

J. Glenn Gray: A Personal Remembrance

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It is a great pleasure for me to visit Juniata and to remember, along with you, a most distinguished graduate of Juniata College. It is also always a great pleasure for me to visit a sister institution of liberal learning in light of our common commitment to supporting and advancing the life of the mind in an era when distractions from that commitment abound. Glenn Gray was, of course, profoundly committed to the life of the mind and especially to “thinking,” a commitment he shared with Martin Heidegger and Hannah Arendt but which he expressed in a particularly American way. To a remarkable degree, Glenn combined his life long study of German philosophy with the upbeat tendencies of the New World.

I arrived at Colorado College to begin teaching in August 1965. I met Glenn Gray fairly quickly and was privileged to know him until he died in 1977. I had known something about him before I got to Colorado College. During my graduate studies at Johns Hopkins, I had developed an intense interest in Hegel’s political philosophy. In reading commentaries on his work, I came across a very useful book called *Hegel’s Hellenic Ideal* by one Glenn Gray, published in 1941 and based on his dissertation at Columbia. It was and remains an excellent introduction to basic ideas in Hegel’s thought, later reissued as *Hegel and Greek Thought*.¹

But I was also studying the application of political philosophy to the study of international relations and this led me to *The Warriors*, Glenn’s most famous book, the one which established his prominence in contemporary philosophy, especially after the new edition appeared with a foreword by Hannah Arendt. His connection to her facilitated his connection to Heidegger and to his work in overseeing excellent translations of Heidegger’s work into English. I sometimes taught *The Warriors* in my political philosophy classes, and when I did I always invited Glenn to visit and discuss his views with the students. It was through Glenn that I had the chance to meet Hannah Arendt because she came to visit him at the college and, when she visited, he would arrange for luncheon discussions with her and a small group of faculty of whom I was privileged to be one.

It is safe to say that Glenn was generally regarded, among a number of outstanding scholars, as the leading member of our faculty. His voice was important in faculty deliberations. But characteristically

he was not an activist in faculty politics. He took the vocation of thinking and teaching with the utmost seriousness. He also exhibited a remarkable degree of serenity, of calmness, in the face of the vicissitudes of life. Hannah Arendt captures this quality very well in her introduction to *The Warriors*: “What must strike the reader to begin with in a book about war is its peculiar stillness, the softly reflecting tone of this voice that never teaches or preaches but tells us in the greatest modesty what the author remembers.”²

She there describes not only the character of his writing, but of his conversation. Even in difficult or testy moments, I never saw Glenn abandon his even temper. His conversation was the externalization of his inner dialogue with himself.

This is striking, among other reasons, because Glenn knew that his health was precarious. He suffered from heart problems which he inherited from his father who did not enjoy a long life. It is possible that he would have survived much longer given today’s medical advances. But he died shortly before his formal retirement and did not live to enjoy anticipated visiting positions that were certain to come his way. In the ancient tradition going back to Plato’s Socrates, Glenn accepted the task of the philosopher to make a friend of death since not to be preoccupied with one’s mortality, he knew, frees one to think without distraction. Like Montaigne, he knew that human beings are born to die and, while we expend much energy running away from death, we every day unavoidably move closer to the end we tell ourselves we are avoiding. Here are three of Glenn’s expressions drawn from *The Warriors*: The first is a single sentence he quotes from his wartime diaries, followed by two reflections later composed:

One does not want to die and cannot live as he would.³

[S]ome soldiers can learn to regard death as an anticipated experience among other experiences, something they plan to accept when the time comes for what it is. They take death into life, as it were, and seek to make it part of experience, sometimes thereby winning an intimate relationship. Because they respect death as a power and do not fear it as a blind fate, they are able to reckon their chances in warfare with greater calmness than other soldiers.⁴

Socrates, who as a soldier had looked death in the face more than once, could not conceal his curiosity about the experience of dying and the possibility of a transformation of life beyond death. The love of knowledge, so rarely found in its pure state, can, nevertheless, impel men of superior mentality to regard death as a boundary they should transgress in order to see whether it in turn may be bounded. For them the unknown is neither uncanny nor frightening. It is, above all, interesting.⁵

