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Dear Colleague:

One of my favorite human beings and intellectual heroes is William James. There is something generous, extroverted, and exhilarating about his personality that is so much at variance with personalities that too often intrude on the current humanist scene--the arrogance of the traditionalist, the condescension of the liberal, the resentment of the ethnic, the ingrown pettiness of the literary pundit, the righteous anger of the deconstructionist, the tight-lipped shrillness of the ardent feminist, the seething hate of the doctrinaire Marxist or environmentalist. James, however, was not a good critic. His biographer, John Jay Chapman, wrote: "He seemed to me to have too high an opinion of everything. The last book he had read was always 'a great book'; the last person he had talked with, a wonderful being."

Charles Darwin was a bit like that too, which is one reason why I also find him attractive. In contrast to clever friends like Thomas Huxley, whose instinct upon seeing a new book was to attack--to break (as it were) its spine, Darwin's first reading of almost any book was sympathetic and favorable. His critical intellect became seriously engaged only during the second reading. This way, Darwin argued, he could benefit from even second-rate books. You have the feeling that Darwin could learn from the babble of a child, whereas his smart friends, ever eager to attack, easily missed opportunities to learn from a Solomon.

Besides scholars and scientists, certain creative writers project an air of generosity, of justice, and of a love of the world that give a "glow" to their works, however harsh the details they might contain. Homer was such a writer, which may explain why he is still read and admired. As the rhetor Dio of Prusa put it: "Homer praised almost everything--animals and plants, water and earth, weapons and horses. He passed over nothing without somehow honoring and glorifying it. Even the one man whom he abused, Thersites, he called a clear-voiced speaker."

Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year!

*Ji Fu*