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## **10. Life Is Good**

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## A Fan of KLON-FM (Now KKJZ), 88.1

*Orange County (California) Register, May 18, 2002*

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It is customary for pundits to bellyache about the world. If you were to put together all the writings of columnists, you would think there is no joy at all in our lives. Indeed, just the other day I had to defend the view that, no, I do not think our culture is bankrupt; I just believe our political system could use a lot of mending.

True, there is the problem—notice, another one!—that folks do not express their joy or delight much, not at least in public forums. Instead it is their dismay, complaints, annoyances, fears, and so on that get broadcast. CNN-TV is, as I once called it, the Crisis News Network TV, and hardly any good news ever gets on the air there, though now and then one may find some amusing stories stuck at the end of the thirty minutes of headlines.

A while back, however, I was reminded of how misguided it is to constantly complain. It was in the form of a bumper sticker I saw on a car in Atlanta, Georgia, on my way to the airport. It was sponsored by the Seventh-Day Adventists, and it read: “Notice the good and praise it.”

Well, today I have simply wanted to spend some of my “ink” to praise a part of the culture I have enjoyed ever since I moved out to Orange County, California, in January 1997. Actually, I knew of its pleasures even before that, since every time I landed at Los Angeles Airport, I immediately set my rental car’s radio to it.

What I want to do is congratulate the on-air and off-air staff of KLON-FM radio, the California State University Long Beach jazz and blues station, for its wonderful array of personalities and, especially, musical offerings. I do not remember the names of all of them. I am one who has to talk to folks and see their names in print before I remember them. But I do know that there is a Helen, a Chuck, a Gary Wagman, all of whom, together with their colleagues, achieve a unique atmosphere for their listeners. I venture to speculate that Helen's infectious laughter-holler has become a spiritual aid to many listeners!

Of course, in the end it is the incredible material this group is able to work with that makes their offering so fabulous. If you are not a fan of jazz and blues, this will not resonate with you, although if you like a bit of the most essentially American performance art, you will at least be glad to know that KLON is the number-one jazz station in the country.

I have dreamt for a long time of having a radio station near me that I can listen to all the time, at home, in my car, even in the background at my office—carrying the kind of music that never bores and indeed often sends me. KLON's repertoire finally fulfills that hope. Add to that the sparkling personalities, young or old, and you have a small part of your life on a winning course, that's for sure.

Now and then, this is almost a liability since I just must listen Saturdays and Sundays, between 2 and 7, to "Nothing but the Blues" with Gary the Wagman. And I just have to catch the next Diana Krall rendition of "If I had You" or Shirley Horn's "But Beautiful." Even worse, I quite often have to go out and buy a CD from which a song simply enchanted me. Because of the litigious atmosphere in which we live, I fear that my three kids will soon be suing KLON

for inducing me to “squander” on jazz and blues CDs the small inheritance they are looking forward to! My planned defense: This is all in the way of a significant contribution to the finest part of American culture. I am buying the music to advance the public interest, of course. Sure!

When I was an undergraduate at Claremont Men’s College, back in the early 1960s, I had an hour-long radio program on Sundays during which I played nothing but Erroll Garner renditions of wonderful classic American melodies from the works of Gershwin, Kern, Porter, Berlin, and others. I was terrible, despite the fantastic, bouncing music of that late great piano player, so I quit and decided to earn degrees in philosophy instead of becoming a DJ. A very good decision, considering all the talent we come across on KLON and how I could never have competed with that.

Sure, there is other wonderful stuff on the radio, and I do listen now and then to the University of Southern California classical station and sometimes to classic rock. (I have finally, after years of masochism, given up on the NPR stations because they are, I have discovered, bad for my nerves.) But I do not think anything quite matches what KLON has to offer me, and I wanted simply to make note of this, following the advice of that bumper sticker from the Seventh-Day Adventists, “Notice the good and praise it!” Even if it is just a little thing, a personal one.

