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A Life of Learning

by

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The invitation from the American Council of Learned Societies to give the Haskins Lecture came to me as a great and pleasant surprise. All honor should seem undeserved—should be a surprise—but this one far exceeds my normal chart of hopes and aspirations. Among geographers, I believe only Don Meinig of Syracuse University has given the Haskins Lecture. The honor to him is as well-earned as it is predictable, for Don is not only a distinguished scholar and humanist; he is also one who labors in an established field—the history and historical geography of the United States—that is itself distinguished and honored, in that many of the country's best minds and scholars have chosen to cultivate it. My own area of study is quite different. It is off-center even in geography. Students who take it up tend to be regarded as impractical loners with uncertain job prospects after graduation. True, I now enjoy a modicum of recognition in geography, but it is more a consequence of my longevity—my long-time card-carrying membership in the profession—than of any marked intellectual influence. And so I return to my surprise and pleasure at the invitation from the Council, a venerable institution with a superb record of support for the high roads of learning, which this year chooses, boldly if not wisely, to acknowledge a maverick.

What is it then that I do? My answer is human geography; more precisely, a sub-field within human geography that might be called (albeit inelegantly) systematic humanistic geography. And what is that? I will try to provide an answer, drawing on my own experience and work. A good way to start is to envisage a faculty social gathering. At such a gathering, a historian is unlikely to be asked, "Why are you a historian?" Yet I have been asked repeatedly, "Why are you a geographer, or why do you call yourself one?" My unimposing physical appearance may have prompted the question, for people even now tend to see the geographer as a robust explorer in the mold of Robert Falcon Scott or Indiana Jones. As a matter of fact, when I was an undergraduate, the professors of geography at both Oxford and Cambridge were explorers. The question "Why do you call yourself a geographer?" may also have been prompted by the titles I have given to some of my books. People don't immediately understand how *Morality and Imagination*, *Passing Strange and Wonderful*, *Cosmos and Hearth*, and *Escapism* can be the works of a geographer.

To those who have wondered about my vocation, I respond in three ways, each geared to a different level of seriousness. At a social gathering, when people are not at their most attentive, I am likely to say, "As a child, I moved around a great deal with my family, and there is nothing like travel to stimulate one's appetite for geography." Sad to say, this lazy answer nearly always satisfies my inquirer. It is what he or she expects. My second and more thoughtful response is: I have always had an inordinate fear of losing my way. Of course, no one likes to be lost, but my dread of it is excessive. I suspect that more than physical discomfort is at stake. To be lost is to be paralyzed, there being no reason to move one way rather than another. Even back and front cease to be meaningful. Life, with no sense of direction, is drained of purpose. So, even as a child, I concluded that I had to be a geographer so as to ensure that I should never be disoriented. Geographers always know where they are, don't they? They always have a map somewhere—either in their backpack or in their head.

A childhood hero of mine was Sherlock Holmes. I admired him and

considered him a superb geographer because he could always find his way, whether in the back streets of London and Chicago, or in the wilds of Utah and Tibet. Moreover, Holmes was always socially at ease: he knew how to behave whether the venue was a duchess's drawing room, a Mormon meeting hall, or an opium den. That, too, I found most admirable for, like many young people, I feared social disorientation quite as much as I did the geographical kind. This fear of losing my way has strongly affected my environmental preferences. Unlike many people, I prefer American towns with their geometric street patterns to Old World towns with their maze of narrow alleys. Old World towns are unfriendly to strangers, who must stay a long time to feel spatially comfortable. By contrast, the open grid characteristic of many American towns says right away, "Welcome, stranger." I dislike the tropical rainforest for the same reason: unless one is a native, it invites disorientation. I like the desert because it is an open map, with the sun serving as a dependable marker of east and west, and with sharply-etched landforms—visible from miles away—that unmistakably tell the visitor where he or she is.

But my dread of rainforest and love of desert hint at something deeper than just orientation. Underneath such likes and dislikes are questions of one's fundamental attitude toward life and death. In the rainforest, all I can see and smell—perversely, I admit—is decay. In the desert, by contrast, I see not lifelessness but purity. I sometimes say teasingly to environmentalists that, unlike them, I am a genuine lover of nature. But by "nature" I mean the planet earth, not just its veneer of life—and the whole universe, which is overwhelmingly inorganic.

