

September 15, 1988 (Vol. 4, no. 2)

Dear Colleague:

Plutarch reports in his Life of Pericles: "Antisthenes, when he was told that Ismenias played excellently on the flute, answered very properly: 'Then he is good for nothing else; otherwise he would not have played so well'." George Bernard Shaw says something similar. "The truth is, hardly any of us have ethical energy enough for more than one really flexible point of honor" (in preface to Doctor's Dilemma.) If we are devoted to one field of endeavor and achieve excellence in it, we are likely to be slipshod in other areas, including knowing how to behave like a warm, decent human being. This kind of insight makes one nervous when one juxtaposes it against George Steiner's characterization of the utmost scholar as someone for whom "sleep is a puzzle of wasted time, and flesh a piece of torn luggage that the spirit must drag after it." What is the "scholar absolute" like as a colleague, husband, wife? What is a great university like with many such scholars? Well, A. Bartlett Giamatti ought to know. He was President of Yale for eight years. He is now President of the National League, and has recently compared his umpires to deans and his players to faculty to the detriment of the latter so far as good behavior is concerned.

The famous Chinese author Lin Yutang (famous in the 1930s and 40s) said how after a few hours of intense work he felt as fragile and beautiful as a leaf pressed between the pages of a book. He would descend from his upstairs study into the dining room, fragrant with food, and into the round arms of his earth-mother wife who restored to him his lost chlorophyll--his vital energy and humanity. Sexist, of course. We shudder at the presumption and practice of the recent Dark Age. Now women and men work at equally demanding tasks. They return home to spouse equally exhausted and wan. Neither is able to offer the other chicken soup. And yet they return to work the following day, chirpy and eager. How do they do it? The human frame seems infinitely stretchable.

Best wishes,

*J. M.*