

**The Life of the Mind is No Bed of Roses,
But a Liberal Arts Education Can Inspire Critical Thinking**
Loren Logsdon

If you are ever traveling through our town on a Monday morning and happen to stop at Cyril Poindexter's Garage and Auto Mart, say around 7:30, you will find Boone Fowler, August Provender, Earl Ogden, and Dr. James Canada drinking coffee and discussing news of the day. On the morning of May 13, 2019, Earl Ogden was upset about several stories in the news. In particular, an ax murderer in St. Louis, a killer clown on a rampage in Peoria, a man in Florida who was killed when a friend tried to shoot a beer can off his head, an inmate on death row who claimed he was too sick to die, the seemingly endless parade of powerful men who have abused their power, and reports of young people who are sick and dying because of vaping.

Earl Ogden, who is one of the most illustrious graduates of Heliotrope University, shook his head and said, "There are so many ways to die, and people keep finding new ones. How can you explain the insanity that is rampant in our country today?"

Boone Fowler quickly responded, "The corrupt, dishonest people are making more money than the honest people, and that's the trouble in America today."

Cyril Poindexter, the younger brother of Mayor Horace "Shorty" Poindexter, could not let Boone's remark go unchallenged. Like Rafael Palmiero pointing his finger at Congress and declaring he had never taken steroids, Cyril gestured at Boone and said, "Don't be such a Nimrod, Boone. The real trouble is that people are suffering from *existential angst* and *fin de siecle hysteria*."

August Provender was aghast at Cyril's remark. "Crimony, Cyril, how can people be suffering from something when they don't even know what it means?"

By this time Dr. James Canada could not refrain from entering the conversation. Dr. Canada was the most intellectually accomplished professor at Heliotrope university. According to his wife, he was the only college professor who had ideas the instant he awakened in the morning, and his students believed he was a university all by himself. Like E.F. Hutton, when Dr. Canada spoke, people listened. Dr. Canada cleared his throat and said, "American culture has not yet succeeded in balancing the Apollonian-Dionysian forces of life; consequently, we see an infinite variety of bizarre, sociopathic behavior, and it will get worse before it gets better."

Boone Fowler's mouth gaped. He slapped his knee, guffawed, and gave Dr. Canada a respectful nod. "Now that's brilliant. It would have taken me six months to come up with an analysis like that, but you can do it at the drop of a hat. You are a genius like the Professor on *Gilligan's Island*."

At this moment Tug Nimbus rolled from beneath Ms. Darlene Maxwell's 1978 Mercury Monarch. Tug was fondly known in the community as "Bad News" because he was the expert mechanic at the garage and he was always busy because everyone wanted him to work on their car whether it needed work or not.

Tug wiped the grease from his hands, poured a cup of coffee, and said, "The insanity in our world is the result of Nietzsche, French Existentialism, Freudian psychology, and the Industrial Revolution."

"What about Darwinian science?" Boone asked, hoping to confuse Bad News and send him off on a

tangent.

“There need be no conflict between science and religion. Can't you see, Boone, that for most people, science and religion are but two attempts to explain the Creation. I would ask you to remember Saint Augustine's Two Cities.”

Boone tried to respond, but Tug was on a roll, and he said, “Nietzsche's declaration that God is dead opened the door to untold misery and a whole host of cockamamie ideas, unleashing legions of mean and nasty people who embrace a narcissism and promote a nihilism so dark and deep that we should all cast ourselves into the abyss.”

Boone started to speak, but Tug continued. “For if God is dead, as Nietzsche claims, then the human being has two equally dangerous alternatives. He can make a god of himself or create a god from among other people or things of this world. These alternatives can lead to the notion of the superman like Nazi Germany's Adolph Hitler or a culture hero like Elvis. The problem is that these gods are both chimerical and bizarre.

“Boone, can't you see that the temporal and eternal welfare of human beings is dependent upon belief in an anthropomorphic God who represents ideals and virtues which we must endeavor to emulate? Virtues such as truth, order, justice, creativity, compassion, respect for nature and for a greater power than ourselves. To put it quite another way, we must believe that truth is a fixed star and happiness is achieved by following a few basic and simple laws of life.”

Tug paused for a sip of coffee, and once again Boone tried to speak, but Tug was too fast for him. “Unfortunately, those who respect nothing outside of themselves can, with a certain philosophical justification, visit all kinds of cruelty and brutality on other people. A case in point, my piscatorial friend. Is Sartre's play *No Exit*, whose upshot is that Hell is other people. It follows logically that if Hell is other people, then one can treat other people like hell. According to this *Weltansicht*, other people become obstacles, things, frustrations, or objects, and one's relationship to them translates into what Martin Buber calls the I-It relationship.”

