned to one’s inspiration, or whatever you want to call it -- the beating of wings as things fly about in the psyche, the messages from other worlds (perhaps), the tracks of wild beasts. On the other hand, one must be disciplined, tough, to master the techniques of one’s craft -- and to survive in a world at best indifferent and often hostile. Too open, and you don’t last long. Too tough, and you lose the capacity for discovery. How to be tough and open at the same time -- that’s the hat-trick!

* Why I love Ikkyu (15th century Zen master): Grief is not the context of his joy. Joy is not the context of his grief.

* I am seeing another person in the mirror. This happens to everyone who lives long enough.

* There are moments of perfect freedom that do not die because they end -- and do not die because they go unfulfilled. Moments that exist apart from beginnings, ends, fulfillment.

* Consciousness can understand many things, but consciousness cannot understand itself.

* We don’t own our experience. Our experience is part of the fabric of all life, which

is owned by no one. In this sense, there is no such thing as “privacy.” There is only the constant flowing of experiences into and through one another.

* Life on earth: A wild party in a bad neighborhood. Good music, though.

* A: Hundreds of millions of people (like the Dali Lama) believe in reincarnation. Let’s imagine they’re right. B: Physicists tell us that linear time is an illusion. Einstein said that time-travel is theoretically possible, because the past and the future are both occurring right now, along with what we see as the present. So, C: “The next life” isn’t necessarily in the future. “The last life” isn’t necessarily in the past. Time isn’t like that. Sometimes souls are reborn into the past. Or into the future. You may be a soul whose “last life” is actually occurring sometime in the future, and/or whose “next life” will be lived in the past.

* Never say “I love you” when what you mean is “Have a good day.”

* Graffiti in the mens’ room of the Palomino Club in North Hollywood: “Nothing survives but the way we live our lives. - J.B.”

* Sign outside a Church of Christ in West Texas: “God Is Up To Something!”

* The people you have to lie to own you.

* You aren’t what you think you are. You aren’t only what happens to you. So what are you?

* There’s something wonderful about pencils. Elemental. Wood and lead. And how with use the implement just disappears.

* Or this, just a little poem, scribbled in Lubbock on a scrap, taped to the wall above the bed:

*lightning to the east... the moon overhead...
moonglow on the clouds...
these... and if they fail to address
your dilemma?*

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