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## Sinatra's Pizzazz

*Orange County (California) Register, May 19, 1998*

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In 1955 I was a teen whose father wanted to make him into a champion crewman. My father had won the European pair-oar without coxswain (that is, a third person steering the boat) in 1936, but he never got to race in the Olympics because that event was canceled due to war!

So when I was finally smuggled out of Hungary, my father began putting into effect his plan to make me a rowing champion. Only I had no inclination to comply. So there were some very unpleasant scenes in our house, mostly his beating me because he didn't like that my plans didn't always include his.

By this time I was enamored of American pop culture, mostly encountered through the radio broadcasts of the Armed Forces Network. I listened eagerly to all the American pop artists, including, of course, Frank Sinatra. My father's favorite was, in contrast, the more mild-mannered and conventional Bing Crosby, someone I liked but not as much as Sinatra.

One day Sinatra's "Learning the Blues" came on the radio while the family was sitting around the house, and my father noticed that I was snapping my fingers to the tune. He was furious and began to deride both me and Sinatra, good and hard. I was forbidden, from then on, from listening to anything Sinatra sang. Whenever my father was out

of the house and returned, he would check the radio to see if it was warm, to make sure I didn't sneak and listen behind his back.

Over the years I always wondered why he showed such hostility to a mere pop idol. And I believe I have the answer, finally.

Frank Sinatra was the pop-artist embodiment of cockiness, brashness, defiance. "I Did It My Way" became his signature tune once he got older, and rightly so. Not that he did it his way all the time, I am pretty sure—no one can bring that off in a complicated world (with agents, producers, a demanding public, and a government that likes to remind everyone who has the police on its side). But in spirit Ol' Blue Eyes projected nothing less than rebellion, the "in your face, you who want to push me around" attitude. His tone, the choice of his songs, all spoke the message: let me be free to do my thing!

I have no illusions that Frank Sinatra was a great political sage. Nor does it matter—not everything in life has to have political merit. Being a wonderful entertainer over nearly a lifetime is plenty of achievement for anyone. Sinatra joins such greats as Fred Astaire, Jack Benny, and the rest, in this role.

But there is something about certain American entertainers that one will never find in other cultures—I realized this when I reflected on the appeal of stars such as Robert Mitchum and even James Garner. There is a relaxed, casual self-confidence they project, saying through their performances: "A human being can do it, do it right, and need not be too taken with himself while he does it."

As I reflected on Sinatra's legacy of projecting this attitude, I wondered if this element in American culture wasn't

fading away? Is this culture, perhaps, becoming like all the others, a class-ridden, stodgy place where good manners, deference, and other forms of self-suppression are valued over the assertiveness that America has been admired for, especially by the ordinary people around the world?

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## How I Learned to Love the Rich

*Orange County (California) Register, July 11, 1993*

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I came to America as a rather poor immigrant and, after leaving home at age eighteen, became dirt poor. But I have also been fortunate and industrious enough not to end up on welfare.

Not that everything went smoothly, but all in all, I got nearly everything I set out to gain, including a superb education, a career that many people could envy, wonderful children, a great deal of travel, some of the best friends one could ask for, and at least a tolerable economic life that sustains me well enough, although by no means in luxury.

There clearly are many people who are far more prosperous than I am. And I could easily benefit from having a good deal more money.

Yet, I have never known envy in my life. Somehow the sight of others with greater wealth has never led me to desire to exchange my life for theirs. Nor, especially, have I ever felt ill will toward those who are rich. And there are some good reasons for my pleasure with them, even if I can hardly think of myself in their shoes.

For one, the rich remind me that if I wanted to aspire to be one of them, I would have a decent chance at it. Some rich people started nearly as low on the economic ladder as I did. But they wanted to be well off and found a way to do this. I know some people who are millionaires, a few who probably have a billion or so, and because I know them, I



can see that the way movies or sitcoms or pulp novels depict the rich is hopelessly inaccurate. None of these folks is mean or greedy or amoral. Quite the opposite.

