

CHASING THE WIND  
A MEDITATION ON WISDOM

BY

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# WISDOM LOST

I stand in a certain place: a certain age, an uncertain wisdom. A certain age: my age is certain because time is counted—seconds, minutes, hours, days, months, years—and recorded however we experience it, fill it with the detritus of our lives. Richness or lack in a life make no difference; good mornings do not expand, nor empty ones contract. They are like the moment of birth and death—a good birth, a bad birth; a good death, a bad death: like a ticking metronome, a moment is a moment is a moment. So, regardless of what has happened in my life it has been counted out in heartbeats and I stand at 67 years. This place, this time. What it means to be me at 67, however, is not objective like radioactive decay or geological strata; its meaning is personal and cultural. Unfortunately, in 21<sup>st</sup> century America 67 is not a good place to stand, especially if one is older and trying to understand wisdom.

An uncertain wisdom. Wisdom is uncertain, elusive, because, at best it is an empty and useless concept; at worst, it is despised and held in contempt, mocked like being out of date, not knowing how to use a cell phone or digital camera, not adept at text messaging or multi-tasking. In this country, at this time, 2004, wisdom cries at every corner, yet no one listens. In this country, at this time, 2004, more than ever we need wisdom, need to understand what it means to live a life, to live through time that lengthens, inexorably, behind us like smoke until we stand at a place where the future is short, where choices narrow, where the moment of death is much closer than the moment of birth, where we are awakened and amazed and stunned that it has happened so quickly, almost without our realizing it.

I stand at this place, 67 and 2004, thinking and talking about wisdom. In fact, I feel compelled to do so. Like the prophet Jeremiah I cannot keep silent. What I have to say, however, is not divine revelation or objective truth. The Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard proclaimed that subjectivity is truth. How I see life, how you, as an individual, see it—that is truth. It is our truth, the truth about life, about how to live. The truth about wisdom, for me, is my understanding about wisdom; it is about a life, my life, lived and reflected upon. I, finally, have chosen this truth and have to take responsibility for it. Yet, it is also about our wisdom. Kierkegaard also said that the crowd is untruth: a group cannot believe for an individual. We each must ultimately believe for ourselves. But surely we can, and should, talk to one another about our beliefs, share, and perhaps in doing so help each other refine and understand better our own truth.

I don't fully understand why I now feel pressure to speak, to share my thoughts about life, my life and wisdom, but I do. Maybe the teacher (and philosopher and god-intrigued seeker) in me must have its due. Maybe it is that time in life, the final strokes on the canvass. I don't wish to convince, convert, as much as explore, ruminate, reflect, suggest. To do this, I'm going to examine two lives that speak about wisdom from a place like mine, near the end of life: the Socrates in the Apology and Koheleth, the teacher in the Book of Ecclesiastes. They have given me much to think about, although they do not agree about life. We can enrich our lives by meditating on theirs.

But first, some preliminary thoughts about wisdom in 2004 America. At the beginning of my introduction to philosophy courses we discuss the word "philosophy," love of wisdom. It is an odd concept for my students; first, because wisdom is not something their culture instructs them to love. In this country, at this time, we are admonished and conditioned to love individual rights, economic and social success, fame and celebrity. Possession of material goods, youth, fashion,

and slim, firm bodies. God is loved, but only because god sanctions love of these other things. American love is the love of consumerism and ego. Sanctified by religious good feeling and assurance of being on the right side. So my students don't know what to make of "loving" wisdom. It is a weird idea.

"Wisdom," on the other hand, is not so much weird as empty, a concept bereft of meaning, shorn of utility. It's not that students don't recognize the word; it's that they don't use it or hear it used among their friends or in the ubiquitous media (except sarcastically as in a "wise" guy or thrown in for effect in a eulogy). Yet the word exists in their vocabulary, preserved like a stuffed bird or beetle under glass. In the beginning I found this lacuna puzzling, but after thinking about it, I realized that it makes obvious sense because wisdom has been associated with the elderly, who after success, struggle, loss, pain, and happiness can teach about life, through their conduct and words. Blind Oedipus, ravaged Lear. They have lived the full arc of human life: the joys of youth, the sorrows of age. We pity, we fear, we are in awe. We learn.

But today, in this time, this place, in this America, the elderly are mostly irrelevant, and I feel this deeply, know it in the intimate sense, because I'm nearing the zone of irrelevance: Medicare, then retirement. Oh, yes, I buck myself up daily, take advantage of "senior" discounts (not confined to cheap seats at movie matinees; how sweet!), read about cool seniors in the AARP magazine (the edition for the with it, forever youthful, sexy boomer generation), but no matter how puffed up as the golden years, the lives of the elderly, unless artists and others doing creative work, are put in society's storeroom, a place of community pools and craft centers and golf courses, hyped and decorated and prettied to be sure, but out of the way like dated books and dictionaries.

Why? Why have people standing near the precipice, the closing of eyes for the final time, lost the authority to teach about life, about wisdom? Could it be

change? Could inexorable, rapid change be the destroyer of wisdom? There is some truth to this. Where change is non-existent or glacially slow, the elders of society have traveled the path the young have yet to walk, thus the young respect this accumulation of experience, of relevant knowledge about and reflection upon life. But if their lives will not be that of their elders, wisdom becomes irrelevant. I have lived a life my parents did not live. I went to college, entered a profession, moved thousands of miles from home, and in achieving the American dream of upward mobility, left my mother and my father spiritually and geographically behind. They loved me, but could not instruct me. I loved them, but could not learn from them. Or so I thought, or so I thought...

My father attended only grammar school and took some adult education courses. He understood machines, had math ability, and drafting skill; in his work he set up machines, often grinders, and designed improvements for over thirty years as a loyal employee of the Ford Motor Company's tractor division in Highland Park, Michigan. His large toolbox with its many micrometers was his treasure. He had a talent and would have been an engineer had he been able to go to high school and college. I remember that he also read the Detroit News every day, at times covering his face with it as he napped on the couch after a tiring day at the plant. He was interested in national and world events, had lived through the unionization of Ford, and had strong views about the bias of U.S. history against Mexico, especially the Alamo. He played the guitar and, as an assistant scout master in my Parkman grammar school troop, tutored a neighborhood boy, gifted in languages, in Spanish.

He had great integrity and pride. I know that for a long time after he had come to Detroit from Texas to find work he sent money home; he was a good son. Once, later, he turned down a lucrative award for an especially effective improvement he designed for his work because his boss would support it only if

my dad shared the award with him. My dad thought that wrong since he was the one who had come up with the idea. He was proud to be a working man and a union man. While he was loyal to Ford (always owned a Ford), he knew that his interests and those of management weren't always the same, and would strike if he had to. In short, as I look back on my growing up on Terry Street in Northwest Detroit, it's clear my dad was special. Yet we didn't talk about my high school or college experience, classes and education, and as the years passed I seemed to leave him behind along with my childhood, did not think he could teach me. Why?

My mother, the Scot, went to high school and was a good writer—I know because of her letters to me in college. I remember her prose was smooth and her concern for me great. I'm sure she described what was happening at home, in the shade of Terry Street, later on Plainfield Avenue and inquired after my well being. When I was a small boy at Francis Parkman I was so proud of her because she was young and pretty. And she was a true 50's mom, sending me to school in the morning, making sure I was dressed warmly in cold Detroit winters, and waiting at home for me at lunch time and after school. Her daily care was a constant in my life, fussing over me, protecting me, holding me to my chores, yet giving me the freedom and independence to roam the neighborhood with my chums.

During that time she became religious, took me to Sunday school and church at the Joy Road Baptist church in our neighborhood—first, when it was a small white, wood chapel-like structure, later when it was a brick basement of a new church started and to be completed across Joy Road. Mom was devout, but when I became a boy preacher my religious star shined, and although we always went to church together and shared a faith, I don't remember discussing anything theological with her. Even my high school experience seemed different from hers: I was involved in student government, sports, and the newspaper. I was a city-wide leader in the Voice of Christian Youth. My mother always supported me,

was a ferocious rooster for the Mackenzie High Stags when I played, and was always proud of me. She, too, was special, but I thought I had left her behind. Why?

I grew up in a clearly bounded neighborhood of blue-collar factory workers and white-collar salesmen, with a sprinkling of professionals who lived in the two-story, red-brick houses on spacious streets on the edges of the neighborhood. We all went to Francis Parkman, then to Mackenzie High, which was mostly middle class and white (Detroit was a very segregated city). At Parkman I played baseball in the spring and summer, football in the fall, and hockey in the winter. I had a happy 50's childhood—in some ways idyllic, but did not know much about going to college—the factory was a very respectable place to work, to earn a fairly good living. Of the boys I hung out with, only Lynn Evans seemed destined for college, the University of Michigan, his father's school. But mostly in the neighborhood there was little chatter of college in the air.

But I went to college, thereby spiritually, and unintentionally, leaving my neighborhood and my parents. Two things made this happen: in grammar school and high school I was placed in college prep classes, and I decided to become a minister. The latter was the most decisive influence. In contrast, my children and the children of my friends have grown up in households where attending college is an expectation, an aroma they breathe from birth. Does that mean parents like this embody and pass on wisdom in a way that my parents couldn't? Not necessarily, because of other cultural forces undercutting wisdom—one I've discussed, the shelving of the elderly; others I have yet to discuss.

Because of my experience, I think that children who achieve the American dream of climbing above their parents' social and economic status have an especially difficult time acknowledging the wisdom of their home. Further, many

of these children, like me, have left home geographically, physically moved away, thus underlining the psychological and spiritual difference.

When I was a senior in high school, our principal, Mr. Pinnock, called about fifty of us into his office to praise us for having the grades high enough to get into the University of Michigan. That planted a seed in my mind along with another incident. A well-known radio minister and Bible scholar, Dr. Donald Barnhouse, was speaking on a Sunday night at Highland Park Baptist, a large, well-known church in a Detroit suburb attended by two of my friends, who had invited me to hear him. During his talk he jokingly referred to his son calling from college to ask for money, and I was jarred to hear that he was at Princeton—a (gasp!) secular university.

My choices at that time were definitely not secular—Bob Jones University or Wheaton College—and I had been already accepted by Bob Jones. When I mentioned Bob Jones to Dr. Barnhouse after his sermon, he winced and pointed out that I had one of the best universities in my backyard, the University of Michigan—another seed planted. In January 1955, I took the middle road and went to Wheaton, thirty miles from Chicago, where Don Crellin, the trumpet player in my high-school day's evangelistic team, had begun that fall. In a symbolic way, I flew my first time from Detroit to Chicago, took a taxi to the train station, and the train to Wheaton, where I got off with my suitcase. This was also my first journey alone.

Thus began my college education and acculturation: two and a half years at Wheaton as a pre-theology and philosophy major, followed by three and a half years at Michigan as an English and philosophy major and grad student in English. Later, in California, I would get a doctorate in higher education and philosophy of education at UCLA. Except for summers, and several months after I graduated I never again lived at home. In some deep, unconscious way, I guess I knew that I

could never go home, that my journey had taken me far away from my childhood home, my neighborhood, and, sadly, from my mom and dad.

I loved them. Dad took a second job at an ice plant and mom worked the counter part time at a dry cleaners to help pay for my education—they loved me. My sister was born and filled their lives with joy. We remained close. Love is not the issue; distance in how we saw and experienced life is. This is difference, however, not better. Did this separation have to happen? At the Sequoia Sandwich Co. where I write, I was talking about this to an acquaintance, a Lebanese woman, who told me that her family was different, that it remains very tight and elders are still respected for their experience. But I grew up at a time when we were expected to assimilate, melt into the Anglo dominated middle class, take on their manners and mores, dress in khakis, button downs, tweeds, and loafers. The adults we were to follow were those who embodied this standard of life. This is, of course, very shallow, but still potent. Those who were to guide me in this unknown, new life of college and after were not my mom and dad. They were, however, the source of wisdom in this life I was entering.

Is my experience unique? I don't think so. A deep American value is leaving home, moving on and up. It's an old story, an enduring myth. It's the story of our founding, the story of the frontier. Change. Change. Change. We change our landscape, we change ourselves. Success, reinvention we call it. With one hand it beckons us, with the other it dismisses our past, and its wisdom. And we embrace it.

The irrelevance of older age and dislocation of upward mobility and geographic dispersion are not the only cultural forces that undermine wisdom. Rapid change, especially in technology, and our preoccupation with youth as the source of all things good have also caused us to dismiss wisdom as irrelevant. Our national preoccupation with youth began in the 60's when the Baby Boomers

became young adults and rebelled against their parents' beliefs, values, and culture. Of course, not all did, but those who went to college and joined the counter culture did and set the tone for their generation. New music, new politics, new dress, new values—they discovered them and wrote off their parents as pawns of the system, ossified and corrupt.

The Age of Aquarius devastated wisdom. If all things are new and all things new are created by the young, then older people and what they know are superfluous. In Berkeley, in 1964, Mario Savio said not to trust anyone over thirty (I was relieved to find myself under thirty, just barely), the Beatles sidelined Cole Porter, and love replaced knowledge. Today, narcissistic as always, the Boomers still worship youth and youthfulness, putting great effort into maintaining its illusion even as they slide into the elder hostel stage of their lives. Nips, tucks, and Botox. Their legacy is our linking of youth and success in many of our most important activities: sports, movies, science—the great achievements are done when young. It is cool to be young, uncool to be old. Sometimes parents feel left behind by their teen kids; they don't know the music or the lingo. "Over the hill" says it all. And, of course, youth is a huge market, and in America, markets rule.

Upward mobility is change that calls wisdom into question, and when that is mixed with rapid technological and cultural fashion change and the glorification of youth, wisdom has no chance. It's not only a matter of not knowing how to use the latest electronic gizmos and gadgets, although that is certainly a big part of it because in America wisdom is confused with know-how. In my class discussions of wisdom we talk about the Greek concept of *techne`* --technique, know-how--and that in America if one has the *techne`* that's sufficient to live a good life. If we have know-how, we don't ask why we are using it to achieve something; we ask whether it can make us more efficiently achieve it, it being manipulating things or people. Mastering ever-changing technology is only a manifestation of our prizing

techné. That's what we want to learn, not wisdom; or, perhaps, that is what we think wisdom is. We admire the young because they seem so at ease with technology, and we fear being left behind.

We are a consumer society, which means we are conditioned to want new products, material and cultural, and to discard last year's, maybe even month's models. Wisdom cannot exist in such an environment, because wisdom implies stability, consistency, the long view, perhaps eternity. Wisdom does not change with every new fashion—it is not a fashion; it transcends fashion. But in America we change with the wind, and think by drifting on its currents we understand how to live.

Something deep is at work. As I write this Ronald Reagan has just died. I have read a number of news accounts and eulogies about him; curiously, amid the adjectives of praise, the word “wisdom” never appears. Last night I talked with friends who admire Jimmy Carter as a great humanitarian, but amid the praise the word “wisdom” was never spoken. Even those few older people who are not sidelined like most of the elderly are not described as wise. As extraordinary political and business leaders and humanitarians, but not wise. What has happened to wisdom?

Wisdom thrives in a community, a community of shared values, a shared vision of life. We in America live in a fractured society. Our only shared vision is our right to individual liberty and opportunity to consume, to use our liberty to fulfill our individual wants. Other than that we are fractured morally and spiritually. We are splintered into a nation of individuals who believe that they alone can decide how to live, thus even the most successful, the most admired, the most revered among us have lived their lives well, but cannot tell us how to live—for what do they know of our unique lives? Even when we join with others, share their values, we are fractured along generational lines, socio-economic lines,

political lines, religious lines, cultural lines. Diversity, praised by many, stays wisdom.

Many are the forces, then, that have sucked the meaning and viability from the concept of wisdom. Perhaps one could say, “So what?” If wisdom is no longer useful in describing human life (at least in this country), so be it—what’s the big deal? As we change and know more, many concepts like racism, chauvinism, paternalism, chivalry, altruism fall into disuse, no longer guides to understanding life. So, why not “wisdom”? Even modern philosophers do not believe they teach wisdom, any more than sociologists and mathematicians. But just because we don’t use a concept doesn’t mean we haven’t lost an important way of seeing life, an important guide to living. If we have lost the concept of a deep understanding of what it means to live a good life, we have lost a crucial way of thinking about ourselves as humans. We have cut off our head, and while we may manipulate and motor more effectively we have weakened or lost our ability to ask why, to what purpose we do these things. What should define us is not *techne`*--a machine has *techne`*--but knowing who we are and why we are, wondering and thinking about this. We cannot escape: loving and ardently pursuing wisdom is our burden and our glory.

Wisdom lost is our fall.

