

States of the Union

NOTES TOWARD A FATHER'S BLESSING

BY RICHARD J. MARGOLIS



IT IS THE eve of my older son's graduation from high school. I am sequestered in my office attempting to write him a fatherly letter full of wit and wisdom. The odds are against me, tipped by the weight of my apologies.

False start: *Dear Harry: Advice, noted Ambrose Bierce, is "the smallest current coin," while a bore is "a person who talks when you wish him to listen."* None of which dissuades me from asking you to listen

to the fidgety clinking of my small coins.

Weak and oblique. When a father starts giving his son advice, he fears two things: first, that his son will not listen; second, that he will. One risks anticlimax, the moment of half-truth.

Last night at a youth committee meeting I chatted with a boy who was holding car keys in one hand and a raspberry sucker in the other. I did not know which hand to address.

I find my Shakespeare and look up Polonius, to purloin his confidence. Polonius was probably the world's all-time champion advice-giver. He had a way with moral epigrams that must have annoyed his son Laertes: "Neither a borrower nor a lender be. . . . This above all—to thine own self be true. . . ." Polonius' advice always scanned.

What impresses me, though, is the way he sneaked in his facile recommendations under cover of a father's blessing. "There, my blessing with you!" he began, and laid his hand on Laertes' head—lightly, I hope. A father's hand can hurt.

My own father once blessed me in the Polonius manner, not because he was my father but because he was my rabbi. (Alas, I kept getting the two mixed up.) The occasion was my Confirmation. In the presence of the entire congregation, while old Mr. Thornton up in the organ loft played soft music, my father bestowed separate and secret blessings upon each of us quaking confirmands. He stood a step above us, before the open ark, blessing us in turn. I don't recall many of his words, but the first two were "My son"—a powerful opener—and the last word was "peace." What I remember most was the weight of his hands on my bowed, crew-cut head and the familiar, reassuring rumble of his voice in my ear.

Afterward, to my embarrassment, I cried. My embarrassment was both understandable and unnecessary. We are taught to suppress our tears, but I have gradually grown to honor mine and have shed them gratefully on three subsequent occasions: once for my dead father, once for my lost youth and once for the happiness of a friend.

Weep, then, when the occasion warrants; but have a care to enjoy long, tearless interims.

The reason I remember my father's hands on my head, aside from the supercharged solemnity of the moment, is that it was one of the few times during those last years of his life that we touched. Although my father and I felt deeply about each other, we had trouble expressing it—a routine problem between fathers and sons, not to mention the rest of the human race. The communes and the encounter groups that are all the rage now may be a reaction to this physical detachment, to aloneness. Personally, I mistrust such instant solutions—especially the encounter groups, with their desperate huggings and programmed caresses—but I can see what they are getting at. They are defrosting devices. Perhaps they signal the breaking up of the Ice Age.

To thine own feelings be true, Polonius might have said, particularly when your feelings are laced with affection. He intimated as much when he told Laertes how to deal with old friends: "Grapple them to thy soul with hoops of steel. . . ." To which I would add, "Touch them."

Thus far I seem to be telling my son to go through life spilling tears and hugging friends. He could accuse me of unbridled sappiness. Polonius, after all, offered his son many practical, time-saving tips on how to get ahead. For instance, he admonished Laertes to play it cool ("Give every man thine ear, but few thy voice"), and he cautioned Laertes to be finicky about his clothes ("For the apparel oft proclaims the man. . . ."). These were sensible suggestions, but not the kind Harry would be likely to accept. I am not sure Laertes accepted them either. He got out of there in a hurry.

Being young, Laertes was probably seeking new and startling truths, while his father was spouting what passed for ancient wisdom. "Father," said Laertes, in effect, "show me the way through life."

"Okay," replied Polonius: "Remember to keep your shoes shined and your mouth shut." Some answer! Some question!

The beginning of wisdom, one senses, lies not in the answers we invent but in the questions we pose. "And why do you pray, Moché?" asked the boy Eliezer in Elie Wiesel's first novel. "I pray to the God within me," answered the beadle, "that He will give me the strength to ask Him the right questions." Why "the strength"? Well, it's a stern and lonely task, being your own inquisitor. Few of us have the character for it.

Raise old questions anew; suspect unique solutions. Prepare for weakness in yourself; pray for strength.

I AM startled by my fogyism. Where is the greening of America in all this counsel? Where the revolution? Every father, it appears, is a natural reactionary, robbing his own past to shape his son's future. "When we are young," observed Yeats, "we long to tread a way none trod before, / But find the excellent old way through love. . . ." Let's hear three cheers for the excellent old way!

Yeats' inner disputes, the questions he asked himself, may be helpful here. They seemed to signify a conflict between the private man and the public man, between the seeking of self (my son's main concern at the moment) and the reorganizing of others: salvation vs. revolution. A passionate politician, one of the first senators of the Irish Free State, Yeats later retreated into a centrifugal privacy, a deep swirl of memories and regrets.

Not long before he died, on the eve of World War II, he wrote a poem gently scolding Thomas Mann for his political obsessions. "In our time," Mann had written, "the destiny of man presents its meaning in political terms." Perhaps, Yeats replied; but how was a man to fix his attention on politics with "that girl standing there"?

*And maybe what they say is true
Of war and war's alarms,
But O that I were young again
And held her in my arms!*

Whom was one to believe? Alas, Yeats was charming but Mann was right. In the slaughter of 30 million that followed, each murderer saw his victim not as a personal enemy but as an Enemy "in political terms." Harry was born a decade after the Holocaust—born remembering.

Beware of those who call their enemies gooks, kikes and pigs. They are building not a new world but a slaughterhouse.

My wife and I are children of Mann's decimated century. We have fortified our children with few faiths, but I suppose we have burdened them with some characteristically Western assumptions, one of which is that of redemption through politics. (Read Micah, vote for McGovern.) We may have overdone it. When Harry was three, we trundled him off to Brooklyn's Borough Hall where, before a large crowd and for the benefit of newspaper photographers, we had him hand over a petition to Borough President John Cashmore. Who knows what the petition called for? A traffic light, maybe, or a new housing program. In any case, Harry was there, and he has been "there" ever since—petitioning, organizing, marching.

But lately his political ardor has cooled—for the moment he has postponed considerations of Buchenwald, Hiroshima and Mylai. Who can blame him? He is 16.

Yesterday he rented a tuxedo—the apparel does not always proclaim the man—and tomorrow, with a girl by his side, he goes to the Senior Prom.

Read Yeats and rejoice: Arms were made for more than leaflets.

"Farewell," intoned Polonius, removing his hand from Laertes' head. "[May] my blessing season this in thee!" Weep, touch, pray; beware, remember, rejoice. Is this all a man can tell his son? I have finished before I have begun.