

On Having an Agenda: a Great Blessing

A vast army of senior persons have to decide how to use their time. Our successes in health care have given us years - even decades - beyond the once-ironclad sixty-five, but they haven't filled the potential void. Our generation once thought we could glide down the sunset slope, making use of the education that had come our way and keeping fairly current, while avoiding like the plague any hint of devotion to the past.

All of a sudden, at least four topics have exploded far beyond our preparation, and summon us back to role of student. I refer to economics, information technology, and the cultures of China and India.

As to economics, or The Economy as you prefer, pre-boomer undergraduates thought they had a decent grasp of the essential terms; but no one, including the professionals, appears to have foreseen the burst out of boundaries both geographical and mathematical which have made it altogether new and just this side of a mystery religion. For example, who could have foreseen the number of zeros in your average golden parachute? Whoever would have thought that the evening news reports on the stock market would routinely include Japan, Europe, and Latin America?

The vocabulary of information technology is challenging in two ways: once you have made some headway in catching up, it has already changed out from under you. Of course we know that young people learn all this like lightning, and more power to them. IT is a skill, not a branch of learning; and in some quarters it can push out needed forms of traditional wisdom. But there is no sense in fighting it. With our tired mental apparatus, we have to overtake the hand-held speed all around us.

We used to think China and India were far away. They are down the block. But to deal with this adjustment in perspective we need to have some notion of - pardon the overworked term - the culture. What is it like to look out on life as Chinese or Indian, just to name the most numerous in their billions? Until lately, many

Americans thought that all we had to do was make ourselves clear to them, and that the superiority of our way of seeing things would be self-evident. Overnight, we are barely tolerated in much of the world where we assumed special status.

Soon, I plan to try to run through this agenda again in the light of Catholic faith. We are surely not meant to be a minority religion; but Muslim beliefs animate the lives of untold millions, for example. Our agenda has certainly to include knowledge of what makes them tick.

Christian Brother Patrick Ellis is a former president of The Catholic University of America.