

What Came to Mind: Thoughts Late in Life

Robert Griffin
2019



May 10, 1942.

To Dee

Table of Contents

Introduction i

1. *Michel Foucault* June, 2007. 1
2. *A Very Big Regret* July, 2007. 12
3. *Jack Kerouac in Big Sur* September, 2007. 20
4. *Chuck Davey* September, 2007 22
5. *Victoria's Dogs* November, 2007. 29
6. *The Beans Story* December, 2007 34
7. *Self-Abuse* February, 2008. 36
8. *Robert Henri* February, 2008. 41
9. *Steve Ditko* August 2008. 49
10. *Philippe Petit* August, 2008. 53
11. *Gorgeous George* September, 2008. 56
12. *Eddie Waitkus* September, 2008. 62
13. *John Lennon's Lifeline* October, 2008 65
14. *The Barber* November, 2008 72
15. *The Death of Jean-Paul Sartre* April, 2009. 78
16. *Being a Modern Day Spinoza* September, 2009. 83
17. *Straightening Out Twyla Tharp's Thinking* March, 2010. 88
18. *Cocoons and Butterflies* March, 2010. 91
19. *"Unchained Melody"* March, 2010. 97
20. *Scaredy Squirrel* June, 2010. 101
21. *Dick W C Anderson and Me* July, 2010. 104
22. *An Evening Meal* February, 2011. 117
23. *Jerry Lewis' Socks* March, 2011. 120
24. *Trying to Charm the Uninterested* April, 2011. 125
25. *est and the Human Potential Movement* August, 2011. 128
26. *Dog Shows* November, 2011. 146
27. *Unimpressives* March, 2012. 151
28. *Telek* April, 2012. 155

29. *Playing One Game at a Time* July, 2012. 158
30. *A Dream* September, 2012. 162
31. *A Big Grey Poodle-Looking Dog* November, 2012. 164
32. *Nietzsche's Maxim* November, 2012. 166
33. *Pseudo-Self-Effacement* May, 2013. 169
34. *The Daily Puppy* June, 2013. 175
35. *Doing Here Now* August 2014. 177
36. *Arthur Schopenhauer* August, 2014. 180
37. *Laura Jane Jones* December, 2014. 187
38. *Factoids* January, 2015. 192
39. *Losing My Mind* January, 2015. 195
40. *To My Place* May, 2015. 200
41. *Embarrassing Moments* June, 2015. 202
42. *Mortality* July, 2015. 207
43. *"River of No Return"* October, 2015. 217
44. *Living "Blind"* January, 2016. 221
45. *Waiting* February, 2016. 224
46. *The Hollywood Argyles and Kinji Shibuya* Sept., 2016. 232
47. *Riders Rules for Cowboys and Cowgirls* February, 2017. 240
48. *Snow Days* February, 2017. 243
49. *Jerry Kindall* December, 2017. 246
50. *Dad's Stories* January, 2018. 248
51. *Dr. Toni Grant* March, 2018. 263
52. *The Baritone Horn* March, 2018. 269
53. *William Stoner* April, 2018. 272
54. *Guilt* June, 2018. 277
55. *Dee's AirPods* July, 2018. 282
56. *"It's Only Make Believe"* July, 2018. 285
57. *Jack Jarpe* August. 2018. 292
58. *Dealing With Reviews* September, 2018. 296
59. *Dreams As Life Lessons* October, 2018. 299
60. *Getting Better At Golf (And Other Things Too).* Jan., '19 305

Introduction

It's January of 2019 as I write this sitting on my twenty-year-old black leather couch in a two-room rented apartment—the townhouse I owned was getting difficult for me to keep up--where I live alone in Burlington, Vermont. Last May, I celebrated (or better, acknowledged) my 78th birthday, so I'm bearing in on eighty. Three-and-a-half years ago, June of 2015, I retired from a 51-year career in education—really, that long—first, for five years, as a high school teacher, and then as a professor of education in colleges of education, 41 years of that at the University of Vermont.

Approaching twelve years ago, in June of 2007, I set up a personal web site and I've posted crafted writings continuously since that time, whatever I felt pressed to clarify and express, on any topic, in any area. I used the style and tone that best suited whatever I was writing. I didn't concern myself with length; the selections in this collection range from one page to eighteen pages. I would have been fine stopping at any point if I didn't feel compelled to get something onto the computer screen, but the push from inside me was never absent for more than a few days during the whole of the time. These writings were challenging and satisfying for me to do, and I'm better—clearer, stronger, more directed--for having done them.

This collection is addressed to a general, not a professional, audience. To it together, I gave myself a page limit—300 pages. Staying within that quota, I selected website writings over the years that seemed best for this project, which is essentially an exploration of taking on the challenge to live well—honorably, effectively, and gratifyingly--as the person one truly is. I didn't have a list of topics I made sure to include, and I didn't pay

attention to how many selections there were from any particular year. None of these writings has been published elsewhere.

I wrote one thing at a time. I did the best I could with that intellectual and writing challenge for itself, not as part of something larger. This book is sixty individual efforts. Even though I didn't consciously try to create it, I think you'll find coherence and progression, even a memoir of sorts, here. This book has an identity of its own, separate from its components.

Labels that apply to various selections include commentary, reflection, report, philosophical inquiry, analysis, profile, reminiscence, and suggestion. Essay fits a lot of them. At heart, an essay is a quest, a search, an attempt to make better sense of something. That's very much here. As I was composing these writings, however, I only saw them as thoughts, nothing more defined than that, and let each be whatever it was, no requirements, no limitations. Let's leave it that the writings in this collection are thoughts.

What might you get out of reading this book? I believe, I hope, you will find a fair amount of it unique, informing, stimulating, entertaining, and moving. I'd like to think there are ideas in these pages that, if applied, will contribute to improving the quality of your life.

These writings span the period during which I went from being old to, now, elderly. At 67, when I wrote my notes in response to a biography of the French philosopher Michel Foucault, the first selection in this book, I was a university professor, teaching my classes, attending committee meetings, advising students, my name was on an office door. Even though I was advanced in years even then, I had good energy. I went to restaurants and entertainments and took part in social gatherings. I traveled extensively. While I have always felt distant from the world, within reason I was part of it.

At 78 and retired, I have no public identity or role to play, no office with my name on the door, no place I have to be each day, and I rarely go anywhere. This morning, a Friday, I slept until I woke up, at 7:15 a.m., and that was just fine. It could have been 8:15 or 9:15, or noon; that would have been OK too. To me now, the world is even more “over there” than it has always been. To the world, I’m the old man on the street corner shivering in the cold on a winter day waiting for a bus.

My mind seems clear these days. Or clear enough anyway. I couldn’t write what I did ten years ago, or even three years ago, or two years ago; close perhaps, but not quite. Even if mentally I were up to it, I don’t have the energy now to write all that I did the past almost twelve years. It’s my energy level, so much lower now, that is the most noticeable difference I experience in 2019 compared to 2007. I’m wiped out from putting this book together, which besides this brief introduction is basically a collating job. Yesterday I went to the university library to take some books back and get new ones. It was all I could do to get there and back home. A back problem, which I didn’t have ten years ago, I need surgery, and vertigo from Meniere’s disease, an inner ear disorder, made the trek to the library even tougher than it otherwise would have been. I read my books and stream my films and I sit by the lake near where I live, and I enjoy all of that, but just getting to Hannaford’s super market, which I need to do sometime today, tests my outer limit, that’s my reality now.

I’m finding that the most gratifying aspect of this last going-on-twelve years for me is the feeling that, yes, I have made good use of the capability and opportunity I had available to me during this period. I believe I have spent my time wisely and well. As it turned out, this has been the best time for me of them all, and this late in life I wouldn’t have expected it to be.

Also uplifting, I’ve come to realize that no matter what one’s physical or mental state, there is always something good to do if

you look around for it—positive, enjoyable, personally elevating, helpful to others. Right now, writing this introduction is a good thing for me to do, and I'm happy, content, doing it, I believe in doing it. Two more paragraphs after this one, and then a last sentence, and I'll be done with this introduction. Then I'll have a tuna and cheese sandwich and a glass of cranberry juice for lunch, and then read some Chekhov short stories. That will be a good thing to do too. As long as we possess the incredible gift of life, there'll be something good to do . . . always. That's wonderful.

The readings in this collection are in chronological order. I begin each with the month and year I wrote it. I tinkered with titles and did some editing for length and clarity and changed a few names and places, but I didn't alter the content, cross-reference, or do updates beyond a few terse current-status asides in brackets. Some of what's here is scholarly, heavy, though I believe it is accessible to a lay audience, and some of this is observational, light. What ties all of these readings together is that in every instance what I was writing mattered for something in my life at that time. Perhaps some of what's here matters for something in your life now.

These selections are self-contained, but I suggest you read them in the order they are here. Start at the beginning with the Michel Foucault notes in June 2007 and go through the years with me. Having completed this book, I see that there's a story told here, with a narrative arc and resolution, which you may find interesting or informative.

Good luck with your reading.

June, 2007.

The Passion of Michel Foucault, a biography by James Miller, was published in 1993. I read it when it first came out and have gone back to it a couple of times since, browsing sections here and there before putting it back on my library shelf.

Michel Foucault (1926-1984) was a French philosopher who taught at the College de France and other universities, including in the United States. He authored critical studies of social institutions, among them psychiatry, medicine, and the prison system. He also wrote about the history of sexuality and the relationship between power, knowledge, and human discourse. His outlook has been described as post-modernist or post-structuralist. I'm interested in his take on the things I care about and haven't tried to slot him into a philosophical category.

This last time I took the book off the shelf, a couple of days ago, I reviewed the phrases and sentences, sometimes a paragraph, I had underlined, the only time I did that, I suppose eight or ten years ago. In this writing, I will reproduce selected underlines—set in from the margins, smaller type--and follow each with a self-referential note prompted by it. The number at the end of each quote is the page it is on.

...understanding his life as a teleological quest. 7

Teleological quest refers to Foucault's attempt to find, or ascribe, meaning and purpose to his life. What does it matter that I am alive and this human being and no other? What ought I strive to become, to accomplish, while I possess the gift of existence? Foucault asked these questions from an early age. I'm asking them now.

. . . corporeal experimentation that formed an integral part of his philosophical quest. 8

Foucault was all but unique as a philosopher, as an academic, in underscoring the importance of the body, the organism, sensation. I have lived detached from the physical.

“At every moment, step, one must confront what one is thinking and saying with what one is doing, what one is.” 9

Personal integrity: the alignment of my inherent nature, insights, commitments, and behaviors.

“The key to the personal poetic attitude of a philosopher is not to be sought in his ideas, as if it could be deduced from them, but rather in his philosophy-as-life, in his philosophical life, his ethos.” 9

After spending my working life in academic settings, which have so much been about words connected only to other words, a focus on my life, my ethos, my spirit, is inviting.

. . . resistance to institutions that would smother the free spirit and stifle the right to be different. 13

I find fault with the way institutions and political systems co-opt and subordinate individuals.

“Do not ask who I am and do not ask me to remain the same.”¹⁹

I don't want to feel as if I have to keep something going, whether it is thinking a certain way, writing on certain topics in a certain way, or anything else. I'm fine with being asked who I am and I'm speaking to that question here.

Foucault was the kind of thinker who enacts his ideas through his own personal odyssey, in his writing, of course, but also in his life. 19

I've brought my life into my writing, and my writing into my life.

“I believe that someone who is a writer is not simply doing his work in his books, but that his major work is, in the end, himself in the process of writing his books.” 19

I connect with the idea that my work is myself, and that teaching and writing are aspects of that project.

Foucault perceived death as the constant companion of life, its white brightness always lurking in the black coffer of the body. 20

At 67, the prospect of death is always, at some level, in my awareness. Whether it will be in fifteen years or five, the end will come soon enough.

He described the appeal to him of certain extreme forms of passion as a means of seeing the world completely differently. Through intoxication, reverie, the Dionysian abandon of the artist, the most punishing of ascetic practices, and an uninhibited exploration of sadomasochistic eroticism, it seemed possible to breach, however briefly, the boundaries separating the conscious and unconscious, reason and unreason, pleasure and pain—and, at the ultimate limit, life and death—thus starkly revealing how distinctions central to the play of true and false are pliable, uncertain, contingent. 30

From earliest childhood I've felt unwanted and threatened. Perhaps that has led me to go emotionally dead, live my life in survival mode, wait it out and endure rather than truly live.

“Each time I have attempted to do theoretical work, it has been on the basis of elements from my own experience.” Each of his books is a fragment of an autobiography. 31

The idea of my writing being a fragment of an autobiography has a favorable ring.

“One writes to become someone other than who one is.” 33

I want my writing to serve, and document, my quest to become the person I am.

He had written these books [his last two], he explained, in an effort to get free of oneself, to let go of oneself, to lose one’s fondness for one’s self (the French phrase is *se déprendre de soi-même*). 34

I want to grab hold of myself, not be free of myself. I want to find fondness for myself, not lose it.

. . . undertaking how, and up to what limit, it would be possible to think differently. 36

I was so certain about everything, and in the last few years that has turned around.

Sartre’s [Jean-Paul Sartre, French philosopher] stern call to uphold freedom and accept responsibility, even in a world bereft of redeeming significance, hit home. Given the absurdity of wars, slaughters and despotism, it seemed to be up to the individual subject to give meaning to his existential choices.³⁸

The affirmation of human freedom and accepting personal responsibility for defining my life and giving it meaning through the self-chosen actions I take moment-to-moment.

Whether transcendence was understood properly or not—and with an esoteric writer like [Martin] Heidegger it is always hard to know—this idea was implicitly the starting point for all of the dominant French philosophers of the post-war period, from Sartre and [Maurice] Merleau-Ponty to Foucault and Jacques Derrida. A distinctly human capacity (though most human beings, Heidegger thought, failed to grasp its significance), transcendence gave to every single person the power to start over, to begin anew—to take up, reshape, and transform the world. 48

“Transcendence” and “take up, reshape, and transform the world” seem a reach for me, but perhaps in the time I have left I can become better as a person and make a modest contribution to the world.

. . . it is helpful to recall the moral aim of Sartre’s philosophy. This he once summed up, in a word, as authenticity. This meant having a true and lucid consciousness of a situation and assuming the responsibilities and risks it involves. That these criteria will not be met by most people most of the time, Sartre makes plain. 52

My task is to be awake and aware, to see things as they are, and then do what is true and good regardless of negative consequences to me personally.

Plagued by an endless series of somatic problems—stomach ailments, acute myopia, nervous disorders—Nietzsche felt increasingly isolated, uncertain as never before about where he was going and what he would make of himself. . . . [Nietzsche] “It is the free man’s task to live for himself, without regard to

others.” . . . “When each man finds his own goal in someone else, then nobody has any purpose of his own in existing.” . . . “By trying to conform to the expectations of others, men reveal a pathetic modesty.” 67-68

My levels of physical and mental health significantly influence the direction and quality of my life. I need to get as healthy as I can. I want to live with regard for both my and others’ worth and wellbeing; define my purpose in life for myself and not allow it to be imposed upon me; and conform to the highest expectations I have for myself, not the expectations of others.

[Nietzsche] “They [men and women] are all afraid. They hide behind custom and opinion. Basically, every man knows quite well that, being unique, he is on this earth only once, and that no accident, however unusual, could ever again combine that wonderful diversity into the unity that he is.” 68

I haven’t known “quite well” that I am unique and that I am on this earth only once. I need to comprehend these realities and their implications more fully.

[Nietzsche] “Be yourself! You are none of the things you now do, think, desire.” 69

Be yourself is an injunction I have accepted. I am some of the things I now do, think, and desire. I want to be more of them.

[Nietzsche] “True, there are countless paths and demigods that would like to carry you across the river, but only at the price of your self; you would pledge your self and lose it. In this world, there is one unique path which no one but you may walk. Where does it lead? Do not ask, take it.” 70

I spent my life walking someone else’s path rather than my own. In recent years I’ve been on my path and it’s been good.

[Nietzsche] “The secret for harvesting from existence the greatest fruitfulness and the greatest enjoyment is to *live dangerously!*” . . . “There is no drearier and more repulsive creature than the man who has evaded his genius.” . . . “The riddle which man must solve is being what he is and not something else.” 71

It’s as if at a time in our life we are at the station when a train (like the “living dangerously” train) makes perhaps its only stop. If we don’t know about it or miss it, we can’t count on a second chance to catch it. Other trains are coming (like the “honest expression” and “peace and quiet” trains), but very possibly not the one we missed. I’ve missed some trains in my life, and I don’t want to miss any more of them.

[Foucault as a teacher] “I consider myself more of an artisan doing a piece of work and offering it for consumption than a master making his slaves work.” If his students had a question, he would answer it; if they needed help, he would try to provide it. Otherwise, he preferred simply to let them go their own way, offering himself as an example, rather than trying to impose doctrinal conformity. 181

The approach to teaching I favor.

“Humanism is everything in Western civilization that restricts the desire for power.” Nietzsche’s central concept—power—here, finally, claimed its rightful place as a central term in Foucault’s own vocabulary. To reach this goal required revolutionary action—a simultaneous agitation of consciousness and institutions. 199

I’ve never thought of myself as powerful, or considered it my place to engage the world directly. Can I change that? Do I want to? Do I need to?

“The relationships we have with ourselves must be relationships of differentiation, of creation, of innovation. To be the same is really boring.” 256

My relationship with myself involves valuing opposites: differentiation and integration; creation and discovery; innovation and implementation; change and continuity.

Faced with any form of government, be it liberal or totalitarian, it was the vocation of the intellectual to exercise a decisive will not to be governed. 316

I cherish my freedom, my autonomy, particularly the independence of my mind.

The great Nietzschean questions: Why am I alive? What lesson am I to learn from life? How did I become what I am, and why do I suffer from being what I am? 319

I am among those for whom suffering is a consequence of being who they are. I need to learn to embrace suffering, not run from it.

In order to pave the way for a rupture with one's self, with one's past, with the world, and with all previous life, it is necessary to jettison false opinions, evil masters, and old habits. This entails not only a kind of ongoing critique, examining and evaluating every facet of experience, but also an ongoing combat and struggle in which the outcome is ambiguous, reversible, and always uncertain. 325

For me the past decade has involved jettisoning opinions, masters, and habits. I expect that to continue and welcome it, despite any combat, struggle, ambiguity, and uncertainly that is involved.

“The main interest in life and work is to become someone that you were not in the beginning.” 328

I seek to become the best possible manifestation of the person I was at the beginning, before the conditioning—from my family, schools, the media, my work settings, and personal relationships—that shaped me into something other than what I am.

Foucault was always very much alone, recalls one of his close associates. 328

I have always felt alone.

[the dandy] . . . making of his body, his behavior, his feelings, his passions, his very existence, a work of art, struggling, in this way, to get free of himself—and then to invent himself. 334

The dandy consciously wears a mask, creates a persona, chooses to be someone other than he was born to be or is inside, sees life as a performance art. Intriguing possibility. At this late stage of my life, rather than invent myself I want to be myself.

. . . the will to live a beautiful life—the positive side, as it were, of the decisive will not to be governed. The aim, was to leave to others memories of a beautiful existence. 346

I never thought of living a beautiful life. It would be good to use this ideal as a guiding principle now.

“What will come next? I am going to take care of myself.”³⁴⁷

I have taken care of myself quite well, but I aim to do better in this regard.

That he felt moved to exercise care was due neither to a divine law, nor a natural law, nor a rational rule, but rather to a passion for beauty, which led him to try to give his existence the most beautiful form possible. By approaching one's life in such frankly aesthetic terms, one might turn one's self into a kind of existential artwork—a work that might enable the artist to transform a part of himself from which he feels free, and from which the work has contributed to freeing him. 347

I didn't perceive my life a work of art when I was young and wish I had. In the upcoming years, I intend to see my teaching and writing, and my life generally, more in aesthetic terms. I hope doing that frees me, gives expression to my essence as a human being, and contributes to others.

Freedom can be found, he said, in a context. Power puts into play a dynamic of constant struggle. There is no escaping it. But there is freedom in knowing the game is yours to play. Don't look to authorities; the truth is in your self. Don't be scared. Trust your self. Don't be afraid of living. And don't be afraid of dying. Have courage. Do what you feel you must: desire, create, transcend. You can win the game. 352

Freedom. Power. Struggle. Living. Dying. Fear. Courage. Self-truth. Self-trust. Desire. Creation. Transcendence. Playing the game. Winning the game. Concepts I need to define and relate to the conduct of my own life, and to the lives of others.

Foucault, in effect, was conceding his own inability, when all was said and done, to escape the duty to tell the truth—above all, the truth about who he was and what he had become. 358

I feel compelled to tell the truth about who I am and what I have become.

He described how Socrates exercised care by putting others to the question and his soul to the test, refining a new kind of art, of not being governed, exhibiting an admirable and unwavering kind of courage in his willingness to reason without direction from another. The philosopher should be governed not by popular opinion but rather by the convictions he had forged for himself during his own search for truth.³⁵⁹

This concept of the philosopher inspires. I'd broaden it to apply to anyone

The true life can only be embodied. Viewing life as an adventure to be lived in the spirit of Odysseus, the Cynics supposed that each might find his natural home, but only by resisting the blandishments of slavery, setting sail—and then drawing the line, stubbornly staying the course, ignoring the Song of the Sirens. ³⁶⁰

I have a painting of Odysseus and the Sirens on my living room wall.

Diogenes approached philosophy as a field of limit-experience, pushing through to its breaking point—just like Michel Foucault. Putting truth to the test, he mocked, shocked, and provoked—just like Michel Foucault. Above all, by living a life of bodily freedom, he issued a challenge to the society he criticized and rejected. In Foucault's words: "The *bios philosophicos* is the animality of being human, renewed as a challenge, practiced as an exercise—and thrown in the face of others as a scandal." ³⁶³

I strive toward a free and corporeal and reality-grounded existence as the person I am.

2

A Very Big Regret

July, 2007.

A very big regret in my life is being deeply involved in organized sports as a teen and young adult. This was in Minnesota and it was a half century ago.

Into my early twenties, sports were it for me: baseball and basketball as a participant and fan, and football as a fan. I gave time and energy to sports and, for all practical purposes, nothing else. I went to practices, played organized and pickup games, watched games on television, and read sport magazines and the sports section of the newspaper. I looked upon star players on the pro, college, and high school teams as special people, heroes, exemplary beings. I fantasized about becoming a major league baseball player—a completely unrealistic aspiration--and had no other long-term goals, say, to develop my mind, attend a good university, be successful in a profession, create a family, or serve other people and society.

My family meant little to me, and I meant little to them. I had no religious or spiritual impulse or connection to a church. School meant nothing. My most salient memory of elementary school was at six and seven when frequently, for being bad, I was banished by my teacher to the narrow unlighted cloakroom adjacent to the classroom where children stored their belongings. There I was, alone and numb, sitting on the floor up against the wall amid coats and overshoes. I don't know what I was doing so wrong at that age, but I was doing something, or was something, that put teachers off. I never opened a book in high school but somehow I got through, or was I shuttled through, my classes. What happened in the world meant nothing. Travel meant nothing. The arts meant nothing. Girls were alien creatures. In high school I hung around a group of guys who played on my sport teams and

no one else, and we talked superficially about sports and nothing else.

Was I any good at the sports I played? Not really. I was good enough to make the teams and start right away in baseball and eventually in basketball, but mediocrity was my upper limit of achievement. In my last year of high school baseball in Saint Paul, the local newspaper named me to the honorable mention all-city team. Not first team, not second team, not third team; honorable mention. In basketball, I sat the bench until my senior year in high school and then started. I suppose I averaged about five points a game that senior year.

In my junior year of basketball, I played a bit in the early-season non-conference games and scored in all of them, but I didn't get to take part in a second of conference action, even if we were way ahead or way behind. I was the only player on the team that didn't get into a conference game. Did I think to ask the coach what was going on, or consider the possibility that there might be something better to do with my time than sit on the bench and watch others play? Never.

I was put ahead a grade in elementary school; I never went to the fifth grade. The school didn't say anything to me about skipping a grade. The last day of the fourth grade, my teacher gave me a fifth-grade geography book and told me to read it over the summer. I didn't think to ask why, and never looked at the book. During the summer, my mother mentioned in passing that the school told her they had decided my problem was I was bored and that being in a higher grade would motivate me, so I was going to be in the sixth grade in the fall. I wasn't bored but rather damaged by the situation I was living in at home, but the school people never got close enough to me to find out what was going on with me.

So I was a year younger than the others in my class the rest of the way through school—a detriment in sports--and graduated

from high school a month after I turned seventeen. My classmates were eighteen. I immediately joined the army for two years. Why? So I could play baseball in the army and be older and more mature when I played for the University of Minnesota baseball team. I never spoke to my parents about going into the army and they never asked what I was going to do after high school. The day to leave for basic training at Fort Carson in Colorado, one of my sports compatriots gave me a ride to the airport for my first ever plane flight.

My interest in the U of M baseball team was one-way. The coach of the team, Dick Siebert never expressed any interest in me. There was no offer of an athletic scholarship. I'm sure Siebert didn't know I was alive. But there I was, seventeen and eighteen years old, in Fort Lewis in Washington state playing second base on a battalion team and hitting about .260 and leading the league in errors and counting the days—there are a lot of them in two years—until I would get out of the army and play college baseball.

I got through my two-year army enlistment—a wasted two years of my life as I think about it now--at nineteen and tried out for the U of M's team. In those years, freshmen weren't eligible to play on the varsity team. I made the cut and was on the freshmen team. I played second base—weak arm, shortest toss to first—along with two other guys. We didn't play other teams, just a few intra-squad games.

I offhandedly signed up for courses my freshman year—I was in school to play ball. I decided I was majoring in political science because one of the guys standing around second base with me on the freshman team said that's what he was doing. That was good enough for me. I had no idea what political science was. It had something to do with politics I assumed, although I didn't know a Democrat from a Republican.

The University of Minnesota is a huge place—50,000 students. Nobody knew that I was there. A professor was assigned

as my advisor and I went to his office each quarter—three quarters in an academic year--for him to sign the program of courses I had drawn up. He would barely acknowledge my presence and without comment sign the program I'd drawn up and go on with whatever he was doing. One time when I went to his office to get my program signed he was on the phone. "Hold on a second," he told the caller. "I'll get back to you after I get rid of a guy that just came in the door." Was I offended by that comment? No.

I remember my first test result. It was a paper in freshman English and 90 and above was an A, 80 to 89 a B, 70 to 79 a C, and so on. I got in the low 50s F. It never entered my mind to talk to the professor or his teaching assistant about that abysmal outcome. I skipped classes left and right. One time I went to the final exam at the time and place scheduled on the course syllabus and the room was empty. They'd changed rooms and I hadn't been in class enough to know about the change, and I didn't know anyone I was in class with, so there was no one to tell me.

I never missed a freshman baseball team practice, though, or the sport section of the newspaper, or a sport magazine, or a game on television. Among the magazines were the pre-season reviews of the teams. There I'd be, reading about the prospects of Vanderbilt's football team in the Southeastern Conference. I remember watching NBA basketball on sunny afternoons in a darkened room by myself eating potato chips and candy bars--I think a case could be made that there is no sadder human activity than that, unless it is reading about Vandy's prospects in the SEC.

At the end of my freshman year I was put on scholastic probation. I never knew I was on probation, though, until I got a letter telling me I was off probation, because I missed the letter telling me I was on probation.

I tried out for the varsity baseball team as a sophomore. I didn't make it, but for some reason I wasn't told to go away—which, looking back on it, would have been a gift. Instead, I was

kept on as a non-roster member of the team. I wasn't issued a uniform or a bat. I stood in the infield while the roster players took batting practice. When they took fielding practice, I was excused. I played in a few intra-squad games with no preparation at all using a borrowed bat. On one occasion, I was employed as a base runner so the real players could practice their relay throws. After a few times huffing and puffing around the bases—the potato chips and candy bars had taken their effect—I slowed down significantly and Siebert chewed me out for ruining the players' timing on their throws.

Since I was never issued a cap, I'd be standing in the infield in a blue cap I owned while everybody else had on a maroon and gold cap with an "M" on it. After a couple weeks, a player on the team, Barry Effress, gave me one of his old caps to wear. It was faded, but it was better than the blue one. The problem with Barry's cap was it was too small for me. I was able to jam it on my head, but I wound up with headaches and an indentation in my forehead that took about a half hour to go away every day. But at least I wasn't wearing a blue cap while everybody else was wearing a maroon and gold cap.

Except for Barry, who not only gave me a cap but let me use his bat during the few intra-squad games I was allowed to participate in and spoke to me, no one else on the team acknowledged my presence. Wherever you are today, Barry Effress, if you are still alive, thank you. [2017: Barry has passed on.]

As for Siebert, that sophomore year he spoke to me exactly three times. I have already mentioned the first time, when he berated me for not running faster when I was base running fodder during relay practice. The second time was after I struck out during an intra-squad game. I was overmatched by the pitching in any case, but it certainly didn't help to have gone to the plate with a borrowed bat without having had any batting practice and in the

freezing cold—this was Minnesota in March. The mound has been lowered since, but in those years you could get nosebleed on the top of that thing. So there I am, standing up to the plate with Barry's bat in my delicate hands and with my small wrists—too small for a baseball player—and having had no practice trying to hit baseballs that looked like lightning bolts being fired down on me by Zeus.

After taking three whiffs at the ball while falling away—the truth was I was afraid I was going to get hit by a pitch—as I was walking back to the bench, Siebert, who was sitting in the first row of the first-base-side stands, barked, “Come here!” I veered to my right and walked toward him. Siebert, was about fifty at the time and had the persona of a longshoreman with crotch itch. He thundered, “You're swinging like Ted Kluszewski!”

That's it, that's all Siebert said to me, but that single sentence was replete with meaning. What he was telling me was that I was swinging too hard, overswinging. At the time, Ted Kluszewski was a slugging first baseman for the Cincinnati Reds. He was called “Big Klu” and cut off his uniform sleeves to show off his muscular arms. So I knew what Siebert meant with his Ted Kluszewski exclamation. I might have replied that part of my problem could be that I was up there hitting having had no batting practice and with a bat that was the wrong length and weight for me, but that never occurred to me, and I didn't say anything at all.

The third, and last, thing Dick Siebert said to me, I was standing in the infield during batting practice in Barry Effress' old hat that felt like it was going to pop off my head and Siebert is walking in my direction and it hit me that he was coming up to me. He got up very close to me looking like he had just eaten an entire dill pickle in two bites and in a low, confidential, guttural snarl said, “You are ruining the ball club. Why don't you quit?”

I just smiled slightly and didn't reply, and Siebert, looking repulsed, turned on his heel and walked away. I have no idea what

I was doing to ruin the ball club. What strikes me now is that I never thought of asking him to explain himself. I never thought of going immediately to the locker room and handing in the woolly long sleeved shirt and denim pants we wore for practice and doing something else with my life. I never moved from my spot in the infield. I stayed through that practice and was back the next day and the next and the next through the end of the season as if the exchange with Siebert had never happened.

There I was on the university baseball team, or sort of, completely out of place, getting nothing done, and nobody wanted me to be there. Somehow I had it in my head that this was where I had to be and this is what I had to do. It was a waste of my time, and it disconfirmed and diminished me. In those years, I took any crap dished out by anybody and never spoke up in my defense. I look back at this time in my life with sadness, and yes, profound regret.

Just before classes began my junior year, Siebert's student assistant phoned to tell me that fall ball, as it was called, was starting up—we played the entire academic year, outside in the fall and spring and inside in the winter. Impulsively—I hadn't thought it through--I told him I wasn't going to be there, that I was done playing. Without a word, he hung up the phone.

I wish now I had never gotten involved in organized sports in the first place--I started playing in something called a peewee baseball league at ten. Certainly beginning with high school, I should have focused on my schoolwork, where I did have talent. I should have started writing. I should have explored dance and theater, which suit me. I should have gotten around people, including girls and women, who shared my sensitive, verbally expansive personal style. I should have connected with nature through hiking and camping. I should have thought seriously about higher education and career possibilities. And yes,

somewhere along the line an adult should have taken the time to talk with me about my sports involvement.

But that's not how it went. How it went was a hurt and lost kid obsessed over sports and tried out for the teams a half-century ago, and he lives with the consequences of that to this day.

3 Jack Kerouac in Big Sur

September, 2007.

In the book *Big Sur*, writer Jack Kerouac's recounts his trip, alone, in the early 1960s to San Francisco and the area south of that city near the ocean known as the Big Sur. This was several years after the publication of the book that made him famous, *On the Road*. Below are excerpts from *Big Sur*, although in some cases I may not have copied them down exactly as they were in the book.

I'm supposed to be the King of the Beatniks according to the newspapers, but I'm sick and tired of all the endless enthusiasms of young kids trying to know me and pour out all their lives into me so that I'll jump up and down and say yes yes that's right, which I can't do any more. Like those five high school kids who came to my door, all expecting me to be 25 years old and here I am old enough to be their father. My reason for coming to the Big Sur for the summer is to get away from that sort of thing.

The poor drunkard is crying. He's crying for his mother and father and sister and wife and children, all gone, he's crying for help. He tries to pull himself together by moving one shoe nearer to his foot and he can't even do that properly. He'll drop the shoe, or knock something over. He pulls and tugs on his stained shirt. He'll do something that will start him crying again. He feels like rubbing his face into something soft, but there is nothing soft. He moans for forgiveness and mercy, but there is silence.

"Where have I gone wrong?"

"What you've done wrong is withhold your love from a woman like me. Can you imagine all the fun we would have had, with the boys, going out to hear jazz or even taking planes

to Paris suddenly, and all the things I could have taught you and you could have taught me?”

“But what if I didn’t want that.”

“Of course you wanted that.”

That’s it, be a loner, travel, talk to waiters, walk around, no more self-imposed agony. I have been fooling myself all my life thinking there was a next thing to do to keep the show going. It’s time to think and watch and keep concentrated on the fact that, after all, this whole surface of the world as we know it now will be covered with the silt of a billion years of time.

The ocean seems to yell to me DON’T HANG AROUND HERE. I’ll get my ticket and say goodbye on a flower day and leave all of San Francisco behind and go back home across autumn America and it’ll be like it was in the beginning. Nothing will have happened, not even this. Constance will be there, young again—and standing beside her, the two little boys, smiling in joy. My mother and father and sister, and my brother, his heart healthy, will be waiting for me. On soft spring nights I’ll stand in the yard under the stars. It will be golden and eternal.

September, 2007.

In the 1950s, television was just the three networks: CBS, NBC, and ABC. Actually there was a fourth, the Dumont network, established to sell Dumont brand television sets, but it was short-lived. Boxing matches were prime time programs on all four networks. The Friday night NBC boxing show came out of arenas in New York City, and CBS's Wednesday night bouts were from venues around the country. As a kid, I faithfully watched Wednesdays and Fridays--I don't remember doing more than glancing at the Dumont fights.

Boxers who caught the public's fancy and brought increased viewer ratings made repeat appearances on the Wednesday and Friday shows. They would run up a string of victories--in retrospect I realize that it was against overmatched opponents in order to ensure wins and re-appearances--and in the process became celebrities in the same way that repeat winners on American Idol do these days. One of the stars, so to speak, of the Wednesday CBS show was a Michigan welterweight (147 pounds) by the name of Chuck Davey. Along with many people around the country, I got caught up with Davey's fate and rooted for him as he won fight after fight and finally got a shot at the welterweight champion, a Cuban named Kid Gavilan. This was in 1953.

I wrote the fragment about Davey that follows this introduction in 2002. I had learned that a kinescope of Davey's title fight with Gavilan was available through the university library. Kinescope is a motion picture film of the television picture. That sounds as if it would be poor quality, but while it is not up to the standard of today's taping process, it is quite realistic. I remember watching the fight on my seventeen-inch Zenith console TV when it happened, and I was curious to see how

viewing it now would be different from the way I remember it being back then.

As well, I wanted to look again at Chuck Davey from the perspective of my adult interest in the personal and cultural meaning of organized sports. In particular, I wanted to view Davey through a lens I now use to assess athletes: the concept of the gentleman, and within that, the idea of a sportsman. The most celebrated fighter of my lifetime has been Muhammad Ali. Ali was certainly a superb fighter, but he was neither a gentleman nor a sportsman. He was ignorant, vulgar and boorish, a self-consumed braggart, and corrupt in his personal life. He made racist remarks, belittled and taunted opponents, and left the sport of boxing as soon as he quit fighting. I had looked into Davey's life and had concluded that he was the anti-Ali, as it were. Davey couldn't fight like Ali, but he was a gentleman and a sportsman, and to me that counted for a lot, and I was living in a culture where those qualities didn't matter for much of anything.

So I watched the kinescope of the Davey-Gavilan title fight. I added what I had learned about Davey from other sources to my response to the kinescope and wrote a couple of pages. I thought the writing might be the beginning of something I would publish about Davey. I ran the idea of an article on Davey by the editor of *Ring* magazine--I had done some writing for *Ring*--who said that Davey wasn't anybody he thought his readers would be interested in. With that turndown, I put the writing aside and didn't look at again until now.

Reading what I wrote five years ago, what strikes me most doesn't have to do with Chuck Davey and whether he was a gentleman and sportsman, but rather me: how different I am now from 2002, and how that difference, not the *Ring* turn-down, is the biggest reason I didn't continue with the Davey project, say, turn it into a scholarly article, or even a book for a general audience on men and sport.

The writing ends with my phone call to Davey's home in Michigan and a conversation I had with his daughter in July of 2002. Right after that phone conversation, I lost virtually all of my hearing, and that was one of the last, if not the very last, phone calls I made for almost five years.

With the loss of my hearing, I have become--in a general way, as a person--more inward, cut off, than before, more within myself, in my own world. I had planned on going to Michigan to interview Davey and his family, but with the loss of my hearing that became outside my frame of reference, something I just don't do. And more and more, I have come to prefer it that way. Even though now I can minimally use a phone (a new word processor for my cochlear implant), I don't even think of calling anyone, or really, connecting with anybody about anything. I'm not clear whether that will, or should, change.

Saying this is not to imply that I consider myself less of a person than I was in 2002. I am limited in ways that I wasn't before, that's undeniable, and in that sense I'm less than I was, but on balance, the hearing loss has resulted in becoming better, not worse, overall. While I would give just about anything to be able to hear normally again, I think I'm more sensitive than before, and more insightful, and more reflective. I'm a more decent human being than I was, I believe. The hearing loss has grounded me, centered me; I am more the person I really am now.

I recently read a biography of Beethoven and was taken by the biographer's assertion that Beethoven's compositions were better after his hearing loss than before. The artist Francisco Goya went deaf in his later years. Goya's biographer holds that while Goya's paintings were different after the onset of his deafness, they were just as good as before. That, I believe, applies to my own work, teaching and writing.

I've learned that everything bad that happens to us, even the most painful and debilitating--the loss of a job or a cherished

relationship, public disfavor and rejection, serious illness, the death of a loved one, in my case the loss of a sense—contains within it an opportunity for growth and creation and a richer, more gratifying, more honorable, life. Amid grief and regret, we need to find the gift, the new capability, the new path to take.

The 2002 Chuck Davey fragment:

Chuck Davey was a white, left-handed boxer from Michigan who was featured on the CBS Wednesday night Pabst Blue Ribbon fights in the early 1950s. Davey became a television star of sorts and, with much hoopla, signed to fight Kid Gavilan for the welterweight title in February of 1953. The Gavilan fight drew 20,000 people in the Chicago Arena, the largest indoor crowd for a welterweight fight up to that time. The gate was the largest ever for welterweights. Thirty-five million people saw the bout on television. To put that number in perspective, last week's top-rated television program was watched by thirteen million people.

I watched a kinescope--this was before videotape--of the Davey-Gavilan fight. It was of the entire Pabst Blue Ribbon show, beer commercials ("Bill the Bartender") and all. Announcer Russ Hodges--the same Russ Hodges who called Bobby Thompson's home run to win the National League pennant in 1951--handled the fight alone, no one did color commentary.

The Davey-Gavilan match was treated as a major event: phrases like "magical evening," "one of the most dramatic evenings in boxing history," and "tremendous fight" were thrown out during the almost twenty minutes, without commercials, of pre-fight festivities. After Hodges set the scene, there were films of the weigh-in. Then it went to a meeting hall for a presentation of an award by the American Legion to a representative of Pabst for providing entertainment to disabled veterans. Then there was an interview with the governor of Illinois and the head of the International Boxing Club.

And then dramatically, bathed in spotlights in the darkened arena, the fighters came down aisles from opposite sides and up the stairs and into the ring. Davey had on a white robe with a shamrock on the back and was accompanied by the strains of the Michigan State fight song (he was billed as a college man). The boxers' gloves were laced on in the ring rather than in the dressing room. Prominent fighters climbed into the ring to be introduced, among them the former heavyweight champion, Ezzard Charles. Then the national anthems of Cuba and the United States. The ring announcer gave pitches for upcoming events in the Chicago Arena, a college basketball double-header and an NHL hockey game. Anticipation was building.

Finally the introductions of the two fighters and the fight itself.

It turned out to be a mismatch; Davey wasn't in Gavilan's league. He resembled the tennis player John McEnroe in boxing trunks, while Gavilan looked like, well, Kid Gavilan, one of *Ring* magazine's top twenty fighters of all time. Davey was out of place in the same ring with Gavilan.

Davey bounced up and down constantly and stayed busy shooting out right hand jabs and an occasional left cross. Everything from Davey was to Gavilan's head, no body punches. Davey held his right arm bent at a ninety-degree angle, with his glove forehead high. To jab from this position he would snap his forearm down and straighten his arm. It looked like someone throwing a dart. Nothing Davey landed appeared to have the least effect on Gavilan.

Gavilan laid back like a snarling panther, and two or three times a round, he would spring forward in frightful ten- to fifteen-second flurries with both hands to Davey's head and body. Every so often, Gavilan flashed the "bolo punch" for which he was famous, an underhand right that looked like someone rolling a pair of dice with a flourish.

Davey was knocked down four times in the fight. On one of those occasions, a vicious right hand punch from Gavilan to his temple propelled him through the bottom two ropes and onto the ring apron.

The bout ended with Davey surrounded by his cornermen and a doctor at the end of the ninth round. It had the appearance of an emergency room scene. When the bell rang for round ten, Davey's chief second, Izzy Klein, waved his arm to the referee to stop the fight.

Although out-classed, Davey showed determination and courage in the fight, and grace and good sportsmanship in the interview with Hodges afterward, referring to Gavilan as "a great champion." Gavilan told Hodges that Davey "is a good fighter, but he needs more experience." Actually, Davey was quite experienced, with 39 prior matches on his record.

As I watched the old kinescope, I thought to myself, Chuck Davey is now 75 years old. I wondered what all that had gone on back then had meant to him at the time--the television build-up and then the crushing defeat. It would be good to talk to him about that, I decided, and to tell him that as a kid I had waited all day, counting the hours, until his fight with Gavilan.

I have looked into Davey's life. He is considered by many to be the best collegiate boxer of all time. Yes, at one time there was college boxing. He was undefeated and a four-time All-American, the only one ever, as a member of the Michigan State University team. He won four NCAA championships, the first one at seventeen-years-old. The finals of the NCAA boxing championships drew as many as 15,000 people. Davey was an alternate on the United States Olympic team in 1948. In the Olympic trials, he fought two future world champions on the same day, beating Johnny Saxon and losing a decision to Wallace "Bud" Smith. During his pro career, he beat some big name fighters, including Rocky Graziano, Ike Williams, and Carmine Basilio. Interestingly, Hodges never mentioned any of this background during the telecast of the Gavilan fight.

After Davey's retirement from the ring, he was Michigan Boxing Commissioner for fifteen years, a founder and president of the United States Boxing Association, and served four terms as Vice President of the World Boxing Association. He is a member of the Michigan Sports Hall of Fame and the World Boxing Hall of Fame. He has been married for 48 years and

has raised nine children and is the grandfather of twenty. In 1998, a tribute to him was entered into the Congressional Record of the United States Senate.

I phoned Davey's home in Birmingham, Michigan. His daughter Maureen answered the phone. Her father, she told me, couldn't answer the phone himself because he had broken his neck two years previously in a swimming accident and was paralyzed from the neck down. He has great difficulty talking, Maureen said, because he is on a ventilator. Maureen told me that she was sure her father would be happy to work with me as much as he was able to if I decide to write something about him.

That is the end of the fragment I wrote in 2002. Just now (September of 2007), I checked online and learned that Chuck Davey died on December 4, 2002, a few months after my phone conversation with his daughter. I could have gone out to Michigan despite my hearing loss, but I didn't. I'm OK with that for reasons I've gone into here, but still, I'll never meet and know Chuck Davey. The news of his death brought home to me how we need to be vigilant to our opportunities in life, because they are fleeting. There is always something good to do in life, but we can't turn back time and do the good things we could have been done before but didn't. We need to live with the realization that when each moment of our lives is gone it is gone forever.

5

Victoria's Dogs

November, 2007.

Is your dog driving you mad? Does he/she bark incessantly, destroy property, have unusual quirky behavior, refuse to be toilet trained, terrorize the neighborhood, take over the house, have eating problems, hump legs or come between you and your partner at bedtime? Is your dog causing a family feud? Any problem, Victoria will tackle it!

So says a web site devoted to an Animal Planet cable television show called "It's Me or the Dog." I've been watching it Friday nights at nine. It stars Victoria Stilwell, a transplanted Brit—late thirties, tall, slim, attractive, brown bangs touching her eyebrows, charming--who now lives in Atlanta, Georgia with her husband and daughter after a few years in Manhattan and New Jersey. She is an ex-actress who got into the dog walking business about fifteen years ago as a sideline when acting parts became scarce and then went into dog training full time.

"It's Me or the Dog" is produced in Britain in half hour segments. Victoria goes into people's homes and teaches them how to manage their unruly dog(s) and then comes back later to check on how things are coming along. "It's Me or the Dog" is shown in twenty countries around the world, so evidently it is a hit.

The besieged dog owners are decent souls living their lives anonymously and unpretentiously. Victoria is straight-ahead solid. No big shots, sarcasm, ironic detachment, posturing, preening, or forced cleverness on the show that I've seen. The people on the show are looking for Victoria's help. Their dog, which they love to pieces, pees on the kitchen floor and insists on sleeping between them under the covers and impedes their love life--something like that. In the half-hour show, Victoria turns this problem dog around like that, zip—it's impressive to watch her operate.

Besides enjoying the show, I'm picking up some useful tips even though I don't own a dog. It seems to me the kinds of things Victoria does to manage obstreperous dogs applies to dealing with people who give me trouble.

The first thing you have to do when you are getting static from someone, I've learned, is work on yourself: namely, get yourself as close to being an alpha dog as you can in bearing and behavior. An alpha dog (person) is calm, confident, in charge, no nonsense, direct, and action-oriented. If you come on as an omega--passive, deferring, weak, reactive, "bottom dog"--you are inviting trouble.

Also, you need to keep in mind that what someone is dishing out to you might well stem from their self-perceived deficits, not assets, and they aren't as personally together as they appear. As Victoria puts it in her web site:

It is a widely held belief that if a dog shows behaviors such as guarding toys, food or locations in the home, urinating on beds, responding aggressively toward family and visitors in and out of the house, or bullying other dogs, the animal is trying to exert its authority in an attempt to become the "alpha" or "top dog" of the family. I see it differently. A dog that exhibits these kinds of behaviors is NOT a confident dog, nor is it trying to unleash an evil plan for home domination. This dog feels insecure and copes with life by trying to control the environment around it.

Understanding this fact of life makes the problem seem less of a big deal and more manageable.

Victoria doesn't try to out-muscle the dogs. Rather, she employs techniques she calmly and all but effortlessly implements. It's about tactics to Victoria, not brute strength. Victoria never works up a sweat, never gets her feathers ruffled. Victoria is not about to play tug of war with these dogs; she won't stoop to that level.

Victoria emphasizes that you need to stop dwelling on how much pain and frustration you are going through and look at things

from the dog's perspective. As her web site puts it:

Think dog. Take time to think about how your dog perceives the world, and use this knowledge to make training easier.

When you “think dog,” you’re particularly looking for the payoffs the dog, person, is getting from giving you grief. They wouldn’t be doing whatever it is if it weren’t rewarding to them in some way. A big part of what Victoria does to bring the dogs in line is take away whatever rewards they are getting out of the bad things they are doing.

I’ve “thought dog” about people who have pushed my buttons recently. They include relatives, love interests, students (I teach), colleagues and administrators at the university where I work, medical care providers, and business representatives. When I went through this list of people just now I was taken by how many are on it. No wonder I live with a strong desire to hide out in my house and read, at the moment, Edward Abbey’s journals.

As I thought about these people, I identified four categories of rewards that they might be getting from giving me a bad time.

1. *Attention*. They do something that annoys me, disconfirms me, diminishes me, whatever it is, and I attend to them in one way or another. I complain, beseech, moralize, explain, or negotiate with them. All that is attention, and even if it is negative attention it can be rewarding to people.

2. *Power*. If I am changed at all by what people do, they have power over me, and that can be a positive experience for them.

3. *Hurt*. It can feel good to make another person experience discomfort, distress, or unhappiness.

4. *Diminishment*. People can find it rewarding to take someone down a peg. Perhaps they have doubts about their own capability, and bringing others down closer to their level makes them feel better about themselves.

My challenge is to take away these rewards from the “bad

dogs” in my life: Don’t give them attention. Don’t give away any of my power. Don’t show hurt or unhappiness. And don’t be diminished by the stunts they are pulling.

One of the things Victoria does when a dog is acting out of line is fold her arms and silently turn away, which is both effortless and powerful. Most often, dogs and people would rather fight with you than have you turn away, write them off, and thus negate and dismiss them.

If a dog does right by Victoria, she lets it know she likes what went on. Victoria isn’t effusive about it—just “good dog,” something like that, no fawning or over-reacting, which is unbecoming behavior in an alpha. With people, it might be a simple “Thanks” or “I appreciated that.”

Victoria is not above imposing punishment. Basically, it comes down to discerning what the dogs find aversive and giving them that when they get out of line. She makes sure not to hurt them in the process, and again, she doesn’t get down and dirty with these dogs. So it will be something that doesn’t harm the dogs that she can implement easily, like clanging metal pots together or blowing a whistle or spritzing them with a puff of air.

