

Now Hear This!

A YEARS' COLUMNS IN
The Montgomery Journal

29 July 1988 - 28 July 1989



Jack Wright

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FOREWORD

One afternoon in early April of 1988, I happened to pick up a flyer at the lobby desk in *the OAKS* announcing an essay contest for which only amateur elders were eligible. They wanted one typed, single-spaced page on the topic: “Why Maryland Is Beautiful To Me.” I read it through enroute back to my apartment, and having nothing more urgent to do at the moment, soon found myself at the old computer banging out on entry. I promptly walked across the street to the mailbox and it was on its way.

Enroute back to my apartment once again, I found further thoughts on the subject still flooding through my mind. I promptly resumed my place at the keyboard and proceeded to bang out another entry from what I conceived as my devoted spouse’s point of view, and in a substantially modified style. I then mailed that entry¹, which she willingly signed as representing both her view and her style. We both then promptly forgot all about the matter, until.

In early May we both received written invitations to on awards ceremony to be conducted by the County Executive, in which it was desired that all contest entrants participate. We politely declined. It was hot. Rockville was too far, with too much intervening traffic. A phone call soon followed, repeating the invitation a little more

1 Remarkably, Jack failed to include the text of these contest submissions in this book. Sadly, their text has been lost.

persuasively. At length we attempted a compromise – we proposed that Kathleen represent us both. They wouldn't buy it, so we again respectfully declined. At this point they insisted, pleading that we had to be there since I had been awarded first prize, and Kathleen had garnered No. 1 “honorable mention.” So – we went.

Then followed an invitation to be interviewed on county cable TV. We once again declined, but finally had to acquiesce. Then there was a further luncheon at which the Governor, who sponsored the state-wide contest presented awards, and favored us with a luncheon in Annapolis, and a tour of the Governor's Mansion. But, this still isn't the end of the story.

In June I was contacted by an editor of *The Montgomery Journal*. He wanted to take me to lunch to discuss becoming a regular columnist, writing on county “elder affairs.” I told him I was too old for any such affairs, but was no more successful than with earlier refusals. This in spite of the fact that I warned him that I couldn't be the man they were looking for, because I strongly felt that seniors were favored overly much already, and that my first column would likely blast elders' greed. Said he to this escape ploy, “Great!”

The consequences of all this comprises the substance of this small volume, one year's worth of bi-weekly columns, concluding with my swan-song farewell column – written 14 weeks in advance! I've compiled these mini-gems by way of passing on to my 9 children and 18 grandchildren (to which latter this effort is

dedicated) at least some hint of the philosophy and accumulated wisdom (if any) of their proud progenitor.

Jack Wright
07 May 1989

DIGITAL EDITION NOTE

The title of this document, *Now Hear This*, is Jack's, and reflects his heritage as a Navy officer. It echos the words commonly used to begin an announcement over the public address system aboard US Navy ships. The title under which his words were published – the name of the bi-weekly column Jack mentions in his [FORWARD](#) – was “Speaking of Seniors².” The text presented here represents what Jack provided to *The Journal* for publication. Before publication, however, the titles and content was edited by *Journal* editor(s). I could locate no record of the exact published text.

Some thoughts:

Those close to Jack knew what a love he had for writing. His autobiography³ details how, starting as early as the late 1930s, when he was barely 20 years old, he already had established the habit of submitting various writings to anyone he thought might publish them. These include successful submissions to RCA and Decca Records as well as *Variety* and *Life Magazine*. Later, while working for the Navy Department, he continued his quest for publication, succeeding with articles published in the Navy Department's monthly *Navy Management Review*, as well as

2 See an image of the column's masthead in the [Letters to the Editor](#) section herein.

3 His autobiography *That Jack The House Built* (for which this is only the *first* of a number of shameless links) can be found at <https://wrightstuff.site>.

several in more nationally-known technical publications like the *Journal of the American Society of Naval Engineers*. Later, he had a number of pieces published in *Air Facts* and *Private Pilot*, among others (none of which I could find.) As with the essays which spawned the writings herein, he often, and sometimes successfully, submitted his writing under his wife's name.

From the time I was a small boy, I remember him coming home from his office, then working late into the night to create screen-plays for submission to *Hallmark Hall of Fame*⁴ in the hopes of becoming famous.

A self-taught theologian, he submitted numerous writings to various Catholic magazines such as *Commonweal*, *America*, and others. He also produced hundreds of pages of biblical and scripture analysis for his own personal use (available on request.)

With that as background, the reader should realize immediately that the opportunity he was given here, to write regularly for a public audience, was literally his dream come true. Jack acknowledges as much himself in the [EPILOGUE](#).

And he threw himself fully into the work. A singular hallmark of just about everything Jack did can be summed up in the old aphorism: "Do a thing right, or don't do it at all." As I worked to extract the text you will read here from a printed copy that Jack

4 A television show, still seen sporadically, that during the 1950s and 1960s broadcast stage plays. In an annual contest similar to that which spawned the material presented here, it solicited submissions from amateur playwrights. Jack submitted several manuscripts (none of which survive) without success. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hallmark_Hall_of_Fame

produced, I was struck by the amount of time and effort that he clearly had poured into producing these pages. Imagine having to produce new 1,000-word essay every two weeks – both sides of a single, type-written, double-spaced sheet of paper. When stated in such abstract, clinical terms, that doesn't sound too hard. But when you read these pieces, it becomes apparent almost immediately how much research went into each. [One](#) of the letters that Jack includes in the final section acknowledges that effort. I'm sure Jack found that letter extremely heartening, making the disappointment he expresses in his EPILOGUE all the more poignant.

Perhaps Jack was merely feeling his 70 years as he wrote the words here. (The column was, after all, intended to be for and about seniors.) Even after retiring from this job, he never stopped writing. His computer held a number of essays – finished and unfinished – on a range of topics similar to those covered here. As you read, listen to his words, and you will experience just a little of his “philosophy and accumulated wisdom” and you will come to know a little better the Jack Wright his children knew.

Charlie Wright
September 2021

1. GREED

Governmental-elderly coalition seen as greedy new Jabberwock

More than 94,000 folks over 60 live in Montgomery County. Since 1976, this sub-population has grown three times faster than the population as a whole. With that rise in numbers has come a rise in political clout. I know. I'm one of them, and I'm a little embarrassed by it all.

Let me explain.

Early in 1961, our then fledgling president, JFK, challenged Americans: "Ask not what your country can do for you -ask what you can do for your country." There is mounting evidence that too many elders missed that stirring inaugural address. The fact is, political pandering to every whim of our gratuitously benighted age group may already be the nation's No. 1 growth industry. Even as Kennedy was rousing us with his rallying cry way back in 1961, the departing Ike Eisenhower was grimly predicting the possibility of massive governmental corruption by the then-emerging military-industrial complex. We are all witnesses to the regrettable accuracy of this prophecy. Just look at the haunting headlines heralding Defense Department fraud today.

Now Hear This

With this in mind, I venture the opinion that President Reagan, an avuncular diplomat of rare good humor who enjoys an almost-unprecedented degree of acceptance by the public, might do well to focus his farewell address on what I see as the emerging threat of our era: a “governmental-elderly coalition.”

I have in mind the virtual collusion of our already-vast array of overly greedy elders, and those poll-reading sycophants at all governmental levels who make a self-serving career of catering to their every whim.

Now, hold on! I’m not tarring all elders with this one sweep of the brush. I know that as recently as 1980 more than 15 percent or those over 65 were living below the poverty level. No doubt a great many more hovered at the margin. I’m certain that our entire community wishes these good neighbors the fullest possible commitment of county compassion -fiscal and otherwise. These good folks know who they are, and I know they’re out there. There’s no need to write letters. What I’m talking about is the well-heeled other, say, 75 per-cent.

What really sticks in my craw is that the largess lavished across the board on seniors is ladled out strictly on the arbitrary basis of age. This is as outrageous as those meteorological morons on TV who apologize for storms and claim credit for sunshine. Who among us really has control or our own longevity?

And where in the Bill of Rights do we seniors derive our increasingly presumed inalienable right not only to free lunch, but to

GREED

a free ride? I would think that a great deal of discount discrimination in favor of the elderly would prove unconstitutional. I have in mind, for example, the obscenity of fairly luxurious senior citizen centers flanked by parking lots flooded with Chryslers, Caddies, and late model Continentals.

Isn't it high time we – the “not-so-silent-majority” of elders – demonstrated our alleged maturity, and realistically reassessed our current station in life, our responsibilities to our progeny, and established new goals more befitting a group on the down slope of life-expectancy curves? We cannot really take it with us, you know.

Do we want our chief legacy to be monstrous debt amassed through our endless pursuit of aimless amusement that will shackle those who follow us all the days of their lives? Is it unreasonable to suggest that our remaining days in good health might be better spent in serving our sick and suffering, than in playing bridge, back gammon, or bumper-pool?

French writer Simone de Beauvoir said it well almost a century ago: “There’s only one solution if old age is not to be a parody of our former life, and that is to go on pursuing ends that give our existence meaning – devotion to individuals, to groups or to causes, social, political, intellectual or creative work... One’s life has value so long as one contributes to the life of others, by means of love, friendship, indignation, compassion.

Now Hear This

To this our own Eric Sevareid has provided a fitting postscript to the effect that nothing is less worthy of honor than the old who present no other evidence of having lived than their age. Amen!

Why then should we be granted the benefit of the bounty that is more properly the due of the currently poor and the still struggling younger generations – just because we were blessed beyond any power of our own to survive to a certain age? Just dwell for a moment on the injustice this works on our less fortunate neighbors and on our own flesh-and-blood descendants still fighting their way up life's ladder.

We should be ashamed of our unwarranted raids on public funds – the unrelenting retiree rip-off. This isn't to say that our youth aren't or might not become greedy, but to confess that we should know better – we should do better.

The sounding of the Klaxon for common sense, decency and justice is long overdue. The question then becomes: Who's going to make the first move to shut down the flood of gold flowing to "golden-agers?" (Now, at least, we may better appreciate the aptness of the latter euphemism.)

Well, one thing is certain: Let's not suffocate by holding our collective breaths waiting for governmental officials to be seized by a fit of courage and common sense.

If ever the vicious circle of greed contrived by the governmental-elderly coalition is to be slashed, we elite elders must

GREED

wield the knife. Let's resolve now to be budget-surgeon volunteers rather than vultures.

2. EUPHEMISMS

**Forget elder, senior citizen, golden-ager
– just call me ‘Gramps’**

All columns under this byline are intended for that segment of Montgomery County citizenry that shares a unique empathy for the “September Song.” You have to understand that the very first task of anyone addressing seniors is to fashion pleasant alternatives to that most fearful of all words – old.

This brings us to the matter at hand.

How are you coping with the current craze for phony “fog-speak?” I’m referring to the bureaucratic practice of using nice-sounding phrases to convey a notion directly opposite to reality. I’m talking about using “peace-keeper” to designate a killer weapon; speaking of “revenue enhancement” instead of calling a tax a tax. Where is Gertrude “Rose-is-a-rose-is-a-rose” Stein when we really need her?

If we’re honest when it comes to fog-speak, we’d have to admit that old folks are prime offenders. There! I said it – old folks. That’s what we are, you know, if we’re over 65. Yet, most of us fight the very idea of aging as if it were akin to getting leprosy.

Now Hear This

Like Lady Astor, some women refuse to admit to a certain age even if it makes their children illegitimate. But isn't it time we all grew up and recognized that closing our eyes to the process isn't going to stop it? Resorting to euphemisms won't help much either. Whom do we think we're kidding? We see the wrinkles. We feel the aches and pains. We hear the creaking joints.

Our undisguised efforts to dupe ourselves about our advancing years – and accumulating physical handicaps – is ridiculous. We sure aren't fooling our children or our friends – let alone ourselves. They say, "You're only as old as you feel." But once past 65, the odds on our feeling good decrease drastically every day. Let's face it. Our well-worn bodies grow weak and weary. I, for one, can really relate to the recent retiree who said he'd spend his first year on the front porch in a rocker – the second year he might start rocking.

Why do we feel so compelled to refer ludicrously to ourselves as "boys" and "girls?" As Steve Martin might say, "Excuuuse me!" Please don't call me an elder, a golden-ager, a senior citizen or any of that jazz. I'm simply old, and I'd be mighty proud if you'd just call me "Gramps."

Jesse Jackson helped boost black pride by simply encouraging acceptance of the slogan "Black is beautiful." Isn't it time we "geezers and geezerettes" started taking similar pride in not only surviving in an increasingly youth-oriented society, but in maintaining our dignity and a well-rounded sense of humor as well?

EUPHEMISMS

To me the title “Elder Affairs” sounds too much like an epithet referring to golden-age hanky-panky.

Let’s tell it like it is. It’s hard to grow old gracefully, to be shunted aside, ignored, and sometimes even ridiculed. But what have we got to prove? We’ve all been around the block, and none of us were really ever as important as we thought.

To paraphrase what the late Andy Warhol once said – everyone is famous for about 15 minutes. OK. May be he exaggerated a little, and you and I only made it for 15 seconds, but we’ve all had our moment in the sun. Now it’s time to move on and to re-order our priorities.

Searching for the fountain of youth shouldn’t even be on the list. Forget what advertising moguls may have led you to believe. No product’s going to make you look 10 years younger, and who cares? Forget cosmetic surgery. It’s only a costly and sometimes dangerous delaying action. And do we really want to risk not being recognized by St. Peter? Besides, we’ve earned our wrinkles and our scars and should wear them as proudly as war heroes sport combat ribbons.

We’re so conditioned to feeling embarrassed about being old that we tend to overlook some of the benefits. For example, we often know what’s going to happen next. “What goes around, comes around.” We’ve gained the gift of perspective. We know that sorrows grow dim with the passage of time. We’ve learned to cherish our occasional encounters with happiness along the way,

Now Hear This

even as we realize they won't last forever. Like Scarlett O'Hara, we know that "tomorrow is another day."

Perhaps our best stock in trade is advice. It isn't age itself, of course, that brings wisdom so much as the experience that's gained along the way. You know what experience is – what you get from not reading the small print. So, we've all made a mistake or two along the way. Those who follow could profit greatly from a recital of our missteps.

We know that there's no point in volunteering our advice to our own youngsters. They only take advice from experts, that is, any stranger. Of course, if they could tell the difference between good and bad advice they wouldn't need any. But don't despair. Our children are growing older, too. Sooner than we might expect, even, they will come to realize that we know a thing or two.

When this happy day arrives, remember that the best advice is always simple and its validity self-evident, like – never stand between a dog and a hydrant. The late Duke of Windsor once confessed that the best advice he'd ever had was from a footman who cautioned him never to pass up a chance to sit down or visit a rest room.

Some sage has put the matter a little more elegantly: "Life is a country that the old have seen and lived in. Those who have to travel through it can only learn from them."

Now, let's just wait for that old phone to ring.

3. CRIME

**The object all sublime – is to keep
seniors safe from crime**

The Journal recently published crime statistics for the first six months of 1988. The figures were discouraging. All categories of serious crime increased 12.5 percent over last year.

Even more ominously, those crimes most frightening to elders – like murder, rape, armed robbery, aggravated assault, and residential burglary – were up 20.8 percent.

This sad state may bring to mind an idea once voiced by the late Will Rogers: “We don’t seem able to check crime, so why not legalize it and then tax it out of business?”

But despair not.

Older people will be comforted to learn that the National Institute on Aging says, “Actually, the rates of most serious crimes are very low among the elderly.” The Institute identifies the most common crimes against the elderly as purse-snatching, fraud and theft of checks from the mail.

What to do? The Lord helps those who help themselves.

Now Hear This

Maybe you remember an old Smothers Brothers shtick where Tommy tells about almost drowning once when he fell into a vat of chocolate in a candy factory.

“What did you do?” asks his incredulous brother.

“I just yelled Fire!” Tommy replies.

“Why for heaven’s sake would you yell ‘Fire!’ when you were drowning in a vat of chocolate?” Dickie asks innocently.

“Because,” Tommy responds, “I didn’t think anybody would come to my rescue if I just yelled, ‘Chocolate! Chocolate!’”

This might be dismissed as just another cute story except that it dramatizes a valid point regarding personal security. What would normally be considered common sense could backfire if exercised in a truly threatening situation like, say, in an apartment complex.

Security professionals generally agree that to cry “Help!” might be the worst thing you could do if attacked in a deserted hall, laundry room or stairwell – because that would make everyone in the building rush inside and double-lock their doors. Conversely, yelling “Fire!” would make everyone stream out to join you.

The old maxim about safety in numbers still has merit. It’s always a good idea to have a companion along on shopping tours or when taking your daily walk. It’s only good sense to park among the crowd rather than in some remote corner of the mall. Greta Garbo notwithstanding, it’s not always a good idea to “want to be alone.”

CRIME

If you are so unfortunate as to be confronted by a demand for your money: turn it over! Don't get cute or courageous, or you risk serious bodily harm. "Never contest with a man who has nothing to lose" goes double in this age of drugs. And your surviving family would very likely rather applaud your sly and swift cooperation than mourn a foolish dead hero. The odds aren't with you, so why devalue your life?

Of course, if you've really grown tired of life, you may mimic Clint Eastwood and challenge your assailant to, "Go ahead. Make my day!" Columnist William Rueher offers an interesting sidelight on this approach, noting: "A person over 60 has a new (and healthy) awareness of his own mortality ... Courage to face life's disasters becomes a bit easier. If a tyrant were to threaten me with execution, I think I could defy him more bravely now than I might have been able to do 30 or 40 years ago. The ability of others to do me harm is severely limited these days, and to that extent age has actually increased my freedom."

There's no denying that old folks are relatively easy prey on the streets. We're both less able to defend ourselves and less capable of fleeing. On the other hand, if we're really as smart as we're reputed to be we also present less worthwhile targets. We've long since learned to carry less cash, not flaunt expensive jewelry, and never unduly encumber ourselves with conspicuously valuable purchases.

Now Hear This

Fear can be constructive if it encourages us to be more careful, even as excessive fear can be more harmful than crime itself by severely restricting our freedom. It might help to know that half of all residential burglaries occur because someone simply didn't lock up. We can further protect ourselves by using front-door peepholes before swinging them wide on some unwelcome stranger.

We also can reduce our risks by unloading unneeded valuables and engraving identification on those we choose to keep. We also should keep an inventory of the latter in a location remote from the valuables themselves. And, we can safeguard our Social Security checks by having them deposited in the bank.

There's no excuse other than outright greed for being done in by a con man. You'd think that by now we'd learned that nobody gets something for nothing, but health quackery exceeds \$10 billion a year. If any deal seems too good to be true, it is too good to be true. This caution extends to gimmicky health insurance policies, bargain eyeglasses and hearing-aids, and so-called miracle cures.

If you do find yourself the victim of some crime: Inform the police. This will alert them to the problem area and encourage better protection in the future. It may not only benefit your neighbors, it might also save you from double jeopardy.

Relax. Crime is only one of many assaults on the body. More people die annually from auto accidents or heart attacks than from

CRIME

murder, and who among us is wise enough to know which might be the easier way to go?

As they say, "Life is merely what happens while we're making other plans."

4. RELIGION

Of sex, politics, and religion, why is God now the only taboo?⁵

The 1980 census disclosed that 27 percent of our county population was under 18, and 9 percent was over 65. With children outnumbering elders by 3-to-1, the majority of old folks must be parents.

