

Father to Daughter: An Inheritance

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"A husbandman like my father never thinks and lives solely in the present. He ever recollects what those on the prairie gave him and is concerned to keep intact the link between those who came before him and those who will come after him."

STRETCHING FROM the eastern deciduous forests to the western mountains, the prairie grasslands of America once ran in flat fertile vastness, gift of receding glaciers of the Ice Age. At the humid eastern edge of this expanse, where forest met grassland, lay the tall-grass prairie, or true prairie, as some call it. My father, Ralph Husted, was born here, near the little eastern Illinois town of Martinsville on U.S. Highway 40, the National Road, in Clark County, twenty miles from the Indiana state line.

The prairie is mostly gone now; even when my father was a boy, it had become cornbelt. Most of the fences are gone, because few farmers raise livestock. The zig-zagging split rail fences that my father helped build to supplement woven wire fencing remain only in folklore. Now the farms of this region have become agribusinesses and are all in corn and soybeans. Yet the configuration of the land is the same—flat to the horizon in all directions. Much of the abundant wildlife is still here, too—hawks and meadowlarks and red-winged blackbirds, foxes and woodchucks, butterflies and grasshoppers. In some patches of protected area the prairie thrives in a more natural state, resplendent with native grasses and wildflowers.

My father at eighteen left the prairie

and went to Indianapolis, but the prairie never left him. Even though he joined the American migration from farm to city and never went back but for an occasional visit; even though eighteen years are not so many out of eighty-four, those eighteen years were the years of childhood and youth, when memory engraves an indelible script in the soul. The memories of those years of formation are the locus points to which the rest of life's memories constantly refer.

My father complains once in awhile that his memory for names is slipping. No more than mine, I tell him. In truth he has the memory of an elephant and forgets almost nothing. His memories of the prairie are some of his favorite recollections. They are the comfort of his old age. As a constant inspiration to him, a framed panoramic photograph of a prairie cornfield extending to the horizon hangs on the wall opposite his reading chair. This photo is not any Illinois cornfield. It is still the scene across the road from the one-room school where my father attended first grade. Forty years ago the school became a house, but my father says the school is perfectly recognizable in the house. The school, incidentally, was named for Jefferson Davis, an example of the Southern sympathies that flourished in that part of Illinois.

Just as much as any human character,

the prairie figures as a character in my father's life. It lives and speaks to him as would any family member or friend. Indeed it is the factor in his life that came first, the background against which his life unfolded, the setting in which memories formed that would suffuse all the years spent far away from the prairie. In my father's childhood and youth, pierced by his parents' broken marriage, and then by his father's untimely death, the prairie was permanence and protection. The fields and orchards and woods of his Granddad Husted's farm, in which my father worked, played, and hunted, were the prairie at its most beautiful and comforting. Here the land itself moved people to set their hearts on permanent things. It reminded them, as people are wont to need reminding, that the land is faithful to them, responding to their careful cultivation; it is they who tend to be unfaithful to each other and to their calling. My father has often remarked that working on his granddad's farm gave him time to think. In plowing and pruning, work could merge with contemplation.

As my brother and I were growing up, the trips to Illinois were rare. Yet when we went, even though almost everyone of old was now dead or grown up and gone to the city, it was as a trip back to the sacred spring. There was hardly anyone to visit; my father's grandparents and father were dead; his mother had long since moved away. Only an aunt or two remained. As a result, the journey was not so much to visit people as to see a place. On one of these trips we stopped at the Church farm, home of my father's deceased maternal grandparents, Phoebe and Uzziel Church. My father's Aunt Cora, a retired maiden school principal, still lived there. Aunt Cora was a plain woman, keenly intelligent and lively. She worked algebra problems to stay alert. I was always astonished by her genuine homeliness but also captivated by her humor, her quick mind, and her

obvious kind interest in children. She loved my father, it was apparent, as did all his aunts and uncles. That particular day Dad and Aunt Cora stood beside the white frame house and looked toward the horizon.

"There's nothing as beautiful as a prairie," my father said. He remembered, he said, the majestic sight of thunderstorms rolling across the prairie. Yes, Aunt Cora said; she, too, loved those storms. Dad and Aunt Cora gestured together toward the flat expanse; they looked and saw. My mother and I looked, too, but we did not see.

My father, were his prairie years somehow taken away, would not be who he is. Despite his having moved nearly every year during his grammar school years, my father as a boy never moved out of the prairie. Thus the prairie was a constant. It was the place that combined with his genetic inheritance and the circumstances of his life, both happy and sad, to form him. Those prairie years formed his character, a character not only strong and noble, as his family knows, but also a character distinctly American. I am hopeful enough to think that America even now can nurture a distinct and virtuous character. That character still exists, at any rate, and in a high form, in my father.