Another reason I welcome the existence of the rich in our society is that without them we and millions of others would scarcely have a chance at the occasional luxury, a taste of the finer aspects of dining, entertainment, decoration, art, and culture in general.

Who but the rich sustain good restaurants? Who but the rich make possible fine porcelain or jazz clubs or beautiful rugs or fancy furniture, not to mention stunning architecture and enthralling theater? I cannot afford to support artists, musicians, actors, great chefs, and the other people who create and produce some of the marvelous features of our culture, nor can my friends with middle or low incomes.

But once in a blue moon we all manage to go to a great French restaurant, an art gallery, a neighborhood where fashionable estates are located, or a shopping center that features exquisite merchandise. I and those like me would not be able to support elegant ocean cruisers, delightful automobiles, or great sports events such as Wimbledon or the America's Cup. But there are those who can and I, for one, am extremely glad for that.

This is one of the reasons — although not the main one — for my distress about the rich-bashing that is so common in our culture. I find it disgusting how the envious among us would rather destroy the rich than witness the gap between their modest wealth and the great wealth of the rich.

I find it especially loathsome that so many American politicians, who ought to know better, gladly capitalize on this envy and persist in using the rich as a scapegoat for their own unwillingness to do the right thing, namely, concentrate on defending us from foreign and domestic aggres-

sors and leave us be, to fend for ourselves in peace, however much economic disparity this may generate (far less, incidentally, than is generated in societies where politicians try to even things out and run the entire country's economy into the ground).

Of course, the first thing to be said about the rich is that they have every right to seek their kind of life, so long as they do this in peace. But there is also this point, namely, that their existence is of enormous benefit to the rest of us, not just in creating jobs and increasing national wealth but in keeping culture at a level that is there for all of us to enjoy, to save up for once in a while, even if we do not wish to live the intense life they are willing to live.

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## Now Beauty Is a Liability?

*Irvington-on-Hudson (New York) Freeman, January 1992*

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Back in 1974 I started editing an interdisciplinary scholarly journal, focused mainly on social and political issues. After the journal got some attention among colleagues in different fields—mostly in my field of philosophy—we began to receive submissions from scholars of a wide array of persuasions.

I recently was reminded of one such submission, which we turned down after it had gone through the regular peer-review process. What reminded me was a book review in the *New York Times* of a work in which the author, herself a beautiful woman, discussed how awful it is that men have imposed high standards of good looks on women throughout the ages.

The paper argued that it is morally wrong, indeed unjust, to heed the appearance of a person when one considers asking him or her out for a date. Why is that so, one might ask? The reason is that a person's natural good looks are not something he or she earned and thus shouldn't benefit from. Only if one chooses a date or even a friend because of something good that the person has done of his or her own free will does it qualify as a morally proper act.

Now at first blush there is a ring of plausibility to all this. If one is considering rewarding people for something, surely it is important to choose what they have achieved as grounds

for the prize. Olympic medals aren't given for just being tall or healthy. The Nobel prize isn't handed out just for having a high IQ. A person has to accomplish something to deserve accolades. Only on television do folks regularly get prizes as a matter of pure luck.

But when I choose a companion or date, am I handing out rewards? It's quite self-deluded to look at it that way. Rather, one is choosing a benefit for oneself. One wants the company of someone who is pleasant, appealing, and the like, initially at least. Later, once one comes to know the person better, one hopes for the emergence of those traits of character that do deserve admiration. What the looks of another person offer is akin to what one seeks from a gorgeous sunset, a fine aroma, or a beautiful flower: something aesthetically pleasing. And why should that be a liability? Why are we somehow worse for desiring attractive natural features in our companions or dates, not to mention mates?

Certainly one can place too much emphasis on aesthetics. Yet, consider that for centuries the bulk of humanity couldn't even begin to exploit the aesthetic aspects of life—women and men simply got by, struggled for bare survival, and could neither ask for nor offer delightful pleasantries to each other. In our day, when finally millions of us are able to pay some attention to what may be aesthetically or otherwise pleasant about us—never mind that this begins with our natural attributes—why would some people denigrate those who accept such gifts? Why should those who can offer them be thought shallow?