Question: When do we cease to be parents? Answer: Never. So, what is the best thing parents might do for their offspring today?

Answers to the last question are probably as numerous as readers, but a recent, local graduation address highlighted one good one. Commenting on our ailing society, the speaker prescribed a liberal dose of truth, church, religion and God.

I know, I know. Such subjects violate the traditional triple taboo against ever discussing sex, politics or religion. But the genie of political gossip has long been out of the jug. Reporters now outnumber participants at our national conventions and end up interviewing each other. Meanwhile, TV and films have virtually transformed sex (the more sordid the better) into the nation's No. 1 spectator sport.

5 Based on the [Letter to the Editor](#) found at the end of this volume, the editor of *The Journal* changed Jack's proposed title for this piece to "Voicing the taboo: God owns a rightful place in our society"

Now Hear This

It seems only fair to ask, “Must religion remain the sole subject that can never be discussed publicly?”

Our forefathers freely invoked God. Yet, few world leaders would risk undertaking moral reform today. As historian Will Durant has remarked, they leave this “most difficult and delicate branch of statesmanship” to “hypocrites and saints.” Mere mention of God evokes a silence more deadly than whispering “E. F. Hutton.”⁶

Isn’t it time to bring religion “out of the closet” as a fit subject for intelligent discussion – at least among consenting adults?

Our county ranks 65th in population among the more than 3,000 in the nation. One in three of the metropolitan area’s high-profile professionals lives here, and we boast more than 375 churches and synagogues. This suggests that Montgomery County may well be among the most religious and best-educated in the nation. Surely we can risk conversing about morality.

In the graduation address mentioned above, nationally renowned historian John Tracy Ellis ventured the following quotation: “Among the principal vices of Americans (is) the desire for unlimited riches, which seems to have seized the minds of all.” Was this Michael Dukakis speaking, or perhaps George Bush? No. These were the words of the French-born archbishop of Baltimore in 1818.

6 E. F. Hutton is an investment company (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/E._F._Hutton_%26_Co.) whose slogan is “When E. F. Hutton talks, people listen.” and whose popular TV advertisements in the 1980s featured large gatherings of noisy people suddenly falling quiet when someone in the crowd whispered the name “E. F. Hutton.”

RELIGION

Ellis added, “The desire for unlimited riches has grown to such proportions in our time as to threaten the moral fiber of society itself.” Noting that the desire to acquire a fair portion of this world’s goods is not evil in itself, he then observed, “When it is permitted to become the be-all and end-all of human existence, it not only corrodes the soul of the individual but too often blinds that person to the responsibility we all have to be of assistance to (the) less fortunate.”

Ellis then alluded to a recent study indicating that “more than three-quarters of college freshmen felt that being financially well off is an essential goal.” At the same time, the fewest freshmen in 20 years indicated that developing a meaningful philosophy of life was very important.

Ellis noted that the kind of education in moral values that affords protection against this sort of thing was a central theme a year ago when ABC’s *Nightline* anchor warned another graduating class of the danger of compliance with every passing fad: “No, the answer is no. Not because it isn’t cool or smart or because you might end up in jail or dying in an AIDS ward, but because it’s wrong. Because we have spent 5,000 years as a race of rational human beings trying to drag ourselves out of the primeval slime by searching for truth and moral absolutes.”

Obviously, the not-so-secret-word today is still “greed.” Evidence of this national contagion abounds daily in the headlines. While we’re decrying the threats of radon, the greenhouse effect

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and a depleted ozone layer, it seems ever more likely the nation may sink out of sight in a morass of moral decay.

Ellis concluded his address with a series of challenges, including: “Hold tenaciously to the enduring principle that there is a right and a wrong in human affairs, regardless of how much a hedonistic society seeks to eradicate that truth from your eyes. Resist with all the force at your command the pervasive tendency to succumb to the herd instinct and follow the majority wherever it may lead.”

Sound advice, indeed. I’d further suggest that if we truly want to resolve the major issues of our day, then it’s time we stopped going into battle with our hands tied behind our backs. I’m daring to broach the advisability of allowing God back into our formulations for pursuing national greatness.

Joseph Sobran was right on the mark when he said, “The prevailing notion is that the state should be neutral as to religion, and furthermore, that the best way to be neutral about it is to avoid all mention of it. By this sort of logic, nudism is the best compromise among different styles of dress.” He then noted that we treat religious values as we once did homosexuals – they can be tolerated only among consenting adults, and as long as they aren’t flaunted in public.

Yet, we willingly nurture moral apathy and then watch helplessly our rudderless youngsters drift into drugs and suicide.

RELIGION

How long must we pursue the conscience-eroding policy of trying to exclude God from our society?

Isn't it time we began restoring some sense of right and wrong, Sound moral principles and more altruistic goals in our younger citizens? Let's set them an example.

5. WALKING

County officials to our community of elders: 'Take a walk!'

County Executive Sidney Kramer and the County Council recently proclaimed September to be “Senior Physical Fitness Month.

Thanks, Sid. I needed that.

Actually, I thoroughly agree on one point. I think a month is just about the ultimate limit that I might endure any physical fitness program. I'll give it a shot and then – well, we'll see.

According to Rosalie S. Abrams, the Director of the Maryland Office on Aging, “Walking is actually one of the best all-around exercises.” She adds, “It can increase the efficiency of the heart, lungs and blood vessels and at the same time help delay the aging process in the joints and slow down the onset of arthritis.

I'm no exercise buff, but that sounds good to me.

Nine out of ten doctors seem to agree that walking is good for you, but have you ever seen a doctor walking? Well, maybe – to and from a golf cart on Wednesdays. When it comes to exercising most doctors stop at nothing.

Now Hear This

I long believed that exercise was the number one killer of Americans. Any honest person will admit that the more you exercise, the worse you feel.

Here's my theory: Fate has ordained that each of us has a predetermined number of heartbeats. Any increase in heart rate, as through exercise, only reduces our life span proportionately. Actually, this "used to be" my theory. A study by Dr. James Stoller of the Cleveland Clinic Foundation as recently reported in the New England Journal of Medicine changed my mind. Maybe it'll change yours.

Let me explain.

Assume a heart rate of 72 beats per minute and a life span of 75 years. Then $72 \text{ (beats/min)} \times 60 \text{ (mins/hr)} \times 24 \text{ (hrs/day)} \times 365 \text{ (days/yr)} \times 75 \text{ (yrs)}$ would yield a lifetime allotment of about 2.8 billion heartbeats. If you double the heart rate by running 30 minutes every day, you might think you'd be expending extra heartbeats and so shortening your life. Right? Wrong!

The typical person on a long-term running program gradually slows the pulse rate by 23 percent, that is, from 72 to 55. You'd be saving nearly 17 beats per minute while resting. Depending on what else you did besides running and resting, these savings could add 20 years to your life.

As much as we might resent it, when you tote it all up, moderate regular exercise is probably good for us. (Expletive deleted.)

WALKING

Of course there are those who figure that pushing 80 is exercise enough. There's another group that acts as though old folk should never stop moving, or they may never get going again. The way these folks overdo exercise you'd think there was some sort of reward.

The key word for elders in every respect is "moderation," and in the realm of exercise this strongly commends walking.

Walking offers many advantages over all other forms of physical conditioning. It requires no special skills or training. It's safe, convenient and inexpensive. It can be enjoyed alone or with others. It can be interesting, educational and relatively injury-free. Almost everybody can do it, and it can even be fun. That's not a bad parlay.

What is meant by "walking?" For it to be a healthy pursuit, we should walk briskly and on a regular schedule.

The scheduling part is easy. Most authorities agree that a useful program should provide for walking at least 20 minutes a day, without interruption, at least three times a week.

As for denoting "briskly," the scientific way would be to set what is known as a "target heart rate (THR)." The THR is based on age and can be determined easily by anyone. The proper THR would be equal to 220 minus your age, with the result multiplied by 0.6. For example, the THR for a 70 year old would be 0.6 times 150 (220 minus 70), or 90. A 70 year old should therefore walk fast enough to get the heart rate up to 90.

Now Hear This

A much easier way to indicate “briskly” might be for you to recall every parade you’ve ever seen. (Can’t you almost hear the bands and the “Hup, two, three, four?”) Marchers usually set a pace of about three miles per hour. That’s brisk enough for most elders.

When exercising like this it’s always a good idea to have a warm-up/cool-off program for before and after walking. Basically, this would be a mini-program of stretching exercises. This might simply comprise a series of bend-from-the-waist arm-hang downs. There’s no prize for touching the toes or the floor – just feel the stretch at the back of the legs, with NO bouncing, and don’t even try this if you have severe arthritis.

Alternate the foregoing with a series of “prances,” that is: standing back about 12 inches from but facing a table, place both palms down on the near edge of the table, and then place one foot rearward as far as comfortable while maintaining that rear foot flat on the floor. Then gently lunge forward about five times, flexing the forward knee to feel some tension in the rear leg. Then repeat, alternating legs rearward.

Continue alternating these two exercises for about five minutes.

Whenever exercising you should dress comfortably and sensibly, according to the seasons. Find a weather – proof indoor promenade – perhaps a long apartment corridor or nearby shopping mall – for a foul weather refuge.

WALKING

It goes without saying that you shouldn't even start an exercise program without the advice of your personal physician. Happily, no two of us are quite alike. We all march to different drummers. The important thing is that we march.

6. SMOKING

**Where there's smoke - there's a lot of
fired-up non-smokers**

Speaking of “fitness” (as we were in our last column), perhaps the single most effective thing seniors could contribute to overall fitness would be to launch an all-out anti-smoking campaign.

I hear all you smokers out there screaming, “Enough, already!”

I realize that if everyone quit smoking tomorrow people would still die of cancer and heart attacks. I also agree automobile exhaust is a killer, but I seldom run my car-engine in the living room, so smoking remains the chief cause of self-preventable, premature death.

October seems precisely the right time to launch such a campaign. It's the month we celebrate Columbus⁷, and it was old Chris who first both sighted and cited smoking in the New World in 1492. (Mayan stone-carved evidence of tobacco use as long ago as 600-900 A.D.⁸, and you know what happened to them. Color them “gone.” It really makes you think.)

7 Sometime around 2020, Columbus himself was accused of being racist by many because of his attitude toward and treatment of native peoples of America and of the Caribbean Islands. Celebrations of his “discovery” of America were subsequently considered by some to be inappropriate. In addition, numerous statues of Columbus were removed from public parks.

Now Hear This

“Why,” you may wonder, “should this be of any special concern to seniors?”

I thought you’d never ask.

For starters, did you know that the No. 1 cause of fires in which seniors die is related to smoking? No one should ever smoke in bed, of course, but certain medications, sleep-inducing music and mind-dulling TV fare increasingly invite drowsiness that makes smoking a particularly dangerous proposition even for sofa-bound-seniors at day’s end.

More directly to the point, some elders blithely believe, since they’ve safely gotten this far and alarming symptoms are rare, that they’ve nothing to fear. Recently that venerable sage Frank Sinatra on surviving his 70th birthday remarked that he was resuming smoking, since it could hardly do any harm at his age. Sorry, Francis Albert, but as the song says, “It could happen to you.”

The National Institute on Aging claims categorically, “It’s never too late to stop,” and then elaborates many reasons why. The Surgeon General has done the same in 20 official reports issued

8 In the 1980s, when this commentary was written, it was accepted practice to date events using the notation B.C. and A.D. To refer to dates Before Christ and Anno Domini (Latin for “in the year of the Lord.”) Subsequently, those notations were “de-Christian-ized” to avoid reference to religion per-se. As this document is being written, it is common practice to use the notation BCE and CE in their place to refer to dates “Before the Common Era” and “Common Era,” where the so-called Common Era is based on the Gregorian calendar which, conveniently, begins in exactly the same year that the Christian religions claim Jesus Christ was born, but which, supposedly, has no religious overtones. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Common_Era.

SMOKING

between 1964 and 1988. “Tens of thousands” of studies have documented all the relevant facts.

Yet some 32.7 percent of men and 28.3 percent of women smoked cigarettes regularly as recently as 1985. Meanwhile, more than 15 percent of all deaths in the USA are attributable to smoking. The tobacco industry being the single largest advertiser in the print media and on billboards is apparently paying off. Sure. You’ve heard all this stuff before and yet persist in mimicking *Mad Magazine’s* Alfred E. Newman – “What? Me worry?” So it’s pointless to bore everyone with another recital of the gory details. Perhaps we’d best just write-off elders and focus on our children and grandchildren.

This past May the 20th Report of the Surgeon General on the health consequences of tobacco use re-confirmed the addictive nature of nicotine first mentioned in the 1964 report. Knowledgeable scientists agree that the nicotine common to all forms of tobacco is a powerfully addictive drug. The *American Psychiatric Association* (APA) has included tobacco dependence as a substance abuse disorder for almost a decade, and nicotine withdrawal as an organic mental disorder. This is scary stuff.

Yet, a recent report noted 26 percent of 10th graders and 16 percent of 8th graders already smoked. Many youngsters experimenting with various forms of tobacco have every intention of kicking the habit later. They apparently underestimate or are unaware of the strength of nicotine addiction.

Now Hear This

Clearly, the most older people can do for younger people in this regard is to discourage them from ever starting in the first place. The best way for parents and other role models to do this is by example. Quit, already!

It can be done. Over 30 million Americans have stopped smoking (as the old joke goes – some of them dozens of times,) and the trend continues. Another hopeful sign is that daily cigarette use among high school seniors declined about 35 percent from 1975 to 1986. Most simply stop on their own. So can you.

Students often claim that smoking helps keep them alert, and cite this as a reason for not quitting. A recent *Berkeley Wellness Newsletter* debunked that excuse, citing a report to the APA by George Spilich of Washington College, Chestertown, Maryland.

Tests Spilich conducted showed that both “smoking” smokers and abstaining smokers did slightly better than non-smokers on simple tasks, but as tests increased in complexity the situation reversed. The study concluded that smoking seriously impairs performance requiring access to long-term memory. So much for smoking as a boon to heavy brain work.

Given all of the above, the Surgeon General questions the appropriateness of selling tobacco products via vending machines, sending free samples through the mail, and allowing distribution on public property where age verification is difficult to impossible. Dr. Koop asks, “Should the sale of tobacco be treated less seriously

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than the sale of alcoholic beverages, for which a specific license is required (and revoked for repeated sales to minors)?"

That's a good question, and one which some of us may have an opportunity in due course to answer at the polls. As recently as this past August the nation's top two cigarette manufacturers sent more than 7,500 telegrams, and flooded our nearby neighbors in Howard County with phone calls, to urge the defeat of then pending anti-smoking legislation.

The tobacco industry lobbyist launched this seeming "overkill" (his sponsors accounting for nearly 71 percent of the nation's cigarette sales, the county comprising only 160,000 citizens) in contrast to a more limited earlier campaign in Montgomery County because, so he said, "I looked upon the Howard County Council as more open-minded and rational.

Hmmm. Now, let's really crush their butts. (Howard County did.)

7. ECOLOGY

**In the sky! Is it a bird – a plane? No!
It's Super-pollution**

Are you all ready for Halloween?

I know. Nowadays, every day is Halloween. Think about it. Halloween is when we're threatened by ghouls, gremlins, goblins and ghosts.

Well, try these on for size: the ghoul of "greenhouse effect," the gremlin of acid rain, the goblin of high-level ozone protective layer depletion, and the ghost of low-level ozone suffocation. I don't know about you, but I feel threatened.

And remember fall – that most beautiful season of the year when everything changes color and the leaves begin to fall? Well, have I got news for you? Chicken Little was right. It isn't just the leaves that are falling these days, my friends, "The sky is falling." And it's not just the leaves that turn color anymore. Check the finish on your car, the paint on your house – sometimes even the skin on your arm. Perhaps it's time we revised the old-time Halloween challenge of "trick or treat" to "trick or treatment."

And as if all of this isn't enough, while we're still fretting about the quadruple-threat from above, we now learn that radon is oozing

Now Hear This

up through the earth's surface to threaten us from below. (At least we didn't cause this.) Until the Surgeon General broke the "sound barrier" on this one recently, most people probably thought radon was just another flashy quarterback from some southern state, like in Ray Don Buford.

Meanwhile, right here at ground-level we not only have to cope with the menace of at least "passive" smoking, we're potential victims to pesticide contamination, beaches littered with possibly lethal hospital refuse and the ever-present threat of "Chernobyl re-visited."

Not to worry.

Congress has already authorized several on-going "studies" and the president has commissioned several "blue-ribbon panels" to look into matters. Golly! I don't know about you, but I feel better already. In fact, I haven't felt so safe since Elvis himself manned a NATO tank in Europe.

Are you wondering just how frightened you should be by these developments? Are you wondering whether any of these invidious new threats to our planet pose any special dilemma for elders? Are you eager to learn what measures you might take now (or actively support) toward alleviating this rapidly deteriorating situation? Are you fearfully imploring whether we're doomed to just sit idly by as our pusillanimous politicians blithely permit the continued "fouling of our nest" on a grand scale?

Frankly, my dear, we must all first "give a damn."

ECOLOGY

It's my firm conviction that all the problems cited stem from or are intensified by a single national defect to which virtually all of us contribute. Simply stated: too many have put distorted personal goals before the "common good." We have allowed personal greed to take priority over our common national need.

A snow-balling sense of uncertainty, confusion and chaos confounds our nation today. Many seemingly assume that if we only regulate "this" or decontrol "that," then everything will be alright. We entirely ignore overwhelming historical evidence that the decline of nations begins with neglect of the ideals that spawned them.

We seem to have forgotten that the basic objective of society itself is this common good; a concept signifying group benefits achievable only through cooperation. The common good is real only as it results in the good of the individual, and it is valid only as it benefits society as a whole. Given these premises, the common good takes precedence over the individual good. It is precisely the government's business to create the climate of cooperation in which common good benefits can take root and grow – as the opening words of our constitution testify -"establish Justice ... promote the general Welfare.

We've clearly lost our way. We're caught up in the national plague of what columnist Colman McCarthy has labeled "Number Oneism," compounded by an acute case of what author Andrew Schmookler calls "collective narcissism." Most citizens march resolutely alone toward their own individual goals, all the while

Now Hear This

proclaiming that our nation excels every other in absolutely every respect. Perhaps, in the latter regard, it could and it should, but as of now this thesis remains as remote from reality as Martin Luther King's dream⁹. We lag in virtually every area but armed-might, economic imperialism, fast-food and – greed.

What happened is that we've become victims of the institutionalized lie. Advertising executives gloat over how easily they can distort the priority of real needs. Public relations specialist revel in fashioning fraudulent images of reality. Government news is willfully manipulated through vacuous "photo opportunities" and the distortions of blatant "spin-control."

Avoiding truth has become one giant conspiratorial game – our new "national pastime." Anything goes. "Everybody does it." No indicted (or even convicted) wrong-doer so much as recognizes (let alone admits) unethical or illegal conduct. In fact, craftiness is more admired and better rewarded than craftsmanship. Vices thinly disguised by outrageous euphemisms are paraded as modern virtues. We appear to have degenerated into a nation of ethical eunuchs.

