

EXCERPT*For Common Things**Irony, Trust, and Commitment in America Today*

By JEDEDIAH PURDY

Knopf

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This book is a response to an ironic time. Irony has become our marker of worldliness and maturity. The ironic individual practices a style of speech and behavior that avoids all appearance of naivete — of naive devotion, belief, or hope. He subtly protests the inadequacy of the things he says, the gestures he makes, the acts he performs. By the inflection of his voice, the expression of his face, and the motion of his body, he signals that he is aware of all the ways he may be thought silly or jejune, and that he might even think so himself. His wariness becomes a mistrust of language itself. He disowns his own words.

In answer to all that, this book is a plea for the value of declaring hopes that we know to be fragile. It is an argument that those hopes are no less necessary for their fragility, and that permitting ourselves to neglect them is both reckless and impoverishing. My purpose in writing is to take our inhibition seriously, and to ask what would be required to overcome it, to speak earnestly of uncertain hopes.

To do so requires understanding today's ironic manner. There is something fearful in this irony. It is a fear of betrayal, disappointment, and humiliation, and a suspicion that believing, hoping, or caring too much will open us to these.

Irony is a way of refusing to rely on such treacherous things. However, there is also something perceptive about irony, and sometimes we must wonder whether the ironist is right. The ironist expresses a perception that the world has grown old, flat, and sterile, and that we are rightly weary of it. There is nothing to delight, move, inspire, or horrify us. Nothing will ever surprise us. Everything we encounter is a remake, a re-release, a ripoff, or a rerun. We know it all before we see it, because we have seen it all already.

What has so exhausted the world for us? For one, we are all exquisitely self-aware. Around us, commercials mock the very idea of commercials, situation comedies make being a sitcom their running joke, and image consultants detail the techniques of designing and marketing a personality as a product. We can have no intimate moment, no private words of affection, empathy, or rebuke that we have not seen pronounced on a thirty-foot screen before an audience of hundreds. We cannot speak of atonement or apology without knowing how those

 The advertisement features a background of dark, textured cobblestones. The text is in a bold, white, sans-serif font.

**HATE
COBBLE-
STONE?
THEN
YOU'RE
ONE OF US.**

**This is where we live.
Get into it.**

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words have been put to cynical, almost morally pornographic use by politicians. Even in solitary encounters with nature, bicycling on a country road or hiking on a mountain path, we reluctant ironists realize that our pleasure in these places has been anticipated by a thousand L. L. Bean catalogues, Ansel Adams calendars, and advertisements promising a portion of the rugged or bucolic life. So we sense an unreal quality in our words and even in our thoughts. They are superficial, they belong to other people and other purposes; they are not ours, and it may be that nothing is properly ours. It is this awareness, and the wish not to rest the weight of our hopes on someone else's stage set, that the ironic attitude expresses. Irony is a response to something else as well. In roughly the past twenty-five years, politics has gone dead to the imagination. It has ceased being the site of moral and historical drama. It has come to seem petty, tedious, and parochial.

This change would signify less if politics had mattered less than it has in recent decades. However, for more than two hundred years, politics has been among the great sources of inspiration and purpose, giving shape to many lives. From the radical period of the French Revolution onward there has stood the promise that politics can change the human predicament in elemental ways. Politics, on this promise, could erase all the foolish, cruel, maddening accretions of history and replace them with fair and humane arrangements where for the first time people would live as free as they are born. For both the revolutionaries whose ambitions convulsed the world and the crusading reformers of Britain and America, politics was the fulcrum on which women and men could move the lever of history. They needed only a firm place to stand to take up Archimedes' old boast and move the world.

This extraordinary promise attracted the people with the greatest capacity and need for hope, the ones with the keenest sensitivity to suffering and cruelty and the strongest impulse to work against them. Politics was the means by which those who were most keenly aware of what should be could turn that moral truth into historical reality. Politics in effect took over the role of religion for many people in both this century and the last. It gave purpose to individual lives. Its aim of remaking the world carried the promise of redemption, both of whole societies and of the long labors of the individuals who worked to change them. Politics was the way to service, to heroism, and to sainthood.

Because its ambitions ran so far and so deep, politics posed questions that were inescapable for serious people. The questions of what sort of country to live in, what kind of men and women to be, how to work, and sometimes even how to love were all ones that politics promised — or threatened — to resolve. The German author Thomas Mann expressed a widely shared perception, which was sometimes reluctant and

sometimes enthusiastic, when he wrote, "In our time, the question of man's destiny presents itself in political terms." Not acknowledging that truth meant avoiding the leading drama of the time.