The reason is actually political: no one is supposed to benefit while others are not doing so. Just as the well-to-do are denounced for having more than others—many blame them for enjoying life as long as there is one remaining poor

person left in the universe—so with other benefits, especially ones people simply inherited through their genes.

Just think of how much hostility there is toward inherited wealth. Why? Because, for example, it is widely contended that we are all one, and if parts of us aren't getting enough, the rest of us should also suffer. Much political thinking goes along these lines. Humanity or the country or some other group is seen as a natural team to which all of us belong and the collective welfare of which is something we are all duty bound to support. If anyone is less well-off than others, that is considered intolerable.

Now if there is one thing that is prized nearly as highly as money, it is good looks or sex appeal. And it is often plausible to say that the owner of such an attribute has done little to achieve it. It is a native asset, more like inherited than created wealth.

Never mind that most attractive people must do something to keep fit and looking good. They are working with an advantage, and heaven deliver us from an advantage—it threatens the contemporary ideal of total uniformity among humankind.

Rather than embracing this awful egalitarianism, it makes much better sense to face the task of making the most of what we were born with and have been given by those around us who choose to give to us. If within these limits we do well, we probably are both fortunate and deserving; if we do badly, then we are the opposite. But in neither instance is playing Robin Hood with these benefits and liabilities justified. No one is justified in depriving us of what has been freely bestowed upon us.

And if a person is attractive, and gains by this good fortune, so be it. Those of us who have the chance to be

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with such people shouldn't have to give up this little delight in our lives simply to please those surly folks who cannot stand anyone being better off than others.

Why begrudge the rose its fate of not being an ugly weed? And why begrudge our luck in finding the rose?

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## Back to All That's Beautiful\*

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Although it is something of a liability to declare oneself either an optimist or a pessimist—the suspicion arises that one may be working with preconceptions—I am indeed an optimist, but for solid reasons. I keep my eyes and ears open, and what I perceive daily confirms my optimism, despite some evidence to the contrary.

What all this comes from is the constant bellyaching I get from folks who have pronounced our age a moral and aesthetic, not to mention political, cesspool. You know, Robert Bork, with his depressing talk of *Slouching towards Gomorrah* (New York: Regan Books, 1996) and former *National Review* and now web columnist Joe Sobran and many others, with their dire judgments about modernity. Not only do these folks suffer from a case of self-induced pessimism, but their message seems to me to be thoroughly uninformed.

Over the years I have been a student of philosophy, reading some of the most exciting products of the human mind—as well as some of the most depressing stuff—to great profit. But apart from such works, I have also found reading fiction to be extremely rewarding. I caught on to this trick when I was only eight or nine, after picking up Hungarian translations of works by Mark Twain, Erle Stanley Gardner, Zane Grey, Max Brand, Karl May, and half a

dozen others whose books I used to read into the wee hours of the night, under my blankets with a flashlight, to escape my mother's wrath for not getting enough sleep. This early proclivity for searching out the ways creative thinkers fashion alternate realities and personalities stuck with me, and to this day no matter how busy I am, no matter how full of tasks and challenges and complications my life is, I am always reading a novel by David Lodge, Winston Graham, W. Somerset Maugham, Thomas Mann, Graham Greene, Margaret Drabble, Barbara Pym, Mark Saltzman, or someone else—and there are many more I just cannot stop to list.

My mother used to drag me to classical concerts back in my early years, and while I mostly fell asleep—having spent the nights reading—this also showed me some astonishing examples of human creativity. Then came the theater, art museums and galleries, jazz and blues, and all the rest—including malls and amusement parks, deserts, the sea and the mountains, night clubs and promenades and friends, lovers, colleagues, and, especially, my kids—and slowly but surely I became convinced that life is rather good, all things fairly considered.