## CONSIDER THE ANT

The Book of Proverbs is a collection of ancient Hebrew wisdom. In its traditional view wisdom is of three kinds: practical, moral, and religious. The mundane, the moral, the metaphysical. I find these three categories helpful in thinking about wisdom; such classifications can be at times too restrictive, over simplifying, limiting, pedantic—the method of the textbook, the lecturer. In this case, however, they are an effective aid because they accord with our experience. I would alter only the last category, the religious, and broaden it to the metaphysical, to include not only archetypal religious figures like Job but Camus' Sisyphus, as well. They have in common a quest for life's transcendent meaning, what I consider the heart, the core, of wisdom. But first to the practical and moral.

“Go to the ant, you sluggard, observe her ways and gain wisdom” (Proverbs 6.6). The sluggard appears often in Hebrew practical proverbs, always as lazy, ineffectual. Purpose, organization, know-how, and energy characterize this busy ant that builds and succeeds. Practical wisdom—the techniques of mastering daily life—are valued by those who want to get ahead and see life pretty much in those terms. It pays off: “Idle hands make for penury; diligent hands make for riches” (Proverbs 10.4). Practical wisdom, how to manipulate things, events, and people is very American: “I am wisdom. I bestow shrewdness and show the way to knowledge and discretion” (Proverbs 8.12).

We admire those who do, not those who reflect. Our anti-intellectualism, our distrust of theory are well known. The thinker, sitting and not doing a blasted thing, is not our icon. “Move, get off your butt; do something” is our exhortation. Pondering is not action and action makes the difference. And, of course, in a practical sense it does. Our lives are made better by it. So our national wisdom, in

so far as there is one, is expressed in best-selling self-help books about how to be a better communicator (persuasion, sales, negotiations), how to be a better lover (gifts, techniques), and how to be healthier (low fat, low carbs). And this is just the beginning. Even the religious life is reduced to practical tips (how and when to pray). No puzzlement here. No sluggard-like meditation (except to improve performance of some kind). Just the right technique applied at the right time and life is conquered. Get it...

Our celebrities, heroes, and heroines are not thinkers. President Reagan just died and we are in a week of wide-spread and high eulogizing. Why is he so admired? Because he was a great communicator, an optimist (America the strong), a doer (fought the Evil Empire and won)—no one (except in a few passing references occasioned by alliteration: “wit, wisdom...”) considers him a man of great wisdom (again, because the word has no real function any more, but also that’s not how we think of him even if we used the word). The first George Bush had no facility with the “vision thing”; Bill Clinton’s facility was with the penis thing; and George the second’s idea of a great philosopher is Jesus who got him on the wagon. Where else do we turn? Business leaders? Michael Eisner? Bill Gates? No, they just tell us how to build and manage large corporations, how to make money. Religious leaders? Not really—they’re too narrowly sectarian, deeply divided, and co opted by our self-interested, materialistic, bigger-is-better society.

“Devise no evil against the neighbor living trustingly beside you” (Proverbs 3.29). A step above practical wisdom is moral wisdom, that which instructs us about right and wrong, justice and injustice. By itself practical wisdom is amoral because its goal is worldly effectiveness and success, which can be achieved through judicious immoral behavior. Machiavelli told us this in *The Prince* when he instructed those who would lead to know how not to be good. He felt that since

humans are by and large such a sorry lot, a person who is always good and just will be at best less successful, at worse ruined. Everyone knows that crime (immorality) at times does pay, that the wicked prosper while the righteous suffer.

We know this but we also believe (at least profess to believe) that morality should trump worldly success (power, money, celebrity); that the Good Samaritan is to be admired more than the good mogul. Moral wisdom, then, keeps in check, reins in practical wisdom. To love one's neighbor is a greater obligation than to make a buck. In America, though, most religious people value the same kinds of success as the non religious. In that sense, all Americans are worldly and secular. Mammon is our anthem. The fish symbol on the Mercedes. Prosperity Gospel. How could it be otherwise? We are all deeply conditioned by our nation's social and cultural values; they, as Plato would say, dye our souls. Our economy is two thirds consumer based, so we are, from before birth almost, shaped to be consumers, to value almost more than anything else, "getting and spending." Thus we are shaped to value the kinds of success society values, regardless of our religious beliefs. Blessed are those that reap dollars for theirs is the kingdom.

All of us, religious and secular, believe in morality, believe that goodness and justice are more important making it and getting ahead. We are conditioned to believe this because a society can cohere only if its members act rightly and justly towards each other. Moral wisdom in its broadest sense has to do with a very general moral outlook and common moral rules. The general moral outlook is that all are equal and should be treated equally; all are in the same circle of moral equality; each life is as precious and valuable as every other life. This outlook is trumpeted in religious texts and in our founding document, the Declaration of Independence: "All men are created equal..." Of course, in the beginning not all were in the circle of moral equality (slaves) or not in fully (women). But we have made progress; more and more sing and dance within the circle.

Beyond this vague, but heartfelt and powerful notion of moral equality are moral rules and guides to moral action. Logically they are entailed by it. The rules are universal, simple, and straightforward, that is easy to remember and say: thou shalt not lie, shalt not steal, not kill, and so forth—a fairly short list of “shalt nots.” These “nots” are mostly codified in law, but not always; it is legal to lie and break promises in many situations. The “shalts” are fewer in number, and almost—in America—never codified in law. These are the Good Samaritan rules: help the poor, the sick, all in need. The neighbor, the stranger, the other. At no benefit to ourselves. And at the extreme: turning the other cheek, giving our coat. This is our moral wisdom.

When discussing morality in my philosophy classes, I ask students who they regard as moral experts, whom they would turn to for moral advice. The idea of the moral expert comes up in Plato’s *Crito* when Socrates reasons about why he should not escape from prison and, instead, accept the sentence of death given him by an Athenian jury. On this matter whose advice should he take, those who express common, unthinking moral views or those who have thought through their moral views? We must look to the experts who have moral wisdom he asserts. Who are moral experts, I ask my students? Confusion and silence is usually their initial response. Finally, some will tender names of religious leaders—pastors, priests, rabbis, and other clerics—and a few parents and friends. That they really haven’t thought about moral wisdom, what it is and who possesses it, is ringingly clear.

Most people don’t think much about their moral beliefs. Even when they know their source, e.g. religion, they don’t reflect on them, clarify them. After all a lie is a lie is a lie. But, of course, it isn’t. The self interested lie that perverts justice or harms someone is not the same as a lie told to protect the innocent from injustice and underserved harm. And a lie is a special case of the more general

deception. How do our beliefs relate to one another? Most moral beliefs are a muddle of rules and utility. At times a rule is applied, first and foremost it seems; at other times the consequences of acting are given most weight. Most do not know, have not thought through what their rules mean, what to do when they conflict, and why they act on utility at times rather following rules. With respect to utility they are vague about the people and factors they consider. Who is the neighbor we are obligated to help, and how do we help?

In short, most really cannot explain how they reason morally but assume, in true democratic fashion, that they do it as well as anyone else, thus have no need for advice from the morally wise; and, frankly, may not really believe such people exist for all the reasons wisdom longer exists. But what does that mean, anyway? We acknowledge experts in auto repair and medicine (body repair), but not morality. Yes, we do acknowledge experts in practical wisdom because those experts generally agree, but because our moral community is splintered and because we have come to accept the moral relativism implied by this we don't believe in the moral expert. This, perhaps, is the blind rationalizing blindness. Those in the cave, confident in darkness.

“By wisdom the Lord laid the earth's foundations and by understanding he set the heavens in place” (Proverbs 3.19). “The fear of the Lord is the foundation of knowledge; it is fools who scorn wisdom and instruction” (Proverbs 1.7). Practical and moral wisdom are limbs without a head if they have not metaphysical wisdom. To what end do they exist? To what purpose? To have meaning they must be part of a larger scheme or plan of life. What is the goal of human life? Of individual lives? The answers to these questions are metaphysical wisdom, the guide for the practical and moral. All humans seek meaning, according to Victor Frankl: “Man's search for meaning is the primary motivation in his life...” (121). But for many this means only that when they are living to succeed in daily life,

which is most of the time, an occasional crack opens letting in a still, small voice: “why?”

Why, indeed. Why are we here? Why am I here? What’s all about, Alfie? All this scrambling to get through days and nights. What does it ultimately *mean*? To ask this question incessantly would paralyze us, stop society in its tracks, so we are protected from having to face it honestly and often. To be honest we would have to begin with what we know to be true: that humans, we, me, are born, live short lives, die, and are generally forgotten. Life closes over us. Generations come and go as successive waves to the shore. Come and go, come and go. Annie Dillard makes this point beautifully in her meditation on life, *For the Time Being*: “Ours is a planet sown in beings. Our generations overlap like shingles. We don’t fall in rows like hay, but we fall” (203).

How can we face this sure, swift mortality? Albert Camus, in the *Myth of Sisyphus*, says that “there is but one serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide”, that is how do we affirm life when it is so transitory, so seemingly trivial in the immensity of time and space. As I write at Sequoia Sandwich Company, at the corner of 18<sup>th</sup> and L in downtown Bakersfield, California, USA, North America, planet Earth circling a single star, one of countless, in one of innumerable galaxies, at 11:30 a.m., June 16<sup>th</sup>, 2004, I watch people dressed in contemporary fashion (tennis shoes, shorts, knit shirts) eating contemporary food (sandwiches, salads, chips, diet drinks), speaking the language of this moment, all unaware that they are just foam on one wave breaking on the shore. In sixteen thousand years another ice age will begin; it will last eighty thousand years. Who cares about them, about this moment, in light of such unimaginable stretches? How can they face this bleakness? Understand it?

They, we, I, don’t and can’t. For society to continue, for us to work, sing, play through our days we must be protected from *really* understanding the

monstrous size of space and time, the short history of Homo Erectus, the passing of generations. Or so it would seem. Metaphysical wisdom gives us answers to life's meaning. Provides us with ultimate purpose. The most common form of metaphysical wisdom, in the world and in America, is comfort metaphysics. Comfort metaphysics is not based on what we know to be true, but upon what we wish were true. What we know to be true is that flesh burns, breezes cool, water boils, clocks work, and so do nuclear weapons—we all agree on this. What we wish were true are religious and quasi religious beliefs, about which we disagree, at times violently. A bullet shot from a gun will put a hole in a target, an antibiotic taken as a pill will cure an infection: we all see this. A prayer uttered from an unobservable mind goes nowhere to be seen. Yet it is the prayer that most need to provide purpose and meaning in their lives. As Anne Lamott says, “I hate that you can't prove the beliefs of my faith...Hope is not about proving anything” (274, 75).

God, the Good, Being, the Logos, the Source, the Way—all are forms of comfort metaphysics. All assure us that our lives, that humanity, are not an accident, are not contingent, that we are linked to some cosmic order and force, have a cosmic destiny and purpose. For most people life's meaning must come from outside themselves, else it is weak and has no power. And because the need for comfort metaphysics is so great, humans will believe anything, its truth a factor of the number of believers, the subtlety of its myth, the strength of its institutions. Need trumps rationality. At night as I channel surf I occasionally stop at TBN (the Trinity Broadcasting Network) and watch a preacher deliver comfort metaphysics to a large, well-dressed, rapt audience, relieved and happy that all is well in the universe; God is behind exploding stars, polio vaccine, and cell phones. On PBS (the Public Broadcasting System), twice I have caught the silky, confident, reassuringly intellectual voice of Dr. Wayne Dyer, author of *The Power of*

Intention, telling another well-dressed, rapt audience, who probably pride themselves on not believing in traditional, TBN style, comfort metaphysics like Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, that they need to get reconnected to the Source (depicted on stage as a lighted Chinese-lantern like ball), after which, vibrating in harmony with the Source, they will find meaning in life. Few, it seems, can do without some form of the comfort metaphysics drug.

What harm, you say? None, unless comfort metaphysics justifies harming others, prods and inspires believers to condemn and damn those who do not share their myth. Thus Christians kill other “heretic” Christians and they all kill non Christians. Judaism and Islam have provided cover for their destructive, hateful adherents. An old story. One especially associated with theistic myths whose God seems to associate life’s meaning with the slaughter of those who do not bow down to this being’s power. But any harm to others, including denying them their rights, any narrowing the circle of moral equality to exclude others for different metaphysical beliefs, is wrong and a perversion of the need to find meaning in life.

As long as believers do not harm others in the name of their comfort metaphysics, as long as they find meaning and solace, and occasionally try to help the neighbor in need, there is no harm in such beliefs, unless we count the brain-numbing harm of not honestly searching for the truth of human life. For them, all human life, in particular their individual lives, has plan and purpose—birth is for a reason and death continues in some form of afterlife, heaven, hell, or rebirth.

Comfort metaphysics also flourishes by conforming to society’s values: individual liberty, materialism, and consumerism in the case of contemporary America. Christians, in particular, the largest religious group in a very religious nation, are soaked in these values and praise our nation’s notions of success: power, celebrity, wealth. No humility or poverty here. Might, not the widow’s mite. No blessed meekness, no turning the other cheek. Of course, many

Christians rail against what they consider the culture's decadence: abortion and gay marriage. But these are distractions that leave the core value of acquisition intact. So, comfort metaphysics is what we would expect: a carrier of society's norms in the name of religious meaning. Hardly radical, as we would expect. Fully domesticated.

What if wisdom is not comfort metaphysics? What if faith is lost? How do those who do not believe in some cosmic spiritual reality cope with the hard-edged, uncaring reality of human existence? Our fundamental existential situation is that we are alone and temporary; we are born, make choices, and die. Are part of a generation that is one wave of many. Waves rise up at sea, roll in, and fission on the rocks, cliffs, or shore. Endlessly. And before the waves, nothing. And after the waves, nothing. How to cope with that knowledge, if one does not have comfort metaphysics? The answer, I believe, is biological and social. Our minds, it appears, are constructed against thinking deeply and often about our existential situation, and even if we do, say as seekers and philosophers, we come up with non religious comfort metaphysics like Platonism, Stoicism, Hegelianism, and Marxism. There is even some evidence that the brain is wired for comfort metaphysics. Even when we are exhorted to think of today as our last we really can't; we intellectualize, not feel it. If not this, the daily effort and pleasures of living distract us. We put up and live in our tents of happiness: work, family, recreation. We follow the path of biological and social imperatives. Occasionally an existential chill blows through the tent—illness, death—but we quickly close the offending opening and resume our sealed lives in a sealed society.

Five years ago my tent of happiness began to collapse. A long marriage was ending, a life was passing into its last act (two years ago, I had my Medicare birthday, and became euphemistically a "senior," a.k.a. one first in line for a flu shot), and my professional and creative work began to draw to a close (it's called

retirement, as in retiring an old car or long debt). I am now sixty-seven, about Socrates' age at his trial (he was about seventy) and, I would guess, the age of Koheleth, the speaker in Ecclesiastes. Having no traditional comfort metaphysics to support me (not only beliefs, but also the community of belief) and expelled from my tent of happiness, I find myself a wanderer, sustained only by popping in to the tents of happiness of my daughter, family, and friends. But, of course, I don't live in those tents; I visit. I am, spiritually, homeless. A nomad. A minor Lear, raging in a small voice on a small heath. An Oedipus lost in malls and political lies and among smug believers. A shimmering landscape of consuming and waste. A shining condo on a developed hill. Hyperbole? Yes, but thus are matters of the heart.

So, I'm getting a good look at life, although not one I would have eagerly plucked from a shelf. My moods, often low, do not readily lead to reflection on life's beauty. My spirit knows it needs protection from life's chill, its indifferent cold and ultimate emptiness. But how to do this? I've flirted with more plausible comfort metaphysics like Stoicism and Buddhism, but while they begin with an honest, courageous look at life they cannot bear it for long and end in comfort notions like the logos and nirvana. Is, then, metaphysical wisdom doomed to either implausible comfort metaphysics or a harsh, unsustainable view of life as brief and meaningless? I don't believe so. I believe in courageous metaphysics: metaphysical wisdom that accepts our inability to know about sources of life's meaning outside of ourselves, outside human life, experience and thought. We all have what theologian Paul Tillich calls ultimate concern: life must have a meaningful depth to it. But we must choose life's meaning, and there are no guarantees. In this we can use some help, and I believe that two who can provide us with the wisdom to live meaningful lives without comfort metaphysics are Socrates and Koheleth.

Loss of faith. Loss of comfort metaphysics. How do we come to believe and lose belief? The mystic Al Gazali observes that his belief in Islam resulted from many factors—that, I think, is true of both acquiring and losing belief. My period of intense Christian belief was from about the time I began high school to the beginning of my teaching and administrative career at Bakersfield College. What made me into a fervent boy evangelist? I can't say for sure: years of Sunday school, my mother's faith, talent and success as a preacher, and who knows what else. What undermined my faith? Studying philosophy at Wheaton, experiencing the Christian atmosphere of Wheaton as constricting and limiting, imbibing the intellectual freedom at Michigan, an increasing theological sophistication and skepticism, becoming less provincial, no longer seeing my vocation as religious (an especially wrenching couple of years), good secular friends in a secular culture. All of this and more. The upshot: I no longer needed the comfort of Christianity, although I remained an active Episcopalian while my family was young.

