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Innocence and Experience

Kevin Lewis

University of South Carolina - Columbia, lewiske@mailbox.sc.edu

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Reflections on being *Born Into a World at War*

By Kevin Lewis

The idea for *Born Into a World at War* (St. Jerome

Publishing, Manchester, U.K.) to which I contributed began as a discussion between the two editors, Harvard classmates of mine, following a class reunion symposium five years ago.

I missed that reunion. But I heard of the symposium when the editors put out a call, asking if any of us in the class would like to write an essay describing the impact of World War II upon our families.

The call reawakened my curiosity about the roots of the person I have become. It spoke to a long-contemplated desire to honor my father, a Presbyterian minister, who died too early at an age younger than I am now.

I have steadily grown more capable of mourning his loss than I was then—and of missing a father who gave himself far more to his work than to his family when he was alive, and of paying him a son's late tribute. The attempt to find words descriptive of his contribution to the larger world and to me

brought a sense of emotional and intellectual closeness and gratitude to him that perhaps only maturity could make possible. I value that.

Writing the essay, placed at the end of the collection, also renewed my gratitude to my father's brother, my uncle, Archibald Lewis. He taught medieval history at USC in the late 1940s after serving in the First Army in France and Belgium and before moving on to other appointments in Texas and Massachusetts.

I am cautioned by the belief that memoirs are the privilege or sanctuary of a dotage that, I hope, has not yet overtaken me. But this chance to weave personal and family experience with larger public themes and concerns was important to me. And what I wrote bears an academic touch. My father's liberal Calvinism comes into it, along with allusion to Albert Camus, Mircea Eliade, Emerson, Robert Jay Lifton, and Simone Weil.

With the baby boom generation born after World War II the sociologists and advertising industry have long been familiar. My college classmates and I

belong to the immediately preceding demographic, born too early to qualify as "boomers." We are nameless—represented by no American president past, present, or foreseeable, though, of course, by aging rock stars.

One sub-text of *Born Into a World At War* is the venerable theme of America as a melting pot. The contributors to the collection were born across the country: Alabama, Tennessee, North Carolina, from California to New York.

But also, amazingly, in Switzerland, England, Scotland, China, Japan, Slovenia, Egypt, Uzbekistan, Malaysia, Germany, and Poland—of immigrant and armed services parents. Though not so aware of it during the college years, our collective cultural heritage as a class is richly diverse and worth efforts like this to remember.

Kevin Lewis, a religious studies professor at USC since 1973, was born in 1943 in Asheville, N.C. The title of the book, Born Into a World At War, is taken from a line in his contributed essay to the volume. The book's cover combines a childhood photograph of Lewis and his sisters with an image of bombed-out Coventry Cathedral.

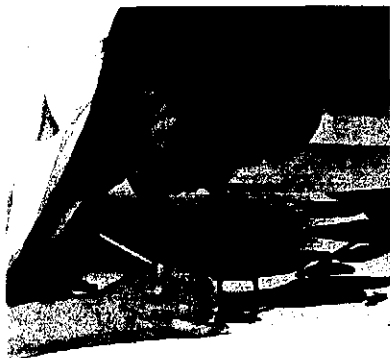
Reading what he wrote

If you haven't found time to tackle Walter Edgar's comprehensive *South Carolina: A History*, you'll soon have an easy-listening alternative.

Edgar, director of USC's Institute for Southern Studies, narrated the nearly 700-page volume for broadcast on S.C. Educational Radio earlier this year.

Those recordings are being co-published by S.C. Educational Television and USC Press and will be available this fall. So learning about several hundred years of South Carolina history could become as simple as popping a CD into a car stereo for the morning drive to work or school.

Edgar also is general editor of an encyclopedia of South Carolina, due out in 2004 from USC Press.