From my father's prairie years sprang a piety and reverence that formed the basis of everything he was to be. I do not mean that he became pietistic. He is, as anyone knows who has seen those intent brown eyes engaging his own gaze, the very opposite of stickily or emotionally sentimental. The closest Dad ever came to emotive religion was at age twelve, when, he says, "I was converted" at a big evangelistic meeting in the Methodist Church at Martinsville. Hearing the preacher's call to the congregation to give witness to their conversion, Dad joined the line filing up to the front of the church.

Proper sentiment is a part of my father's character, vividly, passionately so at times. He effuses warmly over the right things—babies, for example, and small folk of four or five, to whom he knows just what to say; he also reacts in anger or disgust to what ought to be reacted against. In other words, he understands order. He sees things as they properly relate to each other, an uncommon gift, but one with which my father is richly endowed, in so superior a degree, I think, that it is the gift that marks him and sets him apart. It is the basis of his moral authority. By any standard, whether of the world, his family, or the church, my father has lived and continues to live a successful and fruitful life. I attribute to his rare and deep understanding of order his success in rising to any occasion and meeting any circumstance flat on. The created order, Dad calls the proper relation of things, and therein lies the key to his understanding. Order, both the physical order and the moral order, is created—but not by man. Order originates in God; it transcends anything man could invent, and, indeed, man only invents because he sees something of God's order in the world. Our human creations merely reflect the order that God has already created. Our own creations are in harmony with the order that God maintains second by second and without which we could not exist. If our creations are not in harmony with God's order, then they are not really creative at all but are destructive—*disordered*—just as we ourselves, when not in sync with God's order, are disordered.

My father has made the created order, both the physical order and the moral order, his life-theme and his life-study. Years ago when I was in high school and he was president of the Indianapolis School Board and was giving commencement speeches, he spoke to every graduating class about the moral law. Anything less he would have considered frivo-

lous, beneath the dignity of the graduates.

His concentration on the created order has been the basis of my father's piety. In his early years on the prairie he could see that order spread before him, moving the world from seedtime through summer to autumn harvest to winter dormancy and back again to spring. He could see that order in the economy of family and land and community that bound things inseparably together. Seeing in an uncommon way how things relate to each other, how people think and act—and have done so since the beginning—my father is what I would call a husbandman. He cultivates and shepherds what has been sent into his care. There are husbandmen in every generation, it seems, often those like my father who are endowed with vision to put two and two together, understanding human nature so well that they nearly can predict how things will turn out in a given situation. Their vision is not a supernatural clairvoyance. It is simply the result of paying attention. This vision, however, encourages in a husbandman a sense of responsibility, which in my father is present in overabundance. A true husbandman, seeing ahead, likewise plans ahead. As a husbandman he takes care of and cultivates the plot he has been given. He conserves and improves it, ever looking out for those who are to follow him. A husbandman like my father never thinks and lives solely in the present. He ever recollects what those on the prairie gave him and is concerned to keep intact the link between those who came before him and those who will come after him. A husbandman like my father is a shepherd who wants none of the sheep in his care to be lost. A husbandman like my father is a true conservative.

The best synonym for my father's conservatism is fidelity. His faithfulness is a meld of the devotion to covenant of an

Old Testament patriarch and the adherence to duty of a Roman senator. Some people live according to how they feel when they get up each morning. Dad lives his life on principle. Duty and responsibility are to him one with breathing. My brother and I always knew that, and it was the steady rock under our feet. If we were scared, worried, tentative, we went to Dad. He was our visible sign of the Lord's covenant with creation. If Dad said everything would be all right, then it would be. If Dad said something was right and proper, then it was. To this day, if I am growing faint of heart, I review things with him and come away confident. I chat daily with my mother and seek her wisdom; I rely on my husband for constant counsel—and increasingly look to our grown-up children. Yet when I want a firm definitive go-ahead, I still call my father.

My father spent his working career in the semi-public life of a lawyer and corporate executive. I was rather typical, I think, of many children. My father's business life had little impact on me, other than my knowing his work provided our daily bread. What he did in the office everyday was a mystery; I only knew that when I went downtown with my mother to his office, he was always writing or reading. I learned only much later that during his tenure as president and chairman of the company he made some hard decisions, such as resisting pressure to build a nuclear power plant.

