

Supplements to my letter of April 27th

(May 12th)

Near the end of the meeting on May 6th, I asked that we prepare for the next meeting (May 20th) by getting to know well Brooks's "Humility Code" and my letter of April 27th, and to consider what we would especially like to comment on, or at least to hear discussed.

Let me add to that now a particular invitation to seek to explain each of the words in Brooks's phrase, at Sec. 1 of the Code, "successful moral struggle". (It is noteworthy that the noun 'struggle' is used in Sections 1, 4, 6, 7, 9 and 10, and the verb 'struggle' in 3 and 15.) You may also wish to decide whether or not you agree with my criticism of him on pp. 2 and 4 as putting "an inordinate emphasis on moral struggle". Aim to put in writing your explanation of the word-trio.

I said on the 6th, not just to be provocative, that I thought the opening sentence of Brooks's Sec. 1, "We don't live for happiness, we live for holiness", was one of the worst-written sentences I'd seen. Our attention to the word 'holiness' led John Mikuz to mention the Apostolic Exhortation of Pope Francis in March of this year on "the call to holiness in today's world". John has kindly made copies of this for John Drennan and me, and our next meeting should certainly include identifying and discussing some major themes in what the Pope has had to say.

(May 29th)

On the 20th John Mikuz chose well from Pope Francis's Exhortation. He brought out its practicality: holiness requires that when you gossip you don't malign, when you're tired you still listen "with patience and love" to your child (para. 16). We may compare Brooks's remark "Character is built both through drama and through the everyday" (p.14). It is possible to be both conscientious and joyful.

In several passages Francis shows himself keenly aware how widespread, in the Church as elsewhere, are feelings of superiority to others and insensitivity to needs. He draws these contrasts:

The saints are not odd and aloof, unbearable because of their vanity, negativity and bitterness (93). We will find it hard to feel and show any real concern for those in need, unless we are able to cultivate a certain simplicity of life, resisting the feverish demands of a consumer society, which leave us impoverished and unsatisfied, anxious to have it all now (108). Far from being timid, morose, acerbic or melancholy, or putting on a dreary face, the saints are joyful and full of good humour (122).

One way to develop character is to seek to overcome any tendencies in oneself to such faults, but not so much by way of what Brooks calls moral struggle (Francis also says, at 162, "our path towards holiness is a constant battle") but by a growing appreciation of people who are largely free of those faults and a strong desire to learn from and resemble them. Goodness of character does not depend on a religious motivation. What does it depend on?

Francis' main text is the Beatitudes set out as spoken by Jesus in Matthew's fifth chapter and Luke's sixth and the "Rejoice" verse that follows in both. After reference to the

persecutions of the disciples, Matthew has (in the Revised Standard Version) “Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so men persecuted the prophets who were before you.” Francis, though dealing with persecution (90-94), does not even mention that reward. The Christian theme of salvation has always been understood as a matter for this life and a life after death. Even apart from belief in the resurrection of Jesus, it has often and reasonably been argued that immortality (as a gift) is a corollary of theism, since, as the Oxford philosopher H.H.Price said, on p.460 of his exposition of a near-mystical version of theism in the last chapter of *Belief* (1969),

[the Theist] ... asserts that there actually *is* a Supreme Being who created the world, that he actually *is* infinite in power, wisdom and goodness, and moreover that he actually *does* love every single person whom he has created.

The major question is whether one can regard **that** as a reasonable belief.

I invite consideration of why or how it might have come about that the Pope is silent in this address about heaven or immortality, even when dealing also with Matthew 25. 31-46, and whether, if that silence was deliberate, it was justified. In contrast, it is rather surprising that, near the end of his address (paras 158-166), he asserts the existence of the devil.

If one is not a Christian believer, what is there in which one can **rejoice**, rather than merely find happiness, or pleasure, or temporary excitement? Self-giving love, cooperation, creativity, development of capacities for good; formulating, exploring and finding answers to important questions: those make a start on a response. It is certainly a question I ask, and not only as a vital one for a grandparent, teacher and educationist. Like many of life’s major questions, its answering in theory and practice requires courage.

On the 20th, courage was the theme of Ju-an, our member who has come from China to write a doctoral thesis at Melbourne on nineteenth-century British women who intrepidly travelled in China. I have been astonished to find that the word ‘courage’ does not occur in Brooks’s index. Of Plato’s and Cicero’s other three cardinal virtues, justice (or fairness) does not occur either, wisdom does but is inadequately defined on p.9, and moderation valuably discussed and illustrated in a section of the chapter on Eisenhower. Brooks should have attended more to the great moral philosophers. He takes over Kant’s “crooked timber” view of humanity, quoting on p.11 but giving no reference for ‘Immanuel Kant’s famous line, “Out of the crooked timber of humanity, no straight thing was ever made”’. (*The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* ends with “... can ever be made”, citing proposition 6 of Kant’s *Idea for a universal history* ...) There is no other reference to Kant. How relevant to development of good, resolute character is the conclusion (“Methodology ...”) of his *Critique of Practical Reason*! He makes plain the great value, after his imagined boy of ten has learnt the basic moral “catechism” (of fairness, one might say), of his being told a story such as that of a man who went on resisting pressures to join the calumniators of Anne Boleyn.