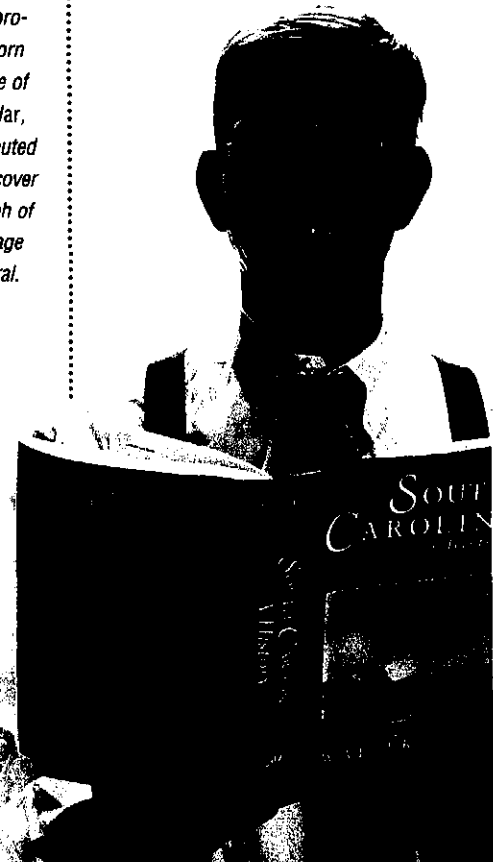
Book triage

When shoes wear out, you can get new soles. But what happens when a book at one of USC's libraries wears out, especially one that's valuable and rare?

Holly Herro likes to think of herself as the cobbler for old books—attaching new bindings, fixing torn pages, and removing any other signs of wear and tear. Herro is USC's librarian for preservation and head conservator, and she and colleague Erin Loftus, left, use traditional hand-bookbinding skills to give new life to old books, maps, prints, and other materials at all of USC's libraries.

"We'll preserve and maintain as much of the original as we can," Loftus said. "We're actually like doctors and the documents are our patients."

Conservator Erin Loftus works with one of the University's Audubon prints.



Born into a World at War



Edited by
Maria Tymoczko
and Nancy Blackmun

INNOCENCE AND EXPERIENCE

Kevin Lewis

Born: July 13, 1943
Asheville, North Carolina, U.S.A.

My sister, my mother, my grandparents, a dog – all inhabit my earliest memories. But my father is not there.

To me our earliest childhood memories seem like fleeting glimpses of a mythic past, an original and static time before our own chronological time began. We strain with dreamlike scraps of earliest memory to grasp the world of that primal past, a golden age, which our selective, fragmentary recall provides so tantalizing and yet so inadequate a means of knowing. A child falls into the conflicts and ambiguities of history from a once-upon-a-time world, a sort of dream time. And those first memories, in contrast to the stories told of that time by parents and grandparents, hold the crux of our origins as conscious beings. They seem the truer link, somehow, to the first grounding of the self, to the persons we travel the subsequent years to become – in my case, son, brother, husband, and father.

My father did subsequently enter my life. Memories of him as a vital pillar of the family, as a hard-working professional, as a bookish, map-loving intellectual and community servant, are clear and strong. Indeed from my early years he marked me in some ways that have been easy to trace and in others that I am still working to understand. In my youth the shape of his undoubted love for me, like mine for him, was elusive. That reciprocal love was strong, but neither well scripted nor spontaneous. Undemonstrative as we were together, our love was difficult to express and, thus, to clarify and cherish. Like other sons, I am occupied in later life by a need to fathom and to honor that love.

What is the connection, if there is one, between the absence of my father from my earliest memories and the quality of our relationship in the later years of my youth and young manhood? I have been worrying this project for half my lifetime in my father's absence. He has been dead for 30 years. Soon after I graduated from college, my father died in a hospital bed, at the age of 54, from system shock at the amputation of a foot, necessitated by the diabetes he developed as an adult. It was an illness that perhaps, or so I believe the doctors said, he might have fought more conscientiously than he did over many years, pre-occupied as he was by the pastoral work into which he threw himself with gusto as a Presbyterian minister with a progressive vision of social change.

Father sailed for France in May 1945 when I was 22 months old. He returned after a stint of service with a French Protestant refugee relief organization in June 1946, in time for my third birthday that July, or so I am told. My older sister's fifth birthday would come later that summer. My younger sister was

six months old. Soon after his return my father left for another year, to raise money around the country for the World Council of Churches' fund to rebuild churches in Europe destroyed during the war. I have no retrievable memory of my father until after I turned four.

