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Dear Colleague:

The transcendental importance of the human individual is a foundational belief of Western culture and society, one which is rooted in religion. Although religion (Christianity) has declined, the belief is still more or less in place and continues to serve as a pillar of democracy. We see it in operation when a child is trapped in a well somewhere, and all of a sudden the world takes notice: the media report what is happening every hour on the hour and the marines are called in. No expense is spared. The child stands, suddenly, for Everyman--a transcendental being of inestimable value. What if this belief disappears, as it will if it is no longer "on the agenda"? What will be the consequence for democratic society?

My sense of identity and dignity can no longer rest on God: I can no longer claim respect simply because I am His child. On what grounds, then, does my human dignity rest? Surely not just on the approval of my gang or tribe, for that yields only conditional or local worth. It rests (I suggest) on my potential ability to participate in some manner in the genuine achievements and virtues of all humans. When I first heard that Roger Bannister had cracked the four-minute mile, I felt that I personally gained stature. When I listen to Beethoven, I feel that some of his genius is rubbing off on me--that, fleetingly, I have access to sublime musical thoughts. Suppose Martians take me prisoner. I think they will treat me well to the extent that they like Beethoven's music, for I am, after all, of the same species.

Exchange of goods, but even more of virtues and qualities, results in mutual benefit. I offer you my gentleness for your boldness, my ability to goof off for your unrelenting diligence. If I am gentle by nature, I can't be bold; never mind, your natural boldness is credited to me, as my gentleness is credited to you. And so on. Beethoven offers me his nine symphonies, I offer him my "Dear Colleague" letter. Absurd. But a friend's handshake, if it is genuine, or a haiku, if it is excellent, fills and illuminates the universe for me (fleetingly) as does an epic deed or a cathedral. I claim self worth because I am, in theory, able to participate in this universal exchange--because the real achievement and excellence of all the people who have ever lived are, in a sense, my own.

Unless this fairy tale is still told--unless it is still kept on the agenda like that other fairy tale "all men are created equal"--I doubt democratic society can retain its rosy hue.

Best wishes,

