

H.L. Mencken, H. Allen Smith

Along with Ben Franklin and Mark Twain, Mencken and Smith fostered a love of the journalism game in my adolescent mind, which ultimately wound up in my making a transition from engineering to journalism at UT Austin. Both are notable as iconoclasts, well able to speak their own minds on various subjects, but perhaps most pointedly on politics.

Mencken is often quoted for his acerbic wit, although ironically, I think I first picked him up because of his agnostic leanings, during a time of personal searching.

Neither left much in the way of direct sayings that came ready to mind (so I picked off a few via the internet), but what does come to mind is their tough minded skepticism about human nature and the political game. Maybe Will Rogers made an even better game of it, or even Jimmy Breslin, and maybe I.F. Stone was more of a prototypical martyr to idealism, but these two stick in my mind as exemplars of journalistic integrity coupled with a willingness to grapple with the muddy issues of the day.

Mencken was a part of the Baltimore Sun for many years, doing a column commenting on matters great and small, and was also known as an authority on the English language, so I probably have acquired some love of the language from him as well. At the request of a “Miss Georgia Sothern”, Mencken coined a word “more dignified than strip teaser” to describe such practitioners: ecdysiast, which still pops up now and again as a trivia question.

Certainly he is one of the sharpest, most skeptical and generally challenging of all (semi-) contemporary writers. Reading Mencken is like a swim in a mountain stream, refreshing, invigorating to the mind, but maybe a bit of a shock at first.

Some quotes, from one of numerous web sites about him (bmacleod.com/html):

No one ever went broke underestimating the taste of the American public.

Freedom of press is limited to those who own one.

Those who can -- do. Those who can't -- teach.

Imagine the Creator as a low comedian, and at once the world becomes explicable.

Nature abhors a moron.

Say what you will about the Ten Commandments, you must always come back to the pleasant fact that there are only ten of them.

Marriage is a wonderful institution, but who would want to live in an institution.

Theology is the effort to explain the unknowable in terms of the not worth knowing.

Every decent man is ashamed of the government he lives under.

Hanging one scoundrel, it appears, does not deter the next. Well, what of it?
The first one is at least disposed of.

Injustice is relatively easy to bear; what stings is justice.

It is hard to believe that a man is telling the truth when you know that you
would lie if you were in his place.

Capitalism undoubtedly has certain boils and blotches upon it, but has it as
many as government? Has it as many as marriage? Has it as many as religion?
I doubt it. It is the only basic institution of modern man that shows any
genuine health and vigor.

Jury - A group of 12 people, who, having lied to the judge about their health,
hearing, and business engagements, have failed to fool him.

...the great artists of the world are never Puritans, and seldom respectable. No
virtuous man--that is, virtuous in the Y.M.C.A. sense--has ever painted a
picture worth looking at, or written a symphony worth hearing, or a book
worth reading...

I originally ran into Mencken while reading about agnosticism or atheism (Bertand Russell
also), and while I disagree with his bottom line conclusions, I agree with a lot he has to say
about religion. You also get the feeling that he didn't take himself or his institution all that
seriously:

Why assume so glibly that the God who presumably created the universe is
still running it? It is certainly perfectly conceivable that He may have finished
it and then turned it over to lesser gods to operate. In the same way many
human institutions are turned over to grossly inferior men. This is true, for
example, of most universities, and of all great newspapers. ("Minority Report,
H. L. Mencken's Notebooks", Knopf, 1956; quoted from
www.lhup/edu/~dsimanek/mencken.htm)

H. Allen Smith

H. Allen Smith did a lot of his journalism in New York and later Denver, which may have
incidentally planted some seeds for me related to Colorado, certainly my second home of the
heart. He was known for doing witty interviews of well known people, along the lines of a
TV magazine program these days, and then went on to write books about his newspaper
experiences, baseball, etc. Smith was mainly known as a humorist, and for some years as the
imbiber of the first legal drink after prohibition, a sort of a journalistic Will Rogers, and like
Rogers, had a great facility for puncturing the pretensions of the mighty, but in a gentler
mode than his colleague Mencken. He also had the good sense to retire to West Texas, in
Alpine, which was a side effect of having taken part in early Chili Cookoffs in the Big Bend,
which necessarily involves travel through (or near) the scenic Alpine area. He also
contributed a Chili recipe, which he claimed (like many of us) to be the best (although he
does add beans!); which is, like a lot of things, available on the web these days.

Here's a bit of him referring to Mencken ("A Friend in Baltimore, from *A Short History of Fingers and other state papers* ", H. Allen Smith, 1963):

He was inconsistent in many directions. He scoffed at joiners, yet for forty years he was the moving spirit behind the Saturday Night Club, an organization of amateur musicians and beer drinkers (he was a pianist). And toward the end of his life he joined the sedate Maryland Club because, he said, he had grown tired of saloons and wanted a quiet and dignified place to entertain visiting whales. He ridiculed churches, yet he was married in one by his own arrangement. He spoke of religion as pure superstition, yet he hung horseshoes around his house and refused to do a lick of work on any Friday the thirteenth. Of the many contradictions between his writings and his personal life George Jean Nathan once said, "Consistency is unimportant. Mencken and I both used to believe in Santa Claus and the wisdom of the President of the United States, but the passing years have changed all that." My own way of excusing him is to quote the lines of Walt Whitman: "Do I contradict myself? Very well, then, I contradict myself; (I am large-I contain multitudes)."

