

### From *The American Soul*

He used to call himself “the last American.” In fact, he seemed anything but American—with his commanding British accent, his aristocratic bearing and his bred-in-the-bone sense of form, always and in everything. I would smile to myself when he spoke like that. I was born here, after all. How could a foreigner, even a man as great-hearted as he was, lay such claim to America? Only now do I begin to understand what he meant, and only now do I see how deep his love for America really was.

It was the summer of 1974. The Vietnam War was tearing the country apart. The image of America’s invincibility and goodness was crashing down around us. I had gathered a group to meet him at his summer house overlooking San Francisco Bay—about fifteen people, most of whom were my students, and a few like myself from the older generation, who could not accept the judgment against America that was rising into the world through the moral agony of the younger generation. I had been encountering this judgment every day in my classes at the university, but I continued to turn away from it, unwilling to question the fundamental goodness of my country.

I had brought some students and colleagues to meet this man, whom I had long considered remarkable for his wisdom and wide-ranging intelligence. I knew that although before World War II he had pursued a diplomatic career in Great Britain, his life had soon taken him in quite a different direction; and never once in all the years I had known him had I heard him say much about purely political questions. I never doubted that he was a shrewd observer of modern life, and his success in business was evidence of his worldly acumen. But with him, the main issue was always the path of self-knowledge, the need to awaken from the illusions about oneself that hold mankind in their grip and that prevent us from seeing reality and living according to conscience. I had never known anyone who could

speak with more insight about the nature of this path, this way of seeking that lies at the root of all the great spiritual philosophies and traditions of the world. The quarrels of nations, the fervor of patriotism, the programs of social movements, the luster of heroic figures or partisan symbols: I was sure that all this was to him part of the sleep of the human race. And the task of waking up demanded, among other things, the struggle to free oneself from the falsehoods and attachments that gave these social and political phenomena their hypnotic power.

And so it astonished me when he suddenly interrupted one of the younger people who were once again speaking of America with contempt, condemning not only its war policy, but the whole structure of its government, the injustice that they felt was built into its institutions and its laws and that had shaped its entire history. America was hypocritically betraying all that it claimed to stand for. American corporations were raping nature and the world. The media were under the thumb of American greed, blanketing the earth with a global consumerism that was destroying the values of simpler, nobler cultures.

Such views were not delivered in any systematic way, but rather crept in and out of my students' questions and conversation throughout the evening as they gave voice to their revulsion at what America offered them for their future and their present daily life.

We were sitting on the patio under a black, moonless sky, our faces lit by the flickering light of a few candles in the center of a large stone table. We all had iced drinks in our hands or in front of us. His interruption took the form of very slowly putting down the glass that was in his hand—so slowly and quietly, and with such a measured, even movement that at first it seemed like some kind of ritual gesture. Everyone suddenly became quiet and looked at him, waiting. I remember listening for a long time to the waves of the bay and watching the lights of San Francisco across the water. The wind was shifting and turning

cool. People were putting their collars up and hugging themselves, but no one dared get up. Foghorns were answering each other like far off, unseen sea creatures.

Just as slowly and evenly, he angled his long, lean body back in his chair and gazed at nothing in particular. Then he turned his head as though it were a gun turret and looked directly at the husky, bearded young man who had just been speaking about the crimes of America. In the flickering candlelight, his bony face seemed wondrously alive and menacing at the same time. What he said to the young man—and of course to all of us present—was only this:

“You don’t know what you have here.” Then, after an uncomfortable pause, “You simply don’t know what you have.”

I doubt if anyone really understood what he meant. He was obviously speaking about America and telling us we did not appreciate what it was. But apart from that, we—in any case, I—could be sure of nothing else. Had this remarkable man of the spirit suddenly descended into ordinary patriotism or some kind of political partisanship? Certainly not. It was not only that such an attitude would have utterly contradicted what I knew of his views about the human condition and the inner causes of war and violence; more than that, it was the way he had just spoken—with the sense of presence and weight that he always reserved for ideas that referred to what is sacred within man, which transcends all distinctions of nation, class or race.

A few days later, talking to my students about what he had said, I thought of all the historical events he must have witnessed in his life. In the early part of the century he had lived and traveled widely throughout Asia and Europe, emigrating to the United States in 1944. His business had brought him into contact with many of the governments and leaders that shaped history between the First and the Second World War and he had seen, from within, the forces at work in the play of nations. As a trained engineer, he also had an

insider's understanding of the power of modern science and technology. And as for his grasp of philosophical ideas, I frequently found myself shedding my professional "expertise" and bowing to his keen insight. In his presence, I often felt myself to be a "mere" American: raw, uneducated, awkward, naïve—like a child. Yet that evening *he* was the American, "the last American," freezing us with the unfathomably powerful statement:

"You don't know what you have here."