What affected me was not his work at the office; what touched my own life was instead what he did at home. Again, if he were not working in the yard, loading bullets in the basement, or cleaning his guns, he was writing or reading. In all of those activities I felt entirely free to stand at my father's elbow and interrupt. He never turned me aside; instead we talked and talked—and he taught. He taught me how the world is put together, the natural world, the political world, the spiri-

tual world. How do flowers reproduce? What makes the (then) Soviet Union a dictatorship? How do seeds sprout? How do you draw a human face? What is a free economy? From my mother I learned to master the ordinary rudiments that oil the gears of personal and social life: to make my bed and pick up my things, to say "Please" and "Thank you," to smile when I really felt cross and wanted to frown, to treat kindly everyone at the birthday party and not exclude anyone, to play fairly, to speak truthfully, to say my prayers. From my father I learned to look for the why behind things. Why do monarch butterflies migrate? Why is a dictatorship bad? Why do people die? Why were Washington and Lee and Lincoln great men? Why should we be free?

My father has been a conservative by inheritance, tradition, and inclination. From his youth on the Illinois prairie, through his law school days, through his legal and business career, he embraced a conservative, thoroughly American appreciation of limited government and the rule of law; free enterprise; hard work, both physical and mental; individual initiative; devotion to family and duty; reverence for God and country. He spent his adulthood, nonetheless, in an atmosphere of growing centralization of power in his own country and abroad. Totalitarianism was the blight of the century; it was sweeping the world, whether as the terroristic absolutism of Stalin's gulag or the bland bureaucratic liberalism of Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal. Conservatives were a distinct minority; even the word conservative was nearly unheard of. It was in this atmosphere, then, that conservatives, both in America and in Europe, began to formulate an apolo-
gia. As the literature of conservatism grew, so did the stacks of books in our house—authors such as Edmund Burke, Adam Smith, Russell Kirk, William Buckley, Friedrich Hayek, Ludwig Von Mises, Wilhelm Ropke, Peter Stanlis,

Gerhart Niemeyer, Gottfried Dietze, Richard Weaver.

My father always accepted man as both a rational and a spiritual being; yet today he puts far more emphasis on the spiritual than he did twenty-five or thirty years ago. His acknowledgment of the spiritual in man reflects his credo of God as author of the moral law and of man as his creature. As a creature in that order, man has the gift of reason. Yet man's reason has limits, and he cannot know everything by reason alone. To know some things—to know God—requires not only reason but also revelation. Twenty-five or thirty years ago Dad believed in revelation, certainly; today, however, he regards revelation not simply as a private, individual concern but as the foundation of civilization. Today he continually marvels at the Christian revelation of God's Word made flesh. All of life's mystery, he thinks, is contained in the Prologue to John's Gospel, in which God spoke and became man. God came and dwelt with us, Dad says. God actually walks with us. Not long ago, on a family trip to the Smoky Mountains, where we were celebrating a fifty-seventh wedding anniversary for my parents, a twenty-fifth for my brother and sister-in-law, and a thirtieth for my husband and me, Dad declared over dinner that the Incarnation is "the ultimate question, and you either believe it or you don't." The way one thinks about all of life depends on the answer to that question of whether God came among us as a man.

In his move away from rationalism and toward a new appreciation of revelation, my father at the same time came to see society not as a collection of atomistic individuals but as families of related people all depending on one another. As his philosophy has matured, he has become an Aristotelian who knows that society cannot long endure without a common bond of law, language, faith, tradition, history. Several decades ago

my father spoke a great deal about individual liberty. Today he is concerned far more with the purpose of our liberty. Why are we free? What are we to do with our freedom? How must we use our freedom to journey toward our end that transcends us?

My father had always read history, particularly Douglas Southall Freeman's biography of Robert E. Lee, the works of Winston Churchill, and histories of the Civil War—all of Bruce Catton's books, for example. He also read legal history, devoting himself to what has been a life-long study of the common law. (I remember him going through Pollock and Maitland's *History of the English Law Before the Time of Edward I*, a work I dipped into a bit myself.) He was instrumental in the Liberty Fund re-publication of *Origins of the Common Law*, a key book by his friend Arthur Hogue, a professor of history at Indiana University. Professor Hogue lived just long enough to see publication of the new edition. As Hogue lay on his death-bed, Dad sat beside him, and the two old friends talked, as they always had, about the common law as the guardian and linchpin of ordered liberty and the treasure of Anglo-American civilization. They both believed that the common law, an institution conservative by its very nature, had been a providential gift to the English-speaking people, endowing them with a stable governmental order and a rich understanding of liberty. These old friends feared, however, that the safety of the rule of law through custom and precedent was being uprooted in America by judges who made up their own law by deciding cases according to their own political agenda.

In 1976 my father retired as chairman and chief executive officer of the Indianapolis Power and Light Company. He was now, at sixty-five, at leisure to be the student he was meant to be. He could begin at last a liberal education. He now

ventured into a course that, other than marrying my mother, probably was the best decision he ever made; he began a plan of reading. This purposeful reading has been both his work and his pastime, and, he says, "It has made my old age delightful." It is typical of him that he has been as disciplined and diligent in his reading as if he were working. It is likewise typical that he has been as reflective and contemplative in his reading as if he were engaged in a pastime. His reading, most happily, has proved to be a harmonious action in contemplation, a pattern of orderly living prescribed by saints and spiritual writers. He is sure, moreover, as am I, that his course of reading has kept him active and mentally vigorous, despite debilitating emphysema.