This leads to my most serious reply to the question, "Why are you a geographer?" I took up geography because I have always wondered, perhaps to a neurotic degree, about the meaning of existence: I want to know what we are doing here, what we want out of life. Big questions of this kind, which occur to most children as they approach puberty, have never left me. But rather than seek an answer in the great abstractions of philosophy and religion, I began my quest at the down-to-earth level of how people make a living in different places and environments. This, to me, was and is the substantive core of human geography. Still, I could never be satisfied with learning about the economics and politics of survival alone. The very word "survival,"

which appears rather often in ecological literature, seems to me unduly restrictive and harsh. It evokes images of nature "red in tooth and claw," of people constantly fighting and struggling, climbing the ladder of well-being only to fall down again. Its message to me is that people can do little more than cope. Perhaps that summarizes the human story, as it does the animal story. But I am not altogether convinced. My almost pathological need to find meaning presses me to ask, again and again, "What else is there? What goes beyond—even far beyond—coping and survival, the vocabulary of nature and of ecological studies?"

I went to Oxford as an undergraduate believing that it offered the best program in human geography. Not so. Geography at Oxford after the Second World War was in the doldrums. Its human geography lacked all inspiration. The only part of the curriculum that gave me any intellectual sustenance was geomorphology—the study of landforms. So I specialized in geomorphology. At Oxford, I came across a paper by a California geographer, John Kesseli, called "The Concept of the Graded River." I liked it: it satisfied my desire for clear reasoning, for the grounding of arguments on evidence that can be seen and touched. In 1951, I went to the University of California at Berkeley to study geomorphology with Kesseli and human geography with Carl Sauer. My graduate student years there were exceptionally happy and productive. Although I spent most of my time working on a geomorphological dissertation, my intellectual engagement with the intangibles of human existence never weakened. I read much else besides technical papers and books on geography. A cousin of mine, who was then a professor of mathematics at the University of Washington, visited me in Berkeley and found a copy of R. G. Collingwood's *Idea of History* and several works on existentialism on my desk. He smiled in a worldly-wise way and said, "You will outgrow it."

Well, I never did. I couldn't jettison the metaphysical questionings of childhood. I continued to tussle with, What does it mean to live on this watery planet called earth? Are we determined by our environment, including its physical elements, or are we free? If we possess even a

small degree of freedom, what have we done with it? All human beings surely want the good life. But what is it? Can one properly and fruitfully speak of the good life in the singular—that is, as a goal toward which humankind as a whole might aspire, or is the good life inevitably relative, a vast array of barely compatible goals dictated by the accidents of taste?

These questions, even when grounded in the tangible facts of geography, remain hard to grapple with. How will I ever find the time to study them? By happy chance, my first tenure-track position was at the University of New Mexico. In the early sixties, New Mexico was a small university located in a modest-sized town that lay in the midst of broad expanses of shrub and desert. The university's geography department was so small that, by hiring me, it doubled its size. We two geographers carried a horrendous teaching load, but felt little pressure to publish. This lack of pressure to publish meant that I had the time and, more important, peace of mind to shift my commitment back to human geography. But I needed more than time and peace of mind. I also needed encouragement and stimulation. These I received from my one geography colleague—a learned man who was also a kindred spirit—and from J. B. Jackson, who lived in Santa Fe and was the founding editor of a magazine called *Landscape*. Under his editorship, this magazine dealt as much with philosophy as with geography; many of its articles moved far beyond descriptions of particular landscapes to seminal reflections on culture and human nature. I lived, then, in a New Mexico oasis, a setting that in its isolation is close to the ideal of a lighthouse on an inaccessible coast recommended by Einstein for the serious postdoctoral student. The desert itself provided me with discipline and inspiration. Its harshness scotched my natural love of ease; its pure lines cleansed my mind of rank growths.

In 1969, thirty-eight years old, I felt that, at last, I knew enough of life and of the world to engage seriously with systematic humanistic geography. I was then a full professor at the University of Minnesota. With that status achieved, I convinced myself that I had no wish for greater worldly success. My ambition, which remained a powerful drive, could henceforth be directed without distraction on intellectual

tasks, including ones that might seem foolish. "Ambition" is not, however, quite the right word, for it suggests too much the limelight. I never sought out the limelight. As a child, I had no interest in becoming President or a famous scholar. As an adult, I found absurd the idea that I should struggle to increase the length of my obituary by another half inch. On the other hand, ever since I had entered Oxford I had worked hard; moreover, all my life I have lived in and loved the campus atmosphere of work. My sense of well-being was nourished and continues to be nourished by an awareness of students swarming just beyond my field of vision, and on the hum of activity in classrooms and libraries that portends high purpose and worthy goals. Official days of rest—weekends and national holidays—were and still are unwelcome. I need my daily dose of mental stimulation. Each day I require the reassurance of having taken a step forward in my own enlightenment; I have simply assumed that this is true of most people in a university community.