At this point, Earl Ogden tried to interrupt, but Tug wouldn't let him. “This gestalt is extended and intensified by Freudian psychology, which denies the human being any worth, dignity, or destiny. Instead, the human being is a poor wretch who is the product of neuroses, psychoses, complexes, and compulsions. As poet Edwin Arlington Robinson aptly put it, ‘Modern man is lost in a spiritual kindergarten, trying to spell G-O-D with the wrong blocks.’”

Earl smiled and tried in vain to visualize that scene, but Tug didn't give him time. Earl, my friend, you can learn a lot about the plight of the postmodern world by reading a book called *The Education of Henry Adams*. In a chapter entitled “The Dynamo and the Virgin,” Adams focused on the most important change that would occur in the 20th century. He explained that for centuries the Virgin Mary had represented a guiding, inspirational, spiritual, unifying force for mankind. Earl, you must appreciate the idea that as a human and divine symbol of the miracle of reproduction the Virgin Mary inspired great art and architecture. Adams realized, however, that the Virgin as a force in life was being replaced by the Dynamo, a machine that was a powerful but non-human force. And, worse, the Dynamo was an anarchical force which would not inspire great art or provide any unifying meaning and purpose for people.”

As Tug paused for a sip of coffee, the telephone rang, and Cyril answered it. “Hey, Tug, it's some

big shot from Detroit who wants to know how to hook up the torque converter on the Ford Wombat.”

Tug hated Detroit and vowed never to go there, but he took the phone from Cyril and began to speak to the suit of clothes on the other end of the line. “Now listen up because I don’t have time to yak all day. I’m up to my gnastus in work. Here’s what you do. You attach the thingamabob to the whatchamacallit, making sure the curlicues on the doohickey fit exactly on the weemote and connect to the arm of the thingy, then slap on the cover so that it fits snug and the infernal contraption should work “

Boone, Cyril, August, Earl, and Dr. Canada sighed with relief and made their escape hastily while Tug was talking on the phone.

To his great disappointment, Tug discovered that his friends had left. Singing “There Ain’t No Cure for the Summertime Blues,” he started to resume work on Ms. Maxwell’s car. Before he could do that, Amber Starr, the top salesperson at Poindexter’s, came by to put dealer’s license plates on a car she was hoping to sell. Innocently, she said to Tug, “I wonder why our weather has been so strange lately.”

Very gently Tug laid his wrench on the hood of Ms. Maxwell’s car. He walked over to Amber, gazed at her sympathetically like Bill Clinton when he felt someone’s pain, and said, “Now there are several theories about the weather. The ancient Greeks in Homer’s time believed the weather was dependent on the quality of worship and sacrifices to the gods. The Shilluk tribe in Africa believed the weather was closely connected with the health and vitality of their king. Strange as it may seem, in our day some people actually believe the weather is determined by a groundhog that lives in the Wildlife Prairie Park near Peoria. Local farmers used to believe that the size of a tumble bug’s ball was an accurate indication of the kind of winter that was coming.”

Tug could see by the look on her visage that Amber was not satisfied. “Now as far as I am concerned, we are beginning to experience a severe climate change which is the result of Homo sapiens’ failure to show proper respect for nature as our home to live in. It is to our peril to forget that no matter the color of our skin, our ethnicity, or nationality, or political convictions, we all need air to breathe, water to drink, food to eat, and a home to protect us and our offspring. Plato was right in his belief that we should regard Nature as our Mother.”

“What about all those people who claim that climate change is a hoax foisted upon us by the liberal press?” Amber asked.

Tug welcomed Amber’s question and answered, “We worship the god Technology and are blind to the negative consequences that our postmodern god has done to Nature. Technology has meshed with Nature, and we don’t know how that, in turn, will mesh with our genetic inheritance as ‘hunter-gatherers’ and later as ‘tillers of the soil.’ We won’t live long enough to see what happens, but it is clear to me that we have reached a watershed in the history of Homo sapiens.”

Amber was fascinated by Tug’s analysis and also curious, so she asked, “If the first stage of Homo sapiens was hunter-gatherers and the second tillers of the soil, what do you think the third stage will be? This inquiring mind wants to know.”

“In the third stage Homo sapiens will be ‘servants of the technological bureaucracy,’” Tug answered

“Tug, Old Chum, I have news for you. We are already there,” Amber opined ruefully.