

Testament

By Harry T. Cook

10/11/17

NOTE: *Harry T. Cook died Monday, October 9, 2017, following a three-year battle with prostate cancer. He wrote this essay in advance, anticipating a time when his disease would force him to retire. In fact, he published his last essay just three days before his death. You can read [his obituary in the Detroit Free Press](#).*

Circumstances dictate that this essay is to be the last in a series that began in April 2005 and now ends with this post. The magic of the Internet has garnered for these essays an international readership and response that has both surprised and pleased me.



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The Readers Write feature that has followed each essay has been the best part as consumers of my prose have responded with critiques, complaints, praise and anger -- just as it should have been.

Readers whom I did not know before the series began and have never yet met in person have become friends. They live in Australia, New Zealand, Great Britain, South Africa, France, across Canada and in most of the United States. Their company I shall miss very much.

I have entitled this essay "Testament" because that is precisely how I mean it to be taken. The disease with which I was diagnosed within a week of my 75th birthday has come to call with the message that I am now on a path that will slow me down sufficiently that I could not do my work with the effort I insist on putting into it. As one who has always thought he wanted to quit while he was ahead, I am doing just that. Also, I have promises to keep with not quite as many miles as I hoped in which to keep them.

Meanwhile, I leave you with these somewhat random thoughts:

+ Love the English language and use it with respect and care. None of us is Shakespeare *redivivus*. Winston Churchill, H.L. Mencken and Graham Greene still stand alone with their Firsts in English composition. They should be our standard.

+ A question -- and, indeed, its formulation -- is likely to be more rewarding than straining to produce a quick answer. Inquiry, research and hypotheses tend to invite more thorough thoughtfulness -- a supreme value in human relationships at any level. If you have never read the work of the late philosopher Richard Rorty and his take on what he termed "contingency," now would be as good a time as any to do so.

+ Beware the politician who runs for office with an index finger pointed at those of an identifiable nationality or ethnic group whilst blaming the woes of the nation on them. Jews were long victims of such an evil, African Americans and Native Americans, as well. Mexicans and Muslims in recent times became targets of such calumny. Who needs a reprise of Nazism?

+ Resist the claims of absolute truth made by those who march under various religious banners. No one can possibly know what any possible deity wants or wills. Likewise, no one can encompass the whole truth about anything.

+ Conserve Earth, her atmosphere, her waterways and seas, her land, her creatures as good stewards would estates entrusted to their care and protection. One can lick away on an ice cream cone only so long before it disappears.

+ Help society understand that punitive incarceration in and of itself is cruel and unusual punishment. Justice is not served by putting people behind bars in violent environments. In the same spirit, help society understand that capital punishment is legalized murder, collective vengeance under the guise of doing justice.

+ Give all you can to encourage compassion for women who struggle to retain control of their own bodies where unwanted or dangerous pregnancies are concerned. Tell the anti-abortion zealots that, if they oppose the practice, they should take care not to submit to it.

+ At least once a year, listen to all six of J.S. Bach's *Brandenburg Concerti* (BWV 1046-1051) and overture to Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro* (K. 492) as well as his *Symphony No. 41*, (K. 551), the *Jupiter*. Each one of them is guaranteed to bestow upon the listener both joy and profundity, mercifully tuning out the mindless cacophony that presses in on every side.

+ Above all, follow the wisdom offered by Hillel the Great more than two millennia ago: "What you hate, do not do to another." The great sage must have known that such behavior as a habit runs contrary to nature. Also he must have believed that humankind could outdo nature. William Faulkner in his speech accepting the 1949 Nobel Prize in literature appeared to have shared Hillel's optimism: *I believe that man will not merely endure: he will prevail. He is immortal, not because he alone among creatures has an inexhaustible voice, but because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance. As a dear bishop friend was wont to say, "May it be so."*

Now an important credit: Susan Marie Chevalier, my loyal and loving wife of almost 38 years, made these essays not only possible but readable by crowding into her busy work schedule their editing and design.

Finally, this last flourish of defiance, taking the closing lines of Alfred Lord Tennyson's *Ulysses* as my own valedictory:

*We are not now that strength which in old days
Moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are, --
One equal temper of heroic hearts,
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.*

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