As often as we revisit our earliest memories, they are never sufficient. Always we are haunted by the thought of what more we might see if our own gaze into the dream time would clear. We want to know what else happened then and what mattered that matters still. Retrieve what it will and refuse what it won't, selective memory holds clues to the people we became and are becoming. I borrow this belief from psychologists. And we work the collective family memory and the historical record over against the mystery of personal memory, back and forth, to sound the waters of the self. In my case, I work to recover a father who was not there at first and whose work consumed him when he was.

In 1945 Father resigned a church pastorate in Glendale, a suburb of Cincinnati, in order to put into practice on an international scale the social gospel he had earlier learned at McCormick Seminary in Chicago. As a clergyman deferred from the draft, he had not served in the armed forces. But he felt an obligation to his generation. And, as later when he passed it on to his children, he was prompted by his own family's interest in global affairs – at Princeton he had thought he was headed for a career as a diplomat. With my mother's concurrence, he had decided he was called to a France in crisis after the war. He was 32 years old. He left my 30-year-old mother, pregnant with her third child, to find shelter with myself and my older sister in the home of my welcoming maternal grandparents in Asheville, North Carolina.

Father, for whom French was a second language, together with a Belgian-born minister-colleague, were the first two representatives of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to be sent to Europe to work with CIMADE (Comité Inter-Mouvements auprès des Evacués, or the Inter-Movement Committee Serving Evacuees). This was a Protestant interdenominational organization founded in 1939, in conscious memory of the courageous Huguenot resistance to tyranny and persecution. Its purpose at first was to save Nazi victims during the war and then later, following the cease-fire, to provide humanitarian aid to victims and refugees in France. Its religious purpose was to aid in the reconstruction of the morale necessary to rebuild civic culture and to restore sociopolitical order amid the wreckage in Europe.

At two and three years old, I was passively aware that I had no father to go with my mother – “passively,” meaning I had no way of knowing someone was missing. Though I am certain I was told where he was – indeed I was probably reminded constantly – I have no memory of knowing who or where he was at the age when consciousness establishes the fixed members of the immediate family circle.

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Phebe Ann Lewis with Kevin and his two sisters, summer 1946.

I have long since passed the age of 32 at which he left the family briefly and have even passed 54, the age when he died. At his death I was 24, too young to respond sufficiently to him and his experience, to have crossed that divide of reticence between father and son. What makes this particularly poignant is to come upon the postcards he addressed to me from France in 1945-46. My mother saved them, along with his letters to her, his postcards to my sister, and his photos of coworkers, bombed-out towns, and CIMADE chalet retreat houses, as well as newspaper and church magazine articles describing the organization's initiatives.

I do not remember seeing this material Mother saved until two years ago when, deciding it was time to pass it on to her children, she made copies of everything for each of us. "Dear little boy" or "Dear little son," he addresses me, some of the cards typed, some written in a consistent, decisive hand. "When I can't see you, it gives me great joy to write to you." On the back of a *carte postale* featuring a sepia photo of an interior of a country dwelling, labeled *chambre de paysans*, he writes, "Here is what a little boy grows up in in this part of the world. It is quite different from what you have at Grandmother's and Grandfather's, isn't it? And do you know, they heat their rooms with a stove that stands right in the middle of this room! Every day now I see little boys helping their fathers gather wood on the mountain side for the long cold winter, which they will burn in their stoves."

Father's home base was St. Dié, a market town on the river Meurthe in Lorraine. The Nazis had devastated it in 1944. The letters he wrote my mother tell of doing anything and everything relief workers could to help bring hope and the most basic of services back to that city. He preached in French at services of worship. He counseled, he married, he baptized. Through an interpreter he conducted occasional services for German prisoners of war quartered in French army barracks outside St. Dié. And everywhere he found, as he put it, "the sickness of Europe, the corrosion of the moral fibre." In March 1946 he saw it "everywhere like a great suffocating wave." More damaging than the earlier bombs and fires and loss of lives was the numbed spirit of the inhabitants. It was this demoralization in a landscape following war that he was most driven to fight against by his American idealism and his Christian belief, and his strong physical constitution made the fight possible.

