
I GET IDEASOctober 12, 1998Robert H. Allen

A few of us were chatting about this and that when Hyman Rickover, who had been more than usually quiet and pensive, seized a moment of silence to intone sententiously: "Great minds discuss ideas, average minds discuss events, small minds discuss people."

The others present, clods like Hilton, Stern and Macht, while momentarily taken aback, soon resumed their bantering. This was not as easy for me and I left shortly, worried by the realization that I had not thought about ideas, let alone had one, for over a year and a half, and about a week. What had happened to me? Why was I mired in a dull world of events and people? No answer sprang to mind; indeed it was several days before I could brush away the cobwebs and even ask myself, "What is an idea, anyway?"

I was days in this quagmire of irresolution when a notice from our clerk's assistant, requested me to produce a paper for this meeting. Unnerved, even frightened, I nevertheless was able to muster the strength to check the appropriate box and send the card back. There must, I told myself, be an idea somewhere that I can find on which to anchor a paper, perhaps not a long one, but a brilliant and electrifying one none the less.

Starting thus, from the will to think, I turned to a lovely, simulated-leather bound volume given to me by my employer on the occasion of my early retirement in 1985. The volume contains the papers I wrote for the club from 1952 through 1983. Not to my surprise, since I was thirty-one on joining, many of the early papers contained ideas, or at least a discussion of ideas. They are perceptive and stylish as well as intelligently conceived and presented with a certain je

me sais quoi. As I remember it, there was only one drawback. They not only put Morse Lippencot (Guido Gores distinguished predecessor in the go-bye-bye chair) to sleep in record time, but created a still unbroken record for the percentage of members with peaceful expressions and closed eyes.

"Well, I thought," things are different now. I'll be seventy-seven next month and have learned at least not to try so hard to put them asleep." And there was, in embryo, an idea. I wondered if the double-digit years in one's life might be period labels indicating the changes we undergo as we wander through this vale of tears and laughter.

Eleven is the age when the first signs of change from childhood to adulthood are visible. Boys are achieving agility and you may begin to see if they are going to like to read, the key to the lock of knowledge. Girls are at about this same point and a few of them begin to suffer the curse of the mother goddess.

Twenty-two and we are out of college — if we went — and on the verge of understanding the idea of work, the advent of parenthood, those twin joys and passions which limit and enlarge us for the rest of our lives.

Thirty-three is the age of maximum ambition and other-directedness. Families are often completed. The limits of ambitions are not yet fully understood.

Forty-four and we have begun to accept ourselves, to see life more lightly, to retreat from the worship of the values of the job to the joys of the home. Our children may already, or soon will be young adults and we can, with a certain calmness and resignation, see ourselves in them.

Fifty-five and experience has helped take us to the pinnacle of our work career. We know how to do things with a minimum of wasted motion.

Sixty-six and we are retired, or "of counsel" and finding out how well we are prepared for the long years we may have yet to live. Some are made desperate by

this, some adapt well enough and some simply thrive in the new life.

Seventy-seven and we read the obituary page quite regularly. Our children are mid-life adults. We can see, as my Uncle Sam told me, that life is at its base a comedy. We have begun to sense our mortality - I take seven different types of pills a day - and to envisage with some calm the idea that we may not live forever, or perhaps not beyond the next two weeks. We are telling anecdotes illustrating what we have learned in life to an audience which bears them only out of politeness. In short, we are on the verge of departure, standing in the doorway while our friends inside wonder if we will ever stop leave taking and go. I have little to say about eighty-eight or ninety-nine, because I haven't been there. Those I know who have are either serene or senile, so I'll have to pass at seventy-seven, where I can enjoy both calm resignation and garrulity.

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Abrupt change of direction: In recent years I have been collecting Horatio Alger Jr.'s books. Having come across a wonderful trove recently, I now have forty-nine different titles. This past August, at our little cottage on Chenango Lake near Norwich, New York, I relaxed and aside from the daily crossword puzzles and some antiquing, spent a lot of time reading the new titles I had acquired.

Alger's young heroes have several shared characteristics: they don't drink, smoke, gamble or play pool; they are honest, frank, open and pleased with hard work; when they get into trouble it is usually because they attribute their own sense of honesty, openness and fair play to others; they are patient and resourceful, good looking and make a very good first impression on others; once in a while, when confronted with crisis they are quick to action, brave and concerned for others in trouble or danger.

All the heroes do not confront the same problems, though usually they have serious ones, problems exacerbated by the greed, dishonesty or outright

villainy of others. Some have inherited money, which a guardian misappropriates, some are simply poor and must help support a widowed mother or a sick father, some have the very good luck to make a good impression on a person who can help them, but it is not just good luck; they have demonstrated the ability or intelligence or bravery which evokes the timely help they receive.

