

THE GIFT OF FIRE
by Richard Mitchell
Chapter Twelve
How to Live (I Think)

I HAVE HABITUALLY IMAGINED--"guessed" might be the more honest word--that Reason is high, very high, a lofty and distant realm where "matters of the greatest import" dwell, and where mighty minds move among them. And accordingly, I have supposed Unreason, a complete irrationality, as low as Reason is high, the very pit, the abyss, the frozen floor of hell. I tend to populate the two realms, therefore, with the extremest of cases, Socrates and Jesus above, and Hitler and Jack the Ripper below. Thus, while intending to distinguish the former from the latter, I end up making them all alike in one supremely important respect. I set Socrates and Hitler both beyond my grasp, far, far away from me, and console myself for being unable to sit with the former by supposing that I am, and by virtue of the same limitations, in no danger of joining the ranks of the latter. It is all bunk. I can easily do either. Or both. That I seldom realize that is testimony to the fact that I have habitually mistaken schooling for education. The idea that careful and attentive rationality can be achieved only by those who have taken the right courses is profitable for schools.

No mind can be more rational, or more irrational, than another. One mind can be more or less often more rational, or irrational than another. In my occasional lucid moments, I have as much light as Socrates, and in Unreason, I am as benighted as Hitler. In certain moments, it is only by humanity's good luck that I am not empowered to direct the destinies of nations, and in others, that may be a pity. And the same is true of you, and of each of us. Reason and Unreason are never far away from any mind. They are neither far above us nor far beneath us. It is one and the same thing to be rational in considering the beginning and the end of all things, and to be rational in telling yourself how to behave in the supermarket checkout line, which might even be the more difficult task, the more likely to be influenced by strong feelings and desires. There is surely a difference between a man who would slaughter millions for the sake of his appetites and beliefs, and a man who turns, however briefly, into a monster of rage when a woman driver turns out not to have exact change in the exact change lane, but it is not a difference in degrees of rationality.

The clearest and most honest assessment of my own life that I have been able to make seems to suggest that I am not called to undertake the great consideration of the beginning and end of all things, the one consideration by which, in the opinion of Aquinas, a person might be accounted truly wise. It is not for me. On the other hand, I am not so situated in this life that I will have to prevent myself, by a scrupulous and rational examination of my appetites and beliefs, from bringing about the slaughter of millions in an evil cause that I can not understand as evil.

But that same assessment makes it pretty clear that I *am* called to rear Petronilla, and any child that is mine, inwardly or outwardly. And I *am* so situated in this life that I *will* have to prevent myself, by that same scrupulous and rational examination of my appetites and beliefs, from bringing about the slaughter of a human being in the exact change line, leaving in his place only

a monster of Unreason. Slaughter is slaughter. In a purely material sense, of course, my act of slaughter is different from Hitler's or Jack the Ripper's, for it leaves no corpses, and the victim may--this time--live again in reasonable self-government. But in principle, it is the same act: the destruction of a person in obedience to desire unchecked by Reason. Against that charge, I would make what seems a lame and ludicrous defense by pointing out that, after all, I *have* refrained from the slaughter of millions. If I have, it may be just by luck, and proves no special virtue or restraint in me. Whatever other punishment my deed might merit, it would surely be enough for any sane and thoughtful judge to pronounce me an unfit parent of any Petronilla, and one who could not possibly provide her a true education.

Here is another definition of education that we might choose to adopt. I have to take, again, a little page from Epictetus, who was convinced that any human being has what it takes to distinguish the better from the worse, and needs only some instruction in *using* what it takes. One of the ways in which he used to make the case for that opinion was in saying something like this:

Look around you, near and far, and find someone whom you can praise, and that without any consideration of self-interest or the profit that you might take from your praising. Whom do you find to praise? The just or the unjust? The patient or the impatient? The courageous or the cowardly? Those who are owned and operated by their appetites, or those who can govern themselves and their appetites? And ask yourself, Whom do I know, or know of, who is a better person than I? And not just a better surgeon or mechanic or cook, than I, but a better *person*? What makes that one the better? What is it in me, or what lack, therefore, that makes me the worse? Is the better one the more temperate or the less temperate? More moderate, or less? More, or less, given to thoughtful consideration, and to quietly asking and answering in turn?

I have elaborated outrageously on what Epictetus actually said, but I think he would not accuse me of falsifying his intent. And his intent was simply to demonstrate a perfectly natural propensity to distinguish between the better and the worse, a propensity that works in us even when we do not take thought consciously and deliberately to make that distinction. But he was not a childish dreamer. While he did take that propensity to be nothing less than natural to us all, he was not deluded as to our powers to distort the natural in us. "There are certain things," he said, "which men who are *not altogether perverted* see by the common notions which all possess." The emphasis is mine.

