



SPIRIT IN THE DESERT
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The Planet You Inherit: Letters to My Grandchildren When Uncertainty's a Sure Thing

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Reflection Guide

The Letters

1. **Author's Note, Epoch Times** and **Leaving a Legacy**. After you read the **Author's Note** and these two letters, jot down what for you are the most important takeaways. What most startled you or provoked you in these letters, provided insight or challenge? Where did that lead you? Next jot down what you would most want to keep in mind if you were to write letters about your children's or your grandchildren's world and the legacy you wish to leave.
2. **Tender Years, Something to Write Home About**, and **You Finish the Story**. These three letters to Martín (or "Spud") begin on his second birthday. The first, **Tender Years**, relays his grandfather's own early years in a rural Minnesota village. A theme is introduced that reappears in later letters; namely, how white racism took shape where no one talked about it and where no African-Americans or Native Americans were to be seen. The second letter, **Something to Write Home About**, introduces another theme later letters elaborate—where Martín and the rest of us fit into the story of life's evolution on the planet we've inherited. This is answered by asking how old Spud actually is at two. How old is he if we ask where he, as a human being, came from and how he got here. In light of evolution, is he only two or is he, as the letter speculates, older than Earth itself? The third letter, **You Finish the Story**, asks how Martín might respond to his profoundly changed world and whether, as the onset of a new life, that will be different than his grandparents' response as they conclude their lives? What animating story will be his? Where will he turn for it? Choose any one, or all, of these letters and jot down the recollections, perspectives and insights you'd pass along to your actual or prospective children or grandchildren's. Contrast the world where these arose and were at home for you with what you perceive to be the children's or grandchildren's world. How might they finish the story you began?
3. The next three letters, to Eduardo, **Love in a Time of Plague**, **"Love With Legs,"** and **The Kindness of Microbial Strangers**, are the initial efforts to set out the meanings of love. Comb these letters and jot your responses to the following assertions about love: the best synonyms of love; love for whom and what; love's painful side; the nature of prophetic love or "love with legs;" and love and worlds we cannot see, like those of microbes. Were there surprises for you?

Finally, test your own jottings against the “starter list for love” at the end of the “**Love With Legs**” letter. Are there additions you would make? Or changes, perhaps deletions?

4. Both grandsons are recipients of the next four letters, **The Core Keeps Score**, **We/They R Us**, **All Too Human**, and **Different All the Same**. While the topics and stories range widely, a common quest surfaces—the nature of human nature in a time so tumultuous that it represents epochal change. Is the human self we share in the late Holocene the same as the early Anthropocene, or not? What elements of the human condition can we depend upon and how might the continuities of human nature rise to meet unprecedented challenges? Do you agree with the contention that cultural diversity is the grandchildren’s best repertoire for meeting those challenges? In the letter, **Different All the Same**, is the contention about the uniqueness of human consciousness convincing? Again, take pen or pencil in hand and make your own notes as you read these letters in search of common human ground.
5. Martín’s middle name is Theo. It derives from *theos*, Greek for God, and occasions the next three letters, **What’s in a Name if the Name is God**, **Coming of Age**, and **The Uncontained God**. The first of the three includes his grandpa’s experience of the God he knew in his youth. You might find it of interest to compare that account with your own and then see where grandpa’s alternative, in **Coming of Age** and **The Uncontained God**, might align or deviate from yours. Do you, like the author, find yourself drawn to Einstein as outlined here? In any case, how would your understanding of God affect any letters you might write?
6. The next letters to the boys, **Democracy Endangered** and **Democracy Enhanced**, discuss the problematic faced by democracy in the US in the 2016 and 2020 elections. For **Democracy Endangered**, provide your response to the discussion of Isabel Wilkerson and Taylor Branch about the US becoming a majority of racial minorities by 2042, with whites an electoral minority for the first time. Consider Branch’s remark: “So the real question would be...if people were given the choice between democracy and whiteness, how many would choose whiteness?” In different words, would most whites rather live in a white authoritarian state than in a multi-racial democracy in which they are a minority? For the letter, **Democracy Enhanced**, do you find Dr. King’s description of genuine democracy congruent with your own, that democracy is power equitably distributed and held accountable across society’s economic, political, and social dimensions? If you differ, where and on what grounds? Reinhold Niebuhr’s theory of power and democracy seems to support King’s so you might ask the same questions of him: Do you agree with his assertions about power and democracy? If you differ, where and how? What are the essential, minimal requirements for genuine democracy? Is a certain kind of love, such as love of country, required?
7. **Aftertime** and **Elsewhere**, also written to both Eduardo and Martín, draw upon Eddie Glaude Jr.’s book, *Begin Again: James Baldwin’s America and Its Urgent Lessons for Our Own*. Baldwin’s critical “aftertimes” were two—after the Civil War and Jim Crow and after the collapse of the civil rights movement. Both betrayed the promise of “liberty and justice for all.” Baldwin’s “elsewhere” was time in Paris and Istanbul as he pondered, from a safe place abroad, what it meant to be Black in America; and as he tried to answer the question, What sort of people, finally, do we Americans take ourselves to be? For Eduardo and Martín, there is, beyond Baldwin’s two, a third aftertime—after the murder of George Floyd and the rise of Black Lives Matter. Will the collective response by white America be a third betrayal and a different answer to the question of what we take ourselves to be as a people? As though three were not enough,

Eduardo and Martín face a fourth aftertime, the time of their Great Work in the Anthropocene, a time when their generation and subsequent ones must effect “the transition from a period of human devastation of the Earth to a period when humans [are] present to the planet in a mutually beneficial manner” (Thomas Berry). How will that be accomplished, or betrayed? It might depend on the qualities of their “elsewhere” havens and “anticipatory communities.” (Have you, the reader, had havens and anticipatory communities that were formative for your future?)

8. A thesis implied in many of the letters is that a remapped and remade human Earth requires a different understanding and practice of human responsibility. That is explicit in two letters, **Responsible by Degrees** and **It’s All in the Pronouns**. Measure your own sense of responsibility against the description of it in the first of these two letters, then say whether it can be, and should be, instructed by the kind of responsibility proposed in the second, **It’s All in the Pronouns**.
9. The penultimate letter, **Becoming Good Ancestors**, is the effort of the boys’s grandfather to set out the essential elements of a way of life in and for the Anthropocene. What might they craft so that they become good ancestors for those who follow? Are the markers, or “cairns,” in this letter the ones you’d have chosen? Are there others you’d recommend for your children’s and grandchildren’s way of life? Describe any additional cairn you’d create, or modify, and say why you commend it. If you’d delete any, say which and why.
10. Finally, revisit a letter you read at the outset, **Leaving a Legacy**. But this time write your own. If this one to Eduardo and Spud is suggestive for you, well and good. Well and good, too, if reading the entire book helps shape your thoughts. But you may wish to set all that aside and simply let the words flow about the legacy you’d like to leave. When you’ve finished, put your version somewhere where you can give it a fresh look after a few months. Then, if you wish, redraft it as a gift, and put it in the hands of your dear ones for their future reference.