With people, it comes down to asking yourself, what doesn’t this person like that I can make happen without expending much energy that isn’t cruel or destructive? I’ve noticed that a lot of people find it aversive to be disrespected or disliked, even by their adversaries. It’s not verbal, not overt, not acted out—rather, it’s a stance, a posture toward another person. Often it is enough simply not to smile at people when you look at them.

Obviously, Victoria doesn’t have any long talks with these dogs she is trying to straighten out. On the face of it, that would seem to distinguish Victoria’s situation from your and my conflicts with people. While this is an important difference, we can make it out to be bigger than it is. Verbal communication can be helpful, but my experience tells me not to count on it to solve the problem.

Regardless of the merits of your arguments or pleadings, if there are payoffs to others in what they are doing to you, you can bet they'll keep on doing it. Plus, people respond more to what you are and what you do than what you say. So get yourself together personally and get clear on where you stand—your bearing, your boundaries--and stick with it. Most often, that is the most powerful thing you can do. People quickly get the idea that you are playing your game, not theirs.

Keep in mind that talk is indeed cheap. It is best to respond to what other people do rather than what they say; conduct, not apologies and promises.

The biggest difference I see between what Victoria does with the dogs and your and my situations with people is that Victoria pretty much controls the consequences of dogs' behavior. If these dogs are going to get something it is going to have to come from Victoria. So she can determine what the dogs get and don't get and thereby manage them. People, on the other hand, may receive rewards from somebody or something other than you or me. In a work situation, someone could be dumping on us and getting payoffs from others in the setting or the system: social and professional affirmation and inclusion, opportunities and promotions, and so on. Friends and family may be affirming our adversary for being on our case.

We have to keep in mind that there could come the time when we survey a situation and realize that no matter what we do the forces working against us are bigger than we are. Either the other person is more that we can handle--I suspect Victoria keeps her failures to herself--or the context is. In that case, the best thing we can do is bear up with the situation with as much dignity as we can muster, or hit the road.

6

The Beans Story

December, 2007.

Beans was the family dog when I was little. He was nominally a Boston Terrier, but looking back on it now, I think he may have had something else mixed in. He had a bulldog look like a Boston Terrier, but he was predominately white rather than black, and he was quite a bit bigger than the typical Boston Terrier. Beans was “put to sleep” when I was about four—my mother said that he had just gotten old. Beans had been a beloved family pet and was often the subject of discussion after his passing when my much-older brother and sister and their spouses came for Sunday dinner.

One Beans story in particular was repeated time and again around the dinner table while I was growing up—I was six, eight, ten, in there. The story was told virtually verbatim, amid laughter and good cheer.

The Beans story:

“I sure miss Beans. What a great dog.”

“He sure was. He was really smart.”

“Was he ever! Smartest dog I’ve ever been around. Remember, he didn’t like Bobby for some reason?”

“Yeah. I don’t think he wanted Bobby around.”

“I don’t think he did. Remember that time he tried to lead Bobby away?”

“Yeah.”

“Bobby was about a year and half. He hadn’t been walking long, and it was out on the sidewalk in front of the house. Bobby tottered toward Beans with his hand out, I suppose wanting to pet him. But just when Bobby got close, Beans moved a little bit away. Bobby kept tottering toward Beans, and Beans moved away again. This went on a couple of times, and I turned away to do something, and the next thing I know, I look up and there’s Beans

and Bobby down at the corner and Beans is in the middle of the street and Bobby is out into the street following him with his arm and hand out reaching toward him.”

“That was Beans’ way of getting rid of Bobby.”

“Yeah. It was really something for a dog to know to do that.”

“Beans was a great dog. We’ll never have another dog as good as Beans.”

7

Self-Abuse

February, 2008.

David Crosby is a singer/songwriter who was prominent in the 1960s and '70s as a member of two groups: The Byrds, and later, Crosby, Stills & Nash, (Stephen Stills and Graham Nash); Neil Young joined the group to make it a foursome. In subsequent years, he recorded and performed as a solo artist. He still does concerts, both on his own and with his former partners. Crosby developed a serious drug problem in the years of his prominence.

The material below is from the book, *Long Time Gone: The Autobiography of David Crosby* (Doubleday, 1988): excerpts from two hospital in-take reports in late 1983. Following the excerpts is my commentary.

ROSS GENERAL HOSPITAL

Crosby, David:

42-year-old, single, white male, rock musician.

Patient describes chills and sweats five to six times a day beginning 24 hours after admission and says he “feels bad all over.”

Describes ringing in the ears and a dull headache in the frontal and occipital areas.

He has a stomachache with nausea. He notes increased bowel rumbling. He has constipation chronically. He last bowel movement, which was hard and dry, was approximately two days ago.

He states that he periodically notices a left pain in the costovertebral angle [abdomen] so that a question of urinary tract obstruction on a periodic or intermittent basis should be considered.

There is a past history of seizure on one occasion. This was apparently a gran mal seizure and may have been related to drug intake.

Physical Examination:

Reveals a disheveled man who appears his stated age and is slightly obese.

Reveals long hair that is in need of shampooing, scalp has some plaque build-up. The nasal septum is perforate [a hole in the cartilage of the nose from cocaine use] with some purulent material [pus], dried and old on either side. Mouth exam reveals four teeth that are broken and badly carious [decayed], left upper, right lower and upper.

Reveals edema [retention of fluid] in the lower legs and hemorrhage of small capillary vessels with subsequent hemosiderin staining [discoloration from internal bleeding]. The skin of the feet is wrinkled and dry. On the upper extremities, his skin is characterized by healing staphylococcus lesions that are pink and slightly pigmented. There are lesions on his right hand, where he has apparently suffered flash fires handling the freebase unit needed to produce his cocaine for

inhalation. There are several open draining wounds on the neck.

Diagnostic Impression:

Chemical dependency, opiate and cocaine.

Chronic staphylococcal neurodermatitis [infections].

Perforate nasal septum.

History of lower urinary tract obstruction and urinary retention with gross hematuria [blood in the urine] secondary to probable renolithiasis [urinary tract infection] and colic [gas].

Fixed tissue eruption [skin lesions].

Hemosiderin staining [rusty discoloration] of both lower extremities.

Disposition:

The patient will be treated for chemical dependency. He will be encouraged to participate in group activities, to begin a program of self care physically by washing and shampooing and then to move into daily exercises, group therapy, and stress management.

GLADMAN MEMORIAL HOSPITAL

Indications are that this patient has used drugs over the years to contain his agitations and depressions.

Drugs work. If they didn't, people wouldn't be using them. Their downside is they only make things better in the short run, and life is lived in the long run. I presume the drugs Crosby used did contain his agitations and depressions—or at least for a time, a few hours. But he was soon back to where he started and even worse. Not only did the agitations and depressions return, he had new problems to deal with—lesions, urinary tract obstructions, hemorrhaging, and the rest.

Drugs mask, maintain, personal issues that need to be dealt with directly and resolved, plus they bring new issues and lower the overall quality of life. In some instances, the same can be said about alcohol, tobacco, food, sex, pornography, gambling, sport spectating, shopping, video games, and social media. If the list of problems that result isn't Crosby's, it's some other, which, depending on the form of the behavior, include depression, social anxiety, muddle-headedness, lost jobs, missed opportunities, hurt loved ones, damaged relationships, financial hardship, physical decline and ill health, and unhappiness.

I believe that just about all people who are abusing themselves know what's going on, it's no big mystery to them. And that the way out for them is clear, it isn't complicated, and they know what it is and, even though it may be very tough sledding, it is within their power to go down that path. The knowledge that they could do it and don't gnaws at them despite all the assurances from others and themselves that things are bigger than they are. They know the truth: they are failing themselves and those in their lives, and they won't be healthy and self-respecting and at peace until they do something about it.

Other people can help, programs can help, therapies can help, books can help, but when it is all said and done it comes down to invoking powers that remain available to all of us no matter how bad things get: rationality, choice, and volition. As long as we are alive, we can pose a question to ourselves and answer it: With everything I have in me, am I going to take responsibility for doing what reason tells me is the best way to get out of the mess I'm in, yes or no? To his great credit, Crosby, who was in really rough shape, answered yes to that question, and he went ahead and did it and he succeeded.

February, 2008.

Robert Henri (1865-1929) was a prominent American painter and educator. His name looks French, but he was an American, born in Ohio. Henri was not his birth name—he was born Robert Henry Cozad—and he pronounced it HEN-rye. Not long before his death, the Arts Council of New York chose him as one of the top three living American artists. Henri was also a popular and influential teacher of art.

Henri's ideas on art and life and education were recorded by a student of his, Margery Ryerson, and published as a book in 1923 entitled *The Art Spirit*. Below are excerpts from a book published in 1930 with the same title but with Henri listed as the author. A lengthy subtitle, which I won't reproduce here, includes "compiled by Margery Ryerson," so I assume the book I have is the one Ryerson published in 1923. The book I have: Robert Henri, *The Art Spirit*, J.B. Lippincott, 1930.

When Henri talks about the life of an artist he is not just talking about someone who creates paintings or sculptures; he is referring to a way to live in the world regardless of one's vocation. As I read what Henri said—or more precisely, what Ryerson recorded—I had the strong feeling, he's talking about me--this is how I approach life, or at least how I would like to. What Henri said eighty years ago has grounded and affirmed me, and given me direction. And it has helped me understand better where I run into problems in my dealings with the world.

The Art Spirit appears to be a compilation of notes jotted down quickly at Henri's lectures. In places they are rough syntactically and disjointed. I have done a good bit of line editing to smooth out the prose and make things clearer and more concise. I've done my best, however, to be true to Henri's ideas. As was

the custom back then, Henri used “he” and “man” when referring to people in general. I’ve left those references as they are rather than try to “update” and “correct” them; plus, I didn’t want to get myself involved with convoluted “he and she” sentence constructions. Enough to say, Henri in his remarks was speaking about both men and women.

From *The Art Spirit*, Robert Henri speaking:

The question of development of the art spirit in all walks of life interests me. I mean by this, the development of individual judgment and taste, the love of work for the sake of doing things well, the tendency toward simplicity and order. If anything can be done to bring the public to a greater consciousness of the relationship between art and life, of the part each person plays in the world by exercising and developing his own personal taste and judgment and not depending on outside authority, it would be well.

When the art is alive in any person, whatever his kind of work may be, he becomes an inventive, searching, daring, self-expressive creature. He becomes interesting to other people. He disturbs, upsets, enlightens. He opens ways for a better understanding. Where those who are not artists are trying to close the book, he opens it. He shows that there are still more pages to be read and to be written.

To become an artist you have to make up your mind to be alone in many ways. We like sympathy. We like to be in company. That is easier than going it alone. But alone, not with the crowd, one gets acquainted with himself; he grows up and on. It costs to do this, but if you succeed even somewhat you will enjoy it.

For an artist to be interesting to others he must become interesting to himself. He must become capable of intense feeling, and become capable of profound contemplation.

It is not important whether one's vision is as great as that of another. It is important to resolve the personal question of how one is to live in his greatest happiness.

There are moments in our lives when we see beyond the usual. We must reach into that reality. Such are the moments of our greatest happiness. Such are the moments of our greatest wisdom. It is our task to continue in that experience and find expression for it.

If you want to know how to do a thing you must first have a complete desire to do that thing. Then go to kindred spirits, others who do that thing. Study their ways. Learn from their successes and failures.

The individual says, "My crowd doesn't run that way." I say, don't run with crowds.

Artists do not forget the present in looking backward or forward. They are occupied wholly with the fulfillment of their own existence. Because they are engaged in the full play of their own existence, in their own growth, their fruit is bountiful.

Artists should be careful of the influence of those with whom they consort. They run great risks becoming members of large societies. Large bodies tend toward the leveling of individuality to common consent, to the adherence to a creed. In such a circumstance, artists have to pretend agreement or they live in broil, and this they should not permit themselves to do. Their principle is to have, and to defend, their personal impressions.

One of the great difficulties for the artist is to decide between his own natural impressions and what he thinks should be his impressions.

Is it not fine to find one's own tastes? To select one's most favorable theme? To concentrate all of one's forces on that

theme and its development? To expend one's constant effort to find that theme's clearest expression?

An artist can't be honest unless he is wise.

To be honest is to be just, and to be just is to realize the relative value of things. The faculties must play hard in order to seize the relative value of things.

All true improvement results from fundamental laws and the deep current of human development rising to the surface. On the surface, there is the battle of institutions, the drama of events, the strife between peoples, upheavals and disasters. On the surface, there is propaganda; there is effort to force opinions. Artists search for the fundamental principles and forces that point the way to the laws of nature and beauty and order.

The artist must look things squarely in the face and know them for what they are worth to him.

Art and life should not be disassociated. No artist should produce a line disassociated from human feeling. We are all wrapped up in life; we should not desire to get away from our feelings.

The best art the world has ever had was left by men who thought less of making great art than of living full and completely with all their faculties in the enjoyment of full play.

Age need not destroy beauty. There are people who grow more beautiful as they grow older. If age means to them an expansion and development of character, this new mental and spiritual state will have its effect on the physical. A face that in the early days was only pretty, or was even dull, will be transformed. The eyes will attain mysterious depths; there will be a gesture in the whole face of greater sensibility, and all will appear coordinate.

Find out what you really like if you can. Find out what is really important to you. Then sing your song. You will have something to sing about and your whole heart will be in the singing.

I should like to see every encouragement for those who are fighting to open new ways. I should like to see every living worker helped to do what he believes in, the best he can.

It seems to me that before a man tries to express anything to the world, he must recognize in himself an individual, a new one, very distinct from others.

A man should not care whether the thing he wishes to express is art or not, whether it is a picture or not. He should only care that it is a statement of what, in his eyes, is truly worthy of being put into permanent expression.

The pursuit of happiness is a great activity. One must be open and alive. Happiness takes wit and interest and energy, and there must be courage. A man must become interesting to himself and expressive before he can be happy.

There is hope of happiness. There is hope that some day we may get away from these self-imposed dogmas and establish something that will make music to the world and make us natural.

We haven't arrived yet, and it is foolish to believe that we have. The world is not done. Evolution is not complete

If a man has the gift of telling the truth and acting rightly, he will not fit into our present state; he will be very disturbing.

Our minds are so overlaid with fear and artificiality that often we do not recognize beauty. How little opportunity we give any people to cast off fear, to live simply and naturally. When people try to do that, we condemn them. It is only if they are

great enough to outlive our condemnation that we finally accept them.

The minute we shut people up we are proving our distrust in them. If we believe in them we give them freedom, and through freedom they accomplish. We harness up the horse and destroy his very race instincts. When we want a thrill for our souls we watch the flight of an eagle. It is better that every thought should be uttered freely, fearlessly, than be denied utterance for fear of evil. It is only through complete independence that all goodness can be spoken, all purity can be found.

Each man must seek for himself the people who hold the essential beauty. Each man must eventually say to himself, "These are my people."

It is not easy to know what you like. Most people fool themselves their entire lives about this.

There are men at the bottom of the ladder who battle to rise. They study, struggle, keep their wits alive, and eventually get up to a place where they are received as an equal among respectable people. Here they find warmth and comfort and pride. And here the struggle ends and a death of many years commences. They have stopped living.

It isn't so much that you say the truth as that you say an important truth.

We are all different. We are all to see a different life and do different things. Education is self-product, a matter of asking questions and getting the best answers we can get. We read a book, a novel, any book; we are interested in it to the degree that we find in it answers to our questions.

You have to make your statement of what is essential to you, an innate reality, not a surface reality. But you choose things seen and use them to phrase your statement.

It is a big job to know oneself; no one can ever entirely accomplish it. But to try is to act in line of evolution. Men can come to know more of themselves, and act more like themselves. The only men who are interesting to themselves and to others are those who have been willing to meet themselves squarely and acknowledge themselves. Today man stands in his own way. He puts externally imposed criteria in the way of his own revelation and development. He should push the restraining hands off himself. He should defy fashion and let himself be.

Of course it is not easy to go one's road. Because of our education we continually get off track. But the fight is a good one, and there is joy in it.

There are many who go through their whole lives without ever knowing what they have really liked and who they have really liked.

Each individual needs to wake up and discover himself as a human being with needs of his own. He needs to look about, to learn from all sources, to look within, and to invent for himself a vehicle for self-expression.

Men either get to know what they want and go after it, or some other persons tell them what they want and drive them after it.

An artist must educate himself. He cannot be educated. He must test things out as they apply to himself. His life is one long investigation of things and his own reactions to them.

All art that is worthwhile is a record of intense life. Each artist's work is a record of his special effort, his search, his findings, in language that best expresses that. The significance of his work can only be understood by careful study: no crack-judgments; looking for the expected won't do; and we can't even trust the critics with the best reputations.

I think the real artists are too busy with just being and growing and acting like themselves to worry about the end. The end will be as it is. Their object is intense living, fulfillment. A great happiness for them is creation.

Enjoy even the struggle against defeat.

Art is giving evidence to the world. Artists discover the pleasure of giving and wish to give, love to give. Those who give are tremendously strong.

Do whatever you do intensely. The artist is the man who leaves the crowd and goes pioneering.

August, 2008.

Among comics insiders, Steve Ditko is viewed as one of the supreme visual stylists in the history of the form. Back in the 1960s, Ditko drew Spider-Man from a concept created by Marvel Comics editor, Stan Lee. Ditko made character and plot contributions to the Spider-Man series. In his half-century career, Ditko has worked on numerous characters and series, including Hulk, Iron Man, and Dr. Strange. The success of the Spider-Man movies has brought new prominence to his work among the general public. A recent coffee table book, which has informed this thought: Blake Bell, *The World of Steve Ditko: Strange and Stranger*, Fantographics Books, 2008.

Despite the enormous impact on the popular culture of Ditko and other artists—Jack Kirby (“The Fantastic Four,” “The X-Men”) and Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster (“Superman”) come to mind—historically comic book illustration has not been a lucrative profession. Until recent times with Frank Miller (“Sin City,” “Daredevil”) and others, comics artists were paid a one-time page-rate fee for their work and received no future returns on their creations. They worked assignment to assignment and had no financial stability or health insurance benefits or pensions. These years, Ditko gets by on Social Security and a veteran’s pension. He lives in spartan fashion, just managing to pay for his lodging and a tiny Times Square studio in New York City and buy ink and paper for his drawings, which he continues diligently, and apparently contentedly, to produce.

With the recent attention he has received, Ditko could alter his financial stress immediately by selling his original artwork, which, with the help of fellow artists, was finally returned to him, and accepting private commissions to re-create his old work, but

he has not done so. He could be working for major established publishing entities that have the resources to promote and distribute his creations effectively; instead he self-publishes and reaches a meager audience. In a world in which maxing out on commercial opportunities is the norm, what accounts for this pattern? What makes Steve Ditko tick?

To understand Steve Ditko, you have to understand his personal philosophy of life; it directs his choices, his actions in the world. What is true and right in human conduct, in his conduct, matter incredibly to Steve Ditko. His personal integrity—living in alignment with his highest beliefs and values—matters incredibly to Steve Ditko. To Steve Ditko, the world isn't comprised of shades of grey. There is a right way to do things and a wrong way; it's one or the other, right or wrong, period. To Steve Ditko, things aren't relative: what is true and right is true and right here, there, in the past and now, and for you and me and everybody else, no qualifications, no exceptions. As long as he has life, Steve Ditko is determined to do things the right way regardless of the negative consequences for him that may result. Steve Ditko refuses to do anything that compromises his principles, or another way to put it, his honor.

Where did this posture come from? I'm sure it came from his parents—either he is emulating them or reacting against them—and from people he has known and things he has done in his life, including his experience in the military during WWII. But from all accounts, the biggest influence on Steve Ditko came from the thinking of a woman who as far I know he never met, the novelist and philosopher Ayn Rand (1905-1982).

In her novels (e.g., *The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged*) and non-fiction writing (e.g., *The Virtue of Selfishness*), Rand set out a philosophy she called Objectivism (she capitalized it). Rand declared that the most essential and admirable aspects of man (to her, man included women) were his (her) capacity to reason and

potential to be heroic. Rand held up the ideal of a certain type of individual: one whose conduct is rigorously grounded in what is rational and right (to her, there are no contradictions in those two—what’s right is what’s rational).

Rand applauds personal autonomy. Rand’s ideal man doesn’t lose himself in the crowd, pitch his life to the approval or rewards of his audience or those in power, or ask anybody for a favor or a handout. Rand’s laudable man (and again, woman) affirms his independence and personal responsibility, and uncompromisingly gets on with his life guided by his principles and reason until his last breath. Rand portrays in her fiction and argues in her non-fiction that living in alignment with Objectivism can result in worldly success or great hardship, but even if hardship predominates, it is the path to self-respect and inner satisfaction. A biography of Rand that provides a good introduction to her perspective and an up-close look at Rand herself is *The Passion of Ayn Rand* by Barbara Branden.

From the late 1960s on, Steve Ditko took Rand’s ideas to heart and lived his life in accordance with them. Much of Ditko’s post-Spider-Man work reflects Randian beliefs. One example, a character he created called Mr. A, who exemplified Objectivism.

Ditko’s Objectivist philosophy explains actions he has taken that have left some scratching their heads and others dismissing him as rigid, dogmatic, and incorrigible.

Why no recreations of his old work? That would be going backward. One’s work should reflect the outer edge of one’s current beliefs, rational understandings, and commitments, says Rand. When the Spider-Man films came out, Ditko pressed for credit as the character’s artist, but he didn’t push for financial gain and made it clear that he had long since abandoned the character and was now engaged with other projects.

Ditko turned down lucrative work starting up the Star Line children’s books over the issue of whether being heroic is a

decision that anyone can make or is an inherent part of the make-up of a few special individuals, something that can be revealed but not chosen. In alignment with Randian precepts, Ditko thought that being a hero is not a matter of special grace, not something you are born with à la Superman. Being heroic is something that every one of us, you and I included, can choose by the way we conduct our lives. The creators of the Star Line series disagreed, and Ditko left them and a much-needed paycheck behind.

Ditko worked on a new series called “Dark Dominion,” but after one issue he decided that portraying the supernatural as it did was in violation of his beliefs and ended his association with the project. He also turned down an assignment drawing the “Transformer” coloring book anthology because the host character for the series was a vampire. To Rand, the notion that the supernatural exists is nonsense. To Rand, and Ditko, what you see is all there is; what you do with this life is all there is going to be; what you exemplify and accomplish in your private and public life and its consequences will be your only legacy.

A comic book organization scheduled a ceremony to give Ditko an award for a distinguished career in comics, but he refused to attend. He was honored in absentia and, without his knowledge, someone accepted the award on his behalf. Thinking Ditko would be pleased, the person who accepted the award sent it to him. Ditko phoned him and said, “Awards bleed the artist and make us compete against each other. How dare you accept this on my behalf!” Ditko sent the award back.

These days, Ditko, now well over eighty, sits every day at his drawing board penciling and inking pictures the best he can, in the most honest way he can. With no mainstream publishing outlet, few people ever get to see them, but he does them anyway. A *New York Times* reviewer of a new book on him (see above) describes him as an artist “whose principles have ossified into bitter perversity.” I guess it is all in how you look at it.

August, 2008.

Last night, I watched a documentary, “Man on Wire,” which recounted the planning and execution in 1974 of a high wire walk by Frenchman Philippe Petit across the space between the twin towers of the World Trade Center in Manhattan. I can’t imagine a more audacious, daring, beautiful, and inspiring act. For me, it was a celebration of individual freedom and possibility and the majesty of the human spirit. For years, I have had a picture of Petit walking the wire that day on my office wall at the university.

Seeing the new documentary brought to mind something I wrote about Petit in my 2005 book *While There’s Time*. The theme of that book is reflected in its title: that the fundamental reality of our lives is the finiteness of our time on this earth, and that the fundamental choice each of us has is what to do with the precious and irreplaceable gift of time we have been granted. Petit was 24 when he walked the wire that day and we see him in the documentary as he was then, young and lithe and vital. We also see him as he is now, approaching sixty, quite an old man, his body diminished by age, less vibrant, his focus not on the present and future as it was then but rather on the past, reminiscence. At least Petit still exists; of course the Twin Towers do not.

Below is my account of Petit in *While There’s Time*.

In the early morning of August 7, 1974 a 24-year old Frenchman named Philippe Petit was at the top of one of the twin towers of the World Trade Center, 1,350 feet—one-quarter mile—above the streets of Manhattan. Earlier that morning, a colleague of Petit’s shot an arrow with a line attached from the North to the South Tower where Petit was, a distance of 145 feet. Petit used the line to haul a thin steel cable of five-eighths

of an inch in diameter, about the thickness of two pencils, across the gap between the towers and secured it to a steel beam. At 7:15 a.m., Petit wrote his name and the date on the beam, changed into black pants and leather slippers he had stitched himself (he had planned on wearing a black sweater but accidentally dropped it the 110 stories to the street below)—and then stepped out onto the wire.

Word spread rapidly. “An unbelievable story has just arrived—I don’t believe it,” one broadcaster said. “Report of a man walking between the World Trade Center buildings on a tightrope!”

Petit stayed on the wire for nearly an hour. He glided back and forth. He lay on the wire. He knelt, bowed, danced, and ran. He sat down and watched a seagull fly beneath him.

Petit describes his performance that August day: “I continued to do the best and the most beautiful things I knew. I did the exercises in the order I had prepared them during my practice sessions. I added what a man of the wire possesses: the expansiveness of movement, the steadiness of eye, the feeling of victory, the humor of gestures. I climbed down from the wire covered with sweat, unable to remember having once taken a breath.” This wasn’t a daredevil act, Petit declared, but rather “poetry and art.” “And it makes me happy up in the sky.”

Petit describes how to walk the wire: “There is the walk that glides, like that of a bullfighter who slowly approaches his adversary, the presence of danger growing with each new step, his body arched outrageously, hypnotized. There is the unbroken, continuous walk, without the least concern for balance . . . as if you were looking for your thoughts in the sky; this is the solid walk of a man of the earth returning home, a tool over his shoulder, satisfied with his day’s work. These walks happen to be mine. Discover your own. Work on them until they are perfect.”

“The wire walker of great heights is a dreamer,” says Petit. “He stretches out on his cable and contemplates the sky. There he gathers his strength, recovers the serenity he may have lost, regains his courage and his faith.”

Petit counsels doing only those moves on the wire that “transfigure you.” “I triumph by seeking out the most subtle difficulties.”

Says Petit: “Limits, traps, impossibilities are indispensable to me. Every day I go looking for them.”

“Persist,” Petit advises, in order to “feel the pride of conquering.” Because for the victor “a red velvet wire will be unrolled for him and he will move along it brandishing his coat of arms.”

September, 2008.

Drawn from John Capouya, *Gorgeous George: The Outrageous Bad-Boy Wrestler Who Created American Pop Culture* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008).

George Wagner was a quiet, deferring man who grew up in Texas during the Great Depression of the 1930s. He had little education and few job prospects and the best he could do was eke out a living traveling from town to town as a professional wrestler. Although as now, the matches were rigged, wrestlers in those years played it straight and gave the show the appearance of a genuine athletic contest: black trunks and high top shoes; modest, functional robes; real wrestling holds held for extended periods of time; and a sober “game face” demeanor as they went about their business.

Wagner was small for his trade—5’9” or 5’10” and around 190 pounds—but he was muscular and agile and gave crowds their money’s worth. But while George Wagner could be trusted to do his job well, he was just another wrestler and not a headliner. He and his wife Betty barely got along from payday to payday.

Betty came up with an idea of what could be done about their situation. Under her direction, George Wagner, journeyman wrestler, was transformed into--the name Betty came up with--Gorgeous George. He grew his hair out and Betty curled it and dyed it blond. She sewed up some trunks and robes of silk and lace and chiffon in pale pinks and rich mauves. Now, rather than modest, dark-haired, clean cut George Wagner anonymously entering the ring, it was haughty Gorgeous George, blond curls glistening and engulfed in “unmanly” adornments, making a regal entrance to the strains of “Pomp and Circumstance.” Preceding

him was Jefferies, his valet (actually a drinking buddy) decked out in formal attire, including a tailcoat, spraying the arena and mat with perfume. George Wagner-now-Gorgeous-George convincingly affected an imperious look and strode about the ring sneering at the “peasants” who had paid to be in his presence and who ought to be grateful for the privilege. His wasn’t a prissy or gay presentation but rather an in-your-face display of pompousness, arrogance, and grating fastidiousness. Once the match began, he stalked around the ring, constantly ran off at the mouth, occasionally interjected interludes of actual wrestling (at which time he became a startlingly fast, high-flying athlete), and cheated every chance he got.

This was in the late 1940s and on through the fifties. Television was in its early years, and wrestling became a regular feature of local stations’ prime time programming. Wrestling shows were inexpensive to produce--just an announcer and one camera at a show that was going to go on anyway--and they drew good ratings. As the fifties went along, Gorgeous George became the biggest thing going in the Los Angeles market. People paid their money and sat in front of their console TVs to ogle his attire, scoff at his outrageous act, and watch him get his due from his salt-of-the-earth opponent. But after taking a licking and looking like a sure-fire loser the whole match, right at the end Gorgeous George would invariably pull an underhanded stunt that everybody saw but the referee and come out the winner. Of course that enticed the arena customers and home viewers to come back next time to see Gorgeous George get his comeuppance, which was sure to happen --the referee couldn’t be that oblivious again. The next time Gorgeous George would unfairly win again and smugly strut around the ring in triumph to hoots and hollers in the arena and living rooms.

For over a decade Gorgeous George was at the top of the entertainment world; his fame transcended wrestling. He became a

genuine national celebrity. He inspired popular songs and made a movie. He hobnobbed with the show business elite of the time. Although her motive had been just to beef up their paycheck, Betty, with her husband going along with it and pulling it off superbly, had created an icon of American popular culture whose influence spread far and wide and past his time in the spotlight. Among the non-wrestlers who have acknowledged Gorgeous George's influence on their careers are Muhammad Ali, the singer James Brown, the filmmaker John Waters, and, no less, Bob Dylan.

With the coming of the 1960s Gorgeous George was bearing in on fifty, and advancing age along with a strong taste for alcohol was taking a heavy toll. It was getting tougher and tougher for this shy and retiring man—beneath the facade, he was still George Wagner—to keep the show going. Matches got further and further apart and the crowds sparser and sparser, and people were turning the station on their TVs to see what else was on (you had to get up to do that in those years; no remote controls back then). Gorgeous George's career looked as if it had run its course.

The Los Angeles wrestling promoter came up with an idea he was sure would bring the audience back one last time. It was a gimmick match between Gorgeous George and the “world champion” at the time, The Destroyer—real name Dick Beyer. Beyer was sixteen years younger than Gorgeous George, tanned, much bigger, and in far better physical shape. He could move well and put on a good show. Gorgeous George's success had prompted other wrestlers to come up with over-the-top personas of their own. Beyer had devised The Destroyer character, whose identity was concealed by a white elastic hood that fit snugly over his head. All you could see were his eyes, nose, and mouth. Who was The Destroyer? What did he look like? He was the mystery man.

The promoter's gimmick was to stage the Gorgeous George-Destroyer showdown as a "mask versus hair" match. The sell was that if Gorgeous George won, The Destroyer would be unmasked (or unhooded, close enough) and his identity revealed for the first time. If The Destroyer won, Gorgeous George's precious golden locks would be shorn right then and there in the middle of the ring. For the paying customers and TV watchers it was a no-lose proposition: either they'd finally find out what The Destroyer looked like or they'd see Gorgeous George get his, and they'd been waiting a long time for that to happen. The arrangement was for Gorgeous George to lose the match, which was fine with him. Low on money, he was grateful for the work.

On a Wednesday night in November of 1962, 7,634 paying customers showed up at Los Angeles' Olympic Auditorium—not a sellout by any means, but a good crowd. "Pomp and Circumstance" rang out on the loud speakers. The crowd perked up and looked around for Gorgeous George, and here he came up the walkway from the dressing room. George couldn't afford to pay a valet any more and the promoter refused to cover the cost, so he strutted along spraying his own perfume. He had on his famous white boots and one of his favorite nylon robes, crimson with rhinestones and yellow embroidery. To the close observer, however, Gorgeous George's tight curls didn't look quite the same. Instead of their usual champagne color, they looked almost white, and they lacked their usual sheen—perhaps because Betty had split and wasn't available to do his hair. When Gorgeous George removed his robe he looked thick but reasonably taut. He had cut back on his drinking and lost some of his paunch, and his arms had some definition, though not much.

The Destroyer and Gorgeous George put the match across well. As one spectator remarked later, "They gave the people their money's worth." George inadvertently twisted his knee, but he

kept the show going through the pain. The crowd really got into it, stomping and shouting.

And then the prearranged ending. The Destroyer got Gorgeous George up on his shoulders and took him for an “airplane spin”—round and round in dizzying fashion. Then he slammed Gorgeous George to the mat and applied the “figure four” hold. The Destroyer/Beyer described it as “bending a guy’s leg ‘til it looks like the number four.” The “pain” from the figure four, which included some real pain from his hurt knee, “compelled” Gorgeous George to give up and the match was over.

Now for the humiliation—the vainglorious “Orchid” would suffer the ultimate indignity: those annoying curls were coming off! The crowd worked itself into a frenzy. They roared as two “hairdressers”—a couple of guys named Frank and Joseph—armed with shears and clippers entered the ring. Gorgeous George was going to get put in his place at last!

Slumped in a metal folding chair in the middle of the ring, Gorgeous George was genuinely exhausted; his chest heaved. He was too tired to act anymore. He just sat there stoically, his eyes closed, as Frank and Joseph began chopping away at his hair with the shears and throwing the shorn damaged-from-dye, whitish-yellow snips into a plastic bucket. The Destroyer stayed in character shouting, “Yeah, that’s it. Shave him good.” After the shears, the Frank and Joseph started in on Gorgeous George’s head with clippers working down toward the skin. The crowd was going wild, jumping and whooping.

And then the oddest thing happened. The crowd fell silent. There wasn’t a sound in the huge arena. A man’s voice rang out: “Leave him alone!” And then there were other cries of sympathy. People started streaming out of the arena. More silence. Finally Gorgeous George, slumped in the chair in the middle of the ring, was completely bald. His large head gleamed in the glaring ring

lights. Later, the promoter of the match scrawled on a photo taken at the occasion, "The final end of a swollen-headed drunk."

The next year, 1963, on Christmas day, his money and career gone along with Betty, Gorgeous George was in the flophouse where he lived alone. He managed to get himself to a hospital and tell them he was having chest pains. The next afternoon he had a massive heart attack and died. George Wagner was 48 years old.

12

Eddie Waitkus

September, 2008.

Drawn from John Theodore, *Baseball's Natural: The Story of Eddie Waitkus* (University of Nebraska Press, 2002).

In June of 1949, Eddie Waitkus was a 29-year-old veteran of the Pacific war and an all-star caliber first baseman for the Philadelphia Phillies major league baseball team. The Phillies were in town to play the Chicago Cubs. The team was staying at the Edgewater Beach hotel. A note on hotel stationery had been left for Eddie in his mailbox at the front desk:

June 14, 1949

Mr. Waitkus—

It's extremely important that I see you as soon as possible. We're not acquainted but I have something of importance to speak to you about. I think it would be to your advantage to let me explain it to you.

As I am leaving the hotel the day after tomorrow, I'd appreciate it greatly if you could see me as soon as possible.

My name is Ruth Anne Burns, and I am in 1297-A.

I realize that this is a little out of the ordinary, but as I said, it's rather important.

Please come soon. I won't take up much of your time.

[There was no signature.]

The elevator doors opened on the twelfth floor. Eddie stepped out onto the plush carpet and tried to figure out the most direct path to room 1297-A. He walked the length of two hallways

before arriving at a small vestibule that led to the room. He knocked twice before the door swung open.

Before the bullet tore through his chest and he slumped to the floor, Eddie was able to see her clearly—young, tall, attractive, a white lace blouse, long curling black hair held back in place by two studded combs.

Ruth Ann Steinhagen knelt by Eddie's side and held his hand in her lap.

Eddie recovered and returned to baseball and was fairly successful until he was released by the Phillies in 1955. He married and had a daughter and then a son. The marriage didn't last.

In the summer of 1972, life was catching up with Eddie Waitkus. His eyes were sunken and he had little energy. He looked far older than his 52 years. He lived in a rented room on the second floor of Belle Power's modest home in Cambridge, Massachusetts. "Eddie was such a pleasant person," Powers said later. "He'd stay in his room at night and read his books and have his drinks. I don't think he had any close friends."

Work hadn't gone well for Eddie since his baseball playing days ended, but he had finally been able to catch on in the summers as a coach and counselor at Ted Williams' baseball camp. "The kids loved him," Williams said about Eddie. "He was magnificent with them, and we were truly lucky to have him. I always knew Eddie was a great ballplayer, but he was a hell of a man, too."

But there was a deep and pervasive sadness about Eddie, or was it depression? Something was wrong. There was speculation that the horror of war had damaged Eddie's mind, and perhaps there were lingering effects from the shooting. Or was it that Eddie didn't fit in his world? "Eddie wasn't the regular, normal ballplayer," noted former Phillies teammate Richie Ashburn. "He

wasn't a rough guy. He wasn't a nasty guy. He didn't go in with his spikes high, and he didn't fight. He was almost an aberration. He read Latin, loved poetry and classical music, and was an expert in ballroom dancing. Sometimes, looking back on his other talents and interests, I used to think it was a shame he had to play baseball."

On September 16, 1972, twelve days before his 53rd birthday, Eddie Waitkus died from esophageal cancer. After his death, his daughter Ronni said about him: "Dad was a philosophical man, always dreaming about what he was going to do some day that he never did. He once told me he didn't get out of life what he wanted. But what was it?"

13

John Lennon's Lifeline

October, 2008.

Mother, you had me but I never had you
I wanted you but you didn't want me
So I got to tell you
Goodbye goodbye

Father, you left me but I never left you
I needed you but you didn't need me
So I just got to tell you
Goodbye goodbye

Children, don't do what I have done
I couldn't walk and I tried to run
So I got to tell you
Goodbye goodbye

Mama don't go
Daddy come home

--lyrics from the song "Mother" by John Lennon.

Beatle John Lennon would be exactly my age now if he had lived. In recent weeks, I've read several books that dealt with the last years of his life, among them Albert Goldman's biography *The Lives of John Lennon* and Fred Seaman's memoir, *Living With Lennon*.

In one of the books was a quote that struck me from Lennon's son Julian after his father's death. I have been unable to find the quote for this writing, but I remember the gist of what Julian said: that his father was a lost and vulnerable soul, and that his second wife, Yoko Ono, had cruelly, destructively, taken

advantage of that. I was taken by this characterization of Lennon, a rock star icon who seemingly had it all.

The story for public consumption the last decade of John Lennon's life, the 1970s, was that he was living in domestic tranquility at the Dakota Apartments in New York City as the househusband of his loving wife, Yoko Ono. The reality was starkly different. Ono discounted him and discouraged his artistic impulses. Remarkably given the obvious disparity in their two talents, he accepted her definition of him as essentially a prop to her own musical career. He all but stopped creating music. Ono literally avoided Lennon. Wherever he was in their multi-room Dakota complex, she wasn't. He spent much of his time attempting, and failing, to get her attention. He was often left trying to make contact with her by telephone. Ono sexually rejected and disconfirmed him. Lennon became for all practical purposes a sexless being, a pattern broken by occasional forays into pornography. He broke off contact with people and spent most of his time alone in his bedroom with three cats, drinking strong coffee and consuming alcohol and taking drugs and writing constantly in a personal journal that has never been published. He developed an eating disorder, alternatively binging and vomiting and fasting, and his weight dropped to a startling 130 pounds on his 5'11" frame. Increasingly he became a self-deprecating eccentric and underling scornfully endured by Ono and a joke to be ignored to the extent possible by the staff, housekeepers and cooks and such.

The official word at the time was that finally Yoko got so fed up with "bad John" that she exiled him from the Dakota for a nine-month period and then deigned to allow him to return. This was in the mid-seventies. Lennon spent that time in Los Angeles with a young assistant of his and Ono's by the name of May Pang. The truth of it was that while Yoko had indeed had it with John and encouraged him to leave with May, whether Lennon fully realized

it or not, the West Coast sojourn was his chance to escape from a life that was killing him as a man and as an artist.

Pang wrote a memoir of those months published in 1983 entitled *Loving John*. It seems to me that May Pang threw John Lennon a lifeline, as it were, that would have saved him from drowning in the life he was living.

The following are quotes are from her book.

As John and my relationship progressed, he changed. He stopped drinking. He had the time of his life with Julian. He stopped being a recluse and learned to have friends once again. He was writing music.

“John, I love you so very, very much.” “I love you too.”

To this day I wonder if I could have done anything differently. Another human being might have. Given the human being I was at the time that I met John and the things I knew, I could only do what I had the capacity to do. As for myself, John brought a touch of greatness and adventure into my life, and I miss him. I will always miss him. I miss him very much.

In New York, John and Yoko never seemed to be in the same room together, and when they did meet they hardly spoke.

During the filming of one of Yoko’s short films, when John made a suggestion of a camera angle, Yoko silenced him with “You don’t know anything about it, John.”

They rarely kissed or touched. As far as I could see there was nothing sensual about their relationship.

John was playing a Chuck Berry album. Chuck Berry was John’s favorite rock ‘n’ roll artist. Yoko said, “Get that off. I don’t want that played around here.”

At the Dakota, when John spent time with anyone it was with Yoko's friends or with people she thought he should meet.

Yoko had the uncanny ability to make John do anything she wanted. She was able to convince him that whatever she wanted was in his best interest. She had the power to speak directly to the deepest, most insecure part of John, and it was essential to him to do what she said. Although I hated to admit it, deep down I believed that Yoko knew how to get John to do what she wanted and that he would return to her.

During lovemaking it seemed as if our bodies were able to talk to each other. There was an amazing give-and-take as we responded to each other's caresses and sexual sounds. I could not believe how responsive we were to each other. "We make love with our hearts and souls as well as our bodies," John explained.

Listening to rock 'n' roll was a passion we shared. For both of us, the music symbolized escape from childhoods that were confining and limited—it meant freedom. We would turn on the radio and switch from station to station, searching for singles we both liked.

John looked at me and laughed. He kissed me, and then we made love. Later that night we got hungry and went out for a walk. It was a mild summer night, and we felt wonderful. We ate and then went back to the apartment. We undressed and I climbed into bed beside him. I said, "I've never been happier in my life." "It's great!" John replied. We drifted off to sleep.

"Aren't you happier now making new friends?" I asked.

I did not want to be John's new mother. He had already begun to ask my opinion about his every move. He wanted me to be Mother, but I would not do it. I wanted John to stand on his own and I wanted to play straight with him.

I can't tell you not to drink. I'd like you not to, but I can't tell you what to do. I love keeping you organized. I love taking care of you. But I can't control you. You've got to control yourself.

You said you drink because you are nervous. Drinking lets you get your anger out. When you are sober you always look away. You push everything to one side. John, I'll help you. Let's start dealing with things as they occur.

At his core, John was a very frightened man.

I heard John's voice cut through the night: "No one loves me. . . . No one cares about me. . . . Why doesn't anyone love me?"

John, I really love you.

I put my arms around him and held him tight. I cradled him in my arms and rocked him gently until his sobbing finally subsided. I got some Kleenex and wiped away his tears. Finally, he calmed down and we went to sleep, holding each other gently throughout the night.

John reached over and smiled at me. "Do you know I love you?" he said softly. "I love you," I replied.

I got a cookbook, and I started a ritual that John adored. I made an English Sunday breakfast consisting of bacon and eggs, stewed tomatoes, beans on toast, and fried potatoes. I found a newsstand that got the English newspapers and had them delivered to the apartment. After our breakfast, we read the newspapers.

Early on Saturday mornings John and I would set out on a boat. We'd cast off and just lie quietly in the sun, letting the boat drift. After a picnic lunch, we'd spend the rest of the afternoon swimming.

The John I loved the most was the productive John, a man deeply committed to making good music. John told me that Yoko had told him repeatedly that he need not worry that he wasn't recording. She told him he did not have to prove himself anymore, because he was already there. I replied, "I think your spirit dies unless you keep challenging yourself to learn and grow. The truth is, John, I think you are very depressed." We watched television for a while, and then drifted off to sleep. In the morning, as soon as John woke up he wrote on his pad. Every so often, he stopped to play me what he had written to get my reactions. He was working on a sad song that he called "Tennessee." It had been inspired by his rereading of Tennessee Williams' "A Streetcar Named Desire." I loved it and told him so. It later became the song "Watching the Wheels."

At night when John was recording, he always took Julian to the studio. It was Julian's summer holiday, so we didn't think it wrong to keep him up to eleven or twelve at night, as he could sleep the next day.

"We'll go to New Orleans next week, he said, and then come back and I'll finish masterin' "Rock 'n' Roll" [the album he was doing], and then we'll start a new one. What do you think?"

I was convinced that a whole world of touring had opened for John. He had experienced the love of his audience first-hand, and he had been able to communicate his love to them. I could tell that he was deeply moved.

"Do you know what I'd like to do this weekend?" I said. I'd like to look for a house. Just the two of us. It will be beautiful."

John loved the ocean and wanted to live near it, and we found a house on Santa Monica Beach. It was a large, airy, two-storied

house with a pool behind it, and it had direct access to the beach.

John Lennon let go of May Pang's lifeline and went back to New York City and Yoko Ono and the life that was killing him. On December 8, 1980, in the entrance to the Dakota, Mark David Chapman literally killed him, shooting him in the back.

November, 2008.

The barber was born in rural Georgia in 1890. He had little schooling. As a teenager, he sold his share of the small peanut farm passed down to him by his father to his two older sisters and set out to make his way in the world. He went to barber school and worked as a barber on a troop ship crisscrossing the Atlantic during World War I. Before and after the war, there were barbershops in Nebraska and Illinois, and perhaps other places, and then, around 1920, he traveled to Saint Paul, Minnesota, where he never left. After the barber died, which was four years after his wife had died, one of his sisters revealed that he had been married when he was in Nebraska. His second family was very surprised to learn that. As far as anyone knows, there were no children from this first marriage.

After working in a multi-barber shop in South Saint Paul, a working class suburb of Saint Paul, the barber worked alone, first at the Saint Francis Hotel in Saint Paul, and then in his own shops on spaces he rented in downtown Saint Paul and in the eastern part of that city.

In contrast to the barbers that had come before, the barber's generation, at least in Minnesota, were serious tradesmen. They were licensed. They had a union that set prices and regulated its members. They emphasized dignity, courtesy, sobriety, efficiency, and hygiene. No cigar smoke and ashes on the floor. No bawdy talk. Proper decorum. The barber's shears, razors, comb—always an Ace brand comb—and clippers—always an Oster brand—were kept properly sterilized.

The large front window of the barber's shop with its conservative lettering announcing the name of the shop—Walt's Barber Shop--was sparkling clean, as was the ceiling-to-floor

mirror on the wall opposite the row of stiff-backed chrome chairs with their vinyl-covered seats and backs for customers waiting their turn to be served. Checkered linoleum floors, spotless. The cut hair swept up at every opportunity. On the ceiling, light bulbs hidden by porcelain fixtures; no dust, ever. Small tables on either side of the row of waiting chairs with the day's newspaper and popular magazines—*The Saturday Evening Post*, *Life*, and *Look*. No off-color magazines. On the wall, a calendar advertising a bank with a pastoral scene; nondescript, benign, hardly noticeable. No pin-up calendars as in previous times. Attached to the outside of the shop, about three feet high, a slowly-turning, glass-encased barber pole that gave the impression of white, red, and blue stripes spiraling upward. The barber bought his own pole for the last two shops, the spaces he operated on his own.

Center stage, as it were, the barber chair (in some shops, there were two or three chairs, with the owner or senior barber taking the one nearest the door)--large, impressive, a throne of sorts. High quality chrome. A large, sturdy circular base flaring at the bottom. Top grade leather-covered and cushioned seats and backrests and armrests. Hydraulically adjustable to accommodate a customer's height. The barber bought his own chair for the shops he operated.

If there was no one waiting when the barber finished a customer, he would lock the barber chair into place and sit in it glancing through the day's sports results in the newspaper. When a new customer—always men--entered the shop and hung his suit coat and hat (in those years men wore hats, felt with wide brims all around snapped forward in front) and, in the colder months, his outer coat on the tall chrome rack, the barber would come to attention by the barber chair, standing tall to his full five-feet-seven inches, though never in a hurried or abrupt way. The barber was always controlled, serene in a way.

The barber was immaculately groomed: his thinning hair, with a sheen from a noticeable amount of hair tonic, precisely parted slightly to the left of center; sparkling clean rimless conservative eyeglasses; black dress shoes highly polished; a spotless white smock, or, in later years, a freshly pressed and starched white shirt and a conservative tie with a double Windsor knot; sharply pressed, cuffed dress pants of dark blue. When it was sunny through the window, a green plastic eyeshade.

The barber gestured respectfully to the customer to take a seat on the barber chair—the seat of honor, really. Once the customer seated himself, the barber would noiselessly pump the chair to the appropriate height and adjust the neck and foot rests. He would swirl an immaculate white, sometimes striped, sheet-like cloth in a wide swing so that it fell gently around the customer's torso, arms, and upper legs and pinned it at the nape of the neck. So that hair would not get on the customer's neck, a three-inch-wide white gauze neck-strip, also secured at the nape. The barber would then wash his hands at the sink near the mirror and dry them. Only then would he turn the customer to face the mirror and ask quietly: "What'll it be?" Or, for the regulars: "The usual?"

The barber was polite, reserved, modest, and somewhat removed, although without being standoffish. During his time there was a semi-official text of the barbering trade entitled *The Art and Science of Barbering*. It seems unlikely that the barber read it, he was not a reader, but nevertheless it appears he took its precepts to heart. Among them: be a good listener, don't be opinionated, and don't give advice.

A fair number of the barber's customers came for a shave along with their haircut. The barber would take a fresh white terry cloth towel from a neatly folded stack on a small table next to the sink and run it under hot water until it was just the right temperature—hot but not too hot. The barber returned to the chair and tipped it back so that the customer was almost prone. The

barber wrapped the customer's entire face in the towel for a minute or two to soften the beard—just the nose exposed to allow for breathing. For the customer, engulfed in the warmth and blackness, with nothing to do but lie back and let go, it was a welcome respite from the world. The barber used a straight razor and lather brush and mug. He took pride in being able to shave equally well with both his right and left hands. After the shave, soothing lotion. When the customer left, the barber sharpened the razor with a three-inch-wide leather strap—called a strop—that hung from a hook next to the sink.

