Circling

Walking the Walk . . .

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In our last post, we featured Michael Novak (1933 – 2017) talking about whether nature is more about equality or inequality.

In this post, we highlight another key global point also with reference to Mr. Novak: That whenever examining the thought of great thinkers of the past, whatever the type (academic to businessperson to politician to clergyman to soldier to Mom or Dad or to friend or foe – whomever), ***always take a close look at how they actually lived their lives in relation to their thinking and what actually happened in them***.

In other words, "if you are going to talk the talk, you have to walk the walk." This is what ***life praxis*** is all about, and we'll be coming back to this point over and over again in our worldview discussions in the future.

To get back to Mr. Novak, whether one agreed or disagreed with him, most who knew him had great respect for how he lived his life and who he became.

Please note the featured articles below from the *Wall Street Journal* that appeared in 2017 the day after he died.

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REVIEW & OUTLOOK

Michael Novak

Over a long life Michael Novak traveled from writing speeches for George McGovern to serving as Ronald Reagan's ambassador to the U.N. Commission on Human Rights, reflecting an intellectual journey from socialism to capitalism. He died Friday at age 83, but in many ways he remained the boy forged in Johnstown, Pennsylvania: a working-class town of steel mills, coal mines and immigrant Slovak families trying to find their way in this new land called America.

A thinker who argued for the morality of free markets.

Raised as a Roman Catholic, Novak believed as a young man that socialism was the ideal economic arrangement. But he began to notice a flaw: While socialism sounded good in theory, in practice it didn't work—and non-elites fared the worst.

Capitalism had little high-minded theory, but in practice it literally provided the goods. If ordinary folks did so much better under capitalism, maybe the caricatures—e.g., that it is all based on greed—were wrong. Maybe free markets had their own virtues and were defensible, and even superior to other economic systems on moral grounds.

From this recognition sprang his most important work, "The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism," which changed America's public debate when it was published in 1982. "Democratic capitalism," he wrote, is "neither the Kingdom of God nor without sin. Yet all other known systems of political economy are worse. Such hope as we have for alleviating poverty and for removing oppressive tyranny—perhaps our last, best hope—lies in this much despised system."

Too many religious leaders, Novak argued, have no understanding of how economies work, and thus they focus on redistributing wealth without regard for how wealth is created. As for business leaders, he encouraged them to think of their careers as a calling, and the rest of us to recognize that capitalists are "the main hope" for billions around the world still locked in poverty.

Michael Novak also wrote for these pages, and we reprint one of his pieces nearby. As we mourn his loss, we also celebrate a life dedicated to the same proposition put forth in the Declaration of Independence: that the Creator fitted everyone to flourish in freedom—and America was founded to prove it.