I am still moved by beautiful Christian churches, the Bible, and the liturgy. I teach the Bible as Literature and resonate with works like the Psalms, Song of Songs, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Job, and the prophets—Amos, Hosea, Isaiah. Two years ago on a bright, crisp November Sunday I attended a service at the National Cathedral in Washington DC and was greatly moved by its beauty. I find inspiration and meaning in the symbols of faith, but cannot believe in the metaphysics, the myth. Recently I attended a Sunday morning service at St. Paul's, a traditional Episcopal church in central Bakersfield, and soon realized I was among people who believe the myth, and, therefore, did not fit in. I had foolishly thought I might find solace and support in a community of belief, which is impossible because the more I have thought about various forms of comfort metaphysics, theism, in particular, the more I cannot believe them to be true, even

though they would protect me from existential loneliness. I cannot kill my mind to save my spirit.

I wish to live. Thus, I must find metaphysical wisdom with those who finished life where I am, a place shorn of comfort metaphysics, from which they reflected upon how they have lived and suggested how we should live when God or gods, and other other-worldly realities, are unknowable. When, at his trial Socrates explained his life and his view of life he was only three years older than I am now. Koheleth, the fictional persona in Ecclesiastes, is clearly looking back from a space near mine. For this reason, and because both sought and found wisdom, to be, as Camus says, to be a matter settled among humans, based on human experience and life below heaven, earthly in its provenance, I reflect upon their words that have helped me find my way and, I hope, help others find the courage and wisdom to live good lives.

## CARE OF THE SOUL

Socrates. A mythic figure in philosophy, one whose concern about how to live overshadows contemporary preoccupation with technical, academic philosophical problems. Philosophy, love of wisdom, as Socrates believed and died for, is about life's meaning, and as such is metaphysical wisdom. Practical and moral wisdom flow from this, are directed by it. Today, philosophers have left the field of how to live a good life to religion and psychotherapy; they have largely abandoned, perhaps betrayed, Socrates.

My approach is to view the Socrates of the Apology as a dramatized and literary figure, not a technical philosopher—a gadfly, a midwife, a seeker, a citizen condemned to death, not an object of academic study nor an academic concerned with scholarly production, rather than student lives; to see what he felt about his life; to apply that to our lives, to tease from it wisdom. Life ends. Death is a fact, universal and personal. We begin life and ask, “What will it be?” “What should it be?” “What is its end?” Usually, the question, not always consciously spoken, is answered by existing social, economic, political, and religious norms wrapped around biological imperatives. It is pretty much hijacked by them. And, of course, we can never really transcend our historical context because there is no supra-transcendent human experience, only a succession of human historical moments and eras, but we do and should ask the question because some choices, some alternatives are available to us, and to think about these, to reason, and to choose are what make us human.

So we live: get through childhood, through college, get married, perhaps raise a family, work, participate in politics, religion, etc. Then that part of life is over; we have largely done what we will do, largely fabricated our life. Suddenly,

as from a dream, we are shocked to find ourselves in a place we never thought we would be—at the ending of life, a geezer playing cards in a community center. And we ask again, at life’s other end: “How did we do?” “What has our life meant?” From these answers comes wisdom, different for different ends of life. Wisdom we should share with those at the beginning and in the middle of life, that they may be roused from their slumber to love wisdom in her beauty.

At his trial Socrates was keenly aware of his advanced age; after the jury voted for his death, he described himself as one well on and naturally not far from death. His apology, his defense, of his life is retrospective, nothing much is to be added. The life he has lived, chosen to live, is on trial; the charges, old and current, are judgments on whether his life has been good, especially its effects on his city and its citizens. We are used to people being accused of specific crimes and failings, but from his vantage point of seventy years, he knows that his crime is that of leading the philosophical life, of seeking wisdom before anything else, and exhorting others to do the same. It is his conception of wisdom that is to be judged. He has chosen, he has lived; now he must argue why he has chosen rightly and lived well.

What can we learn from this? As we make daily choices—some trivial, some monumental; some about what to buy, some about who to love—we do not think we will be ever called upon to defend them (before a jury of some 500 of our peers), individually and as part of our lives. What if we knew that at some point toward the end of our lives we would be tried for what we have done and failed to do? We go through youth and middle age spending our days, months, years as though they aren’t one-time choices that cannot be undone, that will define who we are. Then, lo and behold our hearing dims, lungs and legs weaken; we are old and have lived our lives, have made a life that cannot be unmade, and what do we say

about it? How would we answer those who would demand of us an accounting? What is the wisdom of this life? Why should others live one like it?

Perhaps to imagine this is the beginning of wisdom.

Telos: the end, the purpose—of life. A thought or action is good if it fulfills its purpose, especially if it fulfills it well. Sometimes a purposeful action is simple, like baking a cake or grilling a steak; sometimes a thing is good if it fulfills a simple purpose like a knife that cuts well. At times, however, the purpose of a thing or an institution may not be straightforward. A car, for example, would seem to have an obvious purpose of providing efficient, safe, reliable transportation, but more may be expected of it: an aphrodisiac or status symbol, a whiff of testosterone or gust of freedom. A sign of the alpha male. The independent, sexy female. Marriage—what is its purpose? Sex, romance, companionship, procreation, stability, social acceptance? All of the above? A life is not like a knife or a car; it is even more complicated than a marriage, for it may include a marriage.

When we evaluate something on the basis of its telos, we have to define its purpose, look to its end, try to stand at the place where it is finished. A knife when it has done its cutting. Baking when the cake is out of the oven, a marriage when it is over. A life at death. To evaluate the telos of a life we must try to imagine its end, try to see ourselves on the stand, as Socrates, or, at least, required to make an apology, defense, explanation. Why, dad? Why, mom? Why did you live this way? Make these choices? Why, why, why?

The best time to imagine this is, of course, when we are young, when the future, that unwritten narrative, lies before us and when we are aware of the seriousness of our choices, can imagine their consequences. At this point, ideally, we would be able to say, at least provisionally, this is what my life will be if it is good. Obviously, we cannot foresee all of its unanticipated twists and turns, joys

and tragedies, and many of its details will be the trivia of daily living. But we should be committed to a core, a core vision of some kind. When we are mature enough to do this we do know about certain choices we will have to make: a vocation, marriage or not, children, political affiliation, religion or not. Again, ideally, our choices would be guided by this vision, which, always in the process of being examined, clarified, adapted, none the less remains steady even when life is uncertain, difficult, painful.

The reality is that it is difficult to do this when young. To imagine our lives in five, ten, or twenty years is hard enough, but the end of life? Almost impossible. I don't claim to have done this, and I'm not sure Socrates did, either, but his trial teaches us we should. Comfort metaphysics has recognized this truth, thus the last judgment and karma, for example. They point us to the end, exhort us to live the now in this perspective. When I was a Christian, I heard and preached sermons about standing in judgment for my deeds, my life. Jesus clearly makes that point as does the prophet Micah: "The Lord has told you mortals what is good...only to act justly, to love loyalty, and to walk humbly with your God" (6.8). That connection is made by the author of the Gospel of Matthew when he describes Jesus as separating those to be judged into two groups to be rewarded or punished for eternity based upon how they have treated people: "Anything you did for one of my bothers here, however insignificant, you did for me" (25.31-46).

When people ask what Jesus would do, they make this connection because they know that Jesus not only acted in particular ways, but that his deeds were part of a coherent pattern—a Christian life, and they, too, want to live this kind of life, to imitate Christ. They believe they will be judged on whether or not they have lived it. I lived in the telos perspective more when I was a Christian than when not. Probably the absence of fear of being judged by God is the explanation for this. For if one is a Christian with a vivid belief in a heaven or hell or a non-theist

like a Buddhist with a vivid belief in the weight of good or bad karma to determine the kind of rebirth, one is if not constantly, at least vaguely, always aware of the importance of life's telos.

Just having such a telos, however, doesn't mean living up to it.

What Socrates' end-of-life perspective at his trial does for those of us trying to live a life of courageous metaphysics is to give us a device for imagining an evaluation and judgment at the end of our lives that does not depend on gods, afterlives, or metaphysical notions of goodness and evil. But who will judge our lives? Who will we imagine pronouncing satisfaction or dissatisfaction upon the garment we have woven with our choices and deeds? Will it be society? No, that cannot necessarily be because society may not be fit to judge us. Socrates' jury did not judge his life aright. Nazi Germany did not judge Dieterich Bonhoefer's life aright. The Romans did not judge Jesus' life aright. So who? At the end of his trial, Socrates said that if there were an afterlife, if he went to another place or other world, he would "find the true jurors who are said to preside in those courts...and all those other demi-gods who were upright in their earthly life." Those who will judge us are those historical figures or figures of our imagination who embody the kind of life we believe is good.

For me these will not be those emblematic of success in contemporary America: the prevaricating politicians, the eternally immature athletes, the narcissistic celebrity, the deal-making mogul. As a society those we adore have money, power, fame. Evidence? This week the local newspaper has been giddy over a seven foot, one inch basketball player who just graduated from high school and will go high in the NBA draft. Not giddy over a young adult who is morally outstanding, let alone an older adult who, who is what—wise? Of course not; how can we when we don't even know what it is to be wise, when we are caught up in a shallow materialism, when we identify worthiness with the size of an SUV or

square footage of a house. Some would say such a rant is proof that I disdain America. Nonsense, I don't disdain America; I simply dismiss as worthy its excessive preoccupation with self interest, its shallow materialism, its churning consumerism, its self congratulatory manifest destiny, its smug, self-righteous religiosity, its lack of concern for the poor and tolerance for wide disparities in wealth and health care, its profligate squandering of natural resources, its contempt for meaningful reflection. I will not be judged by these values.

I will have to look for my jury, as Socrates did, elsewhere.

Socrates pointed out to the Athenian jury that his life was a mission, which I think is an important element in the wisdom of living a good life. When I was a boy preacher I had a sense of mission, of purpose. As a teacher, I've felt the same. For me, teaching is not just a job, but a vocation, a calling to help people become more reflective about their beliefs, what Socrates called examination when he described his mission. I don't see the sense of mission as single-minded fanaticism (I probably part with Socrates here), but as a steady, constant attempt to live our concept of the good life. The sense of mission must go beyond vocation because a good life includes more than a vocation. Yet some vocations may be more central to a good life than others. Perhaps it is in how we see a vocation, that we can relate it to the betterment of our selves and of others, our neighbors. So we are thrown back once again on the notion of telos, of the end and purpose of our lives. Our mission is to achieve it, the moments and efforts of our lives part of its mosaic.

A life without a mission is adrift.

Many people I know have a mission; they live coherent, good lives. They just haven't reflected on their lives and made conscious their mission. This is not the same as having a life without a mission, a life that seems to lack pattern and consistency, a life that bumps along from day to day. But consciousness of our

mission is vital because we can explain it to ourselves and to others, can use it as a guide. How should I live, mom and dad? Good question.

A problem: Socrates' mission was from his god, at least that's how he understood it. Puzzled by the oracle's pronouncement that he was the wisest in Athens, he set out to check the truth of it by examining his fellow Athenians—politicians, poets, and artisans—those who might have wisdom. Because he claimed to have no wisdom, he couldn't understand how he was the wisest. I have said earlier that the search for wisdom cannot be based on comfort metaphysics, yet here I use Socrates as a source of wisdom when his mission came from a god—am I not contradicting myself? An unimportant yes, and an important no. While it is true that Socrates believes his mission to be sent from the god, he believes that the only wisdom the god gives him is to know that he must search for wisdom from among those who live in the city (unfortunately, as a man of his time he excluded women). In short, god pressed the button sending Socrates on his way, but did nothing else except occasionally, through an intuitive feeling, stop him from doing something. Knowledge about how to live he had to find out on his own.

Courageous metaphysics finds the impetus for life's mission in the earthly self, not a transcendent god or gods. We decide what kind of life is worth living; we search for the wisdom to live it; and we choose to live it. I'm not convinced by those who insist that we need a god to constantly prod us, any more than as adults we need a parent to constantly prod us. When we grow up we take upon ourselves the responsibility for our lives, for the search for wisdom, for our mission. What I learn from Socrates is that to find wisdom and to live a good life I must have a mission. To the jury he said, "God has assigned me to this city..." as a stinging fly to daily rouse, persuade, and reprove. I can just as well say, "I have assigned myself this life to live and to daily do so." We do not require an outside source to

commit ourselves to living a good life, to having a mission. We are made to search for meaning, we need it, yearn for it, and a meaningful life is a life with a mission. Besides, people have to choose which god or metaphysical force they will believe in, which is no more valid than choosing to believe in a kind of life without a god.

Failure? A poisonous, defeatist, not-to-be tolerated concept in some American versions of comfort metaphysics, which fits nicely with the American everyone can do it mentality. I find particularly pathetic the nostrums of Dr. Wayne Dyer who attributes troubles to being out of sync with the Source. His remedy? Just change our mental channels to the happy and positive and all will be well. I guess so if you're peddling spiritual pap like this, well off from writing best sellers and hawking motivational seminars.

But missions can fail. Socrates' did. Did he live a good life? Yes. He lived the way he thought right, but he did not change many others, did not get them to seek wisdom first. Instead, he provoked their resentment, hatred, and rejection. And for this, at his trial he is angry and bitter, accusing his accusers of iniquity and injustice. He has given his life to help his fellow Athenians, neglected his own advantage, endured poverty, and for this he is judged immoral and condemned to death. Of course, he is angry and bitter; his mission has failed. In success-inebriated America it seems illogical to say one has lived a good life but failed. Wisdom, however, tells us otherwise.

Telos, a mission, but for what? To answer this, our cup of wisdom must first be emptied. Knowledge replaced with ignorance, certainty with confusion, confidence with humility. After Socrates had examined those in Athens who were reputed to be wise and discovered they weren't, he concluded that he was deemed wisest by the Oracle precisely because he knew that he was not wise. He is not speaking of practical wisdom: the politicians knew how to sway the people, the poets how to write poetry, the artisans how to skillfully craft their wares. About

what they thought they knew, however—morality, justice, piety—they were ignorant. As we search for wisdom Socrates warns us that we should be wary of unmovable certainty, especially the assumption of infallibility. This is especially true of beliefs that affect others for ill. While I'm not sure that human wisdom is as limited or worthless as Socrates thought, I share his concern that we humans act too often upon beliefs unexamined and muddled. That's why our society must be open to the airing of all beliefs. In *On Liberty*, John Stuart Mill feels this crucial to our finding truth. Only through the constant testing of "truth" can we find it, and such testing must be accompanied by modesty, humility, and an awareness of our ignorance and fallibility even when we are sure we are right, especially then.

Socrates, although professing ignorance, had some firm notions about wisdom and the good life, notions he lived by, notions I think we should live by. These have not to do with practical wisdom, the *techne`* so valued in America, evidenced by the shelves of how-to and self-improvement best sellers. Ten steps to making a fortune, to losing weight, to finding a mate, to connecting with the source. We manage sex, we manage time. Handbooks, easy lessons, pragmatic, fast, results guaranteed. Low carbs this week, high fiber next. But what about working at wisdom, working at a good life, journeying through uncertainty, the dark night of the soul? No way, that's not the American way; take a lesson, pop a pill, wisdom is only a paperback or prescription away. Moral and metaphysical wisdom reduced to slogans and bumper stickers. Were Socrates' compatriots the same? Probably. His failure in the agora would be the same in our shopping malls, political halls, temples of trade.

To his jurors he asked, "Are you not ashamed that you give your attention to acquiring as much money as possible, and similarly with reputation and honor, and give no attention or thought to truth and understanding and the perfection of the soul?" Sound familiar? Of course—he could be speaking to us, twenty-first

century Americans, and probably to most humans who live in societies of abundance. According to Socrates we do not pay attention to that most valuable part of us. We allow it to atrophy, wilt, wither, while we batten that part which has to do with less important externals: money, celebrity, and power.