The barber's customers were virtually all adults, but there were a few boys (never girls). The barber had the smaller boys sit on a 1x8-inch white painted board that rested on the barber chair arm rests to prop them up high enough to work on. The barber's son recalls that the children tended to be very young, two or three years old. Invariably, it seems in retrospect, these little tykes didn't like what was going on a bit, and squirmed and cried in escalating intensity throughout their haircuts. Their parent—most often the father, every once in a while the mother--would stand beside the chair trying to reassure and calm the red-faced, distressed flailer while the barber worked his clippers, comb, and shears the best he could given the moving target.

Thinking back on it, the barber's son wonders why the very young ages most often, and why getting a haircut was such an aversive experience for these little souls. Perhaps the noisy clippers were scary. In any case, no matter how loud and frenzied the crying and spasmodic the movements, the barber never departed from his calm, pleasant, slightly removed persona. Nothing ever, apparently anyway, rattled the barber in the least.

The barber worked ten hours a day, from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m., six days a week, Monday through Saturday. He ate his lunch, which he brought from home, in the shop. As he grew older, his shoulders throbbed at the end of the day from holding his arms up

from early morning to evening, and he would ask his wife to spread on some smelly balm he got at the drug store on his shoulders, and back in the shop first thing in the morning he would be. His last year, the cancer that had spread forced him to use a high stool to cut hair and shave because he could no longer stand for more than a few minutes at a time.

At the end of each day, after the barber cleaned up the shop and got it ready for the next day, he took the streetcar, and later the bus, home to his wife and son, arriving a little after 7 p.m. He ate dinner with his wife around 7:30—his son had eaten earlier—and he was in bed by ten. Once a year or so, he would bring his barber tools home in a black satchel and after dinner go to a funeral home to give one of his customers or a stranger his last haircut and shave.

The barber practiced his trade for 56 years. For 56 years the barber did the very best he could in his work. He fully completed each task. He never hurried a customer along. His son, who knew of him the last twenty years of his life, cannot recall him missing a single day of work. The barber's one vacation that last twenty years was a weekend train trip to Milwaukee to see a major league baseball game. Unfortunately, the game rained out.

The barber could never afford a car, or a house. All his life he rented. The son remembers the barber paying the rent first to "Mr. Kammer" and then to "Mr. Jensen." The barber's income was whatever was left in the cash register at the end of the day, and often it was very little. The barber never had a savings or checking account. When he died at 74, cutting hair to the end, his only possessions beyond his barber pole and chair and his barbering tools were some clothes, a few pieces of old furniture, and the money in his pocket—a few bills and some change.

The son cannot recall a time when the barber complained about his lot in life, or a time when he extolled any aspect of his existence, professional or personal. The barber seemed to go

through life without comment; or at least external comment, one can never be sure what he thought inwardly. However the barber may have seen life when he was young and just leaving the Georgia farm to begin his journey in the wider world it appears that for him existence had come down to doing the thing right in front of him, and then the next thing, and then the next thing and the next and the next, until, in 1964, next things ran out and eternity began.

15 The Death of Jean-Paul Sartre

April, 2009.

Jean-Paul Sartre, 1905-1980, was a French philosopher, novelist, playwright, and political activist. He was one of the leading intellectuals of the twentieth century. The material below was taken from *Adieux: A Farewell to Sartre*, written by Sartre's lifelong companion, Simone de Beauvoir.

The first alarm was the attack of high blood pressure. The doctors told me Sartre's arteries were too narrow.

When Sylvie and I went to fetch him for lunch, he bumped into furniture at every step. He was staggering. When we were in Rome, he legs gave out when he stepped out of the car. The doctor said that the lack of balance might be caused by trouble in the inner ear or in the brain.

Doctors detected grave disturbances in the circulation in the left hemisphere of his brain and a narrowing of the blood vessels.

When he woke up it seemed to him that his right arm was so heavy and numb he could scarcely move it. His legs were giving way under him, he spoke indistinctly, and his mouth was a little twisted. Obviously he had had a slight stroke during the night.

His cigarette kept dropping from his lips. Sylvie would pick it up and hand it to him; he would take it and it would slip out of his grasp.

The doctor examined Sartre for an hour and reassured me; the underlying perception was unaffected, the mind was unharmed, and the stammer came from the twist to his mouth.

His right hand was still weak. It was hard for him to play the piano, and it was hard for him to write.

Sartre began to suffer cruelly from his tongue. He could neither eat nor speak without pain.

His mouth became more twisted, pronunciation was difficult, and his arm was insensitive to heat and cold.

His face was swollen—one of his teeth was abscessed.

Sartre complained of losing his memory.

He began to talk nonsense and staggered as he went up to bed.

He often had abscesses and they gave him much pain. He ate only soft things.

The evening before, he had had another stroke. His face was twisted. He was sitting in front of the television and asked, “Where’s the telly?” His brain was not good. He wandered in his speech. Liliane told me he did not recognize her—sometimes he took her for Arlette, sometimes for me. The doctor told me that Sartre had had an attack of asphyxia of the brain.

I put on records, among them Verdi’s *Requiem*, which Sartre was very fond of. He only murmured, chilling Sylvie and me through and through.

He read an excellent book, *Les Kapetanos*, but I do not think he retained anything.

The ophthalmologist discovered a thrombosis in a triple hemorrhage at the back of the eye. There was also the beginning of glaucoma. He lost four-tenths of his vision—almost half. And he only had one eye that worked at all. Even

with the magnifying glass he could not manage to read everything.

The doctor gave me a letter in which he stated that Sartre was suffering from cerebral arteriopathy, high blood pressure.

The ophthalmologist told him that there was no hope for a cure. The hemorrhage was healing over, but it had left ineradicable scars in the middle of the retina, which was now dead tissue. A special apparatus might allow him to read perhaps an hour a day using lateral vision. The optician lent us the apparatus, but it was useless to Sartre. The words came so slowly that he preferred hearing them read aloud.

I read aloud to Sartre—works on Flaubert, and an issue of *Les Temps Modernes*.

Sartre had diabetes.

Slow waves had been detected in his brain, and these might explain his states of drowsiness.

We tried to play draughts, but he could no longer see well enough and we had to give up.

One morning I wiped saliva off his shirt. He said, “Yes, I dribble.”

Sometimes he would utter very strange words.

He found it hard to concentrate.

“Shall I never get my eyes back?”

He had urinary incontinence and lost control of his bowels. He fouled his clothes and his pajamas at night.

Kidney stones were making him writhe in pain.

From time to time he would try to write. This amounted to making illegible marks on paper.

The artist Rebeyrolle showed us his latest canvases. Sartre observed sadly, "I cannot see them."

He often lost his bearings in time and space.

He found it really hard to speak; the corner of his mouth and the tip of his tongue were almost paralyzed.

Sartre was told inflammation of the walls of his arteries might lead to the amputation of his legs.

He complained that in the morning his mouth and throat were half paralyzed.

He had pains in his left leg--calf, thigh, ankle, and foot. The doctor said he had sciatica. His walking grew worse and worse.

Melina telephoned me in a panic. Sartre's legs had given way, neighbors had carried him to the elevator. He was deathly pale, sweating, and out of breath. The next day Arlette called me to say that Sartre had fallen several times.

Sartre was to stop walking; otherwise there was the danger of a heart attack or a stroke.

The summary was disturbing—only a 30 percent circulation in the legs.

One morning as he was getting up his right foot hurt him so much that he said, "I can see why they cut your feet off." Aspirin soothed his pain a little. Fresh injections took it away altogether for a time. But it was still very hard for him to walk.

It is to Sartre that one can apply Rilke's words: "Every man bears his death within himself."

He was very sorry that he couldn't see faces.

Finally, Sartre could no longer read at all.

He was laid on a kind of wheeled stretcher that was rolled down a long corridor; he was breathing oxygen from a mask that a doctor held over his head. The doctor said he had a pulmonary edema caused by a lack of irrigation in the lungs.

"He's frail, very frail." Sylvie was horrified at his appearance.

He trailed a little plastic bag full of urine behind him. They used the word "uremia." I knew that uremia often brought hideous suffering.

The doctors told me that because his kidneys were no longer adequately supplied with blood they no longer functioned. Sartre still passed urine, but without eliminating urea. An operation would have been needed to save one kidney, but he had not the strength to bear it; and even if it could have been carried out, the inadequate circulation would then have been transferred to the brain.

The bedsores were horrifying to see—great purplish-blue and reddened patches. Since his blood did not circulate properly, gangrene had attacked his flesh.

With closed eyes, he took me by the wrist and said, "I love you very much."

At nine in the evening, the telephone rang. Arlette said, "It's over."

September, 2009.

I'm on a college of education faculty at a university. In recent years, my outlook has met with strong disfavor. My arguments for student-autonomy-based and traditional, or classical, schooling approaches are seen as contradicting the college's commitment to educational progressivism. My writings expressing respect and concern for the wellbeing of European heritage, white, Americans, including students, are viewed as wrongheaded if not malevolent and as undercutting the college's dedication to promoting diversity and social justice.

People ask me how my university deals with me, and how I manage personally and professionally in such an aversive context. They assume I am living with overt hostility, disparagement, and harassment, and that the situation I'm in must be bringing me down and getting in the way of my professional accomplishment and personal happiness. Not so; nobody is coming after me hard, and by my standards, I'm productive and happy.

It helps to understand the contemporary university if one views it as a secular church. Recently I wrote:

When I entered university work four decades ago, the university was seen as a marketplace of ideas, the phrase that was used. The greater the variety and caliber of "goods" in the marketplace, the better the university. The university was a setting for free and unfettered inquiry and expression. Open and civil dialogue and debate around all claims and points of view was encouraged. Academic freedom and intellectual autonomy were cherished elements in the continuing search for truth. I assumed I would be applauded for offering alternative conceptions of reality and challenging orthodoxies, and for encouraging my students to do the same, and in the beginning I was.

But no more. Over the course of my career, and at an accelerating pace, the university has become a secular church that gives testimony and demands allegiance to a neo-Marxist ideological/political doctrine, or faith, which has come to be known popularly as political correctness. In my field of education, a left-leaning approach to schooling called progressive education is central to the creed. These years, to be a faculty member is to be a missionary spreading the Good Word.

How do churches look upon people who deviate from the faith? As misguided, perhaps villainous, heretics. This week I read about what happened to the seventeenth-century philosopher Baruch Spinoza. (Will Durant, *The Story of Philosophy*, Pocket Books, 1961, original publication, 1926, pp. 176-198.) In 1658, Spinoza was summoned before the elders of his synagogue on a charge of heresy. Was it true, they asked him, that he had said that God is simply the world of matter, and that angels are hallucinations, and that the Old Testament does not support a belief in immortality?

History has not recorded Spinoza's response to that inquiry, but it does record that he was excommunicated for his transgressions:

Hereby then are all admonished that none hold converse with him by word of mouth, none hold communication with him by writing; that no one do him any service, no one abide under the same roof with him, no one approach within four cubits length of him, and no one read any document dictated by him, or written by his hand.

From my own experience and from what I have picked up from talking to people in circumstances similar to mine, what happened to Spinoza is how the “church elders” in today's university often deal with those who violate the faith. While they

may mess with heretics' teaching and committee assignments and merit pay increases and travel money, their basic strategy is to excommunicate them, shun them. Don't talk to them about anything, don't socialize with them, don't read anything they've written, don't encourage or support them, don't give them a forum, advise students not to enroll in their courses and to stay out of their offices. Don't acknowledge anything they do, cut them off if they speak at a meeting, don't respond if they express themselves publicly, and don't put them on committees or work groups or invite them to meetings. Treat them as if they don't exist.

I don't know what it was like for Spinoza, but the modern excommunication is not harsh, or overtly adversarial. In fact, it is a rather friendly snubbing. People don't look the other way or snarl upon seeing you. The order of the day is a robotic "Hello" accompanied by the briefest of smiles and eye contact before quickly looking away. It's never "How are you?" or "What are you doing these days?" There is never a second sentence. A one-sentence limit applies to the excommunicated. They don't put you down, at least to your face, and they don't debate you; they just don't answer your emails.

So you aren't being lashed with a cane, and you still have a job and the wherewithal to make the mortgage payments. Still, being excommunicated, relegated to pariah status by one's workmates, and to a good extent by students who take their cues from faculty, can be very difficult to deal with.

Psychologist Abraham Maslow proffered a theory of basic human needs as a way to account for human motivation and behavior. People do what they can to serve their basic needs, Maslow pointed out, count on it. Among Maslow's list of basic needs are social validation and inclusion, and in that light never getting a word of praise and eating lunch alone for a year or two or three can be a tough row to hoe for someone.

What gives me hope is that I think what Maslow calls needs are more accurately characterized as wants. While I might like some affirmation once in a while or a shared lunch, I don't absolutely need either of them. If I absolutely needed them, then certainly, I had best set about doing whatever it takes to get them. But if I only want them, I really don't have to sell my soul to get a plaque on my wall or someone to talk with in the faculty lounge.

Being persona non grata can leave a person moping around the office and the house. The first thing I do after waking up in the morning is to make a commitment to being happy that day, and throughout the day I say to myself, "Cheer up!" More than we realize, I believe, happiness is a choice and not the inevitable outcome of a situation. If it is a choice--to a large extent, to any extent--it makes sense to choose happiness. A book by the late cognitive psychologist Albert Ellis I have found useful is *How to Stubbornly Refuse to Make Yourself Miserable About Anything: Yes, Anything!*

Likely the first impulse of the excommunicated is to try to get back in good graces with the excommunicators. As far as I can see, that doesn't work. The placating and groveling just reinforces them in what they are doing. And anyway, the decision has been made, it's over, you're out, nothing you can do about it, your file is closed. You could try totally caving in and kissing their feet—some time read about poor old Galileo when he got caught writing that the earth goes around the sun. But that is simply not an option for any self-respecting person. Even if they work, there are some things that are so dishonorable it is better to live with whatever grief you are experiencing than stooping to employ them.

What do you do? You go the other way from your ostracizers. Which doesn't mean you have to leave the setting. In place, you can quit playing your life to them. Quit being defined by them. Center your life around making good things happen on your terms and living well and being happy. It appears that

Spinoza did that. “I am happy,” he said, “and pass my days not in sighing and sorrow, but in peace, serenity and joy.” He sought out congenial and supportive people, he took an interest in the political issues of his time, he pursued adventures, and he wrote philosophical treatises that have had enormous impact to this day.

17 Straightening Out Twyla Tharp's Thinking

March, 2010.

Twyla Tharp is one of America's great dance choreographers, with a career spanning over forty years. In her book, *Twyla Tharp: The Creative Habit*, she poses and answers the question: When faced with stupidity, hostility, intransigence, laziness, or indifference in others, how do you respond? Her answer: Stupidity: run, don't walk. Hostility: get nicer. Intransigence: push back. Laziness: see Stupidity. Indifference: move on. A terse reply from Twyla, but I get the idea, and I know a better way to come at it than Twyla's.

My better way builds on Twyla's response to hostility, which is the strongest point she makes, by taking it even further, I assume, than she does. If somebody is hostile to you, that should be the occasion for you to be really, really, *really* nice to them. Smile, ingratiate yourself. Be *super* friendly! The more hostile they are, the nicer you get. Attend to them, serve them, defer to them, put yourself down around them, pitch yourself beneath them, entertain them, fawn over them, build them up, play the fool. Do whatever you have to do to get them to like you and want to be around you.

Stupidity? No, no, no, Twyla, that's not an occasion for run, don't walk. You've got that totally wrong. Stupidity is a signal for you to get closer, and the more stupidity there is, the closer you should get. Closer and closer to stupid people until your life is intertwined with theirs. Drop other people from your life; they don't matter. Your challenge in life is to enlighten stupid people and to build up their self-esteem. Part of that is to play dumb and show them how inept you are so they feel good about themselves in comparison to you. The dumber they get, the more urgency you should feel about your mission: you *must* smarten them up and

make them realize how brilliant they really are. Go places with them. Have long conversations with them. Tell them in detail about all your ideas and plans and activities, and if they don't get it, tell them again, and again, and again and again and again until they perceive every nuance of what you are saying. Make them the audience in your life. What's this run, don't walk business?

Intransigence? Here again Twyla has a point, though it's best to go even further than she seems to be taking it. Not only should you push back, you should *center your entire life around pushing back!* Nothing should matter to you except wrestling around with intransigent people and coming out on top with them. That is what your life is about: pushing and pulling and jerking, this way and that way, every chance you get, put all your energy into it.

Run from laziness? Again, Twyla is 180 degrees off. Make early risers out of lazy people! Motivate them. Inspire them. Blame yourself when they sit on their duffs. When they don't do something, reason with them, coax them, plead with them, give them another chance, and another and another and another. Got a big project going? Take lazy people on as collaborators. Yes!

Indifference? Make indifference a signal to get close, and closer and closer and closer and closer. Don't move on to people and situations where you are cared about, encouraged, and supported; that's a cop-out. Hang out with indifferent people. Turn indifference around. Make people who don't give a damn about you care deeply, fervently, about you, and don't stop until you succeed at it with every single one of them.

What ties all of this together for me is the profound insight I have come to that if you aren't perfect--perfect!—at turning around stupidity, hostility, intransigence, laziness, and indifference, you deserve to be despondent and hate yourself. You should dwell incessantly on how people of these sorts feel about you and what isn't working for you with them. You can't be happy, you can't get

on to anything else, absolutely not, until you make it 100% right with the people in your life who don't understand you, have no respect for you, work against you, give you nothing, don't care about you, dump on you, and who would throw a party if you fell down a manhole. Twyla just doesn't get it. She knows a lot about dance, but she has much to learn from me in this area, that's for sure.

18

Cocoons and Butterflies

March, 2010.

Dear Jack,

Give my regards to Watson. Next time I get to the Twin Cities it would be great for the three of us to get together. I haven't seen him since high school. I remember the birthday parties I went to at his house his mother so lovingly arranged, the gooey homemade cake and presents and everything. Watson and I were about seven or eight, maybe nine, something like that, I can't remember whether you were there or not.

What an athlete Watson was. I watched the Madison High School football practices, and Watson's arm was so good that to work on punt returns the coaches would have him simulate punts by throwing the ball way high in the air about fifty yards down the field. And those were the days of the big fat ball, not today's little kiddie ball. I was in awe. He could have been a big time quarterback in college if he hadn't decided to concentrate on baseball and hockey.

If you contact Watson, see if he remembers when he and I, we were about eleven, tried to figure out the answer to a grammatical problem, although we wouldn't have known to call it that. The problem was, which is correct, "you guys" or "youse guys?" Is it, "What are you guys doing on Saturday?" or "What are youse guys doing on Saturday?"

At first the answer seemed obvious: you guys. "What are you guys doing?" But when we thought about it, since guys was plural--I think we knew the word plural, or at least we knew the concept--it might be proper to match guys up with the plural form of you, which is youse. So maybe it should be "youse guys." Or is it "you guys"? Watson and I went back and forth. We were really

engaged with this problem.

Finally we agreed on the answer. It's optional. You guys, youse guys, both are correct. Either way is fine.

Watson was on the radio show you said you and I were on together. I can't remember what the show was called either. It was in the Hamm Building downtown, WMIN, Stuart Lindmann was the announcer's name. The contestants were kids from the same school, around eleven or twelve. Our school was on the show a couple years in a row. It was musical chairs--on the radio, the listener had to imagine what was going on. The child that didn't get a seat would have to answer a school-type question, and if you got it right you stayed in the game and if you got it wrong you were out. They kept doing that until there was a winner. Watson won one of the years, maybe both. I remember taking note of that, because Watson wasn't exactly a star student.

A tick scandalous as I think about it now, the show gave us kids questions and answers ahead of time on cards, and we spent the week before the show memorizing the answers. On the show they asked those questions. It was kind of like the quiz show scandals in the 1950s, Charles Van Doren, have you ever seen the movie "Quiz Show"? When they wanted to get someone out of the game, I suppose they were watching the clock and timing things, they would throw in a ringer question, one that wasn't in the stack of cards we were given.

I got a ringer question both years, first question, and out I went. One of them I remember: Who invented the telegraph? No idea. Samuel Morse. My mother told me she suspected that our seventh grade teacher, Miss Riley, who set up our appearance on the show, told them to throw a ringer question at me so I'd lose. I didn't catch her reasoning about why Miss Riley would do something like that, and, my style back then, I didn't ask.

Much less asking about anything, I didn't think about anything growing up. To say I was in a daze, numb, is too strong,

but I was in that direction. I was like a pet dog, I went where anybody that pulled my leash took me. An example, the director of the Madison High School band, Mr. Ellsworth Blood--there's a name for you--told me I ought to be playing something called a baritone horn, it's like a small tuba, which I couldn't play a lick and hadn't the slightest interest in. But because Blood told me to do it, for all four years of high school I was in the band playing the baritone horn. I can understand why Blood thought I ought to play the thing, he was filling out his band. But what was I doing it for? And why wasn't my four year involvement in the band worth at least a comment from my parents or much older sister and brother?

Anyway, every morning at 8 a.m., first hour, there I'd be on the school auditorium stage, wasting a school credit, in the last row of the band, with my baritone horn propped up in my lap waiting for Blood to lead us in the next song. Sitting on my left was Ronald Emerson, who also played the baritone, and far better than I could, and who was on a higher plane of existence than I was, we both understood that, with him destined for college and worldly success and me on a conveyer belt to the Ford plant. On my right playing a monstrous bass horn--it's like a great big tuba--was Stan Diedrich ("Died rich," Stan pointed out), who between Souza marches would recount to me what he was taking in with his binoculars that the couple next door to his house were doing in their bedroom, which I vaguely comprehended through the gauze that separated me from the world in those years.

The damn baritone weighed about 25 pounds with the case, and I remember lugging it all alone on the city bus dressed in my band uniform with an audience of snickering fellow riders to Central High School where we played our high school football games. We'd break into a rousing rendition of the school fight song when we scored a touchdown and formed the letter "M" out on the field at halftime--I was the point of the "M" in the middle on the bottom, kind of an honor--as if anybody was paying the

least bit of attention and it was November and cold and the field was muddy. Why?

My senior year, I played a solo in the band concert, "Jupiter Polka" it was called. I didn't have the faintest notion what a Jupiter or a polka was and absolutely couldn't play the song, so I knew the concert wasn't going to be my finest hour. Though it didn't get to me too bad, because it would just be one more instance of what happened every time I ventured out from in front of the TV set, so I was used to it.

Sure enough, when I was playing my solo at the concert, I completely fell apart during this one particular run up the musical scale and stopped cold. I licked my lips and stood there and, after what must have seemed to everybody present but me an eternity of deadly silence, I restarted a few notes up the line. None of the parents who showed up--my parents didn't bother, and no teachers or students would be caught dead at a band concert--were so tactless as to snicker like those bus riders and the students at the football games did.

One good thing came out of playing in the band: the only award or acknowledgment I have received in my entire life. Maurice Henschel and I were the only two seniors in the band. Remember Maurice? He was cruelly but aptly called "Sunfish," because head-on he looked like a, you know, sunfish. Maurice liked to tell people, "You may be important, but I am Maurice Henschel." (Say that out loud.)

Anyway, there I am sitting at the awards assembly in the Madison auditorium, and to my complete surprise, Blood announced that I had been given the co-band award along with Maurice Henschel. Maurice and I went up on stage and collected our awards. Snickers in the background.

Here I am now, Professor Griffin, and all this happened eons long ago, but I remember it like it was yesterday and it still lives inside me, it's part of me. I'm still the one on the city bus in a

band uniform with a monstrous baritone horn case.

Remember Tom Kiesler? Did you know him? His mother cooked hot dogs at the Saint Paul Saints minor league baseball games really good hotdogs, 25 cents. Tom was wonderfully, and remarkably, simple-minded. I don't mean he was dumb, I'm sure he wasn't. He was just blissfully uncomplicated. Cheerful. Positive. Innocuous. There wasn't a dark or cynical bone in Tom's body. He was kind of like the Chauncey Gardner character in Jerzy Kosinski's book, the one that was made into a film, *Being There*.

Tom was a batboy and then a clubhouse boy with the Saints. He considered it a high honor to pick up the dirty uniforms, socks, and jock straps of the ballplayers in the locker room. I remember thinking, for sure, that is indeed a high honor, and noting, as much as I was capable of noting, which was very little, that I wasn't doing anything noble like that with my life. Tom wound up being a clubhouse attendant and the equipment manager for forty years with major league baseball teams.

I don't mean to be patronizing Tom. I just Googled him and found a newspaper article about him. He seems to have done fine in his life. The article recounted all the star players over the years Tom has known, and how important his work was to everybody. And how he's a beloved grandfather and sits on the bench in uniform as a kind of honorary coach for the college baseball team his son coaches. The article had a picture of Tom in his baseball cap looking just as innocent and pure as I remember him being back when. Although he sure has put on weight--catch the bloated face in this link, makes the baseball cap look tiny. But except for that, it's remarkably the same face I remember. Note how Tom has rounded the bill of the cap into a tight circle around his eyes just like we used to do it.

Reading about Tom just now, I thought about life being fleeting, and that in the grand scheme of things it doesn't really

make any difference whether we try to catch on to what is happening or become or do anything in particular. Tom Kiesler's life seems to demonstrate that you can just stay nestled in your cocoon until you die. No edges: nothing to cut your finger on with Tom, and nothing for Tom to cut his own finger on. Looking at this, albeit inflated, face in the baseball cap a half-century later in the newspaper article, it is the very same agreeable person looking out at the world as back then, or so it appears.

I've spent my adult life trying to figure things out, become something, make something big, new, happen. Why? For what? What compels me? I've pushed against the confines of the cocoon to become a butterfly all of my adult life—I think it started about my third year of high school teaching--because, simply, so I've concluded, I'm not Tom Kiesler, and that's what I do when I am who I am--Tom does Tom and I do me. To stay with that metaphor, being a butterfly has gotten me around people with nets waving them at me, but it's been fine, I wouldn't have had it any other way.

Write with news when you have the impulse. I'll look to hear from you. Give my best wishes to Meg.

Your old friend,

Robert

[May 28th, 2017. Tom Kiesler died today.]

19

“Unchained Melody”

March, 2010.

With my deafness, I can't hear music at all, except in my dreams, where I hear it perfectly, magnificently, I'm sorry to wake up. Last night I heard, experienced fully, gloriously, the song "Unchained Melody." It wasn't any particular orchestra or band that I heard, or any particular singer, although I took in, lived, every note and every word. It was just the song and me, nothing else existed. It was as though I was hearing the song itself, its essence.

Oh, my love
 my darling
 I've hungered for your touch
 a long lonely time
 and time goes by so slowly
 and time can do so much
 are you still mine?
 I need your love
 I need your love
 God speed your love to me

Lonely rivers flow to the sea,
 to the sea
 to the open arms of the sea
 lonely rivers sigh "wait for me, wait for me"
 I'll be coming home wait for me

Oh, my love
 my darling
 I've hungered for your touch
 a long lonely time
 and time goes by so slowly

and time can do so much
are you still mine?
I need your love
I need your love
God speed your love to me

When I woke up, I went back through the song in my imagination. I was touched by the lyrics, but what particularly struck me was the melody, these notes in that order, discordant in places, with abrupt shifts, but yet such a unified whole. It was as if the melody had always existed and that the composer, whoever it was, had discovered it. But of course that's not the way it happened, someone created this melody, and it will always exist because this act of creation occurred. The marvel of creativity: this melody, these words, together in this configuration, never before existed and now exist, and forever. I was particularly taken, going back through it, with the note, high, ethereal, accompanying the word "mine"—"are you still *mine*?" I wondered about why the song is called "Unchained Melody." "Unchained" doesn't appear in the lyrics, and I couldn't see any metaphorical connection to the song.

I'm not sure why I dreamed this particular song last night. I remember it as a Righteous Brothers record back in the 1960s, but I don't remember paying much attention to it in those days. And it was in the movie "Ghost," about 1990, which I saw, but here again, neither the movie nor the song made much of an impression on me at that time. I was saddened and sobered by the recent death of the "Ghost" co-star Patrick Swayze and read the memoir he wrote just before his passing, but that was months ago, and as far as I can tell neither Swayze's death nor how it reminded me of my own mortality has been on my mind recently.

I remember ten or so years ago being touched by Elvis Presley in a documentary film of his last concert, just a few weeks before his death, in Indianapolis I think it was, sitting at the piano

looking bloated and unwell and vulnerable, ending the concert with “Unchained Melody” and struggling to hit the “mine” note and succeeding and looking gladdened by his accomplishment and at peace. I’ve felt a kinship with Elvis, as a man not as an artist, with his humanity beneath the public persona, with his struggle to find meaning in his life, with the way his childhood accompanied him into adulthood, with the way he tried to hold it together as it got tougher and tougher to do, and with the way he hit that high note at the end in spite of it all. But I haven't thought about him singing “Unchained Melody” for years.

Lying in bed after awakening this morning, I pondered the mystery of our inner lives, including our dreams. Dreams for me have always been lessons to me in how I am in the world, what’s going on with me, what I'm like. Perhaps dreaming this song has to do with my own aloneness if not loneliness now, and my humanity and vulnerability and mortality, and that I don't want to try to keep the show going, that I'm Elvis at the end, although I hope my health is better than his was, that I want to go home, that I want to be at peace, that I hunger for touch, for love.

The dream where I heard music so clearly prompted me to reflect on the incredible gifts I was given that I didn't cherish until one of them was gone. Without thinking about it, I assumed that since sound is out there I would have to hear it. Of course that is not the case. I'll never hear music again, only these loud screeching noises inside my head, which were gone in the dream, so wonderful. But I'm truly grateful for having heard music for so long, well into adulthood. Some people never hear music, never hear sound at all. I've heard Mozart and Frank Sinatra and Elvis, and I remember.

Losing a sense has made me more thankful than before for all the senses I do have, particularly my vision. Never a day goes by that I don't marvel at the fact that I can see, and think about what it would be like if I couldn't. It can all go at any time, my deafness

brought that home to me, and it will all go some time; not tomorrow or next year perhaps--perhaps--but inevitably it will all go. Between now and then, I will live with awareness of how I have been blessed with my senses and my mind and my ability to connect with other human beings, and with the gift of life itself, so precious, so fleeting.

I just now looked it up and found that “Unchained Melody” was the theme for an obscure 1955 prison film called "Unchained" and thus the title. The music was by Alex North and the lyrics by Hy Zaret. Both are gone now, but their song lives on, as will the song I write with my life.

20

Scaredy Squirrel

June, 2010.

Adapted from Mélanie Watt, *Scaredy Squirrel*, children's book.

Scaredy Squirrel never leaves his nut tree. He'd rather stay in his tree than risk venturing out into the very scary world. A few things Scaredy is afraid of:

- Tarantulas.
- Poison ivy.
- Green Martians.
- Killer bees.
- Germs.
- Sharks.

Advantages for Scaredy of never leaving the nut tree:

- Good view (visible while scanning the area with binoculars looking for tarantulas, et al.)
- Plentiful supply of nuts.
- It's pretty safe if you keep the scanning up.

Disadvantages of never leaving the tree:

- Same old place.
- Same old nuts.
- Same old view.
- Scaredy is still basically scared.

Scaredy's Daily Routine:

6:45 a.m. Wake up.
7:00 a.m. Eat a nut.
7:15 a.m. Scan the view.
10:00 a.m. Eat a nut
10: 30 a.m. Scan the view.
12:00 noon. Eat a nut.
12:30 p.m. Scan the view.
2:30 p.m. Eat a nut.
3:00 p.m. Scan the view
5:30 p.m. Eat a nut.
6:00 p.m. Scan the view.
6:45 p.m. Eat a nut.
7:30 p.m. Scan the view.
9:30 p.m. Eat a nut
10:00 p.m. Go to bed.

One day at 10 a.m. right after eating a nut, Scaredy Squirrel fell out of the tree. As he was falling, something incredible happened--instead of dropping straight to the ground he glided through the air. Scaredy Squirrel discovered that he is no ordinary squirrel. He's a flying squirrel! He sailed and swooped and soared. He was free and unafraid. He forgot all about the tarantulas and killer bees and sharks.

When Scaredy finally landed gently on the ground after five minutes of swooping and sailing, he was so happy. But then right away he got scared again. What to do? Play dead. Scaredy did that for two hours under some shrubs, and then quickly returned to his nut tree. Safe (relatively) in his nut tree, Scaredy remembered how great it was to be a flying squirrel. He was inspired to make drastic changes in his life.

Scaredy's New-And-Improved Daily Routine:

6:45 a.m. Wake up.
7:00 a.m. Eat a nut.
7:15 a.m. Scan the view.
10:00 a.m. Eat a nut and then sail into the air, soar and glide.
10:05 a.m. Land on the ground, play dead.
12:05 p.m. Return to the nut tree.
12:06 p.m. Eat a nut.
12:30 p.m. Scan the view.
2:30 p.m. Eat a nut.
3:00 p.m. Scan the view
5:30 p.m. Eat a nut.
6:00 p.m. Scan the view.
6:45 p.m. Eat a nut.
7:30 p.m. Scan the view.
9:30 p.m. Eat a nut
10:00 p.m. Go to bed.

21

Dick W C Anderson and Me

July, 2010.

A memory came to me in a quiet moment a couple of weeks ago--I can't say for sure what prompted it—that had to do with a man I encountered just once many, many years ago by the name of Dick W C Anderson. Anderson wasn't one of the pillars of the community, as they say. Just the opposite. He had brutally murdered a 34-year-old mother of four children ages six to thirteen, Carol Thompson, early one morning in her home in an upscale neighborhood in Saint Paul, Minnesota. I grew up in Saint Paul and was living around there at the time. This was the early 1960s.

The case was front-page news for months because of the circumstances surrounding the crime: Carol Thompson's husband, T. Eugene Thompson, a 36-year-old, on-the-rise attorney, was accused of arranging the murder. I was a spectator in a small courtroom in across-the-river Minneapolis (there'd been a change of venue) where T. Eugene Thompson was being tried for the crime the day that Dick W C Anderson took the stand and recounted how he had murdered Carol Thompson.

I went to the Thompson trial with my wife and sister. The three of us got in a line outside the courtroom, and they let people in until the quota of thirty or so spectators was reached, and we made it in and took our seats. It had to have been late in the fall of 1963 because my wife was well along in her first pregnancy, and our son was born on December 15th of that year. I was 23 and she was 21. At the time, we were living in a downscale, second floor apartment in West Saint Paul, a working class suburb of Saint Paul--on Stickney Street, I remember the street after all this time. One of my wife's relatives, an aunt as I recall, had given us some

living room furniture that was torn and reeked of pet urine, but giving us the furniture, torn and smelly or not, was nice of her to do, and both my wife and I were very appreciative of her kind gesture.

I was unemployed at the time and, truth be told, half-heartedly looking for a secondary school teaching job. I had just finished a teacher education program at the university and had a license to teach. At the time, I would have taken any kind of job, it didn't matter all that much to me. I'd stroll along University Avenue, which connects Saint Paul and Minneapolis and was lined with a lot of big companies, and I'd go into a building, I didn't pay attention to what the company was, and ask the first receptionist I came to if I could fill out a job application. She, it was always a woman, would either tersely say no, or, without comment, reach under her desk and hand me a job application form to fill out, and I'd do that and be on my way. I didn't ask to talk to anybody about a job. I'd touch down as lightly as I could and be gone, and after doing that for a while I'd go home and take a nap, which more than anything I was looking to do. The only response I remember getting from that activity--I really didn't expect anything would come out of it--was an interview for a claims adjuster position at an insurance company, and so help me, I didn't know what a claims adjuster was. As I look at it from this vantage point, it's good I didn't get that claims adjuster job.

My wife was supporting the two of us as a secretary. I don't remember thinking much at all about what was going to happen to us financially after she had the baby and was forced to quit working. As it turned out, I got a high school teaching job right around the time my son was born, in North Saint Paul, a town just, well, north of Saint Paul--the North High Polars, as the teams were called. This was December or January, well into the school year anyway, and I was sitting in the office of the principal that was going to interview me for the teaching job, and as part of

introducing me to the principal the guy who had contacted me said, "I was really surprised at what I was able to dig up at this late date." I was what he dug up, which was fine with me; it fit my self-perception well at the time, something you dig up if you are in a bind. The job was replacing a social studies teacher--Raul Piersdorf, the name comes back--whose wife had just died. Raul wanted to work only half time because he needed to be home with his children more. The principal fleshed out my workload at the school to full-time by giving me a couple of study halls and lunchroom supervision in addition to a two of Raul's classes. A salary of \$4,800 a year, looked good to me. That marked the beginning of my career in education, which has lasted to this day.

My mother had died three years before, and my father, with whom I had always been estranged, was dying of cancer. Besides my sister, who was twelve years older than I, I had a brother, seventeen years older, whom I saw infrequently, and then very impersonally--he had left the house when I was three for the army and got married soon after World War II ended and was involved with starting a family and a career. My sister must have come up with the idea of attending the Thompson trial and working out the logistics of getting us to the courtroom. Setting up anything like that, taking initiative like that, would not have been something either my wife or I would have taken on. At that time, both of us were, how to put it, minimally engaged with life, which included each other.

The case was a huge story locally. I followed the newspaper accounts of the arrest and trial of T. Eugene Thompson as much as I followed anything in those years, which wasn't all that much. I knew basically what was going on in the case, and the idea of going to the trial suited me well enough. In those years anything suited me well enough; I went along with just about anything that came up. It turned out that the three of us were there on a big day:

Anderson was going to take the stand and tell what happened to Carol Thompson.

So there the three of us were in this little courtroom. Along with a couple of his attorneys, in walked the defendant, T. Eugene Thompson--diminutive, sharply-dressed, super-short, flat-top, buzz-cut haircut, wearing glasses of the sort they wore in those years (plastic, thick black temples, black top and clear bottom eyepieces), ramrod-straight, staring straight ahead. They took their seats at a long table just a few feet away from us, their backs to us. By this time, Thompson had celebrity status locally. I was taken by how small he was. Celebrities were bigger than that in my mind, certainly bigger than I was, and there was Thompson, this little guy.

Then the judge came in, robes, sat up high.

Dick W C Anderson was sworn in. I remember thinking he had kind of a neat name--Dick W C Anderson. Better than Bob Griffin, which is what I was called at the time, although I could never figure out how you got Bob from Robert. But that's the way it was, so I was Bob. Anderson looked to be in his mid-thirties. He was neatly dressed in a dark blue suit and white shirt and tie. Blondish, medium length hair parted on the side. Working class (he was building supplies salesman), a tad thuggish, but more rugged than thuggish. Lean of build, straight features, bordering on soap opera handsome. You'd take notice of Anderson on the street, the suit, nice looking guy. You wouldn't pick him out of a crowd as a killer.

The prosecutor, William Randall--tall, craggy-looking (I remember him being referred to in the newspaper as Lincolnesque), impressive, had the ring of somebody to be admired--took Anderson through his part in the crime. Anderson had admitted to committing the murder, though he said he had been recruited by a second party and had never met Thompson. This much I knew back then. Anderson was in court that day to

tell about the arrangement to murder Carol Thompson and how he killed her.

In detail, Anderson recounted how he murdered Carol Thompson early one weekday morning that previous March--the 6th, a Wednesday, as I've recently learned. All though his recitation, he was laconic, diffident, low-key, matter of fact. The grisly tale was made even more shocking and disturbing--and it was that--coming out of this apparent everyman in such mundane fashion. He could have been describing a trip to the grocery store. All I can remember is being oh-my-god stunned by the substance of what I was hearing.

Throughout Anderson's testimony, the lead defense attorney --whose name was Hyam Segell, I've learned--would interrupt with objections, and he and Randall would get into heated exchanges. They really went after one another. There were a couple breaks in the session, and on one of them I stood next to the two men standing together in the hall smoking cigarettes and chatting amiably. It hit me that the sniping back and forth in the courtroom that I had assumed reflected personal animosity between the two didn't at all reflect that. They were just doing their jobs. It wasn't personal between the two of them, and yet just a few minutes before it had seemed very personal to me. I had always been straight ahead in my dealings with the world, totally literal, what you saw was what you got. Any distance between me and what I did--posturing, ironic detachment, anything like that--was not in my repertoire, nor did I take into account that kind of thing being a possibility in other people's self-presentations.

Standing next to Randall and Segell, I remember thinking--or better, feeling in a gross way--that these two tall and composed men in their no-nonsense, grown-up suits were serious men, real men, in-the-world men, in contrast to me, a nobody and nothing, at best a voyeur. If they had turned in my direction, they would have looked right past me, or if their eyes did fall in my direction, seen

nothing. I felt invisible in those years, and, I think now, in a very real way I was. Virtually no one knew I was alive, and the few that knew I existed were by and large indifferent to that fact, and I had accepted that as an appropriate response, or I guess non-response, to me.

The three of us—my sister, my wife, and I—sat silently through the session, and silently filed out as we were directed to do. None of the spectators who had been in attendance took into account the others, even looked at them. It was like it was just the three of us, separate from everybody else, an island unto ourselves. On the way home and later, I don't recall my sister, wife, and I discussing what we had witnessed that day, which, as I think about it now, was truly remarkable. I didn't rehash it in my mind, and I have never spoken or written about this experience until now.

When the memory of that day in court came up for me recently, I recalled very little of what Anderson had said on the stand. I only remembered being stunned by what I was hearing. I knew Thompson had been convicted and sentenced to life in prison, but that was it for me until these past couple of weeks. I became curious to find out what had actually gone on in Carol Thomson's murder, so I located an out-of-print book on the case written in the late 1960s by a local newspaper reporter (Donald John Giese, *The Carol Thompson Murder Case*, Scope Reports, 1969).

From the book, I learned that T. (Tilmer) Eugene Thompson had spent a year buying life insurance policies on Carol that paid out more than a million dollars in the case of her accidental death. In addition to the money, getting Carol out of the way paved the way for him to move forward in his relationship with his girlfriend. Thompson hired a former client of his, Norman Mastrian, who in years past had been a prizefighter of some local prominence, to kill his wife and make it look like an accident. Mastrian would knock Carol out with a piece of rubber hose and drown her in the bathtub.

It would look like she fell and hit her head and drowned. Mastrian was to enter the Thompson house before dawn through a door that Thompson would leave open and hide in the basement until the children went off to school and Thompson had had enough time to get to his law office and establish an alibi. Thompson would leave water in the bathtub, where the drowning would take place, and chain the front door to keep anybody from walking in unexpectedly. Thomson would move a phone to a jack next to the basement door and call at a designated time and Mastrian would have ready access to Carol as she stood by the door talking to her husband.

For reasons that have never been clear, Mastrian subcontracted the work--he recruited Anderson to take his place and kill Carol Thompson. Probably Thompson never knew it was going to be Anderson, not Mastrian, murdering his wife. Mastrian's offer to Anderson was four thousand dollars if it looked like an accident and two thousand if it didn't. Anderson wasn't sure he'd be able to pull off the apparent accident and wanted a gun to take along with him on the job, and while he would try for the accident he wanted three thousand either way it went. Mastrian agreed to that, and gave Anderson a piece of hose, a Lugar pistol, drew a map of the layout of the house, and talked him through the arrangements he had worked out with Thompson, hiding in the basement and the phone call and the water in the bathtub. There wasn't much lead-time in all of this. Mastrian and Anderson worked things out just a couple days before the murder.

The book I read provided a detailed account of Anderson's testimony. So I got to read what I supposedly had heard 47 years before. It isn't often that we get to go back and see what actually happened in contrast to what we experienced and made of what happened later on. I was taken by how new it was to me. I didn't remember these details at all. I wonder if I ever took them in given what I was like in those years. I only remember my "I can't

believe I'm hearing this!" overall reaction. What follows is taken from the transcript of Anderson's testimony, the day I was sitting a few feet away. I've edited out the attorney's questions, so it is just Anderson speaking. The date was November 27, 1963. That was a Wednesday. The Kennedy assassination had happened the previous Friday. My son would be born two-and-a-half weeks later.

Anderson testified that before daybreak he parked his car a block away from the Thompson house and entered it through the unlocked side door he'd been told about. Everything was dark, so he turned on a pencil flashlight and found the basement door and went down the stairs into the basement and hid in a storeroom. On his way down the stairs, he noticed that they creaked. From the basement storeroom he heard the sounds of breakfast being prepared and eaten and the children go off to school. He heard Mr. Thompson say "I don't have time for more coffee, I've got to get to the office" and then a door close and the soft footsteps of Mrs. Thomson in the kitchen and then going up the stairs to the second floor, and then silence.

Anderson waited for the phone to ring at 8:25, the time that was arranged, the call from Thompson that would get Carol next to the basement door. The phone rang at 8:28 by his watch, which he could see with the pencil flashlight. It rang "quite a few times," and then there were footsteps down the stairs from the second floor. "I heard a lady's voice," Anderson said. He was supposed to come up the stairs at that point and confront Carol, but he thought about the creaking stairs and decided to wait until she returned upstairs, which she did.

"I then came out of the storage room in the basement into the main area and injected a shell into the chamber of the gun," Anderson recounted. "I put on surgical gloves. I went up the basement stairs very slowly on the side of the stairway. I looked into the kitchen to see if anybody was there."

Anderson went into the living room to make sure no one was on the main floor. He then walked quietly to the stairway leading to the second floor and started slowly, carefully, up the stairs. On the second floor, he checked the back bedroom, the east bedroom, the southwest bedroom, and the bathroom. He went toward the master bedroom. He heard a radio playing.

“She was sitting up in the bed. She had the light on next to her. The radio was going and she was reading a magazine with her glasses on. She looked at me and saw that I had the Luger in my hand. I said ‘Turn your head so you don't see me.’

“She turned her head and took off her glasses. So she would relax and wouldn't be so tense, I said, ‘All I want in your money and you won't get hurt. Where is the money kept in the house?’ She said the dresser. I instructed her to lie down on the bed with her face down.

“When she did that, I put the gun away in my right overcoat pocket. I took out the hose and with both hands put it crossways on her skull, and then I reached up and hit her as hard as I could at the base of the skull.

“I laid the hose on the bed, pulled back the covers, and took off her nightie. I kept the nightie in my left hand and picked up the hose with my right, and carried her to the bathroom. I laid her down in the tub in a seated position. I took my hands and pushed her down in the water that was in the tub. I pushed her chest down so her head was under water.

“She came to.

“With the surgical gloves and the wet water and everything, she slipped out of my grasp. She managed to get out of the tub, so I knew I had trouble, and I was instructed either way, so I went to pull the gun out. I had to hold the overcoat with my left hand and reach in with my right hand to get it.

“She ran out of the bathroom and down the hallway to the master bedroom. I pushed the safety off the gun, went down to the

end of the hallway to the southwest corner bedroom. I went in, pulled back the bedspread--the bed was made--to get a pillow. I folded the pillow in my left hand, put the gun in it and went into the master bedroom.

“She was there putting on her bathrobe. I was right close to her. I pointed the gun at her. She said, ‘Don't do this. My husband is a criminal lawyer. He'll protect you from the police.’ I didn't say anything. I pulled the trigger.

“Nothing happened.

“Things started moving fast. I dropped the pillow and started to hit the gun with my left hand. She started to come my way and tried to get past me. I hit her with the butt of the pistol. She fell and got back up. When I was ejecting the shell out of the chamber and putting another shell into the Lugar, she got past me and ran down the hallway and down the stairway.

“I followed her. I was ten or fifteen feet behind her.

“She went to the front door. She managed to get the door open as far as the chain lock would let it open. She screamed. I got the door closed and pulled her away from it.

“I started hitting her with the butt of the Lugar. She took off her diamond ring and said, ‘Here, take this.’ I dropped it to the floor. I hit her again and drove her to her knees. She said, ‘Oh, God help me.’”

As Carol Thompson lay prone, Anderson rained blow after blow to her head. The blows were so hard they shattered the grips on the pistol and bent the trigger guard. Blood was streaming down her face and dripping onto the floor as Anderson hit her again and again and again, at least 25 times. She pleaded with him to stop. She lost consciousness.

“I went to the kitchen and opened several drawers. I took out a butcher knife. I felt of it and laid it back down. I took a paring knife out of the drawer and took it back to the living room

and stabbed Mrs. Thomson in the throat. Three times.” The knife broke off. Just the blade was sticking out of her neck.

“I thought Mrs. Thompson was dead or dying so she wouldn't get up again. I went back to the master bedroom. I knew the drowning was bungled, so the next best thing I thought I could do was make it look like a burglary. I pulled out a chest of drawers and took everything and scattered it like I had been going through the drawers for something.”

Anderson went into the bathroom to wash off the blood. Over the sound of running water, he heard a door slam. He ran down the stairs. His victim was gone. He walked to his car and drove home.

When the doorbell rang at the house of Harry Nelson and his wife a couple doors down the street, Mrs. Nelson was watching the morning news. When she opened the door she did not realize at first that it was Carol Thompson. The figure was covered in blood and clutching her neck where a blade protruded. She struggled to talk but her words were unintelligible. Mrs. Nelson covered her with a blanket. Carol Thompson was taken to Ancker Hospital (a half block from where I grew up). Mr. Thompson was notified at his office of what had occurred. Carol Thompson went into deep shock and lost consciousness. She was pronounced dead at 12:58 p.m. The children were called to the office at school.

The memory of the Thompson trial and the book I read about it has brought home the reality of that murder, the horror of it, which I really didn't take in at the time. It has also prompted consideration of how different I am now from back then. I was young then and now I am old. I had a long future then, now I have little time left. My father died within months of the Thompson trial. My sister died twenty years after it, killed in a car accident. My brother and I are even more distant from one another than we were then. My wife has gone through two marriages since me. I am estranged

from my son, and a second son. I live on the East Coast. I am virtually deaf. I wouldn't be able to hear court testimony now. I am a university professor. I have a home of my own. I have a young daughter who is the light of my life. I'm incredibly thankful that I've gotten a second chance to get parenting right.