Jonathan Burns expressed his dislike of the tone (akin to religiosity?) of Brooks’s book. Max Stephens, in the chair, said that the Humility Code did not emerge as a conclusion from the eight chapters of biography, but warmly invited us to study Chapter 6, called “Dignity”, on the two African-Americans A. Philip Randolph and Bayard Rustin, whose roles were crucial for the Washington rally of 1963 at which Martin Luther King Jr delivered his famous speech. Let’s study that chapter and so be ready, after we have benefited from Max’s guidance, to discuss it; and let’s not forget para. 2 on p.1 above, which we did not discuss last time.

(June 5th)

In this supplement I cover some of the content of our meeting of two days ago, offer an agenda for the final meeting of the term on the 17th, and explain the nature of the projected 1.2018 issue of our magazine *Learningguild Letter*, for which I warmly invite contributions (preferably by the end of July) to complement those I mention on p.4.

Max Stephens took up major themes in the sixth chapter, entitled “Dignity”, of David Brooks’s *The Road to Character*, the one concerning two leaders of the struggle of African-Americans for human rights in the twentieth century, A. Philip Randolph (1889-1979) and Bayard Rustin (1912-1987). The chapter has little to say about dignity, which is not fundamentally a matter of what Brooks attributes to Randolph (p.131): “a way of behaving ... much more dignified than that of the world around him.” The etymology of the word gives the clue: the Latin adjective ‘*dignus*’ has the meaning of the English ‘worthy’, and a person’s dignity, in the most important sense of the word, is his or her worthiness of respect, sometimes for something special about him or her, but fundamentally because of common humanity. I mentioned Archbishop Desmond Tutu’s vivid memory of the English clergyman Trevor Huddleston’s lifting his hat to show his respect for Tutu’s mother. (Google ‘Desmond Tutu and Trevor Huddleston’.)

Max valuably drew upon detail given in Jervis Anderson’s book *Bayard Rustin, Troubles I’ve Seen: A Biography* (University of California Press, 1998). Making clear that Rustin was the chief organizer of the march on Washington at which Martin Luther King gave his most famous speech, Brooks says of Rustin (p.150) “he organized a corps of black off-duty policemen and gave them training in non-violence”. Anderson has a detailed and presumably more accurate description on p.251f that includes: “Rustin arranged for the deployment of nearly two thousand policemen. And to supplement the local constabulary, he invited William Johnston, a black sergeant in the New York Police Department, to train and direct a large component of civilian marshals.” As Max has since said in an email to me, such careful planning has to be seen as expressive of “a moral and a political dimension that both [Randolph and Rustin] clearly understood”: they had to show that the black leadership continued to deserve trust.

In responding to my own question about the meaning to be attached to Brooks’s phrase ‘successful moral struggle’ (Humility Code, para. 1), I offered, as an explanation of the third word, ‘conflict (often protracted and painful) between opposing forces’, and spoke of the difficulty of defining the adjective ‘moral’. My wife Margaret had found in the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* ‘concerned with the principles of right and wrong behaviour’. That definition is not of much help until we’ve considered the criteria for the verdicts ‘right’ and ‘wrong’. I offered ‘related to such principles for the regulation of one’s own behaviour as those of unselfishness’. I should now say (influenced of course by Kant) ‘... unselfishness, fairness, and respect for humanity’. To be successful in the struggle (a matter of degree) is presumably to develop such virtues. A contrast much emphasized by Kant, as originally by Plato (*Republic* 357-67), is between moral and prudential considerations: hence their scorn for any supposed defence of morally right actions by reference to a consequent good reputation.

I offer as the primary agenda for our meeting on the 17th your responses to these questions: “**What have been some of the influences upon your own character?**” and “**Can we determine our own character?**”. You might perhaps link such responses with your answer to either or both of these questions: “What do you admire, and why, in Brooks’s Humility

Code?” and “What in that code do you regard as unsatisfactory?”. They provide our secondary agenda.

I had better explain the unfavourable view I expressed on p.1 above of the Code’s opening sentence (“We don’t live for happiness, we live for holiness.”). First, ‘holiness’ is essentially a religious word, and Brooks is not of the view that “the road to character” has to be a religious one. Alliteration has been preferred to accuracy. Secondly, the sentence is not supported by this incautious third one: “All human beings seek to lead lives not just of pleasure, but of purpose, righteousness [by now another religious word], and virtue.” Tell that to, for example, victims of family violence. The defence of character, in Brooks’s sense of the word, or, as one might prefer to say, of moral goodness, needs to begin with such basic questions as “What are we to respect, and why?”.

I shall send these pages to David Brooks. Learningguild would gladly offer him hospitality should he think of coming to Australia.

My intention is that the 1.2018 issue of *Learningguild Letter* will draw upon our discussions of this term and include related material. For example, Jonathan Burns will tell us on the 17th of Michael Ignatieff’s new book *Ordinary Virtues*, and that will lead, I hope, to his reviewing it in the magazine. Milan Rados and I are likely to address the relevance of some of Barry Jones’s recent writing to the study of character. There is a general invitation at the beginning of this supplement.

John Howes