Soul. At its most general the term refers to something different from the body, something that directs the body, that thinks, that feels emotion, and that reflects upon and plots our existence. All humans believe this, and even if they only think briefly about it, believe that it is superior to the body. Most systems of comfort metaphysics make of the soul a non-material thing, as the body is a material thing. Socrates seemed to believe this, as, obviously, do Christians, Jews, and Muslims. I don't think, however, we need to believe in the soul as an actual thing to recognize its primacy in our lives for it is the source of knowledge, rationality, aesthetics, love, and spirituality, all of which distinguish a self-conscious, thinking being from all else in the universe. It is a rent in the material world through which transcendence pours. It is the voice of yearning, the cry for meaning. It is that which shapes our lives. Buddhists, who deny substance to the soul or self, affirm and emphasize this, for karma depends on rational choice, good or evil. Even if one were to deny this, a contradiction would emerge for, as Descartes pointed out, the mind and self would do the denying. Choice, accountability, responsibility all require us to exalt the soul. Mill declared that it is better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a pig satisfied, thus affirming the primacy of that higher part of us, the repository of what he thought of as higher pleasures: reasoning, morality, contemplation of beauty, to which I would add spirituality.

Are the body and its pleasures, thereby, to be cast out of a good life? Does the wisdom of the soul demand this? And what about wealth, fame, power and glory? Socrates didn't think that, nor do I. He proclaimed that "wealth does not bring goodness, but goodness brings wealth and every other blessing, both to the

individual and to the state.” While his life would seem to belie any automatic connection between goodness of the soul and social flourishing (no Prosperity Gospel here), his point is clear: wealth and its kin are without worth unless goodness of the soul is first sought. Wisdom is not withdrawal from society unless the values of society are so corrupting that it is impossible to preserve one’s soul. That is not the case of the materialism and self-aggrandizing values of contemporary America. A good life can be lived within these, tempering and placing them in perspective, rejecting their priority and excess. We are not called upon to be poor or not to excel, but to put wealth and social achievement within the shape of our soul, telos, and mission.

Nor do we have to don hair shirts and flagellate ourselves daily. We are soul and body, joined as one. Views that the flesh is heir to every evil desire and should be repressed and punished are themselves perversions. We know, first, that the health of the mind and quality of life depend on the health of the body. We also affirm goodness of physical pleasure. The error is when an imbalance is caused, when the soul is ruled by the physical. This would seem obvious, but it isn’t in a society that touts good health without asking what for, peddles pleasure without understanding its end. The men and women who buff their bodies simply to be admired and the lovers of food simply because it is exotic lack wisdom.

Care for the soul is primary. But can we really do this? Socrates’ mission exhorts us to understand that our lives should have a mission, should be made more coherent by that mission. He failed in Athens—was this only because he stirred up resentment, made enemies, and was portrayed as a danger to society? I don’t think so. All great systems of metaphysical wisdom tell us that life has a telos around which all segments of our lives should be formed. For theistic religions it is worshipping and doing God’s will. For Buddhism it is becoming enlightened to end the circle of suffering, ours and others’, for the stoics understanding that we

are part of the universal logos, for the utilitarian maximizing pleasure, for Aristotle happiness, and so on. But we resist doing this; we may receive, applaud, vow to live the telos message; soon, however, immersed in the stream of life, the pull of daily work, love, joy, disappointment, and pain we forget our telos. And this is the basic reason for Socrates' failure, Jesus' failure, Buddha's failure. They ask too much of us. Many are called, few follow.

Two thoughts: this week I watched Martina Navratilova play singles at Wimbledon. She is forty seven; she has won at Wimbledon many times, yet here she is playing again at an age considered too old, and she has won her first match. Tennis, it is clear, is a major part of her life and she has excelled at it, yet, I thought, if asked what a good life is for her, she couldn't say, "doing well at tennis," because to do so would seem to miss the point of what a good life is. Similarly, doctor would not say that a good life is being an excellent surgeon, or Bill Gates to found Microsoft. If asked, I could not say being a good teacher is a good life. Second thought: occasionally on Sundays I play tennis with close friends who, admirably, regard their family as a major focus of their lives; to have a solid marriage, nurture and raise two daughters so that they live good lives is very, very important to them, yet if asked if this is a good life to them, it would be part of something more.

Our lives are segmented; each segment is a smaller telos whose success is measured by how well we achieve its end. Some segments are more important than others; for Martina Navratilova tennis is a major segment, for my friends their family, for me (at this time in my life) teaching. A life may have telos segments like these: a vocation, a hobby, a marriage, a family, friendships, etc., all of which must be balanced and prioritized. But how, according to what principle? To make sense they must be related in some way to the totality of our lives, our overall telos and mission. We are not naturally inclined to think about our lives this way. We

are born into a society that lays out, defines, and limits the kinds of telos segments available to us. Thus, when the time comes we choose a vocation (and may do so more than once), choose to love, to marry, to have children; choose friends, hobbies. Each is important to us, but we are not asked to explain how these relate to our core, overall telos, our conception of the good life. We are not asked for this kind of wisdom. We in the United States think we are so enlightened, especially when we hear about societies dominated by ancient tribal values and ways of living. When it comes to asking the fundamental question of why this kind of life, however, we are no more enlightened. We essentially follow the conception of a good life our society conditions us to follow. It is the human condition, I believe, where wisdom is confined to the practical and moral, rarely the metaphysical.

Shock. How easy it is to prate on about living a good life, to speak and write words that sound profound but fall on rocky soil. Receptive earth is rare; the wise sower knows this. I, seduced and excited by the poetry of metaphysical wisdom, did not know myself of the disconnect between it and the way I have lived my own life. Perhaps there was less of a disconnect when I was in the fullness of Christian faith. That might have been the case: a certainty, a clarity, guided my initial choice of why and where to attend college and my initial choice of a vocation, becoming a minister. Let's say, however, I had remained a Christian, but not chosen to work in the church, would my major life choices been guided by something called the good Christian life? I don't know, and while I know of Christians who do this, most don't. Is it more difficult for followers of courageous metaphysics to keep our eyes on life's telos because we do not have the daddy voice of the divine encouraging and exhorting us? Perhaps also threatening us with eternal pain (Barstow forever) and rewarding us with eternal bliss (Santa Barbara forever)—greater motivation to keep our eyes on the good life.

Courageous metaphysics does without the divine, requires us to both formulate a good life and be responsible for living it. Is that a weaker psychological motivation—probably; we may respond more to an external lash or carrot. At this point, a skeptic might say, “who cares; if my life is satisfying without an overarching telos or mission, why should I worry about it? I’m productive at work and happy at home, so why do I need to examine myself about my belief in a good life? When I’m old and reflect on my life, I’ll be satisfied to say I did thus and so and they were good things to do, and, no doubt, those who ask me will nod in agreement.”

A plausible point, but let me suggest a couple of thoughts about the idea of coherence in human life. Even if our above speaker has lived a life made up of successful telos segments, I suggest that life to be coherent, to be seen as a whole, has to presuppose a core, an overarching telos. A good life will be one whose segments—job, marriage, friendships, etc.—fit, not contradict, conflict with one another. A person who is responsible in her work and caring of her family is not likely to have dissolute, mean friends. Every so often we are tempted by activities that are out of sorts with the rest of our life, and it would be easier and more effective to evaluate and explain our rejection of them if we could refer to our conception of a good life, our metaphysical wisdom. Intuitively we know that a life has to add up to something, be a shape, be more than loose parts; a song, more than some pleasant notes. I think, too, others expect our lives to reflect a unifying core and centrality and are stunned and disappointed when we violate it.

In Mark Haddon’s novel about an autistic teenage boy, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, the boy, Christopher Boone, is shocked and frightened to discover that his father has lied to him about his mother and in anger has killed a neighbor’s dog. For Christopher, who is much more literal in his moral expectations than a normal person, his father’s behavior cannot be

reconciled with a good life, thus he rejects his father and runs away to find his mother in London, a frightening ordeal for him. I think we all expect coherences in the lives of others. That's why we can label a Hitler evil and a Mother Theresa good. Of course, we know that the most despicable human can have a dollop kindness and the saintliest of humans a sliver of meanness, but these we accept as minor aberrations, viewed against the canvas of a whole life.

A prophetic voice. We are left with a prophetic voice, in this case Socrates', which we can ignore, but which has much to teach us about wisdom. For who can really say, "I have lived a good life," without a notion of what this means, without serious examination and reflection? Socrates would say no one, and I agree. I want to be able to say to my daughter, sister, her children, my students, and my friends, "after a rather hit-and-miss life, after a slow, painful ascent toward the light, a glimpse or two outside the cave, this is what I believe a good life is and how, given that notion, mine has succeeded and fallen short." So, at age sixty seven I write this little book on wisdom...as much an explanation to myself as, I hope, a small help to my family and friends, who know me as all too human, and, perhaps, a concerned voice to others who happen upon it.

Let us begin, then, with the soul or self and our responsibility to care for it, and the souls of others, above all. In some ways the word "soul" is misleading because courageous metaphysics does not regard it as a separate immaterial entity surviving the death of the body. Yet the word "self" sounds too pedestrian to capture the uniqueness and importance of the thinking, feeling, imagining, creating part of us. I'll use the word "soul," knowing that some may not feel comfortable with the term. What is it about the soul that Socrates thinks we should be especially mindful of as we order the various aspects of our lives? Remember that

a healthy soul is our telos, the key to a good life, without which the various telos segments of our lives will be incomplete.

Truth. Beliefs. Examination. From the Apology, it is clear that for Socrates a healthy soul values, pursues, and adheres to truth. Our ability to be rational is a unique facet of our humanity, one that separates us from non-rational life, the key to all wisdom. We reason and we reason about reason. Reason is so important that we must not do anything to weaken it in others, even to gain an advantage. At his trial Socrates said he would speak the truth and not appeal to the emotions and sympathy of the jurors, for to do so would be an injustice. I believe seeking truth is important to us for several reasons. It is, first, part of our humanity, a gift we have as a species, thus something we should cultivate as an individual should cultivate a gift for math or music or art. But that may sound a bit esoteric, like knowledge for the sake of knowledge. The pragmatic point of honing our reason is we need truth on all levels—practical, moral, metaphysical—in order to understand life and how to live well. Otherwise we exist in Plato’s dark cave, a place of flickering shadows. Of course, we can live here, have a pleasant life, but it is a life of a stunted human, a life of myths, mistakes, of little understanding. It is as if we stopped our ears and shut our eyes.

We must reject, then, ways of living that destroy our reason. People automatically think of drink or drugs. But popular culture with its easy slogans and ready-made truths are also drugs. Society and social institutions, to run smoothly and survive, have a stake in our not thinking too deeply about religious, cultural, moral, political, and economic truth. Cultures are fiercely conservative. Blessed are they who accept the status quo for theirs is the kingdom of tranquil consuming. Politics and advertising appeal not to our reason, but to our emotions with the rationale that we really don’t (and can’t) think and it is more effective to

manipulate us this way. Focus groups aren't Socratic dialogues but testing ground for the hot buttons of feeling.

Is this right? Not if it numbs and corrupts our ability to reason. Michael Moore's recent movie *Fahrenheit 911* is, like most of his movies, basted with propaganda. While I agree with many of his views, I'm uneasy about his appeals to emotion; but, then, the Bush administration also uses propaganda to sway the American people. They both corrupt us. And democracy. The problem, which Socrates did not seem to understand, is that emotions, feelings, are important to our lives; we are not simply thinking machines. They provide the energy for our fundamental beliefs and cannot be ignored or relegated to a "lower" place perpetually in conflict with reason. Often they and reason are one. Having acknowledged that, however, reason must cultivate feelings, be at times even corrected by them, but never dominated by them. Feelings without reason are blind, but reason without feelings is sterile.

Socrates urges us to examine our beliefs, our "truth." His mission, like that of a prophet or missionary, was to prod and sting his fellow Athenians to examine their beliefs, to subject them to the scrutiny of analytical reason. Does this mean that we should devote our lives to examining ourselves and others, as he did? Of course not. Few are called to be gadflies, but all are called to live good lives, which means examining our fundamental moral, political, social, economic, and aesthetic beliefs, especially those that seriously affect ourselves and others. Most of our daily decisions do not involve these beliefs, most involve low-level practical considerations like food, clothing, recreation, work, and scheduling our time.

We consider our moral beliefs to be among our most important beliefs, yet they seldom come into play in our daily lives. We can go for days and weeks without confronting a serious moral situation. White lies and small kindnesses occur fairly often. Rarely do we face decisions about cheating, deceiving, breaking promises,

physically hurting someone, or making a major personal sacrifice to help someone in need. While daily we may act morally by not causing harm or by being nice and do not have to consciously reason about these actions, we do need to examine the fundamental moral beliefs that underlie them and come into play when we must make significant moral decisions. This is also true of our fundamental political, social, and economic beliefs because they determine how we orient ourselves to life, how we will live, and treat others. These are the beliefs Socrates urges us to examine, because if we don't we walk unenlightened and do harm from ignorance.

A new phrase has entered our vocabulary from the current war in Iraq, "on the ground." It means to be in a concrete situation, to be "embedded" in a specific time and place and to understand it from the perspective of living it. The contrast is between this existential knowledge and theory, knowledge from afar, second hand, not rooted in experience. As I write about examining our beliefs, I do so from the conviction that it must make sense "on the ground," that is how we really live. Just because we may not do it, however, is not a reason to reject it as not real or not even realistic. We have to have ideals to guide our lives "on the ground." They may be hard to attain, but that they are good and that we should strive to achieve them we cannot deny. Yes, it is difficult, a bother, a nuisance to examine our fundamental beliefs, and we fall short, we stumble, we fail, but we can get better at it, can make progress. And what is the alternative? To let "the ground" push us around like leaves scattering in the wind. The nature of human existence, of life "on the ground," necessitates having ideals and working to make them improve our daily lives—shafts of light in the cave.

Socrates was engaged in life. He was not a philosopher removed to some isolated place from which he could pontificate. He moved among his friends and fellow citizens in peace and in war. He talked to them in the agora where they transacted the quotidian business of living. His point is that examining beliefs lead

to a healthy soul which is crucial to a good life “on the ground.” For him this is not some ethereal academic ideal, but is mingled with the very dust of life.

To examine our beliefs means to interrogate them, to subject them to other points of view, vigorous objections, and criticisms. How we do so is not at our convenience, something nice to do; it is a moral obligation to ourselves and those whom our beliefs affect. If I have a belief about gay marriage and try to persuade others to accept it as true and act on it by voting I am affecting others. How can I do this without rigorous examination? If I accuse the Bush administration of deceiving Americans about the war in Iraq and vote to remove him from office and oppose his policies, how can I do this without rigorous examination? If I accuse someone of being unfair, how can I do this without an examined notion of fairness? In addition to specific beliefs there are general beliefs that inform them: beliefs about issues like affirmative action, gay marriage, and the death penalty are informed by our beliefs about equality and justice. These, all, need examination.

If we should examine our fundamental beliefs, why don't we? First, we can get along pretty well without doing so because we rarely act explicitly act on these beliefs, so why bother about them? Practical beliefs have more impact on our daily lives, thus require our attention. The others seem removed like the ivory tower stuff of professors and judges. We make a mistaken investment and the consequences are concrete, the harm real, even immediate. But we can't see how our belief about gay marriage, for example, affects our lives, unless, of course, we are gay and would like to marry. Yet for many these beliefs are fraught with feeling; they have an emotional position on this issue. They reinforce this belief with friends over coffee, mocking opposition beliefs. These beliefs define in part who they are and where they belong. They are strongly held and not easily modified or thrown over. Examining them is risky because we may become confused, may have to admit our ignorance, and may have to change, which can be

disruptive and painful, threatening our identity and friendships. If this is true about moral beliefs, how much more so about metaphysical beliefs? It is arduous to leave the darkness of the cave and struggle to the light.

Beliefs shape our souls. What we are, if our life has any coherence, is what we believe. If that is the case, then untrue beliefs can wound the soul, deform its shape, mutilate it, according to Socrates.

As I look back on my life, can I say I have done this methodically, consistently? Not at all. Part of looking back on a life is to note what could have been done better, and that is all I witness to. Wisdom sets the goal, notes our failings, and forgives us. We can never get completely out of the cave, but at least we can know we are often too comfortable in its easy assurances.

With respect to the search for the truth, then, the healthy soul is not a cave-dwelling soul. Even more, a healthy soul is moral soul. At his trial Socrates repeatedly said that he did not knowingly harm anyone or act unjustly. Even though, as a flawed human, such is impossible even for Socrates, the fact that he claimed it shows the depth of his belief in its importance. Before it voted the death penalty, he said to the jury, "I am convinced that I never wrong anyone intentionally..." About his mission he said, "I tried to persuade each one of you not to think more of practical advantages than of his mental and moral well being..." What an astounding claim, perhaps priggish and arrogant, for a human to make. And, as it turned out, the jury did not buy it. Yet searching for the truth, examining our beliefs and acting rightly are joined. Socrates believed, incorrectly, that rational humans would never knowingly act wrongly, thus knowing the truth was for him the key to morality. But we are of the flesh, and that truth is necessary for moral action is clear, but that it is not sufficient we all know because reason can be overthrown by emotion. A moral soul must use reason to find truth, but must

join that to the appropriate emotion. The will to act morally requires both right reason and right emotion.