But at the same time I'm different, I'm not different. The person looking out at the world at the Thompson trial is the same one typing these words a half-century later. It's the same me, the same awareness, the same consciousness, now as it was then. My outward appearance has changed--don't I know, I'm struck by the incredibly old person peering back at me in the mirror--but I am the same person now as I was at six and sixteen and twenty-six and thirty-six, and I will be that same person until the moment I die. Everything I've been and everything that has happened to me, or at least as I have interpreted it, no matter how long ago it was, is still part of me, here, now. The person who saw the attorneys Randall and Segell--and really, everyone--as inside and me outside still exists despite all what has gone on in my life since that contradicts that perception. The person who was "dug up" only because Raul Piersdorf's wife had died and they needed somebody, anybody, to cover for him, and who spent five years supervising a high school lunchroom, he's still part of the organism that goes by the name of Robert Griffin. The person who thought he mattered for nothing in the eyes of the world and was neither needed nor wanted and was bad, wrong, off base, and could never change that basic reality about himself no matter what he did, he is still here. The person who cried alone and afraid in his bedroom at seven as his parents screamed at each other and pushed and shoved and slammed doors, and who sobbed and shook when his father stormed out of the house seemingly forever amid his mother's frantic pleas not to leave, he's here, this instant.

None of us leaves our past behind, not really. What has happened to us, what we have been told about ourselves,

particularly when we are young and unable to fend it off or explain it away, remains within us as inner, organic, tacit, preconscious, and at times very present, aspects of our being all of our days. Our challenge is to take charge of our lives and, the best we can, live well, fully, honorably, no matter what has happened to us and what residue of that resides within us.

22

An Evening Meal

February, 2011.

After five o'clock, The Cheese Outlet--a gourmet market so the sign says--sells sandwiches for half price. A \$7.50 sandwich is \$3.75. Drive there, pick up two sandwiches--one for tomorrow--and a small bag of French onion potato chips. \$9.21 with tax.

Home. To the trash barrel in the garage. Retrieve the *USA Today Sports Weekly* to read while eating dinner. It came out Wednesday. Today's Friday. The major feature this week, "The National League Spring Training Preview--Rosters and Analyses of Every NL Team." I'd read it, that's why it was in the trash, but there must be things unread in it, or that could be reread.

Sit on the leather couch in the living room eating one of the sandwiches--humus and veggies (the other is tofu and peanut salad)--and the potato chips, sipping a glass of ice water, and reading (or better, re-reading) the *USA Today Sports Weekly*.

Page 32, brief reports on National League teams. The Chicago Cubs have a new manager, Mike Quade, who took over for Lou Piniella. New managers can be counted on to say they are going to stress the fundamentals of playing baseball, implying that the previous manager was lax in this area. Reporters never press them on exactly what the fundamentals are, although sometimes managers take it upon themselves to cite, without elaboration, hitting the cutoff man. The report on the Cubs says Quade got the team's attention by making it clear he is going to stress the fundamentals. "My thing," says Quade, "is making sure that this group understands how important that is to us winning ballgames

and how vital it is to playing for me.” The Cubs are going to hit the cutoff man this year.

Further down the page in the report on the Milwaukee Brewers, the team's owner is reported as saying that this year the team isn't going to spend money for the sake of spending money. “We've done that for the last couple of years, and it didn't really work.” There you go: as appealing as it may be in concept, spending money for the sake of spending money doesn't always get you the good results you are looking for, and sometimes it can take you two years to figure that out. Food for thought.

Next page, 33, a picture of Brian Wilson, a man who looks to be in his early thirties, in a baseball uniform, grim faced, in the act of throwing a ball, it seems clear, as hard as he possibly can. Wilson is a relief pitcher for the San Francisco Giants team that won the World Series last year. In the spring, players let it be known that they didn't slack off during the winter. Says Wilson: “I started workouts as soon as the World Series ended. I don't want to change anything, because I believe the city and the team deserve me at the apex of my fitness, and I need to come ready to throw 162 games.” Brian Wilson's teammates, and indeed the entire city of San Francisco, can rest easier in the knowledge that Brian Wilson will be at the apex of his fitness this season.

Re-fill the water glass, add a handful of ice cubes. Return to the couch and the sandwich and chips.

On the coffee table, a memoir by the late Swedish film director, Ingmar Bergman. Leave the *USA Today Sports Weekly* where it sits on the couch and pick up the book, randomly open it to page 151. Bergman quotes a character from one of his films: “I have always longed for a knife. An edge that would bare my entrails.

Remove my brain, my heart. Relieve me of my contents. Cut away my tongue and my sex. A sharp knife-edge to scrape out all impurity. Then the so-called spirit could rise up out of this meaningless cadaver.” “That may sound obscure,” Bergman relates, “but it contains a central point. The words mirrored my longing for pure artistry. I had an idea one day I would have the courage to be incorruptible, perhaps even leave my intentions behind.”

An image comes to mind: Relief pitcher Brian Wilson in his baseball uniform looks straight into the camera and intones Bergman’s words as if they were his own: “I have always longed for a knife. An edge that would bare my entrails. Remove my brain, my heart. Relieve me of my contents. Cut away my tongue and my sex. A sharp knife-edge to scrape out all impurity. Then the so-called spirit could rise up out of this meaningless cadaver.” Wilson pauses and adjusts his baseball cap. “That may sound obscure, but it contains a central point, my longing for pure artistry. I have an idea that one day I will have the courage to be incorruptible, perhaps even leave my intentions behind.”

Set the book back on the coffee table. Put the sandwich and potato chip wrappers in the paper bag they came in from The Cheese Outlet and take them and the *USA Today Sports Weekly* to the trash barrel. Put the now-empty glass on the kitchen counter. Go to the bathroom and spit in the sink to see if there is still blood.

[2012: I’d been spitting up blood for days, frightening. It turned out to be nothing serious.]

March, 2011.

At this writing in March of 2011, Larry King has recently ended his nightly CNN interview show. Knowing Larry was in his last days, I found myself watching his program more than usual. One of Larry's guests was the son of the late American actress Grace Kelly and her, also late, husband, Prince Rainier of Monaco--Monaco being a tiny principality in Southwestern Europe on the Mediterranean Sea (I looked it up). He came off as an affable, pudgy, early-middle-aged, completely unremarkable sort, whose only claim to fame that I know about besides being the son of Grace Kelly--her marriage elevated her to princess status--and the Prince of Monaco is fathering an illegitimate child with a flight attendant from Togo. I never picked up his full name because the sign at the bottom of the screen billed him as "Prince Albert II," and Larry referred to him throughout the interview as "Your Serene Highness."

Watching Larry grovel and fawn in the presence of this Prince Albert II brought to mind an area of inquiry that might prove profitable to me and perhaps others, including you: 1) How do people who aren't better than other people make these other people think they are? and 2) Why do people let them get away with it, and how can they stop doing that?

My assumption is that some me-over-you tactics work across the board, with the mass of people--this "Serene Highness" hustle being an example--but when it comes down to the level of the individual they have differential effect: what would work big with me might not work as well, or at all, with you. So part of this area of study is figuring out how this phenomenon works with individual people. Until recent years, I have been a master at feeling less than other people without valid justification. I've

unhooked myself to a great extent from that self-limiting tendency, and it is one of the things I feel good about in my life.

As I let my mind go where it would around this topic, an image from my childhood came up having to do with comedian Jerry Lewis' socks no less. Jerry Lewis is now in his eighties and best known for hosting the Labor Day telethon for the Muscular Dystrophy Association. In the 1950s, when I was a kid, he was a huge star in nightclubs, movies, and television with his partner, the singer Dean Martin. I watched tons of television in those years and Martin and Lewis were on the "Colgate Comedy Hour" on Sunday nights and I never missed a show.

Around this same time, I read a good number of feature articles, interviews, that kind of thing, in newspapers and magazines about Jerry Lewis. In a lot of them Jerry let it be known that he never wore a pair of socks more than once. Every single time Jerry Lewis put on a pair of socks, he unpeeled the sticky paper with the label on the front that holds the socks together and pulled on a brand new pair of socks. When he took a shower or changed clothes during the day, same thing: new socks. What did Jerry Lewis do with the used socks? He gave them to charity.

Since this new-socks revelation coupled with a hint of noblesse oblige came up so often, I'm supposing now Jerry Lewis and his public relations people had decided that informing the public of this aspect of his life would get it across that he was on a higher plane than us plebeians and deserved attention and deference. When you think about it, the socks ploy was a creative and effective way to make that point. It worked with me, I know that; socks alone put Jerry Lewis with his unlimited supply of new socks way up there and me with my two pair, the faded blue dress socks, and the yellow and itchy and saggy from a zillion washings formerly-white sweat socks, way down here. Jerry Lewis and me: never the twain shall meet.

Another memory that popped into mind from my childhood had to do with costumes. In grade school and high school, there was the scratchy and jerky old film footage of WWI military parades and diplomatic ceremonies, something like that. These were Europeans, from the Habsburg Empire, or maybe they were British, or French; I never really caught on to who these people strutting around were exactly, but I did pick up on the ornate uniforms. Gold braiding looped over their shoulders, rows of ribbons pinned to their chests, wide leather belts, stripes down the side of their pants, and they had swords, and hats with plumes in the front and shiny visors. These men had gone out and found a hat with a feather in it and paraded around with that hat on, silly when you think about it. But then again it got their point across that they were big major deals, and I felt you'd have to be on a much higher plane of existence than I was to be decked out like that.

When I was about twenty, this was in college, I remember “Ted Hanson is a super guy.” For some reason, guys kept saying that, though as I remember it was pretty much left at the level of generalization; I don't recall exactly why it was that Ted was so great. Thinking about it now, to a good extent this persistent affirmation that Ted Hanson was all that much was probably a way to let me know that I wasn't all that much. I don't remember the Ted Hanson adulation ever being paired up with a positive word about me. A contrast was being established between Ted and me that wasn't favorable to me. Also part of the Ted Hanson worship, I suspect, was to establish these other guys' connection with Ted Hanson, which I didn't have, so by association not only was Ted better than I was, so were they.

In any case, I remember vague feelings of being brought down, or kept down, by these Ted Hanson testimonials. I believe now I had been in a subtle little put-down game, or transaction. All of my life until too recently, I've been oblivious to the

subtleties of human thrusts and parries in relationships, and, to stay with that metaphor, came away from them with puncture wounds that didn't heal for a long time, and some of them have never healed.

I couldn't figure out back then what Ted Hanson had going for him. I did notice that he bunched his sweater sleeves up around his elbows. Maybe that's a big part of Ted's magic, I thought to myself. I started bunching my sweater sleeves up around my elbows, although it didn't seem to boost my rating with the guys. This was a half-century ago, and right now typing this, my sweater sleeves are bunched up around my elbows, and so help me I thought of Ted Hanson when I pushed them up like that.

I'm being light about this, but I think it is a subject worth serious attention, and I know you could come up with a load of examples from your own experience. One-up posturing goes on all the time, everywhere: people trying to look better than other people without actually being better.

I see three basic lines of inquiry related to this phenomenon: 1) Identify the various maneuvers people employ to look better than other people when they aren't. 2) Identify what makes some people especially prone to being taken in by it, or at least particular manifestations of it. 3) Identify ways to stop being negatively affected by this sort of thing.

With reference to the third area, getting over the tendency to accept the idea that you should feel less than someone else or people in some group or category, some thoughts:

Wake up. Get off automatic pilot. Be present, alert, here, now, in this instant. Be vigilant to you're-a-notch-below-me-and-mine maneuvers.

Get healthy. Mental and physical health are essentials to living well in any area of life, including this one.

Declare to yourself that you are no lower, no less important, than any human being on the planet earth, no exceptions. You will respect those who deserve it, but you kowtow to nobody. You look

everybody straight in the eye. Believe in that, feel that, let it pervade your body, your being; make that your posture, your bearing, your stance in the world. Make it part of every breath you take.

Get on your unique path in life and go down it full speed ahead. Do you--the one-and-only you--fully, completely, the best you can, forthrightly and with courage. Stubbornly refuse to compare yourself with other people and use it as a measure of your worth. If others are doing well, that's great, feel good for them and let them know you do, and learn from their accomplishments where it applies to what you are doing, but don't get caught up with whether they are better or worse than you are.

I hope this is enough to get us started in this area of inquiry. One way of looking at the history of the world, and the current scene, is as a series of attempts by individuals and groups to make themselves appear to be on a higher level of existence, more the action, more deserving, than other people and to get the perks that come from that. Think about all of this with reference to yourself and those you care about and the world generally and act accordingly.

April, 2011.

In her recent memoir, Tina Fey shared that she spent a lot of her earlier years trying to, as she put it, "charm the uninterested." I can personally relate to that, and unfortunately, I haven't restricted this pattern of thought and behavior to my past; I'm still doing it, though significantly less than before. For one thing, I've been teaching all of my adult life, and I'm sorry to have to report that teaching can come down to trying to charm the uninterested. But with me it's gone on in other contexts than teaching. Especially as I got into my twenties, and from then on, charming in the sense that I'm using the term here became an across-the-board strategy. Anybody taking in what I was doing all those years might well have been left wondering what was going on with me: the obsequious smiles and self-effacement and placating and fawning and serving and performing and tail wagging. All I knew was that it frequently felt like my best or only option given who I was and the possibilities in my situation. A love interest and a university colleague noted this pattern to me in passing, but nobody ever talked about it in depth with me. I never thought about it until quite late in life and, this has been gratifying, I pretty much put an end to it, though it still rears its ugly head from time to time.

Using Tina Fey's line of work to illustrate a point, I can attest to the fact that giving yourself over to trying to charm the uninterested is like doing stand-up comedy. They attend to you for a time, laugh at your jokes, or at you, but then they return to their drinks and what and whom they really care about and you wind up sitting alone in your dressing room feeling empty and alone and somehow not OK.

I have concluded that getting a good life going involves

putting an end to attempts to charm the uninterested. Even when it appears to be paying off--they are coming around, they like me, they respect me, they want me here (but was charming what brought that about really?)—there is something still off in your life. Too much energy is going out and it's draining your well and not enough of what you really need is coming in, and that leaves you in a deficit, or incomplete, state and can turn you to drink or, in my case, bags of pita chips washed down with Caffeine-Free Diet Coke.

It seems to me the challenge is to do two things at the same time: 1) stop trying to charm the uninterested (which includes the disrespectful, disdainful, and outright antagonistic or hostile), and 2) start playing your life to interested, and interesting, people. For sure, that isn't easy to accomplish in a lot of cases, but it is worth trying to create that arrangement even if it turns out you aren't up to it. Failing at that good task will make you happier than tap dancing to the distracted.

Making your life work in this regard—and in others as well--often begins with a negation: declaring to yourself no more of that and meaning it, feeling it from the top of your head to the bottoms of your feet. You may not be in a position to make YES--a personally enhancing and satisfying state of affairs--a reality in your life due to your current limitations and/or the forces working against you in your circumstance, but at every moment in your existence you have the power to make NO a reality. At every instant--now, and now, and now, and now—you have the capability to shift your posture, your stance, your bearing, mind and body, to NO: Enough! I'm not doing that anymore! I'm not being that anymore! I'm worth more than that! I'm not paying that price anymore!

Ironically, NO--negativity--is an incredibly positive possibility, potentiality, we all possess at every moment. It can be the start of making things work in our lives. And even if it doesn't

lead to that, it is a way to be honorable, and being honorable feels really good, and it is not a surface and fleeting experience. It lasts all day, and through tomorrow and the next day and the next.

25 est and the Human Potential Movement

August, 2011.

A few weeks ago, I watched a DVD from Netflix of a 2007 documentary called “Transformation: The Life and Legacy of Werner Erhard.” Werner Erhard (born Jack Rosenberg) had his fifteen minutes of fame (and infamy--is this guy a huckster, a con man?) back in the 1970s as a personal-growth mogul. In the early 1980s personal scandals involving him were reported in a “60 Minutes” segment and Erhard dropped out of sight. It turns out, according to the documentary, he had gone to live in Europe and all these years later is alive and well in his mid-seventies doing pretty much the same kind of work he was doing back when he was young and in the limelight.

Werner Erhard's prominence was linked to a self-improvement training program he devised in the early seventies called est (lower case “e”). Erhard personally conducted est in the beginning and less frequently later on. It is commonly assumed that est stood for erhard seminar training, but then again est is Latin for “it is” and it is a suffix for the most--highest, happiest. As far as I know, Erhard never clarified where the est title came from.

Est drew on ideas and practices Erhard had picked up here and there, including from Dale Carnegie courses, Zen Buddhism, Scientology, and his experiences as a Mind Dynamics seminar instructor. Mind Dynamics, developed by Alexander Everett, was a personal improvement program that operated over two weekends. Est followed that pattern. With est, a hundred or so people would pay \$250 each to congregate in a hotel meeting room in Los Angeles or Boston or Philadelphia, some large city, in the hope that by the end of the second weekend they would “get it”: come to

understand what's really going on with human beings, and therefore with them. The idea was that that realization could be the basis for making their lives work, which had great appeal, because, as the est training pointed out and which the participants already knew or they wouldn't have taken the training in the first place, their lives weren't working now.

One trainer would lead the often confrontational and emotional process for the first weekend and another the second. "Body catchers," barf bags at hand, were posted around the room, and it took a doctor's note to be allowed to go to the bathroom apart from the very infrequent scheduled toilet breaks. The trainer, Erhard or whoever it was--Erhard personally selected and trained all the trainers--would bluntly inform the seminar participants early the first Saturday that they "don't know your asses from a hole in the ground," but that if they kept their soles (shoe soles) in the room and took what they got, by the end of the time they would, indeed, get it, the big secret that would unlock life's mysteries and provide the basis for making their lives work.

Word got around that most people, or practically everybody, or everybody, somewhere in there, at least in their own estimations, did in fact get it, and that they felt great about that and personally transformed, and that they were living way better now than before. They felt themselves to be the person they truly are and not the cardboard cutout going through the motions of living they had been before. People close to them were testifying that something indeed remarkable was going on with these people. Several formal studies seemed to bear this out. It wasn't long before tens of thousands of people were lining up, \$250 in hand, to take est.

Including me. This was in Los Angeles, and it was 1979. Erhard himself didn't lead my training, and--I don't know what this means, if anything--I have no recollection at all, zero, as to who did, no picture in my mind of either trainer. Two or three

assistants, I don't remember the exact number, and again, I have no image of what they looked like, buzzed around the big hotel meeting room putting microphones in front of participants who had raised their hands to speak and handling any emergencies, people coming unglued, rebelling, walking out, and the like.

The participants' offerings were about anything that was on their minds they wanted to share: critiques of the training (there was a lot of this early on), personal problems and secrets and hopes and fears, traumatic childhood experiences, anything. Not knowing what was going to come out of the mouth of the person just handed the microphone in itself helped keep interest up throughout the two weekends. The trainer fielded participant sharing in a way that got across the est teachings. Typically, an exchange between a participant and the trainer would go on for five minutes or so, and then the participant would receive applause and sit down.

I never said a word during the two weekends, which was my public style in those years and, to just about that same extent, a tick less, still is. In my mind, and so I was taught beginning in my earliest years, it's not my place to be center stage, ever. Anonymity is my lot in life. Whether anyone ever reads these words, writing them for public dissemination is a singular personal accomplishment in my eyes. If you have gotten the word that you are to spend your time over in the corner eating take-out and staying silent, I hope my achievement very late in life, minor as it is in the grand scheme of things but so incredibly important to me, will inspire you to come to the center of the room and eat gourmet and sing your song, even if you do it hesitantly and don't really pull it off very well. It's important to take pride in any movement forward in one's life, no matter how small, and to view it as an indication of what life could be like and, the best you can manage it, will be like in the future if you take one small step today and another tomorrow, and another the next day and the next and the

next.

Along with the participants' exchanges with the trainer were presentations by the trainer on the est theory using a blackboard and chalk--they reminded me of college lectures. Interspersed were activities, some of them exotic. One I remember after all this time involved participants lying on the floor with their eyes closed imagining they were very afraid of everyone in the room and that everyone was equally afraid of them.

At the end of the est experience, did I get it? After doing a fair amount of thinking these past weeks prompted by the documentary on Erhard, if the answer has to be yes or no, one or the other, I'd say, yes, I got it. I remember being on a high for a couple of weeks following the training. I felt different, new, free, more myself, I sensed greater possibilities than before, I was lighter, somehow a weight was off my back. I don't remember being able to connect that with anything particular in the est weekends, but that was the outcome, however it happened.

And, so it seems, it has lasted. It's been buried beneath a lot of other personal realities, but it's always been there, and it's here now, I'm better for having taken est, and this was over thirty years ago. Whoever Werner Erhard really was, whatever he really did, good and bad, he made a positive and lasting difference in my life.

The est seminar was part of my fifteen-year encounter with what came to be known as the human potential movement, which rose to prominence in the seventies and has since faded from the scene, which I think is too bad, because its insights and practices, at least potentially, have worth in our time.

I was a doctoral student in those years and beginning my career as a university professor in education. Prior to that I had been a secondary school teacher for five years. The doctoral studies were at the University of Minnesota, where I worked as an instructor while doing my course work and dissertation. Then, after a year as a visiting professor at the Morris branch of the

University of Minnesota in western Minnesota, it was the University of Vermont, where I was hired as an assistant professor in 1974.

During this period, I was breaking out of the most thoughtless and pointless of existences, and my encounters with the human potential movement--those writings and people and experiences--was the biggest part of that process of personal liberation. I can't remember what pointed me in this direction; certainly none of my professors and or my fellow graduate students had the least interest in it. I wrote my dissertation, completed in 1973, in this area to the raised eyebrows and quizzical head scratching of my doctoral advisor, Dr. William Gardner, who nevertheless was most supportive. I am so grateful now to Bill for his kindness and acceptance and support back then, and I wish I'd known to thank him at the time. I've lost touch with him. I don't even know if he is alive. He'd be very old now; I'm very old now. To this day, I draw on that doctoral study. It has informed my work, and my life generally, for almost forty years.

Names I associate with the ideational underpinnings of human potential movement include, prominently, Abraham Maslow, Carl Rogers, Alan Watts, Fritz Perls, Michael Murphy, and George Leonard. (Erhard was more of an entrepreneur and implementer.) They came from varied professional backgrounds: Maslow, Rogers, and Perls were psychologists; Watts wrote about Zen Buddhism; Murphy founded the Esalen Institute in California, a center for experimentation with approaches to self-transformation; and Leonard was a journalist, author, and aikido instructor.

What tied these individuals together was their conviction that human beings have untapped possibilities. We can be far better than we are and life can be far better than it is. We don't set our sights high enough, they insisted; that's our big problem. While the focus in the human potential movement tended to be on one

person at a time, there was the tacit belief, sometimes explicit, that individual self-realization would be the foundation of social transformation.

I traveled from Minnesota to California twice during this period of my engagement with the human potential movement. The first trip, in the summer of 1971, was to La Jolla, a suburb of San Diego, to study with Carl Rogers, who among those associated with this movement had the biggest impact on me. After a distinguished academic career at Ohio State University, the University of Wisconsin, and the University of Chicago, Rogers, then 68, had become associated with the Center for the Study of the Person in La Jolla. I was impressed with Rogers' ideas about personal change and helping relationships generally, and given my focus on education, with his writings on teaching in particular. Rogers' 1969 book, *Freedom to Learn*, has been the single most influential book in the whole of my career in education. While Rogers' reputation was as a psychologist and therapist, he had a degree from Columbia University's Teachers College. I felt privileged to discuss education with him during my time in La Jolla.

While in La Jolla, I participated in an encounter group, as it was called, and went through a training program to lead encounter groups, and I co-lead one. The encounter group, which was based on Rogers' ideas, involved twenty or so strangers who would spend a weekend together in a room with the door shut and let it fly with one another. The encounter group experience was an eye-opener for me: "Oh, *this* is who people really are beneath their self-assured acts. I've got it together as much if not more than these people. Where did I get that idea that I'm lower on the totem pole than people like this [middle class--I'm from a low-income background] and am obliged to take a back seat to them?" This lesson—that I'm nobody's inferior--has stuck with me, though it has sometimes been submerged, obscured. The encounter group

experience, which as far as I know doesn't exist any longer, contributed greatly to my personal development.

I was highly impressed with Rogers personally--he was a strong, grounded, kind man. He was the first public figure I'd ever been around, and I remember thinking: "Rogers and I aren't in completely different realms of existence. He's a human being, just I am. He's very bright, but I'm in his league. And he is flawed, just as I am. He's still OK with all his flaws, and I'm still OK with all of mine. I don't have to be perfect to live on this planet with dignity and respect." I had spent the first three decades of my life thinking I was bad and deserving of mistreatment if anybody could find the least thing wrong with me, or simply allege it. This contact with greatness--Rogers was a major figure on a Freud/Jung scale of prominence--and the glimmer of a realization that I'm in the mix along with the rest of humankind was a very significant formative experience for me.

After my return to the Minnesota from La Jolla, I conceptualized my doctoral dissertation grounded in the theoretical formulations of University of Chicago psychology professor Eugene Gendlin, who had keyed off of Rogers' work. (Google him and check Amazon for his writings.) I had learned about Gendlin in La Jolla. Gendlin explored the interplay between language and one's kinesthetic, organic, physically felt, internal or subjective reality--other ways to put it, one's inner flow of experience, one's literal feeling, or sense, of being alive. Gendlin wrote about a process of self-exploration he called experiential focusing. My dissertation applied Gendlin's ideas to schooling. Gendlin was very helpful to me when I traveled to Chicago to discuss his ideas with him.

My investigations around Gendlin's work for the dissertation helped me make sense of things and gave me direction both professionally and personally. I'm thankful I wrote my dissertation on this topic rather than followed Dr. Gardner's well-intended

advice, "Couldn't you maybe do the dissertation on political socialization or something like that?" When I, in my diverted-eyes way, softly said no, he said "OK." That is what I needed to hear.

When I was hired as an assistant professor of education at the University of Vermont in 1974, I began the tenure process that resulted in my becoming a tenured full professor, and here I am, 37 years later, just down the hall from the office I shared that first year with Professor Charles Letteri. Charlie couldn't have been kinder to me--another of the many people with whom I've lost contact that I failed to thank when I had the chance.

I spent my first sabbatical leave from the university work, the 1979-1980 academic year, in California, the first months in Los Angeles and then to the San Francisco area, to continue my explorations of the human potential movement. I lived in a house in central Los Angeles with five or six people. The owner of the house, who lived there, was a psychotherapist, although I can't picture him or recall his name. The house, this therapist, tested the boundaries--therapies, drugs, sex, you name it. It hit me that there are people who really push against the outer limits of human existence.

A Los Angeles contact that had a significant positive impact on me was a woman named Anastas Harris, who at the time was working with a construct she called holistic education. Anastas, whom I've lost touch with, was a talented, committed, sincere, kind, and supportive person, who for whatever reason reached out to me. She was a teacher to me, and she affirmed me personally and professionally.

One of Anastas' colleagues was Jack Canfield, whose background had been in education. Canfield at the time was conducting personal growth workshops for someone who went by the name of John-Roger, one of which I participated in and found very useful. Canfield went on to singular success as the co-creator of the "chicken soup" inspirational books. He recently wrote a

self-help book I recommend called *The Success Principles: How to Get from Where You Are to Where You Want to Go*. Anastas published a journal to which both Canfield and I contributed, which included photographs of us. Just now I looked through it and can't believe that either Canfield or I ever looked that young.

Big in Los Angeles at that time were a couple of Ph.Ds named John Grinder and Richard Bandler, who had devised an approach to dealing with unwanted behavioral patterns called Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP). The television infomercial personality Anthony Robbins is a high school graduate with no formal credentials, and he has had some personal problems lately, but nevertheless he has done a superb job of popularizing NLP along with a lot of other human potential movement ideas. His 1991 book, *Awake the Giant Within*, is as good a self-help book as I know about, and at this writing you can get a used copy for a penny plus postage from Amazon.

In February of 1980, I traveled to Marin County just north of San Francisco to be around George Leonard, whose books I had found most impressive. At the time, Leonard was president of the Association for Humanistic Psychology. I believe Leonard coined the term human potential movement. As it turned out, my contact with Leonard was limited. I took aikido classes at the martial arts center he operated, went to a few of his presentations, spoke to him briefly, and played softball with him and his followers on Sundays.

My closest contacts during that time in northern California were with two young Leonard devotees, the sport psychologist Joel Kirsch and his wife Susan--wonderful people, so gracious and kind to me. (This writing is bringing to mind the many people who reached out to me in those years. It also is underscoring the contrast between my many connections with people back then and my virtual isolation now.) I stayed in contact with the Kirsches over the years, until the last decade.

Leonard, who died in 2010, was a Georgia native with a Southern patrician manner and he could be standoffish and somewhat grand, but nevertheless his compassion and concern and validation of me came through to me. Just being recognized by name by someone of this prominence and accomplishment was affirming to me: “Someone of this caliber finds it worth his time to attend to me.” As it did with Rogers, being around Leonard and seeing what he did day to day led me to concluded: “I can operate at this level.”

Leonard emphasized the role of the body and movement in personal transformation. I remember being amazed at his aikido demonstrations at his martial arts center. The concern for how the body and movement and sport can contribute to overall development has been part of my personal and professional life since those years. I helped the Kirsches conceptualize the PASS program (Promoting Achievement in School Through Sports), which helps high school athletes do better academically. This orientation shows up extensively in a book I wrote in the 1990s on sports and kids, *Sports in the Lives of Children and Adolescents*. This orientation is also reflected in the university course I now instruct on sport and society.

Leonard's daughter Mimi was married at the time to Jerry Rubin, who gained fame in those years as a political radical. Rubin was a founding member of the Youth International Party, or Yippies, and was one of eight defendants known as the Chicago Eight tried for conspiracy and incitement to riot in connection with the anti-war protests at the 1968 Democratic Party convention. It wasn't Rubin's political activities that interested me at the time but rather his published accounts of his personal development. He, as did I, came from modest roots, and here he was, regardless of what one thinks about his politics, front and center in American life. I was especially taken with his book *Growing Up at 37*.

I attended a small workshop around the topic of sexuality that Rubin and Mimi Leonard led. Mimi was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen in person and, speaking of sexuality, the sexiest woman I'd ever been around. Rubin was delightfully bright and funny and free. As usual, I didn't say anything during the workshop, but I remember thinking, these people are really alive! It's possible to live like this. And I'm picking up that sex can be far better than what I've experienced, a *really* good time. Soon after the workshop, I profited from Jerry and Mimi's book on men and women and sex, *The War Between the Sheets*.

You should be able to get used copies of all of the books I'm mentioning at Amazon, and from libraries. If a library doesn't have something, they can get it for you through interlibrary loan. You can Google these people, and if they are still alive, many aren't—including Rubin, who was hit by a car and killed--contact them.

Back to est: Part of the mythology of Werner Erhard was a life-transforming revelation he had in March of 1971 driving to work one day—he sold child development materials for *Parents* magazine—from his home in Corte Madera north of San Francisco. His biographer William Warren Bartley III, (*The Transformation of a Man: The Founding of est*, Clarkson N. Potter, Inc. Publishers, 1978): “The man in the car on the freeway was transformed: the individual who emerged from the Mustang in San Francisco a half hour later was a different kind of being.”

Erhard had had an extraordinary experience, and found what he had been searching for, in one discipline after another, for eight years." Erhard recounted this to Bartley III:

What happened had no form. It was timeless, unbounded, ineffable, beyond language. There were no words attached to it, no emotions, no attitudes, no bodily sensations. What came from it, of course, formed itself into feelings and emotions and words, and finally into an altered process of life itself. But that

is like saying that the hole in the sand looks like the stick that you made the hole with. Holes in the sand and sticks are worlds apart. To put what happened into language would be like trying to describe a stick by telling you about the hole in the sand.

Part of it was the realization that I knew nothing. I was aghast at that. For I had spent most of my life trying to learn things. I was sure that there was some one thing I didn't know, and that if I could find it out, I would be all right. I was sure that there was a secret, and I was determined to find it.

Then this happened—and I realized that I knew nothing. I realized that everything I knew was skewed toward some end. I saw that the fundamental skew of all knowledge to the unenlightened mind, is survival, or, as I put it, success. All my knowledge up to then had been skewed toward success, toward making it, toward self-realization, toward all the goals, from material to mystical.

In the next instant—after I realized I knew nothing—I realized I knew everything. All the things I had ever heard, and read, and all those hours of practice, suddenly fell into place. It was all so stupidly, blindingly simple that I could not believe it. I saw that there were no hidden meanings, that everything was just the way that it is, and that I was already all right. All that knowledge that I had amassed just obscured the simplicity, the truth, the suchness, the thusness of it all.

I saw that everything was going to be all right. It *was* all right; it always had been all right; it always would be all right—no matter what happened. I didn't just think this—suddenly I *knew* it. Not only was I no longer concerned about success, I was no longer concerned about achieving satisfaction. *I was satisfied*. I was no longer concerned with my reputation. I was concerned only with the truth.

I realized that I was not my emotions or thoughts. I was not my ideas, my intellect, my perceptions, my beliefs. I was not what I accomplished or achieved. Or hadn't achieved. I was not what I had done right, or what I had done wrong. I was not what I had been labeled, by myself or others. All these

identifications cut me off from experience, from living. I was none of these.

I was simply the space, the creator, the source of all that stuff. I experienced Self *as* Self in a direct and unmediated way. I *became* Self. Suddenly I held all that information, the content, in my life in a new way, from a new mode, a new context. I knew it from my experience and not from having learned it. It was an unmistakable recognition that I was, am, and always will be the source of my experience.

Experience is simply evidence that I am here. It is not who I am. I am. *I am*. Before the transformation, I could only recognize myself by seeing the movie [of my life]. Now I saw that I am prior to, or transcendent to, all that. I no longer thought of myself as the person who did all that stuff. I was no longer the one who had all those experiences I had as a kid. I was not identified by my past and current identity. All identities are false. I saw that everything is just the way it is, and the way it isn't. I saw that I was whole and complete as I was. I found my true Self. I had reached the end. It was all over for Werner Erhard.

One major consequence of this experience for Erhard was the realization that he needed to “clean up” his wanting others to be different from the way they are. “When you don't have any real identity of your own,” he said, “when you don't know who you really are, you will fault the identity of others. You won't grant beingness to others as they are.” A second major consequence, he realized he wanted to share what had happened to him, what he had become, with others, and the result was the est program.

What did I get out of est? That:

Reality is what it is, and I need to connect with it. What is, is, and what isn't isn't. Reality isn't what I think something is. It isn't what makes me feel good. Or what I or anybody else calls it. Or what it used to be or will be. It isn't what I'd like it to be or hope it is or think it ought to be. It isn't what somebody tells me it is. Or

what my ideology or philosophy or belief system says it is. It isn't what will get me along better if I believe it is. It's not what a story or narrative says it is. It isn't my, or anybody's, prediction of what it will become. Reality is what it actually is, and life is going to go better for me in the long run (sometimes it works in the short run if I con myself) if I discern what is real (and unreal) at this moment in time.

I need to find my Self and live from there. Right now, ask yourself: Who is looking at the words on this computer screen (or page, whatever it is)? Experience the answer to your question; feel it, live with it. It's a consciousness, awareness, a buzz of aliveness. It's *you*.

Now imagine yourself at ten years old looking in a mirror; put yourself there. Again ask: Who is looking into the mirror? Again experience the answer. It's you again. The very same you that is looking at the words on this screen or page.

That you, that consciousness, now and back when you were ten, is your Self.

A message I took away from est is the need to separate out my Self from everything else about me: my body, my physical sensations, my mind, the thoughts and ideas and pictures in my head, my memories and plans and hopes and fears, my activities and status in the world, my possessions, my relationships, and the conceptions and story, narrative, I have used to make sense of who I am and where I fit in the world. The challenge is to *experience* myself, my Self, and to *be* my Self, each moment, fully, completely. I need to get off automatic pilot and become awake, alive, present, here and now . . . and now, and now, and now.

I create my experience. The est message is that something happened, and it was whatever it was; what was, was. What I made of it, my experience of it, the meaning I gave it, the emotions

that I felt in conjunction with it, the thoughts that ran through my head in response to it, *I* did that. And whatever is going on with me now, I'm doing it. She said she'd be here at four and it's now 4:45 and I'm in a stew, my heart's pounding, bad thoughts are racing through my head, I'm all upset. Of course I'm churning, I tell myself. She said she'd be here and she isn't here. What else could I be going through? It's her fault. She's responsible for what I've gone through and what I'm experiencing.

The est message, and indeed it is counterintuitive, is that actually I created the whole thing. Not only did I create the stewing and fuming in response to her being late, I created the circumstance that led up to me standing on a street corner waiting for her in the first place. I set the whole thing up. I'm not the helpless victim of circumstances I think I am. I produced the whole business. And if I'd calm down and look at the situation carefully, I'd see how I did that.

I'm responsible for making my life work. If I'm going to make my life work--as it ought to, realize its possibilities--I'm going to be the one that does it. I can't wait around for fate or a winning lottery ticket or for the cavalry to ride in and rescue me. *It* isn't going to do it; *they* aren't going to do; *she* isn't going to do it. *I'm* the one that has to do it. And I have to take on that job with my circumstance as it is and with me as I am.

What will it look like when my life works? Back to the first insight: it will look like what it looks like. And, here's where things get a bit complicated. A life that works for me might well be very different from what a life that works for someone else, you for instance. It would be a lot easier if there were a formula or template for lives that work, but there isn't one.

A recent book on the sixteenth century essayist Michel Montaigne by Sarah Bakewell entitled *How to Live* quotes an

Austrian writer by the name of Stefan Zweig who extracted general rules for living from Montaigne's essays:

- Be free from vanity and pride.
- Be free from belief, disbelief, convictions, and parties.
- Be free from habit.
- Be free from ambition and greed.
- Be free from family and surroundings.
- Be free from fanaticism.
- Be free from fate; be master of your own life.
- Be free from death; life depends on the will of others, but death on our own will.

On first glance, those sounded good to me, but as I thought about them it struck me that you could make a good case for the opposite of every one of them. For some people, what they need to make their lives work in *more* vanity and pride, not less. Vanity and pride can spur taking yourself seriously, setting higher standards, demanding more of life, shooting higher. And so on down the list: what someone may in fact need are strong beliefs, higher ambition, connection to family and place, intense commitments, and subordination and service to others, and to live in constant connection with the reality of death and his or her helplessness in the face of it, which can be personally liberating.

There is even the question of whether Montaigne's list worked for Montaigne. Just because Zweig said it did doesn't mean it really did; perhaps Zweig misinterpreted Montaigne, or Montaigne was kidding himself or putting people on. Montaigne's life worked if it worked, that's all we can say definitively. And your and my lives will work if they work.

The British literary critic Terry Eagleton wrote a book called *The Meaning of Life*. Eagleton ends up with the assertion that life is about loving and being loved and self-expression and happiness.

Here again, that sounded good, even unimpeachable. But in fact—what is, is--Eagleton's list may be impossible for us to attain

as individuals. Love may not be out there as a possibility in our worlds. There may be nobody to love us, and nobody for us to love. Self-expression may not be possible; won't happen no matter what. And it may not be our lot in life to be happy, to experience a pervasive satisfaction with how our lives are going. If we are hooked to all of that having to be there for our lives to work, we doom ourselves to failure if the world of reality--the one we have to live in--doesn't contain that possibility for us.

Even if we do manage to achieve Eagleton's list--love, self-expression, and happiness—we may find out that, really, as good as it feels at times and as good as it looks from the outside, it isn't a life that works for us, not really. Perhaps, now in my life, my list is honor, personal integrity, decency, diligence, service, and peace and serenity, rather than Eagleton's list. All we can do is assume responsibility for making our lives work and take the next steps in that direction the best we know how, today, tonight, tomorrow, this month, this year, and trust that we will know when our lives work, if in fact they ever do.

I need to keep agreements with myself. A powerful message of est that came through to me is there is one big rule I have to play by if my life going to work: if I tell myself I am going to do something, I do it. Period. *Period.* No excuses. No reasons. No explanations. No cop-outs. No procrastination. I have to be able to count on myself to keep the agreements I make with myself, no matter what. *No matter what.* I may not get the results I want or expect; I'm not all knowing and all-powerful. But I can take the actions I told myself I would take. I can do that. While indeed I may die without my life ever working, it is *certain* not to work if I don't keep agreements with myself.

It's 4:38 p.m. on a Thursday in August and I just have a bit more to do and I'm done with this writing. I told myself that I wasn't going to spend from eight to ten tonight channel surfing

cable news shows and ballgames. In the affairs of the world, whether I keep that agreement with myself is of no significance. What I have to realize, however, is that in my life it has great significance. Seemingly little things add up to big things. It's important to see it all as big. Everything contributes to a life that works or a life that doesn't work. What I have for dinner is big. Whether I write this paragraph the best I can as I told myself I would is big. Whether I clean the kitchen counter as I told myself I would is big. Whether I carefully check out bike possibilities at Target for my daughter's birthday present on the way home as I told myself I would is big. It's not big to you, and shouldn't be big to you; you have your own agreements to keep. But I have to value my life, honor my life, cherish it enough, for it to really, really matter whether I do what I said I would with the rest of my day on this Thursday in August.

Now to Target.

November, 2011.

I watch dog shows on the USA channel, I guess it is, or maybe it's Animal Planet, or both. This past weekend I saw one on CBS. A lot of dog shows on television these days. If you haven't seen one, they are a contest to pick the best-looking dogs. Doing tricks isn't part of it. The dogs don't have to sit up and beg or roll over or play dead or catch a Frisbee, anything like that.

The dogs look happy and couldn't be cuter in these dog shows, and the trainers appear to be having a good time trotting alongside them as they traverse a big circle while the judges that pick the winners and the audience looks them over. One at a time each dog stands still alongside its trainer, who keeps it occupied with small bits of chicken or something--the small dogs on a pedestal to prop them up higher--while the judge inspects them. The inspections look cursory to me. It's really quick, ten seconds tops: the judge runs his hands lightly over the dog's back and bottom and pats it a few times and then looks at its teeth. The television commentators on these shows aren't big on explaining things, so I'm not sure what the judges are looking for, moles or curvature of the spine perhaps, and with the teeth, an overbite or cavities, I can only guess. None of the dogs when I've been watching have taken a nip at a judge's fingers while he or she was probing around in its mouth, although I find myself thinking about that possibility and, truth be told, kind of rooting for it.

With each breed category, or group as they call it--working dogs is one of them--the judge of that group picks a winner. Interlaced with a ton of commercials, they do this seven times; seven groups of dogs, seven winners. Then, the big finish of the dog show, the seven best in breed winners, as they are called, are brought out and on comes a judge we haven't seen before to pick

the best of those seven as the winner of best in show, the top dog in the whole dog show.

Often this big judge we haven't seen before--I've never heard the commentators say a thing about this person that's been back behind the curtain, waiting in the wings, even who it is going to be--is a woman in the late stages of life, late seventies, even into her eighties. She is dressed to the nines in a floor-length evening dress in a bright color. The dress jumps out at you because there is a lot of it. It seems that for whatever reason these big-finale judges have a yen for all-you-can-eat buffets. Anyway, these ladies take up a good deal of space. Yards and yards of fabric went into that dress. You can't miss the dress. In fact, it upstages the dogs.

The judge strides grandly about the arena floor; imagine a mobile bright red pup tent. She's in no hurry. Several rounds of commercials can be inserted while she makes her call of the big winner of the dog show. The dogs and their trainers, or owners, whichever it is, we aren't told, stand in a row--the Pomeranian next to the Great Dane next to the Chihuahua next to the Beagle next to the Springer Spaniel, or something like that, I could be mixing up groups here--all of them, it seems, dogs and people both, humbled and awed to be in the presence of greatness, this judge, she could be the Pope. She points at some of them to run around in a little circle in front of her and they scurry to accede to her dictate. What she says goes, anything she wants.

Then she walks over to a table with some trophies and signs in the winners' names. I think she is picking the top three, but the only one that ever gets any attention is the big winner, so maybe she only picks the one. That's worth a commercial.

Now we are back. Suddenly, with a flick of her wrist, almost as an aside, she points to the two runners-up (I think) and the big winner, the best in show. The winning trainer is beside him- or herself with joy and somehow the winning dog knows to jump up and down on his pants leg (or her dress) seemingly in the thrall of

victory. Other trainers shake the winner's hand in what appears to be genuine pleasure in his/her triumph. The winning trainer is interviewed on television (“How does it feel to win?” “Great!”). The judge is interviewed (“A fine dog.”). And that's the end of the show. Pretty good TV if you have time on your hands, which I do.

It's hit me that everybody involved in these dog shows agrees to suspend reality in order to make the whole enterprise work. As far as I can see, and to be sure, this is from a long way back, the easy chair I have set up in my bedroom in front of the TV, and I do read during these dog shows, they get a little slow for me, everybody--contestants, judges, television commentators, the press, and the people that attend these dog shows--goes along with the fiction that this best in show judge, or any judge, is capable of deciding definitively that this Pomeranian is better than that Beagle and all the other dogs in the final seven.

Without that article of faith, there'd be no dog show. Everybody accepts the idea that there is something in this judge's background, some blessing from nature, she's graced by God, some remarkable capability, something, that enables this elderly woman to do little more than glance at seven dogs that don't look anything alike to me, she didn't know ahead of time which seven dogs it would be, so she couldn't have studied up on these particular ones, and knows with a certainty that the Pomeranian is the best one. That's it, case closed. You never hear anybody complain about the choice—“What do you mean the Pomeranian? The Chihuahua had it beat up, down, and around!”

The judge doesn't even have to justify her choice. Why exactly did she decide the Pomeranian was better than the Great Dane, which looked really good to me? That's part of what keeps everything going: judges don't have to explain their decisions beyond a vague “That dog just jumps out at you” platitude. If they were pressed to do that, it would open their infallibility up to question. (“Nicer tail? Are you kidding me?”) And nobody

questions her credentials: “She raises Shih Tzus, if you'll pardon the expression--what does she know about hunting dogs?” Or bring up bias: “A Boxer bit her granddaughter. No way is she going with a boxer.” Or question whether she is on the up-and-up: “That old biddy is on the take! The owner of the Pomeranian gave her a pass for ten free games at Ben's Bingo Parlor.” And certainly you never hear anybody challenge the basic premise of the show: “This is apples and oranges. The whole thing doesn't make sense!”

You get the idea: everybody plays along and keeps their mouths shut. If they didn't they'd run the risk of losing all they get out of participating in dog shows: the fun and excitement, they are on TV and written up in the newspaper, all the social goings on, and if they are in the retail dog business there's good money to be made selling the offspring of the winners.

The ideal for these people is to get themselves to really believe in what goes on, so that it's not that they are just going along with what they know amounts to a con. If they can get themselves into a personal place of sincere irrationality it keeps them from having to live with cognitive dissonance, as it is called. Cognitive dissonance is the uncomfortable feeling you get when you say you believe something and act accordingly but you don't really believe it. That's no fun. You are a fraud of sorts. Ouch. Since it is in your perceived interest to keep participating in dog shows, it makes sense to set aside your connection with objective reality and really, truly, in all sincerity, buy in, with your total being, to the judge-infallibility article of faith. Best of all, don't even think about it; just believe.

My bet is that just about all of the people involved with these dog shows pull this off. They might have a sliver of a doubt buried deep down, but for all practical purposes, they have successfully suspended reality. Their personal, inner, subjective, reality, the one they go by, is that the winner of best in show really is the best dog. They are at peace with themselves and the world.

When you think about it, dog shows aren't the only dog shows. As far as I'm concerned, religion, egalitarianism, mass democracy, World War II/Greatest Generation nostalgia, being a Cubs fan, public education--dog shows. I sit in university faculty meetings thinking, this is a dog show. But then again, everybody else there has each other and they feel good about themselves and what they are doing and they are having a good time, while I'm there alone and brooding and looking to bolt out the door. I maybe should re-assess the idea I've had that it's best to live life grounded in reality. It could be that the Tyler Durden character in the movie "Fight Club" was onto it when he said, "Hey, whatever works for you, keep it going."

March, 2012.

I'm reading a new biography of Dwight Eisenhower (Jean Edward Smith, *Eisenhower in War and Peace*, Random House: 2012). One of the things coming up for me reading the book is how impressive Eisenhower's résumé is. Get this: he was a Five-Star General in the army, Supreme Commander of the Allied Forces in Europe during World War II, Chief of Staff of the Army, Governor of the American Zone of Occupied Germany, European Commander of NATO, President of Columbia University, twice elected President of the United States, and his likeness is on the silver dollar.

Paying attention to résumés isn't new with me. Over the years, I've taken note of people that I thought had particularly strong ones. Thomas Jefferson was the principal author of the Declaration of Independence, Governor of Virginia, Representative from Virginia to the Congress of the Confederation, Secretary of State, Minister to France, Vice-President of the United States, President of the United States, and his likeness is on the nickel *and* the two dollar bill.

The first time I can remember thinking about résumés was when I was in my late twenties and went to work at the University of Minnesota as an instructor in the College of Education while I was doing my masters and doctoral work. My advisor in both programs was Dr. William Gardner. While I was his advisee, just a few years, Bill went from assistant professor to associate professor to full professor to department chairman to associate dean and then dean of the college, and then he was elected the President of the American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education, and then the Democratic Party recruited him to run for

the U.S. House of Representatives, although he turned them down. To say the least, I was highly impressed by that.

As the years went along, I came to realize that it wasn't so much the résumé itself that interested me; it was how impressed people are with certain people. Or not impressed; I made note of instances where I thought someone was getting something worthwhile done and yet nobody seemed to think it was all that much.

There was the president of a Catholic college near where I live in Vermont, a nun. I've blanked on her name, this was a lot of years ago. Anyway, people were impressed to the skies with her. The mere mention of her name brought a torrent of praise and affirmation. While I thought she was fine and all, I couldn't figure out what all the adulation was about. I speculated that there was something about her beyond her accomplishments that accounted for the standing ovations she received, but I couldn't discern exactly what it was. A look about her? A personality trait? A way of affirming people that prompted them to project things onto her that weren't there? What?

There is one particular colleague of mine--I'm a university professor--who really, I mean really, impresses students, and I can't figure out what it is about him that warrants it. Oh, I have some idea, but there is still a mystery about it.

There are many other examples that come to mind as I write this that I won't take the space to get into here.

I wasn't as clear in years past as I am now about why I have been so intrigued by the topic of impressiveness--we are talking about a span of forty years. It's because impressing people is an area where I personally have a track record of coming up short of optimum.

With what I've just written as background, I'll set out a concept. It is a category of human being: the Unimpressive. Note the capital "U". There are people who are unimpressive because

they simply aren't much and don't do much that's worth anybody being impressed about, or who now and again don't get their proper due. I'm not talking about them. Unimpressives are those who arguably, by reasonable criteria, deserve to be considered impressive but aren't. And more, there's a pattern to it; it's not just a one-time or occasional thing. It happens here, it happens there, it happens now, it happened then.

