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IRWIN EDMAN'S CANDLE

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"In an age where gentleness has vanished, it is possible still to be a gentleman."

(*Under Whatever Sky*)

In Irwin Edman's writings we may profitably study the strength and limitations of a liberal humanist's view of the modern dilemma. The late Professor Edman was for forty years a teacher of philosophy at Columbia University; he was deservedly popular for his expositions and advocacy, in speech and in writing, of that reflective consideration of man's nature and destiny without which life is only partially lived. "The unexamined life is not worth living," said Socrates; Irwin Edman taught hundreds of people how to enrich life by thoughtful examination of it. The tone and temper of his books reveal that he had also a gentle and sensitive spirit.

The range of his intellectual interests may be suggested by mention of some of his books. *Human Traits and their Social Significance* is a pioneer work in social psychology. *Arts and the Man* is an excellent primer of aesthetics; it is admirably designed to help the average thoughtful lay person get more enjoyment from his experience of pictures, music, and books. *The Mind of Paul* does more than justice to the much misrepresented and often much maligned Apostle to the Gentiles. Edman shows clearly what Paul's experience as a Jew, as a Roman, as a Greek, and as a student of mystery religions contributed to the formation of his mind and teaching, and he makes out a case for Paul as essentially a mystic that illuminates the Epistles more sensibly than any strictly theological systematization. *Four Ways of Philosophy* usefully sorts out the main and recurrent strands of human reflection; Edman deals with Philosophy as Logical Faith (idealism), Philosophy as Social Criticism, Philosophy as Mystical Insight, and Philosophy as Nature Understood.

He is himself mainly on the side of the fourth. In *Richard Kane Looks at Life* he relates with kindly sympathy, in a semi-fictional form, the gropings of a young man who is trying to understand politics, education, marriage, the arts, and religion. *Philosopher's Holiday* is an engaging series of autobiographical essays in which he shows what his experience of various people, places, and books has contributed to the development of his own philosophical outlook. *Under Whatever Sky* is a collection of "minuscule essays," usually just a page or two in length, any one of which may start the reflective reader on a voyage to any or all points of the intellectual compass. He has also edited useful collections of the philosophical works of Plato, George Santayana, and John Dewey.

His own philosophical position he sets out most explicitly in *Philosopher's Quest*. The title suggests his fundamental conviction, that philosophy is a seeking and not a finding. He is chary of absolutes and he looks for no finality, no completeness, no consistency. He is afraid of the 'convinced' people, for they are usually dangerous to their fellows; before you know it, they turn into fanatics, conquerors, and hot gospellers; they know the 'truth' and they will suffocate your doubts and put their brand mark on you: "Absolutes in ideas turn into fanaticisms in action." Edman prefers the 'unconvinced' people, who ought more properly to be called the unchained:

They subscribe to no orthodoxy, cling to no doctrine, cram no literal faith down other people's throats. But they have the tentative faith of the true humanist; they have the audacity of hope and the daring of venture.

The audacity of hope and the daring of venture — those to Edman are the qualities of a sound philosophical attitude. Philosophy is a questing with hope and faith, hope that we may learn some answers and faith that there are answers to be found. We ought to bet our lives that in the apparent schemelessness of things there is a core of reasonableness of which the patient and questing venturer may at least catch sight. Such a faith and such a venture will keep us serene in the storm and confusion. Edman makes Marcus Aurelius say to the twentieth century:

Only a faith in the reasonableness of the universe and a busy living in accordance with what one discovers to be one's reasonable place in it — only such a faith and such a steadfast activity in it, only such a conviction of order pervading everything, will enable us to face the disorder in the immediacies of one's life. Only by playing one's part in what seems a

deeply reasonable game can one overcome the sense of fraud in one's own life and futility in one's experience. A sense of duty saved me; it may save your generation from a sense of frivolity or vanity. And the sense of duty itself makes sense only when it is made part of the logical meaning of the whole universe, that logical order in which all reasonable men do their duty as part of the divine commonwealth... Meanwhile, in your time as in mine, you must do your part towards reasonableness and be brave and tenacious when you are at moments discouraged. The discouragements will pass, and you also. But while you live you can do as a reasonable man believing courageously against all the evidence in a reasonable world.

This seems to me John Dewey touched by Plato.