Mencken was a confirmed agnostic, as his father was before him. Yet in his later years, according to Edgar Kemler, he undertook to copper his bet and rehearsed himself for his first day in Heaven just in case he should wake up and find himself there. He pictured himself arriving before the judgment seat, surrounded by the Twelve Apostles, and in this setting he planned to say, simply, "Gentlemen, I was wrong."

I remember being asked one day after Mrs. Dorothy Oswalt's English class what I was going to do in college. I confidently answered that I was going into Engineering, to which she replied, "too bad, you'd have been a good writer". That comment stuck in my mind, and years later, after getting discouraged, or disgusted at some of what I was seeing as an engineering student, I decided to transfer to journalism.

This was on the heels of the Watergate experience in real time journalistic impact on the daily political scene: the burglary story, broken by Woodward and Bernstein of the Washington Post, had actually brought down Nixon! This was the power of the press in action, much as Jefferson had hoped for.

Some years earlier (after exiting the USAF), I'd been sitting in an engineering lab one day there at UT in the early '70's, working on some project, when a (probably anti-Vietnam-war) protest marched by. Oddly, even though I was by then an Air Force veteran, I didn't have any real strong feelings about the whole thing. In fact, my lack of strong feelings led me to avoid the draft, the Army, to be a "draft dodger" by going into the Air Force, where at least I was likely to be safe.

What I realized in the years after I saw that protest, was that engineering could tell you how to build a gun, how to aim it, how to fire it to maximum effect, but couldn't (and definitely wouldn't!) tell you why we were shooting.

With the burst of idealism brought on by Watergate, validating the importance of the press, I and many others wound up going into journalism.

There were so many of us in that wave in the late '70's that I recall hearing the statistic, as I was about to graduate, that there were something like 100,000 journalism students, but only 2,000 jobs. That fundamental imbalance led me to revert to technology, computing and telecommunications, to make a living the next 20+ years.

As a basic rationale for my own personal efforts, a lot of the inter-computer and communication work that I have been involved in has turned out to be key in building the internet, which we ALL hope can and will foster greater communication between nations and cultures, maybe, just maybe someday helping us all achieve a true peace. We have a long way to go, but the world truly looks like a small place since the advent of the internet.

I sometimes describe myself as a "non-practicing" journalist, because whatever is going on, I wind up trying to fit into my overall framework of "how it is", whether it's an event on the local, national or international scene. However, I continually am using the skills I learned as a student journalist, again somewhat ironically I suppose, for instance being the master of the "2 minute memo" via email, a valued skill in the business world.

Of course, sometimes those quick memos can turn out to be embarrassing, so you learn to be careful, to avoid saying anything you would not want quoted in public, avoiding curse words, slanders, etc. Even so, the habit of speaking one's mind can be a mixed blessing, which most of us don't ultimately regret, but which may be sticky from time to time.

That rock solid habit of personal integrity is the kind of thing I (hope I) really got from Mencken, Smith and the others. Certainly it's also a common thread among my other "Fathers", but while saying something out loud is one thing (and hard enough at that sometimes), saying it in public quite another, but putting it down in print for posterity, is something else again. As soon as you put your "word babies" out there to be noticed, somebody will come along to tell you and the world how ugly they are. There's a whole body of media law having to do with what's fair comment, and what's not (libel and slander), but any public figure, having put themselves forward, has to take the slings and arrows of criticism as part of the deal, writers and other media types included.

A lot of old newsmen turn into old cynical drunks it seems. My theory is that that happens partly because of happenstance, but mostly because of the burden that too much knowledge of the realities of politics brings (like the line about how you want to see neither sausage nor legislation being made!). As I said after seeing the movie "Chinatown", "the whole country's Chinatown", meaning, subject to a whole lot of corruption. Scandal after scandal seems to bear this theory out. Doesn't seem to matter all that much which party, or race even. They all seem to be corruptible.

Mencken again:

Under democracy one party always devotes its chief energies to trying to prove that the other party is unfit to rule--and both commonly succeed, and are right... The United States has never developed an aristocracy really

disinterested or an intelligentsia really intelligent. Its history is simply a record of vacillations between two gangs of frauds.

“Minority Report, H. L. Mencken's Notebooks”, Knopf, 1956 (quoted from www.lhup.edu/~dsimanek/mencken.htm)

When you see all that corruption and venality, the baser instincts of men brought to fruition on a daily basis, it's a hard thing to witness. Harder yet to know the real score, and not be able to tell the story because of publishing realities. The publishers' inherent conflict of interest which tends to bind the muzzle of the watchdog press has a severe and demoralizing effect on the reporters, if they are paying attention at all, that is. That's why a lot of them get drunk. A lot. A temporary oblivion is still some relief from the pain of knowledge. Even that's a semi-slandorous kind of statement that no one will try to refute.

I sometimes describe myself (semi-seriously) as not cynical, but rather having lost my naivete, meaning, I still have hope (I hope).

Thanks to Mencken, Smith and the others, maybe I can still see the humor in it all; we all NEED to.