Another way to consider this is in terms of finding a way to be “at home in the world,” as Hegel and Heidegger would put it. This is a world of birth and death. But being at home turned out to be complicated. In *The Warriors*, remarking on the strangeness of his service in war, he tells us: “Through the study of Hegel in college and graduate school, I had adopted the life goal of becoming at home in the world. Now it became remote to the vanishing point, for I could not banish the alien character of much of my experience.”⁶

At home in the world means, among other things, to be able to live in the present. This is not the same as “living for the moment” or “eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die.” Rather, it is to step back from the distractions of getting and spending, and fighting, not allowing those things to exhaust the possibilities of life. It is not uncommon to feel guilty about what has happened in the past and to feel anxious about the future. These are distractions in the sense that they take away from one’s ability to perceive and to enjoy the possibilities available to one here and now. His wartime experience dramatized what it meant to find no satisfaction in the present and to be deprived of the chance to think. Thinking in this sense takes one away from the distractions of past and future because, as Arendt liked to say, thinking and acting cannot be combined. Acting in the world imposes on us the concern about where we have been and where we are going in a most immediate and relentless fashion. The unavoidability of the practical world can mislead us into thinking that the intrusive practical life is all there is, obscuring the reality of other dimensions of our experience.

In a passage where Glenn is speaking of the soldier’s guilt, he begins to expand his reflection, stating what I believe became the point of view he adopted for the remainder of his life after the war:

For the more philosophical temperament, however, there is no immediate solution or resolution to metaphysical guilt. If such a soldier is strong enough, the insight gained through his recognition of this most comprehensive form of guilt may help him gradually win a new relationship to his fellows and to the cosmos. Guilt can teach him, as few things are able to, how utterly a man can be alienated from the very sources of his being. But the recognition may point the way to a reunion and a reconciliation with the varied forms of the created. In short, he may pass beyond his rejection of the human species and gain a new grasp of his world. Such a soldier will discover his future mission in life to be as far removed as possible from the destructive work of war. He will be absorbed in the reconstructive, the simple, and the truly humane arts. Atonement will become for him not an act of faith or a deed, but a life, a life devoted to strengthening the bonds between men and between man and nature. He will not be in any obvious way a reformer or a social worker or a preacher. But among his friends he will be known as extraordinarily gentle, sane, and wise.⁷

It seems clear that this passage is an exhortation directed at himself.

Along these lines, Glenn had a reverence for nature and the rural life. As a teacher, he often said that he had a special regard for students who came from rural and modest backgrounds – who were not already sophisticated – because he thought they were naturally educable, perhaps even naturally philosophical without knowing it. This is reminiscent of Nietzsche’s critique of us moderns who have ever-expanding historical knowledge as if a thousand knowledge stones rattled around inside us, as if the world were a museum of bygone achievements; we know many things but less and less of the meaning of life. Glenn put it this way in his commencement address at St. John’s College, Santa Fe, in 1977: The search for truth is a “cognitive enterprise...We think of truth in this way as what results from knowledge, and the acquiring of knowledge is what engages the ratiocinative elements of our minds, our intellects.” But “meaning” haunts us with the question, What does it matter to me, what is the sense of knowing all

this? We come to college, he thought, to confront the distinction between acquisition of knowledge – or as we now are wont to say, information – and the quest for meaning.⁸

To address such questions which arise in our experience of being in the world is, he thought, the vocation of the teacher, the inquiry at the center of liberal learning, the defining feature of the humanities which makes reflective thought the heart of the matter. The college experience is thus the initiation into a life-long commitment to make sense out of the fundamental experiences in the human condition.