Dad's plan proceeded more or less chronologically. He began with the Greeks, devoting himself to Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, and then to nearly all the plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. He went on to Dante and Chaucer, Shakespeare and Milton. By this time he has been through all of them several times. He has continued to read the Bible and now has recently read for the first time, much to his satisfaction, the Book of Wisdom, one of the books of the Apocrypha not included in his favorite King James version. In the last few years, too, he has been reading not only Plato and Aristotle but also Augustine and Aquinas. His reading of poetry, always an interest but formerly secondary to his prose reading, has become in his retirement one of his greatest joys. A couple of years ago, for instance, he was reading Longfellow's epic "Evangeline," declaring it to be one of the most beautiful statements of love between a man and a woman that he had ever read.

My father is now eighty-four. His reading program has taken him through nearly twenty years. He is just the age of Cato the Elder as Cicero describes him

admiringly in his treatise *On Old Age*. In Cicero's imaginary conversation, Cato teaches his listeners that the best program for a happy old age is "namely the study, and the practice, of decent, enlightened living." "Do all you can to develop these activities all your life," says Cato, "and as it draws to a close the harvest you reap will be amazing. That is partly for the very important reason that you can go on living in this fashion until your dying day. Besides, there is great satisfaction in the knowledge of a life well spent and the memory of things well done."

At eighty-four my father treasures two insights in particular: first, the Incarnation of God become man, and, second, the knowledge of God and his created order that comes through a liberal education. Dad says that his reading has given him this two-fold discovery—"the importance of religion and the importance of a classical education." Putting together those two insights, he has acquired in the last two or three years a new hero—Pope John Paul II. Even though still a nominal Protestant, Dad has been curious, I think, to know more about the spiritual leader of the church that drew to its heart his children and grandchildren. He consequently has encountered one of the great minds of the century, reading the Pope's encyclicals *Centesimus Annus* and *Veritatis Splendor*, the new *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, and now the Pope's personal statement on the spiritual life, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*.

Dad says that he always had faith. It was just an unformed faith. I do not recall he ever did so, but in his own judgment he took religion for granted. He says he did not take time to learn much about it. Now, however, he laments the splintering of Christianity into denominations and says he is learning more through the *Catechism* about Christianity, even about Methodism, than he ever knew. He is

gratified to find in these documents of John Paul II's pontificate confirmation of his own basic intimations of truth. He has talked to me more than once about *Veritatis Splendor*, especially recognizing in it an extraordinary defense of the dignity of the person, of human nature as created by a loving God to be the same in all times and places, a nature meant for God. He recognizes in *Veritatis Splendor* a remarkable defense of the natural law, that law inscribed upon the human heart simply because man is who he is, created by God, ordered with wisdom and love toward his final end in God. He recognizes in this encyclical a defense of truth, "a universal truth about the good, knowable by human reason...." This universal truth is in stark contrast to the modern idea of truth as individual opinion, in which truth varies according to each person's whim. Moreover, if truth is something permanent that can be known by all people, despite the time or culture in which they live, then human nature, too, must be something unchanging and permanent. As *Veritatis Splendor* points out, the individualist ethic, in which each person's notion of truth is equally valid, when taken to its extreme consequences, "leads to a denial of the very idea of human nature."

The modern relativist apostasy, as *Veritatis Splendor* teaches and as my father has come to believe, is a denial,

finally, of transcendence. Modern man claims himself, not God, to be the final authority. Thus truth is whatever man decides it to be. As a result, nothing can be known. Truth is not the reality of God, discoverable both by human reason and by revelation. Truth is what the most powerful man says it is. Truth, then, is a matter not for the intellect but for the will; who shoves hardest determines truth. Truth in this setting is tyranny—whether of the one or the few or the many. In this setting there can be no freedom, no law, no community—but only the power of one will crashing against the power of another will.

My father at eighty-four has become a wise man. He is a patriarch of sorts, reminding me of Moses, another of his heroes. Awhile ago he called, directing me, "Daughter, get your Bible out right now and read the last days of Moses." I did as I was told and was properly moved by Moses being led up to Mount Nebo, where Moses, barred by God from crossing over to Canaan, was allowed to look over at Canaan from the summit. There, on the mountain, God then let Moses die. Dad, I suppose, reading of the death of Moses, was thinking of his own. I remind him, though, that Moses died at 120 years. At eighty-four, Dad has decades to go, books to read, and great-grandchildren to meet.