Some Alger stories have the character of the picaresque. Adventures of no relevance to the story line occur to the hero simply to amuse us. One hero is proceeding by stage coach from the railroad's last stop to Tacoma, Washington, when, on a sharp bend in the road out along the face of a cliff, a famous outlaw stops the stage. He shoots into the air to terrify the passengers, but succeeds in terrifying the stage horses as well. They bolt forward, knocking the outlaw and his horse over the edge of the cliff to their death below. This incident plays no role in the story and our hero is, in any case, only an observer.

The author makes it quite clear that virtue, if accompanied by some smarts and good manners will triumph and that villainy will not pay off in the long run. He is not afraid to underline and endorse the abstention of his heroes from tobacco and other examples of bad behavior.

One element of the stories is particularly old-fashioned and difficult for us today. The heroes are attractive, opened eyed and look trustworthy while the villains have sneaky appearances, are easily seen on the surface to be insincere and can be identified as untrustworthy by their outward image. In fact, only the heroes' faith in all of humanity keeps him from recognizing at once the obvious signs of enmity towards himself and of generally dishonest intention.

Of course, in about all cases, the resolutions are telegraphed way ahead for us. In one story the hero continues to believe his benefactor is poor, as the benefactor has said, long after any such conclusion can be supported at all.

Why then do I like these stories with their transparent plots and lack of comic relief – certainly of what seems comic to us today?

I think it is because most of us like to think of ourselves in the way we see Alger's heroes, honest and outgoing, with faults only bi-products of our good character. It is fun to identify with the hero, to hiss the villain and to revel in his (or her) inevitable come-uppence. And there is a sort of humor in Alger's style, a humor that we think is unintended but that some times makes us wonder if Horatio may not be pulling our leg a little too.

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You may be wondering, at this point, how I am going to tie this all together. How is he, I can almost hear you saying, going to perform the brilliant tour de force that bundles all this apparent mish mash into a single, coherent concept that will astonish all and elicit standing cries of "Bravo"?

Of course you know at heart that I am going to do no such thing. What you realize, down deep, is that I am searching about desperately for some remotely related theme that will serve to make this paper last the unspoken but traditional minimum length.

Let me ask myself: What can I possibly do to connect together my upcoming seventy-seventh birthday with Horatio Alger's tales of happy and striving youth so as to form a unity from which in turn I might extract an idea?

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One of the charms of British farcical plays is the liberation of the playwright from any obligation to wrap it all up with an understandable conclusion. Three acts of hilarity and the curtain simply comes down, preferably on a good laugh line. We, on the other hand require that every single sit-com episode must close with some sort of resolution.

To some extent this is an apples and oranges situation. As a fan of British sit-coms, I must confess that these generally wrap-up fairly neatly. Each episode of "Are You Being Served", for example is self-contained and complete. Even stories that continue from episode to episode have a sort of tidy conclusion to each segment. Perhaps this is a question of different audiences. My wife, for example, is charmed with a few very old comedies like "I Love Lucy" or the "Andy Griffith Shows" but she can't tolerate the sit-coms of the nineties. I conclude that as television reached an ever larger audience, the taste and quality of the shows declined proportionately. (My own tastes, I have to confess, are more catholic and I can often watch a modern sit-com with only the mildest sort of nausea.)

Which sort of thing more accurately captures the reality of human life? Don't jump to a hasty conclusion. Earlier in this paper - if I may so dignify it - I argued, (not with complete originality) that each decade of our lives has a characteristic flavor and that we, with minor exceptions, share this pattern with the rest of humanity, at least with that portion of the world's folks who have reached a general similarity of life expectancy.

Now here is a rather long quotation from a commentary in the Wall Street Journal of July 31, 1998, which I happened to stumble on mixed with a pile of newspaper crossword puzzles I hadn't gotten around to working on.

The writer is Dr. Jody Robinson, a physician in Washington, D.C.

"If only (the baby boomer generation) ate the right foods, performed the right aerobics, thought the right thoughts and instituted the right policies, there would be no suffering, no indignity and no injustice. . .They are in for a big shock."

She gives as examples the Gulf War veterans "who cannot believe misfortune may just be misfortune: and "the women who received silicone gel breast implants. . .The idea that bad things simply happen, and that, when

they do, there may be no one to blame and nothing to do, never seems to register on their radar screen."

"A system called the International Classification of Diseases and Management, or ICD-9, "Dr. Robinson goes on to say, "categorizes every disorder from arthritis to xeroderma pigmentosa with an assigned numeric code, recognized by computer programs for purposes of reimbursement, resource management and research. So far ICD-9 has no number for 'natural causes' or 'time is up' let alone 'you blew it'. If we do not reorder our thinking and allow for such categories, we are in for civil unrest from our not so gently graying baby boomers."

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The Horatio Alger heroes, on the other hand fully accept the idea that bad things simply happen and that their proper reaction is to get on with their lives, accept the burden of new and unsought responsibilities and do the best they can. Little time is spent weeping over the death of the father. Mother needs the boy to take charge, earn enough to avoid recourse to charity and, if he can, to somehow avert the impending mortgage foreclosure and loss of their simple home. To these ends he turns his energies. Even the nagging suspicion that the local squire has embezzled the family savings doesn't turn the boy to weeping or send him to a lawyer. No he goes on with his work.

