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Dear Colleague:

Summer provided me with the leisure to look over my commonplace book, which contains ideas and stories that I have collected, as others do stamps, for a quarter of a century. Let me share a couple with you. One is a letter (2nd century A.D.) from a schoolboy to his father. "Theon to his father Theon, Greeting. It was a fine thing not to take me to town! If you won't take me with you to Alexandria, I won't write to you or say good-bye to you. I won't even take your hand again. That is what will happen if you don't take me... It was good of you to send me a present the day you sailed. Send me a lyre, now, I beg you. If you don't, I won't eat, I won't drink. That's that." (Oxyrhynus Papyri 119). The other story is taken from the Minneapolis Tribune, 23 Sept., 1970. A man suffered a nervous breakdown as the result of his reaction and behavior in an armed robbery. The man told the reporter: "I was with my wife and this guy came on us with a gun. He held it on her and that frightened me. I couldn't do anything, but somehow I kept calm. Then he put the gun on my head and before I knew it I was on my hands and knees crying and pleading... I just fell apart, I fell absolutely apart."

When I look over my file of old correspondence, I inevitably feel depressed. Not only the sad events and failures, but even the happy occasions and successes reported in them now haunt me like wistful ghosts. Strange to say, my response to the stories in my commonplace book, none of which are from my own life, is different. Far from hearing there the melancholy music of time, I hear--as I reflect on the Greek schoolboy and the Minneapolis man--whisperings of immortality. How to explain the difference? One answer might be: in foraging among my old letters I tunnel into my own private past, which is irretrievably lost, whereas in recording events out there in the world I am engaged in the public and political act of saving the world's "moments" and "particulars"--its appearances--from meaninglessness and oblivion, and in doing so I feel that I simultaneously enhance my own substantiality--my standing as a being in the world. Does it seem strange to think of these entries and my reflections on them as constituting a political act? Hannah Arendt would not think it strange, for, to her, the essence of the political is the wish and the ability to introduce a measure of permanence--an enduring world--into life that, in its biosocial aspect, is chained to cycles of needs and their momentary relief, the making and unmaking of beds, birth, growth, and decay.

Best wishes,

*J. In*