

The Educated Person
A Letter to David
June, 1980

A letter and a book – Not Man Apart – from your delinquent godfather for high school graduation. I think the book says more than a dozen special day trinkets, though I appreciate the value of continuity in a relationship, even a ceremonial one.

You go to college next year, and your mother's letter tells us you may be playing football. That's great. You must have enjoyed the game in high school. I admit doing it, but never really enjoying it. I liked the artful part of pass catching, but I got no pleasure out of being smashed to the ground or doing the same to my opponents.

I think you should read the book at some point when you can deal with it as a whole, not piecemeal. You should have time to linger over the thoughts that emerge. This is not a book to "just read and release." It is not a book of pretty pictures to leaf through in a crowd: the "oh, another pretty one" syndrome. This is not a bedtime book to encourage sleep and no reflection. Ultimately this book is about how a person perceives the natural world around him, and in most cultures this perception is a model for how man perceives his social world as well. The book points a direction that is not at all the model of your own culture, though some people talk about ecology at the present time. One day you will realize that making a science of some problem area is a response from within your own culture which in the case of ecology hides the real challenge which is so fundamental and disturbing to central cultural assumptions of western man that he assiduously avoids looking at it.

Someday you will realize perhaps that science is western man's response to the difference between what man needs and what he wants. It says it is the pursuit of knowledge, but really it is the pursuit of control over the unknown through the exclusive use of man's rational faculty. As it is presently practiced, science is an elaborate cultural veil set forth in the noble celebration of reason which hides little but man's greed. The pursuit of reason in the name of science, technology, and big business, untempered by the pursuit of man's spiritual faculty in religion and the arts is an uncaged monster. It is not itself bad; it becomes bad when the balance provided by man's other ways of perceiving and understanding is lost. Our culture celebrates the divorce of religion from government, and art from religion, and in part the celebration justified because of the excesses of religions no longer in contact with their source – the religious experience, and the spiritual in man. But the truth is that man is both spirit and reason and culture goes awry

when either has exclusive reign. The answer is not the denial of reason and science, but the insistence on the necessary balance from a spiritual perspective.

I expect that the idea that you have a spiritual faculty sounds bizarre to you. It is not surprising since your culture does such a superb job of suppressing its use. But if you had grown up in Tibet, the notion that you possess such a faculty and that it can be highly refined would be a commonplace. But in your culture you have been taught that reason is man's highest faculty, and science man's supreme use of reason. Likewise you have been taught not to trust your feelings or that grab-bag – your intuitions. Well, what your culture refers to as feelings or intuition is the tip of the iceberg of your spiritual faculty.

You are now mature enough to examine some of your culture's assumptions, and doing this examining is what college should be about. It should not be about learning to be something in the professional sense. Most people never bother to examine the egg of their culture, or they claim that surveys of its art or history or literature constitute examination. But such surveys operate within the assumptions and typically glorify them. If you ever wish to be truly educated, you must look at the assumptions themselves, not just at their positive reflections in art or politics. Only then will you see, understand, and be able to assess the structure of the cultural egg in which you live. You are educated when you begin to formulate a considered answer to how your own culture decides what is real, what is time, what is life (death), what is truth, what is mind, what is faith, what is art, what is God. I don't mean a bunch of philosophical jargon that exercises some sophist. Your culture supplies you with ready made answers to each of these "what is" questions. An educated man examines these tailor made solutions and discovers how shallow they are. And he discovers that other cultures have answered these questions in different ways. Most importantly he realizes that in the array of answers among cultures, his own culture has no monopoly on the truth.

If you come away from college with a refined ability to think and to reason, that will satisfy your college, your profession, and your culture. It will assure you of a place within your system where you can be successful as your culture defines success. If you come away from college a biologist, that will be a more limited achievement unless you are also a thinker. If you come away from college a philosopher in the college sense, you will have considered grave issues with the haughtiest superficiality. If you come away from college a radical anti-nuke or a Jesus freak you may have confronted an assumption or two, but you will probably have too highly specified your response, and perhaps you will have just substituted one set of blinding absolutes for another. If you come away from

college really understanding what this book I am giving you now MEANS, and what the ramifications of this meaning are for how you see yourself, your profession, your family, your community, and the natural world, then you will be an educated man. You will have peered through the cracks in your cultural egg, and you will know the answers to how your culture encloses you and your life with its concepts of reality, time, truth, psyche, art, life, and the divine (spiritual). You will have escaped the confines of who you are and will be able to truly choose what you want to become and what directions you want to see your culture take. Eggs come in many shapes, but there are few egg shapers. The ultimate secret is that no shape is RIGHT. What is RIGHT is the awareness that all shapes are choices. What is RIGHT is the recognition that it is the awareness of choice itself that must be kept alive.

There are few educated people in the sense I am talking about. I hope you become one of them. Knowing what I was like graduating from high school, I doubt that this letter or the book will make much sense, though the times have changed, and there is more public doubt being expressed now about our egg. It is too bad if you are where I was as a high school graduate. I was a living testimonial to the way in which culture paralyzes its achievers, even those of some sensitivity and intellect. If all this makes no sense now, put the letter and book away for a year. Try the book each successive birthday and see if there is a difference over the years. If you are on target to becoming an educated person in the sense I mean, there will be. If you pursue being educated in more than just the intellectual sense, you will discover mysticism, and perhaps with guidance in techniques from a true master, you will develop your OTHER half to become a complete human being, not just know what one should be.

Consider this starting point: Games like football are miniature symbolic representations of the cultures that create them. The values, goals, and attitudes; the mental, physical, and social faculties these games reward are usually ones strongly emphasized in the culture. You are pursuing football - what are the values, goals, attitudes and faculties this game rewards? Do you find these same characteristics generally prominent in American culture? Now, how is the model of nature presented in the book Not Man Apart fundamentally different from the model represented in football? Think about it. It may give you a "competitive" edge in the "race" toward the educated man.

Don't miss the title poem on page 12.

Delinquent, but Never Dull,

The Best, Tom