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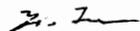
Dear Colleague:

When I was young I used to hear stories about eccentric great scientists falling down a well when they are looking at stars, or of Archimedes being so busy with an abstract problem in algebra that he doesn't notice that the city has fallen and he is about to be killed (George Steiner, Nostalgia for the Absolute, 1974). Another story I am fond of goes roughly as follows. Bertrand Russell and the pure mathematician G. H. Hardy are close friends. At a party, Hardy says to Russell, "I like you Russell, but I would be very pleased if I can find a logical proof that you will die within twenty four hours." Russell clasps Hardy on the shoulder and says excitedly, "But Hardy, so will I!"

To show you how dated I am, I liked these stories as a young person and still do. I am inspired here by an old-fashioned transcendental notion of truth, the search for which commands one's allegiance even at the risk of one's own life. Nowadays, truth is widely viewed as an invention--a nice story. Mine is as valid as yours. There is a sour, almost chip-on-the-shoulder attitude. If you think my version is not quite correct, well, you are only revealing your cultural or class bias. At times, it almost seems that the ad hominen argument is the only one that has any force, even among intellectuals.

My last letter is on Beauty. This one is on Truth. You, reader, will throw up your hands and say, "My God, at this rate he is going to preach the Good next." But it is not BTG as such that I am concerned with here, only their hard facets, which a great University is uniquely qualified to offer. (The other facets are just as important but we can pick them up in ordinary life--in our own local culture.) What do I mean by "hard"? Well, beauty is exemplified by a Ramanujan equation, truth is the sort that can make you fall into a well, and as for "good"... Alfred North Whitehead says that the goal of civilization is to make it possible for people to be good and still live.

Best wishes,



P.S. I put things strongly and (I hope) with clarity--but this clarity is not necessarily a measure of my conviction. I just want to get certain things on the map so that we can think about them. By the way, I read somewhere that the use of P.S. is a female trait. If true, does this mean that males have a distaste for qualification and subtlety?