By the time I arrived in Minnesota, I was a driven man—driven ultimately by the big and "woozy" questions that had started haunting me as a child. They took on an extra edge in young adulthood. My great good fortune was that the Oxford of my undergraduate years made them seem respectable, even fashionable. In the aftermath of a horrible war, the university welcomed students and teachers of a philosophical, theological, or literary bent, willing to address the timeless puzzles of life. If I showed exceptional diligence as an undergraduate, it was because this deeply-rooted personal need found satisfaction and stimulation in the books, lectures, and, above all, endless late-night talks that were a part of the university's ambience.

There was another reason. At Oxford, my eyes were opened to the richness and sheer fascination of human reality. Like most people, I felt the world's magic as a child, but had lost this sense of magic in middle school's unholy mix of regimented work and relentless competition. At Oxford, I regained it. I was drawn to wonder not only at the glories and miseries of human existence, observable on the streets as well as in colleges, but also at the common routines of cooking and washing, planting and harvesting, buying and selling, the flowing and ebbing of traffic in city streets, the raising and tearing down of houses, the perambulations of men, women, and children—these and the other

pulsations of life that make up the content of human geography. They are thoroughly worthy of study. It is sad for me to say that geographers have all too often made them seem rather pedestrian. The challenge to the humanist geographer is to see afresh these ordinary objects and motions of life, to take delight in them for what they are, as they appear, then to dive under for hidden relations and meanings, and, finally, to present both—surfaces and depths, the seen and the unseen—in a language that is subtle yet vigorous.

With the onset of middle age, my drive to learn could easily have lost momentum, turned into studious habit or chores dutifully performed, if I thought that I was merely consuming the world's stock of knowledge and wisdom—that is, observing reality through what others had said and written. I needed to feel that I had something to add, not so much in factual details as in frameworks and perspectives, which, by permitting facts and ideas to interact in new and fruitful ways, could subtly reshape our understanding of the world. An ambitious goal, indeed. I worked hard toward it in the various places I taught between 1956 and 1968—Indiana, New Mexico, and Toronto—but it was only at Minnesota that I came close to touching the hem of success.

Yet, in 1983, I left Minnesota for Wisconsin. Why? I have often wondered myself. I was happy at Minnesota and expected to stay there till my three score years and ten ran their course. Perhaps it was the awareness that a late middle-age crisis lurked down the road, or that I needed a change that would give me a final surge of energy. Wisconsin's faculty was as distinguished as Minnesota's, but younger. I could draw on their youth and vitality. I would be the oldest member there, itself a pleasing thought to someone of Asian descent. So, after fourteen good years at Minnesota, I moved to Wisconsin, where I spent another fourteen good years. The late middle-age crisis I vaguely anticipated did break while I was trying to settle down in my new academic home. Fortunately, it was brief. I managed to overcome depression—a sense that I had studied life but had not lived it—with the help of understanding colleagues and friends.

Let me now turn to my small successes. They are so in my own eyes

rather than the world's, although *Topophilia* might be counted an exception. This book, which is a systematic study of how people come to be attached to place, was published in 1974, at a time when the environmental movement needed a work in the tradition of humane letters to complement the flood of publications pouring out of the factories of applied science. *Topophilia*'s popularity may be gauged by the fact that at one college bookstore, it was put on a shelf labeled "Astrology and Occult." To my surprise, late-blooming Flower Children found it sympathetic, as did their bible *The Whole Earth Catalog*. *Topophilia*'s romance with Counter Culture was, however, brief, and would have been even briefer had Counter Culture not dovetailed into the environmental movement. The book eventually achieved the respectability of a required text for college courses in landscape architecture. More important than marketplace success in motivating me to persevere, despite many dead ends and failures, was the occasional psychological reward—success in the sense of an unexpected shift in my pattern of thought. I shall illustrate what I mean with two books that I published in the 1980s.