I know some people, and I'm sure you do too, to whom I would rather not put the question of Epictetus: Whom would you praise, and why? Since I do not move in the appropriate circles, I probably do not know anyone who would choose to praise Jack the Ripper for being consistent in purpose and very good at his work, or anyone who would praise Hitler for being an astonishingly skillful and powerful politician, but I do know people who would choose to praise certain others for exactly those reasons, as though particulars were more important than principles. And I know many more who would think that by "praise" I meant also "admire" or "envy," or even "adulate" and "emulate," seeing no particular or pressing reason to distinguish among those mental deeds. I even know some, including myself, who would praise me for the skillful audacity by which I manage so often to get into the shortest line at the tollbooth.

While I can not deny my suspicion that the "altogether perverted" do indeed exist and move among us, I do not suspect that such interesting answers are always signs of the altogether

perverted. They are, often, merely the answers of fashion and trend, the answers of posers. And those who pose in this context will often find themselves, unlike the altogether perverted, utterly unable to pose--unable even to want to pose--in the presence of the truly praiseworthy. Even in our popular literature, seen mostly these days in motion pictures or in television, goodness is celebrated. Whether in war, or sport, or business, or in the smallest enterprises of ordinary life, the appearance of steadfastness, courage, loyalty, temperance, and of the bright dawning of self-knowledge, can make even the thoughtless rejoice, however they know not why. We imagine ourselves relativists, and think ourselves sophisticated and modern to suppose that virtue depends on fashion, but even third-rate hack writers in Burbank know better.

The Great Hitler War is now far behind us, and the children among us now know surprisingly little about what we considered an epoch of monumental importance, and even a true display of the difference between Good and Evil. Now, we watch in our homes retrospective documentaries, fuzzy film clips of what has already become ancient history. There are the brave young men, standing by their fighter planes, their uniform caps appropriately askew, their arms around each others' shoulders, smiling and waving at the camera. Into the gray sky behind them, soon they will fly and disappear, some forever. They go bravely and willingly, and heavily armed, but not heavily enough, by the conviction that they choose to fight and die out of exactly the power that Socrates understood as the goal of true education--the ability to distinguish between the better and the worse.

I imagine my grandchildren's grandchildren watching the same old films. Will they be able to distinguish at once, as I can, between the brave and virtuous, doomed young men in one set of uniforms, and the deluded slaves of Unreason in the other? Will they perhaps be able to see, better than I, that persons can be good in a bad cause, and bad in a good one? Or will the struggle of causes in whose shadow *they* live lead them to imagine that goodness and badness can be acquired out there in the world by anyone who will attach himself to the right cause and fight against the wrong one?

Consider the "great causes" in which we now bring, and threaten to bring, not merely death and destruction upon each other, which will surely come anyway, but deliberate and untimely death and destruction, thus cutting off forever in millions of persons not merely goodness itself, but the very possibility of goodness. Consider all the causes in which persons can justify themselves in tremendous and appalling acts of violence and coercion, acts that they themselves, unless altogether perverted, would find unspeakably vile if committed by a single person for nothing more than his own reasons, justified by nothing more than his own beliefs, and for the gratification of nothing more than his own appetites. Such causes tend to come in pairs. Just now, there are communists and Christians, and communists of a different stripe, and Christians of a different stripe. There are fundamentalist Israelis and fundamentalist Moslems, and antifundamentalist Israelis and antifundamentalist Moslems. There are black and white, and even dark brown and light brown. There are Protestant Irish and Roman Catholic Irish. There are Indians and Sikhs. There is no counting them all.

We generally imagine great warring parties as utterly opposed to one another, true opposites, and even, for those who are members of either party, Children of Light and Children of Darkness. But the proper work of intelligence is to discover how things similar to each other are also unlike each other, and how things unlike are also alike. And it takes only a small, deliberate act of

intelligence, and certainly not a high I.Q., to notice that all such great, implacable enemies have one important attribute in common. They all depend, at bottom, on some belief, some sentiment, some table of delivered precepts, or some idea of what the real world really is, which is simply not testable by Reason, not demonstrable by logic.