So we continue to allow our planet to be ravaged and our very survival threatened through surrender to well-moneyed, self-serving, private interest groups. Faced with self-inflicted devastation, we recently condoned yet another victory of the NRA's

⁹ Note: This was written in 1988! The more things change, the more they stay the same.

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gun dollars over common sense¹⁰, and invited yet another assault on the very air we breathe through relaxation of auto-exhaust standards.

But, there is something we can do about this. We can resist the entreaties of self-serving lobbyists. We can hold our congressional representatives to account. We can individually harken back to our nation's root principles. WE CAN VOTE!

¹⁰ Ibid.

8. VETERANS

Now is the time for all good citizens to salute their soldiers

Friday, 11 November, is Veterans' Day. Does it mean anything at all?

It should. By the end of this century two-thirds of all elderly men will be veterans and the number of elderly female veterans will have doubled. This is at once a credit to our citizenry and a condemnation of our politics.

Speaking of politics, it's interesting that alone among all 50 states, only Maryland has no veteran in either the U. S. Senate or House of Representatives. So, perhaps our congressional leaders should be excused from commenting upon military service. But somebody ought to do it, and I guess it's me by default.

The nasty nature of the happily concluding presidential campaign – marked by so much foolish distortion about duty, honor, and patriotism – makes it almost imperative that some attempt be made place the nation's debt to our service folk in perspective. Generals from Sherman to MacArthur and Eisenhower have declared there's no such thing as a good war. I fully agree. The

Now Hear This

question is: are our military personnel knaves and fools, or noble and honorable public servants worthy of special tribute.

The armed services, often no less than the smallest family, knows both good and bad, smart and dumb, zealot and goof-off. What we're saying is that it isn't the character of the "soldier" (here used generically to embrace airmen, sailors, marines, coast and national guardsmen, and reserves of both sexes) that we salute, so much as it is the military institution in which one serves. And let's be clear at the outset: **EVERY SOLDIER WHO HAS EVER SERVED WITH HONOR DESERVES HIS SERVICE TO BE REMEMBERED AND RESPECTED!**

A quote from T. E. Lawrence about the military uniform is pertinent: "It came upon me freshly how the secret of the uniform was to make a crowd solid, dignified, impersonal: to give it the singleness and tautness of an upstanding man. This death's livery which walled its bearers from ordinary life, was a sign that they have sold their wills and bodies to the State: and contracted themselves into a service not the less abject for that its beginning was voluntary."

This powerful statement is tempered somewhat by another apt quote, this time from Eric Sevareid: "When marching at the flank of a column on inspection parade, I had a thrilling feeling of being a part of a living, invisible force; but this was a fleeting sensation, despised later as part of the seductive paraphernalia of

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the plot, along with the flag and music and shining brass, to lure us into feeling that the training for murder was really something else.”

These two statements alone, to which any veteran might resonate, should go a long way toward establishing that the soldier – be he volunteer or draftee, desk-bound or jungle bait, unwilling hero or craven coward, – is a breed apart. All surrender their freedom and privacy on a twenty-four hour, seven-days-a-week basis, and self-sacrifice becomes the name of the game, often in a terminally hostile environment. Survival becomes one’s single, all-consuming motivation.

And let’s not forget that many of us who mark this day – or should – are blessed survivors. Too many veterans paid the ultimate price in battle: more than 50,000 in WWI, 290,000 in WWII, 30,000 in Korea, and 45,000 in Vietnam. Many who read this, especially veterans and their families, have plenty to be thankful for, and Veterans’ Day should not go unremarked.

Did I just mention “Nam?” There was a war different from all others. A paraphrase of the testimony of one Marine Corps PFC seems apt. As he saw it, in WWII we faced a clearly defined evil and felt we were fighting for our homes. Nam soldiers sacrificed to save face. In WWII we fought for Bastogne, and slowly pushed the “enemy” back on his own soil. In Nam we fought for hill 881, only to give it back at sun down, and measured success in “body count.”

Our soldiers went to Nam – alone. They buried their best friend – or parts of him – alone. They learned that it didn’t pay to

Now Hear This

get too close to anybody, they'd just get killed anyway, and so they survived – alone. Above all, they came back – alone. They were treated as outcasts. Instead of cheers, bands, and parades, our Nam vets came home to ridicule, silence, and even spittle.

To these guys Vietnam is not simply a word or a place, it is a searing, burning, lingering pain, often haunting days as well as nights. In Nam dying was easy. Living – and doing something you came to believe was filthy and meaningless – was much harder. Some, who luckily escaped unscathed in the paddies and jungles, came home to be tear-gassed in their nation's capital. Yet even today some non-veterans still wonder, "What's wrong with "these" vets?"

Few soldiers intend or want to be heroes. But few go through combat without their lives being forever changed. In one awesome moment they are marked forever – confronted as they are with the precariousness of their own mortality. That soul-searing, image-destroying moment comes when, confronted by ultimate terror, one holds on and does one's duty – thereby forging a common bond with every American soldier who ever went before, or will come after.

Recognition was late coming for the Nam vet, but it finally arrived in that marvelous, mystical, marble "Wall on the Mall." With that Wall came the beginning of healing. We tried to ignore these vets. We tried to forget them. God bless them: they simply wouldn't let us. They endured, and it is right and just that their moments of

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anguish and memories of fallen comrades likewise endure. They did their duty. Now, this Veterans' Day, It's time for Americans everywhere to do theirs. Visit the Wall if you can. You'll be moved.\ Finally, let's not forget our peacetime soldiers. Remember the great speech the drunken lawyer Greenwald unloaded on Keefer at his acquittal celebration in *The Cain Mutiny*? It extols the fact that it was the peacetime-warriors of the world who were "keeping (Greenwald's Mom) out of (Hitler's) soap dish" while their nations armed. Remember: "They also serve who only stand and wait."

9. FOOD

Let's talk turkey - are elders tasteless when it comes to food?

Are we all ready for Thanksgiving and filling our little gullets with giblets?

Place any two individuals at the dinner table and the chances are you'll get an argument about the food. If the two people happen to be elders, you can count on it. The food is either too hot or too cold, too spicy or too bland, too much or too little, too dry or too juicy.

The plain fact is: Even normal people seldom agree on what constitutes really good food, and when it comes to "taste," well – elders just aren't normal.

If you're a senior, or have eaten recently with seniors, then it's quite likely you've heard someone remark, "This food doesn't taste as good as what I've been used to all my life." And such a statement isn't merely a commentary on the adverse effects of pesticide-overkill or acid rain on our food produce. Nor is it just a figment of the speaker's imagination or another reflection of increasing dissatisfaction with life in general. Science is confirming that taste acuity actually diminishes with age.

Now Hear This

Our lessened or modified sense of taste is further emphasized by an accompanying lessening of our ability to perceive and identify odors. As any wine enthusiast will tell you, the bouquet of a good vintage greatly enhances our enjoyment of its taste. So, if your food doesn't taste quite like it used to, or you think it should, don't be too ready to blame the cook. "The fault, dear Brutus, lies in ourselves."

All of this hardly surprise many seniors. Most of us certainly realize all too well that we can't go upstairs as fast as we used to, or walk as far. Some of us come to realize we are more susceptible to feeling too hot or too cold. Others among us recognize how the size of newsprint is forever shrinking, or how our neighbors are so much more prone to whisper or mumble. Most of us simply can't "feel," see or hear like we used to. So why should we think that our sense of taste might not have also and perhaps radically deteriorated?

The medical profession has come to appreciate that it is the diminished sense of taste in old folks that often leads to loss of appetite and thence too frequently to malnutrition. Even so, a declining ability to taste and smell food is not wholly attributable to the aging process. For many elders the problem is compounded by disease or medications, both of which can adversely affect these senses.

Among the diseases that can alter taste, smell, or both are flu, liver disorders, kidney failure, nervous disorders such as Parkinson's disease, endocrine problems such as diabetes,

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hyperthyroidism, high blood pressure, asthma, cancer, and many others.

Then there are the adverse by products of our alleged cures. Radiation therapy won't help your appetite. Neither will drugs such as diuretics, anticoagulants, antihistamines, muscle relaxants, and antibiotics. Nutritional deficiencies and overuse of vitamin and mineral supplements can also interfere with our capacity to taste and smell.

Science tells us that taste is transmitted through so-called taste buds comprising about 50 cells each. These cells have a life span of about ten days and are constantly being replaced by new ones. This renewal process is also affected by nutritional and hormonal states, radiation, drugs, and – age.

The facts are that we not only grow increasingly “tasteless” with age, but our taste is also constantly changing. Maybe we ought to think twice the next time, before we complain to the waiter, the cook, or to management about the food. In fact, the marvel is that an elder community can ever retain a really good cook for very long.

According to a recent study conducted at the University of California as reported in the *American Journal of Public Health*, the level of job-stress experienced by a cook is exactly the same as that of a physician who makes life and death decisions. Not only that, only four occupations involve more stress than that suffered by

Now Hear This

cooks: lawyers, pharmacists, and – waiters and restaurant managers.

Apparently, the so-called “joy of cooking” is considerably offset by the stress and strain inflicted by dissatisfied diners, many of whom may be totally unaware that it is “time” more than the “cook” which has resulted in food no longer being fun.

Compounding this unhappy situation is the further fact that deteriorated tastes can vary widely. Beyond that, an elder clientele is usually beset by a huge variety of dietary restrictions, like-never eat prunes when you’re really hungry. More seriously, it should go without saying that the more customized individual platters must be: the more costly the food procurement and preparation processes become. People who need or demand special service must expect to bear the extra expense entailed.

There is in all of this, of course, another side of the same coin. For elders communal meals often are the highlight of the day – an event to look forward to and to savor. Seniors are therefore especially prone to give short shrift to the cook who delivers an ostensibly hot dish which has already turned cold. In this day of nutrition-consciousness there is also and properly very little tolerance for any dish being awash in gravy, white with salt, or drenched in butter or fatty oils.

Even “tasteless” eaters are entitled to reasonable standards of performance and quality. It is not too much to demand that purportedly hot food be hot, that iced tea be cold, that fresh fruits

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and vegetables be fresh, and that elective condiments be generously available for those who can tolerate and appreciate enhancement of a possibly more generally prescribed bland diet. In short, elder eaters no less than any other Americans have certain inalienable rights.

So, have a Happy Thanksgiving, but PLEASE say something kind to the cook.

10. POTPOURRI

A French word for what 'what shall I write about today'

Have you noticed? Truly thinking columnists (an oxymoron?) occasionally have to unburden themselves of the gripes they accumulate while observing the passing scene with increasingly jaundiced eyes (an occupational hazard?).

Different writers choose different means of catharsis. Jack Kilpatrick¹¹ now and then takes a day off from pummeling the Democrats to wax lyrical about a grandchild. George Will periodically dissolves into silly putty and pens a paean to the Chicago Cubs. Pat Buchanan may briefly digress from blasting Commies to admit that Republicans didn't, after all, invent or secure a lifetime patent on national peace and prosperity. (Oops! Did I go too far?)

You get the point. Everyone needs a safety valve. To preserve sanity, a journalist from time to time has to find creative new ways to spell "relief" from the haunting notion that his efforts are akin to tossing bottled notes overboard at sea. So, please forgive a

11 Jack Kilpatrick, George Will, Pat Buchanan wrote opinion pieces for the *Washington Post* on a regular basis during the 1980s. Only George Will continues to do so in 2021 as this edition is being prepared.

Now Hear This

perhaps unseemly lapse of editorial regard as I fleetingly take a time-out to tell it like I think it should be.

To begin, one ever-popular psychologist, philosopher and all-purpose Hollywood savant recently remarked, "I honestly believe that the regret of yesterday and the rear of tomorrow is (sic) just too heavy to handle. If you can just stay centered on today, *that* you can handle." Wow! I happily pass on this little gem of pristine wisdom as a public service. You'll probably want to clip it and post it where it'll be the first thing you see on awaking each morning. It may just give you strength enough to get through the day.

I don't know about you, but I'm fed up with silicon-enhanced, air-heads being trotted out by the media to share their not-so-penetrating philosophies of life. Where did these noodles get their post-graduate degrees in smarts?

As if that's not enough, we're increasingly afflicted with a rash of life-stories (sic) by mere 20 to 30 year-old celebrity-fetuses, many of whom might be hard pressed to write their own names. What have these plastic-haired, teeny-boppers ever done to enhance humanity? What have they got to say that could possibly be a vital addition to the pool of public knowledge?

Another thing: Why must our sensibilities be endlessly affronted by solemn interviews with mindless "Miss Cosmos" clones who, though exhibiting enough curves to build an Olympic-sized luge-run, altogether probably possess less intellectual equipment than a hardware store? I refer to vapid-faced bimbos jiggling down

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run ways to murmur, “All I want is to work for world peace and reduce the suffering of mankind.” (Please pass the *Alka-Seltzer!*)

Shall I go on? How many self-congratulatory memorial dinners, mutual admiration festivals, and annual award (exchange?) shows do you think the narcissistic, reciprocally anointed, self-appointed super-egos of the entertainment industry can devise? How far is the journey from here to a star?

Let’s move on. I hope you won’t think me if I confess that I’m sick to death of polls, and I’m not talking about the pope. I’m tired of pundits telling me what I think. How do they know? In my entire life I’ve never once been solicited for an opinion by a pollster – never been part of any survey. Have you? Has any neighbor? Any friend?

Who are these pompous clowns who profess to express (rarely correctly) my private opinions on almost everything? How can we be so sure their figures aren’t pure fiction designed to persuade us to think the way they want us to think? How can we be certain we aren’t being psyched into joining phony bandwagons? Remember, everyone has a constitutional right to a secret ballot, and for good reason. To paraphrase an old blues song, our vote “ain’t nobody’s business but our own.”

I here and now propose a counter-group to these nameless know-it-alls who are always presuming to speak for the great mass of voiceless citizenry of which I’m a part. There will be no dues, no headquarters, and no newsletter. To become a member, and assuming (miracle of miracles) that you’re ever questioned by a

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pollster, all you have to do is (in poet Emily Dickenson's great phrase): "Tell it slant." Keep a straight face, but never give a straight answer. If misdirection be the name of their game, prove that two can play.

The only way we'll ever rid the world of the expanding blight of these parasites is to render their product totally worthless – granted they haven't been worth an awful lot in the first place. We must turn them into laughing stocks. Such will be the sole mission of my new group, to be known as – *CRUSH* (Citizens Resolutely United to Silence Hucksters).

Hey! There's more. For example, haven't you grown a little bit bilious over our top-level officials turning so-called press conferences (remember when they weren't held enroute to helicopters?) into gag festivals more befitting a touring USO troupe? Image-makers obviously think we're too stupid to realize that comedy in high places is at best the last refuge of the ill-informed, and at worst the first resort of the cover-up or spin-artist. Buffoonery is the great evasion. It affords an easy way to change the subject or avoid decision. Today it's a too-ready mask for deceit and ineptitude.

I hope you may agree that it's long past time to root gag-writers out of the White House. An occasional touch of wit adds spice to life and can sometimes even *IN*form (as by underscoring a point), but a steady y flow of one-liners can only *DE*form a critical communication process. Let the jokesters write for television

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comics. Lord knows, they could use some fresh material only slightly less than they need some clean material.

Okay, I've finished – for now. No offense is intended, but don't hesitate to write letters. I get so lonely!

11. ASTROLOGY

The only ones who profit from 'fortune cookies' are the 'bakers'

Riddle: What is it that religions condemn, scientists scorn, and comedians ridicule, but leaves most other people fascinated?

Answer: Astrology – the ancient belief linking earthly events to the movement of heavenly bodies.

Can many readers deny that, at least on their birthdays, they haven't stolen a glance at their "horror-scope?" Some 83 percent of our newspapers (including this reliable *Journal*) carry horoscopes, and reportedly 85 percent of all Americans (including our "first family") know their "sign." At least most papers have sense enough to place horoscopes alongside the comics.

The Montgomery County Code provides that anyone who even accepts (let alone demands) any form of payment for even pretending (apart from specified benefit performances) to foretell the future "by cards, palmistry or any other scheme, practice or device" shall be subject to punishment for a code violation. You won't find any crystal-ball-gazers or tea-leaf-readers listed in our "yellow pages¹²." Yet, horoscope publishing flourishes.

12 In the 1980s, before everything was searchable online, inches-thick phone books, listing everyone by name along with their phone number, were published regularly by the various phone companies. Separate volumes, printed on yellow paper, were distributed listing the names and numbers of

Now Hear This

Is everybody crazy?

That's a good question, as it turns out. The word "lunatic," after all, denotes someone who is allegedly "moonstruck." And, how many dastardly deeds have we witnessed on TV against a background of thunder and lightning with the moon suddenly darting behind an ominous cloud? When the going really gets tough in the maternity ward, at police stations, or in hospital emergency rooms the common chant invariably is: "There must be a full moon tonight!"

We thus explain a seeming sudden increase in births, bar room fights, and family feuds. But have YOU ever seen a werewolf? So why does this phenomenal interest in astrology persist?

If we're honest most of us old folks might confess to a feeling of insecurity that seems to grow with age. So, we seek an edge – any edge – on trying to look beyond today.

Human nature being what it is, we might be better advised to study the past if we wish to divine the future. But as some wag must surely have said, the only good thing about living in the past might be that it would be cheaper.

Becoming disenchanted with the present, elders are perhaps more apt to let misplaced hope overwhelm declining faith. We've all seen so many things go wrong so often. And perhaps the more things get beyond our control, the more easily we succumb to the

businesses. These business editions were referred to as the "yellow pages." Today, you may find similar product online at www.yellowpages.com.

ASTROLOGY

siren song of the astrologers. All of this may suffice as an explanation, but it's hardly an excuse.

The Jewish philosopher Maimonides protested centuries ago that, "Astrology is a disease, not a science. Only fools and charlatans lend value to it." Yet, the popular Jewish good luck greeting "*Mazel tov*" literally means, "a good constellation." Apparently we've all inherited some deeply ingrained traditions. We tend to blame the stars rather than ourselves. It's the same old story: It's not whether you win or lose, but where you place the blame.

Assuming for a moment that it ever works, astrology can't predict the really important things in life – like which line at the bank, post office or supermarket will move faster. Yet, many people can't start the day without checking theirs. They simply have to "know" what kind of day they're going to have. So, thousands of people plan their every waking hour around three dubious "by-products" of the daily press: the TV listings, weather report, and horoscopes. Strange.

Personally, I don't believe in crazy superstitions. I think they bring bad luck. I go along with old Abe Lincoln, "The best thing about the future is that it comes one day at a time." And, I really don't want to see what lies ahead. I might die of fright.

Maybe that's why so many elders tend more and more to live in the past. We know, since we survived, that we could at least cope with that. Many so-called experts go so far as to say that one

Now Hear This

of the first signs of old age is an extolling of the past at the expense of the present. If we can succeed at living in the past, then we lose our fear of the future.

There's another reason why elders might fall easy prey to astrology. Many of us grow lonely as well as insecure with advancing age. We sometimes find ourselves at the curb, wistfully watching life's passing parade. No wonder we find consolation in horoscopes: they're so personal! We find ours in the daily newspaper and react as though it were written directly for us – alone. Clearly, somebody “out there” is thinking of us. It's another crutch for our daily coping. So what, if It's all nonsense? It's our very own nonsense. Astrologers may not be prophets, but apparently they're mighty shrewd psychologists.