The first is *Segmented Worlds and Self: Group Life and Individual Consciousness*. I was led to write this book because human emotional and mental make-up has consistently been my point of departure. Humanistic geography is the geography of people and, of course, people have feelings, language, and ideas. So topophilia is the love of place, just as topophobia is the fear of place, a theme I took up in a book called *Landscapes of Fear*. Love and fear are basic human emotions transformed to varying degrees by imagination and culture. Having touched base with these emotions, I then sought to explore a unique quality of human consciousness—self-consciousness. How is it related to the development of individuality and the need for privacy? How would an individual's growing sense of self affect social cohesion and group life? It is a topic of predictable appeal to the human geographer, for a heightening of self-consciousness and individuality clearly evolved with the progressive partitioning of space. Partitioned space promotes privacy by allowing individuals to be alone, engage in separate activities, have separate thoughts, or explore each other's world in sustained conversation. My plan was to refurbish and extend my knowledge of the European house from the Middle Ages to the late nineteenth century, concentrate on the number and arrangement of

rooms, the purposes they served, and correlate these changes in spatial organization with the history of consciousness.

It seemed a worthwhile project. Yet after a year of two of reading and writing I grew discouraged. I could see a decade of hard work ahead, in the course of which I would be wiser in details but not necessarily in understanding, for my arc of vision would have stayed essentially the same. I minded the meagerness of the intellectual recompense because I am so far from being the "utmost scholar," caricatured by George Steiner as someone who can happily spend a lifetime studying Korean chamber pots of the ninth century and little else. To confess that I lack patience for minutiae and the long haul is to invite dismissal as a dilettante. Dilettante in the sense of someone who takes delight in the world, yes, I admit to fitting the description. But I like to claim, or rather confess to, something else, namely, a yearning for the sudden illumination—an excuse to shout "Eureka!"—that is perhaps more common among physical scientists, artists, and essayists than among humanist scholars. Be that as it may, just as I was about to give up my project on specialized rooms and individuality, it suddenly occurred to me that the story could be given a thicker texture and far greater resonance by having it placed between two other narratives—one on food and eating, the other on the theater.

The medieval manor house was little more than the centerpiece—the hall, an unsegmented area in which all sorts of activities took place. Food eaten there, too, was either a whole animal, a hefty shank, or a stew of many ingredients thrown together with little consideration for compatibility. Life in the Middle Ages was public and gregarious. Food was eaten heartily; table manners were minimal. People had few places to which they could withdraw and they did not seem to mind. There was a strong sense of self, but little self-consciousness. Obviously I cannot trace the delicately interwoven stories of house, food, and table manners here. But the essence of what I am getting at is clear enough. By late nineteenth century, the great European house had probably reached a maximum degree of partitioning and specialization. A room existed for every purpose—including that of being alone with one's books and thoughts. Dining reached new heights of refinement, not so much in flavor as in the quality and number of utensils. Meat in vulgar bulk, except for the roast in England, was banished from the table.

Foods were served separately, not indiscriminately mixed as in the Middle Ages and even in the seventeenth century. To proper Victorians, dining was a ritual at which drinking a wine inappropriate to the meat, or confusing the fish knife with the butter knife, was an embarrassing breach of etiquette. Whereas in earlier times guests shared a bench at the dining table, now each guest was ensconced in his own chair and had before him his own private world of sparkling glasses and silverware. He was expected to eat as if nothing so gross as nourishment had crossed his mind, and as if the real purpose for sitting down to table was to engage in polite conversation with his charming neighbors.

More exciting and potentially more revealing than the story of food and eating is the story of the theater. Social scientists seek models of society, and yet have curiously neglected the theater as model. The theater is a model both in its socio-spatial organization and in the plays enacted on its stage. Again, I am able to offer only a few pointers in this talk. As physical space, the medieval theater was, like the Church building, a cosmos, embracing heaven, earth, and underworld. In the market square where plays were periodically performed, actors and spectators freely intermingled; no proscenium arch and curtain, no lighted stage and darkened hall (all much later inventions) separated them. The sort of promiscuous mixing I noted in the medieval hall and in medieval cooking was also a feature of the medieval theater. As for the play's theme, what could it be other than the salvation of man? Plays were morality plays. Even those of a much later time—Shakespeare's, for example—might still be considered morality plays, with the scope and trappings of the medieval worldview still lingering about them, if only because of their cosmic resonance and religious underpinning, and their performance in an all-embracing space called the Globe. How strikingly different the theater became in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when, rather than the cosmos, there was landscape, a much more subjective concept, and the human drama of cues and miscues, failed communication and loneliness, eventually moved to interior space—the living room. Late nineteenth-century plays that depict individual separateness within rooted, communal life find a parallel in the theater's own physical arrangement—its compartmentalized spaces. Actors and spectators do not mix. The sense of one world—the Globe—is missing. On the one side is the

illuminated stage, on the other, the darkened hall in which spectators sit in their separate chairs, as if alone.

