Happy 152nd Birthday to G.K. Chesterton

It was a dark and stormy night, as they say, when I arrived somewhere between sleep and fairy land. I finally got my chance to sit down with Gilbert. Today, he's 152 years old and he doesn't look half bad. In fact I think he may have lost a few pounds since I last saw him.

"So – happy birthday, Mr. Chesterton. Any opening words for the occasion? You really look great after a century and a half!

"Praise should be the permanent pulsation of the soul." So yes – let's begin with that.

I have to say, you seem unusually cheerful for someone who spends his days arguing about God and civilization.

Well, I'd put it this way: gratitude is happiness doubled by wonder. That's not a bad posture for any day, let alone a birthday.

But gratitude requires humility, doesn't it? And humility isn't exactly fashionable.

It never was. People forget how to be grateful unless they first learn how to be humble. That's the uncomfortable sequence.

Let's talk about love for a moment. What's the best way to love something – or someone?

Realize it might be lost. That's the whole secret, really.

That's beautiful. Also a little terrifying.

(He laughs as he enjoys a sip of something more Catholic than

Baptist) Most true things are. But here's what I'd add: an adventure is only an inconvenience rightly considered. An inconvenience is only an adventure wrongly considered. Life is largely a matter of which direction you're facing.

Before we go further – do you have any rituals? A way of preparing yourself before you work?

Oh, I say grace. Before meals, yes – but also before a concert, before the opera, before I open a book, before swimming, fencing, boxing, walking, dancing. Before I dip the pen in the ink. The world deserves a little ceremony.

What is art, then? Is it ceremony?

Art is the signature of man. That's all – and that's everything.

And education?

Truth in a state of transmission. Simple as that. The problem is we've made it very complicated in order to avoid transmitting the most important part.

Which is?

That there is a whole truth of things, and that in knowing it and speaking it we are happy. You will not hear that in most public schools. You will hear a great many other things.

What happens to a culture when it loses its sense of the sacred?

Take away the supernatural, and what remains is the unnatural. And politically? Once you abolish God, the government becomes God. It's a very short step, and people keep being surprised by it.

So what is real freedom, in your mind?

The free man isn't the one who thinks all opinions are equally

true – that's not freedom, that's feeble-mindedness. The free man is the one who sees errors as clearly as he sees truth.

How do we know right from wrong when everything seems negotiable?

Right is right, even if nobody does it. Wrong is wrong, even if everybody is wrong about it. Fashions don't alter facts. Fallacies don't cease to be fallacies because they become fashions.

Do people still love truth, do you think?

Oh, yes. Even the liars love it. That's one of the more hopeful things about us.

Why do people seem so restless, then? So unsatisfied?

Because the most ignorant of humanity know, by the very look of the earth, that they have forgotten heaven. There's a shape missing, and they feel it without being able to name it.

Is faith part of the answer? Because some would say faith and reason are enemies.

Neither reason nor faith will ever die. Men would die if deprived of either. They're not enemies – they're two legs.

You spend a lot of energy defending things people find old-fashioned.

(He grabs my i-phone and throws it into a nearby trash receptical. At first I feel the need to protest, but it's Chesterton. I refrain and he grins)

The act of defending any of the cardinal virtues has today all the exhilaration of a vice. I recommend it highly.

We've had a lot of scandal in the church lately– lots of fighting, sexual misconduct, religious arguing, bigotry, and controvery. If we are call to be different why do we fail so

magnificently as the Body of Christ?

The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult and left untried. That's a rather important distinction.

You've been watching us from the heavenly grandstands for quite some time now. How does anyone stay upright in a confusing age like this one?

There are an infinity of angles at which one falls. Only one at which one stands.

What makes a truly great leader?

There is a great man who makes every man feel small. But the real great man — the genuinely great man — is the one who makes every man feel great.

What is history trying to tell us right now?

That the story isn't finished. That's the most necessary and most neglected point about the whole business.

Any thoughts on poetry before we close?

Poets have been mysteriously silent on the subject of cheese.

…That's your contribution to literary criticism? It seems like our culture these days is constantly looking for amusement instead of God.

The unpardonable sin is being bored.

Last question. Why do angels fly?

Because they take themselves lightly.

And why do humans have such trouble getting out of bed?

Daybreak is a never-ending glory. Getting out of bed is a never-ending nuisance.

Mr. Chesterton, thank you. I must confess that compared to you, I’m a rather dull and unaccomplished writer. You lived life to the fullest, but you have inspired me today to make my work count for something.

(setting down his glass) There is no such thing on earth as an uninteresting subject. The only thing that can exist is an uninterested person.

Happy birthday.

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