A good person is a moral person. A good life is a moral life. Morality dyes our souls and lives. It connects us to other souls. For theistic comfort metaphysics God is the source of morality; the believer lives under the omnipresent “thou shalt,” under the all-seeing, penetrating eye of God, and under threat of eternal judgment. For courageous metaphysics morality comes from the logic of self-regard. If I value myself and want to be treated well by others, I must acknowledge that they want the same. It’s irrational for me to demand moral behavior from others toward me and deny my obligation toward them. I know that I and others will flourish only if we regard each as equals. Because many of our activities involve and affect others—family, work, social life—our lives are permeated with moral behavior. Daily we respect one another, refrain from harming one another; daily we help one another, even sacrifice for one another. Mostly this is an unconscious following of the Golden Rule (the universal moral rule), and only occasionally rises to conscious deliberation.

What we have said, then, about Socratic wisdom regarding the soul, that most precious part of us? First, that it is the centerpiece of our telos, our mission, our good life. All other parts of our lives—each with a sub-telos of its own—our vocation, our marriage, our politics, etc., make sense only if informed by a healthy soul, one concerned with truth and morality. It makes no sense to say, for example, “I’m a great entrepreneur or successful athlete or talented artist, but I don’t care about truth or morality.” We should and would regard this person as a stunted human, one who doesn’t know what is important in life, whose life lacks an overall telos. A successful life, perhaps, but not a good life. A healthy soul, however, does not guarantee success in all areas of life. Marriages fail, illness strikes. We are, after all, flawed and limited beings, subject to ignorance, unruly

emotions, and fate. Wisdom is not a latch-key to happiness, a low-carb diet of the spirit; it is, simply, the way to a good life, a telos and mission we can look back upon as worthy, that which remains steady in life's buffeting. It is much more serious and valuable than what passes for happiness and success today in much of America.

As Socrates discussed and defended his life, his view of the soul, he noted that pursuing moral and metaphysical wisdom requires certain virtues, what is today called character. He stressed courage, comparing his mission to a soldier remaining at his post even in the face of death. Fear shouldn't cause us to abandon our pursuit of a good life, of the care for our soul. Not fear of threats or ridicule or censure or rejection. Pursuing truth and being moral are not always easy. We can be accused of undermining traditional beliefs, beliefs that provide people with security, thus corrupting minds (as Socrates was accused of doing). Questioning any orthodoxy raises hackles. Often the most difficulty is not with outsiders, but with friends and family. Our impulse is to be loyal, not rock the boat, not jeopardize our relationship with those we love. Not that we should be cranky and officious, but at times there will be enormous pressure on us to be mute, to swallow our questions even if we intend to raise them gently.

It is time to confess: I think reason very weak when applied to religious, social, and political issues. When I observe the rhetoric flying, the propaganda masking as truth, the mindless but passionate disagreement over issues like abortion, gay marriage, and the death penalty, I wonder about the wisdom of Socrates. Was he naïve? I have to admit I think he was; I don't think he fully understood the forces arrayed against reason. Excluding, of course, practical reason (when it has no religious, political, or cultural implications): beginning with simple tools, the wheel and flint, and culminating in modern science and technology, humans have done wonders with *techne`*. We don't disagree over how

to build nuclear weapons, but over the religions of the builders and the politics of who can possess them. We don't disagree about the methods of stem cell research, but about its morality.

To paraphrase Socrates: the beginning of wisdom is to know how difficult it is to be rational: to observe accurately, to interpret dispassionately, and to reach agreement on knotty, contentious issues using reason. Why? First, we don't understand ourselves very well, our emotions, desires, fears, and hidden beliefs, and how much we have invested in maintaining them. Second, we are prey to social and group cohesion that pressures us to conform. I tend to believe that as humans evolved the value of cohesion outweighed the value of examining religious, social, and political beliefs because humans can usually get along quite nicely without the latter, but not the former. To abandon the ideal of Socrates is, however, to an ideal of the hive and pack, technologically efficient, but mindless.

Persistence. Because of reason's weakness, we must not give up when we stumble, when we see public discourse (including our own) degenerating into the purple haze of slogan, cliché, and stereotype. Reason often fails us. Fails us in our personal lives, as well as social and political lives. We sometimes rely little on reason when we make some of the most important decisions of our lives: career, marriage, divorce, religion. Because reason is limited in what it recollects about the past, knows about the present, and predicts about the future we rely on stories and myths. Thinking about life is difficult: how can we get our mind around it? Much easier to rely on hunch, feeling, and what others are doing. But we can't give up the ideal. We must persist. After all, for courageous metaphysics what other ideal is there but to use reason to improve the self and the lives of others?

Integrity. It's one thing to have beliefs, another to follow them consistently. Under pressure, the threat of harm or loss, we are tempted to ignore our beliefs, to put them aside for the nonce. Of course, we shouldn't. Socrates, at his trial, faced

the real threat of the death penalty. In its face, however, he did not flinch let alone compromise his beliefs, especially in his mission. From the very beginning he did not shave his commitment to truth, would not say what the jury wanted to hear. He told the jury that if they let him go on condition that he cease examining others, his mission, he would have to disobey. Perhaps he went overboard, but he knew that to betray his mission was to betray his life. We must maintain our integrity, which is easy when we are not tempted or tested, difficult when we are.

I like most have a mixed record here. Too often my personal life is cratered with thoughtless, selfish inconsistency. In the 60's and 70's I was too easily seduced by the destructive fads about the primacy of personal liberty. It has taken me a long time to recognize this and recognize the importance of paying attention most to the needs of others. And it's still a work in progress. This book is not from a saintly life, by a long stretch. It is born of my distress at not having understood what wisdom and a good life are until this last part of my life. Doing good is no mystery; it takes, however, integrity. Once I left the clarity of religious belief, I maintained the core moral imperative of helping others. What I didn't do, however, is think it through, develop it as an explicit, guiding creed, reinforced by meditation, reflection, and habit. Seared by loss, I have in the past several years attempted to do this; and, I hope, this book is testimony to that effort, for in it I am addressing myself as much as my readers.

Integrity is aided by a community of belief, and this is one advantage comfort metaphysics has over courageous metaphysics. I miss being a part of such a community where common beliefs can be examined, clarified, nurtured, and sustained through dialogue and friendship. There when we stumble others can pick us up. When we are overcome by the darkness of despair others can give us light. We can cry, laugh, think, struggle together. This I miss greatly.

Socrates was not an academic philosopher who spun theories of wisdom and the good life from a privileged, isolated position in a college or university. For him philosophy was a way of living, a gospel to be tried, tested, and worked out in the heat, dust, conflicts, and debates of Athens—his city, his neighbors. To have value, I believe, wisdom must be a helpful companion, a true light, a guiding voice as we live out our lives in our cities. Fidelity to wisdom must, through our trials, successes, failures, and joys, be what allows us to at the end to say that wisdom called us to care for our souls, that we did so the best of our ability, and because we were faithful, wisdom will vouch for us.

Socrates' wisdom affirms life's meaning, gives it purpose, telos. Yet he does so as a stern, puritan-like father exhorting us to hew to the straight and narrow, to stay on the true path. Life is serious business; he, after all, neglected his own material well-being to pursue his mission. Like a good soldier he stayed at his post for which he was rewarded with death. His wisdom goads and inspires us, but something is missing: joy. In the Apology Socrates for all of his fervor doesn't seem to have any fun. He doesn't seem to enjoy life. Perhaps to great, intense spiritual and moral exemplars like Socrates, delighting in life and reveling in its pleasures and beauty is trivial compared to the serious task of minding the health of the soul, but to have lived a life and not enjoyed its fullness would be a sorry thing. In the Book of Proverbs Wisdom says she was the first of God's created works and that "I was at his side each day, his darling and delight, playing in his presence continually, playing over his whole world, while my delight was in mankind"(9.30-31).

Play, delight, happy? Socrates sees himself not as playing but as stinging, as a gadfly sent to arouse his city mates from their spiritual slumber. He urges, hectors, examines, mocks, reproves. As the gadfly, "All day long, I never cease to settle here, there, and everywhere, rousing, persuading, reproving every one of

you”. Surely life is more than this; care for the soul, seeking truth and being moral, life’s lodestone, can be arduous and taxing, so there must be time for the soul to play, dance, and rejoice in living, in loving and creating. There are two things that grieve wisdom: a blind soul and a joyless soul. I sit here at Sequoia Sandwich Co., day after day, writing this book; in doing so I admonish myself to pursue truth and be good to others, but I also enjoy being here: listening to the hubbub of lively talk, tasting the daily sandwich and soup, seeing the bright sky and light outside the large plate glass windows, and fitting ideas and words together.

For courageous metaphysics, Socrates reminds that life must have purpose, an end, a goal. His wisdom is from the perspective of loss of meaning. To find wisdom as joy, however, we must move on to another older seeker of wisdom, to a different, but complementary, perspective. We must listen to the voice of Koheleth, the Speaker, who talks to us about life in a short book in the Bible, Ecclesiastes. His wisdom is from the perspective of death, of joy removing its sting.

## A CHEERFUL HEART

Koheleth speaks to us from the podium of age and experience. Affecting the persona of King Solomon, known for great power, wealth, and wisdom, Koheleth tells us in a world-weary voice that all is vanity—futility, emptiness, and a chasing of the wind—except for one thing: to enjoy life when we can. One by one he dissects and examines all things that we humans value under the sun and dismisses them as vanity. Life and the power to enjoy it is a gift from God, who otherwise is unknowable.

Here someone could note that Koheleth believes in comfort metaphysics, in the existence of a creator God, therefore his wisdom should not be counted as courageous metaphysics. He is, however, like Socrates who gets a start from his god but has to figure out wisdom on his own, through his own reason. Likewise, Koheleth gets life from God, which is no comfort, however, because he has to discover wisdom on his own, using unaided reason. For him, the voice of God is silence. Other than an initial push neither can look to a god for any understanding or guidance. One could say that the initial push is everything: in Socrates' case the motivation to seek wisdom, in Koheleth's the context of wisdom. I think, however, this is small comfort, certainly not the kind of comfort we associate with comfort metaphysics which provides believers with an explanation life's purpose and guidelines on how to live it. But both Socrates and Koheleth live in the cave, whose darkness is lighted by their reason only. Essentially, this is the situation of anyone who must tease from life its meaning without the clarion voice of a transcendent being.

From his radical religious skepticism, then, Koheleth advises us on how to live. Like Socrates' words in the Apology, his essay is about wisdom, its source

limited to his experience and reason. His perspective, similar to Camus', is that death defines life. Death is the universal, knowable truth, "Human beings and beasts share one and the same fate: death comes to both alike...all came from the dust, and to the dust shall return" (3.19,20). Like Socrates, Koheleth has no way of knowing if there is an afterlife, "Who knows whether the spirit of a human being goes upward or whether the beast goes downward to the earth?"(3.21). His conclusion: "Man has no advantage over the beast, for everything is futility" (3.19).

Wisdom tells us what to value in life and from this instructs us on how to live. For comfort metaphysics the perspective, the lever for life, is a transcendent reality. For Kohleleth everything, including practical and moral wisdom, is nullified by death. Against this dark backdrop of inevitable death only the gift of life shines. What we know, then, is our life, that we live some years, which hurry by, unnoticed as night follows day, as the moon's rising the sun's setting. We are young, middle aged, and old; and, suddenly, our life is over, and we are dead. What is life under this sun?

Koheleth begins with the observation that there is nothing new under the sun, "What has happened will happen again, and what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun" (1.9). Is he right? At first it would seem, no. His seems an outmoded cyclical view of history, supplanted by the modern view of history as progress, as constant change antiquating and leaving the old behind. What seems constant under the sun for us is the new. And that is why we don't regard length of life and experience as sources of wisdom. Anyone, young or old, who keeps up, is wise.

In April, 1937, I was born in Detroit, Michigan, at Harper Hospital. My mother was a homemaker, my father a Ford worker. I grew up as an only child in a small, but comfortable house on Terry Street, where under the shade of its

arching trees I rode my Schwinn in the summer and framed by bare, snow-piled limbs played street hockey in the winter. Mine was a mostly working class neighborhood, whose center for me and my chums was Frances Parkman school, where gaunt Miss Quinn taught math, Miss Van Arnom taught social studies and whipped the school Safety Patrol into shape, and Mr. Baer kept us fit in the gym. When not in school I played baseball, football, and ice hockey on Parkman's playground. Every December the Detroit fire department opened a hydrant to flood our modest skating rink. In the 40's and 50's it was safe for me to roam my neighborhood alone, baseball mitt dangling from my handlebars or hockey stick and skates slung over my shoulder. Technology was the hand lawn mower, a Ford sedan, the rotary phone, and the radio, although television, with Milton Berle, had arrived in our living room by the end of my childhood. My growing up was secure, tranquil, predictable, happy.

My college experience was pretty much the same, with a dollop of intellectual excitement added. Wheaton and Michigan were residential and students full time. Student activism began just as I left Michigan in the early 60's. The portable typewriter and erasable bond paper were the cutting edge in technology. Even when I began to teach at Bakersfield College, we still used dittos. Even in a community (then junior) college the students were traditionally right out of high school, full time, middle class, and white. Then the middle 60's hit and America was launched into abrupt and continuous cultural, social, economic, and technological change that has become a way of life.

Nostalgia? You bet. Yet one could say that in my childhood and young adult life there was nothing new under the sun. Of course change took place, but placidly, imperceptibly, and was not glorified. Koheleth was right then, but is he wrong now? I don't think so. I think we are too easily misled by the river's surface. In my lifetime America has fought five wars and the world has been

wrenched by many more. From what I've seen of war, there is nothing new under the sun. Yes, weaponry has changed ("advanced" is misleading morally), but the reasons people make war and the suffering caused by war are as always. Ideology is ideology, genocide genocide. In America minorities, women, and gays have struggled for equality, as people always have. In economics greed is always with us. Love, the heart's hope and passion, is as misguided, fickle, clumsy, hurtful, faithful and glorious as ever. People are born, mature, decline, and return to dust as always. Nature unleashes devastation and death as always. And, as Paul Tillich observed, to be human is to face the anxieties of guilt, death, and meaninglessness— anywhere, anytime—always the same.

Life's deep currents are, as always, the same under the sun.

America is a roll up your sleeves, get the job done nation. We pride ourselves on solving practical problems, on improving our gizmos and machines, on greasing the skids of life, which we believe improve our quality of life. Microwaves, self-cleaning ovens, cell phones, Blackberries, I Pods, GPS, and digital to infinity—better technology for a better future. Lose a beloved pet, we'll clone it (for a price). Lose your mind, we've got a pill for it (for a price). Lose your way, we have a manual to find it (for a price). We mistake practical wisdom for moral and metaphysical wisdom. A problem with ethics: for an easy, sure fire solution take a workshop or listen to Dr. Phil. A glib consultant will fix your moral glitches. Metaphysical angst? Simple, buy a book on the ten steps to connect with life's source or force or whatever, read it, and presto, your life will be even more effective at getting, getting with it, getting things done, getting and spending.

So, ye Ludites out there, is the answer to bemoan and give up technology, go back to the golden age of the milkman, the corner mom and pop store, of Benny Goodman, of Your Show of Shows, Wonder Bread, Wonder Woman, soda

fountains, and ink pens? No, because we couldn't and wouldn't. Couldn't because change, especially technology, will take place driven as it is by economics. Many of the gadgets we have do not improve us as humans (do we need the cell phone to tell someone about our lunch?), but making and buying them is how a free-market, global economy works, especially in a privileged country like ours. Wouldn't because we really believe we need all this stuff to be advanced and happy.

While increased convenience is hardly a major step forward for humanity, science and technology have contributed much to our understanding of the natural world and to improving our health. For this reason we shouldn't renounce progress in this key; we should, however, do more for the people of the world who suffer from deprivation and disease that can be alleviated and cured. We have spent billions on a war against Iraq purportedly to make the world safer, that is, I assume, to save lives, yet we would never spend the equivalent to save many more lives by combating hunger, malnutrition, and disease. Iraq is not about saving lives, at least non-American lives. We as a nation were traumatized by the loss of life on 9/11, but we are not as shocked at the much greater daily loss of life elsewhere in the world. The haves have more and the have nots less. Yet all die.

There is nothing new under the sun.

