

Goodness

There is goodness in the world. How do I know this? I don't except within myself, as a set of private experiences that make up some working theory of life. What is that theory? It's this: We are all secret solitudes working out our philosophies of the universe based on purely personal feelings and sensations; we all seek the guidance of internal compasses, private illuminations, that shed light on the darkness—the unknowability—we live in. These private illuminations allow us—carefully, tentatively, but sometimes with great power and purpose—to move through the world.

If this is true, I appeal to my own such experiences in the hope that they might invite your own; my own personal feelings and sensations, as they relate to here, to UVM, to my time on this campus when I was an undergraduate between 1981 and 1985. Three memories, coming to me now but never having left me either, memories that have always been there as constellations that make the space between the far stars less meaningless for me; that make me feel less alone.

First memory: I would study up there, on the 4th floor of Williams Hall, and sometimes on brilliant fall days I would look out the window and stare across the lake, to the far shore, where there was a farm—a red barn, a copper roof, a green field. The farm must have been huge to be so clearly visible from far away. I would look at this farm, look at the clarity of the lake between me and it, at the colors, the big green field, the copper roof in the sparkle of the

cool sun, and feel, without reason, without explanation, not in any way that my textbooks could tell, that there is goodness in the world.

Second memory: I am in this building behind me, Waterman, on a cold winter night, in a darkened classroom, watching a movie with my classmates for a Shakespeare course. The movie is *Henry V*; it's from the 1940s, in technicolor. Moving across the screen are medieval knights in armor, on horseback, knights and horses in blue and yellow and red and white. But what I see is not this illumination, the one on the screen, but the reflections of the horsemen on the windows of the classroom. There they were, painted on the double darkness—the dark of the room and the dark of the night, floating there in that darkness as if their colorful pageantry took place outside the room, not in it, horses, armor, and men suspended weightless in mid-air. I watched these phantoms play at their separate reality, and thought, again without reason, without rationale, that . . . here I seem to change my terms a bit . . . there is beauty in the world.

Third memory: I am vacationing in Vermont, in Middlebury, out visiting from St. Louis, Missouri, where I grew up. The year is 1979, I'm sixteen, and I am spending time with a friend, a student at Middlebury Union High School, who shows me his high school yearbook. I'm looking through the pages, staring at a photograph of the girls' track team. "Who's she?" I say to my friend, pointing to a girl standing and smiling in the photograph. "I'd like to meet her," I say to my friend. But I don't meet her, I forget about it, and three years pass.

Cut to me, now a sophomore at UVM. I'm at a party talking to a girl. I go away to get each of us a drink, and as I return to where she is standing I suddenly realize that it's her, the same girl from the Middlebury photo. I go back up to her and say hello, I know who you are,

and I explain the story, which she had heard about, and we end up going out. Though it doesn't last beyond a few dates (we're different, she likes The Grateful Dead; I don't)—she, Phebe is her name, is a good person; and I thought then, as I think now, that chance encounters sometimes speak to secret unities; a quiet in the universe and a quiet in us.

This feeling, when it arrives, is fragile, like it's going to break apart at any moment. Goodness, beauty, quiet—it is the nature of these things that they seem impermanent, fleeting. Another Vermont story, this one about fragility: it's the summer of 1985, just after my graduation (it rained on mine), and I'm spending the summer in Burlington, working for Domino's, delivering pizzas in my brown 1976 Saab to that great pizza-loving region known as Malletts Bay. At the end of that summer, in August, I agree to house-sit at a place not far from here, at the end of a dirt road called Lost Nation Road. House-sit and kid-sit, actually, because the house is that of my friend and his wife, and they're away, with their two teenage sons, Luke and Eli, in my care.

Out behind the house at the end of Lost Nation Road is a lake, and one day, seeing a little rowboat on the shore, I decide to go out in the boat, alone, without a life jacket, even though I couldn't swim. I figured to myself, with some odd logic, that it was a test, that I needed to be brave, and that the day and the lake being perfectly calm it was not a big deal. Eli, one of the boys, saw me there and asked if I wanted company, or if at least I wanted to wear a life-jacket. But I didn't, and I rowed out into the middle of the lake, far from the shore—that was part of the bravery, the test—and stopped there, letting the boat float, quiet in the warmth and haze.

Nothing happened (as you may note by observing me here still in existence). But what I think is this: that Eli, the boy who in asking me about the life-jacket kid-sat me, rather than the other way around, who showed himself wiser and saner than me, that a few years ago this Eli died suddenly, a young man still in his 40s, which made me recall the boat, the lake, the haze, as if—maybe my memory plays tricks on me—he *did* come out with me on the lake that day. Even now I can't be entirely sure. We all float weightless on the heavy surface of the world, suspended in dreams of who we are.

These moments of good, of calm, which I believe we've all had in some form, are delicate, aren't they? They are the moments when the world does not devour you, does not drown you, but instead raises you up, keeps you afloat, buoyant, in some strange awareness of the fragile balance of being alive. The moments are delicate, yes, but I've also noticed that they're indestructible. Maybe they are even the most indestructible part of us. Another story: I am in California, with our younger daughter, in a secluded forest through which a clear stream runs, a perfect stream, twenty feet wide, twenty inches deep, rocks and gravel bright at the bottom, shimmering in the flow, sun and shadow playing through the branches of the overhanging trees. My daughter and I spend some time there, who knows how much: time stops or slows down. My barn, my field, my shadows, my calm, the kindness and sweetness of the world is a secluded realization of love, a balance or pause in which we sense, I don't know how to put it, *a joyous secret that is always there* but that is only occasionally made so vivid, so real.