From this point of view, the survival and flourishing of the liberal arts depend primarily on attentiveness to the fundamental human experiences, and only secondarily on the day-to-day debates about reforming the curriculum, deciding on all-college requirements or first-year experiences, constructing strategic plans, and the other fashionable preoccupations. Glenn was old-fashioned in believing that a place of liberal learning is genuinely a place set apart where, for a period of time, students are encouraged to cultivate habits of reflection without being plunged into the ineluctable duties of life. The college experience, one might say, is the experience of an interval — what Michael Oakeshott called the “gift of an interval” —between the acts of life. The hazard in dwelling on the practical debates about how the college is to relate to the world is that this opens the way for the world to impose its causes and concerns on the college. Of course, we recognize that making this distinction is not easy, perhaps, under current circumstances, close to impossible. In a way, then, the philosophic task is a rear guard action intended to remind us of the central calling of liberal learning when so much tempts us to forget it. I suppose that since the time of Socrates the rear guard task has been with us. Glenn’s work on Heidegger’s *What Is Called Thinking* certainly reinforced this understanding in him. He elaborates on his commitments in his excellent book *The Promise of Wisdom*.

Glenn worried about the modern equation of liberal education with exposure to a wide array of loosely connected, or even unconnected, academic subjects. And he worried about the emphasis on research at the expense of the conversation of teacher and student. He adopted Aristotle’s argument that the fully realized human being accepts the necessity of occupation or work not in order occasionally to enjoy recreation or amusement but to attain the sufficiency that allows for the leisure which is necessary for cultivating the life of the mind. Intellectual formation is not completed by mere exposure to a curriculum, even though that is indispensable; one cannot just learn in general — one eventually must learn something concrete and particular. Skill is required, but the life of the mind is not simply skillfulness — it is the choice of a way of living one’s life.

Belonging in the world must not be taken to mean acquiescence before impersonal forces. For Glenn, education is to help individuals to self-reflection. This is how he put it:

This enables him to transcend himself and become what the groups who fostered this reflection perhaps never intended. Reflection is able to envision an ideal that goes beyond any existing condition. It can not only make its possessor dissatisfied with himself, what he formerly was and

now is, it can also make him highly critical of his social environment. To such an awakened one, all groups are likely to seem too conservative, cautious, and intent on self-perpetuation...[C]riticism is a form of creativity that is inescapable if all our groups are not to become human ant heaps.⁹

Glenn thus combined what might seem contradictory goals: learning to belong and critical self-reflection leading to criticism of the world in which we seek belonging.

There was in Glenn both an element of Aristotelian moderation and of Kantian idealism, filtered through a certain hopefulness — really a rediscovery of the theological virtue of hope — which made him in practice a chastened liberal. He endorsed Kant’s admonition *sapere aude*, dare to know, with an Aristotelian sense of the need to share a way of life with others. I can illustrate this by reference to what Glenn said, in reflection on his service in World War II, at the end of *The Warriors* in talking of the future of war:

If optimism and pessimism have become increasingly irrelevant in our terrible dilemma, there is great reason nonetheless to practice the ancient virtue of hope. Though generally neglected in recent centuries, when optimism about progress was the rule, hope is that quality of character and virtue of mind which is directed toward the future in trust rather than in confidence. Its trust is that human beings will ultimately prove capable, to the extent granted to mortals, of controlling their own destinies through reason and wisdom. Poor as the present outlook for peace is, we can take hope in the realization, coming more and more to be accepted, that nothing except ourselves prevents us from consigning wars to the unhappy past. They correspond neither to God’s will nor to the dictates of necessity.¹⁰

I agree that God does not will there to be war, but God might very well will that we live with the consequences of having chosen war. Here Glenn separated himself from the progressivism of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries insofar as that view imagined inevitable progress towards perpetual peace, while, at the same time, he retained his commitment to gaining a world without war. War is not an ineradicable feature of the human condition, he thought, but neither is there a guarantee of its disappearance. “Trust” here means that the ideal of perpetual peace is not an impossible illusion, while “confidence” would be an excessive reliance on something like historical forces that will propel us towards that ideal’s fulfillment. He thus rejects optimism. But he also rejects pessimism in the Machiavellian sense that war is not only not an aberration in the human condition, but is often the source of sustainable order. Glenn rejected the thought that God wills that there be war, but he also rejected the Machiavellian assertion of the “necessity” of war. He quotes Nietzsche, who was not a friend to Kant: “And perhaps the great day will come when a people, distinguished by wars and victories and by the highest development of a military order and intelligence, and accustomed to make the heaviest sacrifice of these things, will exclaim of its own free will, ‘we break the sword’ ...”¹¹

Glenn was elusive and rather removed from the practicalities of political life, but it is hard not to wonder how much this resembles the idea of a war that will end all wars, that the condition of breaking

the sword is having an invincible sword to break. The two of us debated the question in a most concrete way.