No, I didn't miss the horrors, either—I was born just six months before the outbreak of World War II and was right smack in the middle of it all, with bombs falling around me, sirens going off at all hours of the day, a city in near-total ruin, and lives destroyed or maimed, so how could I miss the evil that human beings were capable of? And then living under the brutal Communists and growing up with a similarly brutal Nazi-supporting father put me on notice about how rotten things and people can get. And I have had my share of pain and disease and calamity and guilt, too, so I'm not deluded about how bad things can be.



Yet, what I had to conclude, after some time, was that all in all life is good, and if one pays attention, one will not succumb to the temptation of dismissing it cavalierly as so many earnest and profound—or pretentious?—folks do. It is their insistence that there is something especially bad about the modern era, something soulless and dreadfully shallow, that keeps annoying me. All this dissing of bourgeois values by our literati Left and Right is just out to lunch, so far as I can judge.

I have tried to explain it in one way or another: maybe these folks just want to carp about something, wag their fingers, to create for themselves the illusion of being much more high and mighty than the rest of us; or perhaps they cannot differentiate between getting old, running down biologically, and being near death themselves, and the way the world is outside their heads; or maybe they just have indigestion too much and infuse their bad feelings into how the world looks to them. I am not sure, of course.

But I do know they are distorting how things really are—do they ever listen to music, look at paintings, attend plays, and, especially, read both nonfictional and fictional works? Don't they notice just how wonderful is the human ability to create, how it has filled the world with wonder and beauty, aside from some admittedly annoying trash?

I have not been alive in another age, so I do not have direct knowledge of how it all was in A.D. 300 or 400 B.C. or the 1400s, but I look into these periods regularly through the reports of those who lived then. And, all in all, I do not get the impression that those ages were so cool, comparatively speaking. Yes, the twentieth century had some of the worst manifestations of human evil and neglect, and much of this is going on right now, as well. But then not only

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nature but human choice manages to produce both good and bad in the world, and I do not believe that somehow in our time human evil has conquered. If you do, I recommend taking a closer look—read, listen, look, experience, and, most of all, do something interesting and valuable!

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## Entranced from the Start by “Here’s Johnny”

*Orange County (California) Register, May 12, 1992*

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About ten years ago *TV Guide* ran an article on Johnny Carson in which the claim was made that the *Tonight Show*’s host appealed only to middle-class Americans. I wrote a letter, which was published, protesting this claim.

I, a Hungarian refugee raised in Europe until my late adolescence, have been a Carson fan from the start. I recall watching NBC-TV’s tryouts to see who would take over after Jack Paar left, in the late summer of 1962. I was hospitalized at the time and stayed up for each of the performers, to see who would be most enjoyable to watch late at night, when the day ended and one didn’t wish to retire with trouble on one’s mind. Carson was clearly the hands-down winner.

As soon as I left Hungary, I knew I wanted to come to the United States, and I made the most of American entertainment in Europe—notably the Armed Forces Network radio station in Munich, Germany, where I lived for three years before coming to the United States. After I arrived, I found it helpful to take in some of the popular entertainment, partly because I was eager to adapt to American popular culture.

One favorite entertainer of mine was a disc jockey named Big Wilson on a Cleveland, Ohio, radio station. He spoke incredibly fast—I could only get about every fourth word he spoke—but I swore that in time I would fully understand him. That is one of the ways I learned English—I

wanted to get the pronunciation down pat, not just the grammar and vocabulary. (In those days no one would have suggested that a refugee should be treated to bilingual education!)

I started to watch Jack Paar around 1958 and found the range of gossip on the show very interesting, though Paar's idiosyncrasies were often annoying. He really believed himself to be much more than an entertainer, or he feigned this belief, apparently thinking that there is something ignoble about just entertaining an audience.

When Carson took over, I realized how pleasant it can be to watch a very good and self-confident entertainer at work. Johnny never seemed to apologize for what his job amounted to, bringing some laughs and gossip into our lives, after we had coped with our daily routines and responsibilities. I admired that and still do.