I'll add a subcategory: the *hardcore* Unimpressive. Absolutely nothing a hardcore Unimpressive could ever be, say, or do would impress anybody. Zero. Cure cancer? Rescue a child from a burning building? Walk on water? Not impressive if a hardcore Unimpressive does it. I believe they exist.

Back to everyday Unimpressives, four ways they can create problems for themselves:

1) *Buy what others think of them.* Because the public at the time wasn't impressed with Vincent Van Gogh's paintings (he sold one painting in his life, to his brother) didn't mean he wasn't any good as a painter.

2) *Back off or quit.* Seeing that nothing they are or do impresses anybody, they can decide to lower their sights in life or give up altogether. Not a ticket to happiness and fulfillment.

3) *Chase after impressiveness.* Do this, that, and the other thing and in effect, or literally, say: "How about that?" "Was that good enough?" "Was I nice enough?" "Did I entertain you?" "Did I make you feel good about yourself?" "Are you impressed with me now?" Of course, the answer is, "No, I'm not impressed with you, and will you please excuse me, I have to be someplace."

4) *Put up with mistreatment.* Unimpressives can get the idea that unimpressed people have the right to be inconsiderate, unfair, and hurtful to them.

Two things Unimpressives can do about their status:

1) *Find a different audience.* No matter what he might have done, Sigmund Freud would not have gone over big with the

Nazis. Sigmund had to find people to be around that would be congenial to him and his work.

2) *Decide that how impressive they are is none of their business.* Their business is what they are trying to get done and matching up with their own standards.

28

Telek

April, 2012.

Drawn from Kay Summersby, *Past Forgetting: My Love Affair With Dwight D. Eisenhower* (Simon & Schuster, 1976).

Kay Summersby was a vivacious fashion model who became General Dwight Eisenhower's driver in Britain early in World War II. Summersby was in her early thirties and Eisenhower was in his early fifties. He was married, his wife remaining in America for the duration of the war. During Summersby's time with Eisenhower, he rose from a unknown two-star general to a four-star general and Supreme Commander of Allied Forces in Europe and one of the most prominent and respected people in the world. Summersby's relationship with Ike, as she called him, grew in intimacy to a companion and confidant and woman-at-his-side in public events, and eventually they began a romantic relationship.

Together, Kay and Ike bought a little black Scottie puppy that Ike named Telek. No one knew the origin of the strange-sounding name Telek until, late in her life, Kay revealed that it was a combination of Telegraph Cottage, where Kay and Ike lived in Britain, and the first letter of Kay's name.

Kay loved Ike deeply, and it seemed to her that he loved her. She hoped that they could some day be married and have a family. But it wasn't to happen. At the end of the war, Ike went back to America and his wife and broke off all contact with Kay. She was devastated. She kept Telek, who became her only link to her years with Ike.

Ike's remarkable professional successes continued after the war as he became Chief of Staff of the Army, President of Columbia University, and was twice-elected President of the United States.

Kay moved to New York City in the early 1950s and she saw Ike briefly in his office at Columbia after having had no contact with him for six years. Telek came along with her. Ike was cordial but formal and distant, and it was a strained time for Kay with someone with whom she had once been so close. For Telek, however, it was like old times. He jumped out of Kay's arms and bounded over to Ike and flipped on his back with his paws up inviting Ike to scratch his belly as Ike had done so often all those years ago, and, with a wide smile, Ike did.

Kay never saw Ike again after that one meeting. But she never stopped loving her dear Ike. She always pictured him in her mind as the vibrant man she knew during the war years, and she never got used to the idea of Ike growing old. She would see a picture of him in the paper and think, Oh God, I can't believe it. With each of his illnesses, Ike seemed to shrink a little. During his final illness, Kay's heart ached for him. What Ike went through seemed so cruel. Kay felt relieved when he died. He had suffered too long.

Then mortality caught up with Telek. He was seventeen years old. One morning, he staggered as he got up and fell down. He tried to get up again but just couldn't manage it. The vet had told her she had to expect this. In her book written just before her own death, Kay wrote:

I picked Telek up, put him in my lap and talked to him. I told him how much he had always meant to me, how much I had loved him. I told him he was an important part of my life, that when I was sitting at home and he was curled up at my feet I never felt alone. I talked to him about Ike. I told that poor tired Scottie how much Ike had liked him. I reminded him of how he used to ride in the car with us, of how he had visited Buckingham Palace, of how President Roosevelt had held him, of all the adorable scampering puppies he had sired. I suppose it was a bit silly, but Telek knew that I loved him. I let my voice and my memories surround him. I wanted him to feel

comfortable, loved, and secure. I buckled his little tartan coat around him and carried him out to the taxi and to the veterinarian. "Please put him to sleep," I said, and burst out crying.

29

Playing One Game at a Time

July, 2012.

Committed sports participants do more than just play ball. They are enrollees in the sports way of life, or *culture*. A culture sets out what you are to think and how you should act in this place. A good way to study the sport culture, or any culture, any area of life, is to look at how it employs language. I'll list and discuss words and phrases used a lot in the sports world. The point in this context is that they may have application beyond sports.

Play one game at a time. Sport—everything we do in life--comes down to playing today's game, the one going on right now, the very best we can, and that's it. We can't replay yesterday's game, that's past, and we can't play tomorrow's game, that's not here yet. Let yesterday's game go and play today's game today and tomorrow's game tomorrow, and then play the next game after that and the next game after that and the next game after that, and the next game and the next game and the next game until the season (life) is over. Just do today, that's your focus.

Came to play. He (or, of course, she) took the game seriously. He was into it physically, mentally, and emotionally, with all of his being. He was completely present on that occasion. He meant business. He came to play. A good posture to bring to any endeavor.

Give 110 percent. Do your absolute best in the game and more. Go at it with all you have in you. Just getting the job done, an easy-does-it, good-enough-is-good-enough attitude, doesn't make it here. Good standard to have.

Put numbers on the board. The sports world cuts through the explanations and excuses and assurances that it will happen next time. What counts in sports are tangible results, numbers on the (score)board--singles and doubles and home runs, yards gained running the football, passes completed and caught, baskets made, goals scored and saved, assists, and so on. Sports are about production, and so is the rest of life.

Focus. If you are going to be successful in the game you need to give your complete attention to what you are doing right now, this instant. Dilettantism, dabbling, and dashing something off doesn't get it done in sports, or anywhere else except with tweets and text messages.

Kind of guy. The sport world acknowledges that people are different. We aren't all alike. Each of us has a certain inherent nature, certain predilections, and a certain personal style. Yes, we can change what we are like. We aren't carved in granite. But the sport world thinks there are limits to that. Says the sport world: don't assume you are going to change significantly the kind of guy you are.

Play my game. You hear reference to a player's game in basketball especially. It gets at the fact that we aren't equally good at everything. We are better at some things than other things. The sport culture emphasizes acknowledging that reality and playing to your strengths. Playing your game is the best thing you can do for yourself and for your team. Identify your game and play it.

Study the tapes. Sports emphasize self-analysis and individual improvement, usually with the help of coaches and sometimes other players. Playing one game at a time includes understanding that something can be learned from your performance in

yesterday's game that can help you in today's game. So become a student of yourself as a player. Learn what you did right and do more of that and better, and figure out what you need to improve and get about improving it. A shorthand way to say it: study the tapes.

Put in the work. Six o'clock in the morning and the last thing you want to do is lift weights and run the track, but that's what you do. You put in the work. You don't just show up and hope for the best. Applies to everything we do in life.

Mistakes. The sport world isn't big on moralizing, self-condemnation, groveling, apologies, and guilt. Invariably when athletes do something that is called into question they call whatever it was a mistake. They don't say "I did something wrong," or "I did something bad," or "I'm bad." They say, "I made a mistake." They take the morality out of it. Seldom are we outright immoral. Far more likely, we are shortsighted; we made a mistake. Admit the mistake and don't repeat it. But quit beating yourself up for it.

Move on. If today and yesterday and the day before yesterday weren't good, don't stew over it or let it tie you up. Let the past go. Move on. Tomorrow's a new day.

Respect the game. Sports emphasize playing the game the right way. Don't do anything that insults or cheapens the sport—or anything else in your life.

Make the people around you better. Help out your teammates (and workmates and family and friends).

My teammates share this award with me. The sport culture underscores the importance of encouragement and support from others. It's really tough if you don't have that.

It's 4:55 in the afternoon on a Friday and I've completed the write-a-thought game for today. I focused and gave it 110 percent, and I think I put good numbers on the board. Now to the next game, writing an email to my daughter on the West Coast. I'll play that game the best I can. And then I'll go on to the next game, cooking dinner. One game at a time. Through all of this, I'll be the kind of guy I am and I'll play my game. I'll study the tapes—reflect, write in my journal--and see where I can improve. I'll put in the work to be the best “player” I can be. I'll acknowledge and learn from my mistakes and move on from them. I'll respect the game (of life), and I'll support those who play it with me. I'll keep in mind that it's very difficult to get it done without the help of the people around me. And whatever my batting average at the end of the season (the end of my life) turns out to be, I'll have the satisfaction of knowing that I came to play.

September 2012.

A dream I had a couple of nights ago:

I was in a bathroom. Or was it a bathroom? There were no walls. There was only a bathtub overflowing, and, a foot or two away, a washbasin, water pouring over the rim. Someone had turned on the faucets of the tub and washbasin full out. I was looking on from a few feet away with a muted feeling of distress but no particular thoughts.

A young woman's voice from behind me, I didn't recognize it, I never saw her, said calmly, impersonally, matter of factly, "Do you want to turn it off?"

I stepped toward the tub. It had a circular handle parallel to the floor. I would turn it to the right to shut off the water.

Children--seven, eight, nine years old--perhaps four or five of them, were darting around me, happy, playing, unconcerned, or so it seemed; they were fleeting images and I never saw them distinctly.

As I reached to turn off the water, I looked to my right and saw about seven feet away, in focus amid all of the commotion of the children darting about, a child of about seven standing alone. The child was naked and had blond hair. I didn't discern whether it was a boy or girl. The child had its arms wrapped tightly about itself and was trembling. So alone.

I stepped toward the child. As I got nearer, I saw that covering much of the right side of its face was shiny red plastic. The plastic molded to the contours of the child's face.

Now up close, I leaned down and gently asked the child, "Did you do this with the water?"

Our eyes met and, still trembling, the child answered, "Yes."

I woke up.

The child was me.

31

A Big Grey Poodle-Looking Dog

November, 2012.

It was 4:30 in the afternoon on a crisp, overcast mid-week day in early November in Burlington, Vermont. I was driving to my townhouse, which is at the top of a long hill. A hundred feet or so from my destination, on my left, I approached five people clustered talking. Amid them were three dogs, one of which was a big grey poodle-looking dog. As I drew even with the group, driving very slowly, the big grey poodle-looking dog made eye contact with me and maintained it as I went by. None of the people and neither of the other two dogs took notice of me, just the big grey poodle-looking dog. It left the group and started slowly walking toward my car as I crept along toward the townhouse. I turned left at my townhouse, stopped the car a few feet from the garage door and pushed the button on the device attached to the passenger seat visor that opens the garage door and drove into the garage and stopped the car and took the keys out of the ignition. I opened the car door and there was the big grey poodle-looking dog standing inside the open car door, silent, still, just a few inches away, taking up the space I would use to get out of the car. I said hello and petted the dog and scratched its ears and got out of the car, the dog backing up to give me room, and closed the door and walked over to hang up the keys on a hook next to the door that leads into the townhouse. I turned around and there right next to me was the dog. I leaned over and petted its head and scratched its chin and stood back up and said softly, "You have to go now." The big grey poodle-looking dog turned around and slowly walked out of the still-open garage and turned to the right and went out of sight. I pushed the button that closes the garage door and went inside the

townhouse and hung up my coat on the rack I've attached to the inside of a closet door.

November, 2012.

“That which doesn't kill me makes me stronger.” That's one maxim just about everyone knows and takes to heart. Or at least some version of it, the wording varies from speaker to speaker. Sometimes the reference is “us” rather than “me.” The 1982 movie *Conan the Barbarian* opens with “That which doesn't kill us makes us stronger” and attributes it to the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1840-1900). Nixon era Watergate conspirator G. Gordon Liddy got a lot of attention using this “us” version. A recent Kelly Clarkson song makes it “you”: “What doesn't kill you makes you stronger, stronger.”

Nietzsche is indeed the one behind this dictum, another word for it. In an essay published in 1889, *Twilight of the Idols*, he wrote: “Out of life's school of war: what does not kill me makes me stronger.” Here, Nietzsche likens life to being in a war, one that, if survived, has this strengthening outcome. I'm not sure if he was setting out a fact of life that applies to everybody or just to some people. Nietzsche wrote about a superior brand of human being, the *übermensch* in German, or, other terms for the concept, the overman or superman. So he may have been applying this axiom, yet another term for it, only to people of this higher sort, and included himself, or a fictionalized version of himself (in real life Nietzsche wasn't exactly a dynamo), among their number.

Although it has received little attention, Nietzsche had gotten at this basic notion in an earlier writing, albeit with a distinctly different twist, in a collection of thought fragments entitled *Maxims of a Hyperborean*: “What does not destroy us—we destroy and it makes us stronger.” Notice in this case we become stronger not by enduring adversity or attack but rather by destroying what would destroy us.

With reference to the maxim as it stands in our time, it seems to me that whether the referent is “me,” “us,” or “you” they all mean “a person”: that which doesn’t kill a person makes him or her stronger. And it’s clear that “kill” is not to be taken literally. Kill means devastates, personally destroys, shatters, debilitates, crushes, in there somewhere, an instance in which someone might be brought down, done in, in a major, lasting way.

Undoubtedly the popularity of this Nietzschean notion stems from the fact that despite its grim imagery (confronting something that could, figuratively at least, kill you) it’s a positive, hopeful, feel-good idea. If things are going really rough, keep the faith, because going through this ordeal is going to beef you up. In fact, if you are seeking to get stronger—tougher, more resilient, less vulnerable, more battle ready—you might be advised to go looking for trouble, or at least not duck it, because it’ll move you in that direction in the end if you tough it out.

Amid all this optimism, we need to keep in mind that everything is what it is and isn’t everything else. In this case, a maxim is a maxim and real life is real life. Reality is far more complex and one-of-a-kind than any maxim can capture. My experience with real life, actual existence, leads me to conclude that what doesn’t kill us does make us stronger . . . sometimes. And when it makes us stronger it does so in every imaginable way and to every imaginable extent. But too, sometimes what doesn’t kill us diminishes us, hurts us, injures us badly, tellingly, and again, in different ways and to varying extents. And sometimes what doesn’t kill us strengthens us in some ways and weakens us in others, and again in every possible combination of those two outcomes, although I’ve noticed that usually the balance tips in favor of strengthening over weakening.

This last possibility—some combination of weakening and strengthening--seems to me the most likely outcome of major

adversity. That leads me to a modification of the Nietzsche maxim that takes into account his early version of this basic idea:

That which doesn't kill you might make you stronger, and it might make you weaker, or some combination of the two, though usually on balance it'll make you stronger; keep your eyes open to what's going on and do whatever works for you, including destroying what would destroy you.

Thus when confronted with what might kill you, it might be your best strategy to fight like a wildcat and even literally kill, or it might be best to cut and run, or to do something else, with no limit on what that something else might be. And while you are thinking about this take on it, maintain a healthy distrust of maxims, including the undoubtedly-too-complicated one I've just given you. Instead, trust reality and trust your wits.

May, 2013.

I've been paying attention to how people who are fawned over get themselves in that position when they don't really deserve to be that high on life's totem pole. It's not that these people are unaccomplished; it's that the adulation they evoke goes beyond their actual merits. How do they pull that off? I ask myself.

For example, there's Princess Kate in Britain. She used to fold clothes at the Gap, not there is anything wrong with that, and seems a nice enough person, and she keeps herself slim and trim and has a pleasant smile, good precision with it, upper lip exactly to the top edge of her front teeth, but really, she's no better as far I can tell than the young women I see looking in store windows in downtown Burlington, Vermont where I live.

Of course what Kate has going for her is the princess title—or I guess actually she's a duchess—which, princess or duchess, from what I have read, she went after pretty hard. If you can bring it off, the princesses and kings and queens and duchesses and dukes stratagem is a good one: you get you and yours designated royalty and the rest of us commoners. We get to watch you ride by in carriage. Good deal for you.

This past week, I've been paging through a book of reminiscences about the late George Plimpton (Nelson Aldridge, Jr., editor, *George, Being George*, Random House, 2008). Plimpton (1927-2003) was an American editor, author, and party-hosting man about town in New York City. He was best known for a being a co-founder and editor of *The Paris Review* literary magazine and for his sports writing in which he would recount his exploits as an everyman participant in big time sports.

Plimpton's most successful book in the sports area was *Paper Lion: Confessions of a Last String Quarterback*, published in 1966,

in which he wrote about his experiences in the training camp of the Detroit Lions pro football team. His angle was that he wasn't there as an observer but rather as a player. He even took a couple snaps as a quarterback in one of the Lions' pre-season games. *Paper Lion* was a good book and a best seller. I remember enjoying it at the time it came out.

Looking back on it now, I realize that more than anything the reader of *Paper Lion* comes away from the book thinking what a super guy George Plimpton is. Here he is, this Harvard man and big time literary type, and yet he gets around these rough and tumble jocks and they accept him in their world and really take to him. Yes indeed, George Plimpton is a man for all seasons.

Back in the 1960s and '70s, I would nightly sit alone in front of a TV set in a darkened room in the Midwest munching on potato chips watching late night talk shows out of New York City—Johnny Carson and Dick Cavett in particular—and Plimpton was a regular on those shows. Plimpton would sit on the couch or chair with Johnny or Dick in his tweed sport jacket and, without being heavy-handed about it, get across in a vaguely British accent that he was from old money and went to Harvard and went to the right parties and knew everybody that was anybody. He related amusing name-dropping anecdotes to an attentive and bordering-on-reverential Johnny or Dick--as well as to me, of course.

Now that I think about it, the only thing that stuck with me from these little stories was that not only was George Plimpton a superior being compared to the rest of us, he was an upbeat, chipper, fine fellow to boot. I got that message loud and clear, but at the same time I didn't feel as if I were being sold anything or put down. I felt fine about me being a humdrum plebeian and George Plimpton being a lively noble; that was just the way things were. When I think about the people who have been masters of self-puffery over the span of my long life, George Plimpton's name is right up there at the top.

I didn't pick up the Plimpton book this week to read it from the angle of Plimpton's self promotion, but it couldn't have been more than twenty pages into it and I was caught up with examining how Plimpton worked his self-inflating magic. The book has been a fun read for me, I'm not done with it yet. Techniques that went right by me back in the old days jumped out at me now. One of them is what I'll call the pseudo-self-effacement technique. The basic idea with this maneuver is ostensibly you're putting yourself down, but what you are really doing is building yourself up.

I'll use a transcript of an after-dinner speech Plimpton gave in the mid-eighties that was in the book (pp. 323-326) to illustrate how the pseudo-self-effacement technique can be effectively employed. I'll quote from Plimpton's speech and insert my comments in caps to point out how George was selling himself even as nominally he was documenting his limitations.

I think I should start off by saying that I didn't do very well at Exeter. I WENT TO EXETER, AN ELITE PREP SCHOOL. My marks were terrible. I'M NOT HERE PITCHING HOW GREAT I AM. I'M A MODEST, SELF-EFFACING GUY. I had the strange notion that in class, even if I were daydreaming of something else I'M CALLING IT DAYDREAMING, BUT YOU KNOW ENOUGH ABOUT ME TO GET THAT IT WAS ACTUALLY MATURE, INSIGHTFUL, CREATIVE MUSING AT A VERY YOUNG AGE, my brain was still absorbing all the material like a specialized sponge, and the next day at the exam I could scratch around in the appropriate corner, in the detritus I KNOW WORDS LIKE DETRITUS, and there would be the appropriate answers. I HAD CONFIDENCE IN MYSELF EVEN BACK THEN.

These low grades elicited letters from my father. MY FATHER CARED ENOUGH ABOUT ME TO SEND ME LETTERS. Genetically speaking, I was supposed to soar I COME FROM GOOD STOCK through Exeter I WENT TO EXETER. Wasn't the family full of outrageous successes? I'M FROM AN OUTRAGEOUSLY SUCCESSFUL LINEAGE. THAT'S MORE THAN PARTICULARLY SUCCESSFUL, OR REMARKABLY

SUCCESSFUL, OR EXCEPTIONALLY SUCCESSFUL—OUTRAGEOUSLY SUCCESSFUL, GET IT? CAN YOU HONESTLY SAY THAT ABOUT YOUR PEOPLE, OUTRAGEOUSLY SUCCESSFUL? NO, YOU CAN'T.

I hadn't studied, but why hadn't my brain compensated out of thin air? I DIDN'T GET BAD GRADES BECAUSE I WAS DUMB. I HADN'T STUDIED, THAT'S WHY. Somewhere in Melville's *Moby Dick* is the line "my whole beaten brain seems as beheaded." I HAVE READ *MOBY DICK* AND CAN QUOTE IT FROM MEMORY. Which is apt, thinking back on it, because my head when I was in Exeter I WENT TO EXETER was ever off somewhere else I WAS THINKING BIG THOUGHTS funning it up I WAS A GOOD TIME KIND OF GUY, NOT A DRUDGE with heads of the few others who were having difficulty. We beheaded few, we band of brothers. I WASN'T AN ISOLATE LONER REJECT. I WAS PART OF A BAND OF BROTHERS.

At nightfall, I went down to the Plimpton Playing Fields THIS ELITE SCHOOL HAD FACILIITIES NAMED AFTER MY FAMILY and drop-kicked field goals with Buzz Merritt I HAD FRIENDS, just the two of us in the gloaming YOU DON'T KNOW WORDS LIKE GLOAMING, often with a thin moon shining above the pines, above the river. THAT IDYLIC IMAGE WAS ME—YOU WORKED IN A CAR WASH. Why did I do this when I should have been studying Tacitus WE STUDIED TACITUS IN THIS ELITE SCHOOL I ATTENDED, WHILE YOU STUDIED HOW A BILL BECOMES A LAW IN THE ONE YOU WENT TO for the exam I knew was coming up the same day? THE ANSWER: BECAUSE I WAS INTO COOL THINGS LIKE BEING WITH MY BUDDY BUZZ—PREPPY-SOUNDING NAME, RIGHT? TOP DRAWER--KICKING FIELD GOALS UNDER A FULL MOON, NOT CRAMMING FOR AN INANE TEST LIKE YOU DIDN'T KNOW ANY BETTER THAN TO DO. Sometimes to escape the exams, I went to the infirmary. There was a secret way, which I have now forgotten, to drive up the temperature on a thermometer. CLEVER OF ME, HUH?

But what really got me in trouble were the little things I thought were funny—like sneaking in at night and turning all the benches around in the Assembly Hall because I thought it would it would be

funny to have my classmates sitting backwards when they came in for assembly. I WAS ADVENTUROUS AND CREATIVE AT A VERY YOUNG AGE.

I wrote for *The Exetonian* I WAS GOOD ENOUGH TO WRITE FOR A LITERARY MAGAZINE AT A PLACE LIKE EXETER, I WENT TO EXETER, but if you were on probation you couldn't use your real name.

I took piano lessons from Mr. Landers. He assigned me a Debussy piece called "Bells," as I recall. I PRACTICED PLAYING DEBUSSEY ON THE PIANO WHILE YOU LEARNED THREE CHORDS ON A GUITAR SO YOU COULD POUND OUT CHEAP-ASS ROCK 'N ROLL. The next week I appeared at Mr. Landers' quarters NOT AN OFFICE OR DESK SOMEWHERE, QUARTERS, GET THE PICTURE? and sat down to play. Mr. Landers said, "Well, that's very fine, but that's not Debussy's "Bells." I PLAYED NOT JUST FINE BUT VERY FINE PIANO, WHAT CAN'T I DO? PLUS I ADDED MY OWN INDIVIDUAL TOUCH TO IT--CREATIVE, UNIQUE, ONE-OF-A-KIND, THAT'S ME, GEORGE PLIMPTON.

I tried out for a play called *Seven Keys to Ballpate*. I WAS GAME, TOOK RISKS, TRIED NEW THINGS. They found a minor role for me, that of a young widow. I was required to let out an unearthly scream, perhaps at the sight of a corpse, I've forgotten what. My scream carried far out over the quadrangle QUADRANGLE, GET IT?, down the hill past Langdell and into the Jeremiah Smith Building CATCH THE IMPRESSIVE-SOUNDING NAMES AT THE ELITE PREP SCHOOL I WENT TO, past the mailroom with its letterboxes WHEN I DID SOMETHING, I DID IT BIG, where in those days I received my father's letter once a week I WAS IMPORTANT ENOUGH TO MY FATHER FOR HIM TO WRITE ME ONCE A WEEK with its admonitions—and up the stairs to Dean Kerr's office WE HAD A DEAN IN MY PREP SCHOOL; YOU HAD A PRINCIPAL IN THAT HIGH SCHOOL YOU WENT TO, where he sat comfortably smoking his pipe A PIPE--GOT THE IMAGE? when suddenly this high-pitched shriek wandered in and his blood curdled and he said aloud, "My God, what's Plimpton up to now." THE DEAN KNEW ABOUT ME. ONE MEMORABLE ESCAPEDE AFTER ANOTHER. "MY GOD, WHAT'S PLIMPTON UP TO

NOW," THE DEAN WOULD SAY. QUITE THE TEENAGER, ME, DON'T YOU THINK?

Could it have been that, having failed in all the departments at Exeter I WENT TO EXETER, I was driven in later life to compensate, to try once again to succeed where I hadn't? I've wondered on occasion whether these exercises in participatory journalism for which I am known I WROTE PAPER LION, A BEST SELLER, THAT WAS ME were as much to show my mentors at Exeter I WENT TO EXETER AND HAD MENTORS; YOU HAD A GUIDANCE COUNSELOR that I had somehow managed to intrude into the highest plateaus of their various disciplines. THE HIGHEST PLATEAU IN NOT JUST ONE DISCIPLINE, OR TWO DISCIPLINES--VARIOUS DISCIPLINES. ME, GEORGE PLIMPTON, I DID THAT. AND YOU PICKED UP THAT I WENT TO EXETER, AN ELITE EASTERN PREP SCHOOL, WITH FACILITIES NAMED AFTER MY FAMILY, RIGHT? THAT DIDN'T GET BY YOU, DID IT?

How about if you come up with an example of the pseudo-self-effacement technique? I think you'll find that it'll be a good time, and that it will give you a better handle on how people acquire unwarranted reputations and status in the world generally and in your own circumstance.

34

The Daily Puppy

June, 2013.

A highlight of my life these days is The Daily Puppy. It's one of those gadgets you can put on the home page of the computer. Every morning without fail, I check out the picture of the puppy for the day. Without exception, they are dear little souls. Each picture is accompanied by a bio of a few sentences. Here are some daily puppies from the past few weeks:

- Oliver the Boston Terrier likes to sleep under lots of blankets.
- Sasha the Husky is very quiet and never growls.
- Cody the Border Collie used to be very shy, but now he is making regular trips to the park and meeting new dogs and people.
- Bella the Poodle has traveled around the U.S., and even went to France and Prague.
- Angus the Australian Shepherd Mix is a perfect gentleman.
- Boo the Whippet enjoys hiking.
- Bentley the Pug Mix enjoys having his belly rubbed.
- Fiona the Labrador Retriever enjoys pretty much anything.
- Someone tried to drown Jasmine the Alaskan Malamute Mix in a bucket of water, but now she is safe and receives lots of love.

- Wilfred the Cocker Spaniel is trying his hardest to stop eating wood chips, but he just can't because they are so yummy.
- Gordon the Beagle is afraid of thunder, the vacuum cleaner, and many other things. His mom says he'll be going swimming soon, but he'll see because he thinks he'll be afraid of that too.
- Bart the French Bulldog is a defender against evil and quite the leaper.
- Winston the Yorkie Mix loves peanut butter and hates balloons.
- Lily the Chihuahua is very smart and learns fast and likes baths.
- Colleen the Irish Setter copies everything Dottie the Pomeranian does.
- Frankie the Dachshund Mix was rescued from a high kill shelter. His favorite things are snuggling with Mom and Dad and hiding under the dining room table where he keeps all his toys.

35

Doing Here Now

August, 2014.

I just finished reading Ram Dass' latest book, *Polishing the Mirror: How to Live from Your Spiritual Heart*, published in 2013, and had a markedly different response to it than I would have had in years past.

Ram Dass was born Richard Alpert in 1931. He and his Harvard colleague Timothy Leary were dismissed from their faculty positions in 1963 for their advocacy of hallucinatory substances. Alpert went on a pilgrimage to India and came back reborn, as it were, with a new name, Ram Dass, and a new message. This new message was captured in the title of his remarkably successful book published in 1971, *Be Here Now*. I'm old enough to have read it when it came out and was mightily impressed with it. I'm still impressed with it, but not as unreservedly.

Ram Dass is now in his eighties, and although slowed by the effects of a serious stroke is still sharing his outlook on life, which is summarized in his introduction to *Polishing the Mirror*.

Being here now sounds simple, but these three words contain inner work for a lifetime. To live in the here and now is to have no regrets about the past, no worries or expectations about the future. To be fully present in each moment of existence is to reside in a different state of being, in a timeless moment, in the eternal present. There's nothing to do, nothing to think about. Just be here now.

That sentiment sounds valid on the face of it . . . if you don't think about it too much. It went over big with me in days of yore, when

nothing characterized me more than not thinking too much about anything. These days, when I think things through for myself more, I take exception to it. I'll get at my differences with it by commenting on the Ram Dass quote sentence-by-sentence.

Being here now sounds simple, but these three words contain inner work for a lifetime.

Yes, these three words do sound simple, and I've decided they are *too* simple. One's inner work, to use that term, is more complicated than what is implied here, learning to be in the moment. Inner work involves learning to incorporate perspectives on doing, in contrast to being, and the past and future into one's internal or personal, subjective, repertoire.

To live in the here and now is to have no regrets about the past, no worries or expectations about the future.

Regrets about the past are good if we extract lessons from them on how to live well in the present and the kind of future to create. Worries and expectations about the future can make us more thoughtful and cautious in positive ways. The challenge isn't to avoid or suppress regrets, worries, and expectations; rather, it is to use them in positive and productive ways.

To be fully present in each moment of existence is to reside in a different state of being, in a timeless moment, in the eternal present.

Being able to exist in the moment, mindfully, fully present, is indeed a capability worth developing. But we need to be careful not to discount living with an awareness of the continuity of past, present, and future. We need to look back and learn from it, and we need to look ahead and do what will get us the future we want.

For each of us, the moment is not timeless. It is here and then it is gone, replaced by another moment, and another and another and another and another, and then moments run out, we die, it's over for us. Life comes down to what we do with our moments.

There's nothing to do, nothing to think about.

There are all kinds of things to do. Nothing defines us more than what we do with our lives. We need to decide what is most worth doing and do it while we still can. There are all kinds of things to think about. We need to decide what's most worth thinking about and think about it while we still can.

Just be here now.

The way I'd put it: be here now when you choose, and do here now when you choose, both within a clear sense of what's gone on before and what it could be like later on.

36

Arthur Schopenhauer

August, 2014

Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860) was a German philosopher best known for his book, *The World of Will and Representation*. Schopenhauer's thought focused on the individual person, and more particularly on his (and her, I'm avoiding cumbersome sentence constructions here) use of his will, his power of volition, to overcome what Schopenhauer saw as his fundamental, ontological, dissatisfaction with his state of being. Schopenhauer influenced many better-known personages, among them, Friedrich Nietzsche, Leo Tolstoy, Thomas Mann, Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Albert Einstein, and Joseph Campbell.

I'll comment on Schopenhauer quotes--set in and in smaller type--taken from the book by R.J. Hollingdale, selector and translator, *Arthur Schopenhauer: Essays and Aphorisms* (Penguin, 1970). What holds all of this together is Schopenhauer's, and my, concern for how individuals can effectively and responsibly use their minds with reference to what truly matters in life, and in the process achieve personal satisfaction.

For intellect in service of the will, that is to say, in practical use, there exist only individual things; for intellect engaged in art and science, that is to say for its own sake, there exist only universals, entire kinds, species, classes, ideas of things. The will aims directly only at individual things, which are its true objective, for only they possess empirical reality. Concepts, classes, kinds, on the other hand, can become its objective only very indirectly. That is why the ordinary man has no sense of general truths, and why the genius, on the contrary, overlooks and neglects what is individual. To the genius the enforced occupation with the individual as such which constitutes the stuff of practical life is a burdensome bore.

Schopenhauer distinguishes an individual's private and public use of his mind, or intellect. The private use of the mind informs the will, the volitional dimension of the individual, provides it with knowledge and understanding to guide its direction. In contrast, the public use of the mind comprehends reality in a general or inclusive way, which is then shared with others for their edification and possible use. The will, Schopenhauer notes, predisposes one to focus on concrete, empirical realities, that which can be discerned with the senses. It overlooks, or misunderstands, general truths—concepts, explanations, generalizations, propositions, and theories. The public use of the mind does the reverse, obscures or misinterprets concrete realities. Schopenhauer sees this state of affairs as problematic: the ordinary man, as he calls him—I'll call him the willful man--gets mired in particulars, and the genius—I'll call him the public man--has his head in the clouds. In both private and public intellectualization one has to attend concurrently to both concrete realities and abstract ideas and let each shed light on the other.

The two main requirements for philosophizing are: firstly, to have the courage not to keep any questions back; and secondly, to attain a clear consciousness of anything that goes without saying so as to comprehend it as a problem. Finally, the mind must, if it is really to philosophize, also be truly disengaged: it must prosecute no particular goal or aim, and thus be free from the enticement of will, but devote itself undividedly to the instruction which the perceptible world and its own consciousness imparts to it.

Questions direct investigation. If you don't ask the right questions, you won't get the right answers. To be a public man, public intellectual, you need to be intensely curious, even about things that seem a dead certainty, case closed, and you need to be highly skeptical. It takes courage to question everything and keep everything problematic. Raising the “wrong” questions and

problematizing current orthodoxies is strongly proscribed. The public man should not be in the service of furthering any particular doctrine, cause, or agenda. Rather, he should pursue the truth, whatever it turns out to be, and announce it to the world.

A true philosophy cannot be spun out of mere abstract concepts, but has to be founded on observation and experience, inner and outer. Philosophy must have its source in perceptual comprehension of the world; nor, however much the head needs to remain on top, ought it to be so cold-blooded a business that the whole man, heart and head, is not finally involved and affected through and through. Philosophy is not algebra.

Ideas need to be rooted in empirical reality and rigorous personal introspection and reflection, not in off the top, easy-does-it, sounds-good notions that play well at a particular time. While public men must ultimately be guided by their rational minds, they need to bring all of themselves to their explorations.

Skepticism is in philosophy what the Opposition is in Parliament; it is just as beneficial, and, indeed, necessary.

The public man is not a company man, not a conformist, not a member of the pack, not a foot soldier in someone's army. He thinks for himself and shares his truth and lets the results be as they are.

A dictate to reason is the name we give to certain propositions which we hold true without investigation and which we think ourselves so firmly convinced we should be incapable of seriously testing them even if we wanted to, since we should then have to call them provisionally in doubt. We credit these propositions so completely because when we first began to speak and think we continually had them recited to us and they were thus implanted in us; so the habit of thinking them is as

old as the habit of thinking as such and we can no longer separate the two.

What everybody knows for an absolute certainty, because they have seen and heard it from every source that has had their eye and ear, is the very thing that most needs to be re-thought.

Metaphysics will never put forth its full powers as long as it is expected to accommodate itself to dogma. Free investigation of man's most important concerns, of his existence itself, has been hampered and made impossible by this paralysis, and in this way man's most sublime tendency [to comprehend the reality about himself and his world] has been put in chains.

The public man is pressured to support the current dogma and rewarded if he does so. It's understandable if in that circumstance, knowingly or unknowingly, he kowtows to those in power, but his challenge is not to do that.

The discovery of truth is prevented most effectively by preconceived opinion, by prejudice, which as a pseudo a priori stands in the path of truth like a contrary wind driving a ship away from land, so that sail and rudder labor in vain.

The public man needs to stand outside of the world and himself and ask: What are these people like—which includes me--what do they, I, assume to be true and right, and how did they, I, get that way, and what keeps it going? What is this circumstance, what's happening here, what are its consequences, who profits from this arrangement and who loses, and what are alternatives to this pattern? He needs to see his world and himself with clearer eyes, and the clearer the better.

Every general truth is related to specific truths as gold is to silver, inasmuch as it can be converted into a considerable

number of specific truths which follow in the same way as a gold coin can be converted into small change.

In the process of coming to either willful truth, call it that, or general truth, there needs to be a constant interplay between the abstract and the particular. How does this general truth, concept, conclusion, illuminate this observed-with-the-senses phenomenon? How does this concrete reality, this fact, inform the formulation of a general truth, or modify or refute one that already exists? Never just concrete reality, never just abstraction, always both at the same time.

Normal men, despite their individual diversity, all think along certain common lines, so that they are frequently in unanimous agreement over judgments which are, in fact, false. This goes so far that they have certain basic views which are held in all ages and continually reiterated, while the great minds of every age have, openly or secretly, opposed these views.

In every setting, people think along common lines even as they don't realize it. Human beings are flock-disposed creatures and can be made to be even more so. Those who control minds, and thus actions—in schools, through the media, from the pulpit and dais—foster the notion among people that there is no other valid way of thinking than the one that's been put into their heads, and that they came to their conclusions and dispositions on their own. The first challenge for the willful and public man is to understand that his mind has been managed along with everyone else's, and to take on the task of expelling the outcomes of that process. Freedom of mind takes conscious, concerted, and persistent effort. It has to be earned, achieved, over a long period of time, many years.

If you want to earn the gratitude of men of your own age you must keep in step with it. But if you do that you will produce

nothing great. If you have something great in view you must address yourself to posterity: only then, to be sure, you will probably remain unknown to your contemporaries; you will be like a man compelled to spend his life on a desert island and there toiling to erect a memorial so that future seafarers shall know he once existed.

If you want to go over with people: stay within their frames of reference and tell them what they basically already believe; make them feel that they are on top of things and don't need to change anything about themselves; move them a tick forward in the direction they are already going; and do it all in an appealing way. In return for that, you'll be thought of as great and bestowed with the rewards that come with it. But you won't be truly great, because greatness of mind is measured by profundity of its insights rather than its ability to play to the crowd. Pervasive and lasting self-satisfaction comes from honestly and diligently seeking the truth about the world and announcing it. Even if both contemporaries and posterity pass by your memorial, Schopenhauer's term, you'll be at peace with yourself.

Talent works for money and fame; the motive which moves genius to productivity is, on the other hand, less easy to determine. It isn't money, for genius seldom gets any. It isn't fame; fame is too uncertain and, more closely considered, of too little worth. Nor is it strictly for its own pleasure, for the great exertion involved almost outweighs the pleasure. It is rather an instinct of a unique sort by virtue of which the individual possessed of genius is impelled to express what he has seen and felt in enduring works without being conscious of any further motivation. . . . To make its work, as a sacred trust and the true fruit of its existence, the property of mankind, laying it down for a posterity better able to appreciate it: this becomes for genius a goal more important than any other, a goal for which it wears the crown of thorns that shall one day blossom into a laurel-wreath. Its striving to safeguard its work is just as

resolute as that of the insect to safeguard its eggs and provide for the brood it will never live to see: it deposits its eggs where it knows they will one day find life and nourishment, and dies contented.

I share what I have seen and felt and express my truth about things because I feel compelled to do it and find it immensely gratifying—yes, there is that. But I'm not just laying it down for posterity as Schopenhauer wrote about it. I very much hope that people now find something useful in what I offer. I care about them. I want them to be who they are at their freest and best, and I want them happy. It's been reward enough for me to express myself publically these many years. I don't need laurel wreaths from either my contemporaries or posterity. In my weaker moments I want them, but I don't need them to die contented, I really don't,

December, 2014.

It was three days ago as I write this, the day after Christmas, 2014, in the early afternoon. It was far from the best of times for me. I was alone during the holidays and felt very cut off from the world. I wasn't feeling motivated or hopeful about much of anything. Nothing seemed worth doing that day beyond somehow getting through to bedtime and the oblivion of sleep--that is, if I could get to sleep, I had had insomnia for a week or more.

The legendary British pop singer Joe Cocker had recently died, and that prompted me to check him out on YouTube, what else was I doing. First the performance that put him on the map: 1969, the Woodstock music festival in upstate New York, he was 25-years-old, his cover of the Beatles song "With a Little Help from My Friends."

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=POaaw_x7gvQ

A bit down the web page from that video was a 2013 performance, 44 years later, of Joe singing this same song in front of an arena-sized audience in Cologne, Germany. I watched that too.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3XO-UB3TJ-c>

Cocker's was a dynamic performance in this second video, just last year. What most hit me watching it, though, was Joe himself and what that brought up for me. He was all but unrecognizable. That diminutive, bald, geriatric pale, gnome-like little man was Joe Cocker? My gosh. I was touched by his attempt to sell the song just like he did in the old days, and, really, being quite successful at it despite bearing in on seventy and being so very sick--the obituaries reported that he had been suffering from lung cancer for a long time. Watching him belt out his first big hit from over four decades ago surfaced thoughts and feelings in me related to aging

and decline, human fragility, indefatigability, the fact that we have one shot at life on this earth and we do that thing we do, or those few things, and then it ends, as it did for Cocker not long after that show, and that all of us are us in it together, some of us famous, most of us not.

I watched the Cologne performance of “With a Little Help from My Friends,” which was long, around eleven minutes, a second time, and this time I found myself taking notice of the taller of two women backup singers, who was standing perhaps ten feet to Cocker’s left with a microphone of her own. She had a compelling stage presence: vibrant, radiant, very much on top of the occasion. She seemed completely invested in her work, totally there and giving it her all, albeit anonymously, in support of the performer we came to see, Joe Cocker. I respected that.

She was in her mid-thirties I’d guess, attractive, fit, shapely, on first glance Caucasian but likely biracial, a touch Beyoncé-esque, with hair a cloud of lightened tight curls, which she brushed to the side with her hand, and, on the left side of her nose, a colorless mole, perhaps she covers it with make-up. She had on—barely—a skimpy Los Vegas-type body suit, backless, cleavage-revealing, short shorts, and she wore high heels. Her outfit accentuated her beauty, which was considerable, and rendered her revealed, displayed, and perhaps feeling a bit vulnerable--when she exited the stage she tugged at the front of the body suit to cover her breast, a self-conscious, and humanizing, gesture. The camera showed her from the back, and from that angle her bare legs, just a tad heavy and undefined, looked rather like those of an attractive mom, getting a little older, who somehow wound up backing Joe Cocker, and that imperfection, that commonness, for me anyway, heightened rather than detracted from her attractiveness and appeal, took the edge off of the glitz in a good way.

I’m hearing impaired and can’t discern music, so I wasn’t able to tell how talented a singer she is (I had heard Cocker before my

hearing loss, so I could imagine his voice). But it wasn't her art I was taken with, or the sexuality she exuded, which was palpable; rather, it was, how to put it, her being. There was something about her as a woman, as a person, that drew me to her.

I watched the performance of "With a Little Help from My Friends" a third time, and this time I focused just on her--the camera showed her fleetingly but regularly. The way the left side of her mouth stayed pretty much closed as she pronounced "friends," a word used over and over in the song, was endearing. Her hands, which she often held in front of her face, were youthful, delicate, expressive, like an artist's drawing. I found her overall appearance and manner feminine, lovely—which contrasted markedly from my world that day, with its absence of both femininity and loveliness.

For all practical purposes, life for me the rest of that afternoon and into the evening came down to a backup singer for Joe Cocker; the rest of the world went away, including the distress I was in. I was taken with what I sensed to be her humanity, and her grace, and even though she was part of the group on stage, her separateness; I could relate to the separateness. Amid the joyousness that radiated from her in her performance, I thought I was picking up some hurt, perhaps akin to the hurt I was feeling then. I was struck by the presence of such opposite, contradictory qualities: she was beautiful and ordinary, strong and delicate; show biz inaccessible and lives-down-the-street accessible; immersed in a group enterprise and alone; elated and in pain.

The obvious question became who is she? The magic of the Internet, click some keys and there was her name—Laura Jane Jones. I'd never heard of her, but she has a rather large presence on the Web, including pictures, an interview with her, a review of an album she made, a web site and Facebook page, a music video, and a blog. I spent the next four hours, I'd say, going through this material.

I came across a review of her work by Joe Cocker. He wrote that night after night, performance after performance, Laura Jane gave her very best effort. Yes, I saw that. The interview of her was lengthy, 37 minutes, low tech, conducted by a woman, early thirties, chatty, eager, who runs, or works for, some kind of singing school. Laura Jane said she had grown up in Michigan and was now living in Los Angeles forging a career in the music business. I had trouble hearing, but I think she said she'd been in L.A. for thirteen years, or was it ten, or eight, I'm not sure. She is in a highly competitive line of work and gets jobs wherever she can find them. She mentioned going to Los Vegas to work a weekend in a lounge act "to pay the rent."

In the interview, Laura Jane came across as genuine, unaffected, respectful of people, sincere, straight-ahead, not ironic, cynical, or jaded, and as hopeful about her future. The interviewer had the propensity to break from the interview and turn toward the camera and impart words of wisdom to the aspiring singers she assumed were watching the interview, and Laura Jane was patient and as she did that. It was clear in the interview that Laura Jane believes in the work she has chosen to do and that she's moving forward in her career the very best she can while remaining true to her principles and values.

In her blog, Laura Jane shares some tough experiences she has gone through in her life. She was abandoned by her birth mother, and, when as an adult she contacted her mother, rejected again. She had a boyfriend who called her stupid. But even though she has had some rough times, she has a positive outlook and is committed to make something of her life.

And she has done that. While she hasn't achieved fame or, so it appears, financial riches, she's accomplished quite a lot as a singer. She has supported a number of well-known performers, traveling the world in the process, including pop star Enrique Iglesias. She's had at least one solo engagement in the Los

Angeles area along with other aspiring female singers, where, as did the others, she sold her albums to the people in attendance. Her music video online is called “Dear Rita” (Rita being her birth mother’s name). She has done a small-scale solo performance in New York City. She’s been asked to teach singing. I picked up from the interview and her writings, and I could sense it from seeing her perform, that Laura Jane is kind and supportive and generous to the people in her life. She mentioned passing up jobs and giving them to singers she considers better suited to them than she.

What I read and saw on my laptop that afternoon and early evening brought to my mind that I too went through some tough times in my early years, and indeed they have affected my adult life, including contributing to the circumstance I was in on this very bad day I was experiencing at Christmastime. But with all of that, like Laura Jane, I believe in what I do in my life, and I do my very best with it, and I am good to other people. These last three days, I’ve gotten at it, and I’m feeling upbeat, and I was really immobilized and down, and I owe much of that to the example of Laura Jane Jones. Thank you for being who you are, Laura Jane.

January, 2015

Increasingly these last few years, I've been interested in how people come to know what they know, or better, what they think they know. The philosophical term for this process is epistemology. What makes epistemology matter so much to me is that personal freedom and self-determination matter so much to me. If we aren't good at distinguishing reality from fiction, or fantasy, other people will have the power to control what we deem to be so, and, since what we do is based on what we know, determine our destinies.

I took note of a letter written on March 21st, 1985 by the late author Norman Mailer to David Irving Shapiro (see, J. Michael Lennon, editor, *Selected Letters of Norman Mailer*, Random House, 2014, pp. 594-595). Mailer wrote:

I coined the word "factoid" while writing a biography of Marilyn Monroe titled, no surprise, *Marilyn*. Since the book is not handy, I cannot give you the page where the concept is introduced, although as I remember it was in the first two chapters. In any event, my definition of a factoid was a fact which had no existence prior to its appearance in print. A movie star's flack might, for example, say, "So and so sleeps only in the nude," when in fact she in reality wore wool nightgowns every evening of her life and the flack indeed had never met her; he was merely an assistant flack putting out copy. The word factoid was used to dramatize the fact, and this is a fact, not a factoid, that a vast percentage of what we take for real, codified, observed, verified, and factually true is, in fact, built upon nothing other than an existence in print. Needless to say, once a factoid is printed, it is reprinted in many another newspaper, wire service, etc., and takes on a

psychological reality often more powerful than the other psychological reality attached to the true fact.

A factoid doesn't have to be an outright lie or fabrication. While it could be that, it could also be a sincere speculation or assertion—the writer believes it to be so. What makes it a factoid is that it only exists as words on the page, however articulate and compelling those words might be.

Since the great majority of people believe what they read, that's their epistemology, what they read. The factoid becomes, in their eyes, an actual reality and not just a print reality, especially, as Mailer points out, if they read it repeatedly. And, I'd add, especially if it rings of credibility given what else they know (and "know")—yes, Marilyn Monroe is the sort that would sleep in the nude. And especially if it comes from an authoritative source—it was in *Harpers* or *The New York Times*. And especially if it makes them feel good about themselves and doesn't shake up their lives or cause trouble for them. No threat to them that Marilyn Monroe sleeps in the nude; unlike, say, if they were Christians and read that Jesus was a political resurrectionist who never claimed to be divine.

What should be obvious but often isn't, believing something is so doesn't make it so. Subjective truth, the truth that exists inside someone, doesn't necessarily align with outer, objective truth. Internal, personal truth—I believe it—can, and very often is, the reiteration of factoids, in-print declarations that have no correspondence, or very little, with external, objective reality.

We need be careful about holding something to be the case because it somehow got into type—in the press, in a reading assigned for class, on a web site—and it feels right, and the people we identify with agree on its veracity, and we get rewarded for affirming it.

Each of us needs to break from the herd (those who believe whatever happens to be on the page) and the herders (those who

write things on the page or, these days, the computer screen). We need to bring a healthy skepticism to what we read. We need to think about who put it in front of us and what it's in it for them if we buy it as fact. We need to take a variety of perspectives into account and not just go by what the people who have our eyes (and ears) put forth. We need to take responsibility for coming to truth on our own. Truth not factoids.

A cautionary note to end: while we need to ground our lives in true facts, we don't need to feel obligated to express those facts publicly, in writing or verbally; we can, but we don't have to. We have to be cautious particularly about contradicting an orthodoxy or party line. These days especially, those doing well by the current factoids don't take that in stride. Truth is a dangerous thing to possess. It can blow up in our faces if we don't handle it right. But if we handle it right, it paves the way to a life we can justifiably be proud of.