His work took him temporarily to Le Chambon sur Lignon, the old Huguenot village in the highlands south of Lyons, where Calvin's Protestants had withstood the royalist persecutions of the seventeenth century, where the Camisards had fought for religious liberty in the nearby Cevennes. During the war the entire village of Le Chambon had shared the risk of giving sanctuary to Jews and others fleeing the Nazis. (This unique place was the subject of Bill Moyers's film, *Weapons of the Spirit*.) Father was asked to aid the resettlement of the older, more fragile refugees still remaining in the village.

Coincidentally, Albert Camus, a year younger than my father, had spent

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several months during the winter of 1942-43 in seclusion at Panelier near Le Chambon. Fighting the tuberculosis which would recur a decade later, Camus was writing for the Resistance paper *Combat* and working out the plan of his allegory of war, *The Plague*, a novel I teach regularly to my undergraduates. In the spring before my father arrived at Le Chambon, Camus glanced at the "sickness of Europe" and commented in his notebooks (99-103): "Utter disgust for all society. Temptation to flee and to accept the decadence of one's era ... But disgust, nauseating disgust for such dispersion in others ..."; he writes, "Meaning of my work: So many men are deprived of grace. How can one live without grace? One has to try it and to do what Christianity never did: be concerned with the damned." These and other entries connect me to the father who – unknown to me at the time, bound as I was in the chrysalis of dawning self-consciousness – was working to be an example, confronting the paralyzing corruptions and compromises of Europe's defeated spirit, Camus's "decadence." As he understood it, my father was going about the business of restoring once more the hope of living with grace, by concerning himself daily with "the damned" of Europe.

But Father found French colleagues who were not to be counted among the damned. Again and again his letters recount working side by side with men and women who, though they had suffered during the Occupation, had behaved not only well but with extreme courage. These were a rare few who, when civic values had collapsed on all sides, had proved and were proving capable of what Father termed "sacrificial witness" and of acts of heroism born of a special "purity and intensity of spirituality." Father writes of finding these "saints of the earth" wherever CIMADE assigned him: Paris, Le Chambon, Boulogne, Calais, Dunkirk, and St. Dié.

He attended a meeting of the city fathers to hear Le Corbusier present a plan for rebuilding the rubble of St. Dié into "the first completely modern city in the world." Noting, realistically, that the "French peasant and small landholder" found it difficult to envision this, Father added, "You can see how deeply I am interested in the result from the fact that we are trying to bring the Gospel to bear in the architectural as in other areas of reconstruction." His was a hopeful, liberal religious vision of collaborative transformation in all the connected parts of the ailing body of Europe. A consistent note, deeply religious, deeply humane, is sounded in each of the letters from that year, all retyped by my mother. This record makes me more proud of him with each rereading. He voluntarily suffered privations, he adapted to awful conditions, he worked side by side with local city governments, churches, and various other aid organizations without tiring and without losing his idealism. And he voiced his special interest and hope in "the youth of France, and I suppose it is general all over Europe, [who] are alone going to save it."

My father, Burt, had a younger brother. Uncle Archie was to come gradually into my life years later, outliving my father by 23 years and serving as a

father figure to me after my father's death. Following service during the war as a first lieutenant and captain in intelligence assigned to an artillery unit from 1942 to 1946, my uncle held appointments as a medieval historian at the University of South Carolina (where I have taught for 20-odd years), at the University of Texas at Austin, and then at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. By temperament a peace-maker, he chaired the history departments at both the latter universities. His career as an academic seemed as exuberant as it was peripatetic. As children we relished occasional visits from this vibrant, jolly man, who told stories of frequent travel to archives in exotic European and Japanese cities. He was neither as solemn nor as religious as my father.

After Father's death, as my own academic career was slowly getting off the ground, Uncle Archie took a welcome fatherly interest. His touch was always light. His advice – publish soon and often, don't worry about getting it perfect – was helpful. His example inspired me. He was one of the first Fulbrighters in Egypt, and, by encouragement, partly responsible for my taking a Fulbright in Poland 10 years ago. And he was affected by the war.

