

22 January 1968

Dear Ray,

Yesterday (Sunday) I received your telegram, and I want to thank you and Letha for your expression of condolence. On first reading, I assumed you were referring to your short letter of the 12th, which might be described as "brutally frank." I thought that you had sent the wire while my letter of the 18th was en route to you.

On more careful reading, however, I realized that you must be referring to a second "brutally frank" letter which had not yet arrived. Tonight, it was there, when I picked up my mail. However, in recognition of your apology for ill-considered timing, and the realization that you would have delayed mailing this letter had you known of my father's death, I have not opened the envelope. You have my word of honor that it is sitting on my table sealed and unread. I would like to give you the opportunity to act as you might decide to act if you had it to do over again. Therefore, I will not open your envelope until such time as you stipulate, by return mail if possible, that you would have waited had you not already placed the envelope in the mail on the 19th. There is only one proviso, and I think you will agree that it is reasonable: If it turns out that copies of this letter have been sent to third parties and read by them while I abjure reading the original directed to me, I will retain the option of reading the letter before the date you stipulate.

I don't want to give the impression of "nobility" or "self-control" in offering not to open the envelope. Truth is, I am not in the requisite mood for reading brutal or brutally frank letters from anyone, and my curiosity is not at the highest pitch. Nor is my morale. I don't want to under-react to presumably solemn charges and grave denunciations as if they were petty, inconsequential, ~~mm~~ so to speak, mosquito bites. I want all my adrenalin ready to pour. There have been many experiences which would have made me weep, had the adrenalin not taken over decisively. Few of those experiences, however, have been related to my work as a WR critic. On the contrary, I think that I have had unusual understanding, friendship, and recognition generously expressed, from most of my colleagues. Some of them I have come to distrust and repudiate, not because of personal attacks or private quarrels but because of fundamental differences of principle and morality.

Recently, it occurred to me to wonder how many of us would have become WR critics if the WR had found that Oswald, a right-wing extremist, had committed the assassination acting alone. Perhaps some or all of us might still have become critics—some because it was impossible to tolerate the clumsy fraud or the insult to one's intelligence; some because they wanted the Right Wing, not just a lone right-winger (the converse of the ultras who reject the WR because it fails to incriminate the whole Left Wing and tries to pin it on a single Marxist). What is the relevance of this conjecture? I don't quite know, but I am sharing it with you just the same. What do you think?

While I am not opening the envelope, I am speculating on the contents. What have I done about which you found it necessary to be "brutally frank"? It must have to do with Thompson's alleged plagiarism, or his double-agentry, or Garrison, or a combination, or all of these together. Naturally I am examining my conscience. Have I done you an injustice? My opinion was solicited, and presumably my support; but I did not consider that I was under a compulsion to render an opinion that coincided with your position. Was my differing opinion dishonest? self-interested? opportunistic? prejudiced? disloyal? Or was it just "differing"? (I am trying to figure out what is in your envelope.) Did I violate ethical norms by not recognizing at once, when I reviewed Thompson's manuscript, that his attribution was inadequate, unfair, and tantamount to plagiarism? Am I guilty of not carrying around in my head the detailed inventory of who discovered what, and when, and whom he told, or when he published or submitted for publication? Do I now cover up my own transgression by minimizing Thompson's? Do I insist on the last ounce of credit due me, while asking another to accept shortchanging or eclipse?

Another set of assumptions: I am predisposed toward the Epsteins and the Thompsons, and thus toward The Establishment; and I am trying to get the WR off the hook, as they are. I have turned my back on the "good guys" like Lane, Garrison, Mort Sahl, and given my loyalty or help to the bad guys, Epstein and Thompson. And--how could I forget--Sauvage, who had the double sin of attacking both Lane and Buchanan, to say nothing of saying that Garrison was the Henry Wade of New Orleans.