Edman is advising us, then, to keep clear of both the convinced and the doubting, the dogmatist and the sceptic. The dogmatist will kill us if he can for what he will call our heresies, and the sceptic will bid us close our eyes to the possibility of the gleam. We should range ourselves with those who quest in hope, believing that the heart has its knowledge that knowledge does not know. This is essentially a religious attitude; its flavour is beautifully suggested in an early poem by George Santayana, who was Edman's teacher:

O world, thou choosest not the better part!
 It is not wisdom to be only wise,
 And on the inward vision close the eyes,
 But it is wisdom to believe the heart.
 Columbus found a world, and had no chart
 Save one that faith deciphered in the skies;
 To trust the soul's invincible surmise
 Was all his science and his only art.
 Our knowledge is a torch of smoky pine
 That lights the pathway but one step ahead
 Across a void of mystery and dread.
 Bid, then, the tender light of faith to shine
 By which alone the mortal heart is led
 Unto the thinking of the thought divine.

Edman was also to the end an unrepentant liberal. He stated flatly in *Under Whatever Skies* (1951) that liberalism is "the most distinctively human quality of Western man" and stoutly defended the old-fashioned liberal's conviction that there is in the human stuff a fund of basic goodness on which men may draw to improve the quality of their society and civilization. The smug and the cynical may be content with what is, or say that nothing can be done about it, but Edman saw nothing in the nature of the cosmos which makes it inevitable "that there must be demagogues and wars and unemployed and diseases of

malnutrition and starvation wages in the world." It is interesting to observe the cultivated philosopher agreeing with the rough-neck poet like Sandburg that it is high time to start the old battle over again in defence of the French-Revolution principles of Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity, and to reaffirm the old faith in the competency and value of the average man: "The brotherhood of man is, you may think, a fiction, a dream. But it's worth trying to live by it, and accepting it as a fiction. Otherwise, even the doubters in the world will be wiped out."

Not that Edman had any perfectionist or Utopian illusions about the nature of the human animal. He quotes approvingly Kant's dictum: "Men cannot live with each other; they cannot live without each other," thereby underlining the ambivalence of man — his proneness to sin and his need for co-operation. Edman takes his stand with Hawthorne who, reporting on the execution of old Matthew Maule for witchcraft, pointed out that the wisest, calmest, and holiest of the time were quickest to condemn and slowest to repent, and drew the conclusion that there is no élité whom we may trust to govern, none who may dare aspire to be masters, and that therefore all erring men must do the best they can together to order their society aright. Edman says:

One way of understanding democracy is this: it is a way of life which realizes that we must all take the rap together, that we are in the same boat. We *must* take the rap, that's what it is to be human; we must all take it, that's what democracy is.

Too many liberals to-day, said Edman, are displaced persons in the spiritual sense; they have lost their home base, they have lost their roots, and they have lost their imagination:

It is not that the liberal mind is crushed, but that the liberal imagination is flattened out. It takes almost impossible effort these days even to imagine a world at peace. It is even more difficult to imagine a world is anything better than the uneasy equilibrium of tensions ready to snap.

It has become the fashion to smile a little at romantic hopes for the world, or Utopias of a perfect society. But it could be that it is precisely such dreams and visions that are needed to rekindle the fagged enthusiasms of man. It is hard to believe, but it is even harder to imagine, to see, as seers and poets see. A few poets and prophets helping us to *see* would fortify our belief that in the moral and political world too, however severe the winter, some spring, however late, will come.

It is within this context of philosophical consideration that I wish to examine Edman's little book, *Candle in the Dark*, in

which he confronts the worst that can happen to man and writes of it in a spirit of poetic imagination. The book was first published in November, 1939, surely a testing-time for any man's philosophy. The world had been plunged into hideous war again, for the second time in a generation; the nations most advanced in the arts of civilization were setting about to destroy as much as possible of each other's civilization; all that men of good will had been able to do in twenty years towards creating international peace and justice was being swept away in a maelstrom of blood. The ape and the tiger were again in full control of human society. What was the man of good will to do when he saw before his eyes "the collapse of everything by which the hopeful spirit or generous mind has lived?" This catastrophe made mockery of all his hopes and nonsense of all his knowledge; it knocked the pins from under his faith in man. It filled him with despair. How can the generous mind endure in such circumstances? asked Edman. Where can we find a bomb-proof shelter of the spirit? "What can we do to keep sane in a world gone mad?" He offered his *Candle in the Dark* as "A Post-script to Despair."