Early in his essay, Kohleth observes that "For everything its season, and for every activity under the sun its time:

A time to be born and a time to die;

A time to plant and a time to uproot;

A time to kill and a time to heal;

A time to break down and a time to build up;

A time to weep and a time to laugh;

A time for mourning and a time for dancing;

A time to scatter stones and a time to gather them;  
A time to embrace and a time to abstain from embracing;  
A time to seek and a time to lose;  
A time to keep and a time to discard;  
A time to tear and a time to mend;  
A time for silence and a time for speech;  
A time to love and a time to hate;  
A time for war and a time for peace; (3.1-8)

The rhythms of our lives. Is wisdom discerning them, understanding their pattern and plan? Koheleth denies that such wisdom is possible: “He has made everything to suit its time; moreover he has given mankind a sense of past and future, but no comprehension of God’s work from beginning to end” (3.11). I don’t think Koheleth denies the possibility of practical or moral wisdom, but he does deny comfort metaphysics—that we know what meaning life has from above. Because of this he concludes, “I know that there is nothing good for anyone except to be happy and live the best life while he is alive. Indeed, that everyone should eat and drink and enjoy himself, in return for his labor, is a gift of God”(3.12,13). Even if we don’t believe in a god who gives life, we can accept life as a gift, a good we possess for nothing we have done. Like Socrates, Koheleth asserts that we understand little about life, that such knowledge is reserved for the gods; unlike Socrates, he throws up his hands and focuses on enjoying life. Yet, like Socrates, he does not think much of the prevailing reasons given for a good life.

Koheleth, whose defining perspective of life is the death that comes to us all, has other ideas as he recounts his attempt to find life’s meaning in the usual suspects: sensual pleasure, building great works, loving money, and gaining wisdom. Of these, sensual pleasure would seem most obviously to be the least

valuable, the most transient. Enjoyment encompasses much more like the intellect, friendship and love, and creativity. As he observes, cheering our bodies with wine (2.4) is futile. A moment's reflection by any of us who appreciate the pleasures of the body—sport and fitness, food and drink, and sex—will dismiss quickly any idea that they are an adequate *raison d'être* of our existence. A good meal with fine wine is better if shared with those whose company we enjoy, a form of communion, of breaking bread together. Obviously sex with love surpasses the unemotional orgasm. And often, although not always, we exercise—bike, hike, walk, play tennis—with others with whom we talk and share the experience. We would think someone sadly dim and wildly off the mark who told us that life's end is pleasuring the flesh. But we would also find someone's view of life sadly limited if it excluded the joys of the body.

The soul, after all, is embodied. Attempts to draw a bright line between body and soul are seriously misguided. We sense they are different, yet we know they are united, two aspects of one person. Yes, I think, therefore I am (thank you, Descartes), but I am also a sensing, sensuous, emotional I. The same I. Mortifying the flesh is, well, mortifying. Some who hawk pleasure would have us mortify the mind. The ideal is not war between soul and body, not the starvation or death of one or the other, but harmony—often easier said than done.

Faux pleasure. Martha Stewart's response to her sentencing was that she should not suffer more because she has done good for others. What good? Is the creation of desires in people for inauthentic pleasures good? Our consumer economy works only because it makes us believe we need the latest fashions, food and technology to be happy. If Koheleth found true pleasure to be futile, what would he make of faux pleasure? To go through life chasing after the latest style

sold to us as necessary for a full life? Is our telos to live like Martha Stewart? Of course, one could say that there is no authentic us, that humans all over the world, in every historical time and place, have always been sold a cultural bill of goods, can do nothing but pick their pleasures off the social rack available to them. To say this, though, abandons any notion of genuine individual ways of living. Authentic pleasure is founded on understanding our true emotional, spiritual, aesthetic, and bodily needs and desires. What this means, at a minimum, is see through the faux offerings of a constantly churning consumerism, hawked by people like Martha Stewart.

“I undertook great works...” asserts Koheleth, continuing his survey of human aspirations, “I achieved greatness...”(2.4,9). That sounds familiar: I conquered, directed, built... To build a great company like Microsoft, certainly that is devotion worthy of life. But Bill Gates will die as did Henry Ford, who also built a great company. As a kid, in April, 1947, I watched the Ford cortege as it passed on the edge of my Detroit neighborhood on its way to the family cemetery close by. I was too young, then, to be very philosophical and think, like Koheleth, that Ford’s “handiwork, all (his) labor and toil: it was futility, all of it, and a chasing of the wind, of no profit under the sun” (2.11). I just watched as it made its slow procession: who was I, who was this Detroit son of a faithful Ford worker living in a neighborhood far from the grand homes of the Dodges and Fords?

I’m sure I had no inkling of what “great works” were. My father and mother, who provided a secure and loving home for me in our modest white frame house on Terry Street, didn’t aspire to such great works. For me, pedaling my Schwinn through the streets between Joy Road and Tireman, Greenfield and the railroad tracks, greatness was symbolized by the two-story red brick homes on Sussex and Coyle, but that was a vague, minimalist view. What did I know of industrial and political power, of might? Not much—the only entrepreneur in my life was Carl

Keply's dad who made formica tables in a small operation known as Keply's Manufacturing. After college, I knew, but so what?

The string of dark cars in the distance bearing Henry Ford's body. What does it mean to build great works when death ends all effort? When what one has built passes on to those who may or may not maintain it? Egypt with its great pyramids and Rome with its great empire have disappeared—all great works do. Why, then, build them? I don't think Koheleth says that we shouldn't, only that we must realize we will die and they will eventually disappear in history's past, and these efforts are meaningful only if we enjoy doing them because they guarantee nothing more. There are no ultimate accomplishments that transcend life and death, and undertaking great works has worth only as it enriches our lives. To bring our Socratic perspective in here: great works must enhance our souls as well as providing enjoyment. If they do so then they are good even though we will die and they will disappear. All we have are our moments here, nothing more; Koheleth's wisdom understands this. The day of Ford's procession there were other funerals in Detroit, funerals of factory workers like my dad. Death came to all equally. One created a gigantic company, the others modest homes. Their lives were good if at the end they could say that "I cared for myself and others, and I enjoyed my years." That is the only way to understand life lived in death.

We hope that our work will benefit others. The creators of science, businesses, charities, and the arts want the world to be better because of their creations. Ford's Model T, the plays of Shakespeare, the efforts of parents, doctors, teachers to affect those they care for, all want good to come of their work, in addition to the joy it brings them as they labor all of their days under the sun. Yet all we can do is hope; of the fruits of our labor we have no ultimate control; fate

and time will have their way, so again we must find our happiness in our effort, our intention, in the desire of our soul.

Three men, three generations: Henry Ford, Paul Hernandez (my father), and Jack Hernandez (me). How to evaluate our very different lives, that is the question. America says that's easy: great works make a great person—and I think for awhile I bought that. But what about my father who was born in Mexico, became a U.S. citizen, migrated to Detroit, set up machines in Ford's Highland Park Tractor Division until 1965, and who provided love, support, a home, and a model of pride and integrity in his work and life for my mother, my sister, and me? If great works make a good, meaningful life then most Americans are falling far short. This doesn't make sense, yet it is the myth of success that thickens our social air. I don't know much about Ford's personal life (I do know that he was anti-Semitic), but I do know his life was not better than my dad's simply because he founded the Ford Motor Company. If we take "great works" to mean publicly acclaimed, outstanding achievement in any field of human endeavor, art, sport, academics, science, politics, etc., it still rings false to equate this with a good, meaningful life.

One of the legacies of my religious experience is the view that a person's life is valued by the health and fruits of her soul. Not great works, great souls. Even after I no longer believed in Christian theology, I knew this to be true and was attracted to Socrates because of it. We, I, are tempted, however, to forget this truth, replacing it with the values of success embraced and celebrated by our society, that the more wealth, material goods, prestige, power, and public acclaim we have the better our lives, but that leaves most of us living in dry, inferior husks. And that cannot be. Death, says Koheleth, is the leveler, the mirror that tells each of us that only the quality and enjoyment of our living are, finally, relevant. Fortunately, many of us know this; unfortunately, many learn it too late, if at all.

Learning this is wisdom, yet Koheleth maintains that wisdom is also futile, a chasing of the wind. How can this be? What does he mean? He doesn't mean that practical wisdom is not worth having as he approvingly cites a number of proverbs that counsel successful living: "A good name smells sweeter than fragrant ointment...Do not be quick to take offence, for it is the fools who nurse resentment...Do not ask why the old days were better than the present; for that is a foolish question" (7.1,9,10). He also approves of moral wisdom, although he observes that he has seen "the righteous perish in their righteousness (and) the wicked growing old in wickedness" (7.15). Death comes to both equally. Yet he admires moral living and concludes, in some despair, "...I have found one man in a thousand worthy to be called upright..." (7.28).

What is futile is metaphysical wisdom—that we can decipher the grand meaning of life: the plan is hidden. Even justice, which we should be able to discern and rely on as evidence of a divine plan does not prevail. Oppression is everywhere. While practical and moral wisdom may make life good, they don't always because "One more thing I have observed under the sun: swiftness does not win the race nor strength the battle. Food does not belong to the wise, nor wealth to the intelligent, nor success to the skillful; time and chance govern them all" (9.11). Koheleth concludes: "...no human being should be able to discover what is happening here under the sun. However hard he may try, he will not find out; the wise may think they know, but they cannot find the truth of it" (8.17). That life is a gift and death a fact is all we know, so we must attempt to live as best we can enjoying the days we have under the sun.

What an un-American philosophy! How it contradicts comfort metaphysics with its belief that life has a knowable (often in great detail) end and Rotarian go-go optimism that anyone who works hard can achieve material success. But experience belies this belief. Time and chance do govern all, from our genes to the

circumstance of our birth and breaks in life. Naturally our effort contributes to what we achieve, but less than we would like to believe. I did not choose the ability, however modest, to write; did not choose to be born in America to loving parents who stayed together; did not choose the coincidences that led to my going to college, or coming to Bakersfield College. Other roads were almost taken. This is not the wisdom of passive quietism. I respect human freedom too much for that. I believe we should strive and choose, only that we acknowledge the large role time and chance play in life. Death, time, and chance are unalterable facts of life, the backdrop against which we all labor and live under the sun. Wisdom knows this, and wisdom instructs us to enjoy the days we have. But how?

First, whatever our tasks, of youth, middle-age, older-age, we should do them with “might” because in death there is “neither doing or thinking; neither understanding nor wisdom” (9.10). What else can we do? (Well, we could be sluggards.) This life, however long or short, is all we have and part of its enjoyment is working at the tasks that matter to us, that contribute to our living a good life. Part of being human is the desire to create, to make. Koheleth’s point is that the enjoyment of doing this is finally its value—and I would take enjoyment in its largest sense to mean satisfaction, pleasure, even if the task is frustrating and difficult. We hope our tasks bear fruit, but they may not, at least in abundance, and when we are dead we will know nothing of their effects. The sower casts the seed, cultivates the land, prunes the growth, but weather, pestilence, and the market may frustrate her efforts. If the task is worth doing, however, she takes joy in it, whatever the outcome.

Socrates examined men’s souls in Athens, my dad set up machines in Detroit, and I have taught for over forty years in Bakersfield. We have each had his task—Koheleth would ask whether each enjoyed it. I assume Socrates did, although he does not mention this at his trial, emphasizing duty instead. My father

definitely enjoyed his work, took great pride in his toolbox and skill. And teaching, too, has unquestionably given me great satisfaction, at times joy, even when I'm not sure of the difference I'm making in students' lives. Even Sisyphus endlessly rolling his rock, can be described as happy, says Camus. Doing work with "might." But too often, for too many, work is mechanical drudgery, providing no satisfaction save a paycheck. This to Koheleth, would be futility within futility. The sadness of squandering days under the sun.

My daughter and sister and friends keep me alive. Without them my mind and spirit would collapse into a narrow, dark hole, from which neither light nor life would escape. Koheleth observes that "Two are better than one...and if two lie side by side they keep each other warm, but how can one keep warm by himself?"(4.9,11). And, again, "Enjoy life with a woman you love all the days of your allotted span here under the sun, futile as they are..."(9.9). Friendship and family and love, enjoyment of these gives life meaning. This is true and we know it. The outcast, the lonely we pity. Even outlaws and the wicked have companions. Without them life is unbearable.

Home and hearth, necessary ingredients for a happy, good life. I need solitude to read, think, and write, but solitude is different from being alone and lonely. Solitude is space within a home, being alone is being homeless, without someone to share daily life. Homelessness is not a necessarily a physical condition, literally with no place of one's own. It is a kind of spiritual solipsism. I have a home, but have no one to share it with. I have lost two parents, two children, and two marriages; I think of my family and friends as living in tents of happiness, which I visit, warming myself at their hearths. I am fortunate to have them, as I wander from tent to tent enjoying them as they enjoy their families. Like coals I take the warmth of their hearths home with me until it cools and I'm alone again. That we should prize our home is a wisdom I have learned late in life; I seemed to

have lacked the vocabulary of caring and sharing. I know now that we must cherish friendship and love, relish family and children and spouse or companion, for without them we do not live fully even if we enjoy doing our tasks.

In winter and spring of 1992, after my son's death the previous fall, while I was on sabbatical leave, I wrote a poem that expresses what I feel about family, loss, and the importance of home:

### Another Easter

Another Easter, time of rebirth  
Arrives. Children rejoice  
With voices bright  
Under a mother sun  
Incubating this risen day.

On other Easters I hid eggs  
Craftily. That time  
Crackling with giggles of discovery  
Is quiet now, like a house at night  
When all the stories have been read.

One is missing, one is dead,  
One adult and far away.  
Their Easters still dye my mind.  
This year could have killed Easter,  
But time is kind: I still open to the sun.

“A time to weep and a time to laugh.” Weeping and laughter make us attend to life, highlight moments, freeze time. Sorrow over loss of friends and family, of home, fortunately, is occasional; our hearts could not take its constant pounding. Humor should be pervasive. Not the mocking, sarcastic kind but laughter which simultaneously attests to the joy and transience of life by singling out moments whose seriousness is made light. Laughter at ourselves and the pretensions of the world make us glad, glad to be alive, glad to be at this feast, so full of fun. I did not become a preacher; I became a teacher instead; but for the way life breaks I would be a comic. We need others to weep with; we need others to laugh with. We shake with grief; we shake with laughter. One follows the other: weeping puts us in the grave; laughter resurrects us. The poles of the human heart.

In our few days under the sun we eat, sleep, talk, play, work, travel, read, watch TV, exercise, and so much more that color our daily existence, our life’s composition. Sometimes, as in sharing a meal, they are done as part of doing our tasks and building our friendships and homes; at other times, as in gardening or washing the car, they seem peripheral to these important sources of enjoyment. They seem so quotidian, so insignificant, so usual, so un-dramatic that we may easily forget how much of our days they take up, may even be impatient to get them over with, consider them a waste of time. Yet they take up time, and there is a time for them. Koheleth reminds us that they, too, are to be enjoyed: “Go, then, eat your food and enjoy it, and drink your wine with a cheerful heart...” (9.7). If we do not enjoy our lives, the totality of our lives, the minutes, hours, days, he has this question: “What if the man (who does not enjoy life) should live a thousand years twice over and have no enjoyment?” (6.6). His answer: “...then I maintain that a stillborn child is in better case than he” (6.3).

Fifty years ago I was seventeen, a young man. Koheleth has advice to young men (and young women): “Delight in your youth, young man, make the most of

your days...” (11.9). This he follows with a vivid, poetic description of the decline of old age and urges us to “Remember the grave in the days of your youth, before the bad times come and the years draw near when you will say, ‘I have no pleasure in them,’ before the sun and the light of the day give place to darkness, before the moon and the stars grow dim, and the clouds return with the rain.” (12.1).

“Remember the grave before the silver cord is snapped and the golden bowl is broken, before the pitcher is shattered at the spring and the wheel broken at the well...” (12.6).

But youth, ah youth, does not acknowledge death; then, when our skin is smooth and our bodies strong, we think unlimited our days under the sun. Perhaps this protective coating is necessary for us to live optimistically. To dare work, love, and form a family. But one day we awaken and our time is mostly gone; we see ourselves at the end of life, a place, where, it seems just yesterday, we saw those before us, not understanding that we saw ourselves.

When I was in my early forties, I played tennis every Friday afternoon with a group of faculty friends at a local park. One Friday soon after one of our colleagues died, I had an inkling of mortality and wrote this poem:

### Jastro Park

To focus on a tennis ball  
Completely  
Requires the brain  
To stop frame the world  
Halt the spin  
Tilt and whirl,  
Feeling only

The mind's tight grip  
On silence the instant  
Before the explosive  
Release.

After three sets  
Happy in our bodies  
And a good forehand or two,  
We drink beer  
From a cooler  
In Jastro Park  
Ringed by joggers.

At first our talk  
Is tennis, fellowships,  
And summer plans, then  
As imperceptibly  
As the cooling down  
Of our muscles, we  
Mention Muriel's recent death  
And the world stops again,  
The joggers, the late afternoon  
Yellow valley sun, all  
Are frozen on a photograph  
Of us centered in light  
And park shadows, a group  
That has played together

For years, suddenly aware  
Of life's rush to the edge  
And our need to hold  
Moments motionless like  
A tennis ball stopped in flight.