My second example of a psychological reward—an unexpected insight that made for a period of personal satisfaction, if little else—is illustrated by the book *Dominance and Affection: The Making of Pets*. This may seem an unlikely work for a geographer, yet I consider it mainstream geography, though mainstream "with a twist." And what is the twist? To answer that question, I must first say something about the mainstream. There are, in fact, several mainstreams, several historically rooted, generally accepted approaches to geography, one of which is studying how humans have transformed the earth. This particular approach received a major impetus in 1955, when three distinguished scholars, Carl Sauer, Marston Bates, and Lewis Mumford, organized an international symposium to demonstrate its fruitfulness, and a further impetus when the different interpretations were published in a much-acclaimed volume called *Man's Role in Changing the Face of the Earth*. I was a student at Berkeley in the early fifties, which were also Carl Sauer's last years before retirement. I could sense the excitement—the importance of what was going on. Since the sixties, this flurry of excitement on university campuses has become the well-organized, sometimes well-financed, often passionate, global environmental movement. Publications quickly reached floodtide. Overwhelmingly they emphasized, as they still do, how human economic activities, driven by necessity and even more by greed, have radically altered and all too often despoiled the earth.

Dominance and Affection is part of the mainstream insofar as it, too, can be taken as a study of how humans have transformed the earth. But, as the title indicates, the book's point of departure is psychological rather than economic. My concern is more with human nature than with nature "out there." In the book, changes on the earth's surface matter only to the degree that they shed light on the sort of animal we are. One thing is clear: we are the sort of animal that has amassed enormous power, which we have used for a large number of ends, among them to temper nature's harshness and to make it produce food and other desirable commodities regularly and abundantly. In advanced

civilizations, this power has often been abused. Not only nature but also weaker peoples suffer as a result. Economic exploitation is the name of the game.

The particular twist I introduce shifts attention away from economic to aesthetic exploitation, which is the mistreatment of nature, including human beings, for purposes of pleasure and art. I ask the reader to picture not cattle yoked to the plow or trees cut down to make homes, but rather the laptop poodle, the potted garden, and the pampered human underlings of a potentate. In the last set of examples, power is applied to create comeliness and beauty, and with a certain affection for the manipulated objects. Hence, the book's title, which is dominance *and* affection, and the book's subtitle, which is the making of pets. Power so used tends to be regarded as benign, especially because it does not bring about massive changes on the earth's surface or cause serious problems of pollution. I cast a shadow on this attractive picture by saying that power can be even more uninhibited, more arbitrary and cruel, when it is playful. "Play" is such a sunny word that we forget its dark side. It is bad to be "used," but it can be worse to be "played with." Economic exploitation has a limited end, the efficient attainment of which calls for an awareness of the nature of the thing to be manipulated and a deference to tried-and-true rules of procedure. Play, by contrast, is open-ended and freely experimental. The manner of play is not guided by anything other than the manipulator's fantasy and will.

In my book, the first pet I introduce is water. It may seem poetic license to call water a pet, for a pet is normally thought of as animate, whereas water is not an organism. Yet, in the imagination, water is almost universally considered "alive." This moving and living force is harnessed for many economic ends, but it is also a plaything. We train it, we force it to act against its nature for our amusement, captivatingly, as fountains that leap and impart an air of spontaneous joy to the garden. There is nothing spontaneous about fountains, however, which rather are clear examples of submission to power. Their existence requires channeling water from distant sources through canals, tunnels, and aqueducts—a complex organization in which managers, engineers, skilled workers, and a large labor force must effectively cooperate. Moreover, the choreography of sprouting water depends on the

development of a sophisticated hydraulic science. From the sixteenth to the eighteenth century, fountains were among the most showy pets of European princes.