Some of us will be old enough — at any rate, I am old enough — to have experienced the upheavals of the 1960s and the antiwar protests which reached a crescendo in the 1968-1970 period. I am happy to say that the violence that erupted on some American campuses did not occur at Colorado College. But there were demonstrations, and we did conduct teach-ins involving suspension of regular classes for a day so that students and teachers could debate the issues of war, peace, and justice. Glenn and I collaborated on one of the many teach-in meetings, a meeting attended by more than a hundred students. Of course, *The Warriors* was well-known and widely read at Colorado College. I was then teaching courses on the history of just war theory and seminars on contemporary radicalism and conservatism. He and I each offered reflections on war, justice, and the prospects for peace. I expressed sympathy for Glenn's view on the breaking of the sword, but I also thought it doubtful whether the resort to force could be removed from the human condition. This, in the context of the passions of the time, was an unusually philosophic conversation, and it was perhaps the moment at which he and I became what I would like to call philosophic friends, engaged in a companionable search for wisdom. There is a paradox in the quest to be at home in the world which reveals itself in a debate such as we enjoyed then. For Glenn had also said in *The Warriors*,

A tragic fact of our day, which outweighs all the others, in my judgment is simply this: At a time when the most revolutionary demands are made upon us for conversion to a better form of existence, we are so little ready for any inner change. Few serious students of our society would have the temerity to assert that Western man is more at home in the world now than formerly, and less anxious or more in charge of his institutions and the larger forces of history...¹²

The tension in these reflections is evident. On the one hand, to be at home in the world can mean, as I think Hegel understood it, to recognize necessity, to resign oneself to the human condition as we have inherited it, striving to improve our immediate circumstances perhaps, but accepting that there is no clear pattern for the historical future, and no assurance that the future will transcend the human condition as we have known it. In other words, one wants to understand why the world is the way it is, why it must be as it is, and to achieve the serenity which such detachment of philosophic understanding may offer.

On the other hand, to be at home in the world could mean remaking the world so that it is a more satisfactory place to be at home in. I think Glenn lived in this tension between the world as we have known and know it, and the world as he imagined it might be; his wartime experience must have made him experience the true profundity of this tension which is at the heart of modernity. From my point of view, the greatest benefit of his analysis of men in battle may be the illumination of this tension, which shows us what we need to think about without prescribing a policy for rescuing us from the tension. Glenn's speculation about the breaking of the sword is not, needless to say, a policy; it is, rather, a

speculation on an existential moment in which by an act of will humanity transforms itself in a radical break with the past. He speaks of it this way:

One day in the ripeness of time new leaders may appear who will induce their peoples to take the irrevocable step...But even when large numbers have undergone that inner change of mind and heart...it will still require the most courageous of leaders to break the sword in their name and thus assume responsibility for possible failure.¹³

This longing for the re-creation of the human condition suggests a thinker who is not at home in the world, even questioning whether it is right to want to be at home in the world as we know it. Glenn thought it not right and thus he also experienced the tension as that between detachment and engagement. He refers to Socrates' famous ethical maxim that it is better to suffer harm than to do harm. In Plato's *Gorgias*, Socrates argues with Callicles who asserts that the Socratic ethic is an illusion because, outside the conventions of society, everything is permitted. But Glenn was a modern man, an inheritor of the Kantian perspective, and thus he did not live, as Socrates did, for the heavenly city, or the best city in speech, but instead for the break with the past which would realize the ideal immanently. In the end, he suffers the tension between seeking wisdom as understanding the world and seeking the wisdom to change the world. He brings together the ancient quest for wisdom beyond history with its peculiarly modern form of hoping for wisdom in history. Glenn also refers to Heraclitus, who may offer the most profound expression of the unresolved tension of human existence that we have ever known, and who stands behind Plato, Kant, Hegel and Nietzsche. Knowing all this, Glenn felt the tragic sense of life but also resisted it. In this sense he was a chastened modern thinker, but clearly a modern thinker. He called himself a "broken-hearted idealist."