First of all, it is impossible to turn away the eyes. We cannot ignore such a disaster; there is no hiding-place; "even the Ivory Tower is not bombproof." There are various possibilities of retreat, but they are all unsatisfactory to the honest mind. There is the way of callous selfishness; but the man of good will can only be ashamed of taking his personal pleasure or enjoying a private success when the world is in agony. There is the retreat to vague mysticism, by which in some mysterious way we assure ourselves that all is well in the Absolute; there is the retreat into the past, whereby we try to live in an antiseptic world that never was. We cannot fool ourselves in these ways. Nor can we retreat into ourselves; for psychology and psychiatry have shown us that the world within is an exact reflection of the world without: "the inner world as well as the outer one is barbarism."

No, we must think about our savage world and face its issues. There is this about war that it makes us think, makes us ask fundamental questions. When things we have taken for granted are suddenly in peril, we are moved to ask: what *are* the good things of life? When society is shaken to its foundations, we are led to inquire: what are the right principles of social organization? We start to examine our mores and morals, we start asking questions about our science, education, art, religion. Perhaps we start thinking together; war forces us to transcend our individual isolation and turn our minds to our common plight:

It is not until the boat is sinking that we are made to realize that we are in the same boat. During a common crisis there is a frightened closeness of human association. In a dark time men for once realize that they are brothers in desperation.

But we must ask ourselves the searching questions, no matter how bleak the answers. What about the faith in education as a way to gradual improvement of social, national, and international relationships? Is there any reason to believe that it has not been almost totally useless? How improvable is man under any circumstances or by any means? Have we a right to expect from political democracy anything better than the shamefully mediocre results that are visible on every hand? Had we not better face the fact that science is also a broken reed, considering the uses to which it has been and is being put?

It rains bombs upon defenseless cities as well as celestial music upon enraptured ears. It invents unspeakable tortures as well as the clean beauties of modern architecture. It brings the most elegant and disciplined of chamber music into our homes but it carries thereto also the voices of the demagogue and the dictator. It gives us abundance but has not prevented starvation in the midst of plenty. It gives us longer life — and swifter death. . . . Surgery marvelously salvages men shattered by an equally marvelous precision. Fields of grain and flocks of sheep are destroyed while gifted chemists devise substitutes for bread and wool.

Most searching of all, can we continue to have faith in the instrument of reason, or must we not admit that its power in human society is negligible? The deep fear has arisen, says Edman, that intelligence itself is pathetically ineffective in the ways of men. If this is so, we shall have to face the fact and live with it. We must be prepared to call in question all dogmas by which we have lived: "Only when we are willing to call into question everything we have taken for granted, only on the precarious bedrock of doubt, can we rise to any encouragements, or can any consolation be found."

Accepting then the fact that the surrounding gloom is almost impenetrable, and that there is every reason for good men to go mad, Edman offers five rays of hope as a light to lighten our darkness. This is his postscript to despair:

1. Things have been as bad before and yet civilization survived.

Taking the long historical view, we may legitimately hope to see possibilities of good emerging in the far distant future. To-day is not the first time in the history of the western world

that good and reasonable men have seen the future utterly black before them and fearfully expected the consummation of all things. Men in other ages have known for sure — or so they thought — that they were living at the end of the world. What about the men of Athens at the end of the Peloponnesian War? Must it not have seemed to them that civilization would be no more? Or what of the civilized men in Rome in the fifth century A.D. who saw the hordes of barbarians inundating and destroying everything that they called good? Or what of any good man in Europe in the twenty-ninth year of the 'Thirty Years' War — must he not have been in the depths of despair, knowing in his bones that disaster was final and absolute?

Let us assume — an easy enough assumption to make in 1957 — that the worst can happen to our western culture, that, say, all our democratic institutions and all our most cherished conceptions of behavior and belief will perish under the iron heel of communist barbarism. Perhaps it would do us all good to look that prospect squarely in the face and take for given that it will all happen. Perhaps it would emancipate us from fear. We could then ask ourselves the question: are we sure that that does mean the end of the world? Certainly it would mean the end of *our* world, but will virtue and knowledge and wisdom perish with us? Civilizations do not end, they change; and who can say that in some way, totally inconceivable to us at this time and in this place, our western civilization centuries ahead may not be transformed into something rich and strange? The spirit of man has hitherto proved indestructible, in spite of recurring disaster — why should we assume that this time it will not survive? Man may be tougher than we think. As Edman remarks jocularly in a more recent book, it would be good for our sense of proportion if we were all to become astronomers; their crises are millions of years apart.