But, of course, what was most appealing to me about Carson is probably what kept him on the air for all those years and why no one has ever come even close to unseating him: he is a master of comic timing. Even when his jokes fail to make it big, he is very quick at milking the failure for as much humor as he can extract from it. He never gives up. He is self-reflective in an unpretentious way that does not flaunt his skills and achievements but makes excellent use of them for the purpose for which he was hired, to keep us in stitches, or at least very pleasantly amused.

Carson's one fault is that he sometimes wants to match his guest's intellectual agility, which is clearly not always possible. He should not try to "out-Gore Vidal" Gore Vidal, "out-Bill Buckley" Bill Buckley. That is not his forte, and trying to go such folks one better makes him look insecure. That may be why in later years he stopped inviting such guests—he somehow didn't feel comfortable with them.

And his team should have realized this long ago; it didn't really add a lot to the *Tonight Show* with Johnny Carson to let Carl Sagan and his ilk show off their stuff. (Of course, some of this is a very close judgment call; Truman Capote, though something of an intellectual, had a number of entertaining quirks to his personality and so managed to be a good guest for Carson.)

But the real meat of the Johnny Carson program was (1) the monologue, (2) the guests, such as Buddy Hackett or Burt Reynolds, and (3) the hundreds of young, as well as established, comics whom Carson featured over the years.

A word about Ed McMahon. Some people find him irksome, what with his somewhat artificial guffaws, but he really did serve the show in just the capacity he was selected for early in Carson's career, as a sidekick. And the musical support of Doc Severinsen and his orchestra could not easily be matched either.

I, for one, want to thank Johnny Carson. I am glad he was paid well by NBC—he certainly added a small but very delightful dimension to the past thirty years of my life in these United States. Thanks, Mr. Carson. I will miss you.

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## Meanings of Christmas

*Orange County (California) Register, December 24, 1984*

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I have this wish that we be spared this year all the talk about how Christmas is turning into a commercial orgy, how people shamelessly indulge their desires, whims, and materialistic concerns and thus forget the true spiritual meaning of the season.

When the world is clamoring for a better life, when we are wringing our hands about unemployment, hunger, destitution, and sickness, let us for once admit that what we really want is for everyone to produce a lot and buy a great deal. Why shouldn't Christmas be a time to want more and better and to resolve to do what is necessary to get it—earn more, work harder, produce, and create?

The spirituality of Christmas is mysterious, and it should be private and intimate. But the wish for nice gifts, the desire to please, the search for a good buy—these can be quite public. If there is more of it everywhere, the country, perhaps the world, can look forward to deflecting an economic depression.

Americans have for decades been the main hope of this world. That great revolutionary society, the Soviet Union, counts on America to feed its people, even as it condemns capitalism. The rest of the world sells us cars, oil, shoes, coffee, and more while we sell them some of what we make. We buy more than they do because we produce more and can afford more.

Except for a few, foreigners admire America, mainly because they know the value of freedom better than we do. That is why they wish to come here and why the dollar is so strong—they know which country is most likely to keep up its productivity, its economic prudence, which creates jobs and good investments.

We should keep it up. A Christmas brimming with goodies encourages people to do more for themselves. That is how progress can be maintained. We discover more, we learn more, we want more—and better—things, of course. A new piece of software, a new car, a new dress, a new book, even a new heart—and on and on. All of that is wonderful, even though it isn't all there is to life.

Wishing to be surrounded with interesting things, with sources of pleasure and satisfaction, is what everyone would like.

As an ex-European, I know that Americans work harder, more productively. They like the idea of fulfillment in life. They are practical, pragmatic, utilitarian; yet they are also generous, joyful, cheerful. Everywhere in America, one sees people walking about laughing, sitting around smiling, kidding, showing that above all they enjoy life, rather than regard it as a great pain.

So this Christmas, let us relax about our interest in all the goodies people want to sell us. We should enjoy shopping; we should defy the calls for feeling guilty and ashamed.

