

## Moody Radio Commentary – Dr. Mark Eckel

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In *Complications: A Surgeon's Notes on an Imperfect Science* Dr. Atul Gawande writes: [Quote] “We look for medicine to be an orderly field of knowledge and procedure. But it is not. It is an imperfect science, an enterprise of constantly changing knowledge, uncertain information, and fallible individuals . . . There is science in what we do, yes, but also habit, intuition, and sometimes plain old guessing. What seems most vital and interesting is not how much we in medicine know but how much we don't—and how we might grapple with that ignorance more wisely.” [End Quote]

Now perhaps it would be best *not* to read Gawande's book before our next doctor's visit. Yet, our allergy to uncertainty has gone undiagnosed and untreated. We *think* we are in control. We *believe* we can solve every problem. We *imagine* we have answers. But I contend that we tend to be scientifically conceited and mystery challenged. The short-story author Flannery O'Connor agreed, believing “mystery is an embarrassment to the modern mind.”<sup>1</sup> She contended [Quote] “If the writer believes that our life is and will remain essentially mysterious . . . Such a writer will be interested in what we don't understand rather than in what we do.”<sup>2</sup> [End Quote] Great literature, poetry and prose, allows us to grapple with mystery.

The novelist John Gardner says, “A brilliantly imagined novel about a rapist or murderer can be more enlightening than a thousand psycho-sociological studies.”<sup>3</sup> Louis L'Amour, an underappreciated “adventure novelist,” states clearly in his *Education of a Wandering Man*, “A book is less important for what it says than for what it makes you think.”<sup>4</sup> George Bernard Shaw employs the metaphor, “You use a glass mirror to see your face; you use works of art to see your soul.”<sup>5</sup> Perhaps it is Anton Chekhov's short story “Gooseberries” that best captures literary unlocking of human uncertainty. [Quote] Behind the door of every contented, happy man there ought to be someone standing with a little hammer and continually reminding him with a knock that there are unhappy people, that however happy he may be, life will sooner or later show him its claws, and trouble will come to him—illness, poverty, losses, and then no one will see or hear him,

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<sup>1</sup> Flannery O'Connor. 1957, 1969. *Mystery and Manners*. (Reprint, Farrar, Straus, Giroux): 124.

<sup>2</sup> Flannery O'Connor. 1997. *Mystery and Manners*. (Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux): 40-42, emphasis mine.

<sup>3</sup> John Gardner. 1978. *On Moral Fiction*. (Basic): 106.

<sup>4</sup> Louis L'Amour. 1989. *Education of a Wandering Man*. (Bantam): 100.

<sup>5</sup> George Bernard Shaw, a quote from his plays *Back to Methuselah*.

just as now he neither sees nor hears others. But there is no man with a hammer. The happy man lives at his ease, faintly fluttered by small daily cares, like an aspen in the wind—and all is well.<sup>6</sup> [End Quote]

Here is where we find ourselves at the inception of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, thinking certainty is complete and all is well. But we should contend with mystery, allowing the little man to hammer away, allowing poetry and fiction to awaken our conscience, prick our spirits, send us to confession, working as salve to cure. For Moody Radio, this is Dr. Mark Eckel, personally seeking truth wherever it's found.

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<sup>6</sup> Anton Chekhov. 1947, 1966. *The Portable Chekhov*. (Viking): 381.