

## For Common Things, by Jedediah Purdy (2000)

### Preface

**This book is a response to an ironic time. Irony has become our marker of worldliness and maturity. The ironic individual practices a style of speech and behavior that avoids all appearance of naivete of naive devotion, belief, or hope. He subtly protests the inadequacy of the things he says, the gestures he makes, the acts he performs. By the inflection of his voice, the expression of his face, and the motion of his body, he signals that he is aware of all the ways he may be thought silly or jejune, and that he might even think so himself. His wariness becomes a mistrust of language itself. He disowns his own words.**

**In answer to all that, this book is a plea for the value of declaring hopes that we know to be fragile. It is an argument that those hopes are no less necessary for their fragility, and that permitting ourselves to neglect them is both reckless and impoverishing. My purpose in writing is to take our inhibition seriously, and to ask what would be required to overcome it, to speak earnestly of uncertain hopes.**

**To do so requires understanding today's ironic manner. There is something fearful in this irony. It is a fear of betrayal, disappointment, and humiliation, and a suspicion that believing, hoping, or caring too much will open us to these. Irony is a way of refusing to rely on such treacherous things. However, there is also something perceptive about irony, and sometimes we must wonder whether the ironist is right. The ironist expresses a perception that the world has grown old, flat, and sterile, and that we are rightly weary of it. There is nothing to delight, move, inspire, or horrify us. Nothing will ever surprise us. Everything we encounter is a remake, a rerelease, a ripoff, or a rerun. We know**

**it all before we see it, because we have seen it all already.**

**What has so exhausted the world for us? For one, we are all exquisitely self-aware. Around us, commercials mock the very idea of commercials, situation comedies make being a sitcom their running joke, and image consultants detail the techniques of designing and marketing a personality as a product. We can have no intimate moment, no private words of affection, empathy, or rebuke that we have not seen pronounced on a thirty-foot screen before an audience of hundreds. We cannot speak of atonement or apology without knowing how those words have been put to cynical, almost morally pornographic use by politicians. Even in solitary encounters with nature, bicycling on a country road or hiking on a mountain path, we reluctant ironists realize that our pleasure in these places has been anticipated by a thousand L. L. Bean catalogues, Ansel Adams calendars, and advertisements promising a portion of the rugged or bucolic life. So we sense an unreal quality in our words and even in our thoughts. They are superficial, they belong to other people and other purposes; they are not ours, and it may be that nothing is properly ours. It is this awareness, and the wish not to rest the weight of our hopes on someone else's stage set, that the ironic attitude expresses.**

**Irony is a response to something else as well. In roughly the past twenty-five years, politics has gone dead to the imagination. It has ceased being the site of moral and historical drama. It has come to seem petty, tedious, and parochial.**

**This change would signify less if politics had mattered less than it has in recent decades. However, for more than two hundred years, politics has been among the great sources of inspiration and purpose, giving shape to many lives. From the radical period of the French Revolution onward there has stood the promise that politics can change the human predicament in elemental ways.**

**Politics, on this promise, could erase all the foolish, cruel, maddening accretions of history and replace them with fair and humane arrangements where for the first time people would live as free as they are born. For both the revolutionaries whose ambitions convulsed the world and the crusading reformers of Britain and America, politics was the fulcrum on which women and men could move the lever of history. They needed only a firm place to stand to take up Archimedes' old boast and move the world.**

**This extraordinary promise attracted the people with the greatest capacity and need for hope, the ones with the keenest sensitivity to suffering and cruelty and the strongest impulse to work against them. Politics was the means by which those who were most keenly aware of what should be could turn that moral truth into historical reality. Politics in effect took over the role of religion for many people in both this century and the last. It gave purpose to individual lives. Its aim of remaking the world carried the promise of redemption, both of whole societies and of the long labors of the individuals who worked to change them.**

**Politics was the way to service, to heroism, and to sainthood.**

**Because its ambitions ran so far and so deep, politics posed questions that were inescapable for serious people. The questions of what sort of country to live in, what kind of men and women to be, how to work, and sometimes even how to love were all ones that politics promised-or threatened-to resolve. The German author Thomas Mann expressed a widely shared perception, which was sometimes reluctant and sometimes enthusiastic, when he wrote, "In our time, the question of man's destiny presents itself in political terms." Not acknowledging that truth meant avoiding the leading drama of the time.**

**All of that is now so thoroughly gone that it is difficult even to**

**recall. If it is difficult to speak earnestly of personal matters, to speak earnestly about public issues seems perverse: not only naive, but wrongly or confusedly motivated. Politics is now presumed to be the realm of dishonest speech and bad motives. More over, it is accepted that everyone sees through the speech, that the motives are as transparent as the new clothes of the fabled emperor. Public life takes on a quality of unbelievable ritual incredulously performed, like the ceremonies of an aged and failing faith, conducted with the old litanies because noothers are available and because rote speech is indifferent to its content anyway.**

**Our private wariness and the public failure of politics are among the sources of our ironic attitude. Understanding them, describing and diagnosing irony, is one of the things that I attempt to do in this book, and is the concern of the first two chapters. The rest of the book is an attempt to express a hope that seems to me too important to let go unacknowledged. I do not believe that, even where it is strongest, irony has convinced us that nothing is real, true, or ours. We believe, when we let ourselves, that there are things we can trust, people we can care for, words we can say in earnest. Irony makes us wary and abashed in our belief. We do not want the things in which we trust to be debunked, belittled, torn down, and we are not sure that they will be safe in the harsh light of a reflexively skeptical time. Nor can we stand the thought that they might be trivialized, brought into someone's ad campaign, movie dialogue, or self-help phrase. So we keep our best hopes safe in the dark of our own unexpressed sentiments and half-forbidden thoughts. I believe that there is too much at stake in the reality of these thoughts to keep them hidden. They matter too much for us to say of them, by our behavior, that we have outgrown them or never believed.**