Historical perspective will help us; it will chasten us in our prospects for the immediate future but it may give us sobered and reasoned expectations of a more remote good. "Why should we, in the long historical perspective, despair of science, democracy, and human nature itself?" Or as the poet has put it, "If hopes were dupes, fears may be liars."

2. *Some little gains were made between the Wars, and some humane activities were carried on; we need to affirm, strengthen, and continue these.*

While acknowledging truthfully that we did so very little to make a better world between 1919 and 1939 and that it was

totally inadequate to prevent disaster, we should not minimize the value of that little. It was a pitiful start; still it was a start. Many good projects were initiated; more important still, many people lived fruitful, sacrificial, and beautiful lives in spite of their chaotic society. Think of the work that was done in healing, in teaching, in housing, in race relations; think of the advances in the western world in social security, in socialized medicine, in co-operative enterprises. We tend to become sour about the failure of science, but we ought to remember how young a venture is scientific method. So far it has been employed mainly in turning out new gadgets for comfort and new weapons for destruction. How often has it been employed towards improving social conditions and human relations?

Might it not be a useful therapeutic propaganda for a while to be reminded that in important ways it is earlier than we think? When we are told that Western Civilization is bankrupt, it would be helpful and even true to observe that on a geological and biological scale Western Civilization is extremely young. When we are informed that the human race is politically and socially at its wits' end, it would be encouraging perhaps to have it noted that human intelligence, especially in its scientific form, has been applied to social and political affairs for a paltry hundred years or so. When we are told that it is nearly midnight and that doom will come on the stroke of the fateful hour, it might help to have it retorted that it is only dawn, and early dawn — in which one cannot see very clearly. Really, it *is* rather earlier than we think — not early enough to go back to sleep, but to relax tension a little, with still time perhaps to get something done. (*Under Whatever Skies*, p. 109).

What we must do is to cherish the gains that were made, keep alive the spark of self-giving service, and cherish the method of scientific inquiry. In a period when most men are abandoning reason and the spirit of free inquiry, it is the duty and the privilege of unchained minds to affirm these values the more positively and the more bravely. The arts and our intellectual activities are the true liberators and nourishers of life; "they are life-giving and life-renewing beyond the immediate clamor, even while destruction is rampant." Some of the greatest art and greatest thought have in the past been produced in some of the darkest hours of human history. The same can be true to-day if we are steadfast in our faith in what we know to be the real values of life: "Out of tragedy, thinking may envisage a way to lessen the tragedy of other generations, or make images of a way of life less disastrous than our own."

3. *Democracy and the common man have not had a fair chance; perhaps they could do better if they had a fair chance.*

It is easy and usual for patricians and snobs to sneer at the mediocre performance of democracy, but it is foolish and cowardly for men of good will to acquiesce in that judgment as conclusive. The democratic experiment has not ended; it has barely begun. How short has been its history! Even if we go back as far as the Declaration of Independence (1776) and take its trumpet announcement of equality of rights for all mankind as the debut of democracy in the modern world, we have still only 185 years to place in the scale against the precedent centuries of rank and caste and privilege and tyranny. The year 1776, further, is significant only as the announcement of a program, not as the accomplishment of a fact. How many more years had the world to wait for even the reasonably effective working of political democracy in the United States, in Great Britain and the other English-speaking nations, in France, in Germany, in Italy, to say nothing of other less fortunate countries in Europe, Asia, and Africa? In what a small part even of the western world in the twentieth century have free elections to responsible legislative bodies been the accepted procedure. Even there, even on the North American continent where it has been most consistently practised, how often has plutocracy, the power of wealth to buy and befuddle, been able to frustrate the best efforts of honest men to make the system work. That is to speak only of the political aspect of democracy; but there are large areas of life where democracy has not even been tried, or tried only halfheartedly: in business and industry, in education, or in the formation of public opinion. There is nothing that has happened in the last fifty years to make us lose faith that the common man, if given a chance, cannot make a better job of life than he has hitherto done.

There is nothing that has happened to make us believe that those elements of decency and kindness, of living and letting live, which people exhibit if they are allowed to live without fear and insecurity, might not animate the decisions of mankind. We have not seriously tried to give the common man an adequate voice in the commonweal. . . . It is as much a challenge as ever to work for conditions of life under which people can come to be themselves, rather than to be stereotypes, or the victims of over-privilege, which makes them callous, or under-privilege, which makes them slaves.