He suggested that we should learn from the experience of love and friendship, of intimacy with those closest to us, and extrapolate from that experience to the larger stage of life. He looked also to nature for guidance in achieving a simpler and more direct understanding of human relations:

A habit of intimacy with the things of nature can fan the creative sparks within us and strengthen the concern for preserving ourselves and others. It is not a misty sentimental feeling for nature writ large that we require; but, rather, a recognition of our dependence on the most humble objects of everyday use and of their importance and place in existence. Until we learn to experience more simply and directly our gardens and trees, the skies above us, and all the objects amid which we move and work, we will find it difficult to achieve closeness to neighbors and even to ourselves.¹⁴

These observations remind us of Heidegger's critique of the technological age, a critique which Glenn shared: "I have become convinced that the familiar and the evident are so remote because we moderns have increasingly separated ourselves from nature by replacing a primary artistic response to things with a technological mentality."¹⁵ And,

The most painful impressions of World War II for me, as I have said, were the ruthless trampling down of the works of nature and the innocent products of human art. Try as I might, I cannot but recoil, even in memory, from the destructive fury of a modern army directed upon the things of nature and her creatures, all untainted by any partisanship. The butchering of each other was

almost easier to endure than the violation of animals, crops, farms, homes, bridges, and all the other things that bind man to his natural environment and help to provide him with a spiritual home.¹⁶

I sympathize with these thoughts. Yet I am hard pressed to see how they translate to the world of nations and empires. His observations are an invitation to a dialogue of the sort Reinhold Niebuhr's *Moral Man, Immoral Society* might engender. Glenn did not live to see the electronic age as we now know it; it seems unlikely this would have reassured him.

We agree that thinking is a safeguard against acting in the sense that having second thoughts at some remove from the immediacy of practical life may save us from doing things we ought not to do. Getting from there to the positive action that will transform the world is another, more troubling question. Glenn's speculation on how such a transformation might happen is, I think, his modesty as a thinker, pointing to a possibility which he cannot bring about and inviting serious dialogue about the fundamental tension of our existence since, without deeper awareness of the tension, the prospect of transformation is even more remote. I was happy to join him in this conversation, and I try to continue it now. This is one way of showing gratitude for what he did for us, and for liberal learning, for Colorado College, and for his alma mater.

NOTES

1. J. Glenn Gray and George P. Adams, *Hegel's Hellenic Ideal* (New York: Garland Publishers, 1941).
2. J. Glenn Gray, *The Warriors: Reflections on Men in Battle*, (New York: Harcourt, 1951), p. ix.
3. Gray, *The Warriors*, p. 105.
4. Gray, *The Warriors*, p. 122.
5. Gray, *The Warriors*, p. 129.
6. Gray, *The Warriors*, p. 16.
7. Gray, *The Warriors*, p. 211.
8. Gray's address is quoted in Timothy Fuller, ed., *Something of Great Constancy: Essays in Honor of the Memory of J. Glenn Gray, 1913-1977* (Lunenburg, VT: The Stinehour Press, 1979), p. 2.
9. J. Glenn Gray, *The Promise of Wisdom: A Philosophical Theory of Education* (New York: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1968), pp. 59, 61.
10. Gray, *The Warriors*, p. 225.
11. Nietzsche, quoted in Gray, *The Warriors*, p. 225.
12. Gray, *The Warriors*, p. 224.
13. Gray, *The Warriors*, p. 227.
14. Gray, *The Warriors*, p. 235.
15. Gray *The Warriors*, p. 235.
16. Gray, *The Warriors*, p. 239.