Following this excursus into the playful use of water, I move on to the "petification" of plants and animals, and, in the process, tread—perhaps rather heavy-footedly—on the idea that the great or aesthetic garden can be considered as belonging to the sphere of nature and innocence. Backyard gardens might be so categorized, but not the princely garden, which is as artificial and artifactual as the palatial house to which it is attached. Indeed, my favorite image of the human domination of nature in pre-industrial times is not monumental architecture, but rather the diminutive garden, known as *penjing* in Chinese and *bonsai* in Japanese. The *bonsai* is wilderness reduced to potted landscape, domesticated in the literal sense, and by exquisite means of torture ("torture" in the literal sense of twisting and bending) sustained with loving attention to detail over an extended period of time.

I have used the two books *Segmented Worlds and Self* and *Dominance and Affection* to show how a slightly different angle of vision can impart a fresh glow to even the most familiar themes. Being able to come up with a different angle is the sweetener that has motivated me throughout a career of four decades. But these sweeteners, though necessary, are not sufficient. The deeper motivation is the quest for meaning that I evoked earlier: the quest for the meaning of life. I am the sort of person who cannot abandon such a quest without also saying quits to life.

What have I discovered about the world that is, equally, self-discovery? As I look over my books, I am struck by their binary titles and themes: topophilia and topophobia, space and place, community and self, dominance and affection, cosmos and hearth. I used to think that I had treated the two poles of each binary evenhandedly, but this I eventually realized was naive. In the book, *Cosmos and Hearth*, I openly acknowledged my bias in the subtitle, which is *A Cosmopolite's Viewpoint*. Hearth I love. Who doesn't? Hearth stands for home, community, familiar customs—stability. Cosmos, by

contrast, stands for world, society, human achievements and aspirations touched by the strange and the unpredictable. My predilection is for the latter and, in particular, for the latter as goal: one starts from hearth and moves toward cosmos. This trajectory seems to me entirely natural, but it may also be that I am disposed toward it as a consequence of certain experiences in childhood. Bear with me therefore if I add here an autobiographical note.

Born in China, I left with my family at age ten for Australia. I have been rootless—on the whole happily rootless—ever since. My childhood in China corresponded to the period of war with Japan. We were constantly on the road, escaping from the invading army. We eventually settled in the wartime capital of Chongqing. The economy had broken down. We barely had enough to eat. The elementary school I attended was a single, ill-equipped room. Yet, astonishingly, we were given a thoughtfully packaged, cosmopolitan education. We read elevating stories from the Chinese, European, and American pasts, stories about great scientists and inventors such as Isaac Newton, Louis Pasteur, and Benjamin Franklin that were meant to stimulate our intellectual ambition, and moral tales (ones of filial piety, naturally, but also Oscar Wilde's "The Happy Prince") intended to help us grow into compassionate adults.

Although I loved school, I was wary of the daily trek that took me there, for in our path was a village, through which a funeral procession passed from time to time. How clearly I remember even now the procession's centerpiece, the corpse. It was wrapped in a bamboo sheet, on top of which was tied a rooster, which served an advance warning system to the carriers and mourners, for it would crow if the corpse stirred. I both dreaded and hated the funeral procession, which I came to identify with traditional culture and hearth, drenched in fear and superstition, compared with which school was liberation—a sunny world where we learned about a man who sought to bring down electricity with a kite, and where we were inspired by a code of behavior (as in "The Happy Prince") that in its idealism went far beyond filial piety and kinship obligation.

Thus, early in life, in the midst of war and poverty, I had a taste of the True, the Beautiful, and the Good, culled from different civilizations. It

excited in me a yearning for the great triad, especially for the Good, that has lasted into old age. I began the search for what good means to different peoples in the facts of human geography. Good, I was to find out, means at bottom nurturance and stability. Nature provides nurturance, though rather meagerly; and it provides stability, though not one that is utterly reliable. Culture is how humans, by imagination and skill, escape into more predictable, responsive, and flattering worlds of their own making. These worlds are immensely varied. On the material plane, they range from grass hut to skyscraper, village to metropolis; on the mental plane, from magical beliefs to great systems of religion and metaphysics. They are all, in different ways, aspirations to the Good.

