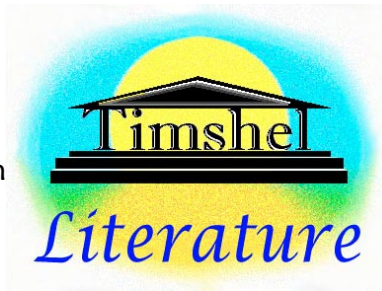


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Just Thinking, 11/24/03:

Thoughts at the End of the Day

by Justin Katz

It is a commonplace in just about any endeavor that a person should play to his strengths and avoid areas in which he is weak. The difficulty arises in figuring out which is which. Sometimes, in fact, one must begin to question whether an entire area of activity represents a weakness. I've been giving this question quite a bit of thought, over the past year, and I think I've come to a pretty accurate conclusion.

At least within the context of career, my central weakness is, without a doubt, who I am. My strength, generally speaking, is what I can do. It is, therefore, folly for me to apply what I can do in ways that highlight who I am. Also causing me problems have been my specific applications of who I am, which have a way of coming around in undesirable ways to my exercise of what I can do.

By "who I am," I don't mean those qualities that cannot be helped — race, gender, social class — although they have affected my options in ways in which I would prefer they hadn't. No, what I mean are my beliefs and my nigh irresistible desire to share them. I consider myself open to rational argument, and I am neither unstable nor obstinate in my application of emotion — traits that tend to put one well to the right on the modern political and social spectrum. And that is a problem in my neck of the woods and my vocation.

Unfortunately, the false cliché is that political conservatives are selfish bigots. Another false cliché is that devout Christians are irrational zealots, to the extent that they don't reject the traditional claims of Christianity. Put these together in the person of an outspoken young white man, and you've created a fearsome monster despised in certain regions, particularly among certain social and occupational groups.

Even as such a monster, I'm not without attractive qualities. For one thing, I can write reasonably well. I've also got a knack for picking up new skills that draw, in some way, on the key aspects of writing: contemplation, organization, and communication. Moreover, I'm motivated; I can do. And I like to learn.

All of these qualities would seem to bode well for my career. The harmful variable, I've found, lies in the responses and efforts of others. Somebody must employ, donate, or promote that which one does in order for it to generate income. Because I seem to lack an innate charm or magnetism that just draws people to help me, it is here that the monster status rears its head. Accomplishments must be made *in spite of* he who initiates them. Considering that creative careers require that the author's spark be puffed up, fanned, and fueled by enthusiastic third parties, the barriers that I face are high enough without my going to pains to enunciate my sociopolitics.

Some reader out there might object that liberals do not have an absolute monopoly of the media in which I am interested, and that would be entirely correct. In fact, when I began writing these columns, I had some modest expectation that my fellow conservatives might help me to establish a periodic, if not regular, income through such writing. If I write relatively well, and if I make relatively unique and interesting points, surely those who are not repelled by my conclusions would be interested in furthering the ideas. Well, I was wrong.

For one thing, the problem still exists that the market for writers, of any kind, is saturated. To be sure, experience in the field quickly proves that more people believe that they can write than actually can. But even so, the available slots are few enough that they can all be filled with capable authors and still not require editors and publishers to dip into the long shallow pool of the inept. In other words, factors other than ideology and ability come into play.

Just now, in fact, when I took a break from writing this essay to poke around the Internet, I came across a column by up-and-coming opinion writer Michelle Malkin. She mentions in passing that her husband was Oxford classmates with the recently defeated Republican gubernatorial candidate in Louisiana, Bobby Jindal. Spend some time reading around the editorial world, on either side of the aisle, and you'll find these seemingly random connections popping up all over the place. There's not necessarily anything suspicious going on — Malkin is among my favorite columnists, after all — but it does serve to discourage an unknown writer who has limited networking charisma.

I like to think that some of my problem is attributable to something I've no interest in changing: my strategy for thinking. Many who write for broad audiences seem never to follow their ideas beyond some arbitrary level of contemplation, which is arbitrary in that it aligns with a given thinker's intellectual comfort level. If that level resonates with enough readers', the writer may succeed. Pushing beyond these comfort levels inherently limits one's audience, and it often happens that hard-earned readers will fall away when a shift of topic jars on their sensibilities.

Suffice to say that — whether it is a matter of talent, interpersonal skills, location, or just luck — my strength as a writer is not in the direct statement of ideas. Minds cannot be changed through direct statement, and perhaps it is true that the more logical and better phrased that statement is, the more it will be resented by those who prefer to disagree. It does no good to make such statements publicly when one is still in the process of establishing a career.

Now, I've been writing this column for just over two years. The only one that I've sold was the very first. Subsequently, auspicious links on other Web sites have brought audiences in the thousands to other specific columns. Some of them appear to be making their way across cyberspace. But that payoff is hardly sufficient to cover either the time spent at writing pieces that are not the object of artistic passion or the goodwill lost when others from "real life" come across pieces putting forth my monstrous point of view.

In short, I'm calling it a day for Just Thinking. I remember the hope (tempered by experience of literary rejection, of course) that I felt when I thought up that title, while driving up the highway on my way to an Autumn Mass. The hope was mainly that the essays would succeed just enough to merit continuation along the path on which I'd found myself.

Now it has come to feel like Just Obligation — the thing that makes Sundays something other than renewing. The beginning of this realization manifested in my outburst, earlier this year, about canceling the column. This time, with my second full year fulfilled, not left dangling like an accident, it is with a cool head that I declare the effort exhausted.

I'm pulling in my neck some. I've no intention of keeping my thoughts a secret, and I intend to continue with my blog, although I plan to make it less conspicuous to those who come to my Web site for other reasons. To the extent that I henceforth put forward my thoughts as a commodity, I think I'll shade them with fiction or verse. Hopefully, this strategy will prove more effective both in furthering my career and in persuading others (because they will not consciously realize that they are being persuaded).

I do thank you for reading. It has meant so very much.