

Editorial

GEORGE ORWELL ONCE WROTE: “When you are on a sinking ship, your thoughts will be of sinking ships.” And while this statement remains true some sixty years after he wrote it and will probably always remain so, it is difficult to know exactly where to direct one’s thoughts at the present, conflicted moment. First, I have had to be much more careful since November 4, 2008 with my casual conversational gambits. Now that the United States has a black president I am not nearly so blithe or confident as I once was in proclaiming what I will not to live to see. While I have slowly gotten used to seeing President Obama on television news coverage doing what presidents do—and looking like he actually understands the gravity of the job, unlike his predecessor—it has been remarkable to note how silent the Canadian press has been in any consideration of how the existence of a black American president might reflect on Canada’s international political image. In a country in which the national public broadcaster and Tim Hortons television advertisements continue to peddle the ideal that every Canadian child grows up wanting to be a professional hockey player, perhaps this silence is not terribly perplexing. This disjunction between my experience of the country in which I was born and its relentlessly monolithic political self-image helps explain why I spent my childhood looking to America for role models rather than to the country of my birth.

Second, as the ship of the global economy sinks, with all of us aboard, everyone becomes an economist, or an actuary, or at least feels the need to grab a bucket and start baling. Having served on the negotiating team for the Dalhousie Faculty Association during the round of collective bargaining that took place during the 2007–08 academic year, and having spent much of that time talking about the imminent end to mandatory retirement, I have spent more time in the past year thinking about my own retirement than I did in the previous forty. As everyone with access to print or a camera weighs in on how we got into this financial mess and what might be the quickest way out of it, it is difficult not to think about the simple fact that capitalism has never been about having “enough.” This built-in desire for infinite growth and expansion means, necessarily, decline and contraction as well. As conservative economists will calmly tell us, these things happen; the market will ebb and flow, and this sort of correction is to be expected from time to time, and is no cause for alarm. That’s all well and good, except

the economists who say such things still have their jobs, their houses, and will be able to send their kids to the (probably quite good) schools of their choice.

In addition to the wide-sweeping implications of these larger ships, my thoughts cannot help but also turn to the deck on which I stand individually as another academic year ends. One of my colleagues greets me with a cheery “Happy New Year” each September as we begin classes, and this seems exactly right. While January 1 has all of the symbolic power of being the first day of the calendar year, the first day of classes carries with it a much more immediate sensation of beginning, as students arrive on campus for classes and the faculty prepare to begin the year’s conversations with them. No one has convinced me that there is anything more important that we do as professors than teach. Of the three principal responsibilities of the job—teaching, research, and administration—it is clear to me that teaching is the most important, and by a wide margin. Not everyone agrees with this evaluation, to be sure. But it seems obvious enough to me, since this is the only one of our professional responsibilities that requires us to make ourselves understood to people who are not academics and (for most) never will be. Our ability to communicate with our students measures and reflects our ability to communicate with the larger world. It’s easy to forget this.

There is something very hopeful about teaching a class. A group of strangers gathers in a room at a prescribed time with only an implicit agreement to participate holding them together. Even those who refuse to participate in one way or another (they stop coming to class, they cheat on an assignment, they don’t hand something in) stand out as anomalies in contrast to the good nature of the majority. In other words, the classroom’s pretty much the ideal system for organizing large groups of individuals. Maybe that’s why I like teaching and why teaching has only contributed to my optimism about people generally. There is something inherently hopeful about such an arrangement. In a year in which so much has happened—for good and ill—we cannot help but think about how the global and local affect us individually. The implication of Orwell’s statement is that we don’t think about the ship unless it is sinking. But maybe we should.

AS