Three intractable problems arise out of this human venture, darkening it. One is violence and destructiveness. On a material plane, nothing is ever built without prior destruction—a fact too soon forgotten since the new is tangible presence whereas the destroyed is at best memory. The second problem is that the ability to destroy and build presupposes power, and power is morally suspect and can all too easily become monstrous. Historically, construction on any scale was possible only because the elite exercised control over the sinews of laborers and draft animals. Civilization could not come into existence without rather rigid chains of command and obedience—without, that is, social inequality, a condition that had cast a long shadow over civilized life even as it strove to diminish its worst effects. The third problem derives from the feeling that even if we put aside violence and the abuses of power, and just look at our accomplishments, our works, what do we find? Wonders galore, but many of these can seem curiously unreal—aeries that have risen too far above the ground of common sense and ordinary experience. They amaze and entertain, they are sources of great prestige, but they do not satisfy deep human longings for . . . for what? The short answer is, for the Real and the Good. But what is real? More answerably, what do people mean when they say "real"? And what is its relation to the Good?

I am now at a stage in life when some sort of accounting seems appropriate. Have I done the best I can with my talent and with the

opportunities that have come my way? What have I learned? Am I wiser or happier for it? Predictably, my answers to these questions are ambivalent. In the case of talent, I am told that we use only about ten percent of what we are given. In biblical language, we bury our talent; we are unproductive servants. But I cannot believe this to be true of me. I have used whatever I was born with to the full. "What you see is all there is," I say to friends who encourage me by hinting that I, like most people, have seeds of creativity as yet undeveloped. It must be extremely frustrating to have talents that fail to come to fruition for lack of opportunity. But that has not been my fate. Mine is the humbling one of knowing that I have only a small talent to begin with, and that its full flowering under even excellent conditions has produced only a very modest bouquet.

Still, however meager the result, how can I not be grateful for the opportunities that the profession of geography has provided? Geography has allowed me to roam from the physical to the human—from climate and landforms to morals and ethics—and still remain within its capacious borders. The downside is isolation—isolation from fellow geographers who may roam the same grounds but come up with quite different questions and answers; and isolation from scholars in philosophical disciplines who, though they may share my questions, find no reason to heed the cogitations of an outsider. But how can it be otherwise? Even at a cocktail party, it is not easy to break into the conversation of people who already know one another well. How immeasurably more difficult, then, it is to break into the conversation of a long line of philosophers in apostolic succession that began with Plato.

Isolation is a subterranean motif of my life as an academic. It did not start that way, for I was once a student of landforms—a specialist on the pediments and arroyas of the American Southwest. I wondered what life would be like if I had remained in that field, cultivating it side by side with fellow geomorphologists. How warmly communal it would have been, even in the midst of arguments and debates! If, as such a specialist, I gave the Haskins Lecture, I would be able to acknowledge my indebtedness to esteemed predecessors and fellow workers. I would have the satisfaction of seeing myself adding my tiny sheaf to the abundant harvest of geomorphological knowledge. But I chose

otherwise. For all the excitement and satisfaction of that choice, it has distinct disadvantages, not the least of which is the appearance of egotism. For what is a maverick scholar but one who cannot readily name his forebears? Of course he has them, and they are a multitude, but they tend to be individuals from different fields unknown to one another rather than conversing members of a single discipline and established tradition.

As I enter my crepuscular years, I wonder about Socrates's famous dictum, "the unexamined life is not worth living." A scholar certainly examines. But what he or she examines is other people's lives—the world "out there," not his or her own life. I can devote an entire career studying desert landforms or traffic flows in congested cities without reflecting on who I am and what I have made of my existence. Indeed, paying attention to the world may be a way of escaping from the intractable dilemmas of selfhood. While this is a plausible outlook, it is also a central tenet of postmodernist thought that any serious and prolonged intellectual engagement with the world transmutes into a marriage of self and the other—so that, as with old married couples, the two may even begin to look alike. My own type of work, ostensibly about "people and environment," draws so much on the sort of person I am that I have wondered whether I have not written an unconscionably long autobiography. By tiny unmarked steps, examination turns into self-examination. Is it worth doing? Will it lead one to the good life? Or will it, as Saul Bellow believes, make one wish one were dead? I oscillate between the two possibilities. In the end, I come down on the side of Socrates, if only because the unexamined life is as prone to despair as the examined one; and if despair—occasional despair—is human, I would prefer to confront it with my eyes open, even convert it into spectacle, than submit to it blindly as though it were implacable fate.

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