I imagine some great convocation on neutral ground, to which every such cause sends a representative. Just for the day, they check their bombs and guns at the door, and sit at an enormous round table to discuss, not compromise and peace, for their certainties forbid both, but survival. No such cause ever wants to go out of business. What is it, they ask themselves, that they *do* share? What great need have they in common, the very food on which they feed and grow fat? If they could somehow engender just one attribute in every person living on the face of Earth, what one attribute would serve them all equally well? What else could it be but irrationality, the condition in which we imagine that we can know the unknowable, in which we act on the orders of the belly and under the authority of the untestable dictates of belief, and by whose strength we can bestow upon credulousness the rank of virtue? What better and more faithful followers can there be than children, governed by their desires and unmindful of their minds? Every great cause in which we hate and kill persons whom we do not even know, and injure ourselves whom we also do not know, is a Children's Crusade.

But my metaphor of the great convocation of warring parties is not truly apt. There is no club of arch-villains out there in the world, whose aim is to seize my mind for evil purposes, and who would, if they could, release the virus of Unreason upon all the world. Each warring party, to be sure, does sometimes--perhaps often--presume such conscious and deliberate ill will in each and every member of the opposite warring party, but, in every case, any disinterested third party can see, on both sides, nothing but true believers, sadly sincere. In a famous phrase, which ought not to be restricted only to certain religious persuasions, a nonpartisan can easily detect the deceivers and the deceived, and also the supremely important fact that they are one and the same. No one, except a practicing criminal, or anyone altogether perverted, is truly out to trick me into believing that which he himself does not believe, or suppose that he believes, if such a distinction is possible. If I am to be tricked into believing what can not be known or affirmed by Reason, I must perform the trick for myself. Thus it is that an important benefit of the mind's grasp of itself is the power to make for oneself some coherent idea about the meaning of the word "knowledge."

If you will please read that last sentence again, you will find it, I hope, pale and puny. Neither stirring nor unsettling. Just the sort of insipid, dull, pussy-footing talk you would expect in an academic. Cowardly, in fact, for it is so impersonally phrased that no one, that is to say, no *person*, is likely to demur or demand justification. There is great danger in such a way of talking, which you will surely recognize as the language of the Land of No One at All. It permits me, or anyone, to speak what is meant to pass for "truth" without taking responsibility for my words.

So let me now put that idea in another way, moving into the world of a real person: If *you* do not know what *you* mean by the word knowledge, your mind is in disorder, and you will be an easy victim of any suggestion, accidental or designed, that seems to promise, whether you are conscious of it or not, the satisfaction of some appetite. If you happen to want the moon, or anything at all that is simply not to be had in the natural order of things, and if you happen to have no way of certainly knowing that some object of your desire is not in the natural order of

things, then you will be an easy mark for all promisers of the moon, and you will often be miserable. To all other miseries, you will add the misery of believing that "bad things," like being deprived of the moon, are always happening to "good people"--you.

I am not leading up to some definition of knowledge. This is not an exercise in problem-solving. To the question, What is knowing? there is no answer, but only the continual business of answering. But in this case, as in all true thoughtfulness, *any* answering at all is better than none. Since, in understanding something, the worst possible condition is never even thinking about it at all, any thinking at all will bring a better condition, and provide the necessary step toward an even better one than that. Here is one person to whom it has never occurred to wonder what he means by knowing, and whether it is the same as believing, or imagining or supposing, or to ask whether there is some clearly identifiable difference between evidence and testimony, or whether certain things might be unknowable. And here is another person to whom it *has* occurred to wonder about such things. Which is in better condition? Which would you rather have for a parent, if you happened to be Petronilla? And here are two more people, to both of whom it has occurred to wonder. One of them, now curious about knowing, asks me what it really means to *know*, and I tell him what *I* think, and he goes away content. The other, having overheard my answer, says, Well, that may give me something to think about, but I still wonder. Which of them is in the better condition?

Of those two, it can also be said that one of them must suppose Reason lofty and remote, an esoteric power best left to the experts. The other finds it near at hand. Perform, now, a little experiment in thought with those two people. Consider again the question of Epictetus, Whom do you choose to praise? And recall the interesting idea that lies behind his question, the opinion that all persons are equipped, by the very nature that makes them persons, with the ability to tell the better from the worse. Which of the two, then, would you praise, and why? Be specific. If this were school, you would have a blue book to write your answer in. You would have to do it. But this is not school, and you don't have to answer. So ask yourself another question: Whom would you praise, one who chose not to answer, or one who answered? Would you have to guess which one to praise, or would you know which one to praise? And, having answered all those questions, what would you have to say about the strange opinion of Epictetus, which runs quite contrary to all of our popular beliefs about the transience and relativity of all ideas of better and worse?

And what have you to say about yourself? Has Epictetus described you correctly, as one who, being not altogether perverted, can see certain things by the common notions that all persons have?