January, 2015.

I was sitting on the leather couch in my small apartment where I live alone. This was about ten days ago as I write this. It was seven in the evening, a Friday. My appointment book lay open in my lap. An email that day from a dentist's office had reminded me that I had a teeth cleaning appointment the next Wednesday at eleven in the morning.

I thought to myself, I'll enter the dental hygiene appointment in my appointment book--eleven o'clock and hygienist's name, next Wednesday. I'd been going this hygienist for years and had a cordial relationship with her and respected the thoroughness and care she brought to her work. I had an up feeling about the appointment. It was going to be really nice to have my teeth smooth and clean and my mouth feeling fresh. My home care hasn't been up to par, I've got to get on it. This scaling and cleaning will give me a new start. Every day without fail, I'm going to floss, brush, and use Listerine. It's going to be really good. A new beginning.

OK, eleven on Wednesday into the appointment book and . . . what's the hygienist's name? I had no idea. It's like my mind was blank, nothing. I've been going to this hygienist for years, she tells me about her daughter in high school and I tell her about my daughter in middle school. What's her name? . . . I can't remember her name. This is odd, I have no idea what her name is. I'll put down "11 cleaning." But what's her name? I can't remember her name. . . . I can't remember her name. I felt a bit unsettled.

On the glass-topped table in front of me was a coffee table book on Meryl Streep I was going to give as a present to one of my audiologists; I am seriously hearing impaired. She looks just like a

young Meryl Streep. It's remarkable. I can't get over how much she looks like Meryl Streep used to look. She's been so great working with me with my hearing problem. I wanted to give her this coffee table book, a really handsome book, new, just published.

I'll write an inscription in the book. . . . What's her name? I just saw her Monday. Nothing comes to me. I've worked with her the past few months trying to get a hearing aid that works, emails back and forth, and she finally found a good hearing aid, she was so diligent and patient getting that hearing aid. She'll like the Meryl Streep book. Young as she is, I bet she doesn't know what Meryl Streep looked like young and how much she looks like Meryl Streep did back then. I've paged through the book—pictures all the way back to Meryl's teenage years and her theater training at Yale and her early movies. My audiologist looks like Meryl did in "The Deer Hunter," and "Kramer Versus Kramer." But what's her name? I can't write an inscription if I don't know her name. What's her name? An ominous feeling starts to come over me.

My secretary at the university where I teach, I've worked with her for years—what's her name? I had no idea. My department chairman. Nothing. What's happening to me? What's going on?

I'm 74-years-old now. It's hard for me to believe, but that's a fact. Really, I'm 74. I've had my share of physical problems, deafness and my back is really bad--do I have surgery as they are recommending--and I don't recognize the geriatric in the photo I have in my laptop folder, but I know it has to be me. Second from the left, that's me all right. But my mind, that's always been sharp. I'm still working at the university, and the writing's stayed up to standard. I haven't as much as thought about losing it mentally. Or, well, I've thought about it a little, but, really, hardly at all. Now I can't remember my department chairman's name. My

department chairman! And what's my dean's name? I don't know.

What is this? It's dark outside and pretty much dark inside, just one table lamp on. Things feel as if they are closing in on me. My realtor, who was so effective selling the townhouse and helping me find a rental . . . I can't remember his name. What's his name?

My head feels like it's full of cotton, there seems to be pressure, it feels stuffed, do I have a slight headache, or am I just self-conscious because of what's happening.

I've written emails to all these people, their names are in my send box. I'll look them up. I found a name, but I couldn't attach it to a person, and I'd go to the next email and lose the name I'd just looked up, and then that name would come back but get mixed up with other names and then it would be gone again. I never linked up names and people with any clarity or certainty. It was all a mish-mash. When I closed the laptop I couldn't remember any of the names. My audiologist's name popped up, but I wasn't sure whether it was the audiologist I was giving the Meryl Streep book to or the other audiologist I work with, the one who has an office at the university, or was it my secretary's name. Cotton. Pressure.

I don't know if anything was wrong with me beside the names. I didn't try to read or write, and I was alone and didn't talk to anyone. I could picture people in my mind, it was just the names. Though come to think of it, I had trouble picturing my secretary, and the two audiologists, and I remember not being able to bring up what my realtor looks like.

I remember thinking, "I'm not going to be able to teach my classes at the university like this." Interesting to me now, rather than being alarmed at that prospect, I had a sense of relief. Now I don't have to teach those classes. I won't have to go through that anymore.

“I won’t be able to write anymore.” There was that sense of relief again. I won’t have to go through the struggle to get the writing out and then deal with the indifference and misunderstanding and negative criticism, it’s so hard.

I can go live with my daughter and her mother on the West Coast. I don’t have to keep this university thing going. I don’t have to be in this town where I don’t fit, hiding out in this little apartment, treading water, my life going by, anxious all the time, on guard, ready, all alone, to keep from being hurt even more than I am.

At that moment, I felt calm. I’m always jittery. I was at ease. I’m never at ease. It was the damndest thing: there I was--was I literally losing my mind?--in a state of comfort, peace. I’m never comfortable. I’m never at peace.

All the names came back before I went to bed that night about four hours later, and they are there now. I’ve taught classes this past week and been mentally sharp in them. I’ve done some writing and it’s gone well. Was it a minor stroke, fatigue, stress, a reaction to something I ate? I’m not going to a doctor—if it happens again I’ll go, but not now.

What am I left with after this episode?

That it’s fine to be however I am. It was fine how I was seven years ago at 67, and it’s fine how I am now at 74. If I’m still alive, it will be fine six years from now when I’m eighty. I don’t have to be other than I am. I’m fine.

That it’s all been an incredible gift—my body, my mind, my ability to experience, to create, my capacity to love, and it’s all temporary, it is all going to pass, I’m going to pass. And that’s fine, so be it.

That I’m satisfied with what I’ve done with my life. I’ve never quit trying to be responsible to the gift of life I was given. I’ve never stopped trying to make something of myself and to be of worth in the world. Within reason, I’ve done my best with the

opportunity I've been granted. That's all any of us can do, our best within reason.

That it's time to let go, to stand on my record, to sit by the water. Relax your shoulders, R., let them fall. Get out of your boxer's stance. Leave the ring.

[I retired from the university five months later.]

May, 2015.

Two days ago, I watched a documentary I streamed from Amazon called “Love and Terror on the Howling Plains of Nowhere.” The blurb had intrigued me: “In an isolated, high-plains town, a brilliant math professor vanishes. Three months later his body is found tied to a tree and burned beyond recognition. Author Poe Ballantine searches for clues while reflecting on his life of wanderlust.”

Contrary to the title (“. . . Plains of Nowhere”), unless it was meant ironically, the documentary brought home that no place is nowhere. Chadron, Nebraska, population 5,600, home to Poe Ballantine, is somewhere, and everybody there is somebody.

Poe Ballantine (a pen name; real name, Ed Hughes) isn’t winning National Book Awards or reeling in cash from his writings--he makes his living cleaning the floors of a Safeway. In the documentary, he comes across as bright, perceptive, and candid about himself, including his failings. I purchased his book that inspired the documentary, *Love and Terror on the Howling Plains of Nowhere* (Hawthorne Books, 2013) and wasn’t disappointed. It brought to mind the last writings of Jack Kerouac I like so much (an example, *Satori in Paris*, Grove Press, 1966). Ballantine has a bent for honest, unpretentious but still well crafted prose and candid self-revelation. I’m guessing that as did Kerouac in his last years, Ballantine senses that it is near the end for him and that there is no longer any need, if there ever was, to impress critics and readers with showy syntax and grand themes. It is the time to be naked, as it were, to tell the truth about his life; not *the* truth, he’s not so presumptuous as to assume he is in touch with that, but rather *his* truth.

Watching the documentary reminded me of the year I lived in Morris, Minnesota, a small town about the size of Chadron in the western edge of the state, not so far from Nebraska. This was way back in 1973. I had just gotten my doctorate from the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis and the only job I could find was as a visiting professor of education at the Morris branch of the University of Minnesota. I saw the Morris job as temporary, a year and out; I wasn't staying in that, well, nowhere place. After the year was up I wasn't as anxious to spring from Morris as I had assumed I'd be. Morris, as I think about it now, was indeed somewhere, and it was a good somewhere.

These musings have relevance to me now because I'm retiring in a few days and I am thinking about where my writing goes from here, if anywhere, and I intend to move from Vermont. Burlington, Vermont is a great place, but it's not my place. With the work no longer being here, I plan to move to the West Coast in the fall.

[2017. I'm still in Vermont.]

41

Embarrassing Moments

June, 2015.

I'm hearing impaired and tend to speak too loudly because I can't hear my own voice. Last week, I was in a faculty meeting at the university and I couldn't hear a thing and I leaned over to say something to the person next to me in what I thought was *sotto voce*. Well, it obviously wasn't. The person I was speaking to leaned toward me and put her index finger to her mouth and said "Shhhh." I was embarrassed for the rest of the meeting and for rest of the day. Actually, I haven't gotten over it completely yet.

I'm the one at a restaurant who knocks over the water glass. Nobody says anything. I sputter, "I'm so sorry." Other than rapidly putting the glass upright, I do nothing. I stay seated with a frozen slight smile giving me the appearance of a dog that accidentally peed on the floor. No one says anything. Someone stands up and dries the table with her, usually her, dinner napkin. Things revert to normal, except there is a big water stain on the tablecloth, a lasting reminder of what I've done, and it seems that people are talking around me.

I was cutting into a grape fruit at a professional banquet amid strangers and juice squirted from my grape fruit onto the dress of the formidable-looking middle-aged woman sitting next to me.

Do I say anything to her about it? Yes I do, I decide.

"Excuse me, I feel dreadful about this, but I was cutting my grapefruit and, well, that stain on your dress is from my grapefruit."

"Where?"

"Right there."

"Oh."

Without a change of expression or comment, she dabs at it with a Kleenex and turns back to the woman she had been talking to.

I decide no more grapefruit and in the process of setting it aside I knock over my coffee cup.

As part of my training at the University of Minnesota to become a secondary school teacher I was assigned to teach a single lesson to a class of high school juniors. My task that day was to instruct a class hour, fifty minutes, on the Civil War. What I knew about the Civil War, as my mother used to say, you could put in your eye. The lesson was to be on the War's causes—slavery, economic issues, state versus federal prerogatives, and so on. I found a college history textbook chapter on the topic and essentially copied down what it said. In the jargon of teaching, lecturing that material was going to be my lesson plan for the day.

I was apprehensive about this upcoming teaching assignment. Except for some ball playing, I had never been in front of anybody my entire life. Oh yes, one exception, I played a solo on the baritone horn at a high school band concert, but I didn't have to say anything on that occasion, or with the ball playing. Standing in front a group of students, actually saying something? Jeez.

Came the day for my Civil War lesson. The regular teacher—I still remember his name, Mr. Rockler, stood in front of the class and said "This is Mr. Griffin" and rapidly proceeded to the back of the room and sat in a student desk. On his way to the desk in the back of room, he had veered to his left and closed the door. Why did he do that, I wondered.

On to the stage comes Mr. Griffin—as far as I know, I'd never been called Mr. Griffin in my life--in a cheap blue dress shirt and a poorly knotted equally cheap tie and carrying the sheets of paper with what I had copied from the textbook. I furtively glanced at the class. I've always had trouble looking at people.

The class had the stunned look of passersby who had come upon a bad car accident.

I went to the blackboard and, my back to the class, started to write with a piece of chalk. I'd never used chalk and held it the wrong way and it screeched as I printed "Cival War" on the board. Then, papers in hand--tightly rolled up it turned out, I had done it unconsciously--I walked the short distance from the board to the rows of desks filled with adolescents.

There I stood and there they sat. Silence hung heavy in the classroom. I glanced at the clock on the back wall, but it didn't come into focus.

I had practiced my lecture a couple of times in the messy one-room apartment near the university campus where I lived alone--shortly after this Civil War lesson the landlord evicted me for not keeping the place up ("Get out!"). By my calculation, getting the students into their seats and Mr. Rockler's introduction of the lesson and me would take ten minutes (I had assumed Mr. Rockler would be a bit more expansive than he turned out to be), so that left forty minutes for me to fill. If my lecture took thirty minutes and there were ten minutes for student comments and questions, that'd be it, I'd get through the hour.

The practice lectures lasted the thirty minutes, so I thought I was set on that part of the lesson. My big concern was with the comments and questions period at the end, because everything I knew about the causes of the Civil War was what I had copied down and I might get revealed as knowing nothing about the causes of the Civil War, or anything else for that matter. But I assured myself that it would be just ten minutes, and that no matter what students might ask I could just repeat something I said in the lecture; good enough. !

So here I am in front of the class. This is really *it!* There they are, the students, and Rockler in the back of the room, and they're looking at *me*. I'm the looker in life, not the looker. I

watch television, read magazines, go to the movies, and scour *The Minneapolis Tribune* sport page highlighted by Sid Hartman's column. But now I'm actually *doing* something, *me*. This is real life. Damn. How'd I get into this?

With some minor delay getting the papers unrolled, I began my lecture. With occasional fleeting glances at the class I read through what I had copied from the textbook on the causes of the Civil War. Evidently the pressures of the occasion speeded me up quite a bit because when I was done with my lecture and looked at the clock on the back wall, this time it came into focus, it had taken up a little over twenty minutes, not thirty minutes. That left—in my panicked state I didn't know exactly how much time was left in the class hour, but a lot of time anyway.

My eyes like pinballs that had just been fired off, I stammered, "Are there any comments or questions?"

The class, Rockler included, looked like a blown up still photograph. Nothing.

Silence—tick, tick, tick.

"Well, let me review the points I want you to remember," and I started reading back through my lecture from the beginning. When I glanced up now and again, I saw what I would describe now as wonderment. Nobody laughed or talked, there was nothing like that. Just wonderment.

Along the way in my lecture replay, I sensed motion and heard shuffling, and when I looked up students were proceeding toward the door, some of them talking softly to each other, none of them looking at me. The class hour had ended. Mr. Rockler was amid the departing. Just before he got to the door, he turned back toward me and pointed his finger at me and smiled and then walked out the door, which I took to mean "Good job." Or did it? I wasn't sure.

There I was, suddenly standing alone at the front of an empty classroom. It was at this point that I noticed that my pants were

unzipped about half way. I quickly zipped up to the top. Erasing “Cival War” from the blackboard surfaced the concern that there could be a problem with that spelling. I rolled up the lecture notes—easy enough to do--and put them in my back pocket and left the classroom, closing the door behind me, click. I walked a couple of blocks to a fast food restaurant and bought a *Minneapolis Tribune* newspaper from a vending machine and sat alone reading, yes, Sid Hartman’s column while I wolfed down my usual two cheeseburgers and large order of French fries and drank Coke from a straw. Then I went home, and drew the shades and got into bed and pulled the covers over my head.

42

Mortality

July, 2015.

Two months ago, I turned 75. That got my attention. That is geriatric old, no getting around it. For obvious reasons, mortality has been on my mind this past month.

I read a book by a physician, Atul Gawande, called *Being Mortal: Medicine and What Matters at the End* (Metropolitan Books, 2014).

“How are you?” Dr. Gawande reports asking a woman in her eighties.

The first thing she mentioned was a lower-back pain that she’d had for months, which shot down her leg and sometimes made it difficult to get out of bed or up from a chair. She also had arthritis and she showed us her fingers, which were swollen at the knuckles and bent out to the sides with what is called a swan-neck deformity. She’d had both knees replaced a decade earlier. She had high blood pressure, “from stress,” she said, before handing over her list of medications. She never used to have “bathroom problems,” but lately, she admitted, she’s started wearing a pad. She’d also had surgery for colon cancer and, by the way, she now had a lung module that the radiology report said could be a metastasis—a biopsy was recommended.

She said she lived alone, except for her Yorkshire terrier. Her husband had died of lung cancer twenty-three years ago. She does not drive. She has a son who does her shopping and checks in on her once a day—“just to see if I’m still alive.” She does her own cooking and cleaning and manages her medicines and bills.

She usually wakes up at five or six o’clock. She doesn’t seem to need much sleep anymore. She gets out of bed as the back pain allows, takes a shower, and gets dressed. She takes her medicines, feeds the dog, and eats breakfast, cereal and a banana that day. After breakfast, she takes the dog for a little

walk in the yard. She does chores, laundry and cleaning. In the late morning, she watches television, game shows. For lunch, a sandwich and orange juice. If the weather is nice, she sits out in the yard in the afternoon. She use to love to garden, but she can no longer do that. She makes dinner—a salad and maybe a baked potato or a scrambled egg. At night, she watches sports on television—she loves the Red Sox. She usually goes to bed around midnight.

I was taken by how much I could relate to what this old woman reported. I too have lower back pain, plus hip pain, and if I stand or walk for more than a couple minutes the pain intensifies and my groin and then legs and feet go numb, and if I don't get off my feet I will fall unless I grab onto something. Last week, I was in a parking lot starting to lose my balance and thought I could reach one of the cars to hold onto and I miscalculated and came crashing to the ground. I was shaken by the experience and bruised from top to bottom. Even now my right arm aches.

I'm told I need orthopedic surgery where they cut away part of my spine and use bone from a cadaver to, with screws, fuse vertebrae. It's four hours of the oblivion of a general anesthetic. At this age especially, the prospect of lying prone waiting for the nothing that I know is coming up any second is scary, like waiting for death. Then three weeks of drug-mitigated pain and disability—"hell on earth" someone who had this same surgery informs me, including constipation beyond imagination--and then a four to six month recovery period.

Do I sign up for that? I guess I'll have to, or should anyway, but I sure don't like the looks of it. But as I am now, I'm all but housebound. I can't make breakfast without having to endure pain and sit down at least once. Go to a mall? No. Except for quick trips to Hannaford's super market for groceries and toiletries—I use a cart—I spend my life alone in my apartment on the leather

couch I'm sitting on right now and in bed. I retired from the university last month, so I don't have to go to work.

Like this woman in the book, I have arthritis, in my knees and neck and hands. Sore, aching, aflame.

I too have high blood pressure. Twenty milligrams of Lisinopril daily. I seem to have had no effects from my heart attack twenty years ago, but I feel the need to be careful about taking the Lisinopril regularly.

No "bathroom problems"—yet.

And no cancer. Though I have to get a second PSA test, which can signal prostate cancer, later this month—my number went up the last time I had it tested. My father died of prostate cancer. It was a horrible ordeal for him, and a traumatic experience for me to be around him during that time

I too live alone. No dog, though; no pets of any kind. With my back as bad as it is, I couldn't walk a dog. I'm thinking about getting a Russian Blue cat—handsome animals and, according to what I read, good companions. Though I don't think the owner of the apartment I rent allows pets. Maybe he will make an exception with me.

Unlike this woman, there's no one to check in on me daily to see that I am alive, as she put it, or to do my grocery shopping. Like her, if food is going to be on my table I will have to prepare it.

I read recently that a high percentage of old people live alone. I don't remember the exact percentage, but I recall being struck by how high it is. It's tough going all day without speaking to a living soul and to realize that that's going to be the case tomorrow and the next day and next month and the month after that.

Something this woman doesn't have to deal with evidently, I have persistent clammy, flu-like symptoms and utter exhaustion

that line up with diabetes symptoms. I'm in the process of checking the diabetes possibility out. Or is it a thyroid problem?

My daily schedule is very much like this woman reported, though pushed later into the day. She said she gets up in the morning at five or six o'clock. With me, it's seven or eight, or even nine; I sleep more now than I used to. Like hers, my back pain is especially bad in the morning, and I struggle to shower and get dressed. My breakfast is exactly the same as hers: cereal and a banana. As does she, I think about the value of the potassium in the bananas, though I don't know for a fact that it matters for anything.

The highlight of my day is a cup of coffee and *The New York Times* online in the morning. Reading the *Times*' stories I think, what difference does it make now whether I know what is happening outside the walls of my little apartment? Nevertheless I feel compelled to stay abreast with what's going on in the world. Perhaps it's simple curiosity. And the mental stimulation and entertainment and distraction it provides. And the fleeting illusion that I matter for something in the larger scheme of things.

This old woman doesn't drive. I'm so grateful that I do. I love my fifteen-year-old Honda Civic. I just had it detailed, as they call it, polished to a glistening shine, and got a new muffler and had some scheduled maintenance done. But how long before I'm physically unable to drive, and then what will I do?

I'm severely hearing impaired and a cochlear implant has accorded me functional hearing one-on-one, but I can't hear in groups, even small ones, or discern amplified sound, so restaurants are very tough, and no telephones, television, movies in theaters unless they are captioned, and no audio books. That said, the implant has been a godsend.

I have the beginnings of cataracts in my eyes, but they say if it gets bad it is easily corrected with minor surgery. I read a lot of biographies and so many of the old people I read about lose their

sight. First it's reading with a magnifying glass and then they can't read at all and someone has to read to them.

No television for me, that's different from the woman quoted in the book. I got rid of cable a couple months ago. Before that, I watched television with captions—just about everything on television is captioned. I didn't watch during the weekdays as this woman does, but like her I watched Red Sox games in the evenings and weekends, plus I watched prime time commentary shows on CNN and FOX, Bill O'Reilly and so on.

I decided to jettison television after reading three memoirs by Donald Hall, a former poet laureate of the United States now in his mid-eighties. I started with Hall's latest book, *Essays After Eighty* (Houghton Mifflin, 2014). Then it was *The Best Day the Worst Day: Life with Jane Kenyon* (Mariner Books, 2006). Kenyon was Hall's wife, herself a fine poet, who died of cancer in 1995. And then it was *Unpacking the Boxes: A Memoir of a Life in Poetry* (Mariner Books, 2009). Hall is a exceedingly bright and perceptive and forthcoming about himself and he's a superb prose stylist, a pleasure to read.

The three books, which depict Hall's passage to very old age, sensitized me to the process of aging and decline and disengagement from people and the world. In some of Hall's writing, he is 53, and other places 67 and 85. How disconnected from the affairs of the world he is now in contrast to before. How circumscribed his life is now. How alone he is now. Everything has closed down for him, narrowed. How few contacts he has with anything outside the four walls of his house now, how few people he sees day to day. In twenty years, it went from intimate contact with Jane Kenyon and parties and lectures and public acclaim to, now, a woman stops by once a week to see how he's doing.

Hall's obviously maintained his mental acuity. This month I saw the film "Still Alice" (Netflix DVD) with Julianne Moore, which is about a woman dealing with Alzheimer's disease. It

underscores that our mind, like all our capabilities, is fragile and impermanent. Also underscoring this reality, again through the example of Alzheimer's, is the excellent 2001 Swedish film, "A Song for Martin" (Netflix DVD). While I've certainly slowed down physically, if I've lost anything mentally I don't notice it, or perhaps I do notice it and I'm in denial. In any case, I didn't expect to be this mentally sharp at my age now. I'm grateful for this state of affairs and want to take advantage of it while I still can.

Hall reports that now in his advanced years he sits alone and watches Boston Red Sox games on television, just as this old woman does, and just as I've been doing the last few years. Game after game after game, night after night after night, weekend afternoons and sometimes evenings, the players strangers all, none of them knowing I'm even alive much less that I watch them and care how they do, the jokey announcers pretending that the game matters for something beyond a mere sport exhibition, a show, a diversion, an entertainment, and a snail-paced one at that, first inning, second inning, third inning, six more to go, foul balls, fly balls, doubles to left, an occasional home run trot around the bases, one team wins and the other loses, commercials upon commercials upon commercials, three hours or more gone never to return, dopey, headachy, vaguely depressed, click, turn off the set, just about time for bed, perhaps a magazine article and a bowl of cereal. I made the decision this month that while I don't know what I am going to do to pass the time and give my life meaning from here on, it will not be watching people playing with a ball or pontificating on cable shows.

The Red Sox are playing the Blue Jays, and these two guys broke out of prison in upstate New York, they are talking about it right now on Megyn Kelly, and what do we do about ISIS? (Why do we have to do anything about ISIS?) Switching back and forth between the ballgame and the cable shows will make life instantly

better. Oh, that's right, I cancelled Comcast. I'll change that back to how it was tomorrow morning.

No, no, no, I'm not doing that.

I don't even think about television now. It took no more than five or six days to detox from it after a lifetime of heavy watching. I speculate that it was so short a time because, really, more than anything what I was getting out of staring hour upon hour at colored dots on a light bulb was a slight headache, dopiness, and depression. It should have been obvious all along: life is too short to waste on television.

There was a big National Basketball game a few weeks ago. They are all big games according the media that make their money hyping their importance, but this was the sixth game of the finals between the Cleveland Cavaliers and the Golden State Warriors, so it was *really* big. But remarkably to me, I forgot it was being played. I didn't take note of it until the next morning's perusal of ESPN.com.

I remember what I did the night of the really big NBA game. I went to a lake near my house. It was still light out; the NBA plays until mid-June now. I sat in a new folding chair--really sturdy, only twelve dollars from Amazon--and looked at the water, the waves rhythmic, soothing, and watched two little ducks swimming along together and glanced at a good book and felt at peace, and all without commercial interruptions with guys yelling at me to buy a Toyota.

Another negative learning I took from the Hall books is the need to take responsibility for getting into the best health possible. From what I picked up in Hall's books, he neglected his health, smoked and drank heavily and ate poorly and let himself get fat and got no exercise, and in general paid little or no attention to the physical dimension of his being. I've attended to my weight and diet—good food, no junk--and worked out and gotten cardiovascular exercise. For my age, I am very lean and fit.

The importance of caring for one's health came through in a documentary I saw and a book I read this past month. The documentary was about Bob Weir, one of the founders of the legendary band, The Grateful Dead ("The Other One," Netflix streaming). Weir took care of himself in his younger years and is well at seventy. His band mate Jerry Garcia didn't do that—drugs and alcohol, obesity—and he was dead at 53. The book was a biography of the English theater critic and writer Kenneth Tynan—heavy smoker, dead after a nightmarish ordeal from emphysema at 52. (Kathleen Tynan [Tynan's wife], *The Life of Kenneth Tynan* (Quill, 1989).) I'm so grateful that I've never smoked or abused drugs and alcohol.

Everybody has to identify his or her own health regimen, but I stay away from junk food, and drink no more than a glass of wine in a day. I do a yoga routine and some pushups and sit-ups daily. I go hard for about twenty minutes most days at a rowing machine (I can't stand up long enough to do anything else to get a cardio workout). I wish I could take a stroll everyday; my bad back precludes it. Just about daily sits by a lake with the waves and gliding ducks bring me peace and serenity. Periodically during the day, I follow my breath in and out about five breaths, relaxing and letting go of tension with each outbreath. And I do this writing; it centers me, calms me. Or at least that's the way it has been--writing is starting to exhaust me and churn me up and disrupt my sleep pattern.

I keep my apartment picked up and clean. This past month, I watched the film "About Schmidt" starring Jack Nicholson, which is about what happens to a man upon his retirement (Netflix DVD). Following the sudden death of his wife, Warren Schmidt, the Nicholson character, lives in clutter. You can't do that, at any age, without paying dues for it.

In *Being Mortal*, Dr. Gawande recounts his father's death from cancer:

He needed daily enemas. He soiled the bed. . . . The pain medication made his head feel “fuzzy,” “foggy,” “heavy.” He did not want to be sedated; he wanted to be able to see people and communicate. Pain, however, was far worse. . . . His weight continued to drop. . . . The doses of pain medication were increasing. . . . He said that he felt confused and had trouble communicating. His world was closing in. . . . A chest X-ray showed pneumonia in his right lung. . . . His paralysis advanced and he was unable to pee. Then the bladder spasms began. He groaned as they came over him. . . . His greatest struggle remained the pain from the tumor. He took morphine every two hours. . . . For long hours, he lay quiet and stock-still, except for the rattle of his breathing. . . . On his penultimate afternoon, he broke out into a soaking sweat. We got him into a wheelchair and took him to the window looking out at the backyard, where there were flowers, trees, sun on a beautiful summer day. The suffering my father experienced in his final day was not exactly physical. The medicine did a good job of preventing pain. When he surfaced periodically, at the tide of consciousness, he would smile at our voices. . . . During his final hour of wakefulness, he asked for the grandchildren. They were not there, so I showed him pictures on my iPad. His eyes went wide, and his smile was huge. He descended back into unconsciousness. . . . Around six in the afternoon, his breathing stopped. My mother took his hand. No more breaths came.

I know—or sort of know, anyway--that I will confront this circumstance quite soon—this year, next year, five years from now, perhaps ten if I’m fortunate. I say “sort of” know, because I don’t *really* know that that will happen to me. I was thrust into closer contact with this reality (I wasn’t expecting it) by a memoir I read this past month by the photographer Sally Mann, *Hold Still: A Memoir With Photographs* (Little-Brown, 2015). Toward the end of Mann’s book, there are her photographs of decaying dead

bodies. It's a gruesome sight—one gory detail, we melt. I'm not sure I wanted to see that, but I did and I can't undo it.

The book *Being Mortal* is written from the view of medical professionals, how they should see things, what they should do. But that is not my frame of reference. I am the one who will die, not the one who will care for the dying. The question for me is how best should I see things with relation to mortality.

I need to use my increasing awareness of my impending death to heighten my appreciation for the incredible gift of life, and to propel me to live as fully and honestly and responsibly as I can in whatever time I have left. What matters most to me now? What do I want to become, do, experience? Who needs me? The requirements of my career and making a living provided ready answers to the basic, call them existential, questions of life. With retirement last month, and I'm financially secure, those props (crutches?) isn't there.

As for actual dying, I need to let it go. It doesn't need my attention. It will come when it comes. I need to focus on the best way to spend the rest of my life.

October, 2015.

This past week, I read a biography of the actor Robert Mitchum (1917-1997): Lee Server, *Baby I Don't Care* (St. Martin's, 2002). Server's book discussed a movie Mitchum made in 1954 with Marilyn Monroe directed by Otto Preminger called “River of No Return.” It hit me that I had seen that movie with my parents in Milwaukee, Wisconsin when it first came out. I would have been fourteen at the time.

Mother, Dad and I were in Milwaukee on the very first trip of any kind we had taken when I was growing up. As it turned out it was my only trip until I enlisted the army at seventeen and flew to Fort Carson, Colorado (of course, my first plane ride). We took a train from Saint Paul to Milwaukee to see the Milwaukee Braves major league baseball team—they are now the Atlanta Braves—play a game. I don't remember who the opponent was. Or I should say, who the opponent was supposed to be, because the game rained out. There we were, Mother, Dad, and I, the rain pouring down on us, standing in a virtually empty baseball stadium. I remember Mother crying and Dad trying to comfort her while I stood silently on the side. I spent my childhood, now that I think about it, silently off to the side.

Mother and Dad had to decide what we were going to do now that there's no game to watch. I wasn't included in the deliberations. Evidently their decision was to take a bus to downtown Milwaukee, because the next image I have in my head now is the three of us, still wet from the rain, which had subsided to a drizzle, walking along a downtown street. This was, I suppose, three in the afternoon. Dad was walking about ten feet ahead of Mother and me, I guess kind of scouting out what we were could do with the time we had on our hands. As we were

walking along, Mother commented to me about the way Dad's wet pants hung straight down in the back—look at him, he has no rear end at all. Per usual, I didn't say anything.

Dad stopped in front of a movie theater and said in an upbeat way, let's see this movie, this looks good. Fine, Mother said almost under her breath. Mostly she indicated her affirmation to Dad's suggestion with a nod of her head and shrug of her shoulders. Anything at that point would have been fine with Mother. Or well, not fine really, but she'd do it--soberly, unenthusiastically, even a bit resentfully, she'd acquiesce to it, whatever it was. This was her pattern.

I paid no attention to the title of the movie. I waited with Mother in the lobby while Dad bought the tickets. I glanced at the still picture in the lobby (which was reproduced in the Mitchum biography), but I didn't know, and wouldn't have cared if I had known, that that was Robert Mitchum, who was a big name movie actor in those years, or even that that was Marilyn Monroe. I didn't know about Marilyn Monroe—who could have been bigger than Marilyn Monroe at that time? And most certainly I had never heard of the director Otto Preminger, whom I now know was very prominent back then. For that matter, I didn't even know there was such thing as a movie director.

What really strikes me now, though, is that, sitting on the right—Dad, Mother, and then me--in the darkened theater in front of the huge screen, I didn't take in the film at all. I didn't--or was it I couldn't?--follow the plot. I had no connection to what was happening on the screen. I notice that I can rent "River of No Return" from VUDU. Right after I finish writing this, I'm going to watch the film and see what I missed.

After the movie ended, Mother and Dad didn't talk about it with each other, and they didn't ask me what I thought about it—I wouldn't have expected that. We went for dinner at a cafe nearby where you slide your tray along a railing and ask for what you

want—I'll have the meatloaf and the mashed potatoes with gravy. And then it was to our hotel room and bed and onto the train the next morning for the trip back home. I looked out the window.

As far as I can remember, and I know this sounds grim, Mother and Dad never spoke with me the entire trip. Mother's comment about Dad's pants hanging down was spoken *at* me; she wasn't looking for a reply. They weren't hostile or abrupt with me. They weren't trying to do me in, anything like that. They simply had no business to conduct with me. I wasn't on their agenda.

It strikes me now that to a large extent my life, which is near its end, has been a series of Milwaukee trips, as it were. Being peripheral and, really, unnecessary to the central action, and rained out games and afternoons spent watching "River of No Return"--non-award-winners, if you know what I mean--and getting myself through the rest of the day until I decide to go to bed, who cares. And, now that I think about it, pitching my wares to women as Dad did with Mother: "Let's go to this movie, it looks good." "Yeah, OK, anything . . . do you realize your pants hang straight down in the back?"

Has my adult life been shaped by what it was like for me in my childhood in any significant way? I think the answer is yes. I believe that early in life we get cast in a movie, so to speak, and that, consciously and unconsciously, we keep playing our part in this same movie—or better, its sequels--in adulthood, and that that's the case even if it is a bad movie and we have been miscast in it or given a minor role to play in it, one beneath our capabilities and possibilities. For many children, I'm afraid, their life's movie could be titled "River of No Escape."

It's a complicated matter, but in this brief thought I'll leave it with the suggestion that anyone around a child—parents, teachers, siblings, relatives, friends—do their best to assure that this precious little human being feels loved, safe, respected, and

included in things, and supported in becoming the person he or she truly is. Staying with the movie metaphor, the ideal is that later on as an adult he or she will have developed the impulse and wherewithal necessary to write, direct, and star in the highest quality, most honest, most honorable, and most personally gratifying movies (it doesn't have to be just one) possible and show them to the world.

January, 2016.

Recently, I saw the film “Blind.” 2014, Norwegian. The central character, Ingrid, late thirties, blond, tall, and modelesque in a classic Nordic way, married to Morten, a successful architect, has very recently lost her sight. She has retreated to her apartment and spends her days sipping wine and tapping out stories on her Apple laptop. After a time, we realize that the events depicted in the film other than Ingrid’s life, all of which look very real, are actually the stories Ingrid has been producing on her MacBook Air.

I found “Blind” to be a superb film. I recommend it highly. What I want to get into here, however, is what I took from the film personally. I was taken with the protagonist Ingrid’s response to her disability. Or was it her response to her personal make-up, history, and/or current overall circumstance? Anyway, how she came at life.

Words that come to mind with reference to Ingrid: inner, self-contained, autonomous, flawless, inaccessible. She is remarkably physically fit and perfectly groomed and dressed; she moves gracefully, like a dancer. Her surroundings, the apartment--she leaves only for brief walks to practice using her white cane—are beautifully furnished, aesthetically appealing, and immaculately clean. Her computer is spotless (in contrast to mine, which is invariably food stained and dirty). Ingrid gracefully sips what I’m sure is expensive red wine in a fine wine glass (unlike the sour-tasting, low-rent, super market version of the same I gulp down in a K-Mart juice glass) and types out her stories. I presume no one ever reads what she produces. It doesn’t seem as if she would feel pressed to disseminate her stories publically, or share them at all, even with her husband. She lives in her own private world.

It struck me that Ingrid's blindness can be taken as a metaphor for any handicap or injury, physical or psychological, or obstacle or challenge. Her stance can be viewed as a choice of how to live in the short run while recovering from, or adjusting to, one's current personal state or circumstance, or even a permanent way to live. Ingrid's example demonstrates that if you can financially afford it, and Ingrid obviously can, and I can, you don't absolutely have to engage or try to affect the world "out there." You don't have to chase anybody or anything down, make a point, go over with anyone, win the day, or produce or change anything. You can sit on a couch and write stories no one will ever read or something similar. You don't have to explain or justify doing that to anyone, or get anyone's OK to do it.

After watching "Blind," I thought to myself, what if I did Ingrid, at least for a while, and perhaps forever? I'm handicapped. Not blindness, thank God, what could be worse, but I'm deaf and my back is really bad--I can stand for only short periods of time and I can barely get around--and I'm coming off hits in my professional and personal life. I'm geriatric old and very, very tired. My concerns are personal and private these days—how my eleven-year-old daughter and her mother [2017: we are now married] are doing and how I'm doing, that's about it.

So how about if I get in the best physical shape of my life, and get rid of these old frayed clothes hanging in my closet and get some new ones, and get this apartment as neatly arranged and clean as I can, and wipe down this dirty laptop I'm typing on right now, and trade in the cheap wine in the refrigerator (and clean the refrigerator while I'm at it) for some 2005 Bordeaux, which I hear is supposed to be good?

Why don't I try just cooling out. Quit checking my email messages all day. Quit trying to connect with anybody or anything outside these four walls except my eleven-year-old and her mom. Stop competing with my natural sedentary bent and preference for an inner, subjective, private existence. Face the fact that I'm just

not an outgoing sort. Face the fact that I really don't care if I see the Grand Canyon or the Pyramids. Traveling is great, but I don't feel like it. Sit here in peace on this black leather couch (clean the food stains off it, please) and type out my web site material that nobody will ever read, fine. Read the best books I can find and stream and watch DVDs of the best movies I can find and eat the best food I can find and use quality as my criterion in deciding what to do with my time, and then go to bed and get up in next morning and do it again. One day at a time—AA has a point--the best I can, with the most integrity and honor I can bring to it. If this pattern is temporary, that's good, and if it is permanent, that's good too.

February, 2016.

I took note of a story I read in the newspaper a couple of weeks ago. It was about a dog in Japan named Hachiko, an Akita breed, born in 1923. Every morning at the train station, Hachiko would see off his owner, Hidesamuro Ueno, a professor at the University of Tokyo, when he went to work at the university. At the end of the day, Hachiko would go the station and wait for Professor Ueno to arrive. This routine continued until 1925 when Professor Ueno unexpectedly died at his office, leaving Hachiko at the station watching and waiting for the reunion that would not take place. The next day at this same time, Hachiko, who had been taken in by Professor Ueno's sister, was back at the station scanning the faces of passersby in hopes of spotting his owner's among them. And the next day after that and the next and the next. Days turned into weeks and weeks turned into months and months turned into years, and for the next eleven years until his own death, Hachiko held vigil at the station.

One of Professor Ueno's students noted that Hachiko would appear precisely at the time the train was due in the evening and published this fact in one of the Tokyo's largest newspapers and the dog became a national figure. Year after year, the country followed this story and marveled in it and took lessons from it about commitment and loyalty. The article I read included a picture of Hachiko at the station just before his death, obviously very old. A statue now exists at the spot he waited those many years depicting him and Professor Ueno greeting one another at the end of the day, symbolically reuniting them forever.

A memory just came to me: One summer as a kid, I was eleven, I would wait all week for Saturday mornings and Palace

Peewees' baseball games (Palace was for Palace playground in the West End of Saint Paul, Minnesota where I grew up). I played third base for the Peewees. Saturday would come, I'd been waiting all week, and most often, or so it seemed, the game would rain out. It occurs to me that I see myself now as someone who waits for something good to happen and the something good doesn't happen. A lesson I may have drawn from the Peewees times was that since what I wait for isn't going to happen, or if it does happen it won't be much (with the Peewees, deep down I assumed that I would strike out with the bases loaded and let in the winning run with an error), the best thing I have going for me is the waiting, which is a half-way pleasant experience and, at times, a very good experience. Plus, back to the Peewees, waiting for the game provided an organizer for my life: What was I doing? I was waiting for Saturday. That justified, excused, doing essentially nothing on a Tuesday besides waiting for Saturday, which included letting my schoolwork go. I've had a lifelong deep-seated, not fully acknowledged, desire to sit or lie on a couch and vegetate, watch some TV and read about sports and munch on a sandwich, that's it.

Until now I haven't given concerted thought to my propensity to wait and do little else and where it comes from, including any psychological or physiological issues that might contribute to this pattern. Is waiting a strategy or refuge for the damaged? Whatever the case, I have spent a good part of my life waiting, to the extent that as much as anything waiting has characterized my life. I waited out my two years in the army, and I waited for the North Saint Paul High School academic year to end (I taught there), and . . . oh, I won't go through the long list of examples. Currently my life is basically waiting for a trip to the Midwest (I live on the East Coast) in a couple weeks to see my brother, my only relative. As soon as I get there I will wait to leave.

I'll comment here on three things I've read the past couple of

weeks having to do with waiting. The first is a *Time* magazine essay written many years ago (July 23, 1984) by Lance Morrow called “Waiting as a Way of Life.” The second is a book originally published in German by Andrea Köhler entitled *The Waiting Game: An Essay on the Gift of Time* (Upper West Side Philosophers, Inc., 2012). And the third is a novel by a Chinese writer now living in America, Ha Jin, entitled, appropriately enough, *Waiting* (Vintage, 2000).

In small type and set in, quotes from the Morrow essay followed by my commentaries:

Waiting is a kind of suspended animation. Time solidifies: a dead weight. The mind reddens a little with anger and then blanks off into a sort of abstraction and fitfully wanders, but presently it comes up red and writhing again, straining to get loose. Waiting casts one's life into a little dungeon of time. It is a way of being controlled, of being rendered immobile and helpless.

This is an example of seeing something as always being a certain way. Yes, waiting is like this . . . sometimes. The challenge for the individual is to check out whether what Morrow asserts about waiting applies to his or her waiting. If it does, it comes down to problem solving: what can I do to extricate myself from this circumstance?

Waiting is a form of imprisonment. One is doing time—but why? One is being punished not for an offense of one's own but often for the inefficiencies of those who impose the wait. Hence the peculiar rage that waits engender, the sense of injustice. Aside from boredom and physical discomfort, the subtler misery of waiting is the knowledge that one's most precious resource, time, a fraction of one's life, is being stolen away, irrecoverably lost.

I know from my own life that waiting can be positive—like when I've waited to see my young daughter, who lives in another state. Waiting to be with her hasn't been imprisonment, injustice, discomfort, misery, or stolen, irretrievably lost, time. Waiting has been a good experience for me in itself, the anticipation of being with her, and it has prompted me to do what I needed to do to make the time when I see her good for both of us. Where is Morrow getting this totally negative take on waiting? What does this say about him, his life, his perspective of himself and the world?

People wait when they have no choice or when they believe that the wait is justified by the reward—a concert ticket, say. Waiting has its social orderings, its rules and assumptions. Waiting can have a delicious quality ("I can't wait to see her." "I can't wait for the party"), and sometimes the waiting is better than the event awaited. At the other extreme, it can shade into terror: when one waits for a child who is late coming home or—most horribly—has vanished. When anyone has disappeared, in fact, or is missing in action, the ordinary stress of waiting is overlaid with an unbearable anguish of speculation: Alive or dead?

Here, Morrow acknowledges that waiting can take various forms and have various outcomes. Waiting can be for all practical purposes inevitable (to get the concert ticket I need to wait in line), but it can also be a matter of social convention (the idea that I have to wait until I finish college before I embark on my career) and thus a matter of choice. Waiting can, yes, be delicious, and it can be terrifying. The question becomes, which of its various possibilities, positive and negative, applies in my waiting at the moment, and what can and should I do about that?

Waiting can seem an interval of nonbeing, the black space

between events and the outcomes of desires. It makes time maddeningly elastic: it has a way of seeming to compact eternity into a few hours.

Waiting is nonbeing, a black space? Is the point here that waiting is too passive, inert, that life should be about doing and achieving results, and that waiting doesn't qualify in these regards? If so, that is worth pondering. The phrase "seeming to compact eternity into a few hours" sounds impressive, even profound—but what exactly do those words mean, and what is their referent in the world of concrete reality?

All life is a waiting, and perhaps in that sense one should not be too eager for the wait to end. The region that lies on the other side of waiting is eternity.

Or at least all life includes waiting, if only for lunchtime. To some extent, yes, to live is to wait. Thus it is worth our time to consciously, critically, come to grips with the place of waiting in our lives. I'd like to think that we are capable of understanding waiting and managing it well enough that it contributes to rather than detracts from our personal wellbeing and the wellbeing of those we care about.

The same quotes/comments approach with the Andrea Köhler book, *The Waiting Game: An Essay on the Gift of Time*:

"The cradle rocks above an abyss," Nabokov writes. Our existence is "but a brief crack of light between two eternities of darkness."

This quote is from Vladimir Nabokov's memoir, *Speak Memory*. It asserts that our lives exist between two other things, "two eternities of darkness." My view of it is that our lives don't exist between two things. I think that before I existed, for me there was

nothing, and that when I die, for me there will again be nothing. It won't be dark after I die. It won't be anything after I die. And it won't be for eternity, because nothing—that reality, or better, unreality--doesn't exist in time. It is hard for human beings to contemplate nothing, no-thing, but it is worth trying to come to grips with it, because as far as I can see, it is the context of our existence. Nothing-life-nothing. This life, for me and for you, isn't a crack; it's the whole thing. What we do with this incredible gift of existence while we still possess it, including wait for something or another, is all there is.

“Keeping others waiting,” writes Roland Barthes, “is the prerogative of the powerful.” Being sentenced to waiting is a curse, and whoever puts it on us has us in his grip. A person or institution forces a rhythm of being upon us that goes against our own fundamental sense of lived time, and that's what makes this situation so depressing.

Waiting can be about power and being one-up on someone, and it can be about making people unhappy and bringing them down. “I'll see you at three (but really I'm going to be late or stiff you altogether).” Who keeps me waiting and why, and what effect does that have on me? Whom do I keep waiting and why? And what are the consequences of that both for myself and for others? If I get clear about that, perhaps I can learn to play “the waiting game” more effectively and more justly than I do now.

Waiting is impotence, and the fact that we might not be able to get out of this predicament on our own is a humiliation that skews our perception of the world as a whole--which is why the one waiting often feels that he has been wronged, that he is being penalized for no reason. The passivity of waiting, the sense of condemnation that often goes along with it, can almost feel like corporal punishment, being both shameful and painful.

That sometimes point again: sometimes waiting is about impotence and humiliation and feeling wronged and passivity and punishment and shame and pain, and sometimes it is about the opposite of that. The challenge is to see what waiting means in one's life at a particular time, and, if needed, transforming it into a positive rather than negative aspect of one's existence.

Godot's absence is far from tragic—in fact, it's quite a stroke of good luck. For as long as we have something to wait for, our life has a purpose.

Waiting for a certain thing or a certain somebody that isn't going to show up can give our lives purpose. So can waiting for something good to happen even if we don't know exactly what we're waiting for—the next email could be it. Whatever it turns out to be, there's hope. But the question is, what is the quality of that purpose? All purposes aren't of the same order of merit. The challenge for you and me is to adopt purposes that will best (as we define best) direct the way we spend the precious and finite time we are allotted to be alive. Near the end of our lives we will make a fundamental decision: whether we have made good use of our one chance to live or to have essentially blown it. With each passing second, that choice point is nearer. Waiting needs to be fitted into that frame of reference.

With Ha Jin's book, *Waiting*, rather than a quotes-comments pattern, I'll write about the book.

The protagonist, a man in mid-life, for sixteen years has waited to divorce his wife and marry another woman. He finally gets the divorce and re-marries only to discover that this new marriage, and life generally, is not better than it was before. In fact, things are worse now. Before, he had something positive to wait for—the new marriage and the good life it would bring. Now what does he have? He has the dawning awareness that his first

wife wasn't his problem. *He* was his problem; he wasn't up to putting together a good marriage with anyone. More, his circumstance in life, including his work and social situation, restricts his love-interest and happiness possibilities greatly—he has a context problem. With his second marriage came the understanding that the best thing he had going for him was . . . waiting.

As a practical matter, a life essentially organized around waiting might be the best alternative among the available options. Going to the train station every day all those years in hopes of seeing Professor Ueno may well have been Hachiko's best course of action. What was his alternative? Sitting in the back yard chewing on a bone? I don't mean to sound flip saying this, but really, what were Hachiko's options? Waiting for something that is not going happen—call it waiting for Godot if you'd like—may be the best card we can play given the hand we are dealt in life. Last year, for five months I waited for someone to get in contact with me who I knew deep down wasn't going do it. After looking into this topic of waiting, I've decided that given what was going on with me last year, waiting like that gave me something tangible to wait for at a time when, at least so it seemed, the only other thing to wait for was nothing.

46

The Hollywood Argyles and Kinji Shibuya

September, 2016.

The Hollywood Argyles were a musical group who were one-hit wonders, as it's called. In 1960, they had a record that went to number one in the U.S. called "Alley-Oop" and never did anything after that. "Alley-Oop" was a catchy, novelty-type song that had been written by Dallas Frazier a couple years before when he was eighteen-years-old. (He's still alive and a Christian minister.) Alley Oop was the title character of a syndicated comic strip created in 1932 by V. T. Hamlin. Alley Oop lived in the prehistoric kingdom of Moo, wore a fur loincloth, and rode around on his dinosaur Dinny. The cartoon's stories were considered satires on American suburban life. The lead singer of Frazier's song was Gary Paxton. He was twenty at the time; he died in July of 2016. Paxton was never identified by name; just the group, The Hollywood Argyles.

The information in this last paragraph came out of Google searches this week. I knew none of this back then. I was alive at that time. Gary Paxton was exactly my age. Like Dallas Frazier, who was also exactly my age, I'm still alive, which I'm finding increasingly remarkable. I'd never seen the comic strip when the song came out (and still haven't). More, I'd never heard of it. All I knew was that the song was being played on the pop music radio stations I listened to constantly in those years. I liked whatever music the disc jockeys played. "Alley Oop" was it? Fine with me. I bought the record—a "45" (for its 45 revolutions per minute), about six inches in diameter, with a big hole in the middle, 78 cents as I remember.