That reality trembles and disappears—that is its nature, it lives only in moments—but yes it is also indestructible. Hate and wickedness can't touch it. Consider: later that same day,

the day of the clear running stream, but back at the hotel, I opened my email and received a message from a source I'd never heard from before: The U.S. Justice Department. The email announced that, after three years, the first arrests had been made in the murder of my younger brother, who had been killed in prison in 2014. My younger brother was a drug addict, a person who started using cocaine in the 1980s, when that drug was the drug of choice, and who never got off it and the lying and sociopathic and self-destructive behavior that goes with it. I could say more about this, but let me just say here that it's an American tragedy of a common kind, I am afraid. But that day—with this new news confronting me, of the arrests of the men accused of beating my brother to death, of, yes, the cruelty and depravity of the world—I noted that the clear stream still ran; that it wasn't changed in the slightest by this poison, this toxin; nothing ran through it other than its accustomed clarity and peace.

Worthless I have heard that peace called. And I am sure I will continue to hear it do described. The haters come in two stripes, two shapes. One kind is made up of those who live perpetually in worlds of facts and figures, demonstrable proofs and claims, most often tied to money, for whom the idea of a man staring at a stream with his daughter, on that or any day, is truly a worthless phenomenon . . . worthless, that is, unless some financial gain can be squeezed out of it. The other kind of hater is the kind that says, let me see if I can say this right, *There is no time for that*. Let me see if I can say it right again, this time another way: *People are suffering, injustice goes on daily, hourly, by the minute*. You need to do something, not just sit there and stare. Never mind that in this feeling I have described "all mean egotism vanishes," as Ralph Waldo Emerson said; that all "mean" as in *average* egotism vanishes and that all "mean" as in *mean, nasty, harsh* egotism vanishes; never mind, too, that Emerson said that it is from

these moments that the qualities we all want, the qualities of wisdom and virtue and beauty, spring; never mind that. Instead, in the words of this second kind of hater, *You are a walking, talking example of privilege*: of the gratuitous pleasures and peace that only those with money, means, financial and social capital, can achieve.

I draw the following conclusion from these kinds of hate. There is something about goodness the world does not like. I mean goodness in the sense of the calm and quiet and beauty I have spoken of today. It's threatening, somehow. Once I was at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C., quietly reading the Gettysburg Address as Lincoln's words are inscribed there in stone, in the delicious shadow of the cool within the Memorial, when I was startled out of my contemplation by a little boy who, sneaking up and, in effect, screaming boo at me, evidently thought that no such form of quiet as was my own just then was tolerable to a mind, like his, already forming its estimations about what does, and does not matter, in life.

Or—another time—I was on a big airplane flying back to San Francisco from New Zealand. It was at night, and I was looking out the window at the stars of the Southern Hemisphere. I had never seen them before. As I did so, out of the corner of my eye I saw the flight attendant motioning with her hands. I thought she was only asking if I wanted a cup of water, and anyway I was all too enthralled by the stars, which blindly, in a kind of braille, I was reproducing in ballpoint-pen dots on a blank paper before me, making my own homely connect-the-dots chart of the heavens; so without turning from the window I said to the flight attendant, No, thank you. But after a while I sensed that she was still there, and that in fact she was now mad at me. Pull down your blind, she said, people are trying to sleep. I looked outside—it was dark. I looked inside the plane. It was dark, save for the hundreds of tiny

individualized screens that made a great glare before each passenger's face. And I concluded that the flight attendant felt that I had violated the pact, not of darkness, and not even of light, but of our mutual agreement as a culture, as a society, that we not look outside, that we not ask big questions, that we not marvel at the very fact of being alive, at our smallness in the scheme of things, which we blindly try to draw, to the best of our ability, in a simple language such as this here I speak; and that instead, as compensation, we politely enjoy the rich bright entertainments placed before our individual faces; the diversions, as they are called, to which we daily outsource our imaginations.

It seems like self-help, doesn't it, what I'm saying, like a treat, a gift, a special form of awareness; like it's nothing more than a fast, a cleanse. But this is not the yoga of a movie star. This is not a new line of products or a corporate roll-out in the latest wares of mindfulness. At the same time, it is not some philosophic treatise requiring us to retreat to the library or the desert, or both, to suffer the great torments to mind and body that only the especially wise acquire. Instead I name a quality we all possess, all the time. It is this quality of goodness, in our ourselves and the world, manifest in just these fragile but indestructible moments we all experience. Yes, we learn to doubt this goodness, to repress it as of no account, even to hate and ridicule it within ourselves. Plenty of times—maybe most of my life, I assure you—I have been my own flight attendant, my own jeering boy at the Lincoln Memorial. We hardly need the world's external censors of our goodness, since we already efficiently internalize the prohibition against this nameless, weightless, utterly personal feeling in which we miraculously see the world and ourselves as we are.

Like on a brilliant day here in Vermont, when the lake is blue or silver or gray. I sense all the boats that have ever floated on it, the schooners and sailboats and dories and side-wheelers; I feel all the times that have been. And I am down among the fishes, some hundreds of feet deep, there with the blips on the fisherman's sonar screen that are the schools, the living creatures that for a while remain living still. And I am in some Adirondack valley, where a fox eats a mouse, the fox tilting its head back, the better to bring the back teeth into play. And I am at our near shore, looking at the moonlight glinting off the leaves in the trees, off the faces of the lovers as they kiss. I am all of these things. You are too.