Am I merely "predisposed" or am I consciously on the side of the villains? Well, of course, we have different villains. I prefer the imperfect human--sometimes opportunistic, sometimes careless, sometimes presumptuous, sometimes a coward or a compromiser or a self-seeker--to the demented, consistently unscrupulous demagogue and District Imbecile from New Orleans. And his entourage.

But you won't accuse me of hypocrisy. (Will you?) When I find myself in basic conflict on ethics and morals with a treasured friend, or with an Important Person like Lane or Garrison (who knows--the next Senator? the next Vice-President?), I don't maintain the pose of friendship and milk him for information while knifing, or planning to knife him in the back. I don't consort with Life, Liebeler, or the Kennedys. (No question mark here!) I have yet to write one letter charging usurpation of my findings; insufficient tributes or credits; I have yet to receive one letter charging me with trying in my book to steal credit for what someone else discovered (I did get one such letter but it has been retracted by the writer).

So WHAT is the catalogue of sins about which you have found it necessary to be so brutally frank, if so ill-timed?

Who wrote one letter defending me when Mark Lane denounced me for not mentioning the National Guardian? Who wrote one letter defending me when Mort Sahl, fronting for Lane, charged that I had tricked him into praising my book on its jacket? Who wrote one letter to Harold Weisberg supporting my expression of shock and outrage at his statement in Oswald in New Orleans that he first published a reference to Clay Shaw "under the name by which he was known to Dean Andrews"? Who wrote a letter to Lifton when he treated me to unheard of abuse because I protested his fraternization with Liebeler? Who wrote to Sparrow taking issue with his put-down of my book? To Bickel, ditto?

I'll tell you who: No one. I'll tell you why: Because I neither wanted anyone to fight my battles, nor asked them at any time to rally round my flag. To protect my interests. To sing me hymns. At first, and I admit it, it was idealism and the wish to maintain personal dignity and to give freely in what seemed an idealistic, highly-motivated group effort. Later, in the last year or so, it was the realization that I must depend solely upon my own self, in effort and in conscience, lest I take the first and irrevocable step into compromise and ultimate debasement. I will tell you something else, Ray (some adrenalin present, after all, and before the fact)---I have NOTHING on my conscience, and I have NO apology, except for inadvertent error when and if demonstrated. But one is not "brutally frank" on the score of inadvertent error, and I feel sure that the sealed envelope contains an indictment on moral and/or ethical grounds, AND I reject it, here and now and in advance. Succeeding, no doubt, in sounding as self-righteous as I will no doubt accuse you of being after I do read the letter! Come, Ray, laugh with me, at our mutual human vanity, pride, and self-approval. You are becoming a factory producing demands for apologies, ultimata, and Olympian condescension toward your steadily increasing numbers of inferior, defective, and sinister flock of delinquents and worse. What is really behind this rash, this rage, this meting out of punishment and judgment to a selected group, while Garrison can rave about assassins in sewers shooting 45's without a murmur from Ray Marcus? I'm an anti-Freudian; and how the hell can I know from this distance what is really souring your milk?

My father on his deathbed wisecracked that he would have bitten the nurse's finger except for fear of breaking his teeth. You have to know what his teeth were like (he steadfastly refused for 79 years to enter a dentist's office) to appreciate the joke on himself. (I won't tax you or myself by repeating the whole page of wisecrack and wit that I can remember, much of which I did not retain, from a man confronting personal mortality.) We must all retain the ability to mock ourselves as well as others, and (I take it back) I DO apologize if I have played the pompous, self-righteous jackass out of pique, vanity, or self-interest.

Well, I wonder if I was "warm" at any point in my speculations about the contents of my mysterious unopened letter with its brutal frankness. Or am I unable even to imagine my own sins? Well, if I could only be a Garrisahlane, I would still have all my friends, and not a single brutally frank letter.

I will try to do better
Though neither jolly
Nor green; a giant---?
Ask Lane Bryant!
Nor Hamlet, Orphan Annie,
Oswald's Granny...
Just a lightly spattered,
Human, slightly battered---

My enemies confront their ends,
But God protect me from my friends.

Always, or pro tem,

Sylvia Meagher