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Now we repair to an early moment in this paper. Nearly seventy-seven, fat and frail, did I seek an injunction against the assistant clerk? No, I gravely took pen in hand and went to work, a pad of paper blank before me and nothing rattling around in my head except some old, long-used marbles. Perhaps some friend - of mine or of the club's - ought to have intervened. Hilton, for example, has told me often enough that I was left out in the rain too long. But I'm not asking you to blame Hilton. I assure you that this paper is merely an example of those things Dr. Robinson says there are no numbers for - such as natural causes. Of

if you are in the generation that must find some one to blame for every ill, lay it on to Horatio Alger.

At one point in her article, Dr. Robinson says, "We also can now apply a large body of knowledge to prevent or ameliorate disease. But there is still a natural course of events in the flow of life which eventually results in senescence and death. When I tell my patients that my goal is to enable them to die in good health, I get stares of bewilderment."

This natural course in the flow of life affects, as I have said, not only the physical man or woman, but the mental and psychological person riding along in the body. It seems to me that awareness of this natural course is not only useful and constructive, but essential to the very enjoyment of life itself. "Know thy self", said Socrates, and knowing ourselves entails as well an understanding of the nature of our species and of the basic conditions of life on earth.

Living beings and what they do are what make up natural and political history. Understanding the protagonists and learning why they do what they do — these are fundamental to wisdom and to learning how to alter our situation for the better. How can we improve things if we don't know what can and what cannot be altered.

While seventy-seven may be a little late in the day for it, I am learning about some things that can't be altered. Space and time limit my ability to discuss all the wonderful things I have accomplished in those areas where alteration is possible, and for this you may grant me a nod of thanks. My ability to expatiate on what I have learned and what I have done is limitless and not easily held in check. But let's reserve that for another paper.

I think I am getting somewhere. On the one hand is a framework, a pattern of existence — both physical and, if I may, Dr. McLeod, psychological — which binds us all. At the same time, we are certainly not automatons. Events impact on our character. We react in a variety of ways. Some are ground down by circumstance. Others rebound and are vitalized by the

same circumstances. A lot of very bright people have considered this conundrum for a long time and have essentially come up with no answer, nicely dressed up in gobbledygook and jargon, of course. So I hope you don't expect me to solve the problem in this short paper.

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Early September: pause while writer goes back over his paper to check for grammatical errors and to count the length to see how much padding is required before the big finale. Unfortunately for me – and for you as well – there is a small deficit in the word count that requires one more foray into the barely relevant in search of a minute or two of padding. Aside from the care and feeding of my physical ills, I have a few hobbies. First among these – as with many of you – comes the constant joy of observing the beauty, taste and vigor of my dear wife, sometimes referred to affectionately as the Missus.

Of course, the Literary Club is an overflowing fountain of youth, keeping me entranced and making me better educated all of each school year.

I must also confess a fondness for mediocre bridge, using an early version of Goren, slightly modified by mistakes.

Finally there are the crossword puzzles. I do the New York Times and USA Today offerings each day and of recent weeks the weekly Wall Street Journal puzzle which is a nice addition.

Now of course you know all about me. I have bared my soul and I hope you will treat all this in reasonable confidence.

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As I was going over what I have written, counting words, I couldn't help re-reading as well. Suddenly some thing struck me. If people and events are the things that make up, describe and direct our little universe, then ideas have to be about people and

events. These three are the legs of the same milking stool. In that case, what did Rickover mean that night? I will re-read what he said to us: "Great minds discuss ideas, average minds discuss events, small minds discuss people."

It came to me. Here is a high sounding piece of drivel that cannot stand examination. Full of sound and fury signifying nothing. Far more penetrating is my uncle's dictum that life is basically a comedy.

I feel so ashamed to have dragged you through this dreadful ordeal only to find that my text is a thick slice of pious baloney.

That'll teach me to get ideas.

THE SUPERIOR LITERARY EXPERIENCE

October 19, 1998

Paul Ross Freshwater

Michigan's Upper Peninsula, known simply as the "UP," is bounded on the east by Lake Huron, on the south by Lake Michigan, on the west by a riotous pack of cheese heads, and on the north by mighty Lake Superior, the second largest body of freshwater in the world (you are looking at the largest one!). Those who live in the UP today are known as "yoopers" by the far more numerous residents of Michigan's Lower Peninsula whom the yoopers call "trolls" because they live below the bridge — the five-mile-long Mackinac Bridge connecting the two peninsulas. About three hundred thousand yoopers inhabit fourteen thousand square miles — more land area than nine states, but fewer residents than any state. In fact, Keweenaw County where I now live much of the year has fewer than 2,000 permanent residents, about the same as a large high school. All of the ones with telephones fit on four pages of a regional phone book and until the 1990's they could call one another by dialing just four digits.