In a class on critical thinking when we discuss stereotypes, I show a Southpark episode about older drivers, which is brazen and hilarious in its caricature. I laugh along with the students, but my laugh is one of recognition, theirs one of distance. Sometimes in discussing wisdom in a philosophy class, I'll casually point out that my death will come in a small and fairly definite number of years, while they have a large and fairly definite number of years. And I ask, how will you live them? This is mostly, I suspect, for them an academic, not an existential question. But for Koheleth it is the existential question, one which we should face when young, middle-aged, and older because all of our attempts to stay time are defeated by death's pull and certainty. We should do this so that just before the silver cord is cut, we can say, yes, we have enjoyed life.

## CHASING THE WIND

Wisdom cries aloud in the open air,  
And raises her voice in public places.

(Proverbs 1.20)

Wisdom seeks us. Philosophy says we should love wisdom, Sophia. Socrates urges us to pursue wisdom with ardor, letting no obstacle deter us. Koheleth regards wisdom as a chasing of the wind, yet even he admonishes us to live rightly. How do we answer wisdom's call, embrace her, tightly, never letting go? It is not easy. Socrates knows that finding truth about how to live is a difficult, unremitting examination. Koheleth, using his reason, has given us a general idea of a good life, which will take careful thought to round out. As I mull over what I've said about wisdom a subversive, skeptical voice asks whether it is nothing more than a bouquet of pretty words. I can see a student, young, tanned, bored, sitting in the last row of my class, propped up against the wall thinking the troubling question that stops philosophy in its tracks: "So what?" Or an even more dismissive, "whatever." I stop in mid-sermon; I am, after all, paid to anticipate and answer such questions; and after forty years of talking about the "higher" things of life—the human spirit, truth, good and evil, justice, love—you'd think I would simply smile, a small, knowing smile, a licking-of-the-chops smile, a "gotcha" smile and fill the classroom with a glorious, soul-captivating answer. You'd think...

But after spending most of the summer of 2004—the summer of Ronald Reagan's endless eulogy, Bill Clinton's bloated memoir, Martha Stewart's transformation into a con, Shaq's leaving L.A., the pomp and pretense of the

Democratic and Republican conventions, genocide in Sudan, the AIDS crisis in Africa, good tennis with my daughter, mountain biking and kayaking with good friends—writing this slim book about wisdom, bunches of words every day at the Sequoia Sandwich Company, usually at a small table, by a plant, by the front door, I am still bothered by this question, bothered by the relevance of these words, any words, about wisdom. I ask myself what part wisdom has played in my life this summer. Have I consulted, listened to its voice? And how about my family and friends—would these words make any difference to their lives? We haven't had any conversations about wisdom—is this because I sense that it has little bearing on life, on getting up in the morning to going to bed at night?

This is a philosophical meditation on wisdom. I have consciously tried to avoid the bromides, slogans, clichés, and ten-step format popular with self-help books, with their hazy, metaphysical, feel-good assertions like “connect with the source” and simplistic therapeutic suggestions like “accept yourself.” In any major bookstore there are bookshelves filled with such books, each claiming the secret to wisdom, to a good life. There are many who, vaguely sensing a lack in their lives, lap up and resonate to these books, but I suspect their lives are not much changed. I know this because I, too, am susceptible to this kind of psychological sugar rush. A flood of inspiration, a flush in the skin, an aroused spirit, but not much else. Then, of course, there are those like my philosophy student who simply regard any discussion of wisdom as irrelevant to real life, except to be learned to pass a philosophy exam.

How does wisdom—metaphysical wisdom—become important in our lives so that we pursue it, think about it, live it? What makes us want to live a meaningful, good life and take the time and effort to do it? I don't mean consuming our every waking moment; that would be impossible unless we all lived in monastic-like communities. More like a conscious effort at regular reflection

and action guided by the reflection. How do we get this into our lives? From my religious experience, I believe that something has to happen to us, jolt us into awareness about life, our life, especially its swift passing, and cause us to ask whether we are not merely living, but living the right kind of life. Because biology and culture shield us from asking this question nesting at the heart of our existence, I think there has to be a crisis of some kind, perhaps an abrupt event or an accumulation of troubling experiences. Many of the religious describe a sudden conversion that opened their eyes, something I sought to bring about when I preached.

On a non-religious note: recently the L.A. Times Health section told of a young man who came to Los Angeles to find fame and fortune in the music business, which included some hard partying. He began to experience some physical problems like severe headaches, shortness of breath, and twitching, which his therapist attributed to panic attacks. But when he passed out one day on the bathroom floor, he went to a doctor and a malignant tumor the size of a lemon was found in the region of the brain that controls the left side of his body. His doctors were able to remove only fifty percent of the tumor and he went through chemo, other standard treatments, and alternative therapies like acupuncture, a macrobiotic diet, and meditation. This experience woke him up to the chaos of his life, its lack of telos, prompting him to ask about whether he was living the right kind of life. He turned from his music ambitions, got a degree in oriental medicine, and now works along with M.D.s at Cedar Sinai Medical Center helping cancer patients as a licensed acupuncturist and Doctor of Oriental Medicine. He has been cancer free for eight years. His life has changed.

What has intervened in my life, disrupted its predictable daily flow, made me pause now to think these thoughts?

Because I have taught literature and philosophy, the question of how to live has always been a part of my thinking. I see the purpose of teaching these subjects to be more than academic, to be enlightening, even spiritually transforming. An ideal, yes, but one that is plausible and in keeping with the intentions of many writers and thinkers. We read poetry, fiction, and drama to learn about life not merely to analyze artistic patterns. The same is true of philosophy, although that's not how many academic philosophers understand it. But I've always taught in a community college, which does awaken minds and change lives. Teaching, for me, has been a vocation, a kind of calling to help others; as such it is a continuation of my religious vocation, not with its intent to evangelize and convert to "the truth," but with its sense of the importance of living a meaningful and good life.

Even I am no longer religious in a doctrinal sense, religion's concern with bettering the soul and moderating, if not transcending, the materialistic, selfish preoccupation of our society has been imprinted on me and been a theme in my life, although not always consciously or rigorously. I write as one still struggling to know and to live.

I write this book as one who has been shaken, beginning with a crisis two years ago. Before then there were two crises that made me think deeply about my life, though not with the ongoing power of this latest one. A crisis is a turning point, often a time for decision. It has the sense of a sudden, unexpected intervention which may lead to drastic, dramatic change. It can be a time of emotional and intellectual upheaval. I think that Socrates, through his subjecting others to a rigorous examination of their beliefs, expected them to experience an intellectual crisis that would change them, but often failed because a crisis has to engage more than our minds; it has to cleave open our whole life, engage our deepest feelings. Even then our instinct is to close it up and continue on our way.

In 1991, in late August, my son, Paul, who was twenty seven, took his life. He was my firstborn, my first experience as a father, and he lived with me after my divorce in 1977. He jumped from a bridge near Niagara Falls, leaving behind on the bridge only a bag with a few of his belongings. His body was not found until October. A death of a child is stunning; a child's suicide is an upheaval that never ends. Fortunately, I was surrounded by a caring wife, daughter, family, friends, and students, so while I was wounded with loss, regret, and guilt I was not pitched into an abyss of despair and meaninglessness. John Edwards, the current Democratic nominee for the vice presidency, lost a sixteen-year-old son in a care accident, an event which caused him to think about his life and change careers. I was fifty four; my life did not change so drastically—I was already in a satisfying vocation that served others—but feelings about time, loss, and helplessness began to seep into my consciousness. One summer soon after Paul's death, my daughter Laura and I visited my sister and mother in Saginaw, Texas, just outside of Fort Worth. We had a fun time with my young nephews and nieces, my sister Kathy, and my mother, who showed us old family photographs. After our visit I wrote the poem Bearing West, which expresses my mood at the time:

### Bearing West

Sliding through the air  
At thirty thousand feet  
I bear west, home  
To loss and after, to face

My aging. Nothing can  
Efface my life so far,

Nothing can predict  
Tomorrow's unraveling.

The air is bright and flawless  
Here. Below, clouds  
Float unbothered by,  
Throwing slow, massive

Shadows on brown and scarred  
Ground. The jet's constant  
Wind lulls my mind  
As we try to reverse time.

A white shred of cloud  
Reminds me of my mother's  
Thinning nest of hair  
Perched above her pinched

Back, as she stands  
By a wet, unkempt field  
Waving my daughter and me  
Goodbye, allowing a tear.

Our visit has grounded my daughter  
In my past, with photos  
Surprising my memory: Mom  
Audacious in a bathing suit

And me, fifteen and fluid,  
Shirtless, glistening with life.  
Hours are gathered around  
Our small circle here:

Grandmother, father, daughter,  
Three lines traced in time,  
One beginning, one ending,  
Mine facing both ways.

Time cannot be reversed  
For good. This year my son  
Died. I cannot undo  
That. Cannot stop

My mother's steps to death,  
Cannot prevent my daughter's  
Encounters with uncertainty,  
Cannot make much right.

Spring 1994, early March to be exact; Laura and I had arranged to visit my mother and my sister's family in Saginaw. Several weeks before our visit, mother was hospitalized in a coma freakishly caused by a virus. Laura and I decided to stay with our scheduled visit, and soon after we arrived in late March, we saw mom in the hospital, lying quietly as though she were peacefully asleep, except that her eyes didn't move. Under Texas law the oldest child has the legal

responsibility to decide for an incompetent parent, but whatever decision was made I felt should be one which my sister, Kathy, agreed with. Mom's doctor met with us explaining that she had suffered brain damage when she had stopped breathing for several minutes before the paramedics arrived at her apartment and revived her after Kathy had called. Consequently, it was almost certain that she would never regain consciousness and we should let her die naturally by not keeping her alive on any machines. After, Kathy and I decided that we would let mom live naturally but instruct the hospital not to use means like a tracheotomy or respirator to keep her alive. Back at the hospital Laura and I wrote out the instructions to the medical staff: I dictated and Laura wrote (because of my gnarled handwriting)—later she told me that was one of the hardest things she had ever done. It was for me, too, and I have never forgotten it. After putting mom's things and affairs in order, Laura and I flew home, she to Baltimore and I to Bakersfield. A day later mom died.

My father had died a few years before, after a series of strokes disabled his mind, so much so that the last time I saw him he did not recognize me, except maybe once when we hugged in the living room of mom and dad's apartment in San Antonio and he wept. But with my mother's death I suddenly felt alone; the parents who loved me, raised me, and sacrificed for me were gone and I was next in line in front of the grave. I was fifty seven when mom died, and suddenly mortality was more than an abstraction.

The loss of my son and my parents brought death into my life, grabbed me and turned me to look at it as a memory and a future. To see life, as the Psalmists say, as smoke and frail grass. Yet I went on living much as I had until two years ago when I was forced to ask how I have lived and should live, questions which continue to preoccupy me. To be spiritually and psychologically wrenched has made me realize that a serious and sustained examination of life is brought into

being by a crisis, absent that we mostly cruise along, experiencing the normal difficulties and joys of daily life and assuming our direction to be the right one.

Socrates believed that such examination could be brought about by recognizing our ignorance, specifically that our beliefs about religion, justice, and ethics were at best ill-conceived and poorly thought out. He was disappointed that this did not happen very often, but didn't seem to understand what provokes serious, perhaps life-changing, examination. In profound change reason alone is powerless—an emotional upheaval must accompany any major shift in reason. Reason is like the surface of the earth that shakes, rolls, and separates in an earthquake when the depths of the earth rupture surging waves of powerful energy to the surface. That's why I find Christopher Phillips' use of the Socratic method described in his book *The Socrates Café* to be trivial, a self-promoting, feel-good, and misleading application of Socrates' attempt to change lives. The discussions described in the book have a faux depth, like many class discussions, that never peel off more than a surface layer of thought. At least Socrates knew that something very serious, radical even, was at stake when he engaged a person in discussion of his beliefs. He knew that true examination was one-on-one, a focused, rigorous, relentless pursuit of a theme; unlike group-led discussions that are superficial, never penetrating the veneer of rationality, making their participants feel, however, that for an hour or two they are doing some deep thinking. A deception, a joke, another shallow self-improvement, self-congratulatory book that leaves all happy and untouched. As Socrates knew, serious self-examination leads to ignorance, and, as I would say, to crisis, distress, although I believe the crisis precedes the shift to rational belief. Socrates was a deadly serious, stinging gadfly, not a fluttering popular butterfly.

Suddenly in the summer of 2003, when I had just turned sixty-five, a feeling and perception came upon me, and has not yet receded. Two faults opened

simultaneously, shaking me furiously, when one would have been serious enough. This against the backdrop of being alone, at the end of a long marriage. First, in April I had turned sixty-five, a birthday which made me aware that my life was winding down, that I was now a senior, an older person. This powerful, existential sense of a diminishing future came unbidden, a blow none the less for that. Second, I sensed that retirement was close, that my vocation would soon be over. Not that I am forced to retire soon, only that I sensed it coming, sensed I had done most of my work, again sensed my future shortening. I've often said that retirement is not a concept we would apply to artists or musicians; to do so would be absurd because they stop when they can no longer do their crafts, not because they become eligible for Medicare. The effect of these events was magnified by their interrelatedness: solitary, end of vocation, end of life.

Not that I curled in a ball, moaning in a corner, not that these are grand tragedies, but the weight of loss, grief, and melancholy pressed down hard upon me. The seven deadly emotions of getting older—regret, guilt, grief, sadness, nostalgia, anger, and hopelessness—often had their way with me. So I began to think, and think, and think endlessly about how I had lived my life and how I should live its final stage. I was in crisis. Bound by the serpent of despair, burrowed into by the worm of self-doubt.

Much of what I've felt and thought about is not uncommon among those who grow old in America. As I've noted, older people are regarded as having not much to contribute to society. Just knowing, however, that others feel this way is no consolation and not particularly helpful because I'm concerned with what this crisis and emotions have brought about: an examination about how best to live a life. We all share kinds of suffering with others: death of parents comes to all, illness comes to all, decline and death come to all. But suffering, including feelings of despair and loss, is ultimately an individual matter. It cannot be shared,

and while others can advise us and comfort us, suffering wrenches our soul, our soul alone. No one can live for us, no one can die for us, and no one chooses and experiences our life but us.

Age marks us. Birthdays mark us, categorize us, like tattoos or stigmata. At twenty we become young adults, at forty middle aged, at sixty older, at eighty curiosities. These are quadrants, cultural signposts that tell us where we are on our journey, according to our culture. Twenty is optimistic, forty empowered, sixty pensive, eighty resigned. Naturally, these are generalizations; not all respond the same, but these signposts do affect people, cause them to pause on their journey, consult the map, seen where they've been and where they have to go as "many miles to go" and "promises to keep" become fewer and fewer. At forty I began to think about the end or, perhaps more accurately, became faintly aware that there was an end, but was still far off and I had years to fill and undo mistakes, and accomplishments to notch. Fifty increased my anxiety but physically I felt young and my future's glass still had a lot of room. At sixty-five, though, I suddenly felt most of my life behind, gone into memory, with not that much time left—the idea of beginning became suspect. I started reading the obituary page and noticed that many deaths were near my own age, whereas in the personals most were younger.

It's amazing how time flows by without our grasping it. Hours, days, decades. We seem protected against realizing it. A poem by Billy Collins, *Velocity*, expresses vividly the invisibility, to us, of time relentlessly moving past—here are the last three stanzas:

As we rush down the long tunnel of time—  
The biker, of course, drunk on the wind,  
But also the man reading by a fire,

Speed lines coming off his shoulder and his book,  
And the woman standing on a beach  
Studying the curve of the horizon,  
Even the child asleep on a summer night

Speed lines flying from the poster of her bed,  
From the white tips of the pillowcases,  
And from the edges of her perfectly motionless body.

Occasionally when we are young we are aware of the speed lines, and we stop to, try to halt time, try to freeze the moment, fix it in our memory because we know that it will soon be gone, be behind us in that part of our life that no longer exists. In March, 1965, I did this when I walked at night in a late season snowfall with no sound but my steps in the fresh, undisturbed white and the slow-falling, soft flakes drifting in the streetlight, against a black sky. Because I was moving back to Bakersfield from Detroit, I thought I would never experience this again so I tried to preserve it in my mind. A friend of mine who is forty did the same this summer on an Oregon beach with his children, recognizing that the late afternoon vacation moment, playing in the surf, everyone laughing, would soon pass.