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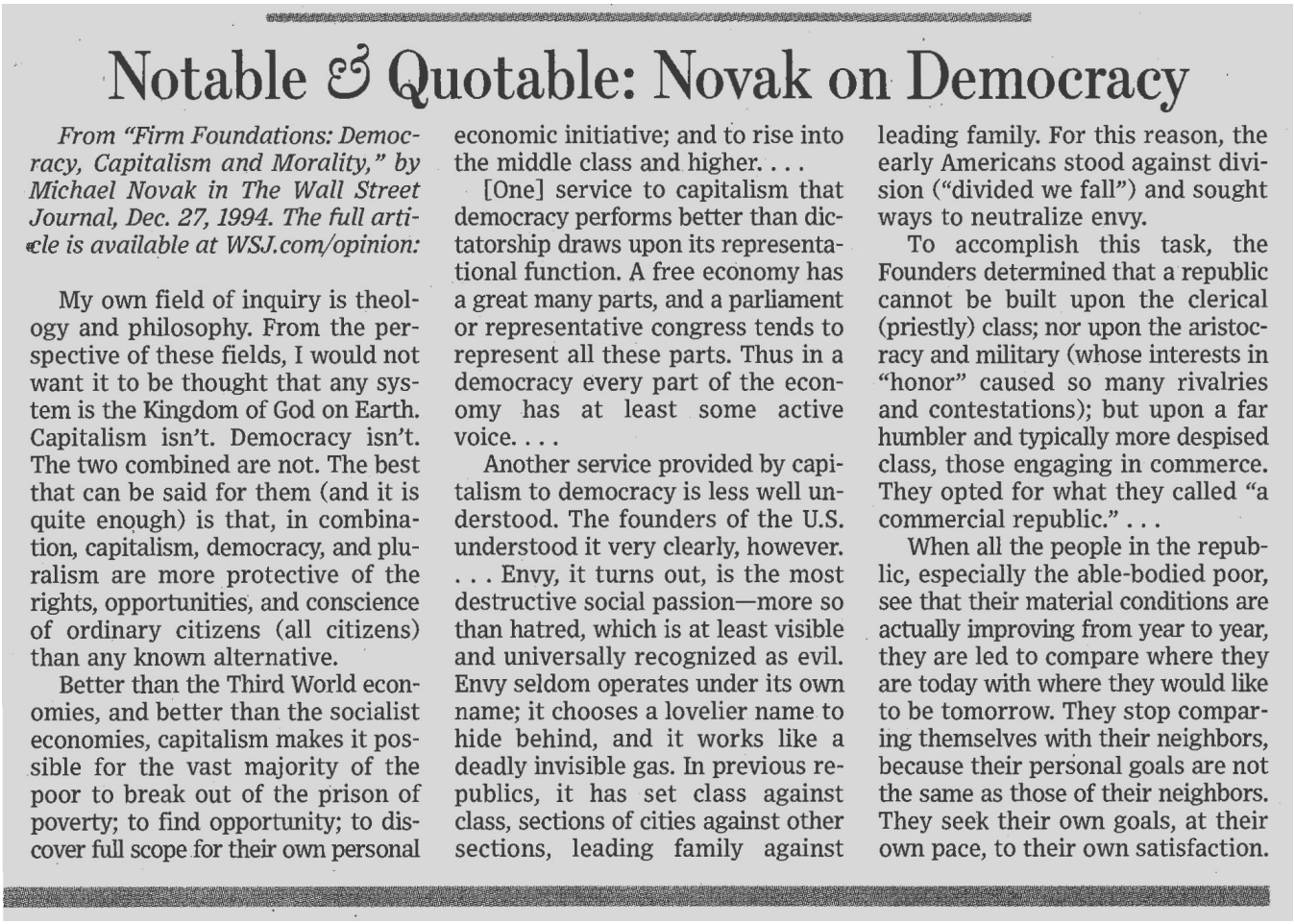

Notable & Quotable: Novak on Democracy

From "Firm Foundations: Democracy, Capitalism and Morality," by Michael Novak in The Wall Street Journal, Dec. 27, 1994. The full article is available at WSJ.com/opinion:

My own field of inquiry is theology and philosophy. From the perspective of these fields, I would not want it to be thought that any system is the Kingdom of God on Earth. Capitalism isn't. Democracy isn't. The two combined are not. The best that can be said for them (and it is quite enough) is that, in combination, capitalism, democracy, and pluralism are more protective of the rights, opportunities, and conscience of ordinary citizens (all citizens) than any known alternative.

Better than the Third World economies, and better than the socialist economies, capitalism makes it possible for the vast majority of the poor to break out of the prison of poverty; to find opportunity; to discover full scope for their own personal economic initiative; and to rise into the middle class and higher. . . .

[One] service to capitalism that democracy performs better than dictatorship draws upon its representational function. A free economy has a great many parts, and a parliament or representative congress tends to represent all these parts. Thus in a democracy every part of the economy has at least some active voice. . . .

Another service provided by capitalism to democracy is less well understood. The founders of the U.S. understood it very clearly, however. . . . Envy, it turns out, is the most destructive social passion—more so than hatred, which is at least visible and universally recognized as evil. Envy seldom operates under its own name; it chooses a lovelier name to hide behind, and it works like a deadly invisible gas. In previous republics, it has set class against class, sections of cities against other sections, leading family against leading family. For this reason, the early Americans stood against division ("divided we fall") and sought ways to neutralize envy.

To accomplish this task, the Founders determined that a republic cannot be built upon the clerical (priestly) class; nor upon the aristocracy and military (whose interests in "honor" caused so many rivalries and contestations); but upon a far humbler and typically more despised class, those engaging in commerce. They opted for what they called "a commercial republic." . . .

