

■ "Wisdom no longer cries from the skyscraper rooftops. She whispers from ignored corners of the sick, sad world. And still no one listens."

## LETTER TO MY FOUR SONS

WOLF MANKOWITZ

My dear sons:

I write to you because while I am involved in the vanities and follies of my life, and you in yours, we get very little time to communicate wisdom to one another. While you four struggle with the London General Schools Biology and chess gambits and shove-ha' penny tactics; and folk songs on the recorder, Daniel; and, in the case of you, my eight-months-old Benjamin, the enormous problems involved in learning to sit upright, I try to make a musical entertainment out of the Crippen murder.

Now, which of us five is in the most ridiculous situation? Which of us is wise? Which one has an undoubted answer to any of our bizzare problems? As I am your father, we sometimes assume that I am less confused than you are. As I have survived more

follies both of my own, it is suggested that I may be able to give you some advice which will help you to negotiate the follies ahead of you in your own lives.

The truth is, of course, that I can't. The only essential difference between us is that, being older, I have had more moments of sadness in which to reflect upon the need for wisdom. Having you to cherish and raise, I have had to learn practicalities which are not yet your concern. Having had failures and successes to live through, I have developed defense tactics and survival equipment which you so far have not needed. Having the blind impulse of all living creatures to survive, I have learnt means which help, but do not dignify. But wise I am not, and though I am supposed to be shrewd, I don't think that I'm even as care-

ful as those people who, nervous of flying, take out an insurance at the airport before departing. I'm always under-insured. These other people put 2s in a machine and they arrange for their heirs to collect ₱10,000 should the gnawing in their stomachs prove to be second-sight rather than mere anxiety. Perhaps with four sons I ought to do this whenever I fly. I don't, because I feel safer in the air than I do on the ground. While I am up there it's almost impossible for me to get involved in the dangerous projects with which I continually frighten myself down below. For a few claustrophobic hours I can't start anything, I'm perhaps nearer to heaven than I will ever get again and the enforced suspension of life gives me a foretaste of the boredom which being dead and inactive must constitute. To be far up in the air is for me safe and tedious because I am a creature of earth: I spring from it, I 2-letter to my four . . . cef love it, I detest it, and I shall crawl back into it.

You can't say that a man who has spent a large propor-

tion of every day of his life, whether on the ground or in the air, thinking about stories is a normal man. And for twenty years I have been pre-occupied with fantasies and techniques for making them seem real. The only practical mechanics that I have ever succeeded in learning, from typing to scriptwriting, I've done only because of the pressing need I have to try to make these stories happen. I've learnt also the mechanics of selling the products of my compulsion. But there is no wisdom in all that. No, I know very little that is wise.

All I can say is that, with my head-start over you, I have managed to accumulate more good quotations, that's all. But on the other hand this is not such a small advantage either, because whatever is to be lived through has already been lived through by some wild man in the past, whatever can be understood has already been understood by some wild man cooling off from his own wildness. I don't refer to the development of more efficient car gears, my car-mechanic son; or the conquest of space, my space-conquer-

ing son; or the plitting of the neutron, my son with the scientific inclinations. Such futile follies have nothing to do with wisdom. Warily enough, there is no foreseeable end, other than perhaps the most desperate one, to the scientific vanities ahead of us. But to wisdom there is an end; it has been reached and recorded often enough; it lies now mouldering in books, waiting to be burnt at regular intervals by tyrants to whose idiocy it is an affront. It waits, quietly burning like live coals under dead ash, and it will always be there, waiting to be blown into a furnace of invigorating fire, and doubtless waiting in vain. Wisdom no longer cries from the skyscraper rooftops. She whispers from ignored corners of the sick, sad, world. And still no one listens.

I suppose that today if Moses or the Buddha or Christ — or that, to me, greatest of all teachers, the pre-Christian Rabbi Hillel — was to suddenly take over from some popular comedian down with flu and appear on television at a peak hour one night, ten million people

would listen for a few moments and then switch off their sets with a single hand, for what these wise men would have to say we have already heard. We do not wish to hear it all over again. We have ignored it all so often. We have called them false prophets and persisted in the ways of our idiocy. There seems little reason to assume that we shall change this habit of our history.

The Buddha would say: 'Give, sympathize, and control'. But we know all that. Moses would tell us that there is no Good but God, and that man's only contact with Him is through the healthiness of his relationships with other living creatures. But we are over-familiar with that thought. Christ would give us that sermon which for 2,000 years self-styled Christians have quoted, but acted against. And that sweet man, Rabbi Hillel, who brought together the most loving thoughts of the Greeks and welded them with the highest thinking of the Jews, would instruct us not to do to others what is hateful to ourselves.