The lyrics of "Alley Oop" will give you a sense of the song.

It's on YouTube if you want to listen to it.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sz6IpmmYSXA> The lyrics in parentheses are sung by backup singers.

(Oop-oop, oop, oop-oop)
 (Alley-Oop, oop, oop, oop-oop)

There's a man in the funny papers we all know
 (Alley-Oop, oop, oop, oop-oop)
 He lives 'way back a long time ago
 (Alley-Oop, oop, oop, oop-oop)
 He don't eat nothin' but a bear cat stew
 (Alley-Oop, oop, oop, oop-oop)
 Well, this cat's name is-a Alley-Oop
 (Alley-Oop, oop, oop, oop-oop)

He got a chauffeur that's a genuwine dinosawruh
 (Alley-Oop, oop, oop, oop-oop)
 And he can knuckle your head before you count to fawruh
 (Alley-Oop, oop, oop, oop-oop)
 He got a big ugly club and a head fulla hairuh
 (Alley-Oop, oop, oop, oop-oop)
 Like great big lions and grizzly bearuhs
 (Alley-Oop, oop, oop, oop-oop)

(Alley-Oop)
 He's the toughest man there is alive
 (Alley-Oop)
 Wearin' clothes from a wildcat's hide
 (Alley-Oop)
 He's the king of the jungle jive
 Look at that cave man go!
 (scream)

He rides thru the jungle tearin' limbs offa trees
 (Alley-Oop, oop, oop, oop-oop)
 Knockin' great big monstahs dead on their knees
 (Alley-Oop, oop, oop, oop-oop)

The cats don't bug him cuz they know bettah
 (Alley-Oop, oop, oop, oop-ooop)
 Cuz he's a mean motah scootah and a bad go-gettah
 (Alley-Oop, oop, oop, oop-ooop)

(Alley-Oop)
 He's the toughest man there is alive
 (Alley-Oop)
 Wears clothes from a wildcat's hide
 (Alley-Oop)
 He's the king of the jungle jive
 Look at that cave man go!
 (scream)

Thair he goes,
 (Alley-Oop, oop, oop, oop-ooop)
 Look at that cave man go
 (Alley-Oop, oop, oop, oop-ooop)
 He sure is hip, ain't he
 (Alley-Oop, oop, oop, oop-ooop)
 Like what's happening
 (Alley-Oop, oop, oop, oop-ooop)
 He's too much
 (Alley-Oop, oop, oop, oop-ooop)
 Ride, Daddy, ride
 (Alley-Oop, oop, oop, oop-ooop)
 Hi-yo dinosawruh
 (Alley-Oop, oop, oop, oop-ooop)
 Get 'em, man
 (Alley-Oop, oop, oop, oop-ooop)
 Like--hipsville
 (Alley-Oop, oop, oop, oop-ooop)

As I printed the lyrics off the Internet just now, it struck me that I had no idea back then what the song was about. That it was about a comic strip character riding a dinosaur, that he was hip,

none of that registered. That “mean motah scootah” might be a euphemism went right by me.

The next year after the song came out, that would make it 1961, the Hollywood Argyles were booked for a week to perform at the Flamingo Club in Saint Paul, Minnesota, my hometown. The Flamingo Club wasn't a big venue. It was a bar with a small stage, elevated a couple, three feet. A hundred or so people could pack together in front of the stage. On three occasions, as I remember, the packed-together audience included me. There I was, drink in hand, watching the Hollywood Argyles play their music. The drink was a gin and tonic. Actually, I didn't like it all that much, kind of sour tasting, but I didn't know one drink from another (and still don't), and I knew a gin and tonic existed, so I'd order that. If the person taking the order asked me if I wanted a particular brand of gin I'd say, no, it doesn't matter, because I didn't know any brands of gin (and still don't).

Wow, the Hollywood Argyles, “Alley Oop,” right there in front of me, in the flesh, how about that. It was four young men in their mid- to late twenties, and one attractive young blond woman (she'd be around eighty years old now if she's still alive) who kept time by banging her wrists, one and then the other, against her hips, which impressed me no end, very cool. Even though I was jammed in among people, nobody as much as looked at me as far as I could tell, and I wouldn't have thought to speak to anyone in those years (and wouldn't now either). After one set, an hour, never more than that, I left and went home to the one-room rented apartment where I lived alone (right now, I live alone in a two-room rented apartment).

I learned from the Google checking this week that, really, there was no such band as The Hollywood Argyles. Gary Payton made “Alley Oop” on his own with some studio musicians he picked up the day he recorded it. Contractual commitments prevented him from releasing the record under his own name, so he

thought up the name of a group on the spot. The recording studio was in Hollywood on Argyle Street, thus the Hollywood Argyles. With Payton's OK, bands, which didn't include him, traveled the country posing as the Hollywood Argyles. So essentially the band I was seeing at the Flamingo Club were imposters.

In the 1950s I watched wrestling on television every week out of Minneapolis in prime time, like eight on a Wednesday. I understand now that televising the matches was a good deal for both the local television station and the promoter of the matches, Verne Gagne. (Verne died last year, Alzheimer's or dementia, somewhere in there.) The event was going on anyway—people were paying to see it at an arena--so there were no production costs to the station beyond the outlay for a single camera, one announcer, and a technician, and the wrestling shows got good ratings. For Verne, since only the preliminary matches were shown on television and the main events and star wrestlers were hyped during the telecasts, it enticed people to come to his shows. That I could attend the matches in person never crossed my mind.

There I'd be, week after week, I suppose I was fourteen or fifteen, in there, sprawled alone on a couch in front of a black-and-white seventeen-inch Zenith television set; it looked like a small refrigerator. It never occurred to me that the wrestling matches were rigged. I've looked at kinescopes of matches (a kinescope is a film of the television image) from back in those days. They were so obviously phony, and yet I bought the ruse completely. I tell myself that I'm not taken in by baloney these years, but deep down I know I believe just about anything anyone says with a straight face.

A regular on those wrestling shows was Kinji Shibuya. Nothing subtle about the personas of the wrestlers in those years (or now): Kinji Shibuya was a sneaky, evil Jap straight from Japan. This played especially well back then because this wasn't long

after World War II, a time when we had been conditioned to hate the Japanese. Check out the 1943 Hollywood film “Gung Ho” on YouTube sometime to get a sense of what anti-Japanese propaganda looked like in those years.

Kinji Shibuya, short and stocky with a burr haircut, would enter the ring in bare feet wearing some kind of Japanese robe, a kimono or something, with a sinister look on his face to a chorus of boos from the crowd. For sure lounging there on my couch, I didn't like him. (It's 55 years later on a Sunday afternoon and I'm writing this on my living room couch where later on today I'll watch Sunday Night Football on NBC, which, being on the network, I can watch with my new rabbit ears; I got rid of cable last year.) Before a match started, Kinji Shibuya would squat in his corner and raise one leg in the air and slam his foot to the mat, bam! and then do the same thing with the other leg, bam! and then, smirking, malevolence personified, rub his hands conspiratorially together in front of his chest; the whole business an alien, scary Jap ritual of some kind.

The actual match was basically given over to Kinji Shibuya and his clean-cut, all-American opponent shuffling sideways in a circle eyeing each other, and then they'd grab one another around the back of the neck and tussle a bit and then break apart and start shuffling in a circle again. The entire match, they rarely left their feet. During the brief episodes of action, typically Shibuya would be getting his just comeuppance, which felt good to watch there on the couch in the safety of my living room. A common example, he'd have his back up against the ropes with his arms out to the side and his hands grasping the upper rope and be taking punches to the stomach and grimacing and grunting grandly with each punch—ugh, ugh, ugh! For some reason, he was completely immobilized and helpless on these occasions.

Punches with closed fists were against the rules of wrestling; that's what the announcer said--open fists where you hit people

with your lower palm were OK, but no knuckles. Even though closed fist punches were illegal, with dirty Japs they were entirely justified. The referee, taking note of this rules transgression, the punching to the stomach, would ever so gently pat our surrogate, the good-guy American wrestler, on the back and shake his head no, you can't do that. When that mild reminder had no effect, the punching still going on unabated, ugh, ugh, ugh, the referee would start counting in slow, deliberate fashion, raising and lowering his right arm, way up and way down: One! ... Two! ... Three! ... At some number, a penalty was going to be imposed, but I never found out what the number or penalty was, because at four (evidently you could do anything as long as you didn't do it beyond a count of four), the virtuous rule-breaker--not a contradiction in terms in the wrestling shows--would stop and take a step back and the circle-shuffle would start up again.

After the shuffling and punching and a couple of brief headlocks and some bounces off the ropes (I never figured out what the bounces off the ropes had to do with anything), I suppose this went on for ten or twelve minutes, Kinji Shibuya would pull a sneaky, dirty, Jap stunt, á la Pearl Harbor, and win the match, suddenly it was over, out of nowhere. Why couldn't the referee see the low, underhanded thing Kinji Shibuya had connived to do? It was obvious to the rest of us--the announcer, the paying customers, and me there on the couch--but the referee had somehow missed it. Then Kinji Shibuya, victorious, would put on his un-American Japanese kimono or whatever it was, and smirking in that devious Jap way of his, leave the ring.

Kinji Shibuya got away with it this time, but just wait until next week's match. He'll get what he deserves then, and I'll be there watching on TV. But next week would come and darned if he didn't fool the referee again and, right at the end, chalk up another unfair victory!

Kinji Shibuya died recently and I read his obituary online this week. He was actually Jerry Shibuya from Utah, a former college football player, who lived a quiet suburban life with his wife and children.

47 Riders Rules for Cowboys and Cowgirls

February, 2017.

As a kid in the 1940s and '50s I was a big fan of movie and TV cowboy Roy Rogers. When we were about eight or ten, in there, we kids used to line up as being for Roy or, the other big cowboy hero, Gene Autry, and I would announce that I was for Roy.

Roy had what he called “riders rules,” ten standards for how to conduct your life. He exemplified them in his movies and television shows, and he talked about them in interviews and on his television show, and he’d send them on a card if you wrote him. I would never take it upon myself to write Roy, or anybody, but one of the kids in my school wrote Roy and I wrote down what was on his card. Just now, I got the riders rules off the Internet.

1. Be neat and clean.
2. Be courteous and polite.
3. Always obey your parents.
4. Protect the weak and help them.
5. Be brave and take chances.
6. Study hard and learn all you can.
7. Be kind to animals and take care of them.
8. Eat all your food and never waste any.
9. Love God and go to Sunday school regularly.
10. Always respect our flag and our country.

I admit to changing Roy’s rule five in this list. Roy said be brave but don’t take chances. I suppose he meant don’t take unnecessary chances. In his movies and television shows, Roy was brave and took chances, both, and saying don’t take chances could come off as telling little riders that they should play it safe in their lives, and I don’t think Roy meant to be promoting anything

like that. So I took the liberty to make it take chances rather than don't take chances.

Roy's wife and co-star in his movies and television shows, Dale Evans, talked about, and exemplified, being what she called a cowgirl:

A cowgirl is an attitude, really, a pioneer spirit, a special brand of courage. The cowgirl faces life head on, lives by her own lights, and makes no excuses. Cowgirls take stands. They speak up. They defend the things they hold dear. A cowgirl might be a rancher, or a barrel racer, or a bull rider, or an actress. But she's just as likely to be a checker at the local Winn Dixie [a grocery store chain], a full time mother, a banker, or an attorney.

Dale also said, and demonstrated, that if you are a cowgirl "you walk tall whether you work at the ranch, the mine, or the state capital." It looks to me as if what Dale put forth would characterize a cowboy as well as a cowgirl.

I've concluded after a very long life that whoever you are and wherever you come from, if you live by the riders rules (including church on Sundays, and I'm not religious), and do it as a cowgirl or a cowboy, you give yourself a good shot at living a respectable and successful life in America, even with all its supposed inequities and injustices.

I'm serious about this. I think Roy and Dale were on to something—it comes down to an individual's values. Laugh if you want, but I picked up a lot from Roy and Dale about how to conduct myself. It took me a really long time to get it going in my actions, but those ideals, those riders rules, have been part of who I am since childhood. I'm just about at the end, and I'm feeling good about how things have turned out in my life, and Roy and Dale. I mean it, contributed significantly to that. It seems to me that aren't enough people in this time--parents, teachers, public

figures—sending this empowering “Roy and Dale” message to kids, especially kids who start out from way back in life. Those who aren’t doing it, I’m wondering what’s keeping them from it?

48

Snow Days

February, 2017.

To her delight, my twelve-year-old daughter Dee had a snow day today; no school, bad weather, too much snow. She and her friend Meredith romped in the snow together and had great fun—Mom took some pictures.

Ah yes, snow days. I remember back when I was first started my career in teaching--social studies (history and current events and the like) in a high school. Monday through Friday, I would drive a little tin box with wheels called a Renault Dauphine from the converted electrical appliances store with a cement floor where I lived in West Saint Paul, Minnesota to North Saint Paul High School. I weighed 225 pounds (I weigh 168 now) and it was all I could do to get the top button on my pants buttoned and I couldn't have been more uncomfortable and it would be 6:40 a.m. and dark and I was living with the unappealing prospect of sitting on a stool holding court in front of classes of 25-30 teenagers, fifty minutes each, one after the other, from 8:10 in the morning until three in the afternoon.

The students, misnomer, would be unresponsive to my steady stream of initiatives except for a wide-eyed look that I think now was probably mild intrigue at the moon face with the bushy hair in a cheap green tie and yellow shirt (is that a food stain?) sitting on a stool—why the stool?—skittishly chattering away while in metronome fashion glancing back and forth between them and the back wall. Every once in a while, one of them would turn around and check out the back wall, like “What’s he looking at back there?”

The classes, there were four of them—each one of which I experienced as a demeaning eternity--were broken up by one hour of lunchroom duty, as it was called, shared with Ron Hawkins, whose other responsibility at the school was teaching driver education. Ron and I were charged with maintaining a close watch on the kids eating their lunches in case something untoward happened. Ron--tall guy, I suppose he was thirty, single--devoted the hour to lecturing me on how he was going to make a killing in the stock market, posing money-making schemes for the two of us (“How about you and me refereeing basketball games?”), and recounting his successes with various women.

With one exception it was an uneventful five years, as it turned out, that Ron and I spent on guard in the lunchroom. One day, just like any other, Ron talking and me listening, no forewarning, a skinny, sunken-chested, innocuous-looking boy, probably fourteen, pale, glasses, brown hair combed down over his forehead, suddenly stood up and threw his plate full of school cafeteria food complete with mashed potatoes and gravy into the face of another innocuous-looking boy, who remained seated and silent throughout this unfortunate incident. Ron immediately marched the offender—neither Ron nor the evil-doer ever uttered a word, this was a word-free episode come to think about it--to the principal’s office and I went looking for a custodian to clean up the mess. I never found a custodian, and by the time I got back to the cafeteria one of the cooks had taken care of it.

The point of all this is that the highlight of my life back then were the days at 6:40 a.m. and I was there in my bursting pants just about to put on my coat and squeeze myself into the little Renault Dauphine and clink the door shut--the heater didn’t work, so it would have been cold all the way to North Saint Paul, about ten miles--and it was announced on the radio that there would be a snow day that day at North Saint Paul High School. Yes! I could stay home and read every word of the *Saint Paul Pioneer Press*

sport section and then shovel the snow in front of the store/apartment coming within a few feet of heavy traffic, buses roaring up and stopping and the hiss and bang of their doors opening and closing, and then go inside and munch Mars candy bars and Old Dutch potato chips and drink Tab (diet soda--had to do something about the weight problem) and re-read old *Sports Illustrated* magazines I had piled up in the corner and take the first of a series of naps. I was 26-years-old. So it began.

December, 2017.

Jerry Kindall died today, Christmas day, 2107. He was 82 years old. Kindall was a legendary college baseball coach of the University of Arizona, and before that a second baseman for the Chicago Cubs and other major league baseball teams. He was a native of my home town, Saint Paul, Minnesota. I have a personal memory of him, twenty-minutes-or-so standing next to him at an indoor practice baseball field at the University of Minnesota back in 1960—57 years ago. Kindall was playing for the Cubs at that time and I was a scrub on the University of Minnesota baseball team. I was twenty-years old and, I learned from the obituary I just read, Kindall was 25, though he seemed much older than that to me, a confident, grounded, in-the-world adult, while I was a lost kid totally out of place trying to be a baseball player. I wrote about my encounter with Kindall, such as it was, in July of 2007 [“A Very Big Regret” in this collection]. Kindall’s death today prompted me to repeat it here. The central impression I have as I write this is, my gosh, Jerry Kindall, that tall, trim athlete I can picture so clearly in my mind, no longer exists; how much longer will it be before I no longer exist. What I wrote in 2007:

Major league players with ties to the university would practice with the university team indoors in January and February prior to going to spring training in Florida or Arizona. Jerry Kindall had been a big star on the U’s team [the University of Minnesota is called the “U”] and was at that time a good-field-no-hit second baseman for the Chicago Cubs. One day for about twenty minutes, Kindall and I fielded ground balls [University of Minnesota baseball coach Dick] Siebert drilled at the two of us in turn. Kindall and I were standing next to each other. If I were older as Kindall was and standing next to a college-age person—I was twenty at the time--I’d have felt

compelled to say “Hello” or “How’s it going?” or “What’s your name” and, at least briefly, talk to him about what was going on in school or on the team. Not Kindall. It was as if I didn’t exist, and I was standing shoulder-to-shoulder, right next to him, and it was just the two of us in that area. Thinking back on it, I admire Kindall’s self-containment. I have always felt compelled to at least glance at a person standing next to me, and especially if it is just the two of us in the area. I’m not really knocking him. He didn’t owe me anything. He hadn’t asked for me to be standing next to him. He had no agenda with me. I was none of his business. I didn’t think it was my place to start up a conversation with a major leaguer like Jerry Kindall, so I just glanced over at him regularly hoping he’d say something or at least acknowledge my presence, but he never did. I remember feeling a little bad about it at the time, but I assumed I was getting my due. I was nobody and he was Jerry Kindall. Over the years, I’ve found myself thinking, I wish I could be more like Jerry Kindall and be able to make people invisible— he was perfect at it, at least with me.

[2019: My best guess, Jerry Kindall, the son of a truck driver, so I learned from the obituary, was simply a reticent person, just as I, the son of a barber, was, and to a great degree, still am.]

January, 2018.

About a week ago, I read a book on the magician and escape artist Harry Houdini (1874-1926)--*Houdini: The Life and Times of the World's Greatest Magician*, by Charlotte Montague (Chartwell Books, 2017). Excellent book, great photographs, I recommended it. From its back cover:

Harry Houdini's [born Erik Weisz] compelling illusions and daring escapes made him one of the most famous magicians of all time. His spellbinding theatrical presentations were heart-stopping and attracted unprecedented crowds and dramatic headlines across the globe.

The Houdini book reminded me of an anecdote involving him my dad recounted to me frequently as a kid. Bringing up the memory of Dad and Houdini brought to mind other reminiscences, accounts, observations, and words of wisdom—I'll use story as the generic reference to any of that--Dad passed on to me when I was growing up, and that got me thinking about their significance to both him and me back then and to my life since those early years. I've gotten clearer about myself this past week, where I've come from and where I need to go from here. This writing describes the process of free association, reflection, and meaning-making I've taken myself through the past few days. I hope what I share here will be interesting and useful to you in itself, and that it will encourage you to do the same sort of thing with childhood memories that stand out for you.

Dad was a barber. I was ten to thirteen, perhaps fourteen, maybe nine, in there somewhere, when what I'll discuss here happened. This was way back, the early 1950's, in Saint Paul, Minnesota. Dad was old for a dad, over sixty, as he was born in

1890. Even though he had left the small Georgia farm where he grew up as a teenager, he retained a pronounced Southern accent.

What I'll discuss here occurred upwards of seventy years ago—my gosh—yet memories of it still exist in my mind. I ask myself, how do we store memories? (I have no idea.) Why do some persist while others have vanished? (My best guess, because they are about something important to us, and thus it's worth our time to discern what they are about.) How accurate are our recollections—did what we remember really happen that way? (My best guess, not quite, but what is important in this context is the impact these occurrences had on us, and that is a function of what we perceive and recall--inner, subjective phenomena--not outer, objective reality.) How can we call memories up whenever choose to? (Again, no idea.) A truly remarkable process when you think about it. (Absolutely.)

The Houdini story. The memory of it was prompted by the book I read about Houdini. I ask myself, is there is a part of me beneath the level of my conscious awareness that knew I needed to think about the Houdini story, as well as other stories it would bring to mind, and that is what led me to take the Houdini book off the new books shelf at the library, that it wasn't pure happenstance? It wouldn't surprise me if that were the case.

“Houdini came into the [barber] shop,” Dad would begin. “He was a famous magician. I guess he was in town to do a show. Little guy.”

This encounter Dad had with Houdini must have happened before 1926, when Houdini died. The town Dad referred to could have been Saint Paul--he came there around 1920, married my mother, who was a native of Saint Paul, in 1922, and stayed there the rest of his life--or it could have been in Nebraska or Illinois or any number of other unnamed places where Dad did his barbering after leaving Georgia. After reading the Houdini book, I now

know what “Little guy” meant: Houdini was about 5’5”. Dad was 5’7”.

“Houdini said to me, ‘I’ll let you cut my hair if you do it the way I tell you.’

“I said, ‘It’s your money, I’ll cut it any way you want.’

“He got in the [barber] chair and held up a clump of hair and said ‘Cut.’

“I cut it, and then he held up another clump and I cut that, and he did that for the whole haircut. Never had anything like that happen before.

“I asked him how he did all those amazing things he did, and he said, ‘Just tricks.’”

That’s the Houdini story. I heard it over and over, I don’t know how many times, word for word, just like that. Ten times? I don’t know. A lot of times, I knew it by heart, that’s all I know.

Thinking about the Houdini story conjured up four other stories Dad told me repeatedly:

The five-cent cigar story. “Marshall came into the shop one time. He was Vice-President. He’s the one that said, ‘What this country needs is a good five-cent cigar’”

That’s it, the “five-cent cigar” story, word for word, time and again.

The Harold Stassen story. The way it went, Dad had driven a young Minnesota politician by the name of Harold Stassen to his various speaking engagements around the state. “I drove Stassen around, every small town in Minnesota, it seemed like. Stassen makes it big later on, and what do I get from him? Nothing. Not even the time of day.”

Ron Negray’s lament. Dad’s barber shop in the ’40s until the mid-

'50s was in the basement of the Saint Francis Hotel in downtown Saint Paul. The visiting teams stayed in the Saint Francis when they were in town to play the Saint Paul Saints minor league baseball team, as well as some of the Saints players, got their haircuts from Dad.

I sat many the hour on one of the stiff-backed, vinyl-covered chairs for customers waiting for their haircuts watching Dad cut hair, and Dad would introduce me to the players. I'd describe them now as well-kept young men, working men; modest, straightforward, polite.

"This is Bobby, my son."

"Nice to meet you," they'd say.

I'd glance at them and then look away, not saying anything in reply.

"Bobby likes to play baseball."

"What position do you play?"

"Third base."

"That's good."

Ron Negray, a pitcher for the Saints, was a regular customer, Dad told me. I don't remember meeting him, though I may have. I heard his story plenty, that much I know.

"Ron Negray told me you can't get anywhere the way things are set up these days. No matter how well you pitch, you can't get to the big leagues. You stay stuck in the minors. It's so bad it's not even worth trying. Negray wants to quit baseball and go back home and get a job. I think Negray's just quit trying."

That the Ron Negray story, or what I'm now calling "Ron Negray's lament."

The Last Man's Club story. Dad told me regularly that he was in a club for World War I veterans. He was a barber in the navy on troop ships; or was he a civilian employee, I don't know, I never saw a picture of him in uniform. Once a year the club met, so it

went, with a bottle of expensive wine prominently displayed at the head of the dinner table, or on a small table, something like that. The point of the club was that the last one of the members still alive, or was it the last two, I didn't quite follow it, would drink the wine, and that would be the end of the club. I have no idea where these meetings were held, and I don't recall Dad ever going to one, or maybe he did, I don't know.

So those were the five stories, repeated time and again: the Houdini story; the five-cent cigar story; the Harold Stassen story; Ron Negray's Lament; and the Last Man's Club story.

What was my reaction to Dad's stories? No response, zero. Nothing like, "Who was Houdini?" or "What's a five-cent cigar?" or "Ron Negray doesn't even try, really?" As far as I can remember, I didn't even say "Oh." No facial expression. Not a word. No affect at all. Nothing. Blank.

And what was Dad's reaction to my non-reaction? No reaction. No "So what do think?" "Have you studied Stassen in school?" anything like that. He just went back to whatever he was doing, sitting on the barber chair waiting for the next customer to come through the door or, at home, skimming through the scores in the sports section of the newspaper. I went back to whatever I was doing, just sitting there, watching television, reading a comic book, or lying on the couch. It wasn't at the dinner table that this went on, because Dad didn't get home until almost 7:00 p.m.—his shop was open till 6:00 p.m. Monday through Saturday—and he and Mother had dinner together at around 7:30 and I'd have eaten alone earlier.

I didn't know anything about any of these people Dad talked about, and at the time that was fine with me. For that matter, I suspect that Dad knew next to nothing about them himself, and as far as I could tell, that suited him just fine too. It might help in this

context to say a few words about who they were.

Houdini the world-famous magician I mentioned earlier.

“Marshall,” the “five-cent cigar” guy, was Thomas R. Marshall, a Democrat politician who was governor of Indiana and, from 1913 to 1921, Vice-President under Woodrow Wilson. Marshall died in 1925, so, as was the case with Houdini, Dad’s encounter with him had happened in the distant past when he told me about it in 1950 or so.

What was “What this country needs is a good five-cent cigar” about? Marshall was known for his wit. From Marshall’s Wikipedia entry:

Marshall's wit is best remembered for a phrase he introduced to the American lexicon. While presiding over a Senate session in 1914, Marshall responded to comments from Senator Joseph L. Bristow in which the senator provided a long list of what he felt the country needed. Marshall reportedly leaned over and muttered to one of his clerks, "What this country needs is more of this; what this country needs is more of that" and quipped loudly enough others to overhear, "What this country needs is a really good five-cent cigar." Marshall explained that five-cent cigar was a metaphor for simpler times and buckling down to thrift and hard work.

I don’t suppose anybody remembers Harold Stassen these days, but indeed he did make it big as a politician, first as governor of Minnesota in 1939 and then as a serious contender for the Republican presidential nomination in 1948.

Google says Ron Negray the baseball pitcher was born in 1930 in Akron, Ohio (so going back home to get a job would have been to Ohio). To my surprise, he’s still alive, 87-years old—I just assume that everybody from my childhood is dead.

Despite his gloominess about his baseball prospects (according to Dad anyway), Negray did make it to the major

leagues, though he didn't have much of a career at that level. He pitched thirteen innings for the Brooklyn Dodgers as a 22-year-old in 1952. The Dodgers sent him down to their farm team in Saint Paul, where he pitched for three years, 1952, '53, and '54, which is when he must have complained about the injustices of professional baseball to Dad. In 1955 and '56, Negray made it back to the big leagues with the Philadelphia Phillies—the Dodgers must have traded him—where he won six games and lost six games over those two years. Then it was back to Saint Paul in '57 (I was in the army then), and then back to the Dodgers in '58—now the Los Angeles Dodgers, the ownership had moved the team from Brooklyn in '57—where he pitched a total of 11 innings and had no wins or losses. Then in was back to Saint Paul for part of '58 (I was still in the army), and then other minor league teams for the rest of his career. Negray retired in 1963 at the relatively advanced sport age of 33, so he didn't make good on his threat to quit and go back home to get a job.

As for the Last Man's Club, I just now looked it up and found that it was an activity of American Legion posts around the country. I vaguely recall Dad being a member of the American Legion (was he really a veteran? I ask myself). On one occasion, I remember him collecting Bingo cards at the American Legion hall. It stands out because it was the only time I had ever seen him with a public presence other than in the barber shop. He wouldn't even venture out for parent nights at the schools I went to. A 2014 *USA Today* article contained this about a Last Man's Club in Pennsylvania:

Once they got home from the Great War [World War I], the soldiers of Company B made a vow: They'd reunite yearly and save a trophy of their adventure — a bottle of French wine — until one man was left alive. Then he would uncork the white Burgundy and toast his departed comrades. They called themselves the Last Man's Club. They said they would never forget the French town they liberated in

1918 or the war they fought "to end all wars." Remembering was easy when World War I was still vivid — when Veterans Day was still called Armistice Day, and the former doughboys would squeeze into their old uniforms and march, a bit more stiffly each year. But 100 years after an assassination in Sarajevo on June 28, 1914, led to World War I, America's memory of its second-deadliest foreign war is increasingly tenuous. The nation's last World War I veteran died three years ago.

I assume Dad was referring to a Last Man's Club at the local American Legion chapter in Saint Paul. If he did attend the meetings, since he died in 1964 at 74, I presume he was far from the last man in his group.

Looking over the five stories, what themes stand out? These:

Being less than others. The image of someone holding up a clump of their hair and telling Dad to cut it, and Dad doing it. How minimally people dealt with Dad outside of his immediate family. How little he meant to them. "Just tricks" was enough to say to Dad--two words. "Marshall" as Dad referred to him, presumably didn't even say that. Dad was nobody to Thomas R. Marshall. To Harold Stassen, Dad was his driver. What did Stassen owe his driver?

Dad tried to help me get a job when I was about nineteen. He told me to see the owner of PEFCO Porcelain Company in Saint Paul—I still remember the name of the place after all these years. "Go talk to this guy, he's a friend of mine," Dad said. Just now, I check online and I believe I know the man's name—Allen Johnson. He died in 2015 at 96.

When I went to see Mr. Johnson—I'm going to assume that's who it was--and told him I was sent by my dad, Walter Griffin, a friend of his, to inquire about a job. At first, he couldn't place Dad; he looked at me without expression. Then he kind of lit up

and said, “Oh, I know who you’re talking about now, my barber.”
Yes, your barber, my dad.

The plight of the little guy. The Ron Negray story—they keep you down, the game is rigged, I might as well quit trying. I believed what Dad said about Negray back then, but thinking about it now, I can’t imagine him not really trying. There’d be nothing for him to gain by slacking off, plus that’s just not the way athletes approach their sport. My best guess is that Dad said this about Negray out of a sense of the basic futility of life for people low on totem pole in society as he was, as we were. I’m sure he didn’t think consciously about the effect this story would have on my outlook—hearing that things are so unfair, the cards are so stacked against people like Negray, like us, why even bother trying to accomplish anything. He was just reporting what was there for him to a mute and unresponsive son he had sired, whether he intended to or not, late in his life.

The irony is that in his own life Dad always tried his best. There he was at 74, the cancer so bad he had sit on a stool because he couldn’t stand for more than a minute or so at a time, in great pain, giving the very best haircuts he could and getting the shop swept up and sparkling clean and ready for the next day.

I remember Dad buying some living room furniture at Home Furnishings across the street from his barber shop—not the best quality, thinking back on it, but it was all Dad could afford. My mother, who held Dad in surly contempt, never as much as acknowledged his gesture (nor did I of course) or take the trouble to remove the cellophane wrapping the furniture came in. There it was in the cellophane wrapper; I never knew what it looked like exactly. It must have been very tough for Dad to play his life to Mother and me as his audience.

On the periphery. Houdini was one of the most widely acclaimed

performers of the twentieth century. When he came to town to perform, it was front page news. Dad never mentioned going to see Houdini's performance. Now that I think about it, I understood back then that we, our family, us, wouldn't do anything like that. The show of an internationally known performer? That'd be too much in the world for us, too much at the center of what's going on. No, no—we're not at the core of what's happening, not us.

Dad got free passes from the Paramount movie theater for having a sign in his shop advertising its current feature. He and Mother and I went to the movies at the Paramount just about every week. Sitting in the dark watching images—not the real thing--of musicals with Dan Dailey and Kathryn Grayson, that was us.

We went to the Saint Paul Saints' minor league baseball games (major league games? not us), our seats way back in the bleachers. We went to the rodeo and the circus and the Ice Capades, a traveling ice-skating show, when they came to the Saint Paul Auditorium once a year, with seats near the top of the auditorium and, for some reason, always over near the corner.

I remember going with Dad to the University of Minnesota basketball arena to watch the final game of the NCAA basketball tournament. In those years, you could get a ticket for the game that same night and pay regular prices for it. I just looked it up, it was 1951, I was 11, and Kentucky beat Kansas State 68-58.

We got to the ticket counter and Dad told the guy selling tickets, "Two of the best you've got on the side."

"Courtside?" the ticket seller replied, referring to seats down by the floor of the arena.

Dad seemed to get a bit indignant and replied, "No, up top!"

Wasn't it obvious that we weren't the kind of people to sit courtside? What was wrong with this ticket seller that he couldn't see that.

Wait it out. It was fitting that Dad was in the Last Man's Club,

which essentially was about acknowledging that it was now one year closer to the end. I never heard Dad talk about a hope, a dream, a project, a trip he wanted to take, something he wanted to accomplish, anything like that, not even what he planned to do with his Sunday off (he worked six days a week). A November, 2008 thought for my website called “On the Barber,” which was about Dad, ended with this:

The son cannot recall a time when his father complained about his lot in life, or a time when he extolled any aspect of his existence, professional or personal. The barber seemed to go through life without comment; or at least external comment, one can never be sure what he thought inwardly about his life. However the barber may have seen life when he was young and just leaving the Georgia farm to confront the world, it appears that for him existence had come down to doing the thing right in front of him the best he could, and then the next thing, and then the next and the next and the next, until, in 1964, next things ran out and eternity began.

Not really alive. Looking back on it now, I’m struck by my numbness, deadness, growing up. I was flat, unresponsive. It was as if I had post-traumatic stress syndrome. I went to school, but I wasn’t really there. It was a history class that I was taking, and an English class, and those were teachers, I knew that, but it wasn’t really real, and I wasn’t really real. The other kids were alive, in the world, but, the way I’d describe it now, I was a disembodied awareness. I wasn’t a person, a corporal entity, like the others. The other kids went to the high school prom. Never for a moment did I think that was something I could do, because that’s what people who actually exist do. I watch television.

As far as I can remember, all the while I was growing up, I never exchanged sentences with Dad. I never responded to anything he initiated, and I never initiated anything with him. He

was kind to me, like when he arranged for his friend Hank Bratfiet to drive us to the emergency room--we never had a car--when I cut my hand so bad that time (the very large scar remains, I'm looking at it now), but it was a silent trip. When I left for the army at 17, Dad didn't know I had enlisted or that I was leaving that day.

When I got out of the army at 19 until Dad's death I never had a conversation with him. The one memory I have during those last years was of Dad, shaken and looking shrunken and very old, calling to me from the bathroom, "Bobby, come here and look at this." It was blood in the toilet bowl, a sign of the prostate cancer that would end his life. I stood there mute, it didn't register with me. It must have been very difficult for him not to get sympathy and support at a frightening time like that—Mother had died three years earlier and he was very alone, as I am now.

Just now, I looked up the Wikipedia entry on *dissociation*. It hit home.

In psychology, dissociation is any of a wide array of experiences from mild detachment from immediate surroundings to more severe detachment from physical and emotional experience. The major characteristic of all dissociative phenomena involves a detachment from reality rather than a loss of reality as in psychosis.

Dissociation is commonly displayed on a continuum. In mild cases, dissociation can be regarded as a coping mechanism or defense mechanism in seeking to master, minimize or tolerate stress--including boredom or conflict. At the non-pathological end of the continuum, dissociation describes common events such as daydreaming while driving a vehicle. Further along the continuum are non-pathological altered states of consciousness.

More pathological dissociation involves dissociative disorders, including dissociative fugue and depersonalization disorder with or without alterations in personal identity or sense of self. These alterations can include: a sense that self or the world is unreal (depersonalization and derealization); a loss of

memory (amnesia); forgetting identity or assuming a new self (fugue); and fragmentation of identity or self into separate streams of consciousness (dissociative identity disorder, formerly termed multiple personality disorder) and complex post-traumatic stress disorder.

There were never any interventions, call them that, with me growing up. The school, social services, never did anything. My much older brother and sister were married and out of the house by the time I was around five and busy with their own lives. Counseling or therapy was beyond the realm of possibility for people like us. I think now that that was very unfortunate.

A personal work agenda for me. Looking over the themes I've just listed--being less than others and so on--I can see that they were important themes in Dad's life and in my life. I internalized these themes, these messages, took them into myself, they became part of me as inner, organic, physically felt, foundations or bases for conceiving of myself and my place in the world, and they directed my thoughts and actions in the various contexts of my life. In every case, they are problematic, limiting. When I eventually realized the price I was paying for their presence, they became challenges, tasks, for me, they comprised a personal work agenda: to expel them from my being. Since my mid- to late-twenties, and with an increasing critical awareness and understanding—yes, I really need to work on this for these reasons—I've taken on the job of ridding myself of these chains that bound me. In this life-long project, I've been greatly helped by the strong work ethic I picked up from Dad. He did his best with things, and so have I.

With one exception, which I'll get into at the close of this writing, this is not the place to go into particulars about how I've taken on my personal work agenda. This exploration of Dad's stories has help me get a sense of their totality, how they went together, what they added up to—yes, this is the package, this is

the configuration, this is where it came from, now I understand. I'm seeing more clearly that rising above, transcending, transmuting, the limitations of my childhood experiences has been a major part of my life: I'm not inherently less than everybody else. My horizons aren't restrictively circumscribed. I can be fully in the world. I don't have to just cope, endure, wait it out. And, I *am*.

How's it gone? I've done quite well, actually, and that's highly gratifying for me to realize as I take stock of my life now so very near its end. I'm proud of my diligence and persistence and accomplishment. That acknowledged, however, I'm still Bobby—those inner realities, those themes, those prison bars, whatever to call them, are still very much part of me right now sitting on my leather couch typing these words. They are muted, chipped away in good measure, and they aren't as central and dominant as they there, but they aren't gone, not by a long shot.

I'll end with the one exception I referred to a bit ago, where I get particular about the particulars of the work on my personal agenda:

It's 9:30 in the morning on Saturday, January 13th of 2018. I'm in Burlington, Vermont, and I'm alone in my two-room rented apartment amid its decades-old downscale furnishings. My eighteen-year-old Honda Civic is parked out front. My fingernails aren't clean and my tee shirt has food stains and my pants cuffs are frayed with wear and my shoes are unshined. And I'm tense, on guard.

By March 1st, or perhaps April 1st, or May, but soon anyway, I'm going to move to the west coast where my thirteen-year-old daughter lives with her mom (given to surly contempt for me unfortunately, but a good soul and a dedicated mother, as was my mother). I'm going to get a really nice apartment—I can afford it, money's good now—with a room for my daughter if she wants to visit. I'm going to work with an interior designer to get upscale

furniture. I'm going to get a new BMW, a series 2. I'm going to get new, fine, tasteful clothes. I'm going to clean my fingernails and shine my shoes. I'm going to sit in my new apartment in the evening reading a classic book while my daughter does her homework and invite her to stay over if she'd like. And I'm going to be calm and at peace, and I'm going to be happy. At last.

[2019: I'm still in Vermont.]

51

Dr. Toni Grant

March, 2018.

A couple of weeks ago, I guess it was, the memory of a radio show I listened to just about daily many years ago popped into my mind, seemingly out of the blue. This was in Los Angeles, a local station, and it was 1979, which is getting to be forty years ago, my gosh. I was in LA for six months—part of a sabbatical year from the university, where I was a professor.

People would call into this radio show with their personal problems, and a psychologist—a woman, sounded to be in youngish mid-life, 35, in there, around my age at the time, calm, confident, melodious voice—would figure out what was going on with the caller's issue and dispense advice. I was highly impressed, both by this woman's words of wisdom and by the woman herself, who though I couldn't see her sounded really attractive, and that was very much appreciated in my life at that time, which was notably deficient in attractive women.

What was her name? that didn't come up right away. And then there it was—Dr, Toni Grant. Yes, Dr. Toni Grant. How was I able to bring that up after all this time? I have no idea, but it is remarkable to me how that happened.

Why did this radio show host appear in my consciousness in the first place? I can't see anything that prompted it. I wasn't thinking about that time in LA, anything like that. I have noticed that when I take the time to get into things that come into my head seemingly out of nowhere like this Dr. Toni Grant memory, they turn out to be about something significant in my life now, and that it's worth the effort to go with where these thoughts and feelings take me. It tells me what's going on with me and what I ought to do about it. It's as though there is a part of me beneath the level of

my conscious awareness that knows what I ought to be thinking about, and it ships it up to me and says, here, make sense out of this. I've done that with the Dr. Toni Grant recollection, and this is a report of what's come out of it.

I never knew what Dr. Grant looked like—I always thought of her as Dr. Grant, never as Toni--her just being on the radio, but I had a picture I'd conjured up in my mind of what she looked like. In my imagination, she was slim, almost boyish looking, about 35, short dark hair parted on the side and combed straight over, straight features, understated make-up, colorless nail polish, dark-rimmed glasses she wore to read her notes for the show, conservatively dressed, perhaps a patterned buttoned cotton blouse and a dark sport coat she set to the side while she was doing the show, and a smallish, professional-but-feminine watch.

Writing out this description just now, it hits me that I had Dr. Toni Grant looking like a girl I had a big fawning crush on in high school, who had zero time for me except for a bemused annoyance and disdain. Like Dr. Grant, she had what sounded like a man's first name (which I won't divulge). She became a dermatologist, which is a doctor too, now that I think about it.

I decided to Google Dr. Grant's Wikipedia page. From her pictures, she didn't look at all like I thought she would. Big hair, lightened by the stylist who had twirled it into a grand concoction on top of her head, big smile, maybe a little too eager to please, good-looking but in a painted-face "real housewives" reality show kind of way.

I guessed her age right. She was born in 1942, which would have made her 37 when I was listening to her show. She died in 2016. How ironic her cause of death: this obviously very bright, very vital woman died of dementia. It's all in the luck of the draw; she's gone and I'm still here. But my time is coming right up. You can't be 39-years-old listening to radio shows before the

dawn of 1980 without the door marked exit being just a very short stretch down the line.

In 1987, Dr. Grant was a guest on “Hour Magazine, an afternoon talk show hosted by Gary Collins that’s on YouTube. [It’s since been removed.] Dr. Grant—should I refer to her as Toni? or to her real name, which I found out from Google, Toni Glickman?--was promoting a book she had just written, her first she said, entitled *Being a Woman: Fulfilling Your Femininity and Finding Love*.

In the “Hour Magazine” segment, Toni—I’ll call her Toni--was charming, upbeat, and, it seemed to me, a tad self-conscious, vulnerable, and eager to please--not composed and on-top-of-it as she came off on the radio. She looked a tick thinner than someone would be if they didn’t have an issue with eating and weight. My radio Toni Grant (or future dermatologist) wouldn’t have an eating problem.

What’s the point of all this pondering I’m doing? That subjective reality—the reality inside our heads, yours and mine—very often doesn’t square with objective reality, the way things actually are in the external world. We need to keep that in mind as we go through life.

The book Toni talked about on “Hour Magazine,” is out of print, but it’s available used on Amazon for a reasonable price, so I ordered a copy and read it. The book’s dust cover blurb gives a sense of the approach it takes:

Being a Woman will change the lives and thinking of many women today. Suggesting a way to live that is balanced between the adaptive attitude of the homemaker of the fifties and the aggressive woman of the eighties. *Being a Woman* reveals why so many contemporary women are frustrated in their intimate lives. It explores the unfulfilled promises of liberation and the personal disappointments many women have suffered in their quests for independence. It shows today’s woman how to embrace her femininity and how to expand her

capacity for love and for bonding. It challenges today's woman to reclaim the peace, joy, and serenity unique to the female sex: *the power of the feminine*, inherent in woman's basic nature.

Being a Woman was directed at women, but I found it worth my time as a man. I particularly picked up on a categorization scheme Toni had put together inspired by Jungian archetypes (Carl Jung, 1875-1961) that delineates the four basic qualities, or attributes, of a woman. I used it to help men figure out what was going on in their relationships with the women in their lives. Toni had four categories, which I found conceptually muddy. I switched things around some, and took the categories down to three. I kept labels she used, though now, after I had done my tinkering with her ideas, they don't have quite the same meanings as hers do.

I came up with three aspects of a woman--or qualities, or roles, or personas (synonyms are coming to mind)—that she brings, or could bring, or should bring, to a relationship with a man: the Amazon, the Madonna, and the Courtesan.

Amazon. Assertive, self-referenced, autonomous, goal directed, informed, opinionated. Relates to the man in her life as a companion, friend, co-worker, partner, help-mate, talk-mate, sparmate, and/or competitor. Today's feminist ideal, which is not to imply it is all bad. To the contrary, as one aspect of a total relationship, it has worth.

Madonna. Embodies the quintessential feminine virtues of patience, kindness, softness, and gentleness. Loving, peaceful, joyous, serene, flowing, graceful. Virtuous, decent, generous, patient, and tolerant. Embodies and imparts human-centered standards, values, and ideals. Home creator. Nurturer. Enhancer, inspirer. Respects, affirms, believes in, and supports her man in his quest for fulfillment. A woman and proud of it, not an

emulator of men, not a pseudo-man. A complement to her man, not a mirror image of him.

Courtesan. Emotionally, bodily, connected to her man. In close harmony with him, intimate with him. Fully present, attentive, for him. Affirming of her man as a sexual being. Devoted to sexually attracting, pleasing, affirming, and satisfying her man.

My premise is that these three aspects of a woman as I've defined them are *the* basic elements in a man-woman relationship from the man's side of it. If the relationship is in good shape in these three areas—Amazon, Madonna, and Courtesan—a man is probably having a favorable experience with this woman, and if it isn't in good shape in any or all of these areas, he isn't.

We need to keep in mind that a woman may not be able to bring one or more of these aspects to a relationship with a man to the extent that he would prefer, or for one reason or another, she's not up to it. Also, she may be capable of it but doesn't want to. For whatever reason, he isn't her man in that domain or domains, either because of something he does that doesn't work for her (which he might be able to change), or, more fundamentally, and more irreversibly, he is simply not her man in this area, these areas—the biology, call it that, just isn't there for her as a woman.

How about if you read over those three aspects and get familiar with them and play around with them, analyze them, extrapolate from them, think creatively about them?

What do we as men—I assume you reading this are a man--do with these three qualities, or categories, or personas, or roles (I'm not sure yet what to call them)?

We could employ them as criteria or standards when deciding whether or not to commit to a particular woman. How is she as an Amazon, Madonna, and Courtesan--does she make the grade? Of

course, this requires us to get clear about what we mean exactly by “making the grade” in these three areas.

As you are weighing things, you might think, “She’s not great in the Courtesan area (or in the Amazon area as an intellectual companion, whatever it is), but over time I think I can bring her around.” Personally, I’m not big on the prospects of being successful with that. If she doesn’t turn on to you physically, or if she doesn’t like the serious fiction you prefer to read and discuss, don’t count on that changing up the line in any meaningful way. But then again, every case is unique.

These three areas could be used to get a handle on what’s not working in an existing relationship. You could take stock of how it’s going for you in the Amazon, Madonna, and Courtesan dimensions of the relationship and see if you can pinpoint specific problems.

Once you’ve identified what isn’t going right, the question becomes what to do about it. You have to figure out what should be done and could be done in this particular situation with the capabilities and resources you have at your disposal, and with your woman being as she is. That’s a problem-solving job.

Perhaps you are willing to try make things better for yourself and for the woman in your life—you can bet that if you aren’t happy with what’s going on, she isn’t either. You can see whether she is willing to share this work with you. If she isn’t, don’t get your hopes up about being successful.

You might conclude that there’s no hope of things getting better in the Amazon, Madonna, and/or Courtesan area(s), that it’s a lost cause. Then the choice comes down to whether it is best for you to stay in the relationship and bear up with what’s going on because there are enough good things in the relationship to compensate for it, your prospects for anyone better aren’t bright, or you don’t like the idea of being alone; or you can make the call to hit the road.

March, 2018.

I played the baritone horn in the Monroe High School band. A baritone horn looks like a small tuba and sits on your lap. I suppose a baritone horn is like a baritone singing voice, not the highest or the lowest, but sort of low, or lower than the middle, or something like that, I never thought about it until now.

I played the baritone horn because Mr. Blood, the Monroe High School band director—Elsworth Blood, there's a name for you--said that would be a good instrument for me to play, though he didn't say why and I didn't ask, and he said that I could use it free as long as I was in school. My parents had no concern one way of the other, so it was just Mr. Blood and me that made the decision that I would play the baritone horn, although really it was just him, because, now that I think about it, he needed a baritone horn player for his band.

I don't remember Mr. Blood ever giving me lessons on how to play the baritone, but it wasn't complicated, only three valves to push down and just seven notes in the scale to learn--do-re-me-fa-sol, and so on. I figured out for myself how to read music, or sort of, I never really got the hang of it. I never practiced; I just played in school with the rest of the band. I stored the baritone behind the curtain at the back of the stage in the school auditorium.

All four years of high school, every day Monday through Friday, first hour, eight a.m. in the morning, there I was on the stage of the Monroe High School auditorium sitting on a metal folding chair along with the others members of the band playing songs under the direction of Mr. Blood, who stood in front of us looking very serious and waving his arms up and down and turning the pages of the sheet music on the stand in front of him. As far as

I can remember, in the four years Mr. Blood never spoke to me, not once.

Next to me in the last of the three rows sat Steve Diedrich—“died rich,” Steve informed me—who played the bass horn, which is like a tuba only bigger. I don’t know why Steve played the bass, I never thought to ask him. On the other side sat Roger Ellison, the other baritone player, who was much better playing the baritone than I was, but that only stood to reason because Roger was on a higher plane of existence than I was, we both understood that, his father being a doctor and him going on vacations in the summer to Estes Park, which was somewhere outside of Minnesota where I was living in Saint Paul, and for sure Roger was on his way to college while I was going to sign up for the army right after high school, which I did.

Once a year in the spring, we did a band concert, and the parents came. Mine didn’t come, but I didn’t really think about it, that’s just the way it was. Though I do remember being a tick disappointed that they didn’t attend the band concert my senior year when I played a solo of “Jupitor Polka.” There I stood center stage in front of the band, the audience out there in the dark though I could see their silhouettes, doing my best with “Jupitor Polka” knowing there were parts of it that I never got right and that I’d have to bear up with that in front of the parents in the audience and my fellow band members. But the people in the audience applauded politely at the end of my attempt at “Jupitor Polka,” and then in the silence I walked to the side of the stage and back to my folding chair next to Steve (Roger had graduated), who didn’t look at me.

