E.B. White’s Touching Letter to Man Who Lost Hope in Humanity

I’m a longtime fan of E.B. White. Intellectual Takeout readers likely know he wrote a lot more than just *Charlotte’s Web*. His short story *The Door* is one of my favorite short stories. (We’ll deconstruct that one another other day; as you can see, it’s quite mad.)

I bring up White because an old friend recently shared with me a lovely letter White wrote on March 30, 1973 to a dispirited man who had last faith in humanity. I had to share what he wrote:

Dear Mr. Nadeau:

As long as there is one upright man, as long as there is one compassionate woman, the contagion may spread and the scene is not desolate. Hope is the thing that is left to us, in a bad time. I shall get up Sunday morning and wind the clock, as a contribution to order and steadfastness.

Sailors have an expression about the weather: they say, the weather is a great bluffer. I guess the same is true of our human society – things can look dark, then a break shows in the clouds, and all is changed, sometimes rather suddenly. It is quite obvious that the human race has made a queer mess of life on this planet. But as a people we probably harbor seeds of goodness that have lain for a long time waiting to sprout when the conditions are right. Man’s curiosity, his relentlessness, his inventiveness, his ingenuity have led him into deep trouble. We can only hope that these same traits will enable him to claw his way out.

Hang on to your hat. Hang on to your hope. And wind the
clock, for tomorrow is another day.

Sincerely,

E. B. White

The letter gets at something important. The human story is a long one. It’s filled with more beauty and pain, hope and misery than we’ll ever understand.

White, while admitting humans are capable of both good and great evil, seems to be hinting at an eternal truth found in the Book of Ecclesiastes: “What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun.”

It’s a perspective easy to lose, especially in our modern era when technology seems to amplify even transient trivialities into matters of grave importance. Maybe those stoics were on to something.