As a story writer I have

always been intrigued by that kind of story in which the hero chases through exciting picaresque dangers in order to acquire a small box or a sealed bottle or a talismanic ring, or a sword or grail containing the answer. Many of the characters I've written stories about are engaged in such a search, and they imagine that the answer, when found, will be happiness or wealth or satisfaction or freedom, or sometimes just a very good dinner. But after their dragons have been defeated, my searchers have always found that the message in the box or the bottle says 'Search on regardless'. So that after a good night's sleep they, typically, sell the box or the bottle or the sword or the grail, and they finance the next stage of this eternal search. So the characters that I observe or invent, and who, I suppose, are all of them myself in some particular, do not appear to have benefited from knowing the quotations which I know so well. At least, it would seem that if there is no end for them to search for, if the purpose of their lives is in the living, if they have no

alternative but to go on making the same mistakes, living the same idiocies, what point is there in their efforts? Neither they nor I know or can ever know the point.

But I'm reminded of a slightly encouraging thought of Bertrand Russell at this point. He observes that the function of work is not to make man happier, but less bored. I have observed that those who do not work are continually bored, and that the boredom sluices out of their life the juice and the blood and the joy, and I would only add to what Lord Russell has written this, that the by-products of work, nurturing, as they do, life and living, do offer pleasure to those for whom life is a pleasurable process to participate in. This, too, I suppose, is a talent. And I suppose if I could give you anything at all in the way of wisdom it would be the talent for this, the enjoyment of life.

Russell also observes that intensive working makes relaxation sweeter. So perhaps to revert to those sad searchers of mine, those heroes of my stories, there is some wis-

dom in their endless pursuit of the message — though they will find no final solution, that's for sure; nor be remembered any longer than those who do no harm to the rest of mankind are ever remembered.

So, my dear four sons, I come to the point of discovering to you the wisest summary of man's pointless existence that I personally know of. It is, not a very superior, quiet, relaxing, contemplative, at-one-with-eternity sort of wisdom. It belongs more to the no-alternative, practical group for which there is no happy, happy land ahead, but only the land on which we live now, once and for the only time.

'Go thy way', says Ecclesiastes, the anonymous Old Testament philosopher, 'eat thy bread with joy, and drink thy wine with a merry heart'. This voice from the past is no scarecrow puritan, but a lover of flesh and sunlight. 'Let thy garments always be white', he says, 'and let not thy head lack ointment', meaning that what is to be enjoyed should be enjoyed. 'Live joyfully with the wo-

man whom thou lovest; and in thy labour wherein thou labourest under the sun all the days of thy vanity, whatsoever thy hand findest to do, do it with all thy might, for that is thy portion in life; and there is no wori, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom in the grave whither thou goest.' And he also observed that it was purposeless to strive overmuch, or to attempt to be too good, or too clever, or much more than merely human.

Now that, to me, is the greatest piece of practical wisdom I know. And I don't doubt that you will ignore it in the course of living the vanities before you, much as I have done in living my own.

So perhaps it's best for us to return to our personal follies, you to your biology and chess and playing shoveha'penny, and cheating at it, Jonathan; and the recorder, Daniel; and you, my Benjamin, to learning how to sit upright which you are very near to accomplishing; and ¶ to the making of a musical entertainment out of an old murder. But before we do, let me tell you now a very

short story, adapted, like so many of mine, from the Yiddish: There was this old violinist who had, it so happens, four sons, all of them violinists. And on his deathbed he 5—letter to my four . . . cel called them to him and briefly and pointedly confessed his failures as a father and as a husband and as man generally. But when his sons tried to console the old man, he said: 'I'm not apologizing, nor am I excusing, I'm simply explaining that if I hadn't been all these bad

things, I would never have been such a good violinist'. After which he requested that they play him out to a quartet of his own composition, which they did, very beautifully for they were all good violinists. And though they had their doubts about their father in other respects, they had no doubt about his quality, or at least his intentions, or at least his ambitions, or at least his hopes as an artist. — Home Service, *The Listener*, May 4, 1961.

#### AN EDUCATIONAL VIEW

Education is not universal. A radical change in educational policy cannot be ordered as an automobile manufacturer orders a new model. x x x Totalitarian education may assign children to allotted tasks as free education will not do. It may screen out the cleverest students and determine the field of specialization appropriate to each one by processes not available to American examiners. It may thus provide far larger numbers of young men and women prepared to serve the State in predetermined capacities than the colleges and universities of a free society could produce. Indeed a free society precisely because it is a free society, neither could compete, nor would compete in any such manipulation of human lives. But it does not necessarily follow that the totalitarian system is destined to overrun the earth. For in matters of human life and human intelligence, quantitative statistics do not measure differences. One Einstein or one Bohr is worth an inculcable crop of mediocrities, whether they are designated physicists by their diplomas or not. — *Archibald MacLeish*.