

Connecting Discernments; Withering Responses; Sage Advice

When the invitation to give this talk reached me a few weeks ago, I was on the southern edge of the Dead Sea, at the beginning of a tour of Israel, Jordan, and Istanbul. On that tour I realized, yet again, that when you venture into retirement having read books for a living and choose not to shake that habit, and to travel only out of curiosity and inclination, you find yourself in a good many out-of-the-way places you have read about in out-of-the-way books. These are the “connecting discernments” in my title—*concatenations*, in fact--a word that would not come to mind when I had to send in my title.

After ten fascinating, instructive, and exhausting days in Israel, including several fine days in Galilee, we crossed the Allenby Bridge into Jordan, and headed south to Wadi Ramm, made famous by T. E. Lawrence. Reached through the desert by a rough trip in a jeep or a truck, it offers stunning views, camel rides, and Turkish tea in Bedouin tents. Having read *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* in Grad School, I had re-read it for this trip, and thus connected to a discerning, indeed profound, passage in which, after a rapid camel ride across 37 miles of desert to Aqaba and then back, Lawrence sought relief in a small, shallow pool in Wadi Ramm. As he was cleansing and restoring himself there, a moody, mysterious Arab “a grey-bearded, ragged man, with a hewn face of great power and weariness” appeared out of nowhere and muttered “*The love is from God; and of God; and towards God.*”

This gnomic utterance must have been in Arabic—the only thing that impressed the Arabs about Lawrence more than his fluency in their many dialects was his speed and endurance on a camel. I wish I had time to read

you Lawrence's two quite wonderful pages of speculation on the fact that Christianity arose in Galilee, "Syria's non-Semitic province." Polished and Levantine rather than Jewish and Semitic or Hellenic and banal [these are all Lawrence's words], Galilee was a haven of intellectual and religious freedom in which the remote and sandy idea of love muttered by this mystic traveller (Lawrence again:) "*blossomed into novel shapes tawdry with the larded passionate colours of the East.*" Given this unique blend of ethnicities, cultures, and locales, Christianity blossomed into a religion in which, I am pretty sure, Lawrence did not believe, but sometimes wished he could. My travels through Galilee to Wadi Ramm made me a much better reader of those pages.

Let me give you another, shorter, concatenation, equally discerning, and equally out-of-the way. I have always read a lot of travel literature, and used to teach a course in it, in an effort to make Purdue undergraduates better readers and better travellers. Jan Morris's "*Istanbul: City of Yok*" induced me to extend our trip to include three days in that city, which turned out to be one of the most fascinating cities I have ever visited, rich in the ruins of its history while still vibrant with a modern cultural and commercial life of its own.

For Jan Morris Istanbul is a city *chilled* by resignation, fatalism, toughness, commerce, and courtesy, and informed and deformed by the vanishing mightiness of the Roman, Byzantine, and Ottoman empires, of each of which it was once the capital. A city, in her wonderful phrase, of "sedimented pride." Listen to this paragraph, written in 1978, with reports from that corner of the world of the last six months in mind. These are the words of a prophet, a prophet who discerns without scolding!

So[,] many a patriot of this city looks back to Islam. The mosques are busy, the fanatics are aflame, regressive religion is one of the fiercest political movements in Istanbul. Though it used to be postulated that Turkish Islam, like capitalism, would wither away in time, the average age of that Blue Mosque congregation looked strikingly young to me. ... The activist Moslems of Istanbul look outside their own country for inspiration—to Iran, to Pakistan, to the Arab states, where militant Islam is on the march or already in power [Remember, this is from 1978]: and when they take to the streets, as they recently did, or engage in student skirmishes, or burn cars, or break windows, the newspapers are unable to define this heady amalgam of nostalgia and zealotry, and cautiously describe them as Idealists.

As you may know, the Istanbulus did every one of these things again two weeks ago in Taksim Square, and journalists still don't know what to make of it—nor, apparently, does Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

I had in mind to regale you next with an assortment of biting one-liners, such as one by Dr. Arbuthnot, a friend of Swift and Pope. Arbuthnot disposed of the publisher Edmund Curll, who concocted a series of trashy and inventive biographies of recently deceased famous people, in 7 words, denouncing these publications as: “one of the new terrors of death.”

