

Hiding in Plain Sight

BY BERT FIELDS

Choose my favorite author of all time? I don't think so. So many have meant so much to me at various stages of my life. How can I choose one above all the rest? Who could I eliminate? Christopher Marlowe? ("Her lips suck forth my

soul; see, where it flies.") Matthew Arnold? ("And we are here as on a darkling plain/Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight/Where ignorant armies clash by night.") e. e. cummings? ("Dive for a dream, or a slogan may topple you.") Or, despite his bigotry, T. S. Eliot? ("I have known them all already, known the evenings, mornings, afternoons. I have measured out my life with coffee spoons.") And, could I choose someone over Shakespeare, turn my back on *Richard III*, *Julius Caesar*, and *Hamlet*? Not a chance. Selecting an all-time favorite is impossible—at least for me.

So, instead, I'll focus on a contemporary writer you've never heard of. I refer to my friend Aram J. Kevorkian, whose unfortunate nickname is Jack.

Jack is a brilliant, funny, emotional American who has lived and practiced law in Paris for almost 50 years. More important—for me and his thousands of readers in 62 countries—he has written and circulated, for much of that period, a monthly essay he calls his "newsletter." Essentially, it's an articulate American's very special views on France, its government, finances, customs, food, and foolishness. But it's much more than that. It lets us enjoy Jack's own insightful views on life, love, religion, family, and the world in general. It's amusing, sometimes touching, and always original.

Jack has written on the striking differences between the major religions' phrasings of the Golden Rule. To some, it's a

prohibition: "Do not do unto others as you would not have them do unto you." To others, it's an affirmative command: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." Jack ponders the source and implications of the difference. Does the prohibitive version imply an isolationist, even selfish, view of life? "I won't harm you, but don't expect any help." Does the affirmative version encourage officious meddling? "I'm going to help you whether you like it or not."

Jack has also wondered at the Hebraic concept that death should not only be accepted but also valued, because without death, life would lose its sweetness. Think how much less we would cherish each day if we knew life was going to go on forever. Jack has.

One recent issue set out the best analysis I've seen of the arguments for and against the death penalty. As always, Jack respects sound logic and deplors smugness and the unearned assumption of moral superiority. He evaluates each argument with a clear-eyed willingness to think rather than sloganize. He sees the danger of executing innocent people and is concerned about lack of effective counsel in capital cases, but he is appalled by the contention that the murderer and the state that executes him are

morally equivalent. He analyzes the issue of deterrence, reaching the conclusion that we don't know enough to reach a conclusion. He points out, perhaps tongue in cheek, that imprisoning thieves and rapists doesn't seem statistically to deter theft and rape, yet no one argues that prisons should be closed down. I won't even try to summarize the rest.

Quite often Jack becomes impatient with the French. He deplores their criminal justice system, with its pretrial imprisonment that can confine the accused for years in brutal, rat-infested prisons before bringing them to trial. He is irritated by

their stultified educational system, which, like a cookie-cutter, funnels stereotypical citizens through an inflexible curriculum into the ranks of national government officialdom. Yet, he can write soaring prose about the sights and sounds of a morning walk along the boulevards of Paris or the glories of a simple omelet

in a working-class bistro.

Most recently Jack gave us a moving statement of a patriot's feelings on the occasion of a national disaster, pointing out the glories of his naive land, with its enduring constitution and democratic institutions. Of course, there was a switch ending. The words turned out to be those of Pericles, uttered 2,500 years ago about Athens during the Peloponnesian War. My own surprise was that Jack took the speech from a translation of Thucydides. I would have expected him to have read it in the original Greek.

Someday, these splendid pieces will be published in book form. They far surpass the Parisian reminiscences of Janet Flanner or Hemmingway. Someday, you'll hear of Jack. I'm sure of it.



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