In 1989, a year before my uncle died, he published a memoir, written in the 1940s, of his experiences trekking with the American First Army from Omaha Beach through St. Lô in pursuit of the retreating Germans, through the same northern French landscape Father was to travel a year later in 1945. Uncle Archie took part in the bitter campaign in the Hürtgen Forest of the Ardennes in the fall of 1944, as 12 American divisions struggled to take the Roer Dams and then to cross the Rhine at Remagen. His memoir takes him on the dash across Germany to Leipzig and then to Pilsen and the celebrated meeting with the Red Army. But what he does not include – I had to discover this by asking him directly – is an account of his participation in the liberation of Buchenwald.

The absence of that portion of his wartime experience from the record he left is as striking and as important to me as the detailed, wry, and avowedly pessimistic descriptions of the people and places he encountered elsewhere during his wartime service. In his introduction to the memoir, written in 1989, my uncle remembers everywhere noting evidence of the "brooding evil of Nazi occupation," as he witnessed the end-game of the war in Europe playing itself out around him. When, near the end of his life, I asked him finally what he had done and what he had seen at Buchenwald, he replied that he could not tell me. But – and this is the only religious statement I can ever remember him making, either before or after – he said with uncharacteristic gravity that what he had seen made him believe in Calvin's doctrine of original sin.

How did the war affect my family? For me the question shades invariably into the personal question of identity. Raising the one leads to addressing the other. My older sister and I were born into a world at war. On the day in July 1943 when I came into the world, the 200 Jews of Michniów, Poland,

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Kevin Lewis with his sisters, summer 1946.

reportedly departed it, massacred by an *Einsatzgruppen* unit, a "special duty group" clearing the "eastern territories" for settlement by Aryan stock. (Perhaps because it is too small, or perhaps because it no longer exists, I am unable to find that rural village on a map.) My younger sister joined the family in a world straining to recover from war and its considerable effects. Ours became a close and happy family, as families go, and lucky. I have never wished things other than they were.

Only later, much later, did growth of mind compel attempts to imagine and to grasp as well as I could the conditions of Europe under Nazi terror. Only later, as an academic, did my evolving mix of personal and professional concerns begin to include fascination with the same grim reality that my father had struggled briefly to heal before returning to the responsibilities of marriage and fatherhood, as well as fascination with the most awful feature of that same reality, the death camps, of which my uncle chose not to speak. And only later, in middle age, have I begun to see how deeply influenced I have been all along by the interests and values that set in motion those two brothers, Burt and Archie. Their personalities and career choices differed. But they are linked by the common encounter with the effects of that disorienting terror that fell over Europe, and by their respective efforts to record and to interpret.

It is not as simple as this: personal identity described through some sort of triangulation between influence of father and uncle, respectively. Obviously I have left out the influence of my mother, who was far more affected by the war than my sisters or I. Her strength in mothering under adversity, like her profound devotion to her husband in life and in death, remains a living inspiration for her children, whom she continues in her eighties to nurture. I have left out my grandfather, my sisters, and my younger brother, who was born in the early 1950s. I have left out teachers, not the least of whom was the existentialist Paul Tillich during my first two years at Harvard, followed by the Anglican churchman Stephen Sykes and the philosopher of religion John Hick, when I spent two years at the other Cambridge. I have left out a failed marriage followed by the miraculous emotional nurture and intellectual support of Becky, my wife of 21 years. It was she who leaped at the opportunity in the 1980s to spend a year with me in Durham, England, and then a more challenging year in Cracow, Poland – where the physical and political effects of war had lingered on for 40 years. It was in Poland in 1988-89 that I came closest to the "sickness of Europe" that my father had left the family in 1945 to challenge.

In Poland I certainly came closer to the Holocaust. By 1988 I had been teaching about it for 15 years in South Carolina. I had read the accounts of deportations and concentration camps, I had seen the films. I had taught Miklos Nyiszli's *Auschwitz: A Doctor's Eyewitness Account* and Tadeusz Borowski's *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen* again and again. I had screened Alain Renais's *Night and Fog* in so many classes I knew it by heart, frame by frame. In Cracow we were 35 miles from Auschwitz-Birkenau, and I visited it

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on five separate occasions that year, wanting to see deeper into the riddle of its evil, deeper into the source of Primo Levi's recurring dream after "liberation." From teaching American literature and culture that year to young Poles, most of whom really wanted only facility in spoken and written English sufficient to make it in the West, I returned a more knowing interpreter. I wrote a piece on Auschwitz for the liberal weekly *Christian Century*, then found in the republished autobiographical memoirs of Rudolf Höss, the Auschwitz camp commandant, tantalizing insight into the formation of his particular Nazi heart of darkness.