So what's the big deal? Where's the harm? If astrology makes any human being feel a little bit better why should anyone knock it? Well, perhaps that all hinges on how much stock we place in it. I sometimes glance at mine and laugh. Some people don't. To them astrology is serious business. They bet the “meal money” according to the daily “predictions.” They buy or sell stocks. They take or cancel trips. They get pregnant – sometimes even getting married first.

That's really a sad way for anyone to order one's life. After all, if so many people believe in and follow astrology, why aren't they all winners?

ASTROLOGY

The over-riding fact remains that there is not one shred of scientific proof in support of astrology. Worst of all, earnest belief in astrology betrays sadly deformed faith – a corruption of the human spirit, its dignity and innate wisdom. We were made for greater things. I for one confess I'd rather opt to supplant star-gazing by focusing on the One presaged by "the star in the east." And after all, as the bumper-sticker says: Jesus is the reason for the season. May the spirit of the Prince of Peace reign in the hearts of all.

12. DEATH

**One year ends, another begins; and so it
is with life itself**

FREEZE! Nobody's getting out of here alive.

It's true. While more people are cheating the tax collector every day, it's been almost 2,000 years since anyone beat the "grim reaper."

Everyone who reads this is going to pass away, go to glory, depart this vale of tears, shuffle off this mortal coil, give up the ghost, join the heavenly choir, or buy the farm. I hate to be the one bringing the bad news, folks, but no matter how you say it – we're all going to die. That's a natural fact.

It's also something to which anyone over 65 should be giving some thought. There's no need to feel queasy about it, as though it's our own dirty little secret. When it comes to dying, everyone's an apprentice. There are no experts.

All of us try to make sensible plans for almost everything else we might face during life, like setting up educational funds for our children, buying health insurance, calling ahead for vacation reservations, holding a picnic without rain – you name it. But every day we read about guys dying without a Will.

Now Hear This

The increasing sophistication of modern medicine only compounds the situation. Maybe we can't freeze folks yet while awaiting better days, but (and not to suggest a position in the matter) we already manage to sustain human beings scientifically long after they've become hopeless vegetables. There are still others who, though physically normal, suffer mental disorders rendering them incapable of managing their own affairs. To cover such contingencies there are many sound measures which can be taken now, and free legal advice on civil matters is available to those 60-plus by phone.

No single stratagem would likely serve everyone's purposes (different strokes, etc.), but here are a few items that might merit your consideration:

- Have a lawyer execute a Death Bed Declaration to take effect in event of a doubly certified terminal/incurable/irreversible injury, disease, or illness.
- Have a lawyer execute a General Power of Attorney to take effect in the event of an incapacitating disability regarding fiscal affairs' management.
- Have a lawyer draw up a will. This would not only assure fulfillment of your intent and desires, but would save your survivors miles of red-tape.
- Dispose NOW of unneeded property of all kinds – there's no luggage rack on a hearse. This not only saves your survivors needless headaches, it affords you the satisfaction of observing their gratitude for your largess.

DEATH

- If you expect or desire some religious ceremony to mark your passing, register now with the appropriate church authorities. Like the Irishmen who always tipped his hat on passing a church, when they wheel you in there feet-first you don't want God looking down and asking, "Who's the stranger?"
- If you wish to help humanity while avoiding the current funeral vogue, execute the proper forms now with the Anatomy Board of Maryland (655 W. Baltimore Street, Baltimore, Maryland, 21201¹³), and consider registering to participate in organ donor programs. Don't be put off regarding the latter, like the poor soul who recently visited the DMV for a routine driver's license renewal and came away shakily complaining, "They used to just ask for a few bucks, but this time they asked about my giving them my kidneys!"
- As an alternative to the Anatomy Board, consider membership in the Memorial Society of Suburban Maryland¹⁴ – a democratic, volunteer, non-profit organization dedicated to simple, dignified and economical funerals through advanced planning. For details, including information on cooperating funeral directors, write the society at P.O. Box 34177, Bethesda, MD 20827. The price of real estate being what it is, don't overlook the cremation option.
- Start psyching yourself up now for dealing with the anxiety of final illness. Visit a library or Book mobile to pick up helpful literature like that by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, or Norman Cousins – who, like Readers' Digest, prescribe laughter as the best medicine. (We'll save hospice for another column.)
- If you are a religious person, start overhauling your spiritual condition now, even though, as author C. S. Lewis has noted,

13 Address updated to current location as of September, 2021. Also see <https://health.maryland.gov/anatomy/Pages/Index.aspx>

14 Since merged with the *Funeral Consumers Alliance of Maryland and Environs* and found at <https://mdfunerals.org/>

Now Hear This

“God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains.” Sooner or later, and most likely when we’re in deep distress, the Good Lord will get our attention. Even super-macho John Wayne was reported to be a death-bed penitent. As WWII lore had it: “There aren’t any atheists in foxholes.”

We must also begin disciplining ourselves now to resist those ultimate ravages of aging – wholly negative dispositions, unabated cynicism, suspiciousness of everyone, and paranoia over possessions, medicines and money. We must steel ourselves to withstand becoming victims of what columnist Robert J. Samuelson has termed “the recurrent cycle of disillusionment.”

We must constantly strive to turn outward to others, rather than inwardly on ourselves. At the same time, we should refrain from announcing the self-evident truth (to ourselves, anyway) that we’re always right, and must continually battle becoming – like this sorry correspondent – terminally opinionated.

Did I say “terminal?” Shakespeare noted that, “Cowards die many times...; the valiant ... but once.” FDR insisted, “We have nothing to fear but fear itself.” It would be most foolish to be so fearful of death that we become afraid to live. Seneca had it right: “I depart from life as from an inn, and not as from my home.” And a little sense of humor might help. As Mark Twain noted about fear of death – “a strange complaint from ... people ... who have had to live.”

DEATH

Death is the great adventure, and let us hope – only the dawn of new life. Enjoy! Except for Shirley MacLaine, we pass this way but once. Shalom.

13. GRIPES

Like friends, Romans, and countrymen – county officials listen

The county Commission on Aging staged an instant-re play of its award-winning 1987 Takoma Park and Gaithersburg “Speakouts” this past December. Sponsored by the Bethesda-Chevy Chase Citizens’ Advisory Board, this one was held at the Bethesda Women’s Club. It seemed a huge success.

The session was more of a “Listen-in” than a “Speak-out.” The commission and attending officials got an ear full. On hand and completely tuned-in were the chairman of the commission who led the meeting – John Grigg, our county executive – Sid Kramer, the then chairman of the county council – Michael Subin, and the director of the Division of Elder Affairs – Elizabeth Boehner, plus a bevy of county department heads and assorted staff members. If things don’t begin to happen now, everyone will at least know precisely whom to blame.

The overall theme of the forum was “Sustaining Senior Self-Sufficiency,” and it focused on eliciting elders’ needs with respect to housing, health, and transportation. Boehner alluded to the broad array of county services already in place that are designed to enable folks to remain in their own homes as long as possible. She

Now Hear This

also displayed her office's recently released "Senior Citizens Guide to Programs and Services" which details the full gamut of such resources.

Noting the depth of talent and resources available at the meeting, Kramer commended the rare opportunity that the forum gave citizens to button-hole responsible officials on-the-spot with their grievances. He lamented that a major problem continues to be a seeming inability of proper authorities to communicate adequately the wealth of services already available.

The exercise was an encouraging example of democracy at its best – a grass roots grievance gala. Our citizens now know that they have at least been heard. That is, those in attendance do. This brings up two points worth mentioning. First, absentees should know that many of those raising issues spoke for one organization or another, rather than merely for themselves. That's good.

Second, no matter how laudable the level of attendance, too many county residents still remain unheard. And, in affairs such as this there is always the danger that "the squeaking wheel will get the grease," thereby possibly seriously distorting a proper priority of needs. That's bad.

Subin emphasized to forum attendees that, "We need to hear from you -directly from the people who are affected – the people who need the services. We have to know what the people need, not what county officials think they need." And hear them they did! The county critics had really done their homework. The range of topics

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raised by unhappy citizens included questions about: available legal assistance, in-home programs to help disabled shut-ins to become contributors to the community and thus feel like human beings, the outrageous cost of hearing aids, curtailment of visiting nurses to elder communities, spiraling rent-increases, and the short-comings of the so-called rent-increase guidelines. One provocative if less urgent plea raised the specter of possible discrimination against moderate-income elders who failed to qualify for county resources allotted to the more needy elders. This prompted the notion that perhaps even the wealthy were ripped-off by inordinate rental increases. Hey, Solomon!

The meeting was fraught with irony. A major complaint concerned transportation deficiencies. This suggests that many chronic problems may not have been addressed because the aggrieved parties simply couldn't get there. Paradoxically, one participant who arrived via a loaded county bus (from a Senior Center!) gripe d about the inadequacy of buses for more pleasure trips. Again, it's at least mildly amusing that a roomful of folks protesting a lack of transportation incidentally provoked a parking lot overflow on the meeting premises.

One commonly voiced but somewhat surprising aspect of the transportation problem concerned obstacles to walking. A major complaint was the absence of sidewalks in established areas. Current law provides that in such instances the walks can be provided only if a majority of the home-owners whose property

Now Hear This

abuts the proposed walk s agree to pay for them. The odds on this are probably slightly less than John Denver's chances of a trip into outer space, no matter how many of us might wish he could be accommodated – one-way.

Several citizen representatives cited the hazards presented by merely trying to cross multi-lane streets on three-second "WALK" lights, especially as burdened by "walkers," canes for the blind, or even groceries. Crossing busy Wisconsin Avenue was heralded an Olympic event, prompting one fearless (short-term?) Recreation Department official to facetiously boost the body-conditioning programs they ordered. We mention this merely to spotlight the evident atmosphere of good will which pervaded some fairly hot and heavy exchanges.

No one expected solutions to all problems to be forthcoming on the spot. Yet, the session surfaced several unresolved problems which seemingly require fresh insights – some truly creative new initiatives. Among these, we'd venture the need for: modifying the law now governing the provision of essential sidewalks in established neighborhoods, with a more equitable method of defraying the costs or such general public benefits; balancing relief to fixed-income seniors from escalating property taxes against the burgeoning expense of increasing services needed by a mushrooming community of elders; devising an improved method of evolving the county's "voluntary rent guideline," to effect a more realistic and valid balance between a landlord's actual cost-based

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fair return and assuring the continuing availability of affordable rental housing for fixed-income elderly; and perhaps most of all, a streamlined system for determining legitimate community needs and then optimally apportioning the limited resources to achieve the maximum benefit for the widest practicable range of those most in need.

14. HOSPICE

Going in style: Hospice brings intensive care to the home

What does “hospice” mean to you? Chances are, responses will range from a simple “I don’t know,” through confusion, to outright misconceptions.

Some may equate it to a practice originated in India by Mother Teresa to comfort the dying poor. A few familiar with British or Canadian practice might tend to think of places dedicated to the same service. Wrong!

In more recent American experience, the hospice is generally not a place at all, or a thing, or even people. It’s a concept, and one about which many potential beneficiaries remain virtually unaware.

In the USA, “hospice” means a program of total care for the terminally ill and their families – in the home. It denotes a team of professionals (physicians, nurses, social workers, home health aides, volunteers, and counselors) committed to meeting a patient’s needs for medical, physical, occupational, speech, and IV therapies; plus emotional, social, and spiritual comfort. It may even include help in homemaking and running errands. The idea is to let the patient die in peace, surrounded by loved ones, rather than become a hospital “pincushion.” The concept emphasizes control of

Now Hear This

pain and symptoms as opposed to curative action for those with only a six-month or less life-expectancy. Care may range from on-call or periodically scheduled visits, to around-the-clock service, as necessary. Until you've been there, you may not realize that this is a situation where you need all the help you can get. Tending the dying can be both mentally and physically exhausting, though it is not without its rewards.

Montgomery County is fortunate to have two hospices fully accredited by Medicare: the Holy Cross Hospital Hospice and the Montgomery Hospice¹⁵. Normally, if a service is approved for Medicare, it may also be covered in varying degrees by leading health insurance companies. Though the client must be initially physician-certified as having only six months to live, the benefits under hospice continue until death, with some patient's having endured as long as seven years.

In addition to the prognosis of six months or less, Holy Cross hospice requires that patients live within 30 minutes of the hospital (where resource personnel are based), and that the attending physician have hospital privileges there, or at a hospital with reciprocity. Clients must also waive their Medicare benefits to qualify for the total care supplied under the hospice program.

Speaking of insurance, don't consider hospice personnel cold-hearted if their very first question is about your insurance coverage.

¹⁵ As this is being written, there are many more hospice options available everywhere.

HOSPICE

They have to know this to be able to properly set up your care for maximum insurance coverage.

You are well advised not to try to interpret these coverages yourself. This is an extremely complex area in which you likely won't even know the right questions to ask. Hospice personnel work with this every day and can relieve you of this anxiety and frustration.

In fact, hospice personnel generally unburden the family as well as the patient. After all, most families have no experience with caring for the dying and it can be a scary as well as an utterly fatiguing experience. Under stress, you can reach a point in the administration of ever-increasing medications of coming to believe that you might be part of the problem and are causing the deteriorating condition. The hospice team assumes this worrisome responsibility. As for medications, you should know that recent significant medical progress has greatly aided hospice personnel in controlling pain and making the patient comfortable until the end. There is less cause for worry on this score. While no sane person fears the fact of death (we all know there is no escaping it,) many do fear the possibility or pain in the process. Or, as Woody Allen says, "I'm not afraid to die. I just don't want to be there when it happens."

This brings up the matter of trust. Hospice personnel tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. "If a patient asks if they're dying," says hospice veteran Jill Audet, BSN, "we explore

Now Hear This

that concern with them – sustaining their hope and affording them the security of knowing that they will be kept comfortable.” It’s vital that the patient know that hospice personnel can be trusted for straight answers to hard questions. Audet adds, “Most terminal patients know they’re dying, and a family that’s unable to deal with that honestly often builds a wall around the patient who is thus condemned to die alone.” The “denial game” is a game with no winners. The family may forever wonder what the patient really knew, felt, or feared. It may also be guilt-ridden through belated suspicion that it might have failed to be adequately supportive.

Now – the BIG question: How does one actually obtain hospice benefits? The best answer probably is: All you have to do is ask, but YOU have to ask.

Hospices get referrals from physicians, hospital discharge specialists, and other types of programs, but these are neither automatic nor as frequent as you might expect. Requests often come too late. Physicians are oriented to curative and life-sustaining measures, and thus apt to regard death with frustration or a sense of failure. They tend to overlook strain-easing measures, and often must be nudged in this direction. After all, doctors are trained to focus on the patient, and aren’t too often tuned-in to the broader needs of the entire family.

Hospice personnel confront death and are specifically trained to deal with it. It is usually up to the patient’s family to call them, and this should be done as soon as possible, to enable the team to get

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fully in place in time to really help. If you're in doubt, but could use some help – make the call. Sometimes all a family has to do is go to the physician and say, "I want this help." More often the consumer might have to say, "Hey! I have these benefits and I want to use them." But first, of course, you must have some inkling of what's available. Let's hope this little discourse has been helpful toward that end.

Concludes Audet, "You'd be amazed how many people needlessly die alone."

15. CIVILITY

**The only word appropriate for the month of
February is 'Brrr!'**

What can one possibly say nice about the month of February in this frigid area? Even the sidereal gods saw fit to limit the month to only 28 days.

It may seem redeemed for having at least one federal holiday – President’s Day – but all that really means to elders is “no mail today,” hardly a cause for celebration. Maryland offers the additional holiday of Lincoln’s Birthday, but all that signals retirees is that banks and libraries will be closed. Phooey!

New Orleans wildly whoops it up on *Mardi gras*, but Maryland Christians have to settle for Ash Wednesday, a mournful day that somehow seems to convey the proper mood for the entire month.

Poor February: it comes amidst the depths of winter, halfway between the joyous Hanukkah/Christmas holiday season and the blessed rebirth of nature and the human spirit which comes annually (not a moment too soon) with each welcome spring. It’s a sorry commentary on the month that on 2 February even intelligent adults are reduced to focusing on the shadow of the miserable groundhog.

Now Hear This

With so little to look forward to, this might not be a bad time to take another look backward. Perhaps this mid-winter lull is precisely the time to tote up the score on how we're doing as "our days wind down to a precious few." Have we been coasting, resting on the oars? Or are we still trying – thanking God for our blessings, seeking ways to cheer and help our neighbor, and ever-striving to become better human beings ourselves? Since it's still only early February, it's not too late to make a few New Year's resolutions.

Now, don't get alarmed. I'm not suggesting we've got to reform the world, but merely that we might well make some effort to change ourselves. For example, we might try to become more "civil." These days most folks not only won't give you the time of day, they're more likely to threaten to "fix your clock." Civility has become an "endangered species" of human conduct.

Some 200 years ago a philosopher-statesman noted that, "No animal is fiercer or more untamable than man, and more prone to vices capable of disturbing the peace of society ... There is also the fact than man delights in such mad cruelty to his own kind ... (in fact) the majority of woes to which man's lot in life is exposed proceed from man himself." The question is: are we really any more civilized now than then? Don't we still seem to fall back two steps for every step forward?

Malcolm Muggeridge has stated categorically that, "What is called Western civilization is in an advanced stage of decomposition." Is this necessarily the last word on the subject? We

CIVILITY

devoutly hope not. The late Dr. Martin Luther King whose birthday we celebrated just 25 days ago sounded fair warning: “The choice today is not between violence (the ultimate incivility) and non-violence. It is either non-violence or non-existence.”

In large measure, improved civility is up to each and every one of us, precisely as individuals. How can we expect nations to get along if states can't get along, if communities can't get along, if neighborhoods can't get along, if family members can't get along? Any and all improvements in civility can only begin with us – you and I, personally. Politeness must be home-grown. But, sad to say, as many of us reflect on the so-called “good old days,” we're compelled to recognize a serious deterioration of civility even within the span of our own lives.

There is something to be said for the good old days though, and John Steinbeck has said it: “What did they have then that we are losing or have lost? Well, for one thing they had rules – rules concerning life, limb, and property; rules governing deportment, manners, and conduct; and rules defining dishonesty, dishonor, misconduct, and crime. The rules were not always obeyed but they were believed in, and breaking them was savagely punished.”

Bravo!

Let's stop right here and focus on modern “deportment, manners, and conduct.” That's really what civility is all about: the practice of always being kind. Civility means no more than being polite, being courteous to one another. This is what is so crude and

Now Hear This

rude about excessive foul language in films, needless foul language on TV, and obscene bumper-stickers and T-shirts. They're not merely tasteless and unwarranted, they are an affront to common decency and represent an offense against the civility that should mark any so-called cultured society.

Where did we go wrong? Why is it even necessary to suggest that people should be a little nicer to each other? What is it about modern society that encourages us pridefully to pose as ill-bred, and parade uncouthness and vulgarity?

A good case might be made that the advent and growth of the automobile was perhaps the major catalyst in the decline of civility. What is it about merely sitting behind the wheel of a car, Beetle to Corvette, that immediately transforms the meekest man or woman into mean-minded maniacs and would-be masters of all they survey? It's as though turning-on the ignition simultaneously turns-off all sense of common courtesy, not to mention common sense. The metamorphosis appears to occur automatically, whether the driver be a super-macho, teen-aged hot-rodder or a meek-appearing, gray-haired little old lady.