But even if these three candles fail us, there are still two other gleams of light: "the recognition of present goods and the manifestations of the eternal."

4. *Always if our hopes grow dim, there is the present, the present paragraphs of the good life which the fortunate share: art, play, work, friendship, affection.*

"A vivid sense of the present is one of the best antidotes to despair," says Edman. No one should ever undervalue the spiritual health that comes, for example, from absorption in work that one believes to be useful, or the joy that comes from playing with children. Few there are so poor who cannot command friendship and affection. In the world as it is to-day we should be prepared to settle for the small happiness, the little joy:

Is it sour grapes to settle for the little happiness:
to aim to make happiness out of little ingredients:
little things lovingly collected, simple meals in modest
surroundings with unpretentious friends, discours-
ing, perhaps on not too grand ideas?

There is the refreshment of great art, too, within the reach of most: books and music and poetry which in the most tragic times are able to delight the senses, stimulate the mind, and lift the heart.

"These little islands of sound life in a sick world" are foretastes of the world as it could be made; they can be enhanced by practice and perhaps made a means to a fuller life for all men in some remote future:

Companionship in them can be increased through the still possible art of friendship even in an all-hating world. Education in delight and the sharing of delight may be not only an antidote to the poison of despair. If made sufficiently contagious as an attitude towards life, it may be an instrument for removing the grounds for despair. If we learn now to see what the goods of life are and how they gain by being shared, the infinite possibilities of human intelligence and natural resources in the world may be organized for the common good.

5. *We can achieve serenity by not looking for too much and by detached contemplation of the eternal beauty and the eternal tragedy.*

"There are roughly two ways of escaping from time: one by a rapturous absorption in the moment, one by absorption in things that transcend time altogether." (*Philosopher's Holiday*, p. 259). In the worst periods of life, even the first may not be

available. The wise man learns early not to expect too much ever; at the point of blackest crisis he may have to forgo any expectation. But to discipline ourselves to expect nothing good at all may be the gateway to serenity:

To discover that our lives are doomed even in times of peace, that civilization as we now know it may be doomed in times of war, is to meet experience in its most direct and candid terms. It is to live in the immediate for whatever beauty it may incarnate, truth it may reveal, or good it may enshrine.

There is a satisfaction to the mind in simply knowing why evil has come upon us, and the contemplation of unmitigated disaster under the light of eternity may steady and calm us. Man's progress from the dark to ultimate dark — if it is ultimate dark — is still a moving story, and along the way man has uttered great thoughts, created great beauty, and done deeds of noble note. "While we live, at least, we can be alive in the perpetual music of the dream, the eternal note of the tragedy."

These then are Edman's five candles. I suggest that they are light-giving not only in 1939 or in the time of the next great cosmic tragedy but that they avail whenever an honest and thoughtful man is overwhelmed by life's multitudinous and ubiquitous evil. To the thoughtful and sensitive mind in any age, surely, life has been always three-fourths pain and disaster always either imminent or in the ascendant. An antidote to despair is always needed. We need to have someone tell us that life has another dimension beyond that which confronts us in the overwhelming immediacy of pain and wrong. That Irwin Edman has done this for many is sufficiently indicated by this summary of his concluding remarks to his students:

I reminded these students that we are living in a cosmos which was not made for us but in which, willy-nilly, we have to grow. I admitted that some of the old comforts and securities provided by the traditional faiths of the western world are not possible if one adheres scrupulously to the discoverable patterns and regularities in nature. There is, for one thing, no promise of immortality or of ultimate order and justice. Life is a risk and all individual plans precarious, all human achievement transient, and all individual lives doomed. But I reminded my young hearers, too, of the delicacy, the scope, and the variety of pleasure and joy open to the senses and the sensibilities and the mind of men in their brief interval on earth. I recalled to them, too, the enkindling prospect of a world of order and mutual understanding open to men of good will enlightened by

intelligence. I asked them not to listen too uncritically to those who hold that the human race is morally bankrupt and that intelligence, which has given us so many techniques of destruction, has not helped us to render life on earth secure or pleasant or happy for most of its inhabitants. I pointed out how young science is in comparison with the long tradition of superstition, mythology, and folly; how narrowly intelligence, in its critical scientific form, has been extended to the problems of society and of civilization.

"If individual lives are limited and individual achievements minute, one can still," I said warmly, "count on the cumulative results of the co-operation of many men in many generations in the great and very long, if not endless, adventure of mankind." (*Philosopher's Quest*, pp. 269-70).