All of that is now so thoroughly gone that it is difficult even to recall. If it is difficult to speak earnestly of personal matters, to speak earnestly about public issues seems perverse: not only naive, but wrongly or confusedly motivated. Politics is now presumed to be the realm of dishonest speech and bad motives. Moreover, it is accepted that everyone sees through the speech, that the motives are as transparent as the new clothes of the fabled emperor. Public life takes on a quality of unbelievable ritual incredulously performed, like the ceremonies of an aged and failing faith, conducted with the old litanies because no others are available and because rote speech is indifferent to its content anyway.

Our private wariness and the public failure of politics are among the sources of our ironic attitude. Understanding them, describing and diagnosing irony, is one of the things that I attempt to do in this book, and is the concern of the first two chapters. The rest of the book is an attempt to express a hope that seems to me too important to let go unacknowledged. I do not believe that, even where it is strongest, irony has convinced us that nothing is real, true, or ours. We believe, when we let ourselves, that there are things we can trust, people we can care for, words we can say in earnest. Irony makes us wary and abashed in our belief. We do not want the things in which we trust to be debunked, belittled, torn down, and we are not sure that they will be safe in the harsh light of a reflexively skeptical time. Nor can we stand the thought that they might be trivialized, brought into someone's ad campaign, movie dialogue, or self-help phrase. So we keep our best hopes safe in the dark of our own unexpressed sentiments and half-forbidden thoughts.

I believe that there is too much at stake in the reality of these thoughts to keep them hidden. They matter too much for us to say of them, by our behavior, that we have outgrown them or never believed them at all. So far as they are true, they are not fragile unless we neglect them. The only way to test their truth, and the best way to sustain them, is to bring them into the world, to think through them, and to act on them.

For me, writing about these things requires writing about West Virginia. I was born and raised there, on a small hillside farm in the steep, ragged foothills of the Appalachian Mountains. That is where I first knew things that I was sure were real, trustworthy, and mine. It is still the source of my hopes for such things, and my confidence in them. I cannot talk about those things without talking about that place.

My parents came to West Virginia in 1974, the year I was born. They meant to live with few needs, to raise as much of their own food and do as much of their own work as possible,

and to share what they could not do themselves with like-minded neighbors. As my father once said to me, they intended "to pick out a small corner of the world and make it as sane as possible." They chose a little more than a hundred acres, mostly steep, eroded pastures and second-growth oak woods, in the uneven bowl of a broad hollow. One side of the hollow was steep and wooded, the other gentler and cleared as meadow. At its back the bowl's lip lowered into a gap between two ridges. At the end of our property the hillsides drew into a narrow passage, where our creek leapt out into a waterfall, and our dirt road clung to the hillside.

Our home is still there, and the land is unchanged; but I am writing in the past tense. I am writing about how I began. Our parents taught my younger sister and me at home. Or, rather, it is easiest to say that: we were "homeschoolers." Really, though, our parents did something more radical. They freed us to learn. There were no tests, no lesson plans, no assignments. We made no distinction between the summer and the school year, marked by the appearance of yellow buses on the hard road that we could see below us when we walked a few hundred yards out the dirt driveway. Instead, we played endless games with sticks, pebbles, old clothes, mud that we slathered across our naked bodies, and wildflowers that we arranged in my sister's hair. We worked alongside our parents when we were asked or moved to: we dug potatoes, fed and curry-brushed the Percheron workhorses that my father used for plowing, haying, and logging, and herded our milk and beef cows from pasture to pasture. We took part in — or more often were just welcome to listen to — adult conversation as readily as we joined in children's play. Although we did not precisely study, we read constantly, moving from topic to topic in a steadily expanding landscape of understanding, where each answered question occasioned a dozen, interconnected, further outcroppings of curiosity. If there could have been a map of our learning, it would have resembled nothing so much as a topographic sketch of my many daylong rambles, in which each newly discovered ridge could drop me into five unexplored hollows, and the streams of those hollows lead me to broader valleys, then back to other ridges, so that a picture of a place grew out of years of small, cumulative explorations.

We did not know the distinctions that most people take for granted, and which we have since learned to expect. Between adults and children there were few divisions. I counted old farmers, adult homesteaders like my parents, and other children equally among my friends. Older people addressed us children seriously, and we learned to approach them and one another in the same way. Home and school were as indistinguishable as doing and learning. The home was also the workplace, and the work that we and our parents did was visibly, tangibly devoted to building up and maintaining our

place. Home was also the site of community and political life, where meetings took place for our food-buying cooperative, where neighbors gathered around a case of beer to hang the rafters of our timber-frame home in a long evening of daredevil carpentry, and where signs were painted and urgent meetings held when my mother made first a failed, and then a successful run for our county's school board.

Why is it so important that I describe this, my own private West Virginia? Partly, because that experience was an exercise in trust: my parents' trust that their children would want and be able to learn, without classrooms or textbooks and against the warnings of experts; that a marginal place, a small piece of land and an eccentric community, would be full of lessons enough to satisfy two young people; that they, our parents, could get by, learning new kinds of work for a new place and learning them well.

