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April 10, 2005

Cum Laude Induction Ceremony
Durham Academy

Many years ago, I found a marvelous book. It was in a famous bookstore in Los Angeles called Papa Bach, which specialized, as you would suspect, in paperbacks. Its logo, printed on its bookmarks, was a profile of the composer J. S. Bach, and it catered to radicals, hippies, and graduate students. And there, amid the latest editions of *The People's Daily Worker* (for the radicals), and *High Times* (for the hippies), I discovered a book that had been reissued 130 years after it was written by Charles Mackay, called *Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds*—711 pages for \$3.45. Attracted by the title and by the cover illustration showing an alchemist, I sacrificed dinner and bought the book instead.

This book immediately became an indispensable source of amusement and edification, giving me a way of thinking about the ways in which people throughout history have, on occasion, been swept along by passions they scarcely understand, their reasoning power overwhelmed by an hysteria as inexplicable as it is irresistible. “In reading the history of nations,” Mackay says, “we find that, like individuals, they have their whims and their peculiarities; their seasons of excitement and recklessness, when they care not what they do. We find that whole communities suddenly fix their minds upon one object, and go mad in its pursuit; that millions of people become simultaneously impressed with one delusion and run after it. We see one nation suddenly seized, from its highest to its lowest members, with a fierce desire of military glory; another as suddenly becoming crazed upon a religious scruple; and neither of them recovering its senses until it has shed rivers of blood and sowed a harvest of groans and tears, to be reaped by its posterity.”

Among the instances of madness Mackay chronicles are the Crusades, witch-burnings, various economic crazes, the belief in alchemy, fortune-telling, the popular veneration of common criminals, and, in a fascinating 8 pages, a disease he calls “the tulipomania,” which consumed the entire nation of Holland in the 16th century. For a time, the entire economy—the entire society—of the nation was dominated by tulips, precious specimens of which were traded for vast sums. Things spun further and further out of control, with prices escalating and hysteria mounting, until, one day, the bubble burst. People suddenly came to their senses, and individuals who, just the week before, had happily traded their entire fortunes for a single rare bulb were left with a chair, a

table, the clothes on their backs, and, on the table, a tulip that might as well have been an onion.

If Mackay were alive today, he could easily find material for a second edition. Of course, everyone could make suggestions about where that material might be found. It is for some reason much easier to detect madness in the foibles of our ancestors or neighbors than in ourselves. Last fall, John and I went to Amsterdam, and over a delicious dinner at a restaurant overlooking the Amstel River, our gracious and sophisticated hosts taxed me with numerous instances of what they considered popular delusions now current in the United States: our immense deficits, our misguided war, our appalling reinvention of torture, our barbaric retention of the death penalty, our retrograde hostility to science, our inexplicable indifference to environmental degradation.

I restrained myself from pointing out the shocking tolerance for drug use in public places, the strange national fixation on alternative energy, the absence of railings along the canals and of helmets on bicycle riders; suppressed, too, was a wicked impulse to praise the abundant tulips. I reminded myself of the deeper lesson of Mackay's witty and ironic book, that nobody is immune to the peculiar disorienting force of crowd enthusiasm. Just this morning, I found yet another example of this lesson when I visited Monticello, Thomas Jefferson's plantation home. The estate is a miraculous blend of rationality and pragmatism, a self-enclosed and perfect world, where everything necessary for life was produced, made, or grown. Jefferson and his family raised their own crops, bred their own livestock, made their own barrels and even their own nails. At the Visitor's Center, I saw countless exhibits detailing instances of Jefferson's practical talents, his hands-on attention to detail. In his retirement, the genius who wrote the Declaration of Independence and founded the University of Virginia supervised the planting, kept the accounts, invented countless little domestic devices, and inspected the nails.

He tended to other mundane matters as well. One exhibit is a clipping from a newspaper—a notice written by Jefferson about a runaway slave. The sentences describing the slave's appearance, skills, and temperament have that rolling classical rhythm and sense of balance that so forcibly suggests a Founding Father. In this instance, he was a father who badly wanted his wayward son. The slave in question, although overweight, left-handed, and given to drink, must have been a valuable property, because Jefferson offered a reward for his return. Think about this. This brilliantly gifted and accomplished man, the most distinguished and enlightened citizen of his time, possessed of every gift one could want in greater abundance than one can imagine—and a man who once wrote that slavery was “an abominable crime”—still thought it was worth good money to have that runaway slave captured and returned in chains to resume his servitude, probably after a punishment that would instruct the others on the idyllic Monticello estate about the consequences of insubordination.

Unbeknownst to himself, Jefferson was engaged in one of the *most* extraordinary popular delusions ever to have visited the planet, the belief that human servitude was consistent with an enlightened and well ordered society.

You might ask what chance we have of escaping these afflictions if Thomas Jefferson could not. The answer, I think, is that we have no chance at all of escaping them altogether. The very deepest lesson to be found in Mackay's book is that, seen from the inside, our fits of collective insanity look powerfully like common sense, inherited from the past and reaffirmed on all sides. Things that turn out to be extraordinary popular delusions begin as ordinary points of consensus: inside the spell of madness, all we hear is the low hum of the voices of reason and reassurance.

The point I'm gathering toward is that we might spend some quality time wondering what crusade we are on now that appears as mere progress, what blind faith we are following that takes the form of prudence, what tulip we have sold our souls for, what witches we are persecuting. A person who does not have as part of their mental equipment the permanent suspicion that common sense might, from another point of view, be an instance of madness is exposed to every plague of insanity that passes through the village, and is not a true individual but merely an obedient, and easily manipulated, social unit.

I am impressed by the education you're getting here at Durham Academy, and very impressed by the application it took to become cum laude. In this splendidly nurturing and challenging environment, you have learned to cultivate an informed judgment and to trust it. But your education would be incomplete if it did not also instill in you a certain measure of distrust about the assumptions presented to you by your culture, the conclusions that seem to you the most self-evident. This occasional skepticism, this small but habitual allowance for doubt, does not, when compared to the amassing of information and expertise on which you are engaged, seem like a great achievement; it might even be seen as an impediment to achievement. But it might be exactly what you need on some future occasion, when a thousand friendly faces beckon you to folly, in order to avoid falling prey to *extraordinary popular delusions and the madness of crowds*.