But usually we live unconscious of moving through time, a succession of nows, and may even think of our lives as a movie or a book that is tangible and stored to be played again. But our lives are not elongated like a yardstick, our past is no thing, only memory. All the while it comes and goes, comes and goes until much is gone and little is coming. As St. Augustine pointed out, real existence is now, and now only; what is past is memory (and after that nothing), and what is to come is in our imagination only. If we thought about this constantly we would go crazy, so we don't. Until we are older; in my case, sixty-five. A crisis, and now I

think I'm time besotted, aware of its hurrying by, trying to capture moments with family, friends, and students, trying to hold what is gone even as I grasp it, and thankful for moments of conscious living. And with Koheleth I ask what I have done with my days under the sun and what will I do with those left.

As I try to relish life, I have to ask whether I'm caring for my soul and for others. Searching for truth, for knowledge—have I done it? Doing good for others—have I done it? As I become more conscious of the now, I must try to do as Socrates would: be rational and honest in my beliefs, help others appreciate life and care for their souls. Sounds pompous. Who am I to do this? To presume? I am no Socrates; my voice is light, not weighty. I'm afraid that while the focus of my teaching has been to help others, my life has often been otherwise, has not had a clear focus. I have been too influenced by society's emphasis on success, its materialism, hedonism, consumerism, and preoccupation with self. It has taken this crisis of aging to make me think about and formulate a clear sense of what a meaningful and good life is. All I can do is bear witness to what I have discovered, and hope those I know have and will reflect on their own lives. Wisdom is not the same for all; we have to each do it for ourselves and share with each other. Even if we agree on the general shape of wisdom, it will play out differently in each life, which is unique.

I do know that a life of wisdom does not just happen. A crisis, short or long lasting, may not result in a sustained focus because the fault line may close, daily life with its pressures may extinguish any illumination we may have received. A crisis severs the speed lines, disrupts the flow of time, but only for awhile, and soon time's river picks us up and carries us on as usual. I struggle to reflect on and live my life by wisdom. Writing this book has made me painfully aware of this problem. Inspirational seminars and self-help books all share this defect: we have a brief high, then return to the life we have always led under the sun. Whatever our

notion of wisdom, to live it takes constant reflection, effort, and support. At his trial Socrates said, "...I spend all my time going about trying to persuade you, young and old, to make your first and chief concern not for your bodies or for your possessions, but for the highest welfare of your souls."

The life of wisdom is a directed life; it has a telos, a goal; and virtue is living in a way to achieve that goal. How we think, speak, act embody the abstract concepts of our wisdom. We need both: the idea of wisdom and the life of wisdom. I wonder what I would have said to my children had they asked me what a good life is. I wonder, even if I could have uttered some finely spun words, whether my life would have worn them as its cloak? Wisdom is more than a hobby, an avocation; wisdom informs all that we think and do. Cultivating such a life is not easy, the seed can fall on stony ground or the young plant get choked with weeds or burned by the sun. This is particularly true if we do it alone. A life of wisdom needs the support of others, even, if for Koheleth, it is only one other. A life based on comfort metaphysics, which includes most religions, has many formal, institutional supports: an official scripture, a creed, and a community of believers. A Christian, for example, can each day read and ponder the Bible, can join Bible study groups, and can worship with like-minded believers, and more.

While formal structure is helpful, perhaps necessary, to a life of wisdom, because my concept of wisdom is not a form of comfort metaphysics I have no official support to aid me. Yet I feel, because of my religious experience, that such supports are needed. In particular I need a "scripture" to read and meditate upon and a community of those who believe as I do. The triad of a life of wisdom is reflection, action, and community. Yet how do we do this outside traditional systems of belief? How do we daily enrich our chosen path? To do so is a challenge, requiring discernment, commitment, and discipline, because like Socrates, we are seekers—seekers not prodded and guided by "shepherds," but

seekers using our own reason, experience, and that of others who have lived, thought about, and spoken of wisdom.

Reflection, for me, is the heart of the life of wisdom. It involves reading, meditation, and writing. The soul needs regular nourishment, so each day I try to read something—poetry, prose—that reinforces and enlarges my concept of a good life, a life of wisdom. Some favorites are Psalms, Prophets, and Ecclesiastes from the Old Testament, some of the sermons of Jesus and letters of Paul; devotional religious literature of Cathleen Norris and Thomas Merton; Buddhist thought; poetry like *Repair* by C.K. Williams, *Selected poems* by Nathan Zach, *Otherwise* by Jane Kenyon, *Different Hours* by Steven Dunn, the poems of Stanley Kunitz, Billy Collins, and Phillip Larkin; and the *Meditations* by Marcus Aurelius. I often reread the *Apology* and books like Annie Dillard's *For the Time Being*. Repetition is important because the more we read a piece the more we discover and the more it becomes part of us, dyes our soul.

I read these in no set order, and, unfortunately, at no set time, although before I sleep at night is the most usual. The best would be in the morning before the day's events begin and at night after they are over. These readings should deepen our understanding of life, especially transcending our natural self interest and existential isolation, connecting us with others, reminding us of life's goodness. The point isn't to read a lot, but to reflect attentively on short selections, to drink deeply. We can anticipate our day and assess our day in their light; at times because of what we have to do or have done we might select a reading for guidance, the words tuning the soul. I've found, also, that if we do this at set time, in a set place, we begin to anticipate it, look forward to it as we might a meal. It is important for our place to be quiet, free of distraction, because the mind is restless, not easily stilled and focused. There is nothing new under the sun in these observations; they are commonly found in most spiritual traditions, but I think

those of us outside such traditions can too easily forget the importance of regular reflection.

I hope it's clear that the wisdom I'm referring to is not the practical kind, but metaphysical, tied to the moral at the highest level of character—being a good person, being concerned for others. Recently in its weekly health section the L.A. Times described an older fitness trainer as having wisdom, but this “wisdom” seemed to vaguely mean practical wisdom, how to cope as an older person. Of course, such wisdom is important, but not what I read and meditate on (except for aging and the passing of time). That's why I often reflect on religious writings. While I don't believe their theology, I do find what is said about care of the soul to be poetic and profound. When the prophet Amos, for example, thunders against indifference and injustice, my heart resonates, as it does to the comfort offered by Isaiah. As I have grappled with the meaning of time in my life, I have reread St. Augustine whose discussions about time in the Confessions have helped clarify it (as much as it can be made clear) for me. Our souls need nudged and nourished by the passion and insight of others, especially by those whose writing rises on soaring wings.

We must also write. Marcus Aurelius' Meditations appear to have been written to remind him of and reiterate his idea of a life of wisdom. Exhortations to the self. In the past few years I've kept a journal, recording the fluctuations of my feelings, helpful ideas (referring at times to my reading), and admonitions for thinking and living. My entries range from the particular and painfully personal to the universal and philosophical. Sometimes prose, sometimes poetry. There are a number of purposes for keeping a journal, from recording events, people, and impressions to self analysis and confession. Wandering rumination to precise logic. All of these are worthwhile, but the most closely allied with the life of wisdom is the journal that personally and philosophically addresses how we are to better live

a good life, understanding impediments to doing so or making suggestions to ourselves.

Before the last few years my notebooks were filled with fragments and drafts of poems, the tracings and struggles of a craft. I wrote little or no prose, but my most recent three notebooks, while containing poetry, have turned almost completely into prose as I have written more about the crisis I've experienced and about living the life I think right. The passing of time, the life of solitude, the impending loss of vocation and shrinking of future have been reflected on and embedded in observations of my daily life and musings about what I've read. Many of the journal entries conclude with an admonition to appreciate and get on with life, a good life—think of and cherish my daughter, my sister, and my many good friends. Not all, of course; some end on despairing notes. It has become clearer to me that my journal is a way for me to better comprehend how to live a meaningful, good life of wisdom and a support to help me do just that. And, what I often need, a prod. I am in the beginning of the last phase of my life, the last opportunity for me to choose to live it as I should; each day I must decide, and writing is a faithful servant.

It is difficult alone, the life of wisdom. We need the support of others; we need a community of those seeking to live the life we prize. In comfort metaphysics the common faith is built and reinforced through myriad activities: song, prayer, groups, taking refreshment together. Unfortunately, this kind of community is not available to solitary practitioners of a life of wisdom. And this, I believe, is a serious lack. When I believed, each Sunday I entered the house of worship, and the polished wood of its pews and its silence, except for the reassuring voice of an organ, brought me into a union with the faith and all who held fast to it. I was refreshed, purified, inspired, and readied for life in the streets outside.

All that has vanished, does not exist for me now. It appears not to have existed for Socrates, nor for Koholeth. While on trial, Socrates describes his mission as a solitary one; he is a gadfly, not one of a cloud of gadflies. He alone stings Athens from its slumber. His passionate, idiosyncratic beliefs isolate him, not from friends, but from a community sharing the same mission. Young men follow him, but there are few apostles, and certainly no congregations. There is no Church of Socrates, although some, like the Stoics, who were followers of his teachings, did create communities. Koholeth, also because of his very unorthodox religious views, appears to be alone in his reasoning about the point of life. Sadly, I think the life of wisdom as I've described it will always be sans community, a spiritual journey alone through life, with the joys of friends and family, but no sharing of a common "faith," no scripture, liturgy, history, hymns, or gathering places. Book discussion groups, now popular in America, as friendly, provocative and insightful as they may be, do not fill this void. Perhaps if a few people identified a few texts they found inspirational and relevant to their conception of the life of wisdom they would have a little organizational support, but it would pale next to the robust institutions of traditional comfort metaphysics. And academic philosophers, as most now conceive their work, would be of little help.

Still, if we choose the life of wisdom I've described we must find ways to grow in it through the days that remain to us under the sun.

# TIME IS KIND

## Going

There is an evening coming in  
Across the fields, one never seen before,  
That lights no lamps.  
Silken it seems at a distance, yet  
When it is drawn up over knees and breast  
It brings no comfort.

Where has the tree gone, that locked  
Earth to the sky? What is under my hands,  
That I cannot feel?

What loads my hands down?

This poem by Phillip Larkin takes a stark, unsentimental view of life and death, rejecting what I call comfort metaphysics. “Religion//that vast moth-eaten musical brocade//created to pretend we must never die,” is his judgment in his poem *Aubade*. Harsh? Yes, but honest.

His is also my look, one that has intensified in the last few years. We are born, live, and die—that is life’s plot line, its unalterable arc. Wisdom begins with this understanding, then asks how we should order our days. Some events, naturally, are out of our control: accidents and illness happen regardless of our planning and effort. We are born into a particular place and time. We do not choose this, nor do we choose our genes, our gifts and limitations. We are molded

by family, country, and culture. These are givens in the arc of life, and to some much is given, to others little.

Even the concepts with which we think about life are given to us. We can transcend these givens, however, by attempting to look at life clearly, describe how best to live it, and understand what we can make happen. We are human, we are immersed in this time, but we have the freedom to read from other times about other lives and chose to live the life that we deem best. We are responsible for choosing a life, and in that choice recommending it to others, family and friends. There is no certainty our choice is absolutely the right one, but uncertainty is part of living, and we must choose in its face, that too is part of living—even drifting unaware is a choice.

Death is nearer to me than it was ten years ago. It is more palpable, more real, like weather no longer an abstraction. I sense the evening coming in over the fields, and I want to live this bit more of my life wisely, joyfully, and with grace. This book is part of that effort, a record of my thoughts, a brief testament I hope will be of help to those who read it, help them as they think through for themselves what makes a good life, a life of wisdom. Within the wind, a still, small voice. For those I love...

The sage despaired,  
Beholding his own mind  
Flickering desperately over  
The great gush of the real,  
To no end, to no avail.

These the last few lines of C.K. Williams' poem *The Blow*, sum up the truth and the challenge of wisdom. The truth: that our lives are part of the "great gush of the real," but only a molecule in creation and heartbeat in time.

In the café where I write these words, Sequoia Sandwich Company, where I have written most of this book in the summer of 2004, people in shorts and jeans order and pick up brown bags stuffed with sandwiches, cookies, and salads. They are of all ages and body sizes and shapes—slim, often rotund. Those who work here in khaki shorts and brown T shirts with the Sequoia logo slice meat in the back and assemble the sandwiches behind the counter. They take orders and bring them to the tables for those who eat inside or outside. I know many of them because I'm a fixture at a small, wooden table for two. They are mostly young, just beginning their journey; they can't conceive of fifty years from now when they will have lived most of their lives. Outside the large plate-glass windows cars pass and are parked; a motorcycle policeman, official and dressed in authority slides by. It is cool in here; hot outside under a relentless July sun. It is a normal, usual Friday, a normal, usual day—a moment in the great gush of the real.

To what avail? All this living, generations upon generations, here on August 13, 2004, in a medium sized city in California, a fleck in the immensity of time and space, a speck in all that has existed, exists, and will exist. The real—matter, energy, life—continuously rolls into being and disappears, here and gone, here and gone. Annie Dillard in *For the Time Being* tries to wrap her mind around the gush of the real: newborn babies, archeology, waves—metaphors, symbols—how can we understand? This is the truth: we are born, come into being, create, struggle, die. Who can know it? Who can slow it? The wonder: on April 8, 1937, at Harper Hospital in Detroit, Michigan, USA, planet Earth, solar system, galaxy, universe, I was born. Born, improbably, because my plucky sperm won the race; improbably, because a Mexican immigrant came north to find work and met the Scotch

daughter of immigrants. The truth: we live and who can understand it? We are not designed to understand it, only live, ride out this wave, beget what we can. Leave a few traces, few traces.

From this perspective it is of no avail. We make no mark on eternity or the billions of years of this universe. A speck, a fleck, a moment. Yet it is our time. *Our time*. And we have minds, consciousness, awareness to make it of some avail, to create a pattern, a good pattern, a good life. This is the challenge, the challenge of wisdom. Not to deny the truth of our existence, its brevity, its fragility, its inevitable end, but to infuse it with meaning, goodness, joy. Those of us who, through fate or fortune, live in a land of plenty can do this better because our days are not wrung with surviving, getting food, shelter, security. We have time to think, room to maneuver, energy and tools to create, freedom to choose. Unfortunately, our days are often consumed with consuming, getting and spending. But not always; my family and friends are filled with love (I am a beneficiary), with a determination to make life better in a more profound way.

To what avail? It would seem that thinking about life and living out our thoughts is easier when we are comfortable, rather than continuously crushed by want or oppression. But this is not always true. Existentialists like Sartre and the logo therapist Frankl point out that under the most adverse circumstances, as long as we retain our rationality and awareness, we can choose how to act. Adverse circumstances, also, precipitate crises, which wake us unto reflection. Often, in fact, we slumber in prosperity. We can almost always make meaning. We can almost always, even in a concentration camp, snatch life from becoming of no avail.

In whatever circumstances, of blessing or deprivation, we can consciously seek wisdom, consciously reflect upon and explain our concept of a good life. Parents, in particular, bear this burden because, although they may live exemplary

lives, they have the responsibility of explaining to themselves and their children why they live as they do. Pass their wisdom on explicitly. While I say this, I would not hold myself up as an exemplar. Those with traditional comfort metaphysics have it done for them by their religious scriptures and teachers, while those of us without comfort metaphysics can easily forget that no one else is teaching our children wisdom. As difficult as that task is it falls on us alone.

To what avail? There are many paths to wisdom. The lesson of Socrates and Koheleth is that we must seek it, that in doing so we will enrich our lives and fulfill our humanity. I still grope, feeling at times only the edges of wisdom, seeing at times only a weak light. As we seek, we bear witness to the importance of wisdom. This is our challenge; this is our answer to the “no avail.” All we have is the trace of our voice and our actions. They, in turn, will disappear, but our time will have been more fruitful because of them. And that’s all we can ask for: that we understand and rejoice in our journey. We have only each other, and as W.H. Auden said in his poem September 1, 1939:

We must love one another or die.

I would also add: we must walk with one another, search with one another, correct and praise one another, celebrate with one another, comfort one another, mourn one another, and be one another.

True wisdom is tinged with regret. The past is not understood, the present too harried, and the future too opaque for us to plot a clear course through life. We are buffeted by emotions, beset by accidents. Getting wisdom is a life long enterprise that grows from a glimmer in our youth to something more robust and relevant in our middle and later years. We live, we muddle. Time does not wait upon our insights; there are no revisions. Neither Socrates nor Koheleth express

regret. Sages and saints rarely do. But we lesser beings do because of wrong and missed turns. Because the past can be remembered, learned from, made amends for, but never changed. We can't tear it down and start over; we reinvent it for the future. Wisdom is living with regret, not allowing it to overwhelm, but not denying it either. The physical signs of growing older are a loss of speed, nimbleness, strength, and stamina. And eyesight, hearing, smooth skin, and hair. The mental signs are nostalgia and regret and remembrance and thanksgiving. Because the past is now most of my life, there aren't many miles to go, but wisdom skips in front. My family and friends love and sustain me.

I will continue to chase the wind and give thanks:

For time is kind: I still open to the sun.