After about half a century of life, and having already written almost every great work for which we remember him, Tolstoy decided that he was living to no important purpose, and that he would change himself. Thomas Aquinas, shortly before his death, although he did not know that he was soon to die, decided to write no more, saying that everything he had written was nothing but straw. What moved those tremendously accomplished men to such drastic action, I can not know, but I am willing to characterize such deeds in a perhaps uncustomary way. I would, for the sake of doing some thinking, call them artistic, and even literary. It was out of a curious mixture of self-deception and truth that Macbeth could call "life" a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, and signifying nothing. That was true of *his* life, for the teller of his tale was indeed an

idiot, a mindless power, compounded of an utterly irrational company of appetites, beliefs, and feelings. But to us, it seems very unlikely that such lives as those of Aquinas and Tolstoy were being told by idiots. Those men, however, seem to have decided something like that. They said, in effect, The teller of my tale has been wrong. I will take charge of this work, and make it better. I will compose the harmony that the natural order of things will not provide, and find the theme according to which all the possible contents and deeds of this life will be measured, and chosen or rejected.

That is exactly the work we call "art." It is to make of life as it comes, always at random and at the will of others, an artifact, the result of intention and design, both informed by the power to distinguish the better from the worse. It is to make of the inner life something other, and better, than the routine product of the outer life. It is to make literature, to tell a tale that makes sense, because it is told not by an idiot but by a governing mind. If Aquinas and Tolstoy seem to us to have stood in but little need of such a resurgence of mind, it may well be because they had learned more than we about idiocy and could see it even in its subtlest manifestations, where we have come to see only its grossest. Each of them said to himself, on a certain day, that his education might now begin, that some sleeping child in him could now be awakened.

It does us all significant credit that we make jokes about the search for the meaning and purpose of life, and find it most suitable for sophomore beer-busts. Epictetus would be delighted to know that, for he would find it yet another confirmation of his opinion that in our very nature there is some permanent spring of good sense. But the phrase itself, like Macbeth's maudlin effusion, points only to a world that can not be, a world where there is "life," a nonentity, a non-being. There is no life. There are living creatures. Without them, life would not persist, waiting quietly in some corner of the universe for something to inhabit. Meaning and purpose, if they appear, can appear only at the call of a living, and willing, person.

I'm pretty sure that Tolstoy and Aquinas, on their critical days of decision, were not interested in the meaning and purpose of life. They were rather interested in the meaning and purpose of the one life to which they could *give* meaning and purpose, no matter what the world might do to those lives.

There is a strange quality in religiousness. In the greatest of the "religious thinkers"--why do those quotation marks seem right?--we can always find, again and again, ideas and understandings about persons and self-knowledge that they all share, not only with each other, but with such as Epictetus and Socrates, and countless others far outside of the religious traditions of the West. But in the less than great, who are numerous, and especially in the meager of mind, who are countless, there is an admonitory and truculent concern primarily for the virtue of *other* people. If such as Thomas à Kempis and [Bernard of Clairvaux](#) are generous providers of the occasion of education, rather than reciters of precepts and beliefs, it is because they are seeking to *be* virtuous and to compose their own lives, rather than worrying that *others* might be vicious, leading discordant lives. Such teachers do the best that a teacher can do. In their own deliberations, they cast enough light that I may see something by it, if I happen to be looking.

Such teachers do not truly write books that might be called *How to Live*. Nor should there be such a book. There should be millions and millions of books, written down or not, called *How to Live (I Think)*. We would doubtless take some profit from passing our books around, from holding converse with each other, and quietly asking and answering in turn. But we would take nothing but discord and enmity from requiring of each other, as we regularly do, obedience to

this or that version of *How to Live (I Think)*. The best that I can do for Petronilla--or for anybody else--is to make of my book something that will help her to write hers.

This is not that book. *How to Live (I Think)* is a book that can not be finished. But it is all too often a book that never begins. The first line is the hardest part, but whoever writes even that one line has passed at once into what Socrates called the examined life, the life that is worth living. So it is that we do well to listen to our wise parents, and borrow a line or two from them. Many a version of *How to Live (I Think)* can begin with the words of Epictetus, or Socrates, or of Tolstoy or Milton, or of some stranger on a train, or of some letter to the editor. The occasions of education that have been left for us by our parents are beyond counting, and so too are those we provide each other every day. That is the natural duty of any parent--to provide, again and again, that occasion for any child.

The largest and simplest definition of true education that I can imagine is this: It is all that is absent in the lives of those who aren't composing *How to Live (I Think)*.