And John Wilkes, a demagogue, libertine, and wit, who responded to his sometime friend the Earl of Sandwich's dire prediction that

***“you will die either on the gallows,
or of the pox”***

with:

***“That must depend on whether
I embrace your lordship’s principles
or your mistress.”***

But such quips grow tiresome, and are not as edifying as this occasion requires, so let me give you two more substantial and more withering responses, both very much out-of-the-way, but still from the best of all possible centuries.

Near the end of his life Edmund Burke, whom some of you will recall seated with his back to you at the center of the table at that “Literary Party at Sir Joshua Reynolds,” received a well-deserved pension of £3700. The Duke of Bedford, a young, foolish, and impetuous member of the House of Lords spoke against Burke’s acceptance of the pension as a betrayal of his principles of government economy and reform. Burke’s reply, an 80 page pamphlet entitled “A Letter to a Noble Lord,” was published in 1796. It is more excoriating than withering, and I think it, as do others, “the most splendid repartee in the English language.”

Burke writes off the Duke as “*a proud and insulting foe*” and dismisses his speech as “*slander*” and among the “*calumnies of malice and the judgments of ignorance*” he knew he would be subject to when he entered politics.

“Whatever his natural parts may be [Burke continues] I cannot recognize in his few and idle years, the competence to judge of my long and laborious life.” “I was not, like his Grace of Bedford, swaddled, and rocked, and dandled into a legislator”

Burke then contrasts the pension he has earned with his own public service to the vast estate the Duke has inherited from an ancestor, “*a minion of Henry the Eighth,*” “*a greedy and leveling tyrant*” “*who plundered*

... his church and his country” [I trust some of you have enjoyed watching Henry do all this on “Wolf Hall?”]

A lifelong defender of both the British Constitution and the privileges (and obligations) of the nobility, Burke was especially infuriated by the Duke’s support of the French Revolution. Here, in a few words, he disembowels both the Duke and the French:

- ***The persons who have suffered from the cannibal philosophy of France, are so like the Duke of Bedford, that nothing but his Grace’s probably not speaking quite so good French, could enable us to find out any difference. A great many of them had as pompous titles as he, and were full of as illustrious a race; some few of them had fortunes as ample; several of them, without meaning the least disparagement to the Duke of Bedford, were as wise, and as virtuous, and as valiant, and as well educated, and as compleat in all the lineaments of men of honour as he is.***

This pamphlet destroyed what little reputation the Duke had; if the French Revolution had come to Britain, his vast properties, numerous titles, and empty head would have gone as well.

I move in conclusion from the rebuke of a Duke by an eloquent commoner to the rebuke of a King by a coddled Emperor. In 1793 the British East India Company sent Lord George Macartney, an able peer with considerable diplomatic experience, as an emissary to the Qianlong Emperor of China. Attended by a retinue of 100 scientists, artists, and guards, he arrived on a 66 gun man-of-war, accompanied by two vessels loaded with products of the early Industrial Revolution, all calculated to impress and intimidate the Emperor.

(One last concatenation, in which many of you could be said to be entangled: A few days before he sailed for China, Lord Macartney dined in London with the Literary Club, and James Boswell, who recorded this visit, begged to be included in his retinue. There was not room for Boswell.)

Macartney's task was to impress the Emperor so much with Britain's naval, economic, commercial, and intellectual might that he would become a trading partner, much needed because the British tea habit had generated a trade deficit with China of millions of pounds.

Alas, the emperor sent Macartney and his retinue home with little to show for his trip. He then sent George III an edict saying that China needed nothing from other countries.

We have never [the Emperor wrote, somewhat imperiously] We have never valued ingenious articles, nor do we have the slightest need of your country's manufactures. Therefore, O king, as regards your request to send someone to remain at [our] capital, while it is not in harmony with the regulations of the Celestial Empire[,] we also feel very much that it is of no advantage to your country.

Britain's reply was more devious and more devastating:

opium, the opium war, and a century long humiliation of China, the results of which we are still contending with.

I will leave the sage advice for another occasion.