Why not resolve NOW to not blast the horn at the next pedestrian who has the gall to cross our path on a "Walk" signal; not to suddenly swerve in front of someone to catch a beltway ramp at the last second – from the wrong lane; not to frown furiously at the next Christian (?) neighbor who almost runs us down zooming off the church parking lot on Sunday morning (notably, Jewish

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neighbors mostly “walk” to the synagogue for Shabbat); not to shake a fist at the next poor soul who dares to slow us down on the highway by merely proceeding at the speed limit. In short, can't we at least resolve to avoid DANGEROUS incivilities?

After all, February is the month in which many folks pay tribute to St Valentine, the patron of lovers. And there you have it – February is for lovers. So, all we need do is resolve to become more loving persons.

That in what civility is all about.

16. TRANSPORTATION

Elders' transportation complaint: You can't get there from here

“There are far too many older people who are literally prisoners in their own homes for lack of transportation,” says State Senator Margaret Schweinhaut.

As the vital connecting link between home and community, transportation enables us to maintain contact with family and friends; to commute to work or schools; to visit banks, the post office, the grocers, the doctor or dentist; and to be able to engage in social and recreational activities. It also improves one's capacity for independent living, and so reduces the need and financial burden of institutional care. Again, many other supporting services are useful only as transportation makes them accessible to the needy. The need exceeds resources.

Our county Commission on Aging (COA) notes that, “For many of our senior citizens an automobile is essential to the maintenance of self-sufficiency and independence.” But, “Ay, there's the rub.” While a 1986 survey revealed 84 percent of age 60-plus county residents held valid driver's licenses, many are apparently ever-more fearful of driving and more have already quit.

Now Hear This

“In many parts of the county it’s very difficult to exist without a car,” says COA’s Julie King, adding that, “It’s vital that our senior drivers maintain their skills.” Thus, COA is repeating a “55/ALIVE Mature Driving Course” designed to help compensate for any age-related decline in driving skill. It comprises two four-hour classes conducted over two days at seven locations around the county. Some 33,000 Maryland seniors have completed the course this year.

In addition to renewed confidence and a sharpened awareness of potential driving hazards, participants receive a certificate that qualifies for discounts with some insurance carriers offering policies in the state. (Unlike DC and Virginia, Maryland does not yet mandate insurance discounts for senior Driver-Ed graduates, but this is on the COA’s 1988-89 legislative priority list.) Classes (between 10 am and 3 pm, except for starting times of 10:30 am at Gaithersburg and 9:30 am on Saturdays at Silver Spring) will be held at:

- Bethesda, Sr Ctr (Waverly House), 4521 East-West Hwy
- Chevy Chase, Friendship Hts Comm Ctr, 4433 S Park Ave
- Damascus, Sr Ctr, Damascus Shopping Ctr, 9815 Main St
- Gaithersburg, Upper Cty Comm Ctr, 8201 Emory Grove Ln
- Potomac, Potomac Comm Ctr, 11315 Falls Rd
- Silver Spring, Sr Ctr, 1000 Forest Glen Rd
- Wheaton, Holiday Park Ctr, 3950 Ferrara Dr

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Alas, many elders cannot afford an automobile, never could drive, or no longer can because of disabilities. One recent planning area survey disclosed that 23 percent of its elderly households had no car available. Luckily, other aid is obtainable. Since we can offer only a few clues here, interested folks are urged to contact COA for a copy of its "Senior Citizen's Guide to Programs and Services," which details the full gamut of available resources.

Meanwhile, there's always mass transit. We have main-highway-oriented Metrobus, plus the more side-street-oriented *Ride-On*. Fare reductions are available for the elderly and handicapped. (Call *METRO* for their info-packed "Metro System Guide for Senior Citizens and People with Disabilities.") Also, free *Ride-On* tokens are available at Senior Centers for to/from trips. While *Ride-On* is not lift-equipped, Metrobus hopes to be 50 percent so by 1990. Of course, many of our old folks are unable to walk to even fairly nearby Metrobus and *Ride-On* stops (not infrequently due to lack of adequate sidewalks or ones banked with plowed snow, not to mention the hazard of trying to cross 55 mph highways on 3 second "WALK" signals).

The county does offer several other transportation programs for disabled or economically disadvantaged elders. Eligibility rules vary, and needy citizens are well advised not to get their hopes up, as these programs are substantially over-subscribed, and the eligibility requirements must continually be shrunk to match limited resources. Yet, needy folks are encouraged to make application,

Now Hear This

precisely to alert the proper officials to the full dimensions of the problem and to provide a basis for the of informed and balanced eligibility rules.

Foremost among these programs are the county's Paratransit (one week in advance) and Call 'N' Ride programs. Eligibility is generally a function of age, disability, and income-level. Frequency and trip distance/duration are also eligibility factors, as are transit services received from other agencies. Priority is given to those needing trips to work or medical appointments. Applicants can help by opting for in-county facilities close to home. The Red Cross (in Silver Spring or in Gaithersburg) also provides transportation to medical appointments. (More volunteers are always welcome.)

Medicaid will reimburse elderly poor for transportation costs to medical facilities via a state-funded program administered in the county through Paratransit, though only about 6 percent of county elders are qualified to take advantage (the maximum income for a two-person household being \$6,800.)

There are also ten wholly-volunteer groups providing a variety of emergency (more or less one-time) support services in the county: Bethesda Help, Burtonsville's Liberty Grove Methodist Church, Damascus Help, Gaithersburg Help, Germantown Help, Olney Help, Rockville Fish, Silver Spring Help, Wheaton Help, and Western and Upper Montgomery County Help. Typically, about 33 percent of Silver Spring Help calls (50 to 35 per month, with three-days' notice being required) are for transportation. These

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organizations also would welcome more volunteers, including shut-ins who can serve as phone-coordinators one morning or afternoon a month, and thereby gain the personal satisfaction of contributing to the community.

Finally, thank God for good neighbors and even a public taxi, in a pinch

17. VOLUNTEERS

Army axiom No. 1, 'never volunteer,' is alien to county residents

"Is there anybody here from New York?" So goes the sure fire applause cue with which too many young comics open their act.

The second most popular opening line has to be, "I've got some good news, and some bad news." Sometimes what follows is actually funny.

It's quite different with the media. The news today is no laughing matter, be it the horror-full headline in the daily press or the somber sound-bite leading the evening newscast. All you'll ever find there is bad news followed by more bad news.

To be sure, the media thrive on contradiction, controversy and conflict. But even when they ever so rarely stumble onto a potentially good news item, they still manage to mangle it by focusing on some minor but always negative aspect. Modern media moguls seem to have a gift for creative collective pessimism. How I sometimes long for that heart-warming radio herald of yesteryear, the one who so often began, "Ah, there's go-o-o-d news tonight!"

A visitor from another planet exposed only to our present day media might quickly conclude that ours is a world of only violence, wickedness, and wretched misfortune. Like Diogenes in his fruitless

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search for an honest man, they'd be hard pressed to glean any inkling of charity abroad in our land today.

Even the so-called human-interest pieces in the press dwell almost exclusively on drugs, disease, and the seamier sides of life. Meanwhile, the seemingly universal addiction to trivial morsels of mush afflicting TV anchor person's closing comments betrays an apparently contagious case of the terminal cutes.

Nevertheless, and at the risk of scooping the world, I commend one and all to take heart. Despite everything you read and hear – most of it bad, there are a lot of truly splendid folks “out there” doing all kinds of nice things. They come in all ages, sizes, and sexes (are there still only two?), and represent virtually every color, creed, and income-level. Though moving busily among at us day and night, every day of the year, they go almost unrecognized (which, to their great credit, doesn't seem to bother them). We call them – *volunteers*.

In his first inaugural address back in 1933, FDR said, “In the field of world policy I dedicate this nation to the policy of the good neighbor.” For once he didn't go quite far enough. He omitted to acknowledge that our great citizens have also long been dedicated to the policy of the good neighbor in the field of domestic policy as well.

In his colorful novels about the French Foreign Legion, British author Percival Christopher Wren somewhere has a character marvel at his discovery that anyone would call an American

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anything – as long as one smiled. It's true. We can joke about anything, including our national inclination to neighborliness never more manifest than in our disposition to volunteerism. Thus we can quip Love thy neighbor – but don't tear down the fence, and love thy neighbor – even if he plays the trumpet. We'll do almost anything to disguise our embarrassment over an evident tendency to kindness. God forbid that we appear compassionate.

Well, the cat's out of the bag now, and high time, too. Let's take a moment to salute our millions of nameless, self-effacing volunteers. Did you realize that 55 percent of all Americans are involved in some volunteer activity? Among those citizens who are more than 65 years old, 32 percent are active volunteers, 11 percent participating in various community action programs, and 44 percent simply volunteering on their own. This is a fantastic situation warranting reiteration of Willy Loman's widow's plaint in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* "Attention must be paid!"

And the indicated magnitude of volunteerism can't simply be attributed to flight from retirement boredom. With the exception of the Japanese, Americans are more likely to work after age 65 than are older people in all the other developed countries of the world. In the USA 17.7 percent of the males and 7.9 percent of females work beyond age 65. Among these men, 52 percent continue to work full-time, as do 39 percent of the women.

And, should you not already be impressed, consider the myth of family abandonment, or more correctly – abandonment of the

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elderly. About 75 percent of the disabled elderly who live outside of an institution rely solely on the long-term informal care of family and friends. Significantly, the average age of care-givers of the impaired elderly is 57. More than a third of the care-givers are over 65 themselves, with more than 10 percent being 75 years or older.

To its considerable credit, the *POST* recently ran a fairly substantial article by Claudia Levy lauding Montgomery County's unsung volunteers. She reported that 58 out of every 1,000 county residents regularly volunteer help to others. County Executive Sidney Kramer properly characterizes these good folks as "our greatest wealth." No government in the world could afford to subsidize this national treasure of "radiating-good-will in action."

All this is heart-warming, indeed, but the cited article is all too rare a phenomenon, and one you'll scarcely ever find in a front page headline or hear anything about on the evening news with its incomprehensibly gleeful purveyors of gloom and doom. That's too bad. A lot of really nice things are happening around us every day, but a story apparently has to be nasty to be news.

Now you know better. The evidence of the scoop of the century is right in our midst. Forget what you read in the papers. Ignore what you hear on the tube. Next time you're in the check-out line, smile a "thank you" at the person in front and behind. Chances are, one of them is a volunteer!

18. HOME-CARE

More less-costly in-home health care is elders No.1 priority

State Senator Margaret Schweinhaut believes that the most urgent needs of our older citizens are “home health assistance and additional transportation.” Having addressed transportation previously, let’s now focus on in-home aid.

In 1985, the daily activity of nearly 12 million elderly citizens nation-wide was limited by chronic ailments, but only an estimated 1.5 million were confined to nursing homes. Of those suffering a chronic condition, an estimated 5.2 million required some daily assistance in order to maintain their independence.

Most elders who need assistance prefer to get it at home where it is much less costly. Some 70 percent rely exclusively on unpaid sources of home care. Nursing home care is viewed as the option of last resort.

A 1984 survey disclosed that the five major in-home services customarily provided by communities (and percentages of seniors using such services – in “increasingly smaller numbers”) were: visiting nurses (3 percent), home-delivered meals (2 percent), home health aides (2 percent), homemakers (1 percent), and phone-checking (negligible).

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The lowness of these figures may be explained in part by the fact that family members, friends, and neighbors provide the great bulk (estimates range from 70 to 80 percent) of in-home care for older people in the community. Also, the cited figures exclude people who died or were institutionalized the year previous to the survey. Research shows the latter to be major users of health and other supporting in-home services.

Some explanation might also be in order about homemaking services. They are not a luxury. Opening a refrigerator door, replacing a light bulb, opening a screw-top jar (Lord, deliver us from safety caps!), prying open packaging, or even something as simple as rising from a chair may not seem a difficult task – unless you suffer from crippling arthritis.

Similarly, Alzheimer patients find it increasingly difficult to operate micro-wave ovens, vacuum cleaners, dishwashers and other electrical appliances including light switches. Families report these patients also experience problems with heat and cold, and can become furiously frustrated by an inability to adjust room or water temperatures. (Needless to say, they can't monitor medicines.)

A 1987 U.S. Senate report indicated that care givers performed various tasks as follows: aiding mobility – 46 percent; handling finances – 49 percent, giving medicines/changing bandages – 53 percent; aiding hygiene -67 percent; house-hold tasks – 81 percent; shopping/transportation – 86 percent.

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The level of actual in-home “health” care provided is obviously only one aspect of the overall problem. The paramount problem might better be described as a need to provide in-home assistance sufficient to enable semi-mobile clients to live outside of institutions – to be able merely to cope independently.

Another vital need concerns how to provide such services while not requiring clients to “spend-down” to a virtual poverty level in order to qualify for public assistance. Federal legislation is repeatedly introduced to expand Medicare along these lines, but the numerous additional case-workers required to assess actual needs and forestall a massive giveaway presents a road block. So, there are real problems in this area. Yet, Montgomery County is relatively rich in homecare services. A case might well be made that the estimated size of the problem is somewhat inflated as a result of too many of our eligible elderly remaining largely unaware of the wealth of in-home services available.

For example, a 1988 guide to community resources includes: Adventist Home Health Services; Assessment Center; Home Care Dept., Holy Cross Hospital; Homemaker Health Aide Service; Respite Care; Good Neighbor Family Aid; Good Neighbor Program; Hands of Shared Time; Friendly Visitor; Companions Plus; Homemaker Services; Telecare; Telephone Assurance; and the Visiting Nurse Association, plus the Jewish Social Service Agency. No endorsement is implied, and other services (like meals-on-

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wheels) are also available. The Red Cross and Office of Elder Affairs can offer further information.

Other interesting homecare developments include the so-called Chore Service pioneered in Chicago suburbs in 1978, and which utilizes focal youngsters aged 13 to 16 at wages ranging from \$2.95 to \$3.35¹⁶ per hour. More and more of our own county junior and senior high school students earn partial credits by freely participating in similar services incident to sociology, phys-ed, and hygiene courses. These programs are real winners from every point of view.

The Yellow Pages¹⁷ disclose that there is no lack of private, formal home care services – at a price (It's a \$14 billion a year industry), especially for people on Medicare. Simply look up “Home Health Services” or “Nurses.” Many additional listings may be found on community bulletin boards at grocers and in drug stores. Clients may also learn about available, accredited homecare services through the National League of Nursing's homecare hotline.

The Visiting Nurse Association counsels the following responsibilities of perspective patients: cooperate; readily provide fully detailed medical and financial data; ask questions whenever in doubt about instructions; act on suggested home safety measures; encourage all possible family assistance; and never discriminate against volunteer aids on the basis of sex, race, color, or whatever.

16 The US minimum wage in 1989 was \$3.35/hour.

17 See footnote 25 concerning [Yellow Pages](#).

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Costs may range from zero to substantial, and quality varies widely as well. It's a good idea to ask your doctor for good leads, or your rabbi, minister or priest. Hospital discharge social workers also have a wealth of experience in this area. A good choice will take time, patience, great care – and some luck.

19. ACCIDENTS

**Shun the rat-race, forget the fast track –
stop to smell the roses.**

Hurry! Hurry! Hurry! That's the American way. The question is:
WHY?

Around the world Americans are renowned for spending money to save time, while Europeans gladly spend time to save money. Even reasoned travelers returning from the Orient never fail to be astonished at the maddeningly quickened pace of life (and noise) upon landing once more in the USA. In George M. Cohen's great phrase, we opt to be "hurried and worried until we are buried." It never seems to cross anyone's mind that hurry can lead to hurt. The National Safety Council reports that each year about 24,000 persons over age 65 die from accidental injuries and at least 800,000 others sustain injuries severe enough to disable them for at least one day. Elders constitute about 11 percent of the population, yet suffer 23 percent of all accidental deaths. Each year thousands of men and women are disabled, sometimes permanently, by falls that result in broken bones. Many of these injuries could be prevented. All too often these accidents result from needless, mindless rushing about.

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Graham Greene makes the case against haste in a marvelous short story, *A Day Saved*. He asks, “What does a day saved matter? A day saved from what? For what?” He then suggests that instead of spending the day traveling, you merely arrive a day earlier, only to then depart a day earlier, that’s all, and you can’t die a day earlier. So, you may come to rue rashly saving time when you discover that you cannot escape those twenty-four hours you have so carefully preserved. You may push them forward, but eventually they must be spent, and then you may wish you had spent them comfortably in a train or plane. For the day saved may be retarded until finally you are doomed to suffer “its eighty-six thousand four hundred seconds” in the most dire circumstances imaginable. The moral is clear: take life easy as it comes.

It’s an old highway axiom that speed kills. Sad to say, this axiom applies equally well in the safety of the home. Except for auto accidents, more people die annually from accidental falls than from anything else (including fires, drownings and firearms – which latter claims 500 lives a year in Maryland alone). Needlessly rushing about (like to answer a phone – which may well be a wrong number) has probably caused more fractured “pins” than have bowling balls.

The Latin root of “accident” means “to fall.” And people have been falling since Adam. And, as Charles Dickens noted in *David Copperfield*, “Accidents will occur in the best regulated families.” In fact, falls are the most common cause of fatal injury in the aged.

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The National Institute on Aging offers the following guidelines for preventing falls and fractures:

- Have vision and hearing tested regularly and properly corrected. Even the simple task of removing ear wax can improve your balance.
- Consult your doctor or pharmacist about the side effects and interaction of your medicines and how they might affect your coordination or balance.
- Limit your intake of alcohol. Even a little alcohol can further disturb already impaired balance and reflexes.
- Use caution in rising too quickly after eating, lying down, or resting.
- Make sure the temperature in your residence at night doesn't fall below 65°F. Prolonged exposure to cold can lead to dizziness and falling.
- Remember: "Pride goeth before a fall." don't let it induce you to neglect the use of a needed cane or "walker" to help maintain your balance.
- Avoid or minimize walking outdoors on wet and especially icy pavement.
- Wear supportive, rubber-soled, low-heeled shoes. Avoid wearing only socks or smooth-soled shoes or slippers on stairs or waxed floors.
- Maintain some regular program of exercise to sustain muscle tone.
- Don't carry too many packages. Always leave one hand free for railings.
- Allow extra time to cross streets, especially in inclement weather.

Now Hear This

Studies at the University of Iowa and at Harvard indicate that the vast majority of elders show little decline in their ability to move around and function normally until they reach their eighties. The ability to walk a half-mile, climb stairs, and perform fairly heavy work around the house without assistance is retained by the majority of older folks throughout life. Just take your time.

As people age, changes in vision, hearing, muscle strength, coordination, and reflexes may make them more likely to fall. Elders are more likely to have disorders that may affect their balance. In addition, older persons necessarily take medications that may cause dizziness or lightheadedness. Preoccupation with personal problems can result in lowered attention levels also, or become dangerous distractions. Like the county trash trucks when backing-up, discipline yourself to beep-beep-beep yourself fully alert before moving.

Prevention of falls is especially important for people who have osteoporosis, a condition in which bone mass decreases, causing bones to be more brittle and to break easily. This bone-thinning condition affects one in four women over age 60 and is a major cause of fractures of the spine, hip, wrist, etc.

