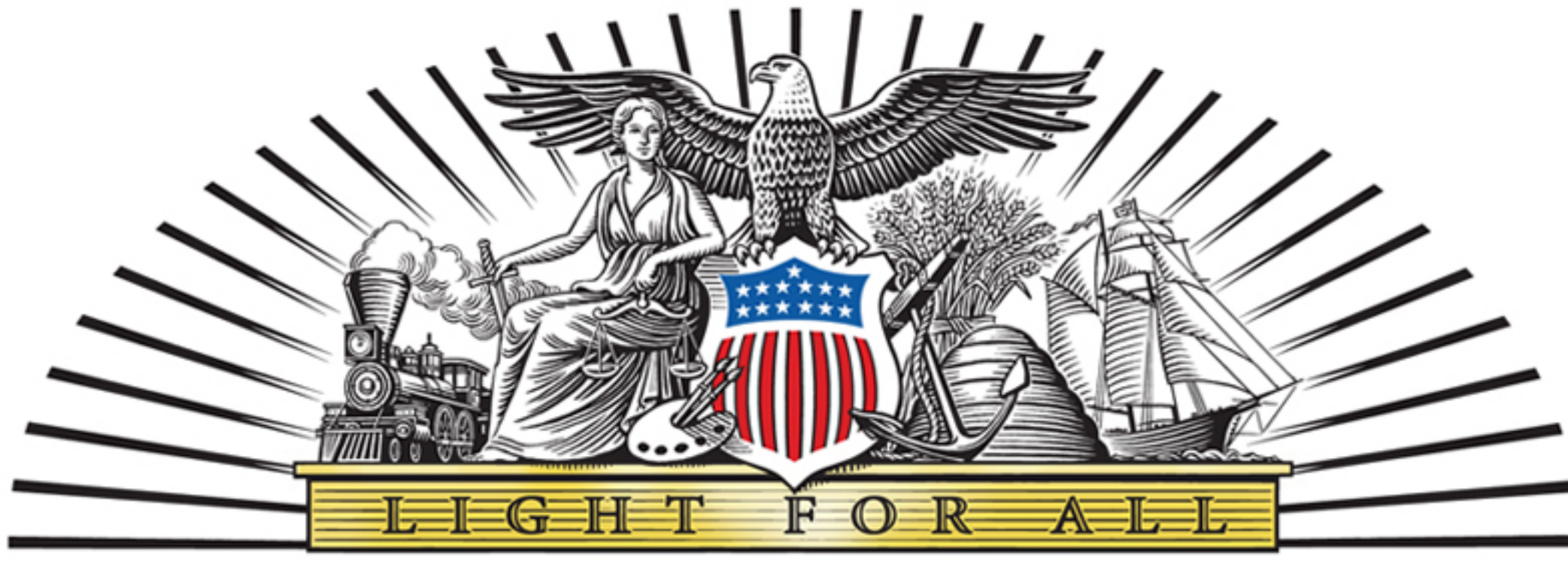


THE SUN

SUNDAY 06.18.2006 **23A**

COMMENTARY

FATHER'S DAY LESSONS OF THE HEART AND MIND

The closing argument

BY JOHN J. CONNOLLY

One day, my dad bought himself a new Rolex. He was about 70 and had cancer. His entire life he never wore a watch.

"Why would anyone need a watch?" he would ask. "I can always tell the time within five minutes." As kids, we would test him and, more often than not, he was right.

"What do you think of my new watch," he asked from the couch. He sat slightly tilted, maybe from the pain, with a blanket over his lap and a dozen pill bottles on the coffee table beside him. Slanting afternoon sunlight filled the room from a row of windows behind him. I was home for a weekend visit during that long last year.

"I cannot believe you bought that thing," I replied.

Off I went on a diatribe about expensive analog watches. Who would want a Rolex? My watch keeps perfect time, tells me the day and date and even corrects for leap year. It wakes me up in the morning and records my laps in the pool. It cost maybe \$35. Who would spend 100 times that much for a watch that is one-tenth as useful? And for a person who hasn't worn a watch in 50 years? Incalculable.

He looked at me, bemused. I knew that if he felt better, he would have fought back. This is a work of art, he would say, not a computer chip on a plastic strap. Look at this bezel! He wouldn't have been quite sure what a bezel was, but he'd guess that I'd have no clue. This *chronometer* took years to assemble, he'd tell me. It's a badge of character and substance. A watch tells so much more than time.