When all the people in the republic, especially the able-bodied poor, see that their material conditions are actually improving from year to year, they are led to compare where they are today with where they would like to be tomorrow. They stop comparing themselves with their neighbors, because their personal goals are not the same as those of their neighbors. They seek their own goals, at their own pace, to their own satisfaction.

Not many have received such immediate recognition – whether U.S. presidents or popes.

Praxis Circle is proud to have spent almost a full day with Mr. Novak in Washington interviewing him, and we are reasonably certain the interview you see on the Praxis Circle website (at the bottom of the linked page) was one of the last ones of his life.

In sum, we were drawn to Mr. Novak because of the worldview he presented concerning the American political, economic, and cultural systems as described in his beautifully simple book, *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism* (1982).

So, a very brief and highly selective summary of Mr. Novak's life is in order to begin a comparison of thought-to-action, as suggested above:

Mr. Novak was born in Johnstown, PA, where the terrible, historic flood occurred in 1889, up river from Pittsburgh, into a Catholic blue-collar family working in and around the heart of the steel industry. His grandparents had immigrated from Slovakia in the early 1900's. His family was familiar with poverty in their community, had strong union ties, and had direct experience with the "robber barons" of old.

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Tragic floods continued in blossoming Johnstown into the 1930's (population approximately 60,000) and beyond, and Mr. Novak remarked, "Just growing up in that town taught me about the nothingness that underlies all things, the immensity of human suffering, and the need to dig deep for the steady will to create anew." (pp. 11-12, see book reference at the bottom of the post).

Mr. Novak was clearly a brilliant student and rose to the top quickly, among the first in his family to do so, getting his master's in history and philosophy at Harvard.

Mr. Novak's family was strongly Democrat, and he had the distinction of having created Senator Kennedy's "New Frontier" presidential campaign slogan at age 27 in 1960; later in the 60's and 70's, he influenced the presidential campaigns of Robert Kennedy, Eugene McCarthy, and George McGovern as a strategist and speech writer. In addition, he was present for the momentous Second Vatican Council in Rome in 1963, having left pursuit of a doctorate at Harvard to become a writer.

Nonetheless, he became a professor at Stanford University and gradually began a movement to the right due to the Democrat party's continued movement to the left, increasing social violence, unintended consequences of the welfare system, and maturing views of Marxism, communism, socialism, and liberation theology, coupled with an increased understanding of the underlying bases of Western and American society, as presented in *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism*.

As he says in the video above, he wrote the book to explain to his friends, many being Marxists, basically what made America tick – knowing that all good Marxists, in particular, absolutely crave "big picture" worldview explanations for the way things are and ought to be.

Mr. Novak married the love of his life, Karen Laub, a painter, sculptor, and writer, in 1963 and was the father of three over the course of their 46-year marriage. (She died of cancer in 2009.)

Ultimately, he found his professional calling as Chair of Religion, Philosophy, and Public Policy at the American Enterprise Institute in Washington, DC, where he remained for 32 years, having served professorships at Harvard, Stanford, State University of New York, Syracuse, and Notre Dame.

He was extremely influential in intellectual circles of national politics, especially during and after the Reagan years, serving on the board of Radio Free Europe. He made a large contribution to the Fall of the Berlin Wall, and during the papacy of John Paul II, he influenced the pope significantly as he presented his own vision of what free Christian societies should strive for in the 21st century. Both men were from Eastern Europe – Slovakia and Poland – and both reached similar conclusions about the political economy, but through rather different pathways.

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It seems to us that Mr. Novak's worldview shifted somewhat as his own personal journey clarified his thinking as a Christian and as he observed how Christian principles might best be implemented, to achieve optimal results for individuals, families, and communities.

No doubt, Mr. Novak was an American patriot, but one who always held America accountable with pragmatism and common sense, which he must have received in large doses during his childhood in Western Pennsylvania.

Next time with Mr. Novak, we'll begin brief thought experiment with another Praxis Circle video of him that will help take us through the rest of this glorious month of August and get us ready for more hardcore worldview examination this fall.

"Reality does not flinch from teaching human beings hard lessons." (p. xi)

"In heavy seas, to stay on course it is indispensable to lean hard left at times, then hard right. The important thing is to have the courage to follow your intellect. Wherever the evidence leads. To the left or to the right. 'The first moral obligation is to think clearly.'" (p. xx)

–*Writing from Left to Right* (2013) by Michael Novak

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