THE DEEPEST HUMAN LIFE

We had the sky, up there, all speckled with stars, and we used to lay on our backs and look up at them, and discuss about whether they was made, or only just happened — Jim allowed they was made, but I allowed they happened; I judged it would have took too long to make so many. Jim said the moon could a laid them; well, that looked kind of reasonable, so I didn't say nothing against it, because I've seen a frog lay most as many, so of course it could be done. We used to watch the stars that fell too, and see them streak down. Jim allowed they'd got spoiled and was hove out of the nest.

An ever-growing number of people have their view of the sky obstructed by the light pollution of our cities. Some go years without once gawking at the moon or the stars. It's an apt metaphor of our whole human situation. There's a haunting line by Kabir, the mysterious fifteenth-century Indian poet, a kind of mystical Mother Goose: "They squander their birth in isms." He's thinking of the few major religious traditions of his day, but the idea applies even more poignantly to our collection of religions, political affiliations, spiritualities, identities fabricated by marketers, and even theories constructed in philosophy departments. The glow of these beliefs, at their best, can guide us through life. But they often amount to a kind of light pollution. The feeling of possessing knowledge can be the worst enemy of the truth. Beliefs and theories, and the identities associated with them, are as indispensable and fascinating as politics, but they are, from the perspective of true philosophy, at worst impediments and at best starting and stopping points of a much larger journey, which involves going off into the darkness once in a while and taking a good long look at what shines above us.

The story I have to tell is about how, in the words of William James, "the deepest human life is everywhere." The coordinates of a meaningful life — the stars, in my analogy — are there for any of us to see and puzzle out. The questions, stories, and injunctions of the great philosophers aren't the speeches of angels loafing in their celestial abodes. Even the most formidable thinkers speak to us out of lives pretty much like our own, with their daily routines, their little aches and pains and pleasures, and their occasional upheavals. Their feet have no more wings than yours or mine.

A little over a decade later, I was finishing a PhD in philosophy at Emory University. The obvious path before me was to drift into a full-time position at a decent institution, work my dissertation into a book, zero in on a specialty, publish some articles and reviews, and lick the necessary wingtips to get tenure. But some sense of destiny (I would have never called it that then) kept me from ever taking such a path seriously. Though I'd proven myself capable of publishing articles and giving papers in the world of philosophy, I rebelled against the prospect of a microspecialty and the bureaucracy of tenure. Moreover, I hadn't gotten into philosophy in order to become a scholar of philosophy, however wonderful and necessary the work of scholarship can be.

When my mother called me from Iowa saying that she'd read in the local classifieds that Kirkwood Community College had a fulltime philosophy position open, it seemed a reasonable way to get health insurance. The saying "a job is a job"

is particularly poignant for philosophers. Diogenes of Sinope, one of our profession's early practitioners, used to beg money from statues. When asked why, he replied, "In order to get used to being refused." But he didn't have a pregnant wife. And neither my wife nor I really wanted to live in a barrel and relieve ourselves outside, as were Diogenes's customs.

Another decade later, my wife and two kids were sound asleep upstairs, and I was alone in the *selva oscura* (the "dark wood," a phrase from Dante's *Comedy*, which to someone with as little Italian as me initially looks like the "obscure self"), staring at the fire in our stove's belly, reflecting on the question of my destiny: exactly the activity I preach to my students, exactly the activity I'd been avoiding as assiduously as they do. You see, earlier that night, someone at a dinner party had had the gall to ask me, "Are you fulfilling your destiny?" The rude question was partially my fault. I'd brought up the subject of destiny, inspired by my recent perusal of the *Mahabharata*, the gargantuan Sanskrit epic of ancient India (it's about three times as long as the Bible), which narrates the fratricidal war between the Pandavas and the Kauravas. To talk abstractly about destiny may be boring or fascinating, but to be asked if you're fulfilling your destiny has an archer's precision in piercing to the heart of the matter. I'd hemmed and hawed, wiggling out of an honest answer like only someone trained in philosophy can do. But now, before the fire, I had only myself to confront.

My initial morose thoughts were that I should be doing more with my talents. As much as I loved teaching at a community college, it was, after all, a community college. Friends of mine at more prestigious institutions, my family, even some of my students, had all prodded me, with various degrees of subtlety, to work on advancing my academic career: a path my choices in life had essentially made vanish. My dark thoughts wandered — though maybe that's the wrong verb — to a story from the *Mahabharata*, the very story that had provoked the bewildering question of my destiny after I'd told it at the dinner party.

A certain Ekalavya, a member of the most despised outcaste tribe, asks to study archery with the great guru Drona. Arjuna, the hero of the *Bhagavad Gita* (one short chapter of the *Mahabharata*), becomes through Drona's tutelage the greatest archer in the world. But Drona disdainfully turns down Ekalavya, despite his considerable talents because the smelly presence of an outcaste would upset the other students. So, Ekalavya goes off to a secluded place in the woods and carves a little sculpture of Drona, which he sets up as an idol to oversee his solitary practice with bow and arrow.

One day Arjuna is out hunting. His dog runs off into the woods and starts yipping at the outcaste archer, who gets irritated and sends off a volley of arrows so expertly that without causing injury they instantaneously plug the dog's mouth. The dog runs back to his master, who looks in awe at the gagged beast. Arjuna then sulks back to Drona and whines, "You told me you'd make me the greatest archer in the world." "And I have," the teacher responds. Arjuna points dejectedly at his pet, obviously the work of someone greater.

Drona and Arjuna head back to the woods to find out what's going on. They discover and watch in amazement the lone archer practicing with his carved idol of

the great teacher. Finally, Drona goes up to him and asks, “Am I your teacher?” The archer bows deeply, honored by the guru’s presence, and says, “Of course you are.” In India at the time it was customary that teachers weren’t paid until after they’d successfully taught their students; but after graduation they could ask for any fee they saw fit. So, the teacher says, “Your abilities prove that you have graduated, and now I ask for my payment.” Even more deeply honored, the student says, “Whatever you ask, teacher.” To which Drona responds, “I ask for your right thumb.” Ekalavya takes out his knife, unhesitatingly chops off his right thumb, and gives it to the teacher, who then turns to Arjuna and says, “There, now you’re the greatest archer in the world.” What’s the story of Ekalavya about? A teacher who chooses the elite over the common. A student who offers the teacher a fulfillment of his calling. The possibilities of participating in the highest economy of education. The psychological blockages that prevent such participation. The brutal tragedy caused by the stupid divisions we draw. The story, it seemed, fragmented into two clear images: the possible me and the real me. I’d chosen to teach Ekalavya, but something in me was clinging to the prejudices of Drona.