Auto accidents are the most common cause of accidental death among the 65-74 age group, and the second most common cause among older persons in general. You must recognize that your ability to drive can be impaired by such age-related changes as increased sensitivity to glare (as from noontime sun or street

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and headlights reflecting off of wet roads at night), poorer adaptation to darkness, diminished coordination, and slower reaction time. You can compensate to some extent for these changes by driving fewer miles; driving less often and more cautiously; driving less at night, during rush hours, and in winter.

Remember Ferdinand the bull. Pause along the way to sniff the flowers. Slow down and live longer. As the poet says – Heaven can wait.

20. PETS

While we argue guns and drugs, the country goes to the dogs!

My pet peeve is precisely that – pets. That’s not quite true. I have nothing against pets themselves. In fact, I’ve never met a goldfish I didn’t like.

My real beef is with pet-owners. No, that’s not quite right either. It’s irresponsible pet-owners that drive me up the wall (which is not an easy pursuit at my age). No. Make that folks in general who treat animals with more consideration and respect than they do other folks. Dr. Benjamin Trump of the University of Maryland Medical School has the priorities right: “We in the medical profession find it painful to accept a dead child over a dead mouse.”

“If you don’t have something good to say about someone, come sit next to me,” cooed Alice Roosevelt Longworth. Well, I don’t have anything good to say about “animal-firsters,” so lend an ear. I don’t mind them loving their animals, (and I too deplore research lab atrocities). What disturbs me is that in their zeal they often seem oblivious to the fact that people also have rights, and that the majority of mankind (despite the heinous human-rights abuses still rampant in the world today) has long regarded humankind as a somewhat higher species. I’m not talking about

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such outrages as the mutilation of children's faces by animals (after "He won't bite you" cautions, no doubt) which are seen increasingly in the media today. I would hope that there would be no argument that something must be done on that score. Dogs are animals – dumb animals, and some are vicious. It's remindful of Will Rogers: "The art of diplomacy is saying, nice doggie, nice doggie, until you can find a stick."

I'd also concede that I've yet to see a coin that doesn't have two sides. So, I'm not insisting that we rid the county of dogs – yet. I confess there are days though, when Iceland (no dogs allowed) sounds very appealing. (No letters, please, suggesting that a travel-subsidizing collection be begun immediately.) For example, have you ever had a neighbor's dog howling outside your window day and night? Are these animals really happy? Are these animal-firsters deaf?

I don't mind fish, birds, or even cats. They're generally quiet, and cats not only wash themselves, they clean-up after themselves, and they don't frighten off mail-persons or "sanitary engineers." Nor do they howl or jump all over you when you walk in the front door. But, cats don't seem overly friendly either. In fact, they often seem downright anti-social. I can tolerate the snub.

Dogs are something else. I suspect it's not their fault, that self-anointed animal-lovers simply don't train them. Worse, they assume that everyone loves the beasts as much as they do, and if not, well-such a person is obviously cruel, crazy or a creep. "Excuuuse me!"

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There is a place for dogs, I guess, and I'm not talking about the country, although that would be my choice. Rather, I'm thinking of some elders whose lives are so obviously brightened by a frisky, frolicking dog, and even more so those single old souls whose loneliness is greatly abated by the warm comfort, consolation and companionship afforded by a cat. These good folks generally give more than they get. Their pets are trained, cared-for and controlled.

I believe that the trouble is that too many professed dog-owners really don't care for or control their beasts. May be some of them merely keep pets to "have a cat to kick." In fact, Dear Abby reports that an estimated 7.5 million dogs and cats are "put to sleep" annually simply because their owners don't wish to be bothered feeding and caring for them. Some animal lovers!

Yet, the country continues to go to the dogs. There are 50 million dogs in the USA today. As if that isn't bad enough, we now have entire catalogs devoted entirely to pet supplies, several aisles in supermarkets offering only pet food – including gourmet meals, Hollywood Oscar-like golden "Poochy" awards at Canine Film Festivals, "Vanity Fur" magazine for fashion hounds, Inns in California that are "purr-fect" for humans AND animals, and pet meals-on-wheels.

Happily, there are also laws governing dog-owners. For example, it is against the law (County Code, Section 5-25) for any dog to run at large in the county, or for any animal to defecate on any private property other than that of the owner (or on any

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common thoroughfare, sidewalk, passageway, by path, or play area unless the leash-holder immediately removes and disposes of all feces deposited). It is also unlawful for any animal to make noises audible within adjacent property and of sufficient volume as to disturb the quiet enjoyment or the occupants thereof. I'm not making this up – check it out. And, there's much more about vicious or attack dogs.

You might never know it, but Maryland (and PA, NY, OH, WV, and VA) have a no-pets policy in parks, as do most motels, hotels, and private recreation areas in the state. Our Park and Wildlife service cites three reasons for this: safety, sanitation, and noise. They point out that even the best behaved dogs tend to become excited among crowds and strangers, and even well-meaning children sometimes frighten them into biting, and that not every dog on a leash is actually under control. Numbers of pets can create unsightly, smelly and hazardous health conditions. Finally, if one dog starts barking, you soon have a mighty chorus, which not only annoys people wishing to enjoy the peacefulness of the parks, but also frightens off natural and non-threatening wildlife which is often a major park attraction.

Wasn't it Mr. Justice Holmes who said, "Your right to swing your fist ends where my nose begins?" I feel somewhat the same about dogs. To use a former Veep's elegant term, their right to deposit "deep doo-doo" ends where my nose begins – especially as the substance in question might be encountered by my shoe on my

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property. Somehow, stepping in it doesn't bring the sort of excitement we used to get stepping on second base after stretching a single.

Ah, those were the days.

21. MOTHERS

Every day is Mother's Day for fortunate old-fashioned home-makers

The annual celebration of Mother's Day dates only from 10 May 1908. The second Sunday in May, it marked the anniversary of the death of West Virginia school teacher and founder Anna Jarvis' mother, but was dedicated to all mothers. At the end of the ceremony, Ms. Jarvis presented each mother and child with a carnation, thereby initiating yet another tradition. Congress made the celebration official nation-wide on 8 May 1914. The greeting card, florists, and restaurant industries haven't been the same since.

There's a sad postscript. Victim of a tragic love affair, poor Anna never married. More than that, she became so obsessed by the over-commercialization of the holiday, that she exhausted all of her personal resources in unsuccessful litigation, became a recluse, and ended up on public assistance. A source of happiness to mothers everywhere, Anne herself died childless and alone.

Today, of course, we have "days" dedicated to virtually every sub-category of humanity – dare I say it – conceivable. To name only a few, we have Father's Day, Mother-in-Law's Day, and

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Grandparent's Day, not to mention Doris¹⁸. These celebrations are in addition to ever-mounting numbers of national and state holidays. It may not be too soon to launch a movement to reserve at least one day of the year as "Non-observed Day." More likely, it's already too late.

Maybe the real question is: Is the dedication of a mere "day" the most fit-ting way to pay tribute to motherhood? Again, why a "day" for anything, or anybody? What does it all really mean? Specking only for myself, I confess I feel more embarrassed than enriched by the celebration of Father's Day. I mean, who needs it? The prospect of being specially praised for the fact of paternity was the farthest thing from my mind in consorting with my beloved spouse.

More to the point, perhaps, I would rather relish unpressured imitation by my children of any virtues I might possess and their avoidance of my too obvious faults. I would be quite satisfied to discern that, overall, they found my example worthy of emulation – everyday. Who needs empty accolades on a designated day that effectively (regardless of initial design or lofty intent) fills the coffers of greedy merchants?

So, remember mother – thank her, praise her, pray for her – I agree. But, let's forget Mother's Day. I mean, let's forget it in terms of the expected, conventional commercial trappings. Mother doesn't crave cards, candy or chrysanthemums. All she wants, and what

18 See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Doris_Day

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she so richly deserves is our love, respect, and on appropriate degree of continuing care and concern for her welfare.

Does she deserve this more so than, say, a father or a grandparent? My immediate and unequivocal answer would be a thunderous "Yes!" One of the saddest spectacles marking the decay of our modern society is the ever-increasing devaluation of the unique miracle that is motherhood. One common denominator of TV sit-coms, current movies and the sensationalist press is the trashing of motherhood.

Any young woman of today who has the temerity to voluntarily assume the traditional role of wife and mother is immediately scorned, ridiculed and ostracized as a sort of cross between freak, Neanderthal and pure nut. Motherhood is out. The chic immediate accumulation of luxury goods is in. You can forget children, and many a could-be mother today does precisely that. (It should go without saying that we aren't here speaking of single parents, households with disabled fathers, or couples in dire financial stress, and the like.) The fact is, modern society portrays motherhood as something to be avoided. (Can you say "birth control?" Can you say "abortion?") To paraphrase an old G. K. Chesterton quote about another subject: Motherhood hasn't been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and left untried.

Speaking of Chesterton, he had a lot of good things to say about motherhood, all of them guaranteed to send the more fanatic ERA phalanx charging up the wall. For example, he observed that

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in olden days young mothers were housebound with youngsters who asked all the questions there are, and some that there aren't. Can you imagine a greater challenge? Little wonder, too, that mothers became generalists in a world of ever-increasing male specialization.

Chesterton further observed that the traditional mother was at the head of something with which she could do as she liked, while the average male employee had to obey orders or else. "The average woman," he said, "is a despot; the average man is a serf." Elaborating, he remarked that, "The woman's world is a small one, but she can alter it," and she "does do work which is in some small degree creative and individual."

He adamantly protested the denigration of motherhood as a trivial pursuit by portraying the hugeness of the task: "To be (a queen) within a definite area, deciding sales, banquets, labors and holidays; to be providing toys, boots, sheets, cakes, and books; to be teaching morals, manners, theology, and hygiene; I can understand how this might exhaust the mind, but I cannot imagine how it could narrow it. How can it be a large career to tell other people's children about the Rule of Three¹⁹, and a small career to tell one's own children about the universe? How can it be broad to be the same thing to everyone, and narrow to be everything to

19 There are a number of so-called "Rules of Three" but Jack is almost certainly referring to the technique, when writing or speaking, that ideas, thoughts, events, characters or sentences that are presented in threes are more effective and memorable.

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someone? No, a women's function is laborious, but because it is gigantic, not because it is minute." Bravo!

Chesterton was ahead of his time with regard to state-provided child-care. He noted that instead of an unlimited supply of loving parents, such programs substituted a limited but costly bureaucracy, with the result that one harassed person looked after a hundred children, rather than one normal person looking after a normal few. He likened the situation to a lunatic carefully soaking his garden with a watering can while holding an umbrella to ward off the rain.

Home-making mothers remain a breed apart, and are worthy of daily admiration.

22. MEDICOS

**Make this Memorial Day truly memorable:
salute doctors and nurses**

On Monday 29 May we celebrate Memorial Day. Or do we? If you've been following the newspaper and TV ads, chances are you're conditioned to view it as just another "Colossal Sale" day.

It's high time somebody called a halt.

After all, we only have ten established national holidays, and without exception every one of them has been corrupted by crass commercialism. Wouldn't you think we could set aside at least one day a year when all sales could be voluntarily dispensed with, and all commercial enterprises (except those providing emergency services) could be shut down for a mere twenty-four hours?

If that proposition seems reasonable, then what existing holiday better commends itself to such a signal observance of anti-materialism than our already established Memorial Day?

If you've forgotten, Memorial Day was originally known as Decoration Day. It was first dedicated on 30 May 1868 by two Mississippi women who placed flowers on the graves of both Union and Confederate soldiers, as a symbol of amity between the states. Little by little, it became a legal holiday in every state, and was

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finally declared a national holiday to be celebrated annually on the last Monday in May.

Among the considerations that recommend the selection of this holiday for the indicated purpose are the facts that it has always been celebrated as a patriotic rather than a religious observance; that we now have Veterans' Day on which to honor all military personnel, both living and dead; and it would enable a fitting commemoration or a long overdue assault on avarice.

The latter point merits emphasis. The daily headlines proclaiming rampant greed at all levels of business and government testify that our national priorities have long since been wrenched terribly awry.

Experts proclaim that the basic human goals are self-preservation, improvement of living standards, reproduction, and the extension of knowledge and capacity for enjoying beauty. Interestingly enough, this enumeration parallels the personal goals of all citizens as clearly echoed in our *Declaration of Independence* in terms of "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

Whichever set of terms you prefer, both obviously reflect a hierarchy of values highlighting the root cause of an evident loss of national direction. Simply put, we're so hung up on lower-order physical objectives that we never persevere into the realm of higher-order intellectual goals. We have willingly opted, as a nation, to accept a stagnated or stunted growth. As the Army might put it

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(and, in fact, has), we are not “being all we can be.” I find that sad. We must do better.

One way to start would be to make a national resolve to set Memorial Day aside, uniquely, as a day on which to reflect with admiration and affection on our departed. “Moments of Silence” have their place, but would hardly be an adequate token of love and respect for all those whom we’ve been privileged to know.

Visits to the cemetery aren’t quite enough either. After all, we’d only be paying homage to dust – the inevitable fate of the body which has only been accelerated by the modern penchant for cremation. As Longfellow said: “Life is real! Life is earnest! And the grave is not the goal; Dust thou art, to dust returnest, was not spoken of the soul.”

Might it not be a much superior idea to honor the enduring spirit of our absent loved ones by lavishing our attention – for a day – on all those who make it their life’s work to not only keep us alive, but also make us as comfortable as possible when our tired old bodies begin to ache? I’m talking about our largely unsung doctors and nurses.

Consider the doctors. We may envy what many envision in a country club life, but how many would want the responsibility of their often critical life or death decisions – or their long years of training, limited time-off, short and infrequent vacations, their office and staff overhead, their liability insurance premiums, their constant on-call status, or their too often overly litigious clients?

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Then there are the nurses – angels of mercy, actually. Who really yearns to assume their murderous swing or night-shifts, their working weekends and holidays, or their constant confronting of understandably grumpy patients (or, perhaps better said, “inn-patients”) – all the while striving (generally successfully) to maintain a pleasant and even cheerful demeanor? All of this (however and justifiably grudgingly), they accept at often embarrassingly low wages, frequently as single parents with very limited options. They are the Rodney Dangerfields²⁰ of the medical world – getting “no respect at all.”

So, how might all these good folks be properly saluted? Sizable bonus pay for those actually working any part of Memorial Day would no doubt prove infeasible, as perhaps reflecting an unfair labor practice, or being too easily subject to abuse. Yet some meaningful form of recognition surely could be found, like encouraging laudatory editorials and op-ed columns, plus honorable mentions by radio and TV anchor-persons. But even that would not be enough.

Why not have the health community itself, aided and abetted by the media promote “office picnics” for all manner of medical facility personnel? If communities can be encouraged to arrange or support such endeavors on a larger scale – sort of like the 4 July celebrations so common prior to WWII – so much the better. The

20 Rodney Dangerfield was an American stand-up comedian, actor, producer, screenwriter, musician and author known for his catchphrase “I don’t get no respect!” See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rodney_Dangerfield

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idea is simply to let these good folks know that they are really appreciated.

What has all this hoopla to do with “Speaking of Seniors?” Everything. Only elders can often afford the time to reflect on our debt to the medical establishment. No single group is more aware of doctors and nurses or benefits more from their ministrations. And besides, they tell us that senior citizens are the most vocal and powerful lobbying group in the nation.

Alright. Let’s transform the annual sales fiasco that is Memorial Day into a really meaningful celebration of life. Hail those medicos! Shun those sales!

23. ELDERS

**If the candles cost more than the cake you
can't eat, you're old!**

What is old? You won't find any given age specified in the dictionary, but let me pass on a few hints. You're old when you finally know how – but can't. You're old when compassion is more important to you than passion. You're old when you realize that you really don't know everything.

Uncle Sam, displaying more chutzpa than Webster, Funk and Wagnall's combined, blithely designates the young-old as 65 to 74 and the old-old as 85-plus, thereby awarding the label of middle – aged-old on those 75 to 84 by default. The old-old group is the fastest growing segment of the American population today, and the USA already has the largest 80-plus population in the world.

If you're over age 65 and have ever wondered how you fit into the national profile of this age group, then we have a few facts you may find interesting.

Upward of 12 percent of our population is over age 65, signaling that old age is already a national epidemic. Our elder population has increased far more rapidly than the rest of the population for most of this century, and has grown three times faster than the under-65 population in the last three decades. In

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fact, our 65-plus population is now larger than the entire population of Canada.

The USA ranks behind only China and India with the third largest over-65 population. As of 1986, California had the most people over 65 (nearly three million), while Florida had the biggest percentage (17.6) of old folks. Maryland ranked 21st and 39th, respectively. Alaska was lowest in both categories. About two million Americans turned 65 last year, but during the year about one-and-a-half million people over 65 died, yielding a gain of about half-a-million.

A recent *U. S. News and World Report* fact-sheet indicated that most folks over 65 (20.2 percent) would prefer to be in their forties, and most of them (34.1 percent) felt that 80-plus was old. Most age groups opted to be in their twenties, while most age groups also felt that 70-plus was old. As for me, there's no way my poor body could take being forty again – or even sixty.

Here are other rather startling figures. Women on average live seven years longer than men. In this century life expectancy had increased from 47 to 75 by 1985. While everybody's living longer, the supporting work force is shrinking. The 1986 dependency ratio – the number of elderly compared to the number of working age – is expected to double by the year 2020.

What else do we know about our so-called golden-agers? Well, they are almost twice as likely as the non-elderly age group to hover in or near the poverty level, by a ratio of 15.5 to 8.4 percent.

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For most of them Social Security is the prime source of income. In 1986, 40 percent of all elderly income came from Social Security. Don't expect to see these good folks on *Life Styles of the Rich and Famous*.

While almost two-thirds of older workers retire before age 65, almost half the males over 65, and almost two-thirds of the women, were working part-time in 1986. Slightly more than 50 percent of the women are widowed. Only about five percent of the elderly are in Nursing Homes at any given time. As for primary caregivers, 84 percent of the overseers of males and 79 percent of the overseers of females are spouses, other relatives or friends.

Twenty-six percent of the federal budget goes to the elderly. Public (federal, state, and local) long-term care expenditures alone now account for 0.45 percent of our GNP. The Maryland FY 1989 budget allots \$24.8 million of \$9,782 billion for the elderly, while our Division of Elder Affairs is down for \$2.8 million out of the \$1,126 billion county budget for 1989. The elderly (and near elderly) are the most likely age groups to vote. Votes evidently beget dollars.

Among the 65-plus group: 50 percent more women than men suffer from arthritis; women with bone disorders outnumber men four-to-one; twice as many women as men suffer from cataracts; four times as many men as women suffer from emphysema; one in every four women suffer from cardiovascular disease; and more than eight percent (2.5-3 million) suffer from Alzheimer disease, at an annual health cost of \$90 billion; while in healthy men the brain

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functions as well at 70 as it did at age 20 (which may not be as good as it sounds at first).

The median income of elders in 1986 was \$11,544 for males and \$6,425 for females. Among the elderly living alone (almost 10 million in 1985) or with non-relatives, 44 percent reported incomes of \$7,000 or less, 22 percent under \$5,000, and 21 percent had \$15,000 or more. About three-and-a-half million live-alone elderly were below the official poverty level of \$5255. Another two-plus million were classified as near-poor or incomes less than \$6570.