Actually, there was one exception to only playing on the auditorium stage. The band played at the Friday night football games, the Monroe Green Wave, our colors were green and white. The band uniforms were green and white too. My family didn’t own a car and I didn’t have anybody to go the games with, so I

took the bus—one transfer—to the football field at Central High School where we played our games. There I'd be, dark out in the fall, by myself in my band uniform, lugging the baritone in its case up the stairs of the bus and into a seat, me at the window and the baritone on the seat next to me. The other passengers basically ignored me, but a few snickered.

At the game, under the lights, the rest of the band and I sat on the wood benches about ten rows up from the field, with Mr. Blood standing in front us pumping his arms up and down as he did, very serious as he always was, his arm-pumping especially vigorous, have to keep the energy up at the football game. We played the Monroe fight song as it was called when our team scored a touchdown. During halftime, we went out on the field and formed the letter "M" (for Monroe) and played a march written by John Philip Souza, who I guess wrote really good marches. I can't imagine anybody in the stands paying attention to us, but there we were anyway out on the field. It was the fall and kind of cold and a lot of times the field was muddy.

After the game was over, I'd catch a bus and, one transfer, go back home. I got in my pajamas and watched some TV by myself—my parents had gone to bed early--and munched on some potato chips and drank a Coke until I decided it was time to go to sleep.

It's all these years later, and if I had to play the baritone horn at a football game I wouldn't have anyone to go to the game with now either, but I have a car, so I wouldn't have to take the bus to the game. It's late at night and I'm sitting here alone and I'd really like to watch some TV and munch on potato chips and have a shot or two of whiskey but I'm not going to, and right now if I could cry I would.

April, 2018.

William Stoner is the protagonist of the eponymous novel—or it's billed as a novel anyway, more on that later—*Stoner*, published in 1965, the author John Williams (NYRB Classics, 2010). The book has gotten a lot of attention in the last few years--decades after its publication, and long after the death of its author. I understand that currently it sells big in Europe, and it gets rave notices, such as this in *The New York Times*: "John Williams' *Stoner* is something rarer than a great novel--it is a perfect novel, so well told and beautifully written, so deeply moving, that it takes your breath away." "Perfect novel," "takes your breath away"--that got my attention, plus I found out that *Stoner* was not about a druggie as I had first surmised but rather a university academic, like I used to be. So I gave the book a shot.

Stoner was worth my time. I wouldn't go so far as to call it a perfect novel, or anything close to that, and it certainly didn't take my breath away. It was well written, and in several places *very* well written (the ending, Stoner's death, a prime example), but I didn't consider myself in the presence of elevated prose reading this book, or first rank art. A good book, which you could miss with no great loss to you, that's my rating.

Note I said "book," not novel. Reading *Stoner* raised the question for me about the distinction between a novel and sociology. There is no compelling narrative line in this

book, no dramatic tension, no in-depth character development, and it isn't really a story with an arc and resolution (rather, like life, it just ends). *Stoner* is a stay-on-the-surface, skip-along-through-the-years, case study of an invented person, William Stoner (though, my guess, it is based on author Williams' own life), from his birth in 1891 until his death in 1954 just as he was about to retire from the university where he had been a literature professor for decades. Whatever it was—a novel or sociological case study—I found *Stoner* thought-provoking, and I stayed with the book all the way to the end, which these days is saying something; increasingly, I'm bailing out on books of all sorts, films too.

I'm too lazy to summarize the book myself, so I'll use the blurb in Amazon.

William Stoner is born at the end of the nineteenth century into a dirt-poor Missouri farming family. Sent to the state university to study agronomy, he instead falls in love with English literature and embraces a scholar's life, so different from the hardscrabble existence he has known. And yet as the years pass, Stoner encounters a succession of disappointments: marriage into a "proper" family estranges him from his parents; his career is stymied; his wife and daughter turn coldly away from him; a transforming experience of new love ends under threat of scandal. Driven ever deeper within himself, Stoner rediscovers the stoic silence of his forebears and confronts an essential solitude.

John Williams's luminous and deeply moving novel is a work of quiet perfection. William Stoner emerges from it not only as an archetypal American, but as an unlikely existential hero, standing, like a figure in a painting by Edward Hopper, in stark relief against an unforgiving world.

“Rediscovered the stoic silence of his forebears” doesn’t square with my reading of the book. “Kept plugging along” is how I’d put it. And I don’t know where “luminous and deeply moving novel” comes from. “Competent,” “workman-like,” “arm’s-length treatment”—that’s what describes author Williams’ effort for me.

While I’m not ecstatic about *Stoner*, as I understand a lot of people are—including the actor Tom Hanks—I am taken with it as a depiction of the sort of life many men lead, one characterized by, a quote from the book, “the cloistered and slow extinction that awaits us all.” And when all is said and done, it’s a cloistered and slow extinction that doesn’t add up to much of anything.

To his credit, William Stoner has well-thought-out theories about medieval literature, his academic focus; he knows his stuff in this area. And he has standards he upholds in his scholarly domain. In one of the few detailed episodes in the book, he admirably sticks to his guns giving a low grade to a student in a course and denying him admission to graduate study.

Stoner works hard in his professorial work: teaching and writing, preparing lectures, grading papers, and getting a book out. He doesn’t have marked success with any of that, but he puts in the effort, and that is laudable.

Unfortunately, however, our man Stoner doesn’t have theories, standards, and a predilection toward hard work in two areas that are crucial to a life well lived.

One of them, he doesn’t have a theory, let’s call it that, of personal happiness. What does it mean to be happy?

What does it feel like? What does it look like? What are the rules you have to play by to attain it? Particularly, how do you get happy when you aren't, and most of the time, Stoner isn't.

Stoner, a bright enough person, doesn't have the sense to realize that a theory, or technology, of happiness that he acted upon with dead seriousness might do him a world of good in his life. Rather, he plugs along getting through his day, he makes do, he copes: with a loveless and sexless marriage; a career without a promotion in rank after receiving tenure (permanent status in the university); and disinterested, uncomprehending, and vaguely disdainful students in the undergraduate courses he is assigned to teach by a department chairman who has it in for him.

Another theory Stoner doesn't possess is a woman-in-a-man's-life theory. What is to be expected of a woman who applies, as it were, to be *the* women in a man's life? What standards apply to her? What's the job description?

To put it simply, Stoner isn't his wife Edith's man in a basic, biological, man-woman, time immemorial way. He's a nice guy and he's got a good job, and he's respectable in the world, but he simply doesn't do it for her as a woman. She'd rather be in another room doing her craftwork than with him. And for sure, she'd rather be in some other bed than the one he's sleeping in.

Stoner applies rigorous standards to his scholarship but none to Edith; he bears up with her, and he pays heavy personal dues for it. All the medieval literature in the world won't make up for a ho-hum look on your wife's face when you walk in the door.

Edith, the woman Stoner married, isn't a good wife to him, and really, she doesn't try to be. He tries to make do by keeping busy in his office and, for a short time, he dallies with a young instructor named Katherine. As far as I'm concerned, he should have committed himself to Katherine. When she left town, she wanted him to go with her, but he didn't want to give up his academic pursuits at the university. Katherine was the real deal as a woman for Stoner, and he chose medieval literature over her. A conclusion I've reached after a long life is that while medieval literature—or whatever your passion or career happens to be—is important, if you have a chance at love, grab on to it with all you have.

June, 2018.

A week or so ago, I read a novel by William Maxwell (1908-2000), *So Long, See You Tomorrow*, originally published in 1980—I read the 2011 Vintage edition. The book is called a novel, but it seemed to me to be a fictionalized memoir. In any case, the book is about a man of advanced age looking back on his boyhood, the key elements of which were his sense of aloneness, an oblivious father, a detached brother, and the death of his mother. Central to the story--this part seemed fictionalized, though to what extent it isn't clear--is a murder-suicide committed by the father of a close teenage friend.

So Long, See You Tomorrow is a very good book. I'd put it in the bottom half of the top rank. That's all I'll say about the worth of the book. This isn't a book review. Rather, it is about what an episode in the book brought up for me about my own life. The murder-suicide separated the two friends, and they meet by chance in Chicago a year-and-a-half after the tragic events. In an incident that I believe happened in Maxwell's own life, though I assume not in a murder-suicide context--the narrator (really, Maxwell) passes by his friend without as much as offering a word or gesture of consolation. A highly sensitive boy, who knows well the hurt of slights, slights another.

Writing this novel, Maxwell, so it seems, is attempting to deal with his profound regret, guilt, and self-recrimination around this snubbing incident. Putting words to that moment is his attempt to see what it was about, why it was, and what he can, and should, do now about it now. I assume he hopes he can come to a resolution, completion, with reference to it.

This episode with the friend in the *So Long, See You Tomorrow* brought up comparable memories for me. Like the

narrator in the book, I am old, and as in the book, these events—events plural in my case—happened decades ago but nevertheless are vividly present in my mind, in all of my being, in this moment as I write these words. Perhaps this writing will, as I presume it did for Maxwell, provide me a measure of understanding and peace (I'm unsettled, in disequilibrium) and direction (what to do now).

In my case, it's three incidents from decades ago. They all involved people very close to me, and it would be a breach of confidence if I revealed their identities or related the particulars of what happened. And anyway, the focus here isn't on the details of what transpired but rather why they did from my side. What was it about me that accounted for my actions? I hope what I do in these pages with as much candor as I can allow myself will prompt you to do something similar with regard to guilt you live with.

As I reflect on these three moments in my life, I see that they all were fundamentally the same: I turned away someone close to me who needed me. I wasn't there for that person when I should have been. I realize now—I didn't then, or for many years—that what I did hurt them. I hurt them. I feel really bad about what I did: profound regret, guilt, self-condemnation. There's an ache in my pit of stomach right now.

I've come up with four explanations—not justifications, what I did wasn't justified—for why I didn't do what I should have done in those instances. They have to do with what was going on with me then, what I was like. The nature of the written word requires me to list these four truths about me back then—or I think they are truths—in an order, one, two, three, four. This can leave the impression that there is a sequence, or hierarchy, to this list, that the first one is the most basic or important, or that it leads to the second one, and on through the list. Rather than anything like that, all four existed concurrently inside me, were part of me, and affected and augmented and reinforced the others. Together they

formed the basis—the organic, physically felt, inner referent—for how I conducted my life. They were the self—the me--or a big part of it anyway, that was the grounding, the underpinning, for deciding what I would do in my life, including, in this case, turning away, not being there for, three people who needed me.

The four:

I wasn't fully there. In response to very difficult childhood experiences, without consciously choosing it or realizing it, I went into, and stayed in, what amounts to a post-traumatic stress state. I was removed, detached, on automatic pilot. I've recently learned that the psychological term for this way of being is *dissociation*—not associated, remote, unconnected to, removed from, reality. People and situations were “over there,” not quite real. I wasn't quite real to myself or, so I felt, real to the world around me. It was as if I didn't exist as more than a disembodied consciousness. I remember being surprised when I would see my reflection in a store window.

I wasn't well. To have conducted myself as I should have, I needed to be in sound physical and mental shape, and I wasn't. Words that come to me, I was *damaged, crippled, handicapped, fettered.*

I believed it didn't matter what I did. I thought I was useless, worthless, immaterial. If I did or didn't turn someone away was of no consequence. Nothing I did mattered, nothing I did affected anything, made any difference, because *I didn't matter.* In my own eyes, I was unneeded, unnecessary, nobody, nothing.

I wasn't my own person. I wasn't clear and committed about what I believed in, what I considered right and decent, what my responsibilities were, what I was trying to achieve in my life. I

wasn't an independent, self-determining, autonomous human being. I was reactive, shaped by my circumstances and immediate impulses.

While this is the first time I have put these four personal realities together in a configuration, call it that, over the past few years—sadly late in life—I have identified these problematic aspects of myself one-by-one and gone to work on them, and with gratifying results. So much more now than before, I'm here, present, in this moment, mindful, awake, alive. I've far healthier physically and mentally, psychologically, than I was. I now believe I have worth, value, that what I do matters, counts for something. I know, clearly, articulately—I have words for it--what I stand for, and experience in the whole of my being a strong resolve to manifest that in my actions in the world. Circumstances and people don't change how I conduct my life as they did before. I make mistakes, plenty of them, but in recent years—three, four, five?--I haven't done anything that I feel guilty about.

This time of reflection has resulted in the realization that the three people whom I rejected, turned away, had, prior to this time, done the same thing to me, and repeatedly. Up until now, I have only thought about my actions (a corollary of being nothing is that what others do to you is beside the point). What they did, and have done since, doesn't excuse what I did back then. I should have done the right thing regardless of their actions. I shouldn't have mirrored their behavior, which I now see I did. But shining a light on their conduct has put things in context, with the result that I don't feel as bad about what happened as before. Responsibility and accountability go both ways: I should be good to the people in my life, but they should be good to me as well. I get that now, finally.

Writing these words and the reflection that informed them has brought me greater self-understanding and self-acceptance.

The regret about what happened is still there, and the sadness, but the self-blame and guilt have lessened markedly. My strongest sense of things now is that I wasn't a bad person back then, I was a flawed person. I meant well. I just didn't do well.

What do I do now about the three people I hurt? I've not been in contact with any of them for many years. Do I seek them out and—oh, I don't know, I don't know. I have to work that through. All I know for certain is I failed them and I'm very, very sorry, and I hope they are happy and well in their lives now. Perhaps there is no need to do anything now. Perhaps it is too late to do anything. Perhaps the period at the end of this sentence is the end of this matter for me.

55

Dee's AirPods

July, 2018.

My 13-year-old daughter Dee, as I'll call her here, lives with her mother in another state. Dee emailed me asking me to get her some AirPods, wireless earplugs that serve as earphones. Dee is an elite golfer and especially wanted to wear the AirPods to listen to music while she plays golf. This is my emailed reply to her.

Dear Dee:

I've thought about the idea of getting Apple AirPods and here's where I am at this point. I'm not locked into this. What I say here is to start a conversation among the three of us about it. I've Cc'd this message to Mom, and invite her best thinking about this purchase as well as yours. I see the use of communication technology as a very important issue all three of us should work through together.

This is my thinking at the moment:

Cost is not an issue. We've got the money [around \$160]. Take price out of the consideration.

Earphones, AirPods—and iPhones--are good, but they have a big downside. They intrude upon, remove you from, cut you off from, the here-and-now reality you are in, including the other people around you. You should be very careful, very wise, about where and when you use earphones and iPhones. [Dee's middle school] knew what it was doing when it didn't allow phones in Hawaii [a class trip]. Hawaii was a better time for all of you without the phones.

I think we should get the AirPods. You say that they are top quality. It does seem good just to have small plugs in your ears and not have to contend with wires and cumbersome

earphones. However, I think it best that you don't use AirPods when playing golf. I realize the big reason you want to get the AirPods is for when you play golf, but they can be used in other contexts too. I define golf as from the moment you get in the car on the way to the golf course until the moment you get back home—no AirPods during that time. No AirPods in the car, on the course, at a restaurant after the round, or in the car on the way home.

Golf is about being away from everything in a beautiful and peaceful setting. It's the wind blowing and the rustling trees. It's total involvement and concentration in the activity, shot by shot, hole by hole. It's personal connection with your caddy or playing partner. Katy Perry, or whoever it is, blasting in your ear intrudes on that wonderful activity, distracts you from it, cuts you off from from it, makes golf jangly rather than restful and centering, distorts and diminishes the golfing experience.

One of the reasons golf has been so great is that it is activity you and Mom share—talking in the car going to the course, on the course discussing distances and strategy and which club to use, talking about the good and bad things that happen during the round, chatting about this and that and kidding around while playing, being together for soup or a sandwich afterwards, and being with one another in the car on the way back home. I don't want Katy Perry to get between you and Mom.

A possible exception is using the AirPods while you are on the tee at a driving range or on a putting green, let's talk about that—I'm OK with that.

I can't imagine Lydia Ko and Justin Thomas [top professional golfers] playing golf to popular music blasting into their brains and compelling their attention. A big part of golf is attending to just the golf, single-pointed concentration. Golf isn't like painting a wall, a gross, inexact, mindless, activity, where listening to music at the same time is fine. Golf's about total

engagement, precision, intense mental focus, rigorous analysis and decision-making, it's about learning to play in a highly disciplined and exact way.

I want the very best for you, Dee. I'm concerned that AirPods will hurt your development as a golfer. You have world-class ability in golf. I don't want anything to get in the way of you realizing your potential in golf, even a little bit. A little bit is the difference between success and failure at the elite level in any sport, any activity. Back to Lydia and Justin, as brilliant as they are, playing against other great golfers as they do, they win or lose by a single stroke. Every little, tiny bit, the most minute detail, matters in achieving success at the highest level. Anything that takes away, or even might take away, in the smallest way from your becoming all that you could become shouldn't be there, and as I see it, that includes the AirPods.

So I suggest getting the AirPods, but not using them while playing golf. What do you think, Dee? What do you think, Mom?

I'll wait to hear from you.

All my love,
Daddy

Later: Dee got the AirPods, but, they will only be used on the driving range and putting green. Dee says what I wrote in the email helped her understand things better, and that she thinks this limited use of the AirPods is best for her. Perhaps she decided that the only way to get the AirPods was to go along with this arrangement (which her mother supports), and that, really, she doesn't believe in this set-up. But it seems to me she does, or at least I'd like to believe she does, I hope she does. Anyway, I believe it is best.

56

“It’s Only Make Believe”

July, 2018.

The past year, every couple of months it seems, I give over a couple days to an “It’s Only Make Believe” pre-occupation, call it that. “It’s Only Make Believe” was a huge hit record in 1958 by a theretofore unknown with the intriguing name of Conway Twitty. I was a teenager back then and heard it on the pop radio stations I listened to day and night. I didn’t pick up what the song was about exactly, but it went from a low note to a very high one in quasi-operatic fashion, which was catchy to my taste at the time. I’ve since learned from Googling that Conway Twitty’s real name was Harold Jenkins and that he was born in Mississippi and grew up in Arkansas and was 25-years-old at the time of his big hit.

Conway co-wrote “It’s Only Make Believe” with the drummer in his band, Jack Nance. He said he wrote his part in just a few minutes in Hamilton, Ontario where they were performing at the time. As far as I know, Conway hasn’t said what his contribution to the song was—my guess is he came up with the chord changes. Here are the lyrics:

People see us everywhere
 They think you really care
 But myself I can't deceive
 I know it's only make believe

My one and only prayer is that someday you'll care,
 My hopes, my dreams come true, my one and only you.
 No one will ever know how much I love you so
 My only prayer will be someday you'll care for me
 But it's o-only make believe.

My hopes, my dreams come true, my life I'd give for you,
 My heart, a wedding ring, my all, my everything.
 My heart I can't control, you rule my very soul,
 My only prayer will be someday you'll care for me
 But it's o-only make believe.

My one and only prayer, is that someday you'll care,
 My hopes, my dreams come true, my one and only you
 No one will ever know how much I love you so
 My prayers, my hopes, my schemes, you are my every dream
 But it's o-only make believe (make believe)

“It’s Only Make Believe” is a four-line intro or whatever it is called, and then three choruses—or verses, I don’t know the terminology--all three with the same melody but different words, though each has the same meaning as the others: I wish you cared for me but you don’t. Here’s Conway singing the song when it first was a hit, his remarkable voice and vocal range shining through. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LJefPaBsSug> [This writing is very dependent on internet sites—I hope they still exist when you read this.]

During my “It’s Only Make Believe” episodes, whatever to call them, throughout the day I sing the song to myself, including when I wake up in the morning. I find it addictive. I have never been able to get the words right, however, which makes me appreciate how seemingly effortlessly Conway and the singers who have covered his song make the lyrics flow in correct order.

In the ‘50s, around the time when “It’s Only Make Believe” hit big, I was a faithful viewer of Dick Clark’s “American Bandstand” television show that came out of Philadelphia. There I’d be, every afternoon after school let out, sitting alone watching teenagers dance to pop records. Now that I think about it, Dick was very good at seeming to be talking right to me sprawled out on my living room couch, and taking me seriously--for sure, no one else did--and getting across the idea that the “artists” who created

teen-oriented, popular music, most of it little more than jingles really, had a special importance and were worthy of my time and attention.

Singers and bands would appear on “Bandstand” and lip-sync their records. Dick’s people would play their record over a loud speaker and they’d pretend to be singing. It took me a good amount of time, sorry to say, to catch on to the fact that they weren’t really singing.

After the performers were done with their song, Dick, decked out conservatively in a suit--he represented maturity and legitimacy, the very things I lacked--would interview them with a cheerful banality but at the same time got across that this was indeed serious business that we, which included me lying there on the couch, were engaged in with the popular music. I remember being taken back when, later on, Dick hosted the daytime game show “The \$10,000 Pyramid.” What is super-big-deal Dick Clark doing on a silly and trivial show? It didn’t occur to me at the time that “American Bandstand” was no less silly and trivial than “The \$10,000 Pyramid.”

Conway Twitty, he too dressed up in suit, lip-synced “It’s Only Make Believe” on one of the Dick Clark’s music specials he produced from time to time, this one for Beech-Nut gum. Here’s the YouTube of it.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R-e2MUH3rBw> As I look at it now, Conway must have found the experience embarrassing if not humiliating. There he was, a grown man, married at the time, pretending to be singing a song walking down a theater aisle amid an audience of high school girls clapping in time to the music and looking up at him as he goes by and laughing. But he had to promote the record

I saw Conway perform once, at the Flaming Club, a bar in my home town of Saint Paul, Minnesota. He was on a small stage elevated two or three feet backed by four musicians in front of a

hundred people or so clustered right up close to him, which included me sipping my gin and tonic and feeling out of place being out in the world like that. My place was on the living room couch munching potato chips and glancing through a sport magazine or staring at the TV. This must have been in the early '60s, so Conway would have been around thirty-years-old. I remember little about the occasion other than Conway was on the short side and pudgy and didn't seem too happy to be there.

All this up to now has been a lead-in to recounting my "It's Only Make Believe" activities, preoccupations, whatever best to call them. Here I am, geriatric old and living alone in retirement, no connections with anybody or anything, no one knows or cares that I'm even in this two-room rented apartment much less what I'm doing while I'm in here. It's the morning and I've eaten breakfast and had my one cup of coffee for the day—more than that and I get jumpy and can't get to sleep at night—and I've scrutinized ESPN.com and skimmed *The New York Times* online. Now what do I do with my day? "I know!" I think to myself. "I'll check out a YouTube of 'It's Only Make Believe.'" Then, for a couple days or so, as a major part of my existence, such as it is, I cycle and re-cycle through "It's Only Make Believe" YouTubes and sing and hum the song. The latest of these episodes is winding down as I write this.

Invariably, I first go to a blurry-but-still-discernable YouTube from sometime in the late '70s I would imagine. Conway "surprises"—it is so obviously scripted--petite, bottle blond, mid-thirties Canadian singer Carroll Baker while she is recording "It's Only Make Believe" with studio musicians. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q-3bmPvIYnU> I must say, Carroll does quite the job of belting out the song, with her clear, radiant voice and hitting the high notes in the face-contorted fashion of "The Voice" contestants. Carroll is really good. Conway joins her for the last chorus (or verse or whatever it is).

Every time I watch this YouTube, I'm struck by the cutesy, Southern-girl speech and persona á la the early June Carter Cash that British Columbian Baker affects, as well as the flirty delight and obsequiousness she pitches at Conway when he shows up on the scene "unannounced." The no-holds-barred phoniness of it all has an innocuousness and inanity that makes the time pass pleasantly for me, what can I say.

Baker later recorded "It's Only Make Believe" and featured it in her concert performances. After the Twitty-Baker duet YouTube, I tend to focus on three YouTubes of Carroll singing the song. This week it was this one https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=otnV3d_asqA and this one https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x6u_cCiG-sM. I couldn't find the third YouTube of her singing the song that I've watched as part of this activity in the past. It was from a least a decade after the first two and outdoors at what looked to be a state fair. I learned from the internet that a very prominent backup singer in this YouTube I couldn't find was Carroll's daughter—tall, perhaps 25, an everyday look about her, like she might have a small child at home and clerk part-time in a convenience store.

Every time I watch the Carroll Baker YouTubes, I notice how she gets older and fatter from one to the next, from trim and slight to hefty and boxy-looking, and how, so it seems, she tries to compensate for things going south on her (and east and west) by getting bigger and poofier with her hairdos and plastering on the makeup. Liz Taylor did that toward the end.

Watching Carroll belt out "It's Only Make Believe" multiple times, I am reminded of how life often comes down to doing the same thing you've done many, many, many times before and trying to be responsible and do your best with it, but really, deep down wanting it to be over so you can go home. I remember that feeling from the acting in theater I did for many years, and, the last

few years especially, when I was teaching—how long before this class hour ends?

After the Carroll Baker YouTubes, I go to one of Conway singing “It’s Only Make Believe” on a television show in 1990, I think it was, or maybe it was ’91 or ’92—anyway, not too long before his death.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zr6BBTC2so4> On June 3rd, 1993, he collapsed during a performance and died the next day from an abdominal aneurism. In the 1990-or-so YouTube, he looks even pudgier than before and he’d let his hair go frizzy and get gray—young, he had it done up Elvis-like, straightened and piled high in an inky-black pompadour—and of course he looked older, time marches on for us all.

In an interview before the song with the show’s host, which is on another YouTube, not this one, Conway is showbiz upbeat and chatty and gets in a plug for Twitty City, his entertainment complex (“Be sure to come by and visit us”). I understand Twitty City was pretty successful, in stark contrast to the Twitty Burger franchises, which went belly up.

Also, and totally out of context, Conway makes note of the fact that when he was young the Philadelphia Phillies major league team wanted him to play for one of their minor league teams, but he’d signed up for the army and couldn’t take them up on their offer. That bit of self-puffery reminded me of how in my youth, particularly among my class of people, down near the bottom. it was a mark of distinction to be chosen, anointed as it were, to play with a ball for a living. In fact, this same Phillies team was interested in me, and like Conway, honored as I was, I had to turn them down because I had enlisted in the army. I had just turned seventeen. Like Conway too, there was a time when I made my baseball talents and prospects known whenever I had the chance. The truth of the matter was that I wasn’t much good at baseball,

and if I'd been able to sign with the Phillies, I would have lasted a year in a low minor league before being released.

Like Carroll Baker did, Conway gave "It's Only Make Believe," which he'd sung who-knows-how-many times before, his very best effort, straining and bending down and bobbing back up for emphasis, really selling it. How different from the straight-ahead lament in his early YouTube.

I usually then go to a YouTube of Glen Campbell's cover of "It's Only Make Believe" that was successful for him, performed in South Dakota in the early 2000s I believe.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Utrkirpbk_o Glen, showing his age some too--I remember him from his TV show back in the '60s, young guy--is in front of a large orchestra including stringed instruments. This was a major operation. Glen doesn't push as hard with the song as Baker and Conway did in their YouTubes. Campbell's virtuoso talent comes through in his performance. It really jumps out how gifted he was.

As I watch Campbell, all of them on my YouTube runs, I think about how our lives come down to rising up above the surface of the water for a time—not very long, really--and then receding back beneath the surface. Glen's gone, as is Conway and Dick Clark. Carroll's around seventy now and I don't know how much she performs these days. Like them, whatever I have accomplished in my life is in the past, and now I'm barely above the waterline, just my eyes and my ears and my mind and my memories. Soon enough will come the oblivion, and I'll sink completely beneath the surface and drift to the bottom and remain there forever.

57

Jack Jarpe

September, 2018.

Every now and again, a former student of mine at the university emails me with an update on how she's doing, and she asks what's going on with me. Especially in retirement sitting here day after day—is it Wednesday or Thursday?—it boosts my spirits to hear from her and be reminded of the time, three years ago now, when I was a professor with my name on an office door.

My former student is around twenty-seven and teaching in a high school in the Midwest, and that prompts me to think back to when I was the same age and doing the same thing. In my case it was North Saint Paul, Minnesota in the second half of the 1960s. North High--the Polars, as the teams were called.

It's early in the morning, a little after 6:00 a.m., and the image of Jack Jarpe from my high school teaching years just popped in my consciousness, however that happens--this was fifty years ago, a half century, my gosh. Jack was the school librarian. I taught social studies—history, economics, current events, that sort of thing. Jack was about thirty at the time, a few years older than I was. He was of average height, trim, short brown hair parted on the side, glasses, conservatively dressed, kind of preppy-looking, soft-spoken, positive in outlook, a classy person; Jack was a gentleman, a gentle man.

Jack and I became workplace acquaintances. I wouldn't call Jack a friend exactly, though he was my closest connection at the school. Neither of us gave any energy to staying in contact after I left the high school when I was twenty-eight to become an instructor at the University of Minnesota and pursue a doctorate in education. I haven't seen Jack since the late '60s.

Jack and I ate lunch together, and we worked out together at the school gym. Jack was in superb physical condition (I just now

Googled him and saw that he won a state long-distance running competition in 1970). In stark contrast, I remember taking note of my soft, pasty, bloated 225-pound body (I now weigh 170) in the locker room mirror on the way to taking a shower after my workout (such as it was—I can't imagine that I went at it too hard back then). It strikes me now how I wasn't alarmed at what I was seeing in the mirror. I sure would be now.

Jack came up with the idea for the two of us starting a book discussion group at the school. We'd pick a book and invite students to discuss it with us once a week, or perhaps it was every two weeks, I can't remember. That sounded like a good idea to me; I went along with just about anything in those days. Jack selected the book, *The Making of the President 1960* by Theodore White. I couldn't have picked a book. Don Riley's sport column in the *Saint Paul Pioneer Press* newspaper was the extent of my reading back then.

Four or five students expressed interest in our book discussion group. Jack set up a meeting time in a small room in the library and specified the chapters we would discuss at our first meeting. I did the assigned reading, but I really didn't take in what the book was about or its details, and I had no thoughts that I wanted to share when we got together. I just showed up at the appointed time. I don't imagine that I said much of anything at the meeting; I never said much of anything in any public setting other than in front of classes where I had to.

We met that once and then the project fell flat, we never met again. Jack and I never discussed what went wrong. We just dropped the matter, which suited both of us. Jack was about as introverted as I was (and still am), which I suppose was one of the reasons we connected so well.

Jack and I went to the Polars' Friday night football games together. I remember on those cool, crisp fall evenings feeling peaceful and in place, settled, where I belonged in the world,

contented, which most certainly was not my characteristic state of being back then (nor has it been since).

I remember one time in particular. Jack and I were standing next to the wire-mesh fence that surrounded the field cheering and jumping up and down ecstatically as the son of the principal--his last name was Arns, it comes back to me after all this time--ran a kickoff back for a touchdown to win the game. As I think about it sitting here in front of this computer screen, that was one of the best, happiest, moments of my life. Would I have been better off if I had stayed in North High instead of going on to university work?

Jack was respectful to me, he took me seriously, he treated me as if I mattered, he was kind to me, he had time for me, and I remember having trouble taking that in. Why would anyone treat me like that? Really, why would anyone want to have anything to do with me? Sad but telling, as I think about it, that I felt that way about myself back then. I wish now that I had stayed in touch with Jack after I left North High. But in those years, I didn't keep anything, or anybody, going, including a beautiful, dear, first family.

Just now, I Googled Jack's name. There was the track result I mentioned earlier. And also, Jack's obituary in the *Saint Paul Pioneer Press* of June 25, 2011.

Jack Daly Jarpe

Age 74 Of Lake Elmo, MN Died June 18, at his home. Remembered as a compassionate and generous man, Jack is survived by wife Carole; mother Laura; and children, John, Amy (Matt Moore) and Anne Wakely (Scott). Jack is also survived by siblings Geoff (Lezlie), John (Mary Kay), Diane Starke (Robert), and Marion (Jay), as well as grandchildren Jack, Rosie, Simon, Joe and Gunnar and beloved pets Charro and Tootsie. Jack is preceded in death by father Gunnar and brother Jay. A visitation will be held at 10:00 am on Monday, June 27 at St.

Mark's Lutheran Church in North Saint Paul, MN. A Memorial Service will follow at 11:00 am. Memorial contributions may be sent to Heifer International (www.heifer.org/ registry) or Catholic Charities (attn: Dan Sloan, 1200 2nd Ave., Mpls, MN 55403).

Compassionate and generous, that was Jack Jarpe. It looks as if he created a fine family, so nice to read that.

What a long life I've lived. That was me at the high school football game in Minnesota with Jack Jarpe a half century ago, and I'm still here. Jack's gone and I'm still here, sitting on this leather couch in Burlington, Vermont with my memories. I wish I could thank Jack for being so good to me and tell him how much that meant to me back then, but I can't. It's eight o'clock on a Thursday morning—yes, it's Thursday--and the best thing I can think of to do is make breakfast.

September, 2018.

A couple of nights ago, I watched a 2014 French film “Bird People” on Amazon streaming. Its two protagonists were a middle-age American businessman in a Paris airport hotel on his way to Dubai (he doesn’t make it there) and a young French maid at this same hotel. The two halves of the film contrast markedly: the first is straight-ahead realistic, and the second is a flight of fancy (literally a flight, as you’ll see if you decide to check out the film, and I recommend that you do).

After viewing a film I find worthy artistically and challenging intellectually, which was the case with “Bird People,” I check the internet to see what professional critics have to say about it, as well as look over Amazon reviewers’ comments. I was taken by how both groups missed this film’s merits. In fact, they seemed to be going out of their way to find fault with it, and the faults they were noting were most often in their minds and not in the film.

On the sites for Amazon films, there’s a heading called “Customers Who Watched This Item Also Watched” and then a list of films. One of them for “Bird People” was “Spinning Man,” a 2018 release I’d never heard of. I guessed that it was kind of a nothing film that had gone straight to video. But its top-flight cast caught my eye--Pierce Brosnan, Guy Pearce, and Minnie Driver. I recalled really liking Brosnan in the 2010 film, “The Ghost Writer.” And the blurb about “Spinning Man” was intriguing: “When a female college student goes missing, a popular professor is the prime suspect. Suddenly, the questions he faces aren’t merely academic, they’re a matter of life and death.” I sprung for a \$4.99 streaming rental thinking this film might not be too bad, and I’m looking to kill a couple of hours before I go to bed. To

my surprise, I really got caught up with the story and was highly impressed by the filmmaking.

I went to the reviews, and again as I found them lacking. I decided to post my own review on Amazon:

After watching “Spinning Man,” I read a newspaper review that said it was “forgettable.” It wasn’t forgettable to me, that’s for sure; I saw it two days ago and haven’t stopped thinking about it. Many reviewers have said the film doesn’t make sense, the ending particularly. To the contrary, from beginning to end it makes sense, and the sense it makes is fascinating and insightful. And the mood it creates and the editing and pace are on the money for this story. There’s no way I can get into particulars here without spoilers. Let’s leave it that surprisingly I found this essentially straight-to-video film to be the best, most thought-provoking, in my memory. All of it, truly superb by the highest artistic standards: the screenplay by Mathew Aldrich (especially when compared to the book on which it is based), the direction by Simon Kaijser, the wonderful acting down to minor roles, the cinematography by Polly Morgan. I see myself as a serious film buff, and I’m saying to my fellows, check out this film!

Which brings me to the point in this thought: that something—in this case a film—is what it is, not what someone says it is. “Bird People” is “Bird People,” and “Spinning Man” is “Spinning Man,” and what people allege about those films, including me, is what people allege about them. I realize that distinction sounds obvious, but I have tended to lose sight of it. Staying with film, I’d read a review in *The New York Times* and think, “Oh, that’s what that film’s about, and that’s how good it is.” No, that is how that film reviewer sees that film, and it may well not be accurate or the only legitimate way to perceive it. In any case, the review is not the film; only the film is the film.

I’ve also tended to see critics, commenters, as on-high, final arbiters. It’s as if they were wiser and on a higher aesthetic and

moral plane than the people who, staying with film, made the movie. But really, if you think about it—and prompted by the “Bird People” and “Spinning Man” experience, I’ve thought about it—the directors of those two films undoubtedly know a lot more about filmmaking than journalists and online reviewers. You can count of those two directors having put elements in their creations that went right by the people passing judgment on them.

I have personal reasons for getting into this topic. Since my earliest days, I’ve given people way too much power to define me. You’re this, you’re that, they say, and given the kinds of people I’ve been around over the span of my life, all too often it’s been negative and hurtful and discouraging, and flat-out inaccurate and unfair. I’ve decided now, so very late in life, enough of that.

These days, I write articles for webzines, online magazines. I find myself checking out the posted comments on them, as well as the number of Facebook “likes” they generate, as if those people know more about what I wrote about than I do, and their take on what I produced is gospel.

As a matter of fact, others don’t know more about what I wrote than I do, and they are not my superiors or betters. I’ll take what they say into account, but I’ll keep in mind that the article is what it is and worth what it’s worth, and that I’m the best judge of that using my understandings and goals and standards, not somebody else’s, as criteria of measure. Bottom line, if I can’t get beyond chasing after others’ approval and deferring to them, I need to stop going public with my expressions.

October, 2018.

I keep a notebook and pen on the bed stand and record my dreams. If I don't write them down, very often I don't recall their particulars. I seek to remember dreams because I find them personally educative, informative, directive. They are private lectures, lessons; they tell me what is going on in my life. They come in the form of allegories, parables, metaphors, and episodes in which I am a participant, and it is my task is to figure out what they mean. It takes some concentration and persistence, but their messages become clear and their implications apparent. I've found the outcome of this exploration to be good insight, good advice, good direction.

A couple of dreams from about a week ago for illustration:

I'm standing on a gigantic, flimsy metal stool next to a tall brick apartment building, perhaps four stories above the ground. It's scary; I'm afraid of heights, and there I am way up in the air like that. Four or five people on the ground, not in focus, are shaking the stool, making it even more precarious for me. Even if these for-whatever-reason hostile people weren't there, I don't know how I could get back down to the sidewalk.

Just above my head is an open window leading into, evidently, an apartment, though not mine. If I climb through the window I can get to safety. To get to the window, I'll have to jump up off the stool a foot or so to get my forearms on the window sill, and from that position I'll need to pull myself into the room. It's risky though. I could fall trying to reach the window; or the stool could topple, especially with people shaking it, and I might not have the strength to boost myself through the window and end up hanging from the window sill four stories in the air

until my strength gives out I plunge to the sidewalk, very likely resulting in my death.

I look up at the open window. There are no curtains or shade. The silhouette of a woman looking in my direction, long hair and attractive lines, takes up much of the window. The light is behind her and I can't see her face or clothing, yet I know who she is. I tell her I am going to jump up and grasp the window sill. I ask her to help me by pulling me into the room.

Without a word, she leaves the window.

What else can I do? I jump up. I make it; my elbows are on the sill. It was much easier than I had presumed, feared. I boost my way up through window, again not as hard as I thought it might be.

The room is empty. I sit on the wood floor in a corner a few feet from the window I came in. The woman isn't there; I'm alone.

I wake up. It's morning, time to get up. I go to write down the dream but realize I don't have to. This one I'll remember, I'm sure of that. I was right. I didn't forget this one, it was powerful, the height and fear and all.

In the second dream,

I sing an old pop song "All the Way." No context, just me singing the song.

I wake up. It is the middle of the night. I wrote the title of the song on my notepad and go back to sleep. When I got up in the morning, I remembered that I had had a dream about singing a song, but I couldn't recall which song it was. When I went to the notebook and saw that it was "All the Way," I was taken back. That is not a song I ever think about. It's completely outside my

frame of reference. I couldn't associate "All the Way" with a time and place, where I might have heard it and when. I am vaguely aware of the title and melody and a couple lines of its lyrics. In the dream, however, I seemed to know the whole song well.

I Googled the lyrics:

When somebody loves you
It's no good unless he loves you, all the way
Happy to be near you
When you need someone to cheer you, all the way

Taller than the tallest tree is
That's how it's got to feel
Deeper than the deep blue sea is
That's how deep it goes, if it's real

When somebody needs you
It's no good unless he needs you, all the way
Through the good or lean years
And for all the in-between years, come what may

Who knows where the road will lead us
Only a fool would say
But if you'll let me love you
It's for sure I'm gonna love you, all the way, all the way

Wikipedia said "All the Way" was written by Jimmy Van Heusen and Sammy Cohn. I know of their names, but that's all. It won the Academy Award in 1957 for Best Original Song--news to me. The movie, "The Joker is Wild"--never saw it, don't know about it. "All the Way" was a hit for Frank Sinatra. Perhaps I heard him sing it, I'm not sure. It was covered by many other singers. As I looked through the list, which included Bing Crosby, Celine Dion, and Glen Campbell and, recently, Bob Dylan and Katherine McPhee, I didn't know that any of them had recorded the song. At some time in my life, I must have heard "All the Way" at least a few times, because I know some of the words and can hum it reasonably well.

This '50s song came to me when I was asleep in October of 2018. How that happened is totally beyond me. When I checked out the lyrics on Google, I noticed one difference between them and what I sang in my dream. The lyrics are “It’s no good unless he loves you, all the way” and “It’s no good unless he needs you, all the way.” In both instances, in my dream I made it “she,” not “he.” So, in my dream version of the song, it was about a woman’s love for a man, not the reverse.

What did I pick up on in the two dreams? What were the messages, lessons, insights?

When I first thought about it, this is what I came up with from the apartment window dream:

It’s understandable how you wound up in that room. Really, there wasn’t an alternative—you’re on the stool way up in the air and there’s only that window into that particular apartment. But look at you, sitting alone on the floor in a corner of an empty room. The woman is gone, and when she had a chance to help you get over the window sill and in to the room, despite the very difficult, even desperate, position you were in, she was unresponsive, mute, before fading away.

Get out of this room, get away from this woman. She doesn’t want you here. This is a barren setting for you. Go out the door. Now. Travel far away. Find somewhere where you won’t end up four stories in air, frightened, anxious, in danger of falling, with people who hold no other feeling toward you than to shake the fragile stool, the foundation, you are standing on. Leave. Exit. Escape.

And from the “All the Way” dream:

Consider the lyrics: When somebody loves you, they love you all the way. They don’t hold back, they don’t turn away from you. They are happy to be near you. They help you. They need

you rather than have no need for you. The woman in your life should be someone you can love all the way. If you can't find this kind of love, this person, be alone. Better alone than in bad company.

As the days went by this past week, I kept exploring the dreams. It was important for me to not just go with my initial conclusions:

I said it was understandable that I wound up in that room. But really, do I in fact understand how I got there? Why was I on that enormously tall, rickety, and being-shaken stool, where my options were so limited? Could I have created a firmer foundation for myself than that stool? Can I in the future? Can I expand my options in life beyond a single window? What options, possibilities, do I want to create besides crawling, uninvited and unwanted, into someone else's home?

Why were those people shaking the stool? What is it about them, about me, that led them to do that? Was I really unable to do anything to stop what they were doing to me at that time? Could I have made it down off that stool?

From her side, why did the woman turn away when I asked her to help me, and then not be in the room when I entered it? What part did I play in that?

Is there a good option to leaving that room and going far away? Do I have to be distant from "stool shakers"? or is there something I can become, do, that will make hurting me an unappealing or aversive undertaking? Could I, should I, seek out the woman, take her hand, and propose the idea that together we furnish the room and work to be happy there together?

Why am I in relationships where neither the woman nor I love "all the way"? Is it possible to change that circumstance, either with "the woman in the room" or someone else?

How essential is an "all the way" love to a life well lived?

Is the truth of a dream the first-take conclusions and insights, and anything after that, like the musings and speculations I've been doing the past few days, something else: intellectualization, rationalization, fantasy, self-delusion, etc.?

I'll leave it there. I hope these two examples encourage you to record your dreams and discern their meanings and implications for your life. I think you'll find it well worth your time.

60 Getting Better at Golf (And Other Things Too)

January, 2019.

My fourteen-year-old daughter Dee, as I call her in public expressions, lives with her mother on the west coast; I live on the east coast. I'm hearing impaired and can't hear amplified sound, so other than occasional visits to see her, my contact with Dee is limited to emails--no phone or Skype communications, can't hear.

Dee is very involved with golf and shoots in the mid-70s and hopes to play on her high school team and in college. During the 2018 Christmas break from school, she with and her mother traveled to Arizona to compete in a junior golf tournament. Dee wrote me a long email just after she returned from the Arizona trip. She reported that she didn't do well in the tournament. A visit to the Grand Canyon (including the rental Mercedes to get there) was a great time. With a bit of editing, this was my emailed reply to Dee's message:

Dear Dee—

I know you were disappointed with your scores in the Arizona tournament, but I was so, so proud of your response to how things went in the tournament. You used that “hit” as a gift, to make you even more dedicated and to work even harder with your golf. Be proud of yourself for that response to a difficult experience.

I think the key considerations for you around golf are 1) do you have the necessary talent to play golf at an elite level, and 2) is golf as an activity right for you as a person. In my view, the answers to both of those questions are absolutely YES! You are wonderfully talented at golf. And golf suits you, it's right for you, and it's fun for you, and golf challenges you, and your golf involvement makes you a better person overall. I believe a big

reason that school is going so well for you now is what you are learning from your golf involvement about what goes into achieving success in something and are developing yourself in those directions.

Here are some thoughts that I have about how you might improve at golf:

1. In any area, whether it's golf or math or designing clothes or being good at business, whatever it is, you should learn from the best. A golfer that really impresses me you can learn from is Justin Thomas. <https://video.golfdigest.com/watch/why-justin-thomas-swing-works> [The links in this thought may no longer be available when you read this. You can find comparable ones on the internet—or anyway, you get the idea.] Note how straight his left arm is on the backswing, and how high he gets his hands on the back swing [I see Dee as needing to improve in these areas]. Notice too how incredibly flexible he is, and the remarkable club speed he generates. Another exemplary golfer is Sung Hyun Park. Check her out on YouTube. While you can learn from the various aspects of their swings, I think it is particularly valuable to get a feel for “all of it,” the totality of their swing. Check out YouTubes of their iron play, and chipping, and putting form. Take “all of that” into your being—your whole being, not just your mind.

2. Strength and flexibility are important. With school and all the other things you do, you don't have a lot of time to devote to these areas now, but I think in you could get a lot done in just five or so minutes a day.

You don't want big bulky muscles with golf. You want long, stretchy muscles. I like resistance bands for that. You could do 10-12 repetitions of these six exercises, one after another, in a total time of just two or three minutes, anytime during the day. <https://www.mensjournal.com/health-fitness/full-body-resistance-band-workout/>. I've sent you some resistance

bands from Amazon. You can decide whether to use them.

For flexibility, you could do the twist. Twenty seconds to the left and twenty seconds to the right. Push hard. [The half lord of the fishes pose from yoga. <https://www.yogaoutlet.com/guides/how-to-do-half-lord-of-the-fishes-pose-in-yoga.>]

And this one, the shoulder pull, 10 seconds each side. Press hard. [In the email, I put a picture here. It's the simple cross-egged pose from yoga. A verbal description: Reach your right arm across your chest, bringing your upper arm close to your collarbone. Clasp the elbow of your crossed arm with the opposite hand. Draw your crossed arm in close to your body. Hold. Repeat on the opposite side.]

3. Relaxation and calming are important in any sport. I'm not comfortable with you using the stress relieving inhalers you asked me to get. This in the questions and answers on the Amazon site gave me pause.

Since there is no nicotine, no tobacco, and no banned substances in our blends, there are no legal prohibitions against minors using them. However, we are against minors smoking cigarettes, and we believe that at the impressionable age of minors, merely gaining the 'hand-to-mouth habit' could increase the potential for a minor to start smoking cigarettes. We ask that minors avoid using our personal diffusers out of an abundance of caution.

I'd prefer you do things like work with your breathing. For example, relax all your muscles, your shoulders and everything, and un-focus your eyes. Take a deep natural in-breath, and on the out-breath, or exhale, silently, to yourself, say the word "calm." Follow your breath in and out. Do three of those breaths. Or even one. Anytime during the day. If you are waiting to tee off, do one of those breaths. As you are standing on the green, one of

those breaths. Anytime.

There are breathing exercises like these you could try. <https://www.drweil.com/health-wellness/body-mind-spirit/stress-anxiety/breathing-three-exercises/>. See what works for you.

4. Nutrition matters greatly. You are so fortunate to be eating the wonderful organic food Mom cooks. Mom is a great, great cook. Your body is your instrument, your tool, for getting you through life, and not just in golf. Nothing is as important now in your life, growing as you are, as what you eat. Eat all your food, drink all your milk. No junk food. Be careful about the food at school. I understand you are mostly packing a lunch, and that you are very selective about what you eat at school—good for you.

It's important to identify the best thing you can eat or drink during a round of golf to maintain your energy and mental sharpness. I don't know what to suggest for that, but you and Mom can look into it and try various things to see what works best. It may be that what is best won't taste all that good, but the key is to do what works best for your energy level and mental sharpness.

Build up your body, don't tear it down. No alcohol or drugs during your teenage years—none, zero. Drugs includes pills. Pills are deadly bad. Needless to say, no cigarettes. No substances to get a temporary uplift. Let your friends do whatever they do. You do what you do—honor your body, honor yourself.

I hope this at least gets you thinking and talking and trying things in these four directions—learning from the best; strength and flexibility; relaxation; and nutrition. The gym you go to can offer suggestions, and Mom is superb in these areas. My point is you don't have to spend a whole lot of time with physical exercise—your body will react to just a few concentrated minutes of effort.

It's important to keep in mind that in golf, any area, you need to do things now that won't show positive results for a long time, even years. I believe strongly that if you do the work now on golf--on your form, on the way you think and strategize about playing, on developing your body--you'll be a top golfer when you are seventeen. I know that sounds like a long time from now, and it is a long time from now. But that time will come. You will be seventeen someday, and eighteen and nineteen and twenty.

Small things add up to big things, though it takes time. Do the very best you can with each detail of your life. Today's homework, today's driving range session, this meal, whatever it is. Do what you do now, this instant, with an awareness that you are creating your future. When you get to your future—like when you are seventeen—if you didn't do what you could have, should have, at fourteen, it's too late, no do-overs in life.

Keep in mind that you only go through life one time—cherish and enjoy every moment. The Grand Canyon with Mom happened just that one time. Love life, every second of it.

I'm always here for you.

Love,
Daddy