We should flaunt the fact that we like life here on Earth. We should indulge, sensibly, but unashamed. We should enjoy all there is to give, to take, to play with, to use, and think of what we might have next.

That is the way the world can be better fed and housed, become more healthy and even wiser, since the time

required to gain wisdom is affordable only when one has some wealth.

Christmas could have far worse effects than making us run about chasing good times, good buys, good gifts, and good cheer. It could pit us against one another. It could make us feel resentful, envious, and jealous. Isn't it far better that it prompts us to cheer, to seek pleasure?

We should not be denied such innocent hedonism. We are creatures of this Earth, and our nature is creative, inventive, exploratory, adventurous.

Why be surprised, then, that we would seek and make newer and better things? That is most human of us, indeed.



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## Affirm the Joy of Living Right, Here on Earth

*Yuma (Arizona) Sun, September 11, 2002*

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September 11, 2002, is near, and I wish to urge everyone to use this anniversary of the terrible massacre of innocent human beings, most of them conscientious business professionals, to affirm loudly and clearly the value of living here on Earth as happily, decently, and prosperously as possible.

That is what those who perished in the World Trade Center were striving to do, for themselves and their loved ones. I believe we should make no apologies for this and indeed celebrate it joyfully, in the spirit of “in your face,” if we must, to all those who resent us for it, who want to intimidate us all, who try to make us feel ashamed for our “materialistic” tendencies.

Materialistic my foot! Living a natural human life is no more materialistic than painting a beautiful painting is just because it is done on a canvas, using paints, brushes, and other worldly objects in the process. Human life here on Earth is, of course, directly dependent on the stuff that surrounds us and, yes, is us. We are part of nature, and this is no liability but something to make the most of.

Nature itself is a very diverse system, from the most simple to the unbelievably complex aspects of it, ourselves. Here we are, beings with the ability to think, write, sing, paint, make deals, construct the most exquisite artifacts, and so on—as well as do a lot that isn’t so commendable. That

is just how we are, and to be successful as this kind of being involves, to a substantial extent, prospering as much as we can.

There are those, of course, who begrudge us all this big time. Just recently, in Johannesburg, South Africa, a meeting took place where a lot of people were bellyaching about how the developed countries of the world are not doing enough to help those in the undeveloped parts. (One may wonder how much of the Earth's resources, the wasting of which is allegedly of such great concern, were spent on this shindig anyway?)

What exactly do the billions who are poor throughout the globe want? They want what those in the developed parts have. Yet, how is this goal to be achieved? Freedom is the answer, not more regimentation by a bunch of politicians who are mostly good at empty rhetoric.

But why should politicians say anything of substance when that would alert us to the fact that they have little, if anything, to offer that will actually help anyone? Politicians mostly urge us to agree to their robbing Peter to pay Paul. They do not do anything constructive themselves, not like people in business, engineering, education, or the arts. They facilitate looting, and that is what they propose, no matter what the crisis that affords them the excuse for it.

No, I do not think that politicians are all crooks, but most of them have no idea of what their real job is, helping to secure our basic, natural human rights. That is the oath the politician takes, in principle, not to solve all our problems for us; at least the politician does who acknowledges that citizens are adults, not invalids or dependent children.

Sadly, even when our politicians claim they are protecting us from terrorists and others who threaten to violate our rights, these politicians, too, are violating our rights under

the pretext that this is needed now. Yet, way before modern terrorism was invented, politicians everywhere used such pretexts at every turn, whether to fight disease, bad weather, or poverty. They are like those members of the police who use excessive force when they say they are fighting crime, thereby making crime fighting just another instance of crime commission.

In any case, let us not be discouraged by how ineptly politicians and even the police defend us. Let us not be persuaded that there is something wrong with our efforts to live well and prosper here on Earth. That, I believe, is one of the best means by which we can answer our irrational critics who would have us return to the Stone Age and suffer in the name of one or another false idol, rather than do our best to live right as human beings who belong here on Earth and need to succeed in the midst of nature.