So much for the country at large. Now, what about our county?

Our 65-plus group is growing three times faster than the county population as a whole, mostly in the age bracket of 60-75 years. Two-thirds are married and living with their spouses, one-fourth live with their children, and one-fifth live alone (and if that doesn't add up, consider that we might have had help from the mathematical wizards who fashioned Governor Schaefer's stadium plan).

The median 60-plus income is about \$32,700, or some 23 percent less than the overall county figure. About 25 percent received less than \$15,000 yearly. We're projected to have 115,000 60-plus persons by the year 2000, with the expectation that the largest group (60-69) will triple its needs in the next 20 years. Some 15,000 of our elder folks are in financial difficulty.

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Our Commission on Aging reports that our older citizens are generally active and independent, with a higher education level than in many other locales. Many have regular contact with their families, and many even contribute volunteer service to the community. But problems of isolation, physical and economic need persist and will worsen as this age group increases in numbers.

There will be a quiz!

24. FATHERS

**Say hey! It's Father's Day. And for love
of ERA, It's time!**

We've come a long way since the days of "Father Knows Best." To judge by current film and TV fare, most of our populace seems to share writer James Joyce's notion that, "A father is a necessary evil." Even good Pope John XXIII went so far as to say, "It's easier for a father to have children than for children to have a real father."

Perhaps the late Adlai Stevenson summed it up best: "There was a time when father amounted to something in the United States. He was held with some esteem in the community; he had some authority in his own house hold; his views were sometimes taken seriously by his children; and even his wife paid heed to him from time to time." Evidently this remark was as counter – productive regarding his presidential aspirations as Walter Mondale's caveat about taxes.

What is a father anyway? Today he's basically seen as an authoritarian nemesis. It's interesting to note that, for the Japanese, the four most dreaded things on earth are: fire, lightning, earthquakes, and – fathers (which latter may partly explain their general aversion to the Christian's father-figure God).

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Even in the United States formal recognition of fathers was very late in coming. According to Charles Panati's "Extraordinary Origins of Everyday Things," the idea for an official Father's Day celebration came to a married daughter (a Mrs. Dodd of Spokane, Washington) while listening to a Sunday sermon on Mother's Day in 1910. The sermon extolled maternal sacrifices made for children. Mrs. Dodd realized that in her own family this had been her father's role, following the early death of her mother in childbirth.

The date originally suggested for the festivities (5 June, Mrs. Dodd's father's birthday, and then a mere three weeks hence) had to be delayed to the 19th when supportive ministers requested additional time to prepare sermons "on such a new subject as Father."

Among the first notables to support the idea was William Jennings Bryan who, like Adlai Stevenson, also failed twice in presidential bids. Being for mom and apple pie may well be the key to political success, but support for papa was clearly anathema to presidential ambitions.

An all-male Congress (then obviously more mindful of what the common people thought than are present day legislators) balked in fear or the possibility that such a move might be interpreted as a self-congratulatory pat on the back.

In 1957 Senator Margaret Chase Smith complained that, "Either we honor both our parents, mother and father, or let us desist from honoring either one. But to single out just one of our two

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parents and omit the other is the most grievous insult imaginable.” This, too, was unavailing. It wasn’t until 1972 – 62 years after it was proposed – that Father’s Day was finally, formally established by that paragon of rectitude and justice – then President Richard M. Nixon.

Given the continuing evidence that fathers are still generally about as welcome as Yasser Arafat²¹ apparently is at the U. N. in New York City, you have to marvel at even this belated recognition. The simple fact is that fathers are notorious as authoritarian monsters, and authority figures are “out.” What adult or child isn’t familiar with the age-old threat, “You just wait until Daddy gets home”? Speaking as a father, I can live with that. It’s as though “Somebody” had the idea that fathers could provide justice even as mothers provided mercy.

Playwright Larry L. King has this to say about fathers: “You see the fix the poor (bozo) is in don’t you? He must at once apologize and inspire, conceal and judge, strut and intervene, correct and pretend. No matter how far he ranges outside his normal capabilities, he will remain unappreciated through much of his paternal voyage – often neglected, frequently misread, sometimes profaned by his own creation. For all this, the father may evolve into a better man; may find himself closer to being what he claims, a strong role having ways of overpowering the actor. And

21 Yasser Arafat was a Palestinian political leader. He was Chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) from 1969 until his death in 2004. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yasser_Arafat.

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if he is doubly blessed, he may know a day when his sons (by then, most likely, fathers themselves) will come to love him more than they can bring themselves to say.” I can wait.

If fathers are indeed a riddle, Larry King is probably right in his concluding hint that children are the key to the solution. After all, even as it is with motherhood, any notion of the value of fatherhood is meaningless except in terms relative to the children involved. And the most happy fact about children is that they grow up to become adults. More than that, most of them in their turn become mothers and fathers. It’s been said many times: You don’t know how much your parents love you, until you have children of your own.

Granted that, as with every other human category, there are some few parents who must (so far as we can see) be accounted as bad, there comes a time in almost every kid’s life when a light bulb goes on in the brain. This is the moment when it dawns on them that they are wanted, loved, and admired by proud parents. It’s like Mark Twain said, “When I was a boy of fourteen, my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old man around. But when I got to be twenty-one, I was astonished at how much the old man had learned in seven years.”

I’d also agree with former Senator Smith that homage is due both mother and father. (Doesn’t one of the commandments have something to say along these lines?) I confess I couldn’t bring myself to say “equal homage,” as I’m much too aware of the larger share of parental effort borne by my wife – due allowance being

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made for the fact that she had a nine-month's head-start. Yet, it does really take two to tango. Both spouses must share the blame and acclaim. So, relax and enjoy the day all you dads out there, but just remember that, as former Notre Dame president Theodore Hesburgh has said, "The most important thing a father can do for his children is to love their mother."

25. PATRIOTISM

**Patriots honor principles as well as laws
- so should officials**

Feeling old, unneeded, useless? Well, listen up!

Indications are that our nation's destiny is increasingly in the hands of senior citizens. For example, in both the 1984 and 1986 elections persons aged 55-64 were the most likely to vote, followed by persons 65-74 years old. And, our elder population is increasing far more rapidly than the rest of our population, having grown three times faster than the under-65 population in the last three decades.

This trend will not only continue, the deviation will expand almost exponentially. Time is on our side, and our voice will only grow louder. This portends a responsibility not to be taken lightly.

In such a climate it behooves each and every one of us to focus more seriously and intently on what ails our body politic. A good place to start might be to review, restore, and revitalize such old-fashioned but now somewhat tarnished ideals as, say – freedom, honesty, and patriotism. A good deal of nonsense (and worse) certainly surfaced about the latter during the recent, shameful national election campaign. And now seems a good time to begin, since next Tuesday we'll once again be celebrating the Fourth of July.

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Somehow, Independence Day just “ain’t what it used to be.” When most of us elders were growing up it was the biggest non-religious holiday of the year. Every city, town, and hamlet held parades, sponsored community fun and games, and set the night sky ablaze with booming fireworks. Everyone became everyone else’s good neighbor for 24 hours. We hailed freedom, sang of liberty, and thanked God for our bountiful national blessings.

So, what’s gone wrong? Today the once noble virtue we called patriotism is more often than not held in contempt. Here is a hint of an explanation: Successive administrations have distinguished themselves by collapsing in the resignations of both the president and vice president; the pardoning of a still unrepentant, un-indicted presidential participant in a Constitutional conspiracy; the heralding of an era of national malaise; and the excoriation of both government personnel and processes, all the while proclaiming by word and example that it was chic to be excessively greedy even to the point of blatant deceit and outright criminality.

Little wonder, then, that the public at large views our national leadership with the jaundiced eyes of veteran cynics and skeptics. But the real fact is that professional critics have always had a field day disparaging patriotism. Every school child is (or used to be) familiar with Samuel Johnson’s dictum about patriotism being the last refuge of scoundrels. Maryland’s own H. L. Mencken topped that with, “Patriotism is the first, last and middle refuge of fools,” perhaps thereby demonstrating that he was well ahead of his time.

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George Jean Nathan maintained that, "Patriotism is often an arbitrary veneration of real estate above principles," while George Bernard Shaw observed that, "Patriotism is a pernicious, psychopathic form of idiocy." Nobody, it seems, has had a kind word for patriotism in a long, long time.

A review of the foregoing quotes discloses a few more clues as to what may have gone wrong. For example, we are all probably less familiar with Boswell's post-script to Dr. Johnson: "He did not mean a real and generous love of country, but that pretended patriotism which on so many, is a cloak of self-interest."

As for the other quotes, there is an implicit confusion of right-ordered patriotism with what might better be termed un-reasoning nationalism of the "my country, right or wrong" school. The latter, as the incisive G. K. Chesterton was quick to point out, is akin to proclaiming proudly, "My mother, drunk or sober." Undoubtedly Shaw had such folks in mind when he protested that, "A man who calls himself 100% American ... is generally 150% an idiot."

To focus on self-styled patriots only serves to debase the noble virtue of patriotism. The point is: patriotism properly understood pertains more to principles than to persons or places. Most elders realize that, as Adlai Stevenson once declared, "It is often easier to fight for principles than to live up to them," and so are wary of the unctuous demagogues who wax poetic over flag-waving and ritualistic pledges of allegiance. It's remindful of

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Emerson lamenting in a slightly different context that, “The louder he talked of his honor, the faster we counted our spoons.”

The simplistic definition of patriotism, of course, is “love of one’s country.” But that clearly doesn’t say it all. Hitler preached love of the Fatherland. We may get a better notion of the virtue by recognizing that patriotism is not militarism, jingoism, or chauvinism.

Patriotism must be distinguished from its corrupt counterfeit. It is not blind, arrogant, fanatic nationalism. Nor does it extend to the mindless adapting of an honorable uniform – one universally accepted as a symbol of self-sacrificing service to country – to a self-serving character reference masking a dubious if not unlawful political enterprise.

Pentagon critic A. Ernest Fitzgerald has commented that, “Concealment or misdeeds has become an official virtue, and suppression of truth national policy.” True patriots simply cannot afford to tolerate such morally crippling distortions. We must be heard. We must act. As former Senator J. Wm. Fulbright has noted, “To criticize one’s country is to do it a service.

Criticism, in short, is more than a right; it is an act of patriotism – a higher form of patriotism, I believe, than the familiar rituals and national adulation. If, as they say, democracies get precisely the kind of government they deserve, then elders (who already have much to answer for) will become increasingly responsible for the future of our nation. If the government isn’t to our liking, then the

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fault is clearly ours. For example, in 1988 only 47 percent of all eligible voters actually voted. We can and must do better. Speak out. Write letters. Vote.

26. HI-TECH

**Dazed by disks, chips, and bytes? Don't
let hi-tech get you down**

“We are witnessing profound social change ... The history of past centuries was a history of wars that raged almost everywhere ... They grew out of clashes of social and political interests, national enmity, or ideological or religious incompatibility ... And even today many would want these vestiges of the past to be accepted as immutable law. But concurrently with wars, animosities and divisions among peoples and countries, another trend ... was gaining momentum – the process of the emergence of a mutually interrelated and integral world.”

“The question is: Who authored the foregoing philosophical evaluation of our times? (Think a minute. Guess. We'll wait.) If your answer was other than the USSR's²² Mr. Gorbachev (speaking before the U. N. last December) you were wrong. Surely a more surprising apostle of the gospel according to the radical, current computer/communication technology explosion would be hard to imagine. And most of us are aware, however vaguely, that something with immense implications is certainly afoot.

²² The Soviet Union, officially known as the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, was dissolved on Christmas day in 1991.

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Today it is common to behold reports spawned by machines in ten minutes that mere man requires ten hours to read and ten days to assimilate. This is the hallmark of a new breed: the *info-maniac*²³, and his handy-dandy electronic computer, complete with high-speed printer, often net-worked with hundreds of clones around the country. Volume reigns supreme over selectivity and quality in the realm of information. Perhaps it's this sheer magnitude of computer output that cowers us into corners, what with experts now predicting that, thanks to electronics, the amount of available information will double every eight years.

In the time it might take most of us to add “two and two” on a pocket calculator and often somehow manage to get “five,” emerging computer technology is developing chips that could perform that simple operation – correctly – 100 million times. Admittedly, that can be intimidating, but we don't have to understand the mysterious mechanics in order to exploit them to our own benefit, any more than we have to know how to manufacture a pencil in order to write.

The late Marshall McLuhan predicted that electronic media would inevitably induce an extremely limited attention span – that one-liners would replace storytelling, and that the daily news would be delivered in the now accepted minimal “sound-bites.” But even

23 Jack first coined the term *Info-Maniac* in a piece published in 1964 in *The Captain's Corner* column of the monthly *Navy Management Review*. You may read more about that in his Autobiography *That Jack The House Built* which can be found at <https://wrightstuff.site>.

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he didn't foresee the remote control "mute button" and channel-changing "zapper" as news-blockers. The plodding, word-by-word print form of communication is also fast vanishing as a news medium, being relegated to the realm of casual entertainment through hobby oriented books and magazines.

British author and cable system executive Jonathan Solomon, writing recently in the *London Tablet*, both confirms the winds of change and spotlights the significance. "Something is indeed astir," says Solomon, "acting as a great leveler of attitudes, particularly the young." He then speculated that perhaps it is something so banal as "the common possession of technology which crosses barriers of nationality and ideology."

Solomon goes on to note that the Japanese – rapidly coming to be recognized as the dominant leaders in the on-going technological revolution – have already coined a name to describe the new generation brought up in an affluent culture dominated by electronic audio-visuals – the *Shinjinrui*. Solomon points out that audio-visuals govern the realm wherein humanity gains 80% of its learning.

"Attuned to the simple digital flow of information, the Shinjinrui (along with the yuppie generation in the West) feel no bond with the archetypal events of the past," notes Solomon, and are "agnostic and aphilosophical ... (and) essentially narcissistic, (as they seek) to live life as fully and comfortably as possible."

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Continues Solomon, “This subculture, impervious to ancient tradition and values, may not be profound, but it is pervasive.” Thus, even as some write of declining US power, American-style Epicureanism is already a world-wide phenomenon. Happily, while “The Shinjinrui and American-style Epicureans are ringing some important changes ... (they) leave untouched the inner attachments of the soul,” concludes Solomon. So, “We are not yet at an historical turning point.”

Well, this is good news, indeed, but the message is clear: We elders had best bestir ourselves and tune in to what’s really happening around us, or we shall be as obsolete and outdated as we might hope fossil fuels may soon become.

To start with, we must overcome any natural aversion to technology. After all, its prime purpose is to be of service to mankind – to make life easier and more fulfilling. And we really can adapt to this sometimes terrifyingly technological culture. After all, we’ve coped with the space-age dials of washing machines, dryers, and dish washers; automatic bank tellers; sewing machines with button-hole attachments; and the introduction of complex micro-wave ovens into the kitchen.

Our generation even survived the assembly of “no tools required” toys on Christmas mornings (despite caustic critics and cryptic directions). We were the first world-class masters of the psychedelic jukebox and bell-ringing pinball machine. So, why should we throw up our hands in despair at the mere mention of

HI-TECH

VCR's or computers? Times are changing, and it behooves us to try and keep up with the age of marvels in which we live. There are advantages.

You can escape prime-time TV trash and save sleep by taping late night British TV classics and old movies made before Hollywood invented plastic people. You can even rent films for VCR viewing that don't feature instant sex, gory violence, or language usually reserved (so I'm told) to the waterfront.

You can even stock a few wholesome flicks with which to amuse and immobilize those hyperactive grandchildren when they visit, thus saving wear and tear on nerves and furniture. Computers can serve similar purposes, plus allay shut-in boredom by affording the facility to write letters or memoirs, learn a foreign languages and even simulate flight, fight dragons, or beat Jack Nicklaus at golf.

Give yourself a break. Don't give up. Look into it. Keep busy. Enjoy!

27. REPRISE

'Age before beauty' is OK, but 'age before poverty' is an outrage

Exactly one year ago our first column ventured the opinion that then President Reagan might do well to focus his farewell address on what I conceived to be the emerging threat of our era: the “governmental-elderly coalition.” Well, Ron never was renowned for confronting reality. The Gipper fumbled the hand-off and opted instead to blast an imaginary “iron triangle” of his own invention, allegedly comprising the congress, special interests, and, of all things – the media.

Predictably, “Mr. Teflon” chose to shift the blame for his past derelictions rather than counsel future prudence. Meanwhile his protégé, in a bitingly bitter bid to launch a kinder and gentler administration, scuttled any hope for a much needed Annual Walter Mondale Award for “truth in campaigning.” Finally, the redoubtable Ron retired (a neat trick in his case) to get cracking on contriving

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his “alibiography.²⁴” (May his book venture be as successful as Speaker Wright’s²⁵.)

OK, so hell hath no fury like a columnist spurned. The fact remains that, beginning with Washington, presidents have traditionally made their farewell remarks a vehicle for final words of wisdom. Ron’s blaming the deficit on his fictitious triangle doesn’t compare well with GW’s caveat to steer clear of permanent foreign alliances or Ike’s astute but sadly unheeded caution against the military-industrial complex. So, a marvelous opportunity may have been lost.

The threat which I perceived as a governmental-elderly coalition, and about which I haven’t since altered my opinion, concerns “the all too evident virtual collusion of our already vast array of overly greedy elders and those poll-reading sycophants at all governmental levels who make a self-serving career of catering to their every whim.” (Eureka! I’ve achieved nirvana – I’ve finally quoted myself!)

24 Jack uses the word ‘alibiography’ here (and also in the title of his own 1985 autobiography *That Jack The House Built – The Alibiography Of An Ordinary Man*. See <https://wrightstuff.site>) most likely as a combination of the words ‘alibi’ and ‘biography.’ intended to establish that the author was elsewhere when the events described in the book occurred, thus absolving himself from blame. He most likely borrowed the word from the Claire Boothe Luce quote: “Autobiography is mostly alibiography”

25 Referring to former Speaker of the US House of Representatives, Jim Wright, who resigned in June of 1989 (as Jack was writing this piece for *The Journal*) amid a House Ethics Committee investigation into compensation that he and his wife had received for his book, *Reflections of a Public Man*.

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What really raises my hackles is the largess lavished on seniors strictly on the basis of age. According to *US News & World Report*, the 22 million citizens aged 55-64 comprise the world's most affluent retiree market; the 17 million aged 65-74 is mostly in good health and living independently; and the 10 million aged 75-84 is largely widows who live modestly. Only the three million aged 85-plus is in dire need of home care, adult day care, or nursing homes – NOT the country-club-like fun and games too often fostered at Seniors' Centers for the healthy and wealthy.

For example, in 1986 tax-payers – that includes almost all adults – saw \$270 billion (26 percent of the federal budget) funneled to the elderly. A huge transfer of funds from the “needy young” to the “greedy old” is in progress. This vast, vocal group (which includes the concentrated clout of 24 million unabashed members of the American Association of Retired Persons) persists in perpetuating a myth that masks the fact that the 62 million age 50-plus control 75% of the financial assets of the nation and half of the discretionary income. The fact is, the poverty rate of the young is almost double that of the old, and that isn't all.