**More specifically, we nearly all have the sorts of experiences and memories that West Virginia gives me. They reassure us of, or**

**keep us from entirely surrendering, the possibility of trust, of confidence in reality. I do not think that I can write intelligently about these things without naming them, describing them, trying to show the sorts of things that they are. And I cannot do that, with any strength or accuracy, unless I name the things that I have known, and still carry with me.**

**The burden of this book is twofold. It is that more things than we usually recognize may deserve our trust or hope. It is also that, if we care for certain things, we must in honest hazard some hope in their defense. A good deal of what we value most, whether openly or in silence, clearly or confusedly, is necessarily common. These are things that affect us all, and we can only preserve or neglect them together. In the end they cannot be had alone.**

**Defending this idea means resisting the cheapening of words by thoughtless use and by the sophisticated and cynical manipulations of advertising and politics. Those uses make words mere tools for getting what their users want-typically sales, sympathy, or votes. They also corrode our belief that words can have other kinds of power, that they can bring us nearer to things and help us to be more attentive to them. One response is to try to draw out in words a hope that begins as intensely personal, trusting that another will say, "Yes, you are not alone in that."**

**This is, perhaps, the work of a love letter, a form that is little practiced today. Such a letter brings some thing delicate and intimate into the light of shared vision. This disclosure is hazardous and frightening, but it is necessary because the kind of love that moves between people cannot survive in solitude. It must be made common if it is to live at all. Love letters, then, require the courage to stake oneself on an expression of hope that may very well come to nothing. They also indicate a perception of importance, a sense that some possibilities, however unlikely, are**

**so important that not acknowledging them would be an act of terrible neglect.**

**I have written this book for two reasons: so that I will not forget what I hope for now, and because others might conclude that they hope for the same things. That would be the beginning of turning some of our private, half-secret repositories of hope and trust into common things. I think that some of them must be common, if they are to be at all.**

**We live in the disappointed aftermath of a politics that aspired to change the human predicament in elemental ways, but whose hopes have resolved into heavy disillusionment. We have difficulty trusting the speech and thought that we might use to try to make sense of our situation. We have left behind an unreal hope to fall into a hopelessness that is inattentive to and mistrustful of reality. What we might hope for now is a culture able to approach its circumstances with attention and care, and a politics that, as part of a broader responsibility for common things, turns careful attention into caring practice.**

**I mean this book as one invitation to turn our attention to essential and neglected things, and a suggestion about the shape that such renewed attention might take. It is one young man's letter of love for the world's possibilities, written in the hope that others will recognize their own desire in it and will respond. I cannot help believing that we need a way of thinking, and doing, that has in it more promise of goodness than the one we are now following. I want to speak a word for that belief, in the hope of an answer.**

## **Introduction**

**America, then, was characterized by a new kind of movement. In economic life and in the contest for social prestige and political**

**power, the new nation was in constant motion, a hectic, disorderly scramble for goods that were never enough. Yet in culture, in intellectual life, and in serious discussion of public affairs, America was curiously static. There was a kind of psychological inertia, a disbelief that that kind of argument was really worth having. America was both constant upheaval and disconcerting stillness.**

**What do Tocqueville's Americans-these odd, utterly new creatures, the ambivalent portents of Europe's future-have to do with us? I am inclined to say that the answer is: everything. A wash in wealth, we worry that we are required to collect our share. Our idea of success is an almost unworldly prosperity and security, our idea of failure the unextraordinary existence that most of us actually lead. We are constantly in motion, and we can scarcely be satisfied. Our leading cultural currency today is a version of the stubbornly flat skepticism that Tocqueville observed. We practice a form of irony insistently doubtful of the qualities that would make us take another person seriously: the integrity of personality, sincere motivation, the idea that opinions are more than symptoms of fear or desire. We are wary of hope, because we see little that can support it. Believing in nothing much, especially not in people, is a point of vague pride, and conviction can seem embarrassingly naive.**

**Finally, our fantasies-the ideas in which we would most like to place our trust, and sometimes bring ourselves to do so-still display Emerson's spirit, though not at its best. We imagine perfect self sufficiency, the need for no one else in making our lives complete. We still seek an original relation to the universe, although our ways of pursuing that condition are often outlandish and unconvincing. We replace the Divine Soul with other sources of unearned self-confidence, answering a flat and remote cultural world with unworldly conviction in guardian angels and other**

**allies whose existence assures us that the universe is not indifferent to our presence in it. Our restlessness, our irony, and our fantasies are all elements of a peculiarly American problem: a confused estimation of our powers, our limits, and our needs that has made us indifferent to one of our most indispensable requirements: public life. My hope in this book is to say something illuminating and possibly useful about what we want and what we fear, how our culture weighs on us. I propose that when we retreat from public life, we fall into exaggerated visions of our own powers or dreams of empyreal alliances. I suggest that this retreat is unnecessary and a mistake, and that we can do better for both Emerson's hope and our own very different circumstances.**