That time was, also, knowing exactly what we relied upon, what we could not do without: the rain that filled our springs or left them too dry for showers and laundry; the sunshine that dried newly cut hay, which a single thunderstorm could ruin; the natural gas, piped from a well on the hollow's steeper slope, that fired our stove and heaters and whose pipes froze on some cold winter nights; the sugar maples that, when there was a freeze by night and a thaw by day, ran with sweet, clear sap that we boiled down to syrup; the steers, which we had named as newborns and watched as they grew, and which we slaughtered and cleaned on cold winter days to put by a year's meat.

In all of these ways, West Virginia meant perfect confidence in the reality of things. I developed one of our hillside springs, digging out a natural seep, filling it with filtering gravel, and ditching out a pipe-run between it and our house, more than a hundred yards below. I drilled the boreholes that brought sap from the living wood of our maples. Although I never pulled the trigger when we slaughtered our steers, I helped to skin and gut a few that I had named. When we spoke about these things, there, we could be confident that our words sat squarely on things that we knew in common.

Maybe because so much of our talk had to do with these stable, certain, solid things, West Virginia was not an ironic place. There was not much talk of trust, hope, or reliance; but there was a great deal of each of those, so thoroughly present that there was no need to name them. They were bound up in the things we did name.

My upbringing was a blend of centuries, with strands of old American idyll and always elements of whatever year the calendar announced. Since leaving that time between times, I have never left behind a sense of betwixtness, of being from somewhere else -- another place and, in some measure, another period, another way of living. Wherever I found myself, I came as a visitor, often a willing participant, but

never exactly a member. Something in me is always native to another place. But the more I am of these new places and populations, the more imperfectly I am of that anomalous and mainly irretrievable Appalachian childhood.

This is my answer to the question of why, to talk about America today, I first have to say a few things about my upbringing. In some ways, my experience of West Virginia is anomalous. In another way, though, I think that it is typical. We are, many of us, from several places, literally or figuratively. We are shaped by several species of loyalty and aspiration. It is not uncommon for us to find ourselves quietly defending a portion of our past from the demands of our very different present — or drawing on that past, however openly or secretly, to enable us to pass through the present on terms that are partly our own.

More specifically, we nearly all have the sorts of experiences and memories that West Virginia gives me. They reassure us of, or keep us from entirely surrendering, the possibility of trust, of confidence in reality. I do not think that I can write intelligently about these things without naming them, describing them, trying to show the sorts of things that they are. And I cannot do that, with any strength or accuracy, unless I name the things that I have known, and still carry with me.

The burden of this book is twofold. It is that more things than we usually recognize may deserve our trust or hope. It is also that, if we care for certain things, we must in honesty hazard some hope in their defense. A good deal of what we value most, whether openly or in silence, clearly or confusedly, is necessarily common. These are things that affect us all, and we can only preserve or neglect them together. In the end they cannot be had alone.

Defending this idea means resisting the cheapening of words by thoughtless use and by the sophisticated and cynical manipulations of advertising and politics. Those uses make words mere tools for getting what their users want — typically sales, sympathy, or votes. They also corrode our belief that words can have other kinds of power, that they can bring us nearer to things and help us to be more attentive to them.

One response is to try to draw out in words a hope that begins as intensely personal, trusting that another will say, "Yes, you are not alone in that." This is, perhaps, the work of a love letter, a form that is little practiced today. Such a letter brings something delicate and intimate into the light of shared vision. This disclosure is hazardous and frightening, but it is necessary because the kind of love that moves between people cannot survive in solitude. It must be made common if it is to live at all. Love letters, then, require the courage to stake oneself on an expression of hope that may very well come to nothing. They also indicate a perception of importance, a sense that some possibilities, however unlikely, are so

important that not acknowledging them would be an act of terrible neglect.

I have written this book for two reasons: so that I will not forget what I hope for now, and because others might conclude that they hope for the same things. That would be the beginning of turning some of our private, half-secret repositories of hope and trust into common things. I think that some of them must be common, if they are to be at all.

We live in the disappointed aftermath of a politics that aspired to change the human predicament in elemental ways, but whose hopes have resolved into heavy disillusionment. We have difficulty trusting the speech and thought that we might use to try to make sense of our situation. We have left behind an unreal hope to fall into a hopelessness that is inattentive to and mistrustful of reality. What we might hope for now is a culture able to approach its circumstances with attention and care, and a politics that, as part of a broader responsibility for common things, turns careful attention into caring practice.

I mean this book as one invitation to turn our attention to essential and neglected things, and a suggestion about the shape that such renewed attention might take. It is one young man's letter of love for the world's possibilities, written in the hope that others will recognize their own desire in it and will respond. I cannot help believing that we need a way of thinking, and doing, that has in it more promise of goodness than the one we are now following. I want to speak a word for that belief, in the hope of an answer.

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