In a recent book, *THE ULTRA RICH – How Such Is Too Much?* author Vance Packard had to coin a word for the new breed that revels in amassing hundreds of millions of dollars. He calls them “centimillionaires,” although the term “obscentimillionaires” seems more appropriate. Packard went on to point out that the combined wealth of the 400 richest Americans equals the

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commercial bank savings of all Americans and substantially exceeds the annual federal budget deficit.

All the foregoing is enough to afflict any conscientious writer with what teacher-columnist Colman McCarthy has called the “gift of creative seething.” And this explains as well as anything, perhaps, why this column is my own farewell address. As my old English teacher used to say (and, actually, he was a young Irishman who happened to teach English), for any writing to be worthwhile it must fulfill at least one of the four I’s: instructing, informing, inspiring, or intertaining (sic). (Like most English teachers, he couldn’t spell.) Alas, I fear that my feeble efforts may well have evoked a verdict of “none of the above.”

Again, author George Orwell posed four great motives for writing: sheer ego-ism, historical impulse, political purpose, and aesthetic enthusiasm. I can only plead that my initial “aesthetic” enthusiasm is now “anesthetized” enthusiasm. I soon discovered that the most exciting activity imaginable when repeated regularly becomes work, and so found new respect for those who grind out daily columns. Along the way we’ve addressed greed, euphemisms, crime, religion, exercise, smoking, ecology, veterans, food, personal gripes, astrology, death, home-care, transportation, volunteers, hospices, elders’ gripes, medicos, mothers, civility, accidents, pets, fathers, patriotism, hi-tech, and greed again – always striving mightily to link the subjects to either elders or the county. In time,

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the latter constraints seemed increasingly confining. (Censuring guns would have been fun.)

Over the past year I also came to agree with Dorothy Parker that, “Everything that isn’t writing is fun.” Sure, I admire the cold, clear, concise prose of Hemingway’s lean classic, *The Old Man And The Sea*, or anything by the laconic Jimmy Breslin. But like Charles McCarry, I’ve found that good writing is “by a factor of 10 the hardest thing I’ve ever done.” Or as Mark Twain saw the problem, “I’ve written a long letter since I didn’t have time to write a short one.”

Trying to be novel also became a chore. And after a lifetime of listening and reading, one easily comes to doubt the very possibility of an original thought, but you’ll find no apology here for my bi-weekly “quagmire of quotes.” I don’t thereby pretend to pseudo-intellectualism, but rather confess that the quotes not only reflect fondly held personal sentiments, but express them better than I ever could. And after all, only Adam could logically plead immunity from quoting, and then not for very long. Let’s hope that the quotes may also have revived at least a mild interest in some very classy word-smiths.

Finally, in concluding this privileged experience as your correspondent, I must express my indebtedness and heartfelt thanks to *The JOURNAL*, its management, staff, and readers for tolerating me, and especially to my editor, Mr. Ken Weiss, who labored masterfully to convert my sows’ ears prose into silk purses.

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28. FLAGS

OUR FLAG IS FIRST AND FOREMOST A SYMBOL OF FREEDOM

Some critics cite “loss of faith” as the root cause of many of the world’s current ills – from AIDS, through drugs and famine, to terrorism. But this verdict misses the mark. Actually, faith abounds these days, as we prove every time we press an elevator button, wait for a bus, or board a plane.

The real problem is that our faith is often misplaced. We tend to rely more on penicillin than prayer; more on government than God. In fact, today we bow before an extended array of “golden calves.” We worship the gods of fame, fortune, and fitness, to name only a few. And now some would insist that we add the flag to our inventory of idols!

Webster’s dictionary defines a flag simply as “a piece of cloth,” and then adds that among its possible uses is service as a national symbol. The question then becomes: what is a “symbol?” Again, according to Webster, a symbol is a sign by which one knows or infers a thing, or which suggests something else by reason of relationship, association, or convention.

Perhaps Henry Ward Beecher best explained our flag as a symbol when he said, “A thoughtful mind, when it sees a Nation’s

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flag, sees not the flag only, but the Nation itself; and ... he reads chiefly in the flag the ... principles, the truths, the history which belongs to the Nation that sets it forth.

Woodrow Wilson clarified the matter even further when he noted: “The things that the flag stands for were created by the experience of a great people. Everything that it stands for were written by their lives. The flag is the embodiment, not of sentiment, but of history.”

Finally, few survivors of a bloody battle crowned by a victorious flag-raising can thereafter restrain a lump in the throat at the sight of “Old Glory” fluttering grandly in the breeze. Nor would many a modern day overseas traveler disagree with statesman-orator Charles Sumner who observed more than 100 years ago, “In a foreign land, the flag is companionship, and country itself, with all its endearments.”

Such noble expressions may serve to explain (but hardly excuse) the rash of rage evoked by the recent Supreme Court finding that flag-burning is among the freedoms guaranteed by our constitution. As beautiful, eloquent and widely-shared as the sentiments cited above may be, they should not obscure the fact that a symbol, for all that – remains a symbol still. They should never be confused with the substance they signify. It’s vital that we *distinguish* image from reality. Beyond that, symbols are subject to varying interpretations. The stars and Stripes are seen differently by citizen or non-citizen; by friend or foe; in peace or war. The flag

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conjures up entirely different visions in the minds of American Indians, war veterans, newly naturalized citizens, and native blacks – one of whom told author James Baldwin, “I have no country, I have no flag.” And surely grateful refugees from foreign lands see the flag quite differently than impoverished Central Americans, not to mention irascible Iranians.

This is exactly as it should be, and most especially in a nation that prides itself on its unified diversity and devotion to liberty and justice for all. This is what symbols are all about. We can read into them whatever we wish. They are merely a kind of shorthand used to convey broadly based notions in a simple, direct manner.

In this context the initial reaction to the Supreme Court’s ruling on desecration of the flag is nothing short of shameful. Too many citizens seemingly progressed overnight from flag-waving to flag-raving. And the odds are that, in their unthinking exuberance, many overzealous self-styled super-patriots probably violate more provisions of the law covering flag etiquette (and thus may ostensibly be more offensive overall) than those calmer heads who might seemingly regard the flag with apathy. One man’s homage may be another man’s desecration.

Fortunately, as time passes cooler heads usually prevail, and the flag-flap is slowly coming into proper perspective. We may also hope that, as so often happens such periodic lapses into instant national myopia, our comedians and cartoonists will hasten the process. Nothing soothes tempers and remolds wayward public

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opinion as fast or painlessly as the unmasking of absurdity. A Carson or Herblock²⁶ can effect revised viewpoints simply by demonstrating (with no exaggeration) the ridiculous disparity between political posturing and crushing reality.

To take just one example, a recent Gary Trudeau cartoon strip successively depicted the crushing problems of Education, AIDS, Housing, Ecology, and Drugs, and concluded with a panel portraying applause emanating from the White House in response to the exclamation, “I want to be the anti-flag-burning president!” Could any 10,000 word essay say more?

As for those who desecrate their own flag, they are often more effective in disclosing their own political immaturity than in threatening the government. They fail to realize that (precisely as with fist-shaking Shiites) their very act of violence to the flag betrays an acute awareness of its awesome symbolism. Only a certifiable idiot would relish desecrating a mere “piece of cloth.” Besides, such zealots are as likely to generate more vehement opposition as sympathetic followers. And U.S. citizens who bear outright disrespect or even hatred for the flag are perhaps more notable for freely opting not to move to another country.

One can easily be more offended by those demagogues who self-servingly wrap themselves in the flag – surely the most

26 Johnny Carson – host of late night TV show *The Tonight Show, Staring Johnny Carson* from 1962 to 1992 (See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Johnny_Carson) and Herbert Block, a nationally-known, Pulitzer Prize-winning editorial cartoonist from 1933 to 2001 (see <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herblock>).

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blatantly outrageous act of desecration, the ultimate hypocrisy. Good and worthy causes don't depend on flag-waving for support. And inevitable replacement of countless flags shredded by unrelenting winds and enemy bombardments testify to its indestructibility.

We don't need a law or a constitutional change to punish flag-burners. What we need is a law to guarantee anyone's right to burn the flag – and we have it. We call it the Bill of Rights. We tamper with this vital essence of our national heritage – of which the flag is merely the preeminent symbol – at our peril.

29. DRUGS

PARENTS ARE FIRST LINE OF DEFENSE IN CURBING PURSUIT OF DRUG PLEASURE

The president has declared war on drugs. His drug czar has delivered his “four point” battle plan. Curiously, neither proposed curbing the firearms that dominate drug violence. And the funds necessary for this “all-out” plan won’t entail any new taxes.

Life can be beautiful.

Priority one is relentless law enforcement. But the two most killing “gateway” drugs (tobacco and alcohol) remain legal, and outlawing behavioral activity has historically proven ineffective. (Remember prohibition?) And never mind that drugs are rampant in areas of maximum enforcement – our heavily patrolled prisons! Nor has tougher law enforcement deterred drug use. It has only served to cram courts and jam jails. Part of the problem is that law enforcement as a basic social service is hardly an equal-opportunity affair. It is gravely flawed through its distorted pattern of application according to wealth and race. You might never realize that 80% of illegal drug-users are white!

Priority two is thwarting the manufacture and movement of drugs. Again, history presages long-term failure. It’s the old game of press here; and it pops up there. Worse, this course threatens

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open-ended catastrophe. Sandwiched mid-way in the president's discourse on drugs is this seemingly innocuous statement: "*When requested* (emphasis added,) we will for the first time make available the appropriate resources of America's armed forces." Just pull our string and we'll dance! (Remember Vietnam?)

Priority three is expanded drug treatment. However laudable for meeting a critical need, as before, this is more a reaction than a solution. And the key ingredient for any successful treatment program is the willingness of addicts to submit to it. Such programs will never reach the many who may never seek it.

And effecting a "cure" doesn't end the problem. The preexisting causes for falling into drugs remain to be confronted daily. There are no medicines or surgical procedures available to eliminate joblessness, inadequate skills, peer pressure, deficient education, parental pressure, boredom, homelessness, or despair.

Priority four is an enhanced program of counseling against first-use. There's no denying that users are the ultimate support of the drug system. And propaganda, persuasion, and martialing moral pressure are what government does best. But details are as yet too sketchy to warrant confidence of much success.

Let's hope that the quarter-billion dollars earmarked to induce schools and communities to campaign against first-use will be expended on something more substantial than "Just say No!" buttons. And let's remain alert in monitoring the billion dollars allotted for "advertising" anti-drug messages. In the past,

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advertisers (and by extension, films and TV) have been part of the problem through shameful and corruptive exploitation of peer pressure on the youth market.

This brings us to the major deficiency of the battle plan. It fails to even recognize (let alone focus on) the basic problem. Simply put: The inalienable right of our citizens to the “pursuit of happiness” has overwhelmed our government’s constitutional function of insuring “domestic tranquility.”

The plan, sad to say, deals exclusively with re-establishing domestic tranquility. It’s even more imperative that we confront the consequences of our unfettered, insatiable pursuit of pleasure – the natural outgrowth of our obsession with self at the expense of concern for others. Such is the real root of our drug dilemma.

Rampant unremitting self-indulgence, once regarded as a deadly vice, has now become the modern way of life. Immediate and intense personal pleasure has become a national goal. Self-discipline or self-denial are subjects of contempt. Personal culpability is an obsolete concept. “I’ve done nothing wrong” is a national joke. Condemnation or contrition are conspicuous by their absence.

We must acknowledge that there is a moral dimension, and that our drug culture is only a natural evolution of a society devoted to instant gratification. And the whole spectrum of society is vulnerable, from the bored rich to the hopeless poor. This confirms that material well-being doesn’t inhibit drug use. And that being so,

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we'd best concentrate on remedying the spiritual poverty engulfing our drug victims. (Even reformed macho-jocks confess to a spiritual re-awakening.)

Anti-drug indoctrination must penetrate well beyond the school room – to parents – and, through them, most especially to pre-school toddlers. That is the place where instilling the habit of “just saying no” must begin. Kipling’s sage but ominous dictum is still valid: “Give me the boy from one to six, and you may have the man.” Teenagers sometime may be influenced, but they rarely can be forced.

Many parents eschew teaching moral values. It’s simply not chic. So, every reason under the sun is given kids to avoid drugs except that it is “wrong” – an abasement of human dignity, a transgression against self and society. So, parents continue to pass the buck to other equally irresponsible parents, or to schools or churches – neither of which they themselves ever visit. Some role models!

The result of this “open-mind” strategy is an aimless army of morally unarmed youngsters. Such is the natural product of a sort of “no-fault parenthood.” What we sorely need is a little old-fashioned “hands-on parenthood” which by word and example can go a long way toward instilling an early but life-long sense of right and wrong. Our best long-term hope of beating drugs might well be to insert a parent wake-up call as priority one, and slip the other priorities down a notch.

30. EPILOGUE

It was all so ironic. All my life I thought I wanted to be a writer, and I tried every way imaginable to become one. Then, when I had already been retired for fifteen years, and had long since given up my dream, the job came looking for me. I thought I had died and gone to heaven.

Alas, things are not always what they seem, and the “grass is always greener,” etc., etc. I soon became overwhelmed by disappointment to a degree that may defy satisfactory explanation to others.

I’d always known that “good writing is endless re-writing,” and so was very hard work. And I didn’t undertake the job for money, and in fact offered to work for nothing. (They insisted on a contractual basis, so a compromise was finally effected at 60 percent of their original offer.) And I sure didn’t want fame, and detested the minimal celebrity (requests to go on cable TV, be interviewed, be a judge of county events) that came my way.

All I wanted was to have a “soap box,” and I had one for a year, though I actually gave notice of my intent to resign at that point a full *six months in advance!* So, you may well wonder what disillusioned me so quickly.

Well, for one thing, you soon got the notion that your forays into print were akin to tossing bottled notes over board at sea – as I

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mentioned early on in my brief career. People who agree with you normally don't write letters to the editor. People who disagree with you quickly reveal themselves as at least marginal kooks. Who needs that?

Even more importantly, and a real enthusiasm dampener, is the realization that it's virtually impossible to change anyone's mind, to be a factor in fashioning some improvement in public manners or mores. Writing can thus be very frustrating, plus it's sort of like intellectual "flashing," exposing your mind naked to the world. That can leave you feeling very vulnerable, indeed.

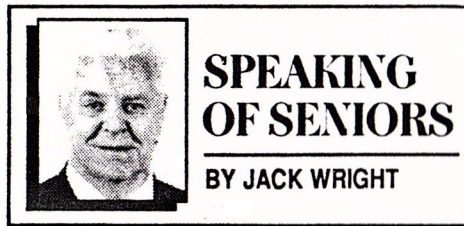
Aside from providing the ultimate ego trip, the chief benefit of writing is that it lends one's thoughts a sort of permanency – as witness this little booklet. My efforts return to life every time my words are read. One does sense a hint of immortality, however obscure. Beyond that, I can only echo what Wilfred Sheed has said, "Writing keeps you much too busy to be angry," and indeed it seems a relatively harmless way to let off steam.

Finally (and didn't you just know you were going to get another quotation?), as author John Irving has said, what separates the good writers from the mediocre ones is a "singular world view" – "a sense of epilogue." I should like to think that at least somewhere along the way I may have provided that. If so, all has not been in vain.

Jack Wright

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

THE MONTGOMERY
Journal
Montgomery County's daily newspaper



A YEAR IN THE LIFE OF A COLUMNIST²⁷

You win some – You lose some

Jack Wright should take on drivers

Editor, *The Journal*:

Jack Wright's recent column ("Voicing the taboo: God owns a rightful place in our society," [Sept. 9](#)) should be read by everyone who lives in Montgomery County. I wish I could shake his hand for his excellent presentation.

I wish, too, that he would give us his views on the drivers who pass us at 50 mph in 25- and 35-mile zones and others who pass on double yellow lines

²⁷ Jack included this small collection of letters and comments at the end of his book.

Now Hear This

and still others who drive through red lights and those who, ignore stop signs.

Have we all lost our heads? Thank you for putting your views on the line.

MARY JO MEEK
Silver Spring

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Children noisier than barking dogs

Editor, *The Journal*:

If columnist Jack Wright really dislikes dogs as much as he purports (“While we argue about drugs, the county goes to the dogs!” [April 21](#)), he could do himself and the animals a favor by using his column space to promote the neutering of dogs and pets. As it is, he has wasted valuable media space to promote a dangerously intolerant attitude.

Dogs who bark incessantly do so for a reason, usually out of loneliness and boredom. The noise of a barking dog drives even the most hard-core “animal lover” insane. However, blaming the dog and hating all canines does not help anyone. I have found that speaking with the animal’s guardian can do wonders toward a quieter neighborhood and a happier mongrel.

As someone who has 10 children, Mr. Wright hardly has room to complain about noise. The sound of babies and young children drives me up the wall. I don’t like kids running around and screaming in parks, grocery stores, department stores, or up and down the street I live on.

The planet cannot support the current human population level. To add to the disaster by having children is criminal.

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Perhaps, when all non-human species have been wiped out due to habitat destruction, toxic waste and ozone depletion, people like Mr. Wright will long for the sound of a barking dog. Meanwhile, he should use his energies by volunteering at his local animal shelter to help curb the current overpopulation of dogs.

I will continue to act responsibly by not having children and treating both humans and non-humans with respect once they have been born.

TERESA L. SPIEGEL
Washington

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Wright should call only self a 'geezer'

Editor, *The Journal*:

As one of the "elderly" residents of Montgomery County, I find your new columnist Jack Wright provocative indeed and, in at least one respect, offensive.

In a recent column ("Forget elder, golden-ager, senior citizen - call me gramps," [Aug. 12](#)), he refers to himself and every other older person as "geezers and geezerettes." If he would refer to the 1983 Webster's Ninth Collegiate Dictionary, he would find the meaning of this appellation to be "a queer, odd or eccentric man."

If his intent had been to describe only himself as such a person, he obviously would have been most correct. But to generalize and paint all elderly as such is a stereotype that is all too often applied by people such who appear to speak before they think.

ROBERT G. CANTOR
Silver Spring

Now Hear This



COMMANDER
NATIONAL NAVAL MEDICAL CENTER
BETHESDA, MARYLAND 20814-5000

30 May 1989

Dear Mr. Wright:

I really enjoyed your article "Speaking of Seniors." On behalf of the many health care providers at National Naval Medical Center I applaud your comments. We in the health professions celebrate the glory of life each day, and it is gratifying to hear from those who appreciate our efforts. During this Memorial Day season we hold dear the memory of our colleagues who have gone before us and we are proud to carry their legacy. Thank you for a fine article.

Sincerely,

D. F. HAGEN
Rear Admiral, Medical Corps
United States Navy

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Let's hope Wright shows up in print

Editor, *The Journal*:

As one old man to another, I must take issue with Jack Wright's self-appraisal in his farewell column ("'Age before beauty' is far better than age before poverty," [July 28](#)).

Modesty is always becoming, particularly in the old, but the facts are that his comments have been superbly wise and entertaining – and so succinct that anyone who has ever tried English composition can recognize the hours of polishing that went into them.

Hopefully, the editor's note that Mr. Wright is retiring from the regular column-writing business means that we can expect to see him again in print from time to time. I look forward to that.

JESSE L. MAURY
Chevy Chase