I have been immersed in Holocaust materials all this while, I realize, with the enabling support of a particular religious inheritance. I am not sure I understand it fully. In one hand I carry my father's intellectual, liberal Calvinism. He loved Calvin, and I recall his mentoring conversations with me about the great reformer's attempts as an intellectual system-builder to balance human freedom with the absolute sovereignty of God. (Camus [104 ff.] in a notebook entry, hoping against long odds to reconcile liberty and justice, seems driven to a similar, perhaps the same, pass.) In the other hand I carry the immensely liberating precept of Montaigne: *Homo sum, humani nihil alienum a me puto* ("I am a man, and nothing human can be alien to me"). Why did this refusal of all parochialisms, this permission granted by traditional humanism to search any and every dark corner of experience for the truth it will yield, fall upon such fertile soil in me? I do not know, unless it was somehow because of my father's passionate contextualizing of his Calvinist conviction of original sin. It was he who must have initially prepared me to look steadily into the gas chambers for a fuller understanding of the human heart. When much later I read in Simone Weil the assertion that it does not matter what path toward a truth one takes, for all paths lead eventually to the Truth, I recognized myself instantly.

When I reread Borowski's much-anthologized work of short fiction "Silence," I see my uncle in the idealistic American officer who arrives at the door of the newly liberated camp barracks to urge the inmates to forgive their tormentors and look to the future. I see him in that officer who then leaves, hoping for the best, while the freed prisoners proceed to trample their kapo to death in revenge. But I see in my father, carrying his reasoned Calvinism into the world, a toughness of spirit and a worldly survivor realism. The pastoral social vision I have grown to admire in him seems better armed and provisioned than alternative visions of progressive social change upon which we are asked to pin our hopes. A flexible toughness of spirit sustained him in France and returned home with him to his short career in the Presbyterian ministry. A firmly grounded visionary fervor shored up his native idealism, enabling him to face down the cycle of revenge which perpetuates evil. Father was not "deprived of grace."

Seeping down to me from the remembered war experience of the previous generation, through the works of my father and uncle in particular, seems to

have come permission to embrace a self-critical doubleness of mind. In another life, I might possibly have found my way to a similar formal philosophical dualism. Twenty years ago, writing initially on this topic as an academic subject, as I did, I would have claimed to have worked it through without benefit of any family intellectual or spiritual heritage whatsoever. This strategic doubleness – “metaphysical schizophrenia” seemed then an appropriate label – has proven for me a life-giving instrument for the balancing of useful but irreconcilable claims upon the modern mind. Ralph Waldo Emerson’s old saw in “Self-Reliance,” “A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds,” need not be a trivial observation. I find it a liberating appraisal, but one to be earned, when earned, by the blood, sweat, and tears of hard experience and responding reflection.

War teaches it. War especially, but other evils, too, teach a survivor doubleness of mind, enabling some to discover evil, maintain belief in good, and go on, as the religious would say, in grace. But while some learn doubleness for good, others learn it for evil. Doubleness carries risk. It has a pathology. Joseph Mengele, at the work of “selection” on the arrival platform at Auschwitz, thrived notoriously between conflicting value systems. Robert Jay Lifton (337-83) has aptly described in Mengele a functional “doubling” of personalities. In their different ways, by precept and example, my uncle and my father prepared me to negotiate the pervading cognitive dissonance and ambiguity of our era. In my father’s Calvin, who taught that the mind is a continuous idol-making factory, I have found a postmodern prophet before his time, but certainly a prophet for mine.

The only formal academic lecture I ever heard my uncle deliver was a sparkling celebration of the medieval cult of romantic love, a medieval legacy for our age. In my teaching, like him, I find myself recommending romantic love. And like my father, who was always interesting in the pulpit, I find myself wrestling with the demands and opportunities of the freely offered love propounded in the religious tradition. To affirm that mind is effectively a balance of more minds than one is for me both a reasoned conclusion and an appreciable inheritance.



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