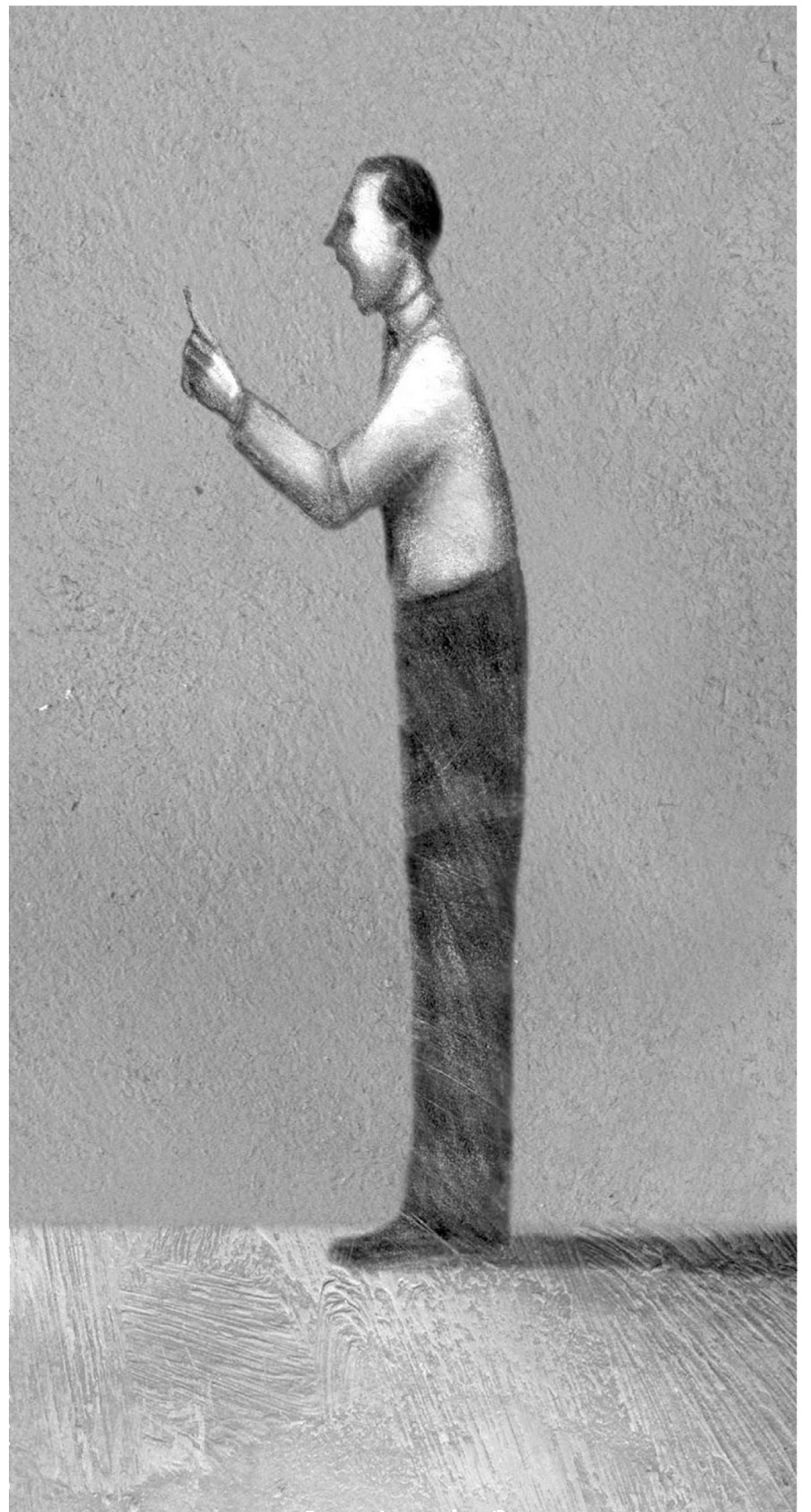
"Yes, a good one tells the day and date, and some even tell the temperature," I would have replied.

I can hear the entire back-and-forth in my head, although it never happened. He didn't have the energy. He just looked down at his beautiful Rolex and smiled. "It's a quarter past four."

For him, the argument was the message. He relished arguing with his five children, one at a time or all together at the family dinner table. He took pride in his ability to start an argument and even more in his ability to keep it focused, controlled and unemotional. An argument was not a fight. It was a sign of deep respect for another person's point of view. The unspoken rules were simple. We argued in one sitting — dinner table, car ride, wherever. No running to the encyclopedia. You could rely on knowledge, logic, analogy and precedent, in the form of your opponent's prior words and deeds.

I had scores of these arguments with him, mainly as a teenager. We regularly argued about subjects that neither of us understood. I remember a long one about whether rail and car tunnels were built under the riverbed or through the water. I insisted that they were built into the earth. Haven't you seen the doors in the Holland Tunnel? Do you think they open into the river?

He had an equally unconvincing position, based on his "experience" in the industry — as a hapless elevator constructor for six months before he went to graduate school (for psychology). We never bothered to look up the correct



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answer, and it was years before an engineering friend told us that tunnels are built both ways. Neither of us really cared.

Not all of the arguments were quite so meaningless, and I never acquired his mastery of the process. I always had to resist acrimony, and our arguments subsided as I grew older and lost both time and patience. But his incomprehensible purchase of a Rolex revived my spirit. Maybe I was a bit too gleeful, but surely Mr. I Don't Need A Watch should have expected a thrashing.

Later that evening, my dad slept on the couch, breathing heavily. My mom and I went to dinner. "How did you like his new watch?" she asked. The watch! "Don't get me started," I said. "It's got to be the dumbest thing he's ever bought. How much did he pay ..."

My Mom cut me off. "He bought that watch for you